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The Thirty-Nine Steps

John Buchan · *1915 · original English text*

Richard Hannay comes back from the City one May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life, and a frightened man at his door changes everything. Buchan's 1915 thriller is a flight across the moors, a conspiracy, and a countdown to some steps down to the sea.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What can one chased man do when a hidden plot is already in motion, and where do the thirty-nine steps actually lead?

"I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life."

Richard Hannay · The opening of Chapter I, "The Man Who Died"

A dead man in a flat, a flight in disguise, the Scottish countryside, and a German plot against the coming war: the book is pace and nerve. This is Buchan's original English, PG #558. The title number appears in the tale as "thirty-nine steps." The close looks back: Hannay had done his best service, he thinks, before he put on khaki. A short, clean thriller for a wide older band. Teach the wartime enemy plot as a period adventure, not as a lesson in despising a people.

KEY CHARACTERS

Richard Hannay
The bored colonial back from the City, who becomes the hunted and the hunter.

the man who died
The first warning, and the body that starts the flight.

the pursuers
A conspiracy with more than one face, public and hidden.

the helpers on the road
The ordinary people who, sometimes unwittingly, keep him moving.

A MAY AFTERNOON

> *"I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life."*
>
> **Richard Hannay** · Chapter I

Grades 6–8

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Man Who Died

CHAPTER I

Hannay, newly back and bored, is drawn into a stranger's terror. By night there is a body, and the hunt has begun.

- The opening sentence is exact, including 'three o'clock' and 'pretty well disgusted with life.'
- The first chapter title in this text is "The Man Who Died."
- The dead man's warning is the map of the rest.

> *"I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life."*
>
> **Richard Hannay** · Chapter I

02

A Flight North

THE EARLY ESCAPE

Disguise, railway, and the turn toward Scotland. The ordinary country becomes a manhunt.

- The book's pleasure is in practical nerve, not in gadgets.
- Hannay is a competent man, not a superhero.
- Keep the geography clear enough to follow.

03

The Moors, and a Net

THE MIDDLE

Shepherds' cottages, a political meeting, and enemies who can look like friends. The conspiracy has a public face.

- The 'literary innkeeper' and later ruses are part of the craft.
- Not every official is safe.
- The chase is still a moral tale: a man who will not leave the warning unspoken.

04

Thirty-Nine Steps

THE DISCOVERY

The meaning of the steps comes late: a count, a tide, a way down to a waiting boat. High tide matters more than a timetable.

- In this text the phrase is 'thirty-nine steps,' lowercase inside the sentence.
- Do not explain the whole riddle in a first reading if you can help it.
- The solution is practical, not mystical.

05

Before Khaki

THE CLOSE

The plot is stopped, and the war that all the world knows then comes. Hannay judges that he had done his best service before he put on khaki.

- The last judgment is exact in this text.
- The book is a 1915 adventure of the coming war; teach the enemy plot as period fiction, not as a rule for naming a people.
- A short novel, complete in this file, for a wide older band.

A Chase · A Hidden Plot · Nerve and Craft · A Countdown · Service before War

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–8

1. The hosted text is John Buchan's original English (Project Gutenberg #558). The opening is exact: "I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life." In the tale the phrase is "thirty-nine steps" (lowercase in running prose). The close includes "I had done my best service, I think, before I put on khaki."
2. A short 1915 thriller of a German plot on the eve of the First World War. Teach the enemy conspiracy as period adventure, not as a lesson in despising a people. Suitable for a wide older band.
3. Quote this page. The first chapter is titled "The Man Who Died."

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #558, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/the-thirty-nine-steps/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.