

A few from Buchan

Greenmantle,

John Buchan

- **On how the book was written:** "During the past year, in the intervals of an active life, I have amused myself with constructing this tale. It has been scribbled in every kind of odd place and moment—in England and abroad, during long journeys, in half-hours between graver tasks; and it bears, I fear, the mark of its gipsy begetting. But it has amused me to write, and I shall be well repaid if it amuses you—and a few others—to read."

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- **On the improbability of the events in the story:** "Let no man or woman call its events improbable. The war has driven that word from our vocabulary, and melodrama has become the prosiest realism. Things unimagined before happen daily to our friends by sea and land. The one chance in a thousand is habitually taken, and as often as not succeeds. Coincidence, like some new Briareus, stretches a hundred long arms hourly across the earth. Some day, when the full history is written—sober history with ample documents—the poor romancer will give up business and fall to reading Miss Austen in a hermitage."

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And, now, from the story itself:

- "One felt the war more in its streets than in the field, or rather one felt the confusion of war without feeling the purpose."
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- **Major Bullivant on how**
- **has changed:** "Soldiering today asks for the average rather than the exception in human nature. It is like a big machine where the parts are standardized." (See the "no Davids or Hectors" quote from

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- **A metaphor worthy of Lewis:** "You have chosen the roughest road, but it goes straight to the hill-tops."
- **On the nobility of the British:** "We call ourselves insular, but the truth is that we are the only race on earth that can produce men capable of getting inside the skin of remote peoples. Perhaps the Scots are better than the English, but we're all a thousand per cent better than anybody else. Sandy was the wandering Scot carried to the pitch of genius. In old days he would have led a crusade or discovered a new road to the Indies. Today he merely roamed as the spirit moved him, till the war swept him up and dumped him down in my battalion." I was struck by the how every character in the book was constantly aware of and constantly commented on race and racial nature. The "German," the "Turk," the "African," the "white man" - all have their own gifts and idiosyncrasies. Obviously Hannay thinks the British are the best.

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- **Unearthly music:** "Then slowly from the silence there distilled drops of music. They came like water falling a long way into a cup, each the essential quality of pure sound. We, with our elaborate harmonies, have forgotten the charm of single notes. The African natives know it, and I remember a learned man once telling me that the Greeks had the same art. Those silver bells broke out of infinite space, so exquisite and perfect that no mortal words could have been fitted to them. That was the music, I expect, that the morning stars made when they sang together."

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- **On the viewpoint of the Oriental:** "The West knows nothing of the true Oriental. It pictures him as lapped in colour and idleness and luxury and gorgeous dreams. But it is all wrong. The Kaf he yearns for is an austere thing. It is the austerity of the East that is its beauty and its terror ... It always wants the same things at the back of its head. The Turk and the Arab came out of big spaces, and they have the desire of them in their bones. They settle down and stagnate, and by the by they degenerate into that appalling subtlety which is

their ruling passion gone crooked. And then comes a new revelation and a great simplifying. They want to live face to face with God without a screen of ritual and images and priestcraft. They want to prune life of its foolish fringes and get back to the noble bareness of the desert. Remember, it is always the empty desert and the empty sky that cast their spell over them—these, and the hot, strong, antiseptic sunlight which burns up all rot and decay. It isn't inhuman. It's the humanity of one part of the human race. It isn't ours, it isn't as good as ours, but it's jolly good all the same. There are times when it grips me so hard that I'm inclined to forswear the gods of my fathers!"

- **Why Nietzsche's Superman can never exist:** "Mankind has a sense of humour which stops short of the final absurdity." [This section reminded me very much of Chesterton.](#)
- **On doing one's duty:** ""But our work lives," I cried, with a sudden great gasp of happiness. "It's the job that matters, not the men that do it. And our job's done."
- **Facing death:** "A man's thoughts at a time like that seem to be double-powered, and the memory becomes very sharp and clear. I don't know what was in the others' minds, but I know what filled my own... I fancy it isn't the men who get most out of the world and are always buoyant and cheerful that most fear to die. Rather it is the weak-engined souls who go about with dull eyes, that cling most fiercely to life. They have not the joy of being alive which is a kind of earnest of immortality ... I know that my thoughts were chiefly about the jolly things that I had seen and done; not regret, but gratitude." [And this reminded me of Nate Wilson.](#)

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