John Buchan, *Huntingtower* (1922)

The plot concerns the unexpected adventure of Dickson McCunn, a retired Glasgow grocer, and his chance-met companion John Heritage, a (bad) modernist poet and war veteran, while they are on a walking tour in south-west Scotland after the First World War. They take a fancy to the village of Dalquharter on the coast, and its apparently deserted Big House, but are puzzled when they are prevented from visiting the house by Dobson the unpleasant inn-keeper, and the two Lodge wardens, Spidel and Léon. The mystery thickens when a group of Glasgow boys camping in the area, led by Dougal, come to ask them for help, as two Russian princesses are being held prisoner in the house. Dickson and Heritage get the princesses out, and go to the local laird, Sir Archie Roylance for help, as Dobson’s forces are coming to recapture the princesses for their leader, the Bolshevik aristocrat Prince Paul, and Princess Saskia will not leave as she is awaiting her own reinforcements.

(extracts from Chapter 3, introducing Spidel, and Léon)

Mrs. Morran meditated. "Whae in the world can be lyin' there? The man bides his lane. He got a lassie frae Auchenlochan to cook, but she and her box gaed off in the post-cairt yestreen. I doot he tell't ye a lee, though it's no' for me to juidge him. I've never spoken a word to ane o' thae new folk."

Dickson inquired about the "new folk."

"They're a' new come in the last three weeks, and there's no' a man o' the auld stock left. John Blackstocks at the Wast Lodge dee'd o' pneumonia last back-end, and auld Simon Tappie at the Gairdens flitted to Maybole a year come Martinmas. There's naebody at the Gar'[n]ens noo, but there's a man come to the Wast Lodge, a blackavised body wi' a face like bend-leather. Tam Robison used to bide at the South Lodge, but Tam got killed about Mesopotamia, and his wife took the bairns to her guid sire up at the Garpleheid. I seen the man that's in the South Lodge gaun up the street when I was finishin' my dinner—a shilpit body and a lameter, but he hirples as fast as ither folk run. He's no' bonny to look at. I canna think what the factor's ettlin' at to let sic' ill-faured chiels come about the toun."

Their hostess was rapidly rising in Dickson's esteem. She sat very straight in her chair, eating with the careful gentility of a bird, and primming her thin lips after every mouthful of tea.

[Mrs. Morran meditated. "Who in the world can be lying there? The man lives there alone. He got a lassie from Auchenlochan to cook, but she and her trunk went off in the postman's cart yesterday evening. I expect he told you a lie, though it's not for me to judge him. I've never spoken a word to any of those new folk."

Dickson inquired about the "new folk."

"They're all new come in the last three weeks, and there's not a man of the old stock left. John Blackstocks at the West Lodge died of pneumonia last winter, and old Simon Tappie at the Gardens moved to Maybole a year ago at Martinmas. There's nobody at the Gardens now, but there's a man come to the West Lodge, a dark featured person with a face like leather. Tam Robison used to live at the South Lodge, but Tam got killed near Mesopotamia, and his wife took the children to her
father up at the Garpleheid. I saw the man that’s in the South Lodge going up the street when I was finishing my dinner—a scruffy, shabby man and lame, but he hobbles as fast as other folk run. He's not good to look at. I can't think what the factor's thinking of to let such ill-favoured folk come into the town."

[...]

The noise brought a man to the lodge door. He was a sturdy fellow in a suit of black clothes which had not been made for him. He might have been a butler en deshabille, but for the presence of a pair of field boots into which he had tucked the ends of his trousers. The curious thing about him was his face, which was decorated with features so tiny as to give the impression of a monstrous child. Each in itself was well enough formed, but eyes, nose, mouth, chin were of a smallness curiously out of proportion to the head and body. Such an anomaly might have been redeemed by the expression; good-humour would have invested it with an air of agreeable farce. But there was no friendliness in the man's face. It was set like a judge's in a stony impassiveness.

"May we walk up to the House?" Heritage asked. "We are here for a night and should like to have a look at it."

The man advanced a step. He had either a bad cold, or a voice comparable in size to his features.

"There's no entrance here," he said huskily. "I have strict orders."

"Oh, come now," said Heritage. "It can do nobody any harm if you let us in for half an hour."

The man advanced another step.

"You shall not come in. Go away from here. Go away, I tell you. It is private." The words spoken by the small mouth in the small voice had a kind of childish ferocity.

The travellers turned their back on him and continued their way.

"Sich a curmudgeon!" Dickson commented. His face had flushed, for he was susceptible to rudeness. "Did you notice? That man's a foreigner."

"He's a brute," said Heritage.

(extracts from chapter 5, on Spidel)

It was the lame man whom Dougal had called Spittal, the dweller in the South Lodge. Seen at closer quarters he was an odd-looking being, lean as a heron, wry-necked, but amazingly quick on his feet. Had not Mrs Morran said that he hobbled as fast as other folk ran? He kept his eyes on the ground and seemed to be talking to himself as he went, but he was alert enough, for the dropping of a twig from a dying magnolia transferred him in an instant into a figure of active vigilance. No risks could be run with that watcher. He took a key from his pocket, opened the garden door and entered the verandah. For a moment his shuffle sounded on its tiled floor, and then he entered the door admitting from the verandah to the House. It was clearly unlocked for there came no sound of a turning key.

[...]

(extracts from chapter 5, on Spidel)
The man—it was Spittal—walked rapidly along the verandah and out of the garden door. He was talking to himself again, and Dickson, who had a glimpse of his face, thought he looked both evil and furious. Then came some anxious moments, for had the man glanced back when he was once outside, he must have seen the tell-tale ladder. But he seemed immersed in his own reflections, for he hobbled steadily along the house front till he was lost to sight.

(extract from chapter 11, introducing Sir Archie)

"You are a soldier?" she asked.

"Two years infantry—5th Battalion Lennox Highlanders, and then Flying Corps. Top-hole time I had too, till the day before the Armistice when my luck gave out and I took a nasty toss. Consequently I'm not as fast on my legs now as I'd like to be."

[...]

What force can you produce?"

"Only cripples, I'm afraid. There's Sime, my butler. He was a Fusilier Jock and, as you saw, has lost an arm. Then McGuffog the keeper is a good man, but he's still got a Turkish bullet in his thigh. The chauffeur, Carfrae, was in the Yeomanry, and lost half a foot, and there's myself, as lame as a duck. The herds on the home farm are no good, for one's seventy and the other is in bed with jaundice. The Mains can produce four men, but they're rather a job lot."

"They'll do fine," said Dickson heartily. "All sodgers, and no doubt all good shots."

(extract from chapter 13, the thoughts of John Heritage)

Very soon he might hear the sound of an engagement to the south, and the next thing would be Dobson and his crew in flight. He was determined to be in the show somehow and would be very close on their heels. He felt a peculiar dislike to all three, but especially to Léon. The Belgian's small baby features had for four days set him clenching his fists when he thought of them.

(extract from chapter 14, introducing Paul)

His words were unheeded, for the figures below drew apart and a young man came through them. His beautifully-shaped dark head was bare, and as he moved he unbuttoned his oilsins and showed the trim dark-blue garb of the yachtsman. He walked confidently up the stairs, an odd elegant figure among his heavy companions.

"Good afternoon, Alexis," he said in English. "I think we may now regard this interesting episode as closed. I take it that you surrender. Saskia, dear, you are coming with me on a little journey. Will you tell my men where to find your baggage?"

(extract from chapter 14, on Dougal’s exasperation with Sir Archie’s reinforcements)
It was a journey which sorely tried Dougal's temper. The only way in was by the verandah, but the door at the west end had been locked, and the ladder had disappeared. Now of his party three were lame, one lacked an arm, and one was a girl; besides, there were the guns and cartridges to transport. Moreover, at more than one point before the verandah was reached the route was commanded by a point on the ridge near the old Tower, and that had been Spidel's position when Dougal made his last reconnaissance. It behoved to pass these points swiftly and unobtrusively, and his company was neither swift nor unobtrusive. McGuffog had a genius for tripping over obstacles, and Sir Archie was for ever proffering his aid to Saskia, who was in a position to give rather than to receive, being far the most active of the party. Once Dougal had to take the gamekeeper's head and force it down, a performance which would have led to an immediate assault but for Sir Archie's presence. Nor did the latter escape. "Will ye stop heedin' the lassie, and attend to your own job," the Chieftain growled. "Ye're makin' as much noise as a road-roller."

(extract from chapter 15, on the death of Paul)

The tide next day brought the dead ashore. Among them was a young man, different in dress and appearance from the rest—a young man with a noble head and a finely-cut classic face, which was not marred like the others from pounding among the Garple rocks. His dark hair was washed back from his brow, and the mouth, which had been hard in life, was now relaxed in the strange innocence of death.

Dickson gazed at the body and observed that there was a slight deformation between the shoulders.

"Poor fellow," he said. "That explains a lot.... As my father used to say, cripples have a right to be cankered."