

POCKET CLASSICS

JOHN BUCHAN
THE HOUSE OF THE
FOUR WINDS



The House of Four Winds

John Buchan

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About Buchan:

John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir, GCMG, GCVO, CH, PC , was a Scottish novelist, best known for his novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and Unionist politician who served as Governor General of Canada. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks Buchan:

- *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915)
- *Greenmantle* (1916)
- *The Three Hostages* (1924)
- *Witch Wood* (1927)
- *Mr Standfast* (1919)
- *The Island of Sheep* (1932)
- *The Free Fishers* (1934)
- *Castle Gay* (1930)
- *Midwinter* (1923)

- *Prester John* (1899)

Prologue

Great events, says the philosophic historian, spring only from great causes, though the immediate occasion may be small; but I think his law must have exceptions. Of the not inconsiderable events which I am about to chronicle, the occasion was trivial, and I find it hard to detect the majestic agency behind them. What world-force, for example, ordained that Mr Dickson McCunn should slip into the Tod's Hole in his little salmon-river on a bleak night in April; and, without changing his clothes, should thereafter make a tour of inspection of his young lambs? His

action was the proximate cause of this tale, but I can see no profounder explanation of it than the inherent perversity of man.

The performance had immediate consequences for Mr McCunn. He awoke next morning with a stiff neck, an aching left shoulder, and a pain in the small of his back—he who never in his life before had had a touch of rheumatism. A vigorous rubbing with embrocation failed to relieve him, and, since he was accustomed to robust health, he found it intolerable to hobble about with a thing like a toothache in several parts of his body. Dr Murdoch was sent for from Auchenlochan, and for a fortnight Mr McCunn had to endure

mustard plasters and mustard baths, to swallow various medicines, and to submit to a rigorous diet. The pains declined, but he found himself to his disgust in a low state of general health, easily tired, liable to sudden cramps, and with a poor appetite for his meals. After three weeks of this condition he lost his temper. Summer was beginning, and he reflected that, being now sixty-three years of age, he had only a limited number of summers left to him. His gorge rose at the thought of dragging his wing through the coming delectable months—long-lighted June, the hot July noons with the corncrakes busy in the hay, the days on August hills, red with heather and musical with bees. He

curbed his distaste for medical science, and departed to Edinburgh to consult a specialist.

That specialist gave him a purifying time. He tested his blood and his blood pressure, kneaded every part of his frame, and for the better part of a week kept him under observation. At the end he professed himself clear in the general but perplexed in the particular.

"You've never been ill in your life?" he said. "Well, that is just your trouble. You're an uncommonly strong man—heart, lungs, circulation, digestion, all in first-class order. But it stands to reason that you must have secreted poisons in your body, and you have never got them out. The best prescription for a fit old

age is a bad illness in middle life, or, better still, a major operation. It drains off some of the middle-age humours. Well, you haven't had that luck, so you've been a powder magazine with some nasty explosives waiting for the spark. Your tom-fool escapade in the Stinchar provided the spark, and here you are—a healthy man mysteriously gone sick. You've got to be pretty careful, Mr McCunn. It depends on how you behave in the next few months whether you will be able to fish for salmon on your eightieth birthday, or be doddering round with two sticks and a shawl on your seventieth."

Mr McCunn was scared, penitent and utterly docile. He professed himself

ready for the extremest measures, including the drawing of every tooth in his head.

The specialist smiled. "I don't recommend anything so drastic. What you want first of all is an exact diagnosis. I can assess your general condition, but I can't put my finger on the precise mischief. That needs a technique which we haven't developed sufficiently in this country. Next, you must have treatment, but treatment is a comparatively simple affair if you first get the right diagnosis. So I am going to send you to Germany."

Mr McCunn wailed. Banishment from his beloved Blawearry was a bitter pill.

"Yes, to Germany. To quite a pretty

place called Rosensee, in Saxon Switzerland. There's a *kurhaus* there run by a man called Christoph. You never heard his name, of course—few people have—but he is a therapeutic genius of the first order. You can take my word for that. I've known him again and again pull people out of their graves. His main subject is nerves, but he is good for everything that is difficult and mysterious, for in my opinion he is the greatest diagnoser in the world... . By the way, you live in Carrick? Well, I sent one of your neighbours to Rosensee last year—Sir Archibald Roylance—he was having trouble with a damaged leg—and now he walks nearly as well as you and me. It seems there was a misplaced

sinew which everybody else had overlooked... . Dr Christoph will see you three times a day, stare at you like an owl, ask you a thousand questions and make no comment for at least a fortnight. Then he will deliver judgment, and you may take it that it will be right. After that the treatment is a simple matter. In a week or two you will be got up in green shorts and a Tyrolese hat and an alpenstock and a rope round your middle, climbing the little rocks of those parts... . Yes, I think I can promise you that you'll be fit and ready for the autumn salmon."

Mr McCunn, trained to know a competent man when he saw him, accepted the consultant's prescription,

and rooms were taken for him at the Rosensee *kurhaus*. His wife did not accompany him for three reasons: first, she had a profound distaste for foreign countries and regarded Germany as still a hostile State; second, she could not believe that rheumatism, which was an hereditary ailment in her own family, need be taken seriously, so she felt no real anxiety about his health; third, he forbade her. She proposed to stay at Blawearny till the end of June, and then to await her husband's return at a Rothesay hydropathic. So early in the month Mr McCunn a little disconsolately left these shores. He took with him as body-servant and companion one Peter Wappit, who at Blawearny was game-

keeper, forester and general handy-man. Peter, having fought in France with the Scots Fusiliers, and having been two years a prisoner in Germany, was believed by his master to be an adept at foreign tongues.

Nor was there any profound reason in the nature of things why Lord Rhynns, a well-preserved gentleman of sixty-seven, should have tumbled into a ditch that spring at Vallescure and broken his left leg. He was an active man and a careful, but his mind had been busy with the Newmarket entries, so that he missed a step, rolled some yards down a steep slope of rock and bracken, and came to rest with a leg doubled unpleasantly

under him. The limb was well set, but neuritis followed, with disastrous consequences to the Rhynns *ménage*. For his wife, whose profession was a gentle invalidism, found herself compelled to see to household affairs, and as a result was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The family moved from watering-place to watering-place, seeking a cure for his lordship's affliction, till at the mountain village of Unnutz Lady Rhynns could bear it no longer. A telegram was despatched to their only child requiring her instant attendance upon distressed parents.

This was a serious blow to Miss Alison Westwater, who had been making very different plans for the summer. She

was then in London, living with her Aunt Harriet, who two years before had espoused Mr Thomas Carlyle Craw, the newspaper magnate. It was the Craws' purpose to go north after Ascot to the Westwater house, Castle Gay, in the Canonry, of which Mr Craw had a long lease, and Alison, for whom a very little of London sufficed, had exulted in the prospect. Now she saw before her some dismal weeks—or months—in an alien land, in the company of a valetudinarian mother and a presumably irascible father. Her dreams of Scotland, to which she was passionately attached, of salmon in the Callowa and trout in the hill lochs and bright days among the heather, had to be replaced by a dreary vista of baking

foreign roads, garish foreign hotels, tarnished pine-woods, tidy clothes and all the things which her soul abominated.

There was perhaps more of a cosmic motive in the determination that summer of the doings of Mr Dougal Crombie and Sir Archibald Roylance, for in their cases we touch the fringe of high politics. Dougal was now a force, almost *the* force, in the Craw Press. The general manager, Mr Archibald Bamff, was growing old, he had taken to himself a wife, and his fancy toyed pleasantly with retirement to some country hermitage. So in the past year Dougal had been gradually taking over his work, and, since he had the complete confidence of Mr Craw, and the esteem

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