

PRESTER
JOHN
JOHN BUCHAN

PRESTER JOHN

TO
LIONEL PHILLIPS.

*Time, they say, must the best of us capture,
And travel and battle and gems and gold
No more can kindle the ancient rapture,
For even the youngest of hearts grows old.
But in you, I think, the boy is not over;
So take this medley of ways and wars
As the gift of a friend and a fellow-lover
Of the fairest country under the stars.*

J. B.

CONTENTS.

I. THE MAN ON THE KIRKCAPLE SHORE	7
II. FURTH ! FORTUNE !	28
III. BLAAUWILDEBEESTEFONTEIN . . .	52
IV. MY JOURNEY TO THE WINTER-VELD	70
V. MR. WARDLAW HAS A PREMONITION	88
VI. THE DRUMS BEAT AT SUNSET . . .	100
VII. CAPTAIN ARCOLL TELLS A TALE . .	117
VIII. I FALL IN AGAIN WITH THE REVEREND JOHN LAPUTA	143
IX. THE STORE AT UMVELO'S'	155
X. I GO TREASURE-HUNTING	170
XI. THE CAVE OF THE ROOIRAND . . .	180
XII. CAPTAIN ARCOLL SENDS A MESSAGE .	196
XIII. THE DRIFT OF THE LETABA . . .	216
XIV. I CARRY THE COLLAR OF PRESTER JOHN	225
XV. MORNING IN THE BERG	242

XVI.	INANDA'S KRAAL	255
XVII.	A DEAL AND ITS CONSEQUENCES	272
XVIII.	HOW A MAN MAY SOMETIMES PUT HIS TRUST IN A HORSE	291
XIX.	ARCOLL'S SHEPHERDING	303
XX.	MY LAST SIGHT OF THE REVEREND JOHN LAPUTA	319
XXI.	I CLIMB THE CRAGS A SECOND TIME	335
XXII.	A GREAT PERIL AND A GREAT SALVATION	352
XXIII.	MY UNCLE'S GIFT IS MANY TIMES MULTIPLIED	367

PRESTER JOHN.

Chapter I.

THE MAN ON THE KIRKCAPLE SHORE.

I MIND as if it were yesterday my first sight of the man. Little I knew at the time how big the moment was with destiny, or how often that face seen in the fitful moonlight would haunt my sleep and disturb my waking hours. But I mind yet the cold grue of terror I got from it, a terror which was surely more than the due of a few truant lads breaking the Sabbath with their play.

The town of Kirkcaple, of which and its adjacent parish of Portincross my father was the minister, lies on a hillside above the little bay of Caple, and looks squarely out on the North Sea. Round the horns of land which enclose the bay

原書缺頁

原書缺頁

the coast shows on either side a battlement of stark red cliffs through which a burn or two makes a pass to the water's edge. The bay itself is ringed with fine clean sands, where we lads of the burgh school loyed to bathe in the warm weather. But on long holidays the sport was to go farther afield among the cliffs ; for there there were many deep caves and pools, where podleys might be caught with the line, and hid treasures sought for at the expense of the skin of the knees and the buttons of the trousers. Many a long Saturday I have passed in a crinkle of the cliffs, having lit a fire of driftwood, and made believe that I was a smuggler or a Jacobite new landed from France. There was a band of us in Kirkcable, lads of my own age, including Archie Leslie, the son of my father's session-clerk, and Tam Dyke, the provost's nephew. We were sealed to silence by the blood oath, and we bore each the name of some historic pirate or sailorman. I was Paul Jones, Tam was Captain Kidd, and Archie, need I say it, was Morgan himself. Our tryst was a cave where a little water called the Dyve Burn had cut its way through the cliffs to the sea. There we forgathered in the summer evenings

and of a Saturday afternoon in winter, and told mighty tales of our prowess and flattered our silly hearts. But the sober truth is that our deeds were of the humblest, and a dozen of fish or a handful of apples was all our booty, and our greatest exploit a fight with the roughs at the Dyve tan-work.

My father's spring Communion fell on the last Sabbath of April, and on the particular Sabbath of which I speak the weather was mild and bright for the time of year. I had been surfeited with the Thursday's and Saturday's services, and the two long diets of worship on the Sabbath were hard for a lad of twelve to bear with the spring in his bones and the sun slanting through the gallery window. There still remained the service on the Sabbath evening—a doleful prospect, for the Rev. Mr. Murdoch of Kilchristie, noted for the length of his discourses, had exchanged pulpits with my father. So my mind was ripe for the proposal of Archie Leslie, on our way home to tea, that by a little skill we might give the kirk the slip. At our Communion the pews were emptied of their regular occupants and the congregation seated itself as it pleased. The manse seat was

full of the Kirkcable relations of Mr. Murdoch, who had been invited there by my mother to hear him, and it was not hard to obtain permission to sit with Archie and Tam Dyke in the cock-loft in the gallery. Word was sent to Tam, and so it happened that three abandoned lads duly passed the plate and took their seats in the cock-loft. But when the bell had done jowing, and we heard by the sounds of their feet that the elders had gone in to the kirk, we slipped down the stairs and out of the side door. We were through the churchyard in a twinkling, and hot-foot on the road to the Dyve Burn.

It was the fashion of the genteel in Kirkcable to put their boys into what were known as Eton suits—long trousers, cut-away jackets, and chimney-pot hats. I had been one of the earliest victims, and well I remember how I fled home from the Sabbath school with the snowballs of the town roughs rattling off my chimney-pot. Archie had followed, his family being in all things imitators of mine. We were now clothed in this wearisome garb, so our first care was to secrete safely our hats in a marked spot under some whin bushes on the links. Tam was free from the bondage of fashion,

and wore his ordinary best knickerbockers. From inside his jacket he unfolded his special treasure, which was to light us on our expedition—an evil-smelling old tin lantern with a shutter.

Tam was of the Free Kirk persuasion, and as his Communion fell on a different day from ours, he was spared the bondage of church attendance from which Archie and I had revolted. But notable events had happened that day in his church. A black man, the Rev. John Something-or-other, had been preaching. Tam was full of the portent. "A nigger," he said, "a great black chap as big as your father, Archie." He seemed to have banged the bookboard with some effect, and had kept Tam, for once in his life, awake. He had preached about the heathen in Africa, and how a black man was as good as a white man in the sight of God, and he had forecast a day when the negroes would have something to teach the British in the way of civilization. So at any rate ran the account of Tam Dyke, who did not share the preacher's views. "It's all nonsense, Davie. The Bible says that the children of Ham were to be our servants. If I were the minister I wouldn't let a nigger into the pulpit.

I wouldn't let him farther than the Sabbath school."

Night fell as we came to the broomy spaces of the links, and ere we had breasted the slope of the neck which separates Kirkcable Bay from the cliffs it was as dark as an April evening with a full moon can be. Tam would have had it darker. He got out his lantern, and after a prodigious waste of matches kindled the candle-end inside, turned the dark shutter, and trotted happily on. We had no need of his lighting till the Dyve Burn was reached and the path began to descend steeply through the rift in the crags.

It was here we found that some one had gone before us. Archie was great in those days at tracking, his ambition running in Indian paths. He would walk always with his head bent and his eyes on the ground, whereby he several times found lost coins and once a trinket dropped by the provost's wife. At the edge of the burn, where the path turns downward, there is a patch of shingle washed up by some spate. Archie was on his knees in a second. "Lads," he cried, "there's spoor here;" and then after some nosing, "it's a man's track, going downward, a big man with flat

feet. It's fresh, too, for it crosses the damp bit of gravel, and the water has scarcely filled the holes yet."

We did not dare to question Archie's woodcraft, but it puzzled us who the stranger could be. In summer weather you might find a party of picnickers here, attracted by the fine hard sands at the burn mouth. But at this time of night and season of the year there was no call for any one to be trespassing on our preserves. No fishermen came this way, the lobster-pots being all to the east, and the stark headland of the Red Neb made the road to them by the water's edge difficult. The tan-work lads used to come now and then for a swim, but you would not find a tan-work lad bathing on a chill April night. Yet there was no question where our precursor had gone. He was making for the shore. Tam unshuttered his lantern, and the steps went clearly down the corkscrew path. "Maybe he is after our cave. We'd better go cannily."

The glim was dowsed—the words were Archie's—and in the best contraband manner we stole down the gully. The business had suddenly taken an eerie turn, and I think in our hearts we

were all a little afraid. But Tam had a lantern, and it would never do to turn back from an adventure which had all the appearance of being the true sort. Half way down there is a scrog of wood, dwarf alders and hawthorn, which makes an arch over the path. I, for one, was glad when we got through this with no worse mishap than a stumble from Tam which caused the lantern door to fly open and the candle to go out. We did not stop to relight it, but scrambled down the screes till we came to the long slabs of reddish rock which abutted on the beach. We could not see the track, so we gave up the business of scouts, and dropped quietly over the big boulder and into the crinkle of cliff which we called our cave.

There was nobody there, so we relit the lantern and examined our properties. Two or three fishing-rods for the burn, much damaged by weather ; some sea-lines on a dry shelf of rock ; a couple of wooden boxes ; a pile of driftwood for fires, and a heap of quartz in which we thought we had found veins of gold—such was the modest furnishing of our den. To this I must add some broken clay pipes, with which we made believe to

imitate our elders, smoking a foul mixture of coltsfoot leaves and brown paper. The band was in session, so following our ritual we sent out a picket. Tam was deputed to go round the edge of the cliff from which the shore was visible, and report if the coast was clear.

He returned in three minutes, his eyes round with amazement in the lantern light. "There's a fire on the sands," he repeated, "and a man beside it."

Here was news indeed. Without a word we made for the open, Archie first, and Tam, who had seized and shuttered his lantern, coming last. We crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered round, and there sure enough on the hard bit of sand which the tide had left by the burn mouth was a twinkle of light and a dark figure.

The moon was rising, and besides there was that curious sheen from the sea which you will often notice in spring. The glow was maybe a hundred yards distant, a little spark of fire I could have put in my cap, and, from its crackling and smoke, composed of dry seaweed and half-green branches from the burnside thickets. A man's figure stood near it, and as we looked it moved round and

round the fire in circles which first of all widened and then contracted.

The sight was so unexpected, so beyond the beat of our experience, that we were all a little scared. What could this strange being want with a fire at half-past eight of an April Sabbath night on the Dyve Burn sands? We discussed the thing in whispers behind a boulder, but none of us had any solution. "Belike he's come ashore in a boat," said Archie. "He's maybe a foreigner." But I pointed out that, from the tracks which Archie himself had found, the man must have come overland down the cliffs. Tam was clear he was a madman, and was for withdrawing promptly from the whole business.

But some spell kept our feet tied there in that silent world of sand and moon and sea. I remember looking back and seeing the solemn, frowning faces of the cliffs, and feeling somehow shut in with this unknown being in a strange union. What kind of chance had brought this interloper into our territory? For a wonder I was less afraid than curious. I wanted to get to the heart of the matter, and to discover what the man was up to with his fire and his circles.