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Opening Extract from...

The Three Hostages

Written by John Buchan

Introduction by Christopher Hitchens

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Introduction

I began to read John Buchan half a century ago and I still return at intervals to take up his work again. If I ask myself why I do this I find myself asking (and being asked) many other questions as well. Isn't Buchan really a *Boy's Own* author, replete with pluck and derring-do and husky Scout-like sincerity? Wasn't he a bit of a bigot and even an anti-Semite? Don't his values represent the vanished Empire in whose service he toiled until his death as a Governor-General?

I think one can mount a reasoned defence of sorts on all these fronts. First, Buchan's heroes are not Baden-Powell types or 'children ardent for some desperate glory', as Wilfred Owen phrased it. They are very much grown men, as often as not with a serious and continuing consciousness of their own mortality. (And also of their bodily frailty: one sometimes thinks that Buchan would have given half his royalties to be more physically robust.)

Second, although it is true that Buchan betrays some marked 'race and class' prejudices that were common in his time – and one must not make that into a plea, since there were many contemporaries who did *not* share such an outlook – it is quite impossible to imagine him doing somebody an injury or an injustice on grounds of their social or ethnic origin. (Contrast Richard Hannay, for example, with the appalling bully and sadist and racist Bulldog Drummond). He greatly admired E. Phillips Oppenheim as a writer, and disliked and distrusted Britain's leading anti-Semite A.J. Balfour.

Third, Buchan's sense of the British Empire may have been quixotic and old-fashioned even for its time, but the virtues he

thought he admired in it – of thrift and courage and modesty and self-sacrifice – are by no means exclusively imperial ones. I am reminded of what Lionel Trilling wrote about George Orwell:

> He clung with a kind of wry, grim pride to the old ways of the last class that had ruled the old order. He must sometimes have wondered how it came about that he should be praising sportsmanship and gentlemanliness and dutifulness and physical courage. He seems to have thought, and very likely he was right, that they might come in handy as revolutionary virtues . . .

Now think of Buchan and his respect for the Red Clydesiders, or the Gorbals Die-Hards. (Of course, Orwell tended to dislike and suspect the Scots and their commercial role in the Empire, so he would have been at odds with Buchan from the first. Yet I think the point stands.)

But it is precisely because of an element of Scottishness – or rather because of contrasting elements of Scottishness – that Buchan retains his grip on readers. What are these contrasts? Well, the Scots are famed simultaneously for their dourness, stoicism and economy, and for their passionate, rebellious romanticism. (Robert Burns was an exciseman, if you want to put it another way. If you want to put it still another way, bear in mind that it was Buchan as a wartime propaganda bureaucrat who suggested to the American reporter Lowell Thomas that he might take a look at the irregular warfare being waged against the Turks by T.E. Lawrence.) In Buchan himself and in his characters, this duality was permanent. His heroes take a good bit of dislodging from the settled habits of their 'wee bit hill and glen' but, once mustered or induced into action, will not sheath the sword until the battle or quest or pilgrimage has been thoroughly finished.

Finally there is the quality in Buchan which was noticed by Graham Greene in his review of *Sick Heart River*: the

'completeness' in his tales of 'the world they describe' and the 'enormous dramatic value of adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men . . . the death that may come to us by the railings of the Park'. Conspicuously this is true of the reticent Richard Hannay, hero and narrator of *The Three Hostages*. In this story, all of Buchan's strengths and weaknesses are on show. Hannay himself is a kind of Cincinnatus, retired to his farm and no longer desirous of serving the nation unless summonsed to the task. Within the first few pages he is being told of 'seedy little gangs of communist Jews' who threaten civilisation. But then he is approached by a highly sophisticated and sympathetic Jew named Julius Victor, whose daughter is among the three kidnapped young people who give the book its title. Victor appeals to Hannay as a 'Christian gentleman'. It becomes obvious that the latter's protestations about seeking a quiet life are only stated in order to be overcome.

The police show Hannay a riddle or 'key', not unlike the one that opens *Greenmantle*, which contains the clue to the plot and has apparently been devised as a taunt or torture by the kidnapper. Thus far, then, the strengths. We are drawn in. However, the dark mystery and the railings of the Park are perhaps too swiftly interwoven. In only a few moments Hannay's local hunting-and-shooting friend has proposed that he meet Dominick Medina: poet and intellectual as well as warrior – 'in southern Russia' – and MP. A mention of him being sighted on 'the Yarkand', a remote river on the Chinese border, at once promotes him to the company of Sandy Arbuthnot and the other adventurers and explorers: men who, as Saki once phrased it, 'wolves have sniffed at'.

Medina is one of Buchan's more considerable villains, possessed of a very strong attraction–repulsion quotient. At first acquaintance a polymath and paragon, he is awarded two fatal flaws, one of which I give nothing away by mentioning: he has a head as round as a cannonball and the vanity to comb his hair so as to conceal the fact. This grotesquerie is a nice touch. His second flaw, on which I will not elaborate, involves

an almost flabbergasting hubris, amounting at times to a virtual indifference to self-preservation.

One no more objects to the early resurfacing of old Sandy, and of the trusty Archie Roylance, than one would to the obligatory consultation with Dr Watson. (One does not object, if it comes to that, to 'Medina' as a name to follow Moriarty or even Macavity as the Napoleon of Crime.) It can be comforting to see the old cast being reassembled – not overlooking Hannay's absolute brick of a wife, Mary. The slight difficulty here is with motive. The villains of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *Greenmantle* and *Mr Standfast* had clear enough objectives – the destruction of British power from within and without – even if they used occult measures to pursue them. Dominick Medina's aims and motives go unexplained, and if he really wishes to encompass the victory of Bolshevism and anarchy then it is perhaps surprising that he should have fought so hard against it with the White Russian forces.

In a way, the plot is a play-within-a-play, since Hannay's friend Dr Greenslade opens the action by suggesting the formula for what used to be called a 'shocker'. In essence, all that is required is a set of wildly discrepant characters and locales, chosen at random and then woven together retrospectively by the teller. It might be objected that Buchan/Hannay follow this prompting too literally. But at least two of the familiar Buchan tropes are given a serious workout: the lure of the pure, cold, true North, always so much preferable to him than the exotic and scented East or South, and the reassurance of integrity and soundness that is provided by Clubland. Thus armoured, Sir Richard is proof against the sinuous and seductive Medina – but only just proof. There are moments in the story when he has to pretend to be under a spell, and moments when he seems actually to be enchanted, bewitched and robbed of all volition.

Mention of witchcraft brings one to the subject of Buchan and women. His refusal of sexuality as a theme is a very large sacrifice for a thriller-writer, but he compensates in more than one book by a very strong invocation of what one might call

the feminine principle, or effect. One remembers Hilda von Einem in *Greenmantle*, while in *The Three Hostages* the most powerful invocation of magic and mystery is in the mother on whom Medina is fixated, a woman whose hands, 'delicate and shapely' as they were, 'had also the suggestion of a furious power, like the talons of a bird of prey'. Through the fog of his quasi-hypnotised condition, Hannay realises that Medina, too, is in thrall to a still-greater guru from the wilds of the Khyber Pass. A huge clue to the real identity of this shaman or prophet is furnished very early on, but not everybody 'gets' it, and I shall not spoil it for you.

Without the Club, where would Hannay be? In Chapter XIV he has a reunion, after a long and arduous separation, with his young and vivacious wife Mary. At the end of the evening he asks her to keep him informed of any further news from Sandy and then without loss of time walks straight back to his Club. A few pages later he tells her that 'the only chance is the Club' – the only chance being the leaving of any telephone messages with the Club's head porter. This is asexuality raised almost to the level of art. (There are, as usual with Hannay, a number of manly shudders even at the idea of homosexuality.)

In a fashion, though, *The Three Hostages* is more 'modern' than its narrator. It is true that post-World War I Britain was infected with a number of neuroses, spiritualist cults and manifestations of a disordered unconscious: an atmosphere of anomie and alienation on which demagogues tried to feed. There were also premonitions of another war that would make the first one seem like what it was – a dress-rehearsal. The decent German who Hannay meets on the Norwegian leg of his quest is full of prescience:

> He said that Germany was no place for a moderate man, and that the power lay with the bloated industrials, who were piling up fortunes abroad while they were wrecking their country at home. The only opposition, he said, came from the communists, who were half-witted, and

> the monarchists, who wanted the impossible. 'Reason is not listened to, and I fear there is no salvation until my poor people have passed through the last extremity. You foreign powers have hastened our destruction, when you had it in your hands to save us.'

Not bad for 1924, and it avoids any race-theory or paranoia.

On at least two occasions Hannay quite unironically employs the famous phrase from Sir Henry Newbolt's 1897 poem *Vitai Lampada*, about the moral imperative of 'playing the game'. And this is another thing that marks Buchan off from other practitioners of the 'shocker' genre. He never takes any undue interest in revenge, let alone in cruelty. The most the young hostage in Norway wants to do, after an especially vile imprisonment, is to deliver a single clean uppercut to his captor. The most that Hannay wants to do, after unmasking and thwarting Medina, is to go back to his family and his estates. He almost feels pity for the man he has beaten. The most the police can do – this is something that the thriller mode has depended upon ever since Conan Doyle – is confess their impotence. Thus there must be a denouement, and it must shift the scene to the wild and lonely places north of the border, where the game can be properly and fairly played, right to the end.

So this, perhaps, is why one continues to read John Buchan. Remember the subtitle of Andrew Lownie's 2004 biography of him? It was 'The Presbyterian Cavalier' – a nicely paradoxical phrasing that had attached itself to Buchan's hero James Graham, 1st Marquis of Montrose. Never more than in *The Three Hostages* does Richard Hannay exemplify the stoic, cautious, prosaic Protestant virtues while managing to combine them with the life of a gallant and chivalrous loner. The day will probably not come when we quite cease to be stirred by this.

Christopher Hitchens
Washington DC

ONE

Doctor Greenslade Theorizes

That evening, I remember, as I came up through the Mill Meadow, I was feeling peculiarly happy and contented. It was still mid-March, one of those spring days when noon is like May, and only the cold pearly haze at sunset warns a man that he is not done with winter. The season was absurdly early, for the blackthorn was in flower and the hedge roots were full of primroses. The partridges were paired, the rooks were well on with their nests, and the meadows were full of shimmering grey flocks of fieldfares on their way north. I put up half a dozen snipe on the boggy edge of the stream, and in the bracken in Stern Wood I thought I saw a woodcock, and hoped that the birds might nest with us this year, as they used to do long ago. It was jolly to see the world coming to life again, and to remember that this patch of England was my own, and all these wild things, so to speak, members of my little household.

As I say, I was in a very contented mood, for I had found something I had longed for all my days. I had bought Fosse Manor just after the War as a wedding present for Mary, and for two and a half years we had been settled there. My son, Peter John, was rising fifteen months, a thoughtful infant, as healthy as a young colt and as comic as a terrier puppy. Even Mary's anxious eye could scarcely detect in him any symptoms of decline. But the place wanted a lot of looking to, for it had run wild during the War, and the woods had to be thinned, gates and fences repaired, new drains laid, a ram put in to supplement the wells, a heap of thatching to be done, and the garden borders to be brought back to cultivation. I had got through the worst of it, and as I came out of the Home Wood on to the lower lawns and

saw the old stone gables that the monks had built, I felt that I was anchored at last in the pleasantest kind of harbour.

There was a pile of letters on the table in the hall, but I let them be, for I was not in the mood for any communication with the outer world. As I was having a hot bath Mary kept giving me the news through her bedroom door. Peter John had been raising Cain over a first tooth; the new shorthorn cow was drying off; old George Whaddon had got his grand-daughter back from service; there was a new brood of runner-ducks; there was a missel-thrush building in the box hedge by the lake. A chronicle of small beer, you will say, but I was by a long chalk more interested in it than in what might be happening in Parliament or Russia or the Hindu Kush. The fact is I was becoming such a mossback that I had almost stopped reading the papers. Many a day *The Times* would remain unopened, for Mary never looked at anything but the first page to see who was dead or married. Not that I didn't read a lot, for I used to spend my evenings digging into county history, and learning all I could about the old fellows who had been my predecessors. I liked to think that I lived in a place that had been continuously inhabited for a thousand years. Cavalier and Round-head had fought over the countryside, and I was becoming a considerable authority on their tiny battles. That was about the only interest I had left in soldiering.

As we went downstairs, I remember we stopped to look out of the long staircase window which showed a segment of lawn, a corner of the lake, and through a gap in the woods a vista of green downland. Mary squeezed my arm. 'What a blessed country,' she said. 'Dick, did you ever dream of such peace? We're lucky, lucky people.'

Then suddenly her face changed in that way she has and grew very grave. I felt a little shiver run along her arm.

'It's too good and beloved to last,' she whispered. 'Sometimes I am afraid.'

'Nonsense,' I laughed. 'What's going to upset it? I don't believe in being afraid of happiness.' I knew very well, of course, that Mary couldn't be afraid of anything.

She laughed too. 'All the same I've got what the Greeks called *aidos*. You don't know what that means, you old savage. It means that you feel you must walk humbly and delicately to propitiate the Fates. I wish I knew how.'

She walked too delicately, for she missed the last step and our descent ended in an undignified shuffle right into the arms of Dr Greenslade.

Paddock – I had got Paddock back after the War, and he was now my butler – was helping the doctor out of his ulster, and I saw by the satisfied look on the latter's face that he was through with his day's work and meant to stay to dinner. Here I had better introduce Tom Greenslade, for of all my recent acquaintances he was the one I had most taken to. He was a long lean fellow with a stoop in his back from bending over the handles of motor-bicycles, with reddish hair, and the greeny-blue eyes and freckled skin that often accompany that kind of hair. From his high cheek-bones and his colouring you would have set him down as a Scotsman, but as a matter of fact he came from Devonshire – Exmoor, I think, though he had been so much about the world that he had almost forgotten where he was raised. I have travelled a bit, but nothing to Greenslade. He had started as a doctor in a whaling ship. Then he had been in the South African War and afterwards a temporary magistrate up Lydenburg way. He soon tired of that, and was for a long spell in Uganda and German East, where he became rather a swell on tropical diseases, and nearly perished through experimenting on himself with fancy inoculations. Then he was in South America, where he had a good practice in Valparaiso, and then in the Malay States, where he made a bit of money in the rubber boom. There was a gap of three years after that when he was wandering about Central Asia, partly with a fellow called Duckett exploring Northern Mongolia, and partly in Chinese Tibet hunting for new flowers, for he was mad about botany. He came home in the summer of 1914, meaning to do some laboratory research work, but the War swept him up and he went to France as M.O. of a territorial battalion. He got wounded of course, and after a spell in hospital

went out to Mesopotamia, where he stayed till the Christmas of 1918, sweating hard at his job but managing to tumble into a lot of varied adventures, for he was at Baku with Dunsterville and got as far as Tashkent, where the Bolsheviks shut him up for a fortnight in a bath-house. During the War he had every kind of sickness, for he missed no experience, but nothing seemed to damage permanently his whipcord physique. He told me that his heart and lungs and blood pressure were as good as a lad's of twenty-one, though by this time he was on the wrong side of forty.

But when the War was over he hankered for a quiet life, so he bought a practice in the deepest and greenest corner of England. He said his motive was the same as that which in the rackety Middle Ages made men retire into monasteries; he wanted quiet and leisure to consider his soul. Quiet he may have found, but uncommon little leisure, for I never heard of a country doctor that toiled at his job as he did. He would pay three visits a day to a panel patient, which shows the kind of fellow he was; and he would be out in the small hours at the birth of a gipsy child under a hedge. He was a first-class man in his profession, and kept abreast of it, but doctoring was only one of a thousand interests. I never met a chap with such an insatiable curiosity about everything in heaven and earth. He lived in two rooms in a farmhouse some four miles from us, and I dare say he had several thousand books about him. All day, and often half the night, he would scour the country in his little run-about car, and yet, when he would drop in to see me and have a drink after maybe twenty visits, he was as full of beans as if he had just got out of bed. Nothing came amiss to him in talk – birds, beasts, flowers, books, politics, religion – everything in the world except himself. He was the best sort of company, for behind all his quickness and cleverness you felt that he was solid bar-gold. But for him I should have taken root in the soil and put out shoots, for I have a fine natural talent for vegetating. Mary strongly approved of him and Peter John adored him.

He was in tremendous spirits that evening, and for once in a way gave us reminiscences of his past. He told us about the people he badly wanted to see again: an Irish Spaniard up in the north of the Argentine who had for cattle-men a most murderous brand of native from the mountains, whom he used to keep in good humour by arranging fights every Sunday, he himself taking on the survivor with his fists and always knocking him out; a Scots trader from Hankow who had turned Buddhist priest and intoned his prayers with a strong Glasgow accent; and most of all a Malay pirate, who, he said, was a sort of St Francis with beasts, though a perfect Nero with his fellow-men. That took him to Central Asia, and he observed that if ever he left England again he would make for those parts, since they were the refuge of all the superior rascality of creation. He had a notion that something very odd might happen there in the long run. 'Think of it!' he cried. 'All the places with names like spells – Bokhara, Samarkand – run by seedy little gangs of communist Jews. It won't go on for ever. Some day a new Genghis Khan or a Timour will be thrown up out of the maelstrom. Europe is confused enough, but Asia is ancient Chaos.'

After dinner we sat round the fire in the library, which I had modelled on Sir Walter Bullivant's room in his place on the Kennet, as I had promised myself seven years ago. I had meant it for my own room where I could write and read and smoke, but Mary would not allow it. She had a jolly panelled sitting-room of her own upstairs, which she rarely entered; but though I chased her away, she was like a hen in a garden and always came back, so that presently she had staked out a claim on the other side of my writing-table. I have the old hunter's notion of order, but it was useless to strive with Mary, so now my desk was littered with her letters and needlework, and Peter John's toys and picture-books were stacked in the cabinet where I kept my fly-books, and Peter John himself used to make a kraal every morning inside an upturned stool on the hearth-rug.

It was a cold night and very pleasant by the fireside, where some scented logs from an old pear-tree were burning. The

doctor picked up a detective novel I had been reading, and glanced at the title-page.

'I can read most things,' he said, 'but it beats me how you waste time over such stuff. These shockers are too easy, Dick. You could invent better ones for yourself.'

'Not I. I call that a dashed ingenious yarn. I can't think how the fellow does it.'

'Quite simple. The author writes the story inductively, and the reader follows it deductively. Do you see what I mean?'

'Not a bit,' I replied.

'Look here. I want to write a shocker, so I begin by fixing on one or two facts which have no sort of obvious connection.'

'For example?'

'Well, imagine anything you like. Let us take three things a long way apart—' He paused for a second to consider – 'say, an old blind woman spinning in the Western Highlands, a barn in a Norwegian *saeter*, and a little curiosity shop in North London kept by a Jew with a dyed beard. Not much connection between the three? You invent a connection – simple enough if you have any imagination, and you weave all three into the yarn. The reader, who knows nothing about the three at the start, is puzzled and intrigued and, if the story is well arranged, finally satisfied. He is pleased with the ingenuity of the solution, for he doesn't realize that the author fixed upon the solution first, and then invented a problem to suit it.'

'I see,' I said. 'You've gone and taken the gilt off my favourite light reading. I won't be able any more to marvel at the writer's cleverness.'

'I've another objection to the stuff – it's not ingenious enough, or rather it doesn't take account of the infernal complexity of life. It might have been all right twenty years ago, when most people argued and behaved fairly logically. But they don't nowadays. Have you ever realized, Dick, the amount of stark craziness that the War has left in the world?'

Mary, who was sitting sewing under a lamp, raised her head and laughed.

Greenslade's face had become serious. 'I can speak about it frankly here, for you two are almost the only completely sane people I know. Well, as a pathologist, I'm fairly staggered. I hardly meet a soul who hasn't got some slight kink in his brain as a consequence of the last seven years. With most people it's rather a pleasant kink – they're less settled in their grooves, and they see the comic side of things quicker, and are readier for adventure. But with some it's *pukka* madness, and that means crime. Now, how are you going to write detective stories about that kind of world on the old lines? You can take nothing for granted, as you once could, and your argus-eyed lightning-brained expert has nothing solid with which to build his foundations.'

I observed that the poor old War seemed to be getting blamed for a good deal that I was taught in my childhood was due to original sin.

'Oh, I'm not questioning your Calvinism. Original sin is always there, but the meaning of civilization was that we had got it battened down under hatches, whereas now it's getting its head up. But it isn't only sin. It's a dislocation of the mechanism of human reasoning, a general loosening of screws. Oddly enough, in spite of parrot-talk about shell-shock, the men who fought suffer less from it on the whole than other people. The classes that shirked the War are the worst – you see it in Ireland. Every doctor nowadays has got to be a bit of a mental pathologist. As I say, you can hardly take anything for granted, and if you want detective stories that are not childish fantasy, you'll have to invent a new kind. Better try your hand, Dick.'

'Not I. I'm a lover of sober facts.'

'But, hang it, man, the facts are no longer sober. I could tell you—' He paused and I was expecting a yarn, but he changed his mind.

'Take all this chatter about psycho-analysis. There's nothing very new in the doctrine, but people are beginning to work it out into details, and making considerable asses of themselves

in the process. It's an awful thing when a scientific truth becomes the quarry of the half-baked. But as I say, the fact of the subconscious self is as certain as the existence of lungs and arteries.'

'I don't believe that Dick has any subconscious self,' said Mary.

'Oh yes, he has. Only, people who have led his kind of life have their ordinary self so well managed and disciplined – their wits so much about them, as the phrase goes – that the subconscious rarely gets a show. But I bet if Dick took to thinking about his soul, which he never does, he would find some queer corners. Take my own case.' He turned towards me so that I had a full view of his candid eyes and hungry cheek-bones which looked prodigious in the firelight. 'I belong more or less to the same totem as you, but I've long been aware that I possessed a most curious kind of subconsciousness. I've a good memory and fair powers of observation, but they're nothing to those of my subconscious self. Take any daily incident. I see and hear, say, about a twentieth part of the details and remember about a hundredth part – that is, assuming that there is nothing special to stimulate my interest. But my subconscious self sees and hears practically everything, and remembers most of it. Only I can't use the memory for I don't know that I've got it, and can't call it into being when I wish. But every now and then something happens to turn on the tap of the subconscious, and a thin trickle comes through. I find myself sometimes remembering names I was never aware of having heard, and little incidents and details I had never consciously noticed. Imagination, you will say; but it isn't, for everything that that inner memory provides is exactly true. I've tested it. If I could only find some way of tapping it at will, I should be an uncommonly efficient fellow. Incidentally I should become the first scientist of the age, for the trouble with investigation and experiment is that the ordinary brain does not observe sufficiently keenly or remember the data sufficiently accurately.'

'That's interesting,' I said. 'I'm not at all certain I haven't noticed the same thing in myself. But what has that to do with the madness that you say is infecting the world?'

'Simply this. The barriers between the conscious and the subconscious have always been pretty stiff in the average man. But now with the general loosening of screws they are growing shaky and the two worlds are getting mixed. It is like two separate tanks of fluid, where the containing wall has worn into holes, and one is percolating into the other. The result is confusion, and, if the fluids are of a certain character, explosions. That is why I say that you can't any longer take the clear psychology of most civilized human beings for granted. Something is welling up from primeval deeps to muddy it.'

'I don't object to that,' I said. 'We've overdone civilization, and personally I'm all for a little barbarism. I want a simpler world.'

'Then you won't get it,' said Greenslade. He had become very serious now, and was looking towards Mary as he talked. 'The civilized is far simpler than the primeval. All history has been an effort to make definitions, clear rules of thought, clear rules of conduct, solid sanctions, by which we can conduct our life. These are the work of the conscious self. The subconscious is an elementary and lawless thing. If it intrudes on life two results must follow. There will be a weakening of the power of reasoning, which after all is the thing that brings men nearest to the Almighty. And there will be a failure of nerve.'

I got up to get a light, for I was beginning to feel depressed by the doctor's diagnosis of our times. I don't know whether he was altogether serious, for he presently started on fishing, which was one of his many hobbies. There was very fair dry-fly fishing to be had in our little river, but I had taken a deer-forest with Archie Roylance for the season, and Greenslade was coming up with me to try his hand at salmon. There had been no sea-trout the year before in the West Highlands, and we fell to discussing the cause. He was ready with a dozen theories, and we forgot about the psychology of mankind in investigating

the uncanny psychology of fish. After that Mary sang to us, for I considered any evening a failure without that, and at half-past ten the doctor got into his old ulster and departed.

As I smoked my last pipe I found my thoughts going over Greenslade's talk. I had found a snug harbour, but how yeasty the waters seemed to be outside the bar and how erratic the tides! I wondered if it wasn't shirking to be so comfortable in a comfortless world. Then I reflected that I was owed a little peace, for I had had a roughish life. But Mary's words kept coming back to me about 'walking delicately'. I considered that my present conduct filled that bill, for I was mighty thankful for my mercies and in no way inclined to tempt Providence by complacency.

Going up to bed, I noticed my neglected letters on the hall table. I turned them over and saw that they were mostly bills and receipts or tradesmen's circulars. But there was one addressed in a handwriting that I knew, and as I looked at it I experienced a sudden sinking of the heart. It was from Lord Artinswell – Sir Walter Bullivant, as was – who had now retired from the Foreign Office, and was living at his place on the Kennet. He and I occasionally corresponded about farming and fishing, but I had a premonition that this was something different. I waited for a second or two before I opened it.

> My Dear Dick,
>
> This note is in the nature of a warning. In the next day or two you will be asked, nay pressed, to undertake a troublesome piece of business. I am not responsible for the request, but I know of it. If you consent, it will mean the end for a time of your happy vegetable life. I don't want to influence you one way or another; I only give you notice of what is coming in order that you may adjust your mind and not be taken by surprise. My love to Mary and the son.
>
> Yours ever,
>
> A.

That was all. I had lost my trepidation and felt very angry. Why couldn't the fools let me alone? As I went upstairs I vowed that not all the cajolery in the world would make me budge an inch from the path I had set myself. I had done enough for the public service and other people's interests, and it was jolly well time that I should be allowed to attend to my own.