



The Strange Adventure of Mr. Andrew Hawthorn
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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

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Any disappearance is a romantic thing, especially if it be unexpected and inexplicable. To vanish from the common world and leave no trace, and to return with the same suddenness and mystery, satisfies the eternal human sense of wonder. That is why the old stories make so much of it. Tamlane and Kilmeny and Ogier the Dane retired to Fairyland, and Oisín to the Land of the Ever Living, and no man knows the manner of their going or their return. The common world goes on, but they are far away in a magic universe of their own.

But even ordinary folk can disappear. Sometimes they never come back and leave only blank mystery behind them. But sometimes they return and can explain what happened. Here is a true tale of what befell a most prosaic Scots gentleman rather less than two centuries ago.

Let us call him Andrew Hawthorn. He was thirty-two years of age and had no wife, but lived with his sister, Barbara, in a steep-roofed, stone house a dozen miles from Edinburgh. The house stood above a narrow wooded glen, what is called in Scotland a 'dean,' at the bottom of which ran a brawling stream.

Mr. Hawthorn was a stiff gentleman, very set in his ways. His wig was always carefully powdered, his clothes were trim, and his buckles bright. He enjoyed a modest competence, which enabled him to devote his life to his hobbies. These were principally antiquities, and he had been busy for some years on a great work on the Antonines.

He was in the habit of breakfasting at seven with his sister, and being particular in his habits, he liked to have his meal served punctually at that hour. He was always in the little dining-room as the clock struck, while his sister was usually a few minutes late. His custom was to take a walk after breakfast and be at his books at eight o'clock. Therefore he liked to finish his meal by a quarter after seven, and this meant punctilious service. In especial he disliked having his porridge so hot that he had to delay some minutes before he could begin on it. On a fine May morning, Mr. Hawthorn appeared in the breakfast room at the exact hour. His sister was not down, but two steaming bowls of porridge stood on the table. Mr. Hawthorn was annoyed. He strode into the little hall and shouted upstairs.

'Babbie,' he cried, 'how often have I told you the porridge should be dished up earlier? They are scalding hot again. I am going out of doors until they cool.'

He walked out into the garden. He also walked out of the world for five years and seven months.

There was a great hue and cry in the countryside. The Procurator Fiscal made his precognitions, and even the capital city was stirred by the mystery, but no trace could be found of Mr. Andrew Hawthorn. His footsteps were followed on the coarse dewy turf which ran along the edge of the dean, and there they disappeared. In the dean itself there were signs of an old fire on a little shelf of ground, and a good deal of trampled grass and broken underwood; but the latter might have been due to the cattle-beasts that were always straying in from the neighbouring hillside.

Mr. Hawthorn had no near kin besides his sister, but his lawyers offered a considerable reward for news of him. None came, and most people assumed that he was dead. His sister, who was his heir-at-law, would have succeeded to his estate had his death been presumed, but she resolutely refused to admit the presumption. Andrew, she said, would come back, though she would give no grounds for her belief. She conducted the household as usual, and every morning she had a plate of porridge set for him at breakfast, as if at any moment he might appear from the garden. She even remembered his wishes and saw to it that the porridge was dished up a little earlier.

Mr. Hawthorn went out into the bright sunshine and impatiently sniffed the morning freshness. He walked to the edge of the dean, and there, on the well trodden path among the fir trees, he saw one Bauldy Grieve, a packman, whose rounds took him up and down the Lowlands. Bauldy was an old friend who had often provided him with minor antiquities. It appeared that he had something important to communicate, for he was sitting there to intercept the laird on his morning walk.

'I've some michty wonders to show your honour,' he announced. 'The pleughman at the Back o' the Buss turned up an auld kist in the field. He didn't let on to his master, but he telled me. I bocht what was in it, a wheen auld siller coins and some muckle flaigons. The pleughman—Tam Dod is his name—thocht the flaigons were brass, so I got them cheap, though he haggled sair over the siller. But they are no brass, your honour—they're gowd, as sure as I'm a living man. Nae doot they were buried by the ancient Romans. So I cam off post haste to see ye, and have gotten them in my pack. Will your honour step down wi' me and hae a look at them?'

Mr. Hawthorn was excited and forgot all about breakfast. He followed the packman down through the bracken to a shelf above the burn, where Bauldy had spent the night. At the first sight of the flagons his eyes

opened wide. They were amphorae of exquisite design, probably vessels used for some ceremonial rite. He scraped off a little of the encrusted dirt, and saw the gleam of bright metal.

Now, as ill-luck would have it, news of the find had got abroad, perhaps because Bauldy had gossiped in his cups. Anyhow three tinkler rufians of the Baillie clan were on the trail, and had followed Bauldy to his camp for the night. They had seen him speak to the laird and were now lurking in the undergrowth.

'Guid save us, Bauldy,' said Mr. Hawthorn. 'This is a most remarkable discovery. The like has not been seen in Scotland.' 'Are they gowd, your honour?' the packman asked.

'I have little doubt of it,' said Mr. Hawthorn. 'Things so beautiful could be made of no baser metal.'

This was enough for the tinklers. They leaped out upon the two, and one, with his big staff, or 'kent,' struck the packman a savage blow on the back of his head. Mr. Hawthorn, though taken by surprise, put up a stout fight, for the passion of the antiquarian put fire into his manhood. But he was soon overpowered and knocked senseless by a blow from behind.

After that Mr. Hawthorn's memory became confused. The tinklers were men of caution and foresight. It was not enough to annex the contents of the pedlar's pack, they must get rid of compromising evidence. The pedlar looked pretty bad, and the gentleman not much better. It would never do to leave them on the scene of the assault, for they had seen too much of their assailants.

Now, on the highway on the other side of the dean, the tinklers had a covered cart, which they were accustomed to use for nefarious business. They swung their two victims on their shoulders and cautiously made their way to the cart, and some time that evening were safe in a hovel near the water-front in Leith.

The pedlar never recovered, for his neck had been broken. Mr. Hawthorn came back to consciousness with an intolerable headache and a raging thirst; he was given a drink, which must have been hocussed, for he lost his senses again. The body of the pedlar was secretly buried, a ceremony for which the tinklers had their own contrivances, and it was not likely that a wandering packman would be missed.

But Mr. Hawthorn was a different matter. The hue and cry over his loss alarmed them, and they saw no other course but to get rid of him too. Murder was their first idea, but presently a better presented itself. They had already done some traffic in kidnapping and exporting the

able-bodied to the American plantations, and they had a shipmaster who was in their secret. One dark night Mr. Hawthorn, still hocused, was smuggled aboard a vessel, and when his wits fully returned to him he was a prisoner on the broad Atlantic.

It would take a long time to tell the full story of Mr. Hawthorn's life in the Carolinas. He was sold under an indenture to a tobacco planter, which meant that till the period of his indenture expired he was virtually a slave. His ill-treatment at the hands of the tinklers had affected both his memory and his wits, and it was a long time before his head cleared. Bit by bit, however recollection came back to him, but the last scene he remembered clearly was leaving his steaming porridge in the little dining-room of his house. All that had happened in the dean remained in a misty confusion.

He was strong in body and of careful habits, and this stood him well in the hard toil of the plantation. Also he was a prudent soul, and, having decided that there was nothing for it but to submit, he did his work and kept his thoughts to himself. His companions were mostly the scum of British prisons, and he might have endured a good deal of rough usage at their hands. But Mr. Hawthorn had a stiff temper of his own, and his fellows realised that there was a point when he would show fight and defend himself. So slowly he won a position of some respect among the others, while his industry and docility secured him reasonable treatment from the overseer.

His master was a man of pleasure who spent his days chiefly in horse-racing and card-playing. Several times Mr. Hawthorn, after his memory returned to him, tried to approach him to state his case, but it was long before he got an opportunity. When it came he found that he was not believed. Such yarns had often been heard before from redemptioners. But the superior breeding of Mr. Hawthorn impressed his master. Here was one who in deportment and speech appeared to be a gentleman, though he looked a dull dog and spoke with a strong Scots accent. The upshot was that when the butler broke his neck one dark night Mr. Hawthorn was promoted to fill his place. Among his other gifts it appeared that he had a very fair knowledge of wine.

Now it happened some months later, when the household under Mr. Hawthorn's sway had acquired a new precision, that a neighbouring squire came to dinner. The guest was of a very different type from the master of the house, for he was something of a politician and something of a scholar. During the meal he quoted a tag from Horace, but could not

remember its conclusion. His host could not help him out, but, to his surprise, the butler volunteered the missing line.

The result was that the guest had some speech with Mr. Hawthorn before he left, heard his story, and believed it. He was a man of a philanthropic spirit, and his first aim was to remove this unhappy scholar to more congenial surroundings. So after various negotiations, which had something to do with a young thoroughbred filly, Mr. Hawthorn was transferred to the establishment of his new-found friend.

There he dwelt not unhappily for a considerable time. At his request his new master wrote to a Scottish correspondent, and, without revealing Mr. Hawthorn's existence, secured the full details of the events which had mystified all Lothian. He learned that Miss Barbara was living in the house, confident that her brother would some day return. Mr. Hawthorn would not let him proceed further. Somewhere in his sober bosom was a spark of romance; as he had departed mysteriously, so he would return. His new life interested him, he had formed an attachment to his new master, and he had almost forgotten about his great work on the Antonines. Also, Mr. Hawthorn was proud. He was determined to be beholden to no man for the cost of his return, and he was waiting until he had saved sufficient money from his wages.

At last the day arrived when he was ready and willing to leave. But in those days of continuous war with France it was no slight business to cross the Atlantic, and there were many adventures in store for him before he reached his native land.

He embarked on a ship which was taken off Land's End by a French privateer. He was carried to Havre and found himself a prisoner in the enemy's hands. This misfortune achieved what none of his sufferings in Carolina had achieved—it broke Mr. Hawthorn's temper. He managed to escape, and for several months was a fugitive on the French roads. Having some command of the French tongue, and dwelling much upon his Scottish nationality and the old friendship between Scotland and France, he managed to secure the good offices of a priest, who facilitated his journey to the capital.

In Paris, Mr. Hawthorn had a friend, a fellow antiquarian, to whom he appealed for help. This was willingly given, but it was not easy at the moment to leave France, and Mr. Hawthorn had to spend several months in Paris, where, after his proud fashion, he insisted on supporting himself by teaching. He had to pass as a Scottish Jacobite, a disguise

which gave him intense annoyance, for he was a zealous supporter of the Hanoverian Government.

It was April when he found it possible to depart from French soil. A smuggler's sloop landed him by night on the Sussex coast, and he was free once more to assume the character of a law-abiding Scotsman. He had enough money for the journey to the North, but, having acquired frugal habits during his wanderings, he insisted on making that journey in the most inexpensive fashion. Late on the evening of a day in early May, a timber barque from Hull deposited him at the pier at Leith.

He slept the night in a waterside inn, and before dawn next morning he was well on the road for his home. It was a fresh, bright day, very much the same weather as when he had left. He ascended the dean and crossed the strip of rough lawn. As he entered the dining-room the clock was striking seven.

There were two plates of smoking porridge on the table, much too hot to eat.

He strode into the hall. Babby!' he cried, 'how often have I told you that the porridge should be dished up earlier?'

But he did not go out into the garden again to wait until it cooled.

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