The Thirty-Nine Steps Study Guide

The Thirty-Nine Steps by John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Thirty-Nine Steps is an adventure spy novel by John Buchan written in 1914. Told from the first-person point of view, it relates the adventure of "ordinary fellow" Richard Hannay, who is thrust into a plot involving the theft of crucial military intelligence by German anarchists.

Richard Hannay's ordinary life is shattered when he receives a frantic visitor, Scudder, who tells Hannay of a sinister plot by anarchists to assassinate the Greek Premier. Hannay allows the man to stay in his flat to hide out. Scudder writes down the whole plot in a black note book. One day Hannay arrives to the flat to find it ransacked and Scudder dead with a knife in the back. Thinking the police would not believe he was innocent, Hannay becomes a man on the run, pursued under false pretenses by the police and evil anarchists.

On the run, Hannay manages to break the code of the black book (Scudder wrote in code), and finds that the plot is even more sinister than Scudder led on. German anarchists, called the Black Stone, plan to steal British naval intelligence in order to establish a naval blockade around England, starting a war across all of Europe.

Hannay eventually steals a police car only to send it off into a ravine as he barely escapes with his life by clutching onto a branch. Nearby is a kind young innkeeper, Sir Harry, who Hannay confides in. Sir Harry agrees to help him by sending a letter to his godfather, a politician named Sir Walter Bullivant.

Hannay soon goes on the run again, this time taking on the guise of a poor road-mender. Subsequently, Hannay stumbles across a remote Scottish mansion owned by an old archaeologist. Hannay realizes with horror that the archaeologist is a member of Black Stone. Hannay saves himself by swearing to be someone else. The archaeologist locks him in a room in order to discern his identity, and Hannay escapes by finding some explosive mining material, enough to blast the room (and his guards) apart.

Hannay makes his way back to London via train, and he manages to find Sir Walter Bullivant. Hannay explains the whole affair to Bullivant, and the severity of the situation is made clear when they get word that the Greek Premier Karolides was assassinated only hours before.

Bullivant is to be part of a meeting that night discussing the very military intelligence at stake. In one of the meeting's participants, the British Sea Lord Alloa, Hannay notices a flash of recognition in the man's eyes that tells him that Alloa is the traitor. They must now find out where the Black Stone will depart England from. At this point Hannay remembers a cryptic portion of Scudder's black book, describing "Thirty-Nine Steps" and a "high tide" occurring at "10:17pm." Hannay narrows the Black Stone's likely exit point to the east coast in a small ship like a yacht, at a place that doesn't have a harbor, with high tide at 10:17pm. A coastguard is brought in with knowledge of the east coast,

and he recalls a portion of the coast, a private beach with steps running down to the shore, with a high tide occurring at 10:17 p.m.

Hannay scopes out the area. One home, Trafalgar Lodge, has steps leading down to the beach numbering exactly thirty-nine. Hannay accuses the three male residents of the Lodge of espionage, and manages to pierce the residents' disguises after some doubt (they appear to be middle-class Brits, but are in fact the German Black Stone spies). In the briefest of epilogues, Hannay reveals he has since joined the British Army.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Richard Hannay is a Scot turned Brit who has for the past three months lived in a modest flat in the Old Country in rural England. At age 37, Hannay is bored of the sights, the restaurants, and the people, feeling he has no true friends or pals, and finds he cannot help but yawn and regret his circumstances most of the time. If he cannot cure his boredom soon, he has resolved to move back to the Cape.

One day returning to his flat, Hannay is confronted by Franklin Scudder, an older man living in the flat above his. Scudder asks to come in, and the man quickly locks the door behind them, clearly in a panic. Scudder states that he is a dead man, and he relates to Hannay his unfortunate circumstance. Scudder is an American journalist and has toured much of Europe in that capacity. Recently Scudder stumbled upon a sinister international scheme to usher in a state of European anarchy, specifically to get Russia to declare war on Germany. This scheme would throw the stock markets into chaos, which the instigators would then use to their advantage to gain much power and money. This scheme, according to Scudder, has been planned by German anarchists, capitalists, and Jews. As part of pulling off this scheme, the anarchists wish to assassinate the Greek Premier named Karolides, because he is a smart man of integrity who has a chance to ruin their plans. Karolides has been invited to Britain on the 15th of June for a tea party, and the anarchists have chosen this tea party as the best time to assassinate Karolides.

Scudder, through many aliases and disguises, put the pieces of this puzzle together while touring Europe. Now the anarchists have found out that Scudder knows about the tea party. Scudder figures the only way he might live is to fake his own death. He did just that by faking illness to neighbors and then using his connections to find a recently-deceased corpse that sort of looks like him and placing the corpse in his own bed. He shot the corpse's face both to discourage accurate identification and to fake suicide. After he pulls his stunt, Scudder did not know where to turn, and going to Hannay was a frantic last resort.

Hannay, still suspecting he may be listening to a madman, wishes to go to Scudder's flat to see this corpse, but Scudder left the key inside. Scudder pleads with Hannay to believe him and let him hide, and Hannay agrees. After two days, during which Scudder scribbles his story and pertinent information into a black book to give to Hannay, police find the dead body Scudder planted, and rule it Scudder's suicide. On the third day, however, Hannay returns from a lunch meeting to discover Scudder dead in his flat, with a knife in his back.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The initial chapter is important to any work, and this is no exception with THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS. We are introduced, in the first-person, to protagonist Richard Hannay. A status quo is quickly established, that of complacency, inactivity, and boredom on the part of Hannay. Hannay finds himself friendless, tired of the local restaurants, and longing for the more adventurous colonial life he just left. In this way, Scudder's arrival and the subsequent adventure is a sort of "be careful what you wish for" scenario. At 38, Hannay hasn't yet found a calling, and he seems to merely drift from place to place without purpose or intent.

All of this expository-laden establishment of status quo is shattered with the arrival of Scudder. When Scudder, with words tumbling like a waterfall, explains the entire improbable plot of anarchists starting a war and a Greek Premier being assassinated during a tea party, Hannay reacts with characteristic stoicism and sarcasm, wishing to humor the old man who he initially does not believe. Hannay's reaction mirrors the reader's own (who also finds the anarchist scenario outlandish), and instantly a bond is formed between Hannay and reader from this common point. Hannay is clearly established as an ordinary man, who is thrust into extraordinary circumstances only unwillingly.

Several crucial things are planted in this chapter. There is the date given of Karolides' visit to England and assassination, the 15th of June, some three weeks' away. This gives the narrative a "ticking clock," helping move the plot along and ratchet up tension, as time becomes yet another obstacle for Hannay. The question becomes, Will Hannay warn the proper authorities in time to prevent this disaster? This question, though it will change, is the reader's initial window into the narrative.

In this chapter also is the introduction of Scudder's black book, the crucial prop in Hannay's adventure. Not only will a crucial clue be introduced, known but not understood now (the thirty-nine steps), it is clear from the ransacking of Hannay's flat that the killer was looking for the book. Hannay's mere possession of the book becomes a danger to Hannay, and a physically-realized reason for the Black Stone to pursue Hannay.

The last sentence of the chapter reveals that Scudder has been murdered with a knife in his back, with additional gruesome detail telling us he has been skewered to the floor. This shock acts as a cliffhanger to propel the reader into reading more. The cliffhanger method of leaving a chapter on a strong, unexpected, or unresolved event is common to a straight-ahead adventure novel such as we have here, though the author does not leave every single chapter on a cliffhanger.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Hannay is shaken by the sight of the body, but he quickly pulls himself together and reasons out his situation. Scudder's enemies must assume Scudder confided in Hannay, and thus Hannay is a likely target for murder. These enemies are in fact probably waiting outside to nab him. On the other hand, Hannay could call the police, but in all likelihood they would not believe his fantastic story about international intrigue, and in fact try him for Scudder's murder, based on strong circumstantial evidence. Cornered, Hannay decides to carry on Scudder's work, that is, lay low for the twenty days before the tea party, and then somehow warn the British government of the impending assassination attempt on Karolides.

Hannay searches Scudder's body, finding nothing of worth, especially not the valuable black book full of information. That the murderer ransacked the apartment tells Hannay that the enemies were also looking for the black book. Fortune then smiles as Hannay by chance finds Scudder's black book buried in his tobacco jar. Figuring his flat is being watched, Hannay hatches a scheme to escape. He waits until the milkman arrives in the morning, and then offers the youngster money to wear his uniform. The milkman, not one to "spoil a bit of sport," agrees to the handsome offer. Hannay, as milkman, exits his flat and heads toward a train station. He resolves to hide out in the "wild district" of Scotland, as he could easily fit in there, being a native Scot. Evading both police and anarchists, Hannay knocks over two station attendants in his frantic bid to reach the train before it pulls out from the station. Hannay arrives safely on board the train bound for Scotland.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter treats us to Hannay's interiority, and after this chapter Hannay's character can be nearly completely understood. This is a classic example of plot revealing character; here, the plot has given Hannay a dead body in his living room. Again forging a bond between protagonist and reader, Hannay is first overcome with shock and emotion, barely able to look at the tortured expression on Scudder's face and having to cover him with a sheet. This is very much how an ordinary fellow might react, and the first-person perspective provides us this window with which to peer into Hannay's soul. After the initial shock has subsided, Hannay's superior reasoning (another of his tangible characteristics) is demonstrated. He reasons that the police would consider him the killer of Scudder based upon the strong circumstantial evidence, and he reasons that neither the police nor higher government officials would believe his fantastic story without evidence. Finally, in a decision that is part reason and part emotion, Hannay vows to carry on Scudder's mission and try to warn someone in Scudder's place. Here we have Hannay as hero; while during the decision he again insists he is but an ordinary fellow, this decision (to go on the run and battle both an evil spy network and

the police) is heroic and not the choice of a mere ordinary man. This is the first interesting play between Hannay as ordinary man and Hannay as hero.

Also a "first" in this chapter is the serendipity of Hannay discovering Scudder's black book in his tobacco jar. Though Scudder placed it there because he knew Hannay smokes and would therefore have occasion to dip into the jar, this is clearly good fortune on the part of Hannay, especially considering Scudder's killer ripped apart his flat to find that very book. This kind of luck follows Hannay throughout, from the various good Samaritans who take him in, to finding Bullivant much later by randomly whistling "Annie Laurie." While these plot conveniences could be viewed as mere contrivances, there is also a sense that chance favors good people, in a karmic sense, and that Hannay is destined to succeed in stopping evil just as Black Stone is doomed to be uncovered.

Finally, this chapter introduces Hannay's ingenuity and facility with disguises, as he convinces the milkman to give him his costume. Disguises will crop up over and again and are important both thematically and in the climactic scene.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Hannay adopts a Scottish accent and travels north on the train. He examines Scudder's black book, which appears to be coded with a cipher that requires a key-word to cracks the code. Switching trains, he finally emerges into the Scottish moorlands, or bog. He finds a modest farmer's house, and the generous husband and wife offer Hannay a stay for the night and a good meal. Hannay sets out the next morning, and his plan is to double-back on his tracks to fool the police and anyone else on his tail. On the train back, he steals a glance at an old shepherd's daily newspaper, and there is an article about Scudder's death, dubbed "The Portland Place Murder." The article mentions the police detaining the milkman and letting him go after intense questioning.

Arriving at a station he had been to the night before, Hannay must hide in the shadows from a station-master he met the day before, and three rough-looking local policemen questioning the station-master. Hannay cannot leave at the station, so he waits until the train starts up again, and then jumps off. Unfortunately he is with a dog who barks at this action, stirring the entire train and making Hannay's departure quite public.

Finding himself back in the moorland, Hannay must hide among the bushes when a monoplane, which Hannay fears is spying for his enemies, flies overhead in a search pattern. Avoiding detection, Hannay next chances upon a rural inn, run by a young man who wants to be a writer of adventures. Playing to the young innkeeper's sensibilities, Hannay invents an adventure for himself, claiming he is a "mining magnate" on the run from a gang who had killed his best friend. This spirit of adventure is just what the bored young man was craving, and he excitedly agrees to house Hannay for a few days.

During this time in the inn, Hannay cracks Scudder's cipher by using a name, "Julia," that Scudder mentioned was the "key" to the whole affair with Karolides. Before he has much time to read the book, two rough-looking men have arrived at the inn asking questions. The innkeepers lies and tells them that Hannay had been at the inn, but had taken off the day before on a motorcycle. Hannay, hidden upstairs, gives the boy a note he forges, which makes Hannay sound like a spy who is about to inform his superior about the Karolides affair. The men leave after reading this note. Hannay instructs the young innkeeper to go into town and tell the police about the men and that they might be part of the Scudder murder.

Soon after the men leave, three other men arrive, these ones policemen. One plainclothes officer parks his car some ways away from the inn. Hannay sneaks from the inn and steals the officer's car, tearing down the road before the police can stop him.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The chase begins in earnest, as it were, with Hannay on the run and pursued. Hannay adopts a Scottish accent to blend in on the train, additional evidence of Hannay's facility with becoming someone else. Soon after, Hannay is fed and housed by a kindly farmer's wife, the first of many times in which a rural Scot helps Hannay out of a jam. The repetition and uniformity of these encounters (the Scots are always nice and ask no questions) is a cultural comment on the laudable characteristics of these people; it is no surprise the author John Buchan is Scottish.

The tension of the novel is sometimes relieved with comic moments. In this chapter, we have Hannay, again with the police hot on his heels, jumping off a moving train to cover his tracks and slip away. Unfortunately a dog barks its fool head off the whole time, and Hannay's careful "silent getaway" is spoiled by a canine. These moments allow the reader to take a break from the action, and they also inject a palpable sense of humanity into the proceedings.

Chapter 3 is the first appearance of the monoplane, flown by members of Black Stone, that harasses and spies on Hannay. This plane is a valuable symbol of Black Stone for several reasons. It shows they are technologically savvy and have plenty of resources at hand. It demonstrates that Black Stone has power over a large region, and can easily cover ground quickly. It also gets at the heart of Black Stone as a ubiquitous espionage organization, a kind of Eye of God that can see all and know all. All of these contribute to the sense that Hannay is an underdog, badly outmatched with nowhere to hide, making his eventual triumph all the more satisfying.

Hannay, once again helped by a stranger, is able to hide out in an inn. True to form, Hannay convinces the young innkeeper he is a "mining magnate" and that his best friend has just been killed. Here, not only is Hannay a master of disguise, he is able to perceptively read the person he wishes to fool. The young innkeeper, like Hannay himself before this all got started, wants action and intrigue as an escape from his lonely existence, and Hannay constructs his persona to deliver just that. Hannay is thus also adept at reading people, which will figure into the climax.

Hannay is able to "crack the code" of Scudder's book, displaying a certain Sherlock Holmes-like ingenuity. A cipher is the perfect vehicle to further the "high espionage" aspect of the novel, and also to further demonstrate Hannay's intelligence and resourcefulness.

This chapter ends on a cliffhanger, though not as sharp or shocking as Chapter 1's dead body. Hannay steals a plainclothes officer's upscale automobile and tears away before he can be stopped. Here is the first real instance of Hannay actually committing a crime, though of course given his predicament and the fact he's fighting for his life, he can be largely exonerated for his action.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As Hannay speeds along the moor roads in the stolen plainclothes officer's car, he thinks about what he discovered in Scudder's black book. Much of what Scudder told him was a lie. The conspiracy was bigger than he stated. The coming war would involve many more nations, and would also involve the break of relations between the Germans and the Brits, with the Germans establishing a naval blockade around the United Kingdom. There is also mention many times of "The Thirty-Nine Steps" (which Hannay cannot make sense of) and an evil underground organization called the Black Stone. It is the Black Stone and not "Jew anarchists" behind these schemes. The Black Stone also planned to intercept important military intelligence on the state of the British naval fleet.

Hannay considers writing the Prime Minister, but figures he would not believe him. He continues riding east until he gets to a little village, figuring to eat. A policeman stops him, and Hannay almost stops, but then figures the policeman probably got word of his fugitive status, so instead Hannay punches the man and drives away. Hannay realizes the stolen policeman's car is very much a liability for him and likely to identify him easily.

Hannay heads for lonelier roads, when suddenly the airplane again flies overhead. He speeds down into a valley to try to evade the plane's gaze, and in his haste Hannay loses control. Before he can brake, he crashes into some hedges, catches on a branch, and the stolen car plunges several stories down into a glen. The branch saved Hannay's life.

A stranger saw the accident and inquires as to Hannay's health. He is okay. The man, Sir Harry, offers Hannay lodging and food. Sir Harry asks if Hannay is a Free Trader, and Hannay says that he is, not knowing the term but wishing nonetheless to ingratiate himself with his host. Sir Harry is thrilled that Hannay is a Free Trader, and he asks Hannay to speak at a political meeting that night. Hannay goes along with the ruse and attends the meeting. Sir Harry is a Liberal, and he makes a poorly-spoken anti-war speech blasting the Tory party for creating a "German menace." Hannay next gives a speech, giving the crowd a completely fabricated account of politics in Australia. The crowd is pleased and amused.

Hannay, knowing full well of an impending and real "German menace" from Scudder's notebook, decides to tell Sir Harry the full and true story of his adventure. Sir Harry is convinced and wants to help Hannay. Hannay has Sir Harry dictate a letter to his godfather, Sir Walter Bullivant, who has a powerful position in the Foreign Office, to expect Hannay at his office soon disguised as a "Mr. Twisdon" uttering the password "Black Stone" and whistling a specific tune, "Annie Laurie." Hannay also borrows clothes, has Sir Harry promise to mislead the police as to where Hannay has gone, and borrows a bike to continue his evasion of the Black Stone.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Hannay is able to fully decipher the book, and as it turns out, the anarchist plot is larger and more sinister than even Scudder intimated. This is consistent with, at its simplest, an adventure book as a series of episodes, in which each episode is topped by the next. As Hannay progresses, ideally each scrape becomes more dangerous and more and more is at stake. Consider the oddness (and the readers' disappointment) if Hannay discovers that the plot is much less dangerous than what Scudder had told him. This would break a basic rule of escalation.

Important circumstances begin to get repeated in Chapter 4. The monoplane again hunts Hannay, and Hannay again finds help in the kindness of a stranger, this time in the person of Sir Harry (after Hannay barely survives his car crashing down into a ravine). Par for the course, Hannay once again dons a disguise and gives his audience what he thinks they want to hear, telling Sir Harry he is a Free Trader. This disguise has consequences in the form of a largely comic detour in which Hannay offers a rousing speech about Australia, though he's never visited the continent. More than humorous, the episode makes a statement about the art of disguise so prevalent in the book. Disguise is progressing and coming in different forms now. At first, disguise was purely functional and on the surface, when Hannay dons the milkman's outfit to visually fool his pursuers. Here, not only does Hannay take on a persona, he does it with such gusto that he is hailed and cheered. Disguise has evolved from mere necessity.

This chapter does not end on a cliffhanger, but instead in a lull in the action, with Black Stone gone for the moment, and Hannay heading out on a bicycle given to him by Sir Harry. Here the chapter division is motivated more by a change in geography and the end of an episode, rather than a need to end on a particularly shocking or salacious turn of events.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Hannay rides Sir Harry's bike deep into the flat country. The airplane again rears its ugly head, and Hannay sees two men in the plain spying on him with a telescope. The flat country is a liability and he has nowhere to hide. But as luck would have it, he stumbles across a drunk Scottish roadman, mending the road. The man, Alexander Turnbull, is afraid his supervisor will come soon and discover he is drunk. Desperate for another disguise, Hannay offers to take over for Turnbull while the man sleeps his drink off. Hannay takes his dirty clothes and hat, and otherwise dirties himself up to become the perfect rural roadman. Pretending to work, Hannay moves down the road. The supervisor arrives via car, and Hannay convinces the man that he is Turnbull.

Hannay soon has another visitor, this time three rough men who he guesses are members of Black Stone. Hannay plays the part of the rural Scotsman perfectly. They are fooled, and ask Hannay if, essentially, he's seen himself somewhere on the road. Hannay says he hasn't seen anyone, and the men seem convinced, driving off.

Hannay continues his ruse until nightfall. At this point a final car passes him, and he recognizes the driver, a haughty stockbroker Hannay dislikes named Marmaduke Jopley. Hannay seizes Jopley's car and convinces the frightened Jopley to change clothes with him. With Jopley, Hannay drives back the way he had walked, into a very remote part of the moors. There he gives Jopley his car and clothes back and sends him on his way.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The plane makes another appearance. Where before the land has helped Hannay hide, he finds himself in a broad, flat portion of the country, and the geography becomes now an enemy and liability, as he has nowhere to hide. This circumstance helps to aid in the escalation of action and tension, and it is also a novel change in the expectation that the wilderness will be Hannay's friend. As Hannay states, even the wide-open country feels like bars in a prison cage; he literally has nowhere safe to hide.

In another "lucky" or happy circumstance, he chances upon Alexander Turnbull the road-mender, a man who in fact needs no reason for another man to assume his identity (he's drunk). With Turnbull comes yet another evolution in Hannay's mastery of disguises. Not only does Hannay assume the man's work clothes, not only does he dirty his skin and boots up with road chalk, Hannay tries to think like a road-mender, assuming his mannerisms, his gait, doing a road-mender's work, etc. Not only does Hannay look like a road-mender, he essentially is a road-mender, a perfect disguise as the disguise and the disguised cannot be separated. This perfection allows Hannay to not only fool Turnbull's supervisor, but survive the scrutiny of Black Stone members,

who are in turn masters of disguise themselves. Even the one flaw in Hannay's disguise, his good shoes which the Black Stone members suspiciously comment on, is solved with a perfectly plausible, "in-character" impromptu reason made up by Hannay.

Hannay's encounter with Marmaduke Jopley marks another bit of comic relief to allow Hannay and the reader to breathe after the tension of the road-mender episode.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Exhausted, Hannay eats a little biscuit then sleeps on the hillside. In the morning he awakes to find three men combing the brush some distance away, looking for him. He silently climbs a hill, calls attention to himself, then fakes one way only to really run another way, throwing the men off his trail. The men are only fooled for a short time, and soon they are on Hannay's heels again. Hannay is chased for many miles, and he feels he will soon be caught, as the men are locals and know the lay of the land and shortcuts.

Hannay stumbles across a remote house and feels his best chance is to hide inside. Opening the door he comes across an old man. The old man senses Hannay's distress, asks no questions, and tells Hannay to hide in a closet. Some time passes and Hannay emerges from the closet. The old man tells Hannay he directed the men away from the house and that he's safe. At this point the old man bats his eyelashes in a peculiar way, a half-shut wink, of a kind that Scudder describes in his notebook belonging to a man he dreaded above all others. Hannay realizes he is in the hands of an enemy and member of Black Stone. Before he can act, two men emerge and aim pistols at him.

Ever the performer, Hannay takes on another guise, this time as a man named "Ainslie," a petty criminal. When the old man confronts Hannay, Hannay as Ainslie confesses he stole some money from a car. Even when pressed with his real identity, Hannay continues as Ainslie, confusing the old man, and causing the old man to settle his identity once and for all by fetching the men who saw Hannay as the road-mender. While these men are coming, Hannay is locked in a dark room and guarded.

Hannay knows his cover will be blown when the men come and identify him. He searches the room for anything useful, eventually finding a flashlight to see better and then some mining material in the form of lentonite (a dangerous explosive) and some fuses. He figures the lentonite is his last desperate chance. Hannay is a mining engineer, so he knows what the material is, but he doesn't know how much to use to blow the door and guards away, and not himself in the process. He takes a good guess and loads the door with explosives, then sets it off.

He momentarily blacks out in the big explosion, and wakes to find himself dizzy and weary, and his left arm nearly useless, but he is alive. The explosion blew a hole in the wall, so he crawls out and scrambles to a nearby mill. He figures the mill is a poor hiding place, so he crawls to the roof (covering his footsteps with chaff he scatters on the ground), and eventually walks a precarious rail over to a dovecot, or structure designed to house pigeons, all the while battling nausea and weakness from the explosion. Once in the dovecot, figuring he's safe, Hannay blacks out again.

He wakes to men yelling at each other in the house. They are obviously looking for him as they tear apart the mill. He is almost, but not, discovered, and the men drive off in a car. At this point, Hannay spots a bare field amidst some trees on a hill, and realizes it is a landing pad for the airplane that's been following him. Apparently this remote home is the base of operations for Black Stone. Hannay waits until nightfall, then runs away, though he must be careful to avoid several tripwires set throughout the property.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 marks the novel's midpoint, the lowest point and most injurious episode Hannay endures. After a chase across the Scottish bluffs, he happens across the very home of the eldest member of Black Stone. Implausible plot contrivance? Perhaps, but also it is the best chance, the best test, for plot to fully reveal Hannay's character. Hannay is caught completely unawares and at his most vulnerable. The Old Archaeologist refers to him as Hannay; the old man knows everything about Hannay, and is about to get rid of Hannay forever by having him shot. At this point, Hannay pulls off the greatest performance, the greatest disguise of all, in the persona of a petty, cantankerous thief named "Ainslie" who has stolen money from a nearby car. Already confronted with his real identity, with no time to prepare and no outward disguise to don, Hannay manages to confuse a master spy through sheer force of performance and passion alone, to the point the Old Archaeologist has enough doubt about Hannay to lock him away until he can get his men to confirm or deny identity.

The subsequent episode has Hannay using his mining knowledge (furthering our sense of Hannay as a Renaissance Man) to rig a bomb to explode. The play between hero and ordinary man is at work here again, because while Hannay is smart and brave enough to rig this bomb, he doesn't quite know how much to use, a human flaw in his otherwise superhuman plan. And importantly Hannay pays for this flaw; while he does disable his guards and blow a hole in the wall for escape, he also manages to poison himself from lentonite fumes and render himself dizzy and his one arm useless. This marks the one time Hannay is seriously physically injured. This injury serves a couple of purposes. It shows that Hannay is not invulnerable and that the shaves have the capacity not only to be close, but to nick him badly. It also provides another obstacle to overcome, another hardship in which to reveal Hannay's remarkable fortitude and strength of character.

The final portions of the chapter, in which Hannay realizes the mill is a poor hiding place, in which Hannay covers his tracks with chaff and hides in the parapet of the dovecot, etc., cement the reader's sense of Hannay's resourceful and smarts, exercised at a time he is badly injured and nearly unconscious.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Hannay spends the night running in the dark, nauseous, poisoned by the lentonite fumes, and starved. His plan is to relocate the road-mender, Mr. Turnbull, for he has Hannay's clothes (and thus the ever-important little black book). Hannay runs across another kindly farmer's wife, claiming he had a bad fall, and the woman takes him in and feeds him. She also gives him a new set of clothes, and he sets out again.

Hannay, aided by a rough map Sir Harry provided him, is able to relocate Mr. Turnbull's house. Turnbull proves to be a great Samaritan and a kind soul, and in fact Hannay spends the next five or so days in bed, nursed by Turnbull (a widower), recovering from his injuries and a cold he contracted in the wetlands. After regaining his strength, now three days from the important "doom date" of the 15th of June, Hannay decides to go back into England. He hitches a ride from one of Turnbull's companions, named Hislop, who is a cattle herder. After this Hannay catches a series of trains, taking him through Reading and finally into Berkshire, where Sir Harry's important political godfather, Sir Walter Bullivant, lives.

Finally arriving at a quaint fisherman's pond and feeling somewhat at ease, Hannay idly whistles the "Annie Laurie" tune. An old fisherman strikes up a conversation with him, they talk about the lake, and Hannay mentions that a difficult fish is tugging like a "black stone." The fisherman then reveals himself as Walter Bullivant. Hannay had inadvertently given him the two signs he said he would! Bullivant has Hannay meet him at his nearby home. There Hannay is given a hot bath and new clothes, and a fine meal. After dinner, Hannay spills the entire story to Bullivant. Bullivant reveals he received a letter from Scudder before his death detailing the events as well, and that Bullivant with his political pull has managed to clear Hannay's name, obviously a great relief to Hannay.

Bullivant and Hannay next comb over Scudder's notebook, with Hannay revealing the cipher used. Bullivant finds the whole plot a little too ridiculous to fathom, as he knows Scudder to be of "artistic temperament" with a tendency to exaggerate. Bullivant especially doubts anyone is after the Greek Premier Karolides, as the man is universally well-liked. Unfortunately Bullivant is given a rude awakening when he receives a call informing him that Karolides has just been shot dead.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 fully puts on display the goodness of the Scottish people, with Hannay first being aided and fed by another farmer's wife, and then coming back to Turnbull. Turnbull, asking no questions, acts as a "guardian angel" figure who takes Hannay in for five days, allowing Hannay to recover from his bad injuries. Hannay thus progresses

from his lowest point and has a kind of renewal or reinvigoration, again made possible by the kindness of a stranger. Turnbull's bull-headed refusal to accept money further underscores his kind nature.

Hannay thus emerges from his adventure in the Scottish moorlands and, refreshed and confident, heads back into the city. At its very basic, this journey is an example of the most basic journey a protagonist can take, that of the foray into the wilderness. Back in London, Hannay's famous luck appears again, as at a fisherman's pond Hannay happens to hum the tune and say the password to introduce himself to Sir Walter Bullivant, who just happens to be fishing there.

Bullivant represents a kind of "sage" or "wise man" figure, having a wide knowledge of the matter at hand. He puts Scudder's rants into context, stating Scudder is a skittish man who tends to exaggerate. However, his own theory takes a hit when, in a typical cliffhanger, Bullivant gets a call stating the Grek Premier Karolides was assassinated. This revelation shows that the anarchists' plot is very real, very dangerous, and has already been put into motion.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In the morning, Hannay is greeted with more intrigue from Bullivant. Royer, the Frenchman in possession of the key intelligence wanted by the Black Stone, is set to meet with Bullivant and three other military men in Bullivant's home that night. The plans are too far in motion to change at this point, so it's decided Black Stone must simply be prevented from obtaining the intelligence. Hannay is kept "in the game" by posing as Bullivant's chauffeur. Hannay drives Bullivant to Scotland Yard, where Hannay is introduced to the police chief who had chased him for the past couple of weeks. The chief assures Hannay he has nothing to fear from British police.

After the drive, Bullivant urges Hannay to lay low until after the meeting. Hannay, now a free man, is nonetheless irritated he can't be a part of the meeting, and he feels instinctively that he still has a crucial part to play in the whole affair. In this foul mood, Hannay bumps into Marmaduke Jopley and his buddies on the street. Marmaduke cries "Murderer!" rousing the entire neighborhood. Hannay proceeds to punch him unconscious, and soon there's a street-wide fight, with the police involved. A couple policemen subdue Hannay and mean to take him to the police station, but Hannay fights them off and runs. Pursued, Hannay is let in Bullivant's house by the butler, and the kind butler lies for Hannay when the police come.

Some time later, and the butler opens the back door for one of the military men there for the meeting with Royer, the "First Sea Lord," named Alloa. Hannay and Alloa meet eyes, and Hannay swears Alloa had in his eyes the slightest spark of recognition as he left the house. Suspicions roused, Hannay phones the home of Alloa, and is told by a servant that (the real) Alloa was sick and went to bed "a half an hour ago." Armed with this fact, Hannay interrupts the other men still having the meeting, proclaiming that Alloa is the Black Stone spy.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The political intrigue is fully realized, as Bullivant, Royer, and the other military men discuss the ramifications of the anarchists' plot and its possible consequences. Hannay is able to don one more disguise, that of Bullivant's chauffeur, as they travel to Scotland Yard and Bullivant clears Hannay's name. Here, it is ironic that for Hannay to become a free man (and thus become free from deceit and disguise), he must don one last disguise.

After these events comes a false ending, of sorts, in which Hannay is let go, a free man, and told to lay low while the real intelligence officers handle the matter. Hannay walks among the streets, has a nice dinner, etc., yet something does not sit right with him. Hannay becomes irritable and angry, sensing that he still has a part to play.

Circumstances threaten to return back to the status quo, with Hannay as just another bored ex-colonial, listless in the big city. With these passages comes more access to Hannay's interiority, and a sense of Hannay's last important characteristic: his gut feeling, or instinct. Of course, the reader's own gut tells him or her that this is not Hannay's last hurrah.

Stewing in his anger, fate again plays a hand as Hannay bumps into Marmaduke. As Marmaduke screams for the police, Hannay is once again forced into action, laying Marmaduke out (as he had wanted to do the first time he met him), resisting arrest, and once again fleeing. This time he is not the innocent man on the run, but in fact a very guilty man on the run. Hannay finds himself at Bullivant's mansion, and in a last instance of the kindness of strangers, the butler leads the police away.

Hannay detects the enemy spy by a certain flash of recognition he sees in the man's eye as he passes him. Here is another demonstration of Hannay's uncanny ability to read people, conflated with the power of his instinct.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The military men don't believe that Alloa could have been an impostor, but the Frenchman Royer believes that the best disguise is the one you're not looking for, and he relates a hunting story with the same lesson as its conclusion. They remember that Alloa did not speak much but only read the intelligence over and over, as a spy committing data to photographic memory. It seems they were duped, and now the only slim chance they have of averting disaster is to somehow find the Germans as they leave the country via boat.

Hannay remembers the cryptic phrase "Thirty-Nine Steps" from Scudder's notebook, and also notations about "high tide" arriving at "10:17 p.m." precisely. Black Stone must be leaving from someplace tomorrow night that has a high tide occurring at 10:17 p.m. Hannay and the men head to the Admiralty to look up books of tide tables. Unfortunately several dozens of places have high tide occurring at 10:17 p.m.

Hannay then uses a bit of detective work and common-sense to narrow down the possibilities. To avoid detection, Black Stone must be leaving from either a small harbor or none at all, in a yacht or similar speedy, small vessel. Knowing their final destination, he narrows the geographical possibilities to the east coast. There must also be thirty-nine steps at this location, perhaps a staircase leading to the beach.

The men get a coastguard veteran with knowledge of the east coast to answer questions. Several places with staircases are ruled out, and finally one place with staircases seems likely; an upscale private beach known as the Ruff, near Bradgate, which has stairs leading to the private beach. The coastguard even knows that the Ruff's high tide occurs at 10:17pm. Now they know the location from which Black Stone will leave England the next night.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 finishes a progression that was started in Chapter 7 and 8, that of the end of the breakneck physical action of the beginning of the book, and a journey into more intellectual and political territory. Ever the Renaissance Man, Hannay is equally at home in either sphere. The first portion of the chapter deals with the veracity of Alloa, whether or not he was an enemy spy, and what this treachery means in a political sense.

The latter portion plays more like a detective novel than spy novel, as Hannay puts clues together given in previous chapters together to arrive at a clear picture of where Black Stone is. Hannay's detective work is colored as the product of three factors: Hannay's uncommon intellect, his "everyman" common-sense, and his instinct which allows him to guess well when the previous two hit a wall. We thus arrive at another

thematic play between hero and ordinary man, so often referenced and now here finally synthesized and working in perfect tandem.

The phrase "The Thirty-Nine Steps" is finally solved, the cryptic title of the book which serves to arrest the reader's interest.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Still trusting Hannay, the military men leave the planning of nabbing Black Stone up to him. Aided by a Scotland Yard official named Scaife, Hannay scopes the private beach out from a nearby hotel. A small destroyer ship is anchored nearby, which Hannay has Bullivant contact. Hannay then has Scaife go down to the beach and count each step for each staircase. Only one has exactly thirty-nine steps, and Hannay figures the house nearest those steps, called Trafalgar Lodge, must be a base of operations for Black Stone.

Hannay and Scaife pose as fisherman now as they investigate a sleek yacht docked nearby, called the Ariadne. The crew seems English and innocent enough, but their officer (although he speaks good English) bears a close-cropped haircut and a certain fashion in clothes that tells Hannay he is German, not English.

Hannay then spends time spying on Trafalgar Lodge. It looks entirely commonplace. An old man comes out to sun himself and have lunch, and while it could be the sinister old man Hannay had encountered in the Scottish bog, he can't be sure. Getting closer, Hannay finds two younger men playing tennis, laughing and talking in perfect English. This crushes Hannay's spirit, for he expects to find Germans. However, Hannay remembers an old wily acquaintance of his, Peter Pienaar, accustomed to posing as others, tell him that the best disguise is worn all the time, to the point that even the disguised believes it himself. Hannay decides to go with his gut, and hours before Black Stone is to escape with the intelligence, Hannay rings Trafalgar Lodge's doorbell and is shown inside to meet with the three men.

The men betray no sign of knowing Hannay or being criminals, and in every way they project the image of common, ordinary middle-class Brits. Risking humiliation, Hannay accuses them of being Black Stone and traitors. They claim to know nothing and are taken aback. Each seems to have very particular (and very English) alibis. He looks at each closely, but still cannot say whether or not they are Black Stone. Hannay begins to doubt himself and begins to wonder if these aren't the men and he has made a terrible mistake. The men invite Hannay to stop his accusing nonsense and join them in a game of bridge (again, very English). Hannay, in a fog, joins the game.

During the game, with Hannay very nearly won over and convinced he is mistaken, he happens to catch the slightest bit of behavior from the old man, a certain way he taps his cigar hand on his knee, that reminds him of the villain from the Scottish home. Hannay is now convinced these men are Black Stone, and as if by magic he now sees through their cover, and sees the sinister intent in their eyes. They all make excuses for leaving, but Hannay tells them they're going nowhere, and he blows his police whistle. The lights go out, police move in. The youngest man manages to escape through a window, and Hannay captures the old man. The old man, revealed as Black Stone

finally, revels in the fact that his partner got away with the intelligence. Hannay has the last laugh, insofar that the boat the young man is running to, the Ariadne, is under police control.

The story concluded, Hannay relates that shortly thereafter the Great War began, and he went into formal service for his country as a captain, though he figures he had probably done his best service to his country before he wore a uniform.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The mystery solved and the detective work largely out of the way, and the grand chase over, Chapter 10 completes Hannay's journey and character arc. Before a listless, apathetic ex-colonial, Hannay now leads a counter-espionage mission for Mother England, clearly in his element and doing what he was born to do. With seeming expertise, Hannay confidently guides the operation, contacting the nearby destroyer ship, canvassing the suspicious yacht, conducting surveillance of Trafalgar Lodge, all with the panache of a master spy.

However, one more test must be confronted, one more obstacle overcome, curiously tied to Hannay's discomfort with the middle class. The three men at Trafalgar Lodge, who by every indication are the German spies, look, speak, and act exactly like everyday middle-class Brits. When Hannay enters the Lodge, he finds a perfectly British home, and when he accuses the men, he confronts perfectly British consternation and perfect alibis. Hannay begins to doubt that these men are the men he seeks. This doubt is not only a doubt of the men, but a doubt of his detective work, the purpose to his whole series of hardships, his own gut instinct, his mastery of disguise and reading people, and even his own journey's end as a secret agent. However, his perception saves him, when he sees a nervous tic in one of the men that he previously saw in the Old Archaeologist. Thus in that singular instant, all his efforts and his whole worldview is redeemed. The master of disguise has pierced his rivals' disguises, and he has proven himself worthy of the mantle of British hero. For Hannay to tell the reader that soon after he joined the Army is simply icing on the cake, because at this conclusion he already proved himself a master spy and hero.

Characters

Richard Hannay

Richard Hannay is the protagonist of the book, and it is through his eyes and ears that we experience the adventure. Hannay bears a classically British "stiff upper lip," and is stoic and even witty in the face of imminent danger. His identity is a bit confused: he is an expatriate Scot, new to London, who just lived in Rhodesia, a contemporary British colony in Africa. As a "colonial," Hannay has a cosmopolitan demeanor, along with a Renaissance Man-like knowledge and resourcefulness. Backed into a corner by Scudder's death, he considers it his duty, both to Scudder and to the United Kingdom, to make a go of it and try to notify the proper authorities before the anarchists can pull off their scheme. He is fond of disguises and adept at "becoming" another person, and while he himself admits he falls short of Sherlock Holmes, he displays a good amount of logic and cleverness in unraveling the location of the Black Stone. While outwardly he is the picture of heroism, despite repeatedly telling us he is simply an "ordinary fellow," inwardly we are privy to his doubts and fears as he survives scrape after scrape. Hannay has no friends, family, or other attachments, seemingly, allowing The Thirty-Nine Steps to be a very straight-ahead, "nonstop" adventure thriller without emotional entanglements or romance.

The Black Stone

The Black Stone is the name for the secret organization of German anarchists whose plot lies at the heart of The Thirty-Nine Steps. Their chief goal is to agitate Britain into going to war with Germany. This war, they surmise, will throw the world markets into chaos, a state which they wish to take advantage of and reap financial profit from. The most frightening aspect of The Black Stone is, while they are German, they have successfully infiltrated the United Kingdom, to the point that they have mastered language and customs and are near-indistinguishable from normal Brits. They are primarily represented in the book by "the Old Archaeologist," an old man of much malignancy and intelligence. Hannay is nearly hypnotized by the man, to the point Hannay confesses he nearly wanted to break down and offer to join the spy's side. In several ways, members of the Black Stone parallel Hannay himself. Both Hannay and Black Stone are masters of disguise, both have a questionable national identity, both are intelligent, resourceful, and doggedly persistent. However, we are not privy to the inner lives of the Black Stone, and overall they are rather flat characters, a constant and sometimes ubiquitous source of evil for Hannay, as manifested in the ever-present monoplane spying on Hannay from overhead.

Franklin Scudder

Franklin Scudder was an American journalist who toured much of Europe. In the course of these travels, he stumbled across the German anarchists' plot, and from that point he must hide and flee for his life. Scudder begs entrance to Hannay's flat, then telling Hannay the whole of the plot. He is dead by the end of Chapter 1. He is excitable, of an "artistic temperament," and given to exaggerate. He starts Hannay off on his adventure.

Karolides

Karolides is the Greek Premier who Scudder claims will be assassinated as part of the anarchists' schemes. Karolides is characterized as a strong, well-liked leader, with the power and intelligence to spoil the anarchists. Karolides is indeed assassinated, though his death is but the tip of the iceberg of a larger plot to steal military intelligence. He does not appear in the book but is only spoken of.

Sir Harry

Sir Harry is a young, excitable man with a sense of adventure, and a desire to rise above his status. He is a self-described "Liberal" and is politically active, though he is a poor speaker and may not even believe his own party's beliefs or understand them well. Hannay confides in Sir Harry, who helps him by writing a letter to his godfather, Sir Walter Bullivant, who can help clear Hannay's name and is a party to the intelligence to be stolen.

Alexander Turnbull

Turnbull is a poor, rural Scot, a road-mender. When Hannay finds him, he is drunk and is fearful his manager will catch him. Like the other rural Scots depicted in the book, Turnbull is quite kind and amenable, willing to take Hannay in for near to a week to nurse him back to health and hide him. Though unintelligent, Turnbull has a big heart, and is a likable fellow.

Marmaduke Jopley

Marmaduke, or "Marmie," has a comic name, and appropriately is a comically inept character. An upper-class stockbroker from London, Hannay intensely dislikes the man, calling him an "imbecile," to the point that Hannay has no problem threatening Marmie and commandeering his car. Marmie is a wimp and a dandy.

Ainslie

Ainslie is the identity that Hannay makes up on the spot, in order to confuse the Old Archaeologist who believes he has uncovered Hannay. "Ainslie" is a petty thief who recently stole money from a car, and when the Old Archaeologist confronts him, "Ainslie" believes his recent theft is the subject of the interrogation, leading to a bit of comic consternation on the side of the evil anarchist.

Sir Walter Bullivant

Sir Walter Bullivant is Sir Harry's godfather, and has a high position in the British Foreign Office. Like Hannay, the upper-class Bullivant is stoic, logical, and well-spoken. He is the ally that finally allows Hannay to stop running and clear his name. Bullivant is one of the key figures attending a meeting in which the military intelligence will be discussed that the anarchists wish to steal.

Royer

Royer is the Frenchman intelligence officer responsible for getting the British naval intelligence discussed at the meeting back to France (as Britain and France are strong allies at this point in history). Royer is open-minded, and willing to hear Hannay out when Hannay claims there was an impostor at the meeting.

Scaife

Scaife is a man from Scotland Yard who assists Hannay in his casing of Trafalgar Lodge and the area called The Ruff where the spies are set to depart from. Though not strongly characterized, Scaife is shown to be helpful and capable. It is he who counts the steps of each set of stairs, finding the stairs numbering exactly thirty-nine steps.

Objects/Places

Scudder's Black Book

This book, written in a code that Hannay must decipher, contains everything that Scudder has uncovered in regards to the Black Stone's espionage plot. Some of it is very cryptic. Hannay uses the book to both uncover the identity of the "old archaeologist" and to pinpoint the departure point for the Black Stone ferrying intelligence.

Scottish Moorlands

This rural, bog-like part of Scotland is where Hannay decides to hide from the police and the Black Stone. It is usually an ideal hiding spot, with plenty of country, plenty of cover, and a multitude of kindly rural folk who aid Hannay with food and a place to hide/rest.

Black Stone

Black Stone is the name of the secret organization of German anarchists that oppose Hannay. They mean to steal British naval intelligence in order to successfully establish a blockade around England, sparking a European war. They are characterized as intelligent, evil, and ruthless, with many resources at their disposal.

Annie Laurie

Along with mentioning "Black Stone," this traditional Scottish tune is the key for Bullivant to recognize Hannay. Hannay whistles the tune near Bullivant at a fisherman's pond, which was the agreed-upon signal.

Rural Scots

The poor, blue-collar workers of rural Scotland oftentimes come to Hannay's aid, giving him a place to rest and a meal to eat. They are universally characterized as good Samaritans and kindly.

The Portland Place Murderer

This is the moniker the press and police have given, mistakenly, to Richard Hannay, the assumed murderer of Scudder. Portland Place was the name of the collection of flats

Hannay stayed at. With Bullivant's help, Hannay is able to clear his name and get Scotland Yard off his back.

Lentonite

Lentonite is a contemporary explosive used in mining. Hannay discovers this substance while trapped in the Old Archaeologist's home, and uses his knowledge of mining to rig an explosion to escape his imprisonment.

Julia cipher

The name "Julia" is the key to the cipher found in Scudder's coded book. Using this key word, which Scudder hinted was the "key" to the whole plot, Hannay is able to decipher the text.

Trafalgar Lodge

This home is the departure point and headquarters for the Black Stone as they try to exit England with stolen intelligence. The Lodge appears to be a perfectly British home, with perfectly British residents, but Hannay is able to pierce the disguise and uncover the German spies therein.

The Thirty-Nine Steps

The Thirty-Nine Steps, a phrase mentioned in Scudder's black book many times, has Hannay perplexed, but eventually it comes to identity the exact point of Black Stone's departure from England. Steps leading to the beach from the spies' headquarters number exactly thirty-nine.

Themes

The Art of the Disguise

From his initial masquerade as a milkman on, the protagonist Richard Hannay takes on a dizzying amount of disguises during his adventure. Sometimes Hannay's transformation seems to happen merely on the surface: he changes clothes with the milkman, and this uniform alone is sufficient to fool anyone on Hannay's tail and allow him to escape to the train station. Similarly, the simple adoption of a thick Scottish brogue on the train ingratiates him to the lower-class Scots on the train, allowing him to blend in. However, Hannay's disguises can be shown to progress, to where mere appearance is not sufficient enough. Hannay's "white lie" in which he declares he's a Free Trader leads him to a political meeting and the compulsion to give a rousing political speech for a subject he knows nothing about. Here Hannay's disguise is tested, and Hannay passes the test through sheer resourcefulness.

Later, Hannay displays an almost manic insistence that he is a petty thief named "Ainslie" when he is trapped with his identity "outed" by the old German spy. Here, as Hannay himself relates, he must become Ainslie and even convince himself he is Ainslie for the disguise to survive examination. In one of Hannay's final disguises, Hannay not only changes clothes with a road-mender, but he adopts the sum of the road-mender's mannerisms, modes of thought, etc. The outer is disguised and the inner is disguised, to where "the cleverest detective on Earth," as Hannay would say, could not detect the masquerade. Appropriate as a final statement on disguises, Hannay's climactic encounter with the German spies has the Germans as completely disguised as Hannay was as the road-mender. Hannay must find the inner strength to trust his special instincts and cry foul as to these disguises, even when they are perfect in nearly every way. Hannay, the master of disguise, in the end destroys disguise and uncovers the truth.

National Identity

National identity is crucial to The Thirty-Nine Steps. Ostensibly, there is the plot by "German anarchists" to steal British intelligence, bound for France, in an effort to start a war between Germany and Britain and eventually between all nations of Europe. In this way, Hannay's struggles can be colored as a British patriot doing his duty to protect his country, but in other ways cultural and national identities are more muddied. Hannay is a displaced, expatriate Scot, newly arrived in London from Rhodesia, then a British colony in Africa. Given the earnest simplemindedness and thick accented vernacular of the Scots Hannay comes into contact with, Hannay with his silver tongue and cosmopolitan, "colonial" nature hardly seems a proper Scot. He is a man whose cultural identity is confused, and in this sense Hannay's journey can be seen as a journey from identity confusion (and here Hannay's disguises figure prominently) to identity resolution, as a man solidly on the side of Britain against the Germans in World War I.

Indeed, the last passage tells us he joins British Intelligence in the war which breaks out only weeks after the events of The Thirty-Nine Steps. There is finally the interesting play of identity with the Germans' disguise as middle-class Brits. By assimilating into the culture, the Germans have infiltrated the culture, a kind of conquest from the inside-out, which seems more insidious than a more traditional military conquest. Hannay must trust his instincts in order to separate the perfect disguise from what is real.

Hannay as the original Spy

Hannay bears the classically British "stiff upper lip," a stoicism or certain detachment that allows him to make light of even the most dire situation. When Hannay discovers Scudder dead, Hannay takes up Scudder's mission because "I hate to see a good man downed"; when Hannay is caught in the lie of being a Free Trader, he rises to the occasion and delivers a rousing speech as if he were a Free Trader, though he has no idea what that means. When confronted with his identity exposed by the old German spy, Hannay doesn't break down but instead creates, on the spot, a sophisticated alias to thwart and confuse his enemy. Hannay is much more likely to "kill" with a quip rather than gun, to use his mind and talents rather than physical violence to escape a sticky situation. For his wit, civilized demeanor, Renaissance Man-like resourcefulness, propensity for disguises, and the aforementioned stiff upper lip, Hannay serves as the prototype for all the other British spies after him. These include chiefly James Bond, but also the spies that make up "The Avengers" for another example. Unlike these derivative spies, however, Hannay is many times referred to as "an ordinary fellow" and it is only in novels after TheThirty-Nine Steps that Hannay is a true agent. It was this idea of Hannay as "an innocent man on the run" that attracted Alfred Hitchcock to portray Hannay in the movie The 39 Steps in 1935. That Hannay is "just like us" strengthens our identification with him, and makes his exploits all the more heroic.

Style

Point of View

The narrative is unfolded in first-person, coming directly from the protagonist Richard Hannay himself. Though Hannay is, on the surface, calm under pressure and largely undaunted by his circumstances, this first-person approach provides the reader access to Hannay's interiority. As a contrast to his hard exterior, inwardly Hannay reveals doubts, fears, pain, and thought processes that would be difficult or impossible to present otherwise. In this way, Hannay has a rich inner life that separates him from some later spy heroes, such as James Bond.

The first-person perspective also lends a sense of immediacy to the proceedings. Instead of, say, operating in a third-person omniscient perspective, where the reader might be privy to the villains' scheming or the thoughts of Sir Walter Bullivant, we are solely and strongly allied to Hannay, seeing the world through his eyes. Because we only know what he knows, there is no dramatic irony, the state wherein the reader knows more than a character. This leads to the kind of immediacy whereby we are shocked along with Hannay when Hannay discovers Scudder's body, or saddened when Hannay realizes he is in the hands of the enemy, or bewildered when we realize Scudder's black book provides contrary information to what Scudder had verbally stated.

Setting

The Thirty-Nine Steps is set in the United Kingdom, mostly in the Scottish moorlands, which today would be called the Central Lowlands, but also somewhat in England, just prior to the first World War in 1914. The setting is crucial to the political intrigue that makes up the book's main plot. At this time, Europe has been described as a "powder keg" ready to explode. Relations are uneasy to say the least, and especially Germany is viewed by many as a "menace" threatening the peace of the continent. In this world, it is no accident, then, that the villains are German spies with a goal to set up a naval blockade around Britain, which plays to the fears and beliefs of a contemporary English reader.

The geographical setting is also important. The Scottish lowlands here are characterized as marsh- or swamp-like, mostly undeveloped, and populated by lower class farmers. It is into this labyrinthine land that Hannay must make his way, away from any comforts or friends he is accustomed to, which ratchets up suspense and adds another level of obstacle Hannay must overcome. The land itself becomes an enemy of sorts, as Hannay becomes lost or starved, to the point where the protagonist must rely on his physical and mental fortitude and resourcefulness to survive this foray into the wilderness.

Language and Meaning

Language used in the book, with the majority provided in the first-person, is that of an upper-class member of the United Kingdom around the turn of the 20th century. Vocabulary is advanced, tone is intimate but polite, and sentence structure is measured and elegant. These traits aid in the characterization of Richard Hannay as a man "cool under pressure," and possessive of the famous British "stiff upper lip." Though Hannay is close to death at several points in the narrative, with sometimes severe physical conditions and injuries, the book's first-person language never loses this particularly British brand of sardonic, clipped, and frequently witty prose. For example, when Hannay meets Scudder and Scudder confesses that "I am a dead man," Hannay responds with, "How does it feel?" adding humor and wit to a situation of otherwise deadly seriousness.

Also present at several points is an attempt at capturing the thick Scottish brogue (both accent and particular vernacular) present among the Scottish lower class at the time. These occur when Hannay speaks with Turnbull the road-mender, for example, among other poor farmers or cattle herders. In these passages, words can be spelled as to be sound-imitative, and apostrophes replace portions of words that are not pronounced.

Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters. While many chapters exist to encompass a specific episode, chapter divisions can exist for several other reasons. Sometimes there is simply a lull in the action, a temporary peace or safety for Hannay to enjoy, and the reader is able to take a proverbial breath with the chapter break. Other times the chapter may end on a "cliffhanger," as in Chapter 1 when Hannay discovers Scudder dead, or Chapter 7, when it is revealed that Karolides has been shot dead. The cliffhanger is an old device, especially in adventure or serial pieces of literature, to spur the reader to continue reading.

As common to the adventure novel, the book takes the reader on an escalating roller coaster ride, a flurry of action followed by relative calm followed by more action, with each "hill" of the roller coaster bigger than the last. While Hannay's adventure is largely episodic in nature, the overarching political conspiracy tends to unify the episodes and put them in service of the main plot, leading to a satisfactory resolution which resolves that main plot. Repetition is an important structural trait of the book; the airplane frequently appears to remind the reader of the constant danger Hannay is in, and Hannay constantly uses different disguises to evade the police and his enemies, for two examples. These repetitions, like the episodes in which they are contained, tend to escalate and become more dangerous/extreme as the book progresses.

Quotes

Chapter 1: "'Pardon,' he said, 'I'm a bit rattled tonight. You see, I happen at this moment to be dead.'
I sat down in an armchair and lit my pipe.
'What does it feel like?' I asked. I was pretty certain that I had to deal with a madman.
A smile flickered over his drawn face. 'I'm not mad - yet, say, sir, I've been watching you, and I reckon you're a cool customer. I reckon, too, you're an honest man, and not afraid of playing a bold hand. I'm going to confide in you. I need help worse than any man ever needed it, and I want to know if I can count you in.'
'Get on with your yarn,' I said, 'and I'll tell you.'" (6-7)

Chapter 2: "Somehow or other the sight of Scudder's dead face had made me a passionate believer in his scheme. He was gone, but he had taken me into his confidence, and I was pretty well bound to carry on his work.
You may think this ridiculous for a man in danger of his life, but that was the way I looked at it. I am an ordinary sort of fellow, not braver than other people, but I hate to see a good man downed, and that long knife would not be the end of Scudder if I could play the game in his place." (21)

Chapter 3: "Now I was certain that Scudder never did anything without a reason, and I was pretty sure that there was a cipher in all this. That is a subject which has always interested me. [...] I have a head for things like chess and puzzles, and I used to reckon myself pretty good at finding out ciphers. This one looked like the numerical kind where sets of figures correspond to the letters of the alphabet, but any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to that sort after an hour or two's work, and I didn't think Scudder would have been content with anything so easy. So I fastened on the printed words, for you can make a pretty good numerical cipher if you have a key-word which gives you the sequence of the letters." (29)

Chapter 4: "The little man had told me a pack of lies. All his yarns about the Balkans and the Jew anarchists and the Foreign Office conference were eyewash, and so was Karolides. And yet not quite, as you shall hear. I had staked everything on my belief in his story, and had been let down; here was his book telling me a different tale, and instead of being once bit twice shy, I believed it absolutely.
Why, I don't know. It rang desperately true, and the first yarn, if you understand me, had been in a queer way true also in spirit." (44-45)

Chapter 4: "I can see yet that bright room with the deers' heads and the old prints on the wall, Sir Harry standing restlessly on the stone curb of the hearth, and myself lying back in an armchair, speaking. I seemed to be another person, standing aside and listening to my own voice, and judging carefully the reliability of my tale. It was the first time I had ever told anyone the exact truth, so far as I understood it, and it did me no end of good, for it straightened out the thing in my own mind. I blinked no detail. He heard all about Scudder, and the milkman, and the notebook, and my doings in Galloway. Presently he got very excited and walked up and down the hearthrug." (55-56)

Chapter 5: "I remember an old scout in Rhodesia, who had done many queer things in his day, once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. You could never keep it up, he said, unless you could manage to convince yourself that you were it. So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road-mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water, I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whiskey. [...] On I went, trundling my loads of stone, with the heavy step of the professional." (65)

Chapter 6: "As he spoke his eyelids seem to tremble and to fall a little over his keen grey eyes. In a flash the phrase of Scudder's came back to me, when he had described the man he most dreaded in the world. He had said that he 'could hood his eyes like a hawk.' Then I saw that I had walked straight into the enemy's headquarters." (79)

Chapter 6: "There was something weird and devilish in those eyes, cold, malignant, unearthly, and most hellishly clever. They fascinated me like the bright eyes of a snake. I had a strong impulse to throw myself on his mercy and offer to join his side, and if you consider the way I felt about the whole thing you will see that that impulse must have been purely physical, the weakness of a brain mesmerized and mastered by a stronger spirit. But I managed to stick it out and even to grin." (82)

Chapter 7: "In all these travels I never knew the names of the places, but I believe this stream was no less than the upper waters of the River Tweed. I calculated I must be about eighteen miles distant, and that meant I could not get there before morning. So I must lie up a day somewhere, for I was too outrageous a figure to be seen in the sunlight. I had neither coat, waistcoat, collar, nor hat, my trousers were badly torn, and my face and hands were black with the explosion. I dare say I had other beauties, for my eyes felt as if they were furiously bloodshot. Altogether I was no spectacle for God-fearing citizens to see on a high road." (93)

Chapter 8: "An abominable restlessness had taken possession of me. Here was I, a very ordinary fellow, with no particular brains, and yet I was convinced that somehow I was needed to help this business through - that without me it would all go to blazes. I told myself it was sheer silly conceit, that four or five of the cleverest people living, with all the might of the British Empire at their back, had the job in hand. Yet I couldn't be convinced. It seemed as if a voice kept speaking in my ear, telling me to be up and doing, or I would never sleep again." (111)

Chapter 9: "All this was very loose guessing, and I don't pretend it was ingenious or scientific. I wasn't any kind of Sherlock Holmes. But I have always fancied I had a kind of instinct about questions like this. I don't know if I can explain myself, but I used to use my brains as far as they went, and after they came to a blank wall I guessed, and I usually found my guesses pretty right." (123)

Chapter 10: "If a man could get into perfectly different surroundings from those in which he had been first observed, and - this is the important part - really play up to these surroundings and behave as if he had never been out of them, he would puzzle the

cleverest detectives on earth. [...] A fool tries to look different: a clever man looks the same and is different." (134)

Chapter 10: "A man of my sort, who has traveled about the world in rough places, gets on perfectly well with two classes, what you may call the upper and the lower. He understands them and they understand him. I was at home with herds and tramps and roadmen, and I was sufficiently at my ease with people like Sir Walter and the men I had met the night before. I can't explain why, but it is a fact. But what a fellow like me doesn't understand is the great comfortable, satisfied middle-class world, the folk that live in villas and suburbs. He doesn't know how they look at things, he doesn't understand their conventions, and he is as shy of them as of a black mamba." (136)

Topics for Discussion

Describe the character of Richard Hannay. What traits allow him to not only survive, but succeed in thwarting the villains? Is he a hero or simply an ordinary man thrust into extraordinary circumstances?

Hannay takes on a multitude of disguises throughout his adventure. How does the author and/or Hannay view the process of disguising oneself? Does a successful disguise happen on a merely superficial level, with a change of clothes being sufficient, or is there a deeper requirement? What happens to the "real" person underneath the disguise?

What reasons might the author have for relaying the events of the novel in first-person?

How do class distinctions figure into The Thirty-Nine Steps? Hannay once states he is comfortable with either the upper or lower classes, but not with the middle class, and indeed the villains are disguised as middle-class citizens. How might this unease speak to larger concerns about class? What class is Hannay himself?

How is national/cultural identity important to The Thirty-Nine Steps? Is Hannay a nationalist and patriot, or is he simply trying to survive?

How does The Thirty-Nine Steps typify or exemplify the adventure novel? Discuss three aspects of the novel, including but not limited to character, setting, plot, pacing, structure, point of view, tone, and theme.

With Hannay's humorous trip to a political meeting and subsequent impromptu (and largely nonsensical) speech, particular care is exerted in demonstrating Hannay is apolitical, and not belonging to any party. By contrast, the Black Stone scheme is nothing if not politically motivated. Discuss this play between the political and apolitical. Does Hannay's lack of partisanship aid him?