

John Buchan

THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS



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Readers



Young Adult

Classic

Book brief

- 1 *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is an adventure spy novel by Scottish author, John Buchan first published in 1915.
- 2 It's the first of five novels with Richard Hannay as an all-action hero.
- 3 The story is set in England and Scotland in May 1914 when war is about to start in Europe.
- 4 It's one of the first examples of an 'innocent man on-the-run thriller', which was then used in many films.
- 5 One of the main themes is that of the ordinary man who puts the interests of his country before his own safety.

John Buchan

The Thirty-Nine Steps

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For Review Only

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Main Characters



Just back from Africa, he's bored and wants something to happen. He doesn't have to wait long.



He has a lot of land in Scotland.



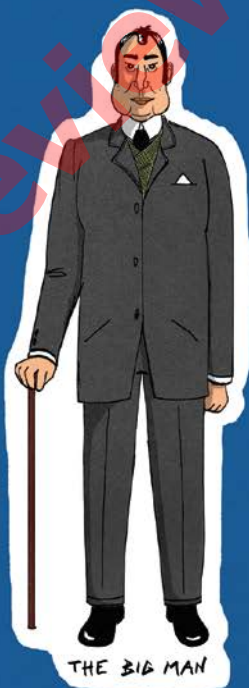
An American who writes for a newspaper about Europe.



He's related to Sir Harry and works at the Foreign Office



*Three
dangerous
men.*



Reading

1 Read the conversation and match the questions to the answers.

'The Thirty-Nine Steps is a film, isn't it?'

..... **a**

1 'Really! What's it about?'

.....

2 'Is it a modern story?'

.....

3 'Is it a true story?'

.....

4 'Who are the most interesting characters?'

.....

5 'The Hawk! Why is he called that?'

.....

6 'And does Richard Hannay stop the Hawk?'

.....

a 'Yes, it's a film by the famous director, Alfred Hitchcock. But before that it was a book.'

b 'No, it's not. There are some things that happen that are true. There's a war. But most of it isn't true. But it's a very exciting story with a lot of interesting characters.'

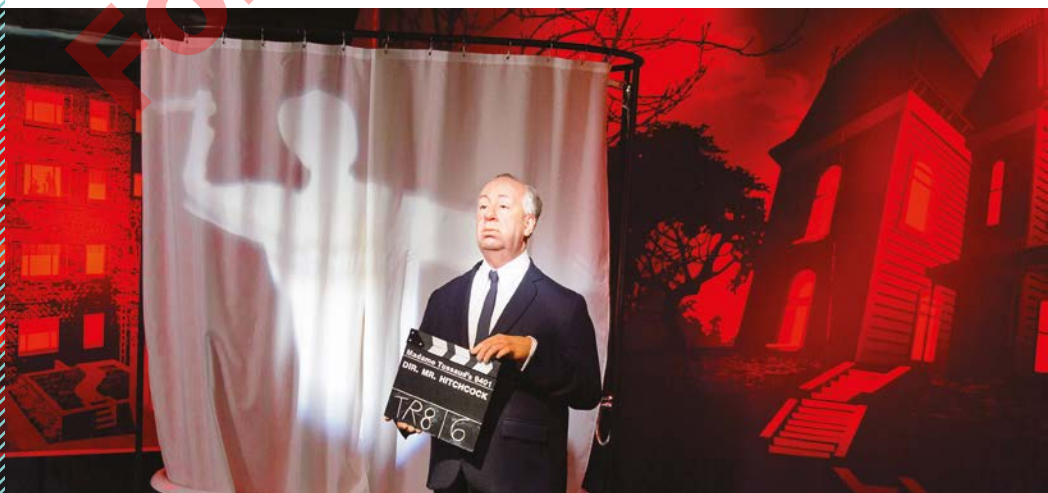
c 'Well, you'll have to read the book to see, won't you?'

d 'It's a spy story, about a man in London. His name's Richard Hannay. He's not from London. He's from South Africa. At the beginning of the story he meets a man, a strange man. Then his life changes. I'm not going to tell you any more now. I want you to read it.'

e 'Because he's like a bird. A bird that eats other, smaller birds, like a hawk. He's a dangerous person.'

f 'Not really. It's about the last days, before the beginning of the First World War.'

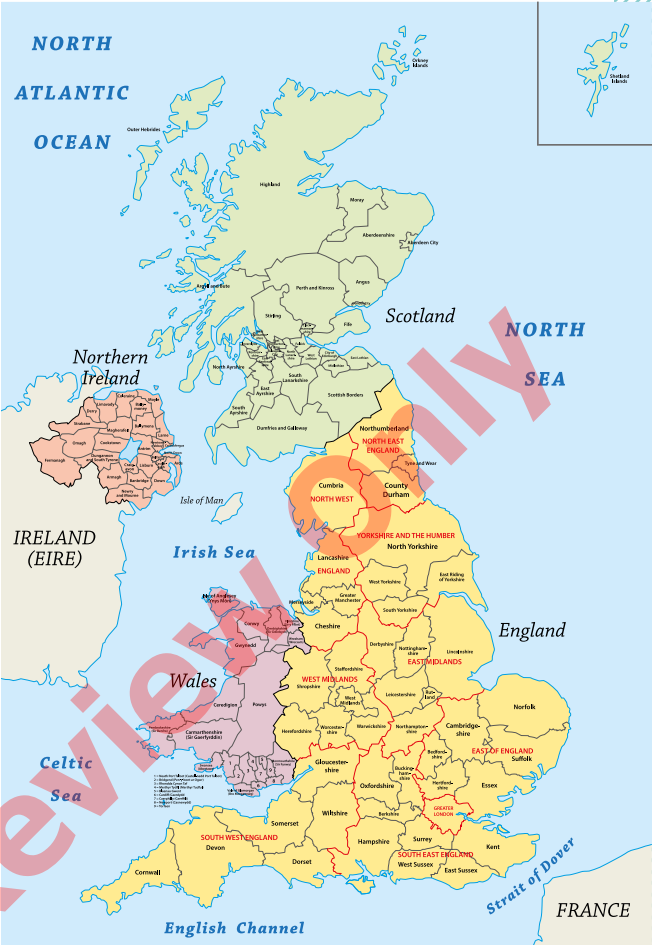
g 'Well, Richard Hannay is certainly interesting. He is the main character. But the most interesting character for me is a man called, 'The Hawk.'



Places

2 Can you see the places on the map? If not could we add their names? Look at the map of Britain, and match the place to the description.

- 1 ☐ Cromer
 - 2 ☐ Galloway
 - 3 ☐ Hungerford
 - 4 ☐ London
- a The capital of the country.
- b A region in the south west of Scotland.
- c A town that is just to the north of London.
- d A small town on the east coast of England.



Characters

3 A code is a secret language that only some people are able to read. Can you understand this simple code to help you know some of the names of the most important characters?

- 8 - 1 - 14 - 14 - 1 - 25 Hannay
- A 23 - 1 - 12 - 20 - 5 - 18
- B 8 - 1 - 23 - 11
- C 19 - 3 - 21 - 4 - 4 - 5 - 18
- D 8 - 1 - 18 - 18 - 2

One More Day

- 2 I looked up at the afternoon sky. 'Black clouds again,' I said to myself. 'Just like yesterday, and the day before that. Did I really leave South Africa for this?'

People thought I was a lucky man. But I was already tired of the restaurants, the people, and the theatres. Here I was in London, one of the great cities of the world. People invited me to parties. And they seemed* interested in me, at first. 'What's it like in South Africa?' they all asked. But after this question they soon lost interest, and I was left alone. Alone, that's it. I was terribly alone. And bored.

At the beginning, I was excited about being in London. Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park, Covent Garden. It was all so different. I wanted to come here so much. And here I was, thirty-seven years old, with enough money, and good health. But I was already tired of the place, and thinking about going home.

That afternoon, I went into a club to read the newspaper. At about six, I went home, got dressed and went out to a restaurant. After this, I went to the theatre. But the show wasn't very good, and I didn't stay long.

As I walked home in the night air, I looked up at the sky again. 'One more day,' I said to myself. 'I'll give myself one more day. If nothing interesting happens, I'll get the next boat back to South Africa.'

A gentlemen's club is a private social club first set up by men from Britain's upper classes in the 18th century.

seem give the idea that

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I lived on my own in a small flat. I liked it that way. It was very peaceful*, and nobody ever disturbed* me. But that evening, when I arrived at my door, something felt wrong. Something was different. I had a feeling that I wasn't alone – that somebody was watching me. I turned* and saw a man standing behind me. 'How did he get there?' I thought. 'I didn't hear him or see him.' At first I was surprised, but then I recognised* him. He was the man who lived in the flat above mine.

The man was slim, with a short, brown beard and blue eyes. 'Can I speak to you?' he asked. 'May I come in?' he added.

I opened my door and let him in. As soon as he was inside, he ran into my study, the place where I usually write my letters. Then he came back. 'Are we alone?' he asked. I was beginning to get worried, and the man could see it.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I may seem strange to you, but can I tell you something? You seem to be the kind of man who'll understand.'

'I'll listen to you,' I replied*. 'I can only promise* that.'

'Please excuse me, but I'm not feeling well tonight, because at the moment, well, you see, at this moment, I'm dead!'

'Oh dear, he's crazy,' I thought.

'How does it feel to be dead?' I asked.

The man smiled. 'I know what you're thinking. You think I'm crazy. But, I'm going to tell you a secret*. You see, I need your help.'

'Tell me this secret of yours,' I said. 'And then I'll tell you if I can help.'

And so he told his story. It was difficult to understand at first, and

peaceful quiet

disturb do something like making a noise

turn move your body to see what's behind you

recognise understand, know

reply answer

promise say you'll do something in the future

secret something that nobody should know

Hannay is opening the door of his flat when he sees a man standing watching him.



I had to stop him sometimes, to ask questions. But this is what he said.

‘I’ll tell you my name in a moment. For now, it’s enough to know that I’m an American. I left my country when I finished college, and I went to Eastern Europe. I spent a year or two as a newspaper writer there. The newspapers back home are very interested in that area.’

‘I met a lot of important people. People who make decisions*. People who are always in the newspaper. People with a lot of money. And I soon understood that where there’s money, there’s danger.’

‘I wrote a lot about the war in the Balkans. And I learnt a lot of things. This war is just the beginning. There are people who want a bigger war. There are people who’ll make a lot of money from a war like that.’

‘These people want to kill me. I already know too much. I know what their plans are. But I have to stay alive* for one more month, or terrible things will happen.’

‘But, I thought you were dead already,’ I said.

‘I’ll tell you about that later,’ he replied. ‘But I’ve got to explain more first. Do you read the newspapers? I imagine* you do. Do you know the name Constantine Karolides?’

Now he had my attention*. I saw his name in the newspapers a lot.

‘He’s a clever man, and he’s honest*. People, the people I talked about before, they want to kill him. I know how they want to kill him as well. And they know that I know. That’s why I have to die.’

‘They can’t kill him while he’s in his own country. But on the 15th June he’s coming to London, to speak to the British government*. And these people – these terrible people want to kill him here – so that he never returns to his country.’

The First World War started in Europe and lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918.

make decisions decide

stay alive not die

imagine (here) have the idea that

attention if you have someone’s attention, they listen to you

honest an honest person doesn’t steal and doesn’t say things that aren’t true

government the group of people that makes decisions for its country



‘Why don’t you tell the police?’ I asked.

‘Because if he doesn’t come, they’ve won. He’s the only man who can stop the war,’ he replied.

‘Tell the government then,’ I said.

‘Then they’ll get more police. But it won’t make any difference. They want to kill him while everyone is watching. He’ll be killed by an Austrian. People will think that the governments of Austria and Germany killed him. And this bigger war will begin. But it’ll be a lie*. A lie!’

‘But there’s a man who understands all of this,’ the man continued*. ‘He’ll be in London on 15th June. Franklin P. Scudder is his name.’

‘And who’s Franklin Scudder?’

‘Franklin Scudder is me,’ he replied.

I was getting more and more interested in this man. Now I knew his name. And I was beginning to believe his story.

‘Where did you get all this information?’ I asked.

‘In Vienna. I got some of the information at a hat shop. Some more at a club, and even more at a bookshop in Leipzig. I had lots of meetings. Then I got the final piece of information in Paris – ten days ago.’

‘I can’t tell you the details now. But then, after Paris, I knew I had to disappear*. I went from Paris to London, but not directly*. I went through Brussels, Hamburg, and Norway. I changed my identity* at every place.’

‘So they don’t know you’re here?’ I said.

‘I thought they didn’t; until yesterday. And then...’ Scudder stopped

lie something not true

continue (here) start speaking again

disappear when something or somebody isn’t there anymore

directly without stopping in other places

identity details about yourself

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for a moment. He looked around the room, and then continued with his story.

‘Then I saw a man standing outside, on the street, in front of my flat. I watched him from my window. I think I recognised him.’

‘When I came back last night I found a card in my letter box. A name was on it. The name of the last man I want to meet – ever!’

The look in Scudder’s eyes at that moment convinced* me, finally, that he was telling the truth*. I asked him what he did next.

‘I realised* that I had to die – to convince them that I was dead. It was the only way.’

‘And how did you do that?’ I asked.

‘I found a dead body. You can always find one in London, if you know who to ask. The body looked like* mine. The man had to look a little bit like me. But nobody really knows me here anyway. I took the body to my room, dressed him in my clothes, and left it on the floor in my flat. After this I waited for you to come home. That’s it really. Simple! So now you know.’

The man looked frightened*, very frightened, as he told me these terrible things.

‘Give me your key,’ I said. ‘I want to see the body. I believe you. But I just want to be sure.’

‘I can’t. I haven’t got it. I had to leave it there. The police have to find my key, in my room. You understand that, don’t you? Tonight you’ll just have to believe me. Tomorrow you’ll know. You’ll know that it’s true.’

convince make someone believe something
truth something true
realise understand

look like seem the same as
frightened afraid

I thought for a moment. ‘Well, I wanted something to happen,’ I said to myself. ‘And it has.’

‘OK,’ I said to the man. ‘We’ll see what happens tomorrow.’

‘Thank you,’ said the man. He went into the bathroom to prepare for bed. When he came out he looked like a different person. His hair was different, and he no longer had a beard. He looked like a British soldier*. When he talked, he didn’t sound* American anymore. His voice* was British. It was incredible*.

‘I’m not your neighbour anymore,’ he said. ‘I’m Captain Digby – from the British army*. If you believe in your disguise*, everybody else will believe it. You just have to act* like you’re that person. I’m now a soldier in the British army. I believe it, and so do you. And you’ve already forgotten about poor Scudder.’

I admired* how he could change his appearance*, and his voice so quickly. He really looked like a different person.

I made a bed for him, and went to sleep quite happy. ‘Things happen – interesting things happen in London after all,’ I thought.

In the morning, I left my neighbour to go for a walk in the centre. When I got back, I saw a man who lived in the flat below. He had a strange look on his face.

‘Did you hear what happened this morning?’ he asked. ‘The man who lived in number 15. He killed himself. The police are there now.’

I went up to flat number 15 and found two policemen there. I asked a few questions, and it was clear that they were sure. ‘He killed himself last night,’ one of them said. ‘Did you know him?’ When

soldier a person goes to war for his country

sound seem like from what you can hear

voice you use your voice to speak or sing

incredible hard to believe

army a group of soldiers

disguise to look like somebody else

act how you move and speak

admire think well of someone

appearance how you seem

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I replied that I didn't, they asked me to leave.

'So, it was true,' I thought. 'It's all true.' I became more and more interested in this new friend.

Scudder was quite happy during the first two days. We played cards. And he had a little black notebook, which he wrote in all the time.

But on the third day, I saw he was getting more impatient*. He was waiting for that day, June 15th. He started to look* worried.

Sometimes he spoke about a black stone, and a man with a strange voice. And he also talked about an old man with a young voice, and strange eyes.

The next day, he seemed quite happy. I went out to dinner and came back at about half past ten in the evening. I was ready for my game of cards.

I went inside my flat, but the lights were out. 'Is he sleeping already?' I asked myself. I turned on the light. And then I saw something in the corner of the room – something terrible.

Scudder was lying on his back, with a knife through his heart!



impatient how you feel when you're tired of waiting for something

look seem

After-Reading Activities • Chapter One

Reading

- 1 What do we learn about Richard Hannay in the first chapter? Put a tick next to the things we already know.

- ☐ Where he comes from.
- ☐ What he does.
- ☐ Where he lives.
- ☐ What he thinks of London.
- ☐ If he's married or not.
- ☐ His age.
- ☐ How much money he has.

- 2 Read about Mr Scudder and choose the right option.

His name is Scudder and he's ~~an American~~/a German who writes for a (1) newspaper/magazine. He writes about (2) Eastern/Western Europe. He's met a lot of (3) poor/rich people. These people want a (4) big/small war so they can get more money. They want to kill Scudder because he knows (5) too little/too much.

Vocabulary

- 3 Use the adjectives below to complete the sentences.

~~alone~~ - black - brown - frightened - honest - interested - strange

Richard Hannay felt *alone* in London because he didn't have any friends there.

- 1 When he went home one evening he saw a man, standing behind him.
- 2 Richard Hannay was in Scudder's story but it was difficult to believe him.
- 3 Mr Scudder was slim and he had blue eyes, and a beard.
- 4 Scudder was because some men wanted to kill him.
- 5 Richard Hannay didn't like the weather in London because all he could see were clouds.
- 6 Mr Scudder thought that Karolides was an and clever man.

Writing **A2 KEY**

- 4 Complete the text about Chapter One with one word for each space.

Hannay*came*..... back home at half (1) ten in the evening. He wanted to (2) cards with his new friend, Mr Scudder, but (3) he went inside his flat, something was strange. The lights (4) out. He put on the light and saw (5) terrible in the corner of the room. Scudder was dead with a knife (6) his heart.

- 5 Imagine that you are Richard Hannay, and write a postcard to your friend in South Africa.

Dear Frank,
London is a big city but
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

.....
.....
.....
.....

Pre-Reading Activity • Chapter Two

Prediction

- 6 A What happens next? What do you think?

- A ☐ The person who killed Scudder is in the room.
B ☐ Hannay will call the police.
C ☐ Hannay will try to run away.

- 6 B Then, read the next chapter. Do you want to change your answer to exercise 6A?