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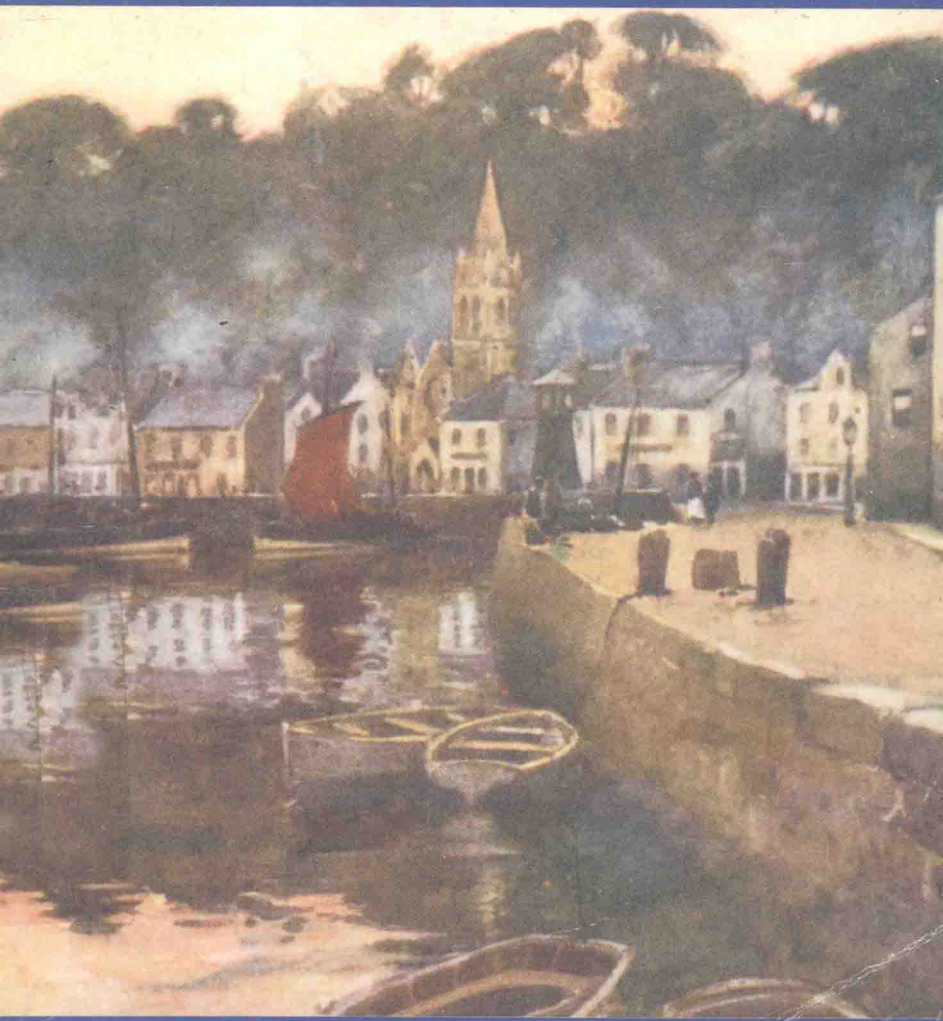
The Island of Sheep

JOHN BUCHAN



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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Introduction

AMONG HIS MANY outstanding achievements, John Buchan produced a total of one hundred books during his relatively short lifetime. Thirty of these are novels of adventure that reflect the rich and varied experience of Buchan's own life. *The Island of Sheep* is the last book in a series of five thrillers about Richard Hannay, a former mining engineer from South Africa, now a British General with an exceptional talent for spy-catching. The first of the series, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, was written in 1915 and brought Buchan international acclaim.

The Island of Sheep, like Buchan's first novel, *Prester John*, which he claims to have written for boys, is a thriller that will appeal to the young as much as it will to anyone with a love of adventure. Set in three main locations, Gloucestershire, Scotland and the Scandinavian 'Island of Sheep', with occasional scenes taking place in London, the action of the novel centres around the now middle-aged Sir Richard Hannay who leads an idyllic life with a considerable amount of leisure on his Gloucestershire estate. Hannay occasionally fears that life is too comfortable and that he is in danger of becoming staid. A chance meeting with an old friend, Lombard, a one-time companion in high adventure who has changed almost beyond recognition, exacerbates the feeling, but curiously, it is Lombard who leads Hannay into thrilling and dangerous action. Some thirty years earlier, both men had sworn to uphold the cause of a man named Haraldsen, and now it is the dead Haraldsen's son who needs help. The plan to rid Haraldsen for ever of his tormentors is masterminded by another redoubtable friend, Sandy, Lord Clanroyden, but it is Hannay's son, Peter John, and Haraldsen's daughter Anna who are the real heroes of the piece.

The story of *The Island of Sheep* reveals an intense romanticism, yet it has none of the mechanical excesses of many a modern thriller. Buchan's unusually wide range of interests is evident throughout the novel, which shows an outstanding grasp of business and financial affairs, of history, geography, science, mythology and particularly of the natural world. Buchan's acute sense of landscape firmly establishes any setting he describes, and his love of birds permeates the story, creating a further dimension. Buchan grew up on the coast of Fifeshire

in Scotland and spent childhood holidays on his grandparents' sheep-farm. His intimate knowledge of the ways of farming is displayed in the section of *The Island of Sheep* which is set in Scotland, and his first-hand experience of coastal life comes into its own once the action moves to the island itself.

Sound characterisation lends conviction to his tale, and the clarity of Buchan's narrative makes for compelling reading. The protagonists in *The Island of Sheep* are great, good and essentially privileged, yet Buchan depicts shepherds, seamen, gamekeepers and other ordinary folk with equal respect and affection. Many of his other novels, particularly those set in Glasgow, feature heroes from a lowlier background.

The uncommonly strange events in the novel are recounted in a poised, lucid style that typifies Buchan. His romanticism and love of wild adventure is tempered by plain common-sense and a natural inclination towards moderate, concise expression that heightens rather than detracts from the tremendous pace and tension created in his stories, and makes his world entirely believable. A fundamental faith in the intrinsic magnanimity of his fellow men informs all his work and makes his adventure stories especially inspiring. *The Island of Sheep* is a stirring tale that casts a refreshing light on human nature, and strikes a welcome note of enthusiasm for life which is widely appealing.

John Buchan was born in Perth in 1876, the son of a Free Church of Scotland minister. He was educated locally before going to Hutcheson Grammar School in Glasgow, Glasgow University and Brasenose College, Oxford. He went to South Africa as one of 'Milner's young men' to assist in reconstruction after the Boer War. He was called to the Bar where he practised with considerable success, was elected to parliament in 1927, and he was created Baron Tweedsmuir in 1935 on his appointment as Governor General of Canada, where he died in 1940. He wrote poetry and biography as well as novels, but is best remembered for his adventure stories, the five Hannay novels, the three Gorbals Diehards books whose unlikely hero is the middle-aged and romantic grocer Dickson McCunn, and the two Sir Edward Leithen stories *John McNab* and *Sick Heart River*.

FURTHER READING:

Life of John Buchan, Janet Adam Smith, 1965
Memory Hold the Door, John Buchan, 1940

CONTENTS

To

J. N. S. B.

WHO KNOWS THE NORLANDS AND

THE WAYS OF THE WILD GEESE

PART ONE

Fosse

CHAPTER I

Lost Gods

I HAVE NEVER BELIEVED, as some people do, in omens and forewarnings, for the dramatic things in my life have generally come upon me as suddenly as a tropical thunderstorm. But I have observed that in a queer way I have been sometimes prepared for them by my mind drifting into an unexpected mood. I would remember something I had not thought of for years, or start without reason an unusual line of thought. That was what happened to me on an October evening when I got into the train at Victoria.

That afternoon I had done what for me was a rare thing, and attended a debate in the House of Commons. Lamancha was to make a full-dress speech, and Lamancha on such an occasion is worth hearing. But it was not my friend's eloquence that filled my mind or his deadly handling of interruptions, but a reply which the Colonial Secretary gave to a question before the debate began. A name can sometimes be like a scent or a tune, a key to long-buried memories. When old Melbury spoke the word 'Lombard', my thoughts were set racing down dim alleys of the past. He quoted a memorandum written years ago and incorporated in the report of a certain Commission; 'A very able memorandum', he called it, 'by a certain Mr Lombard', which contained the point he wished to make. Able! I should think it was. And the writer! To be described as 'a certain Mr Lombard' showed how completely the man I once knew had dropped out of the world's ken.

I did not do justice to Lamancha's speech, for I thought of Lombard all through it. I thought of him in my taxi going to the station, and, when I had found my compartment, his face came between me and the pages of my evening paper. I had not thought much about him for years, but now Melbury's chance quotation had started a set of pictures which flitted like a film series before my eyes. I saw Lombard as I had last seen him, dressed a little differently from today, a little fuller in the face than we lean kine who have survived the War, with eyes not blurred from motoring, and voice not high-pitched like ours to override the din of our environment. I saw his smile, the odd quick lift of his chin – and I realised that I was

growing old and had left some wonderful things behind me.

The compartment filled up with City men going home to their comfortable southern suburbs. They all had evening papers, and some had morning papers to finish. Most of them appeared to make this journey regularly, for they knew each other, and exchanged market gossip or commented on public affairs. A friendly confidential party; and I sat in my corner looking out of the window at another landscape than what some poet has called 'smoky dwarf houses', and seeing a young man's face which was very different from theirs.

Lombard had come out to East Africa as secretary to a Government Commission, a Commission which he very soon manipulated as he pleased. I met him there when I was sent up on a prospecting job. He was very young then, not more than twenty-five, and he was in his first years at the Bar. He had been at one of the lesser public schools and at Cambridge, had been a good scholar, and was as full as he could hold of books. I remembered our first meeting in a cold camp on the Uasin Gishu plateau, when he quoted and translated a Greek line about the bitter little wind before dawn. But he never paraded his learning, for his desire was to be in complete harmony with his surroundings, and to look very much the pioneer. Those were the old days in East Africa, before the 'Happy Valley' and the remittance man and settlers who wanted self-government, and people's hopes were high. He was full of the heroes of the past, like Roddy Owen and Vandeleur and the Portals, and, except that he was a poor horseman, he had something in common with them. With his light figure and bleached fair hair and brown skin he looked the very model of the adventurous Englishman. I thought that there might be a touch of the Jew in his ancestry – something high-coloured and foreign at any rate, for he was more expansive and quickly fired than the rest of us. But on the whole he was as English as a Hampshire water-meadow . . .

The compartment was blue with pipe-smoke. My companions were talking about rock-gardens. The man in the corner opposite me was apparently an authority on the subject, and he had much to say about different firms of nursery gardeners. He was blond, plump, and baldish, and had a pleasant voice whose tones woke a recollection which I could not fix. I thought that I had probably seen him at some company meeting . . .

My mind went back to Lombard. I remembered how we had sat on a rock one evening looking over the trough of Equatoria, and, as the sun crimsoned the distant olive-green forests, he had told me his ambitions. In those days the afterglow of Cecil Rhodes's spell still lay

on Africa, and men could dream dreams. Lombard's were majestic. 'I have got my inspiration,' he told me. His old hankerings after legal or literary or political success at home had gone. He had found a new and masterful purpose.

It was a very young man's talk. I was about his own age, but I had knocked about a bit and saw its crudity. Yet it most deeply impressed me. There were fire and poetry in it, and there was also a pleasant shrewdness. He had had his 'call' and was hastening to answer it. Henceforth his life was to be dedicated to one end, the building up of a British Equatoria, with the highlands of the East and South as the white man's base. It was to be both white man's and black man's country, a new kingdom of Prester John. It was to link up South Africa with Egypt and the Sudan, and thereby complete Rhodes's plan. It was to be a magnet to attract our youth and a settlement ground for our surplus population. It was to carry with it a spiritual renaissance for England. 'When I think,' he cried, 'of the stuffy life at home! We must bring air into it, and instead of a blind alley give 'em open country . . . '

The talk in the compartment was now of golf. Matches were being fixed up for the following Sunday. My *vis-à-vis* had evidently some repute as a golfer, and was describing how he had managed to lower his handicap. Golf 'shop' is to me the most dismal thing on earth, and I shut my ears to it. 'So I took my mashie, you know, my *little* mashie' – the words seemed to have all the stuffiness of which Lombard had complained. Here in perfection was the smug suburban life from which he had revolted. My thoughts went back to that hilltop three thousand miles and thirty years away . . .

All of us at that time had talked a little grandiloquently, but with Lombard it was less a rhapsody than a passionate confession of faith. He was not quite certain about the next step in his own career. He had been offered a post on the staff of the Governor of X—, which might be a good jumping-off ground. There was the business side, too. He had the chance of going into the firm of Y—, which was about to spend large sums on African development. Money was important, he said, and cited Rhodes and Beit. He had not made up his mind, but ways and means did not greatly trouble him. His goal was so clear that he would find a road to it.

I do not think that I have ever had a stronger impression of a consuming purpose. Here was one who would never be content to settle among the fatted calves of the world. He might fail, but he would fail superbly.

'Some day,' I said, 'there will be a new British Dominion, and it will be called Lombardy. You have the right sort of name for Empire-making.'

I spoke quite seriously, and he took it seriously.

'Yes, I have thought of that,' he said, 'but it would have to be Lombardia.'

That was not the last time I saw him, for a year later he came down to Rhodesia, again on Government business, and we went through a rather odd experience together. But it was that hour in the African twilight that stuck in my memory. Here was a man dedicated to a crusade, ready to bend every power of mind and body to a high ambition, and to sacrifice all the softer things of life. I had felt myself in the presence of a young knight-errant, gravely entering upon his vows of service . . .

I looked round the compartment at the flabby eupeptic faces which offered so stark a contrast to the one I remembered. The talk was still of golf, and the plump man was enlarging on a new steel-shafted driver. Well, it required all kinds to make a world . . .

I had not seen Lombard for more than a quarter of a century. I had not even heard his name till that afternoon when Melbury mentioned him in the House. But at first I had often thought of him and waited for his *avatar*. I felt about him as Browning felt about Waring in the poem, for I believed that sooner or later – and rather soon than late – he would in some way or other make for himself a resounding name. I pictured him striding towards his goal, scorning half-achievements and easy repute, waiting patiently on the big chance and the great moment. Death alone, I was convinced, would stop him. And then the War came . . .

The compartment had nearly emptied. Only my *vis-à-vis* remained. He had put up his feet on the seat and was skimming a motoring journal . . .

Yes, I decided, the War had done it. Lombard would of course have fought – he was the kind of man who must – and in some obscure action in some part of the world-wide battlefield death had closed his dreams. Another case of unfulfilled renown. The thought made me melancholy. The fatted calves had always the best of it. Brains and high ambitions had perished, and the world was for the comfortable folk like the man opposite me.

We passed a station, and the next was obviously my companion's destination, for he got up, stretched his legs, and took down a parcel from the rack. He was carrying back the fish for dinner. He folded

up his papers and lit a cigarette. Then for the first time he had a proper look at me, and in his face I saw slowly the dawning of recognition. He hesitated, and then he spoke my name.

'Hannay?' he said. 'Isn't it Dick Hannay?'

The voice did the trick with me, for I remembered those precise tones which he had never managed to slur and broaden after our outland fashion. My eyes cleared, and a response clicked in my brain. I saw, behind the well-covered cheeks and the full chin and the high varnish of good living, a leaner and younger face.

'Lombard!' I cried. 'I haven't seen or heard of you for twenty years. Do you know that the Colonial Secretary referred to you in the House this afternoon? I have been thinking of you ever since.'

He grinned and he held out his hand.

'What did he say? Nothing uncomplimentary, I hope. We've been having a bit of a controversy with his department over Iraq. I've often heard of *you*, and read about you in the papers, and I've been hoping to run across you some day. You made some splash in the War. You're a K.C.B., aren't you? They offered me a knighthood too, but my firm thought I'd better stand out. Bad luck we didn't spot each other sooner, for I should have liked a yarn with you.'

'So should I,' was my answer. 'We have plenty to talk about.'

He replied to the question in my eye.

'Those were funny old times we had together. Lord, they seem a long way off now. What have I been doing since? Well, I went in for oil. I wish I had taken it up sooner, for I wasted several years chasing my tail. My firm made a pot of money in the War, and we haven't done so badly since.'

He was friendly and obviously glad to see me, but after so long a gap in our acquaintance he found it difficult to come to close quarters. So did I. I could only stare at his bland comfortable face and try in vain to recapture in it something that had gone for ever.

He felt the constraint. As we slackened speed, he dusted his hat, adjusted an aquascutum on his arm, and looked out of the window. I seemed to detect some effort in his geniality.

'I live down here,' he said. 'We mustn't lose sight of each other now we have foregathered. What about lunching together one day – my club's the Junior Carlton? Or better still, come down to us for a weekend. I can give you quite a decent game of golf.'

The train drew up at a trim little platform covered with smooth yellow gravel, and a red station house, like a Wesleyan chapel, which in June would be smothered with Dorothy Perkins roses.

There was a long line of fading geraniums, and several plots of chrysanthemums. Beyond the fence I could see a glistening tarmac road and the trees and lawns of biggish villas. I noticed a shining Daimler drawn up at the station entrance, and on the platform was a woman like a full-blown peony, to whom Lombard waved his hand.

'My wife,' he said, as he got out. 'I'd like you to meet her . . . It's been great seeing you again. I've got a nice little place down here . . . Promise you'll come to us for some weekend. Beryl will write to you.'

I continued my journey – I was going down to the Solent to see about laying up my boat, for I had lately taken to a mild sort of yachting – in an odd frame of mind. I experienced what was rare with me – a considerable dissatisfaction with life. Lombard had been absorbed into the great, solid, complacent middle class which he had once despised, and was apparently happy in it. The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barndoor fowl. Well, if he was satisfied, it was no business of mine, but I had a dreary sense of the fragility of hopes and dreams.

It was about myself that I felt most dismally. Lombard's youth had gone, but so had my own. Lombard was settled like Moab on his lees, but so was I. We all make pictures of ourselves that we try to live up to, and mine had always been of somebody hard and taut who could preserve to the last day of life a decent vigour of spirit. Well, I kept my body in fair training by exercise, but I realised that my soul was in danger of fatty degeneration. I was too comfortable. I had all the blessings a man can have, but I wasn't earning them. I tried to tell myself that I deserved a little peace and quiet, but I got no good from that reflection, for it meant that I had accepted old age. What were my hobbies and my easy days but the consolations of senility? I looked at my face in the mirror in the carriage back, and it disgusted me, for it reminded me of my recent companions who had pattered about golf. Then I became angry with myself. 'You are a fool,' I said. 'You are becoming soft and elderly, which is the law of life, and you haven't the grit to grow old cheerfully.' That put a stopper on my complaints, but it left me dejected and only half convinced.