

Terror on the moors



Bank Holiday short story

Summer Weather is an early, rarely seen, work by **John Buchan**. Its

creeping sense of menace anticipates his classic chase thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. It remains as powerful today as it was in 1899

In a certain year the prices of sheep at Gledsmuir sank so low that the hearts of the farmers were troubled; and one — he of Clachlands — sought at once to retrieve his fortunes and accepted an understudy. This was the son of a neighbouring laird, a certain John Anthony Dean, who by way of preparing himself for the possession of a great moorland estate thought it well to learn something of the life of the place. He was an amiable and idyllic young man, whom I once had the pleasure of knowing well. His interest was centred upon the composition of elegant verses, and all that savoured of the poetic was endeared to his soul. Therefore he had long admired the shepherd's life from afar: the word "pastoral" conjured up a fragrant old-time world; so in a mood pleasantly sentimental he embarked upon the unknown. I need not describe his attainments as sheep farmer or shepherd; he scarcely learned the barest rudiments; and the sage master of Clachlands trusted him only when he wrought under his own vigilant eye. Most of his friends had already labelled him a good-natured fool, and on the whole I do not feel ready to dispute the verdict. But that on one occasion he was not a fool, that once at least Mr John Anthony Dean rose out of his little world into the air of the heroic, this tale is written to show.

It was a warm afternoon in late June, and, his dog running at heel, he went leisurely forth to the long brown ridges of moor. The whole valley lay sweltering in torrid heat; even there, on the crest of a ridge, there was little coolness. The hills shimmered blue and indeterminate through the haze, and the waters of a

little loch not a mile away seemed part of the colourless benty upland. He was dressed in light flannels and reasonable shoes — vastly unlike the professional home-spuns and hob-nailed boots; but even he felt the airless drought and the flinty, dusty earth underfoot, and moderated his pace accordingly.

He was in a highly cheerful frame of mind, and tranquil enjoyment shone in his guileless face. On this afternoon certain cousins were walking over from his father's lodge to visit him at his labours. He contemplated gaily the prospect of showing them this upland Arcady, himself its high priest and guardian. Of all times afternoon was the season when its charm was most dominant, when the mellow light lay on the far lines of mountain, and the streams were golden and russet in the pools. Then was the hour when ancient peace filled all the land, and the bleat of sheep and the calling of birds were but parts of a primeval silence. Even this dried-up noon-day moor had the charm of an elder poetry. The hot smell of earth, the glare of the sun from the rocks, were all incidents in pastoral. Even thus, he mused, must the shepherds of Theocritus have lived in that land of downs where the sun-burnt cicada hummed under the brown grass.

Some two miles from home he came to the edge of a shallow dale in whose midst a line of baked pebbles and tepid pools broke the monotonous grey. The heat was overpowering, and a vague longing for cool woods and waters stole into his mind. But the thought that this would but add to the tan of his complexion gave him comfort. He pictured the scene of his meeting with his friends; how he would confront

them as the bronzed and seasoned uplander with an indescribable glamour of the poetic in his air. He was the man who lived with nature amid the endless moors, who carried always with him the romance of the inexplicable and the remote. Such pleasing thoughts were roughly broken in on by the sight of his dog. It was a finely bred sheep-collie, a prize-taker, and not the least costly part of his

equipment. A day once in that burning sun the animal had gone into convulsions and come out of them weak and foolish. Now it lay stifled in exactly the same way, tongue lolling feebly, and fles of white on its parched jaw. Its sensibilities were affected as it turned from the pitia sight.

When he looked back it was creeping after between legs

with sweat. Then at the crossing of a gore he missed the sound of it and looked back. There it lay again, this time more rigid than before, apparently not far from the extremities of death. His face grew grave, for he had come to like the creature and he would regret its loss.

But even as he looked the scene changed utterly. The

coming towards him. He rubbed his eyes with sheer amazement; for the thing looked like an incarnate devil. Its eyes glowered like coals, and its red cavern of a mouth was lined with a sickening froth. Twice its teeth met with a horrid snap as it rushed straight for him at an incredible swiftness. His mind was all but numbed, but some

from home. The far dyke was the nearer, but he chose to make rather for the one he had already crossed. By a hairbreadth he managed to elude the rush and let the thing pass — then with a very white face and a beating heart he ran for his life.

By a kind chance the thing had run many yards ere it saw his flight. Then it turned and with

illustration: Mark Thomas



'For a moment of agony he waited to be torn, feeling himself beyond resistance'

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great leaps like a greyhound made after him. He heard it turn, heard every bound, with the distinctness of uttermost fear. His terror was lest it should gain on him unknown, and overpower him before he had chance to strike. Now he was almost at the dyke; he glanced round, saw the thing not five yards from him, and waited. The great scarlet jaws seemed to rise in the air before him, and with all his power he brought his thick crook down full athwart them. There was something dead and unearthly about those mad jaws; he seemed to be striking lifeless yet murderous flesh, and even as his stick crashed on the teeth his heart was sick with loathing. But he had won his end; for a second the brute fell back, and he leaped on the dyke.

It was a place built of loose moor stones, and on one larger than the rest he took his stand. He dare not trust a further chase; here he must weary the thing out, or miserably perish. Meantime it was rising again, its eyes two blazing pools of fire. Two yards forward it dragged itself, then sprang clear at his throat. He struck with all his might, but the blow missed its forehead, and, hitting the gums, sufficed only to turn it slightly aside, so that it fell on the wall two feet on his left. He lashed at it with frenzied strength, till groaning miserably it rolled off and lay panting on the turf.

The sun blazed straight on his bare head (for he had lost his cap in the chase) and sweat blinded his eyes. He felt ill, giddy, and hopelessly sick of heart. He had seen nothing of madness before in man or animal; the thing was an awful mystery, a voiceless, incredible horror. What not two hours before had been a friendly, sensible collie now lay blinking at him with devouring eyes and jaws where foam was beginning to be dyed with blood. He calculated mechanically on each jump, and as the beast neared him his stick fell with stiff, nerveless force. To tell the truth, the man was numb with terror; his impulse was to sink to the ground; had death faced him in any form less repulsive than this assuredly he would not have striven against it.

It is a weak figure of speech to say that to him each minute seemed of an hour's length. He had no clear sense of time at all. His one sensation was an overmastering horror which directed his aim almost without his knowledge.

Three times the thing leaped on him; three times he struck, and it slipped with claws grating on the stone. Then it turned and raced round a circle of heather, with its head between its forepaws like a runaway horse. The man dropped on his knees to rest, looking intently at the circling speck, now far away, now not a dozen yards distant.

He vainly hoped that it would tire or leave him; vainly, for of a sudden it made for the wall and he had barely time to get to his feet before it was upon him. This time he struck it down without difficulty, for it was somewhat exhausted; but he noted with new terror that instead of leaping and falling back with open jaws, its teeth had shut with a snap as it neared him. Henceforth he must ward more closely, or the teeth might graze his flesh.

But his strength was failing, and the accursed brute seemed to grow more active and incessant. His knees ached with the attitude, and his arm still trembled with utter fear. From what he told me himself, and from the known hours of his starting and returning, he must have remained not less than two hours perched on that scorching dyke. It is probable that the heat made him somewhat light-headed and that his feet shuffled on the granite. At any rate as the thing came on him with new force he felt the whole fabric crumble beneath him, and the next second was sprawling on his back amid a ruin of stones.

He was aware of a black body hurling on the top of him as he struck feebly in the air. For a moment of agony he waited to be torn, feeling himself beyond resistance. But no savage teeth touched him, and slowly and painfully he raised his head. To his amazement he saw the dog tearing across the moorland in the direction of home.

He was conscious at once of relief, safety, a sort of weak, hysterical joy. Then his delight ceased abruptly, and he scrambled to his feet with all haste. The thing was clearly running for the farm-town, and there in the stack-yard labourers were busied with building hayracks — the result of a premature summer. In the yard women would be going to and fro, and some of the Clachlands children playing. What if the mad brute should find its way thither! There could be no issue but the most dismal tragedy.

Now Mr John Anthony Dean was, speaking



Cinematic touch: John Buchan (left) with Alfred Hitchcock during the filming of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Hitchcock's 1935 film was the first of three movie versions of the book

Short, but perfectly formed

John Buchan is now largely remembered for his thrillers, particularly *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. But in a writing career that spanned almost 50 years and more than 100 books, he also wrote biographies, children's stories, poetry, history books, historical novels, essays and hundreds of newspaper articles.

What is hardly known is that Buchan was also a prolific and highly successful short story writer, especially as a young man. About a third of his total output of short stories was published in the five years between his second year at Glasgow University and his leaving Oxford at the end of 1899, and *Summer Weather* comes from this period.

What is most interesting about these early stories is that they are about moorland rather than clubland heroes, with whom he is often identified. They largely rely on the use of local dialects and revolve around the lives of Border shepherds, poachers, gamekeepers and drovers. They are about the power of religion, drink or the weather, or about death, temptation and

retribution, and are a far cry from the adventures of Richard Hannay or Sir Edward Leithen.

Apart from their intrinsic literary merits, the short stories are interesting for a number of reasons. First, they show how the environment shapes the stories, for example, draw from his holiday spent with relatives around Peebles. Second, many of the stories are explorations of themes subsequently developed in the novels.

It is often assumed that Buchan's preoccupation with the civilisation dates from (1916) with Lumley's famous remark: "You think that a wall separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you, the division is a thin glass." In fact, Maitland of the story *Fountain* expresses his concern about the narrow line between the savage out-of-doors and the civilisation of the town. It is a thread, a sheet of

What is also interesting is the way that Buchan's fictional world is taking shape in the stories, long before many of the people or places appear in the novels.

Buchan wrote about 60 short stories. His early ambitions lay in emulating a consciously literary style, and three of his early stories were originally published in *The Yellow Book*, Aubrey Beardsley's famous magazine, which also published George Gissing, Kenneth Grahame and W B Yeats — not writers one normally associates with the author of *Greenmantle*.

Many stories were clearly written to deadline. Others are highly repetitive or imitative. But some have that mark of greatness, the ability to stay in the mind long after the piece has been read. They are a reminder that Buchan was a far more accomplished and complex writer than his contemporary reputation has allowed.

Andrew Lownie

● Andrew Lownie has edited collections of John Buchan's work, and is his most recent biographer.

grace of God the place was void; only a stray hen cackled in the summer stillness. Without swerving an inch it ran for the stable and entered the open door. With a last effort the man came up on its heels, shut the bolt, and left it secure.

He scarcely felt that his toil was ended, so painful was his bodily exhaustion. He had never been a strong man in the common sense, and now his heart seemed bursting, his temples throbbed with pain, and all the earth seemed to dance topsy-turvy. But an unknown hardness of will seemed to drive him on to see this tragic business to an

end. It was his part to shoot the dog there and then, to put himself out of anxiety and the world out of danger. So he staggered to the house, found it deserted — one and all being busy in the stack-yard — took down the gun from above the mantelpiece, and, slipping a cartridge in each barrel, hurried out with shambling legs.

He looked in through the stable-window, but no dog was there. Cautiously he opened the door, and peered into the blackness of the stalls, but he could see nothing; then, lifting his eyes by chance to the other window, he saw a sash in fragments and the marks of

a sudden leap. With a wild horror he realised that the dog was gone. He rushed to the hill-road, but the place was vacant of life. Then with a desperate surmise he ran to the path which led to the highway. At first he saw nothing, so unsettled was his vision; then something grew upon his sight, — a black object moving swiftly amid the white dust.

There was but one course for him. He summoned his strength for a hopeless effort, and set off down the long dazzling roadway in mad pursuit. By this path his cousins were coming: even now the brute might be on them, and in one moment of horror he saw the lady to whom he was devoted the prey of this nameless thing of dread. At this point he lost all control of his nerves: tears of weakness and terror ran over his face; but still he ran as fast as his failing strength suffered — faster, for an overmastering fear put a false speed into his limbs and a deceptive ease in his breast. He cried aloud that the beast might turn on him, for he felt that in any case his duration was but a thing of seconds. But he cried in vain, for the thing heeded him not but vanished into the wood, as he rounded the turn of hill.

Halfway down the descent is a place shaded with thick trees, cool, green and mossy, a hermitage from the fiercest sun. The grass is like a shorn lawn, and a little stream tinkles in a bed of grey stones. Into this cold dell the man passed from the glare without, and the shock refreshed him. This, as it chanced, was his salvation. He increased his speed, still crying hoarsely the animal's name. When he came once more into the white dust the brute was not 50 yards from him, and as he yelled more desperately, it stopped, turned, saw him, and rushed back to the attack.

He fell on his knees from extreme weakness, and waited with his gun quivering at shoulder. Now it raked the high heavens, now it was pointed to the distant hills. His hand shook like a child's and in his blindness he crushed the stock almost against his throat. Up the highway meantime came those ravening jaws, nearer and ever nearer. Like a flash the whole picture of the future lay before him — himself torn and dying, the wild thing leaving him and keeping its old course till it met his friends, and then — more horror and death. And all hung on two cartridges and his uncertain aim.

His nervousness made him draw the trigger when the brute was still many yards

away. The shot went clear over its head to spend itself in the empty air. In desperation he nuzzled the stock below his chin, holding it tight till he was all but choked, and waited blindly. The thing loomed up before him in proportions almost gigantic; it seemed to leap to and fro, and blot out the summer heavens. He knew he was crazy; he knew, too, that life was in the balance, and that a random aim would mean a short passage to another world. Two glaring eyes shone out of the black mass, the centre, as it were, of its revolutions. With all his strength he drew the point to them and fired. Suddenly the fire seemed to go out, and the twin lights were darkened.

When the party of pretty young women in summer raiment came up the path a minute later, they saw something dark in the mid-road, and on coming nearer found that it was their cousin. But he presented a strange appearance, for in place of the elegant, bronzed young man they knew, they found a broken-down creature with a bleeding throat and a ghastly face, sitting clutching a gun and weeping hysterically beside a hideous, eyeless dog with a shattered jaw which lay dead on the ground.

Such is the tale of Mr John Anthony Dean and his doings on that afternoon of summer. Yet it must be told — and for human nature's sake I regret it — that his sudden flash into the heroic worked no appreciable difference on his ways.

He fled the hill country that very month, and during the next winter published a book of very minor poetry (dedicated to his cousin, Miss Phyllis), which contained an execrable rondeau on his adventure, with the refrain — "From Canine Jaws", wherein the author likened the dog to Cerberus, himself to "strong Amphitryon's son", and wound up with grateful thanksgiving to the "Muse" for his rescue.

As I said before, it is not my business to apologise for Mr Dean; but it is my privilege to note this proof of the heroic inconsistency of man.

● *John Buchan: The Complete Short Stories, Volumes 1-3* (Thistle Publishing, £60), edited by Andrew Lownie, is available at the special price of £45, post-free in the UK, from Telegraph Books Direct, 24 Seward Street, London EC1V 3GB, or call 0541 557222. Please quote ref JBSO when ordering.

