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Opening Extract from...

Sick Heart River

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by James Buchan

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Introduction

'His Excellency is writing a very odd book,' Lilian Killick, John Buchan's long-serving secretary, told the writer's wife in the autumn of 1939. It was 'so unlike him, so introspective.'

As she took down his dictation in his bedroom at Rideau Hall, the Governor-General's residence in Ottawa, she noticed how he twisted and turned to find some flesh to support his emaciated frame. One of the model lives of the belated British Empire was coming to an end in the cold Canadian sunshine. John Buchan was sixty-four years of age, had written ninety-seven books, including a thriller a year since 1922, had just signed Canada's declaration of war and sent three sons off to fight Germans, and in a few weeks would be dead.

John Buchan was a good viceroy: the best of the British, as the Canadians like to say. Though he had been in pain from duodenal ulcers since 1916 – 'My innards are not good,' he wrote to a friend in 1938 – he soldiered on, spinning out a couple of poached eggs through the long official dinners lest the footmen see His Excellency had finished and whip all the plates away. Confined to stifling ceremonial and good works, warned off politics and Canada's foreign relations by Mackenzie King, the Canadian Prime Minister, John Buchan made incessant journeys all over Canada and came to know and admire the country as no Governor-General before him.

With his writer's curiosity, John Buchan did not feign interest in the pedigree bulls, milk-condensing plants, centenarians, dinosaur remains, juniper-root carvings, native Canadian dances, veterans of old wars, historic occasions and military reviews that were the stuff of Governor-Generals' tours at that

time. For John Buchan, Canada – and, to an extent, the United States – were 'Scotland on an extended scale', the land in which he had been born in 1875 the son of a Church of Scotland minister and a seventeen-year-old hill-farmer's daughter and to which he would not now be returning. In the intervals of his duties, he dictated to Mrs Killick a life of the Roman Emperor Augustus (1937), *The Long Traverse* (1941), a book of Canadian history for children, an autobiography *Memory Hold-the-Door* (1940) and *Sick Heart River* (1941; in the US, *Mountain Meadow*).

On July 20, 1937, John Buchan set off on the most ambitious of his Canadian journeys and one that was to shape his last years and his last book. It was a tour of the north, the direction you take in John Buchan's fiction if you have business with death. Leaving Edmonton by train, at the railhead at Waterways the Governor-General's party transferred to a Hudson's Bay Company stern-wheeler for the journey north down the Athabasca River. Soon after they set off, a float plane came down beside them and out stepped onto the pontoon the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, on assignment to cover the trip for *Life* magazine and dressed amid the viceregal plumes in trousers and a tartan shirt.

John Buchan liked her very much, and let her photograph him in a sort of intense mental solitude, sitting quite still and alone at the back of the crowded smoking-room of the *Athabasca River* playing patience (solitaire), or out on the deck amid the gear, indexing his *Augustus*. 'A long narrow table,' Bourke-White later wrote, 'had been contrived for him with a couple of planks and there he sat with the fluttering little white paper markers of his index all over the place. Our cargo almost swallowed him up. His spare form was all but lost in the midst of the pig crates, the cage of chickens, the tractor, the assortment of agricultural implements that surrounded him. Several times I tiptoed up and photographed his expressive back, but I never interrupted him while he was working.'

At Fort Chipewyan, they passed into the Slave River. After a short portage round the rapids, they transferred to another

stern-wheeler, the *Distributor*, for the thousand-mile journey to the Arctic Ocean. At the Great Slave Lake, they joined the Mackenzie River, stopped at forts and trading posts, met Roman Catholic priests and nuns, traders, trappers and Hudson's Bay officers, saw on the left the dark mass of the Mackenzie Mountains and came out at the vast delta described in a sort of elemental horror in *Sick Heart River*. At Aklavik, John Buchan opened a hospital, then flew over the Great Bear Lake to Coronation Gulf, called on an Inuit family that had brought a neat schooner through the ice of the western Arctic. Returning by way of Alberta and British Columbia, John Buchan flew over the coastal range and saw below him a place that he had half seen and half dreamed since his childhood in the Scottish Borders and his youth in South Africa: a cup in the hills, 'with a lake, a half-moon of wild meadow, and behind it another half-moon of forest'.

Like many invalids, John Buchan pressed out every drop from his experiences. A yacht cruise in the Aegean in the spring of 1910 had been good for several short stories and two novels, *Greenmantle* (1916) and *The Dancing Floor* (1926). All that he had seen in the north – priests, trappers, an Inuit schooner anchored by a sandbank, the Mackenzie Mountains, the sanctuary in the hills – passed into *Sick Heart River*. What John Buchan did not have from his northern tour was an Arctic winter but that, with his usual economy, he supplied from travellers' accounts such as those of the Toronto insurance broker George M. Mitchell in the Yukon (*The Golden Grindstone*, 1935) and from the conversation of his eldest son Johnnie, who had spent the winter of 1938–9 as under-post-manager for the Hudson's Bay Company at Cape Dorset in Baffin Land. It is one of those mysteries of writing that some of the most powerful effects in *Sick Heart River* – indeed, in all John Buchan – are at second hand:

> The cold was more intense than anything he had ever imagined. Under its stress trees cracked with a sound like

> machine-guns. The big morning fire made only a narrow circle of heat. If for a second he turned his face from it the air stung his eyelids as if with an infinity of harsh particles. To draw breath rasped the throat. The sky was milk-pale, the sun a mere ghostly disc, and it seemed to Leithen as if everything – sun, trees, mountains – were red-rimmed. There was no shadow anywhere, no depth or softness. The world was hard, glassy, metallic; all of it except the fantasmal, cotton-wool skies.

If John Buchan had his setting (the North) and his theme (dying), he needed a character. Of the personnel of his thrillers, Richard Hannay was too hale, Archie Roylance too boisterous, Lord Lamancha too shadowy, Dickson McCunn too commercial, Sandy Clanroyden too heroic. That left the lawyer, Sir Edward Leithen, devised thirty years ago – for the short story 'Space' (1912) – when John Buchan himself was trying to make his way at the London Bar. Leithen is 'a man of good commonplace intelligence' who has made a solid success in a legal speciality, financial law, where John Buchan himself had left no mark, a 'philistine lawyer' who nevertheless has an acute flair for the uncanny, a sort of second sight. A bachelor, Leithen will nevertheless go to the ends of the earth for a virtuous young wife in distress, whether Ethel Pitt-Heron in *The Power House* (1916), Lady Pamela Brune in *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932) or Felicity Galliard in *Sick Heart River*. (John Buchan's titles are the best in English after Shakespeare's, but the names of his characters are another matter.)

Above all, John Buchan gave Leithen his illnesses, not now the battle-shocked *taedium vitae* of *John Macnab* (1925) or the neurotic overwork of *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932) but agonising pain and permanent fatigue. Leithen had come out of the Great War in pieces, 'after the Boche made quite a good effort in the way of a gas attack'. The scars on his lungs had become advanced tuberculosis, and *Sick Heart River* opens in the Harley Street consulting room of an eminent doctor who pronounces

that Leithen has scarcely a year to live. Under double sentence of death, both author and character permit themselves that introspection that so struck Lillian Killick.

In a sort of daze, Leithen unwinds all his ties to the Buchanite London of Parliament, Inns of Court, the parks, the Albany, the clubs. Like Charles Ottery in *The Gap in the Curtain*, who views his own death in the columns of *The Times* a year on, Leithen is at first paralysed by his impending extinction. With an effort of pure will, he determines to 'die standing'. Fortunately, his old American friend Blenkiron (*Greenmantle*) turns up in London and asks his help in locating his niece's husband, Francis Galliard, a French-Canadian banker in New York who has walked out on his wife and partners and vanished into the North. Galliard is, in a lapse into John Buchan's old manner, 'too valuable a man' for the United States 'to lose'. Leithen's quest begins in New York, moves on to Quebec, then by air over the Barrens to the shores of the Arctic Ocean and then, on foot, into those dark and mysterious mountains that Buchan had watched from the deck of the *Distributor*, following the track of Galliard and his half-Scots, half-native guide, Lew Frizel. After a nightmare ascent that takes Leithen to the limit of his strength and some distance beyond, he and Lew's brother Johnny find Galliard. Lew himself has abandoned his client and set off in a sort of blind fury to the Sick Heart River – *Rivière du Coeur Malade* – an all but inaccessible canyon as enchanted and deathly as its name. There Leithen manages to bring Lew to his senses and bring him out with the taint of death on them both. On the descent, Leithen miraculously recoups his strength and dares to dream of a British old age in Scotland and the Cotswolds. Hunting to survive, rather than from boredom as in the other books, Leithen drops a caribou stag at three hundred and fifty yards. ('Poorish head,' says Galliard, as if still stuck in *John Macnab*.) As the story moves without flagging to its close, Leithen regains not only his philosophy but also sovereignty over the disposal of his life. He dies standing.

As always, John Buchan's fiction is laced with propaganda.

The parade of Canadian races – the Canuck Galliard, the Roman Catholic brothers, the native Canadians, the *Métis* Frizels – are a call to unity under the shadow of war, as is the transparent flattery of the United States. The Frizels, who have already fought one war in France, are bursting to enlist again in a conflict of whose causes they know nothing and wish to know nothing. ('Seems it's them darned Germans again. And Britain's in it. Likewise Canada.') John Buchan loathed war, but knew this one had to be fought.

Yet for all of this 'official' character, nowhere else in John Buchan's fiction are his conventional attitudes so weak and his heart so strong. John Buchan was a practical man. Unlike his equal in sickness and superior in craft, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Buchan managed to complete his masterpiece and then die. 'In judging another man's life,' wrote Michel de Montaigne, 'I always inquire how he behaved at the last.' On February 6, 1940, while shaving in the tiled bathroom at Rideau Hall, John Buchan suffered a cerebral thrombosis, fell, and struck the back of his head. Transferred to the Neurological Institute in Montreal, he underwent several operations but never regained consciousness and died on February 11, 1940. The world John Buchan knew and, for the most part loved, was extinguished in the war. For some reason known only to the gods of literature, the books he wrote are still read.

James Buchan
February 2007

I

Leithen had been too busy all day to concern himself with the thoughts which hung heavily at the back of his mind. In the morning he had visited his bankers to look into his money affairs. These were satisfactory enough: for years he had been earning a large income and spending little of it; his investments were mostly in trustee stocks; he found that he possessed, at a safe computation, a considerable fortune, while his Cotswold estate would find a ready sale. Next came his solicitors, for he was too wise a man to make the mistake of many barristers and tinker with his own will. He gave instructions for bringing the old one up to date. There were a few legacies by way of mementoes to old friends, a considerable gift to his college, donations to certain charities, and the residue to his nephew Charles, his only near relation.

He forced himself to lunch at one of his clubs, in a corner where no one came near him, though Archie Roylance waved a greeting across the dining-room. Then he spent a couple of hours with his clerk in his Temple chambers, looking through the last of his briefs. There were not a great many, since, for some months, he had been steadily refusing work. The batch of cases for opinion he could soon clear off, and one big case in the Lords he must argue next week, for it involved a point of law in which he had always taken a special interest. The briefs for the following term would be returned. The clerk, who had been with him for thirty years, was getting on in life and would be glad to retire on an ample pension. Still, it was a painful parting.

'It's a big loss to the Bar, Sir Edward, sir,' old Mellon said, 'and it's pretty well the end of things for me. You have been a kind master to me, sir, and I'm proud to have served you. I hope you are going to have many happy years yet.'

But there had been a look of pain in the old man's eyes which told Leithen that he had guessed what he dared not hint at.

He had tea at the House of Commons with the Chief Whip, a youngish man named Ritson, who in the War had been a subaltern in his own battalion. Ritson listened to him with a wrinkled brow and troubled eyes.

'Have you told your local people?' he asked.

'I'll write to them tomorrow. I thought I ought to tell you first. There's no fear of losing the seat. My majority has never been less than six thousand, and there's an excellent candidate ready in young Walmer.'

'We shall miss you terribly, you know. There's no one to take your place.'

Leithen smiled. 'I haven't been pulling my weight lately.'

'Perhaps not. But I'm thinking of what's coming. If there's an election, we're going to win all right, and we'll want you badly in the new Government. It needn't be a law office. You can have your pick of half a dozen jobs. Only yesterday the Chief was speaking to me about you.' And he repeated a conversation he had had with the man who would be the next Prime Minister.

'You're all very kind. But I don't think I want anything. I've done enough, as Napoleon said, "*pour chauffer la gloire.*" '

'Is it your health?' Ritson asked.

'Well, I need a rest. I've been pretty busy all my days and I'm tired.'

The Chief Whip hesitated.

'Things are pretty insecure in the world just now. There may be a crisis any day. Don't you think you ought—'

Leithen smiled.

'I've thought of that. But if I stayed on I could do nothing to help. That isn't a pleasant conclusion to come to, but it's the truth.'

Ritson stood at the door of his room and watched his departing guest going down the corridor to the Central Lobby. He turned to a junior colleague who had joined him—

'I wonder what the devil's the matter! There's been a change in him in the last few months. But he doesn't look a sick man. He was always a bad colour, of course, but Lamancha says he is the hardest fellow he ever knew on the hill.'

The other shook a wise head, 'You never can tell. He had a roughish time in the War and the damage often takes years to come out. I think he's right to slack off, for he must have a gruelling life at the Bar. My father tried to get him the other day as leader in a big case, and he wasn't to be had for love or money. Simply snowed under with work!'

Leithen walked from the House towards his rooms in Down Street. He was still keeping his thoughts shut down, but in spite of himself the familiar streets awakened memories. How often he had tramped them in the far-off days when he was a pupil in chambers and the world was an oyster waiting to be opened. It was a different London then, quieter, cosier, dirtier perhaps, but sweeter smelling. On a summer evening such as this the scents would have been a compound of wood paving, horse-dung, flowers, and fresh paint, not the deadly monotony of petrol. The old land-marks, too, were disappearing. In St James's Street only Mr Lock's modest shop-window and the eighteenth-century façade of Boodle's recalled the London of his youth. He remembered posting up this street with a high heart after he had won his first important case in court . . . and the Saturday afternoon's strolls in it when he had changed his black regimentals for tweeds or flannels . . . and the snowy winter day when a tiny coffin on a gun carriage marked the end of Victoria's reign . . . and the shiny August morning in 1914 when he had been on his way to enlist with a mind half-anxious and half-exulting. He had travelled a good deal in his time, but most of his life had been spent in this square mile of west London. He did not regret the changes; he only noted them. His inner

world was crumbling so fast that he had lost any craving for permanence in the externals of life.

In Piccadilly he felt his knees trembling and called a taxi. In Down Street he took the lift to his rooms, though for thirty years he had made a ritual of climbing the stairs.

The flat was full of powdery sunlight. He sank into a chair at the window to get his breath, and regarded the comfortable, shabby sitting-room. Now that he seemed to be looking at it with new eyes he noted details which familiarity had long obscured. The pictures were school and college groups, one or two mountain photographs, and, over the mantelpiece, Raeburn's portrait of his grandfather. He was very little of a connoisseur, though at Borrowby he had three Vandykes which suited its Jacobean solemnity. There were books everywhere; they overflowed into the dining-room and his bedroom and the little hall. He reflected that what with these, and the law library in his chambers and his considerable collection at Borrowby, he must have at least twenty thousand volumes. He had been happy here, happy and busy, and for a moment – for a moment only – he felt a bitter pang of regret.

But he was still keeping his thoughts at a distance, for the time had not come to face them. Memories took the vacant place. He remembered how often he had left these rooms with a holiday zest, and how he had always returned to them with delight, for this, and not Borrowby, was his true home. How many snug winter nights had he known here, cheerful with books and firelight; and autumn twilights when he was beginning to get into the stride of his work after the long vacation; and spring mornings when the horns of elfland were blowing even in Down Street. He lay back in his chair, shut his eyes, and let his memory wander. There was no harm in that, for the grim self-communion he had still to face would have no room for memories. He almost dozed.

The entry of his man, Cruddock, aroused him.

'Lord Clanroyden called you up, sir. He is in town for the night and suggests that you might dine with him. He said the Turf Club at eight. I was to let him know, sir.'

'Tell him to come here instead. You can produce some kind of a dinner?' Leithen rather welcomed the prospect. Sandy Clanroyden would absorb his attention for an hour or two and postpone for a little the settlement with himself which his soul dreaded.

He had a bath and changed. He had been feeling listless and depressed, but not ill, and the cold shower gave him a momentary sense of vigour and almost an appetite for food. He caught a glimpse of himself naked in the long mirror, and was shocked anew by his leanness. He had given up weighing himself, but it looked as if he had lost pounds in the past month.

Sandy arrived on the stroke of eight. Leithen, as he greeted him, reflected that he was the only one of his closer friends whom he could have borne to meet. Archie Roylance's high spirits would have been intolerable, and Lamancha's air of mastery over life, and Dick Hannay's serene contentment.

He did not miss the sharp glance of his guest when he entered the room. Could some rumours have got abroad? It was clear that Sandy was setting himself to play a part, for his manner had not its usual ease. He was not talking at random, but picking his topics.

A proof was that he did not ask Leithen about his holiday plans, which, near the close of the law term, would have been a natural subject. He seemed to feel that his host's affairs might be delicate ground, and that it was his business to distract his mind from some unhappy preoccupation. So he talked about himself and his recent doings. He had just been to Cambridge to talk to the Explorers' Club, and had come back with strong views about modern youth.

'I'm not happy about the young entry. Oh! I don't mean all of it. There's plenty of lads that remind me of my own old lot. But some of the best seem to have become a bit too much introverted – isn't that the filthy word? What's to be done about the Owlish Young, Ned?'

'I don't see much of youth nowadays,' said Leithen. 'I seem to live among fogies. I'm one myself.'

'Rot! You are far and away the youngest of us.'

Again Leithen caught a swift glance at his face, as if Sandy would have liked to ask him something, but forbore.

'Those boys make me anxious. It's right that they should be serious with the world slipping into chaos, but they need not be owlish. They are so darned solemn about their new little creeds in religion and politics, forgetting that they are as old as the hills. There isn't a ha'porth of humour in the bunch, which means, of course, that there isn't any perspective. If it comes to a show-down I'm afraid they will be pretty feeble folk. People with half their brains and a little sense of humour will make rings round them.'

Leithen must have shown his unconcern about the future of the world by his expression, for Sandy searched for other topics. Spring at Laverlaw had been diviner than ever. Had Leithen heard the curlews this year? No? Didn't he usually make a pilgrimage somewhere to hear them? For northerners they, and not the cuckoo, were the heralds of spring . . . His wife was at Laverlaw, but was coming to London next day. Yes, she was well, but—

Again Leithen saw in the other's face a look of interrogation. He wanted to ask him something, tell him something, but did not feel the moment propitious.

'Her uncle has just turned up here. Apparently there's a bit of family trouble to be settled. You know him, don't you? Blenkiron – John Scantlebury Blenkiron?'

Leithen nodded. 'A little. I was his counsel in the Continental Nickel case some years ago. He's an old friend of yours and Hannay's, isn't he?'

'About the best Dick and I have in the world. Would you like to see him again? I rather think he would like to see you.'

Leithen yawned and said his plans for the immediate future were uncertain.

Just before ten Sandy took his leave, warned by his host's obvious fatigue. He left the impression that he had come to dinner to say something which he had thought had better be left

unsaid, and Leithen, when he looked at his face in his dressing-table mirror, knew the reason. It was the face of a very sick man.

That night he had meant, before going to sleep, to have it out with himself. But he found that a weary body had made his brain incapable of coherent thought, so he tumbled into bed.

2

The reckoning came six hours later, when his bedroom was brightening with the fore-glow of a June dawn. He awoke, as he usually did nowadays, sweating and short of breath. He got up and laved his face with cold water. When he lay down again he knew that the moment had arrived.

Recent events had been confused in a cloud of misery, and he had to disengage the details . . . There was no one moment to which he could point when his health had begun to fail. Two years before he had had a very hard summer at the Bar, complicated by the chairmanship of a Royal Commission, and a trip to Norway for the August sea trout had been disastrous. He had returned still a little fatigued. He no longer got up in the morning with a certain uplift of spirit, work seemed duller and more laborious, food less appetising, sleep more imperative but less refreshing.

During that winter he had had a bout of influenza for the first time in his life. After it he had dragged his wing for a month or two, but had seemed to pick up in the spring when he had had a trip to Provence with the Clanroydens. But the hot summer had given him a set-back, and when he went shooting with Lamancha in the autumn he found to his dismay that he had become short of breath and that the hills were too steep for him. Also he was clearly losing weight. So on his return to London he sought out Acton Croke and had himself examined. The great doctor had been ominously grave. Our fathers, he said, had talked unscientifically about the 'grand climacteric,' which came in the early sixties, but there was such a thing as a climacteric which might come any time in middle life, when the physical powers