

Mirth, Sexuality and Suspense: Alfred Hitchcock's Adaptation of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

The Thirty-Nine Steps (1935) is generally considered the finest film of Alfred Hitchcock's English period, and one of the most fully realized movies he has ever made.¹ Adapted from a novel by John Buchan, it is the quintessential Hitchcock, a blend of mirth, sexuality and suspense. When one examines Buchan's novel, where none of these qualities can be found, one realizes how markedly Hitchcock has changed his source. He has transformed Buchan's mystery into a quickly paced work of suspense, greatly simplified the plot (and the "MacGuffin"²), altered the structure, used the settings functionally, and made the work an exploration of the nature of male-female relationships. As the following comparative analysis will demonstrate, Hitchcock's film resembles its source, but presents the viewer with a different vision of life, perceived in a radically different form.

Buchan's mystery concerns the unexpected involvement of Richard Hannay in a vast conspiracy. Hannay, a mining engineer from Rhodesia vacationing in England, becomes implicated through a mysterious American who lives upstairs from the flat he is subletting. The American feigns suicide to escape his pursuers and moves in with Hannay. While there, he tells Hannay of a plot by foreign agents to assassinate the Greek Premier in London, with the hope of igniting a war between Russia and Germany. Hannay is dubious, until he returns one day to find that his flat has been searched and the American has been murdered. Fearing for his own life, Hannay decides to flee to Scotland where his Scottish ancestry may help him conceal himself. He is followed there by the agents who killed the American and by Scotland Yard, who suspect him of the murder. The hospitable Scots assist Hannay in eluding his pursuers by providing him with different disguises. Most helpful is Sir Henry, a Liberal Candidate for Parliament whom Hannay meets early in his Scottish adventures. At Sir Henry's request, Hannay addresses a political rally on the

¹See, e.g. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 190; Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (Indianapolis & New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 301; Parker Tyler, *Classics of the Foreign Film* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1962), pp. 98-99.

²The "MacGuffin" is Hitchcock's term for whatever propels the action of the film forward (stolen documents, a kidnapping, the discovery of a secret, etc.). He offers a possible explanation for the term in Truffaut, pp. 98-99.

subject of emigration to Australia. As a result they become friends, and Hannay confides in Sir Henry, who believes his story. Sir Henry suggests that Hannay contact his godfather, the Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Office. Hannay agrees, but while en route he encounters the spies' mastermind, who is identifiable by his tendency to "hood his eyes like a hawk." The spy locks Hannay in his cellar, but Hannay blasts his way out with dynamite and discovers a hidden landing field behind the house. He succeeds in escaping, and then meets the Permanent Secretary. Hannay learns from him that he has been cleared of the murder charge, and he joins forces with Scotland Yard. The assassination attempt is successful, and this convinces the British that Hannay is indeed on to something. With their help he discovers that the "thirty-nine steps" are a location on the British Coast from which the foreign agents plan to flee England. Hannay arrives there just in time, identifies the leader by his hooded eyelid, and the spies are arrested. Although Hannay remains in constant jeopardy from the foreign agents, his fortunes improve once he meets the political candidate who believes his story. Before the novel is two-thirds over he has been declared a free man, and for the remainder of the story he works with Scotland Yard to unravel the mystery of the "thirty-nine steps" and to apprehend the spies.

Hitchcock has structurally and thematically transformed Buchan's novel. One important change involves the simplification of the conspiracy. As Hitchcock explained to Francois Truffaut, he was initially going to retain the complexity of the novel:

In the early stages of the construction, we felt, and we were all wrong, that since life and death were involved, the pretext had to be a very important one. In our first draft, when Robert Donat arrives in Scotland, he picks up some additional information on his way to the spy's house, possibly by following the spy. He rides to the top of the hill, and looking down, he sees underground plane hangars carved into the side of the mountain, secret hangars, which made the planes safe from bombings. Our original idea was that this MacGuffin should be something big and pictorially striking. Then we went on to work it out in our minds: What does Donat do upon discovering these secret hangars? Will he send off a message to report their locations? And in that case, what countersteps would the spies take?³

As these questions were posed, the plot became increasingly complicated: "Anyway, whenever we found ourselves getting terribly involved in this way, we would drop the idea for something very simple."⁴ The MacGuffin is finally reduced to the formula for an airplane engine. Hitchcock eliminates the assassination (a subject he had explored a year earlier in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1934]), the problem of detecting the spies, and the spies' attempt to escape the country by boat. In their place, he creates the character of Mr. Memory who will try to carry the formula out of the country in his head.⁵ The "thirty-nine steps" no longer identify a geographical location, but merely become the means of exposing the villain, who is easily recognizable in the film because he is missing the little finger of his right hand.

³Truffaut, p. 99.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Mr. Memory is in some ways a projection of Hitchcock himself. He shares Hitchcock's prodigious memory and fascination with facts. In Truffaut's volume, Hitchcock comments: "I used to send away for train schedules — that was my hobby — and I knew many of the [American] timetables by heart. Years before I ever came here, I could describe New York, tell you where theaters and stores were located" (p. 90).

Accompanying the simplification of the MacGuffin is a reconstruction of the book into a series of discrete sequences: "I saw it as a film of episodes," Hitchcock has noted. "As soon as we were through with one episode, I remember saying, 'Here we need a good short story.'" ⁶ Each of these sequences revolves around an elemental fear, and virtually all of them also deal in some way with relations between the sexes. Neither of these subjects, however, plays any significant role in Buchan's novel.

The opening sequence of the film combines these two themes in such a structure. It is based on two brief incidents in the novel which Hitchcock has expanded considerably: the murder of the American in Hannay's flat and the portion of an evening Hannay spends in a Music Hall. ⁷ The film begins with the flashing letters M U S I C H A L L moving from right to left across the screen. The hands of an unidentified spectator are seen buying a ticket, and the camera follows his legs and torso as he enters the theater and takes his seat. As he sits down the "Mr. Memory" theme begins playing. This is the music which will ultimately provide the connection between Mr. Memory and the "thirty-nine steps"; as is often the case with Hitchcock, this clue is presented to us in the first scene of the film. ⁸ By beginning the film in this manner, Hitchcock has duplicated the actions of his viewers: we, too, are innocent spectators who have purchased tickets and entered a theater to be entertained passively. Like Hannay, we have all the evidence we need, but we do not know what to do with it.

The interrogation of Mr. Memory begins, and the opening question introduces the sexual motif which will permeate the other sequences: "Where's my old man been since last Saturday?" It is the first of many references to unsuccessful male-female relationships. Other questions follow rapidly after that and finally Hannay asks: "How far is Winnipeg from Montreal?" He is forced to repeat his question three times at intervals before Mr. Memory responds. "Ah, a gentleman from Canada," Mr. Memory remarks, and this observation is followed by the applause of the audience. Hitchcock, with his usual economy, has characterized his protagonist by placing him in a dramatic situation. The question identifies him to us as a Canadian tourist (and this remains virtually all we ever know of his "real" background) as well as indicating to Annabelle that he is also a foreigner, and hence the one person in the crowd she can trust with her secret.

By introducing Annabelle, Hitchcock has given the political intrigue a sexual dimension lacking in Buchan's novel. Annabelle demonstrates her aggressive sexuality the first time we see her, in her encounter with Hannay outside the theater: "Well," she purrs, "I'd like to come home with you." "It's your funeral," Hannay glibly (and prophetically) replies, as he helps her board a bus. She is the archetypal femme fatale: dark, beautiful, mysterious and foreign. Like us, Hannay is very skeptical. At his flat she wants the lights kept off, the

⁶ Truffaut, p. 66.

⁷ Buchan dismisses the latter event in one sentence: "It was a silly show, all capering women and monkey-faced men, and I did not stay long" (John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1926], p. 14).

⁸ Hitchcock has stated that he believes "in giving them [the audience] all the information and then in making them sweat" (Charles Thomas Samuels, *Encountering Directors* [New York: Putnam, 1972], p. 232).

mirror turned to the wall, and the telephone not answered. All of these actions have sexual as well as political implications. Yet Hannay remains strangely passive. His apartment characterizes him perfectly: the furniture (and even the telephone) is covered with sheets, suggesting both his transience and his cold, withdrawn passivity. He remains wrapped in his overcoat, as Annabelle explains that it was she who fired the shots at the Music Hall, and that, as she has been followed there, he is now equally involved. "A beautiful mysterious woman pursued by gunmen . . . It sounds like a spy story," he replies with a note of mockery.⁹ When he suggests that she simply call the police, she notes that "They wouldn't believe me any more than you do," an insight confirmed by the rest of the film. But Hannay remains flippant: "Have you ever heard of a thing called persecution mania?" he asks. At her request he looks out of the window and observes two men in trench coats standing by a telephone booth. Hannay continues to be disbelieving, as Annabelle briefly tells him of a plot to take military secrets out of the country and then indicates her next destination on a map of Scotland. She retires to the other room, and he prepares for bed. Later, Hannay's sleep is interrupted as the door is suddenly thrust open and Annabelle staggers into the room and utters a warning. Hannay is awakened to find himself living in a nightmare world.¹⁰ Hitchcock cuts from the recumbent body of Annabelle stretched across Hannay's bed with a knife in her back to an extreme close-up of Hannay's ringing telephone: as the camera slowly dollies away from it, Hannay backs into the frame to pick it up. The phone has become a menacing object, and Hannay's inability to answer it signals his acceptance of Annabelle's story, and his complicity in the action. Unlike Buchan, Hitchcock has us witness the event, thus forcing us to share Hannay's involvement.

An ironic reversal has taken place as a result of this sequence: not only has the passive, uninvolved spectator suddenly become a participant in the action, but he now finds himself confronted with the same disbelief with which he had greeted Annabelle's story. Throughout the film Hannay attempts to tell people the truth, yet the only person who believes him at once is the villainous Professor. This becomes immediately apparent in the sequence which follows the murder of Annabelle. In the novel, Hannay exchanges clothes with a milkman quite easily, by offering him money. But in the film the milkman looks on with astonishment as Hannay attempts to relate the truth. Sensing defeat, Hannay changes the subject: "Are you married?" he asks. "Yes, but don't rub it in," replies the milkman. Hannay then fabricates a tale of sexual infidelity which the milkman immediately understands, and he gleefully agrees to exchange places, remarking that Hannay can return the favor some day. Again, the sexual humor has a cutting edge, depending upon the milkman's own imperfect marriage. As Hannay's own credibility begins to be questioned, he develops a "persecution mania" of his own. Hitchcock utilizes a subjective

⁹As Hannay tries to explain the truth to Pamela on the road to the Inn, she remarks, "It sounds like a petty novelette."

¹⁰ Hannay is twice awakened by women (Annabelle and the farmer's wife), and each time he must flee, not to sleep again until he shares a bed with Pamela. There Hitchcock emphasizes the connection between nightmares and reality by having Hannay converse at length on the subject to Pamela before falling asleep. When he awakens, Pamela is no longer his antagonist, and, consequently, his problems are nearly at an end.

camera to show each passer-by as a potential threat to Hannay, and we partake of his fears because we view them through his eyes.¹¹

Hannay's continuing attempts to explain his innocence are in vain: Pamela betrays him on the train and again at the Assembly Hall; the Scottish Inspector tries to lock him up, after remarking ironically that "I have no doubt you'll be able to convince Scotland Yard as easily as you've convinced me"; and, true to the Inspector's prediction, Scotland Yard follows Pamela and tries to arrest Hannay. Obviously Hannay is no safer with the police than with the spies. Here, too, we are far from Buchan's novel, where Hannay is accorded a warm reception virtually everywhere he goes. The only cordial welcome he receives in the film is from the Professor, the genial family man who tells Hannay that it would be crude to lock him up, and then attempts to shoot him. The reception given Hannay by the jealous, penurious farmer typifies what one can expect in Hitchcock's world: suspicion and betrayal. The farmer's wife, longing for excitement, helps Hannay, but she pays for it with a beating. Whereas Buchan's protagonist is declared innocent long before the novel is over, Hitchcock's Hannay must prove his innocence, which he is unable to do until the final moments of the film. He remains a hunted fugitive throughout, and we are constantly reminded of this by his dangling handcuff.

For Buchan, the topography functions primarily as a backdrop, but Hitchcock makes it an integral part of the story. In speaking of the early version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock noted that "The contrast between the snowy Alps and the congested streets of London was a decisive factor. That visual concept had to be embodied in the film."¹² In this film a similar contrast exists between the frenetic activity of the London streets and music halls and the desolate solitude of the Scottish countryside. Hitchcock exploits the visual properties of the Scottish moors, where the low scraggly shrubbery offers no place to hide, and Hannay is an easy prey for his pursuers. When Hannay has the protection of a crowd, as at the Music Hall or the Assembly Hall, Hitchcock emphasizes the mob-like nature of the group that pushes Hannay in one instance into Annabelle, in the other into the arms of the enemy agents. The only mob that works in his favor is the flock of sheep which, ironically, separates him and Pamela from the agents.

Hitchcock's theatrical settings also function dramatically, allowing him to manipulate the distinctions between spectator and actor. Hannay's first question not only characterizes him (to us and Annabelle), but it also involves him in the action by making him a participant in the theatrical spectacle. He continues to "perform" each time he uses a pseudonym or invents a past, notably at the Assembly Hall and at the Inn with Pamela. At the conclusion of the film he returns to a theater where a "crazy month" is in progress.¹³ Just as Hannay identifies the tune which has been haunting him and makes the

¹¹ Further sequences develop more of Hannay's phobias: his paranoia, on the train and at the Professor's home; his fear of heights, as he clings to the Forth Bridge; his fear of mistaken identity and his fear of confronting a strange crowd, both of which come together on the stage of the Assembly Hall; and his own sexual fears and longings, especially at the farmer's cottage and later with Pamela. Virtually all of the fears dealt with here continue to preoccupy Hitchcock, finally becoming the subjects of future films.

¹² Truffaut, p. 61.

¹³ In a sense, the entire film exemplifies the British tradition of "crazy comedy," which Leslie Halliwell has defined as a "new kind of comedy which came in during the thirties,

connection between Mr. Memory and the Professor, a Scotland Yard Inspector orders him to leave with a remark which reminds us of our role as spectators ("You don't want any trouble . . . These people are here for entertainment"). Hannay pauses, and then asks Mr. Memory the question which frees them both from the plot. The content of the question is no longer important; it is the mere fact of asking it and the response this elicits which are significant. The drama has come full cycle: the film ends where it began, at a spectacle, as Mr. Memory utters his dying confession while the show goes on.

Hitchcock's interest in the battle of the sexes finds its fullest expression in Hannay's relationships with Annabelle and Pamela. While Annabelle slowly disrobes in Hannay's apartment, he remains distant and cold, preferring the safety of innuendoes and fantasy to action. His sudden awakening, as she staggers into his room with a knife firmly planted between her shoulder blades, arouses something in him. The stabbing has clear sexual overtones, and promotes feelings of guilt in Hannay, for not having offered adequate protection, and regret, for what might have been.¹⁴ The series of relationships that pass before him during the rest of the film provide negative examples that ultimately help him define his relationship with Pamela. We have already examined the references to failed marriages in the opening sequences of the film. The train trip to Scotland provides further examples, first in the conversation of the traveling salesmen, and later in Hannay's abortive encounter with Pamela. The farm couple Hannay meets next are a barren, unhappy pair. The husband is driven by jealousy and a strict Calvinism; the wife is lonely and bored. However, her simple kindness to Hannay affects him at once, and is ultimately responsible for saving his life.

The most blissful domestic situation is ironically that of the master criminal, whose wife and daughter are the picture of warmth, affection and duty. In fact, he is the only person in the film who has a family: all other couples are childless. Hitchcock has a penchant for the attractive villain, and here he characterizes him by that ideal which is still out of reach for Hannay.

Pamela presents a different sort of challenge to Hannay. From the moment of her kidnapping by the agents, she is bound to him emotionally by hatred and distrust and physically by handcuffs. On one level, the handcuffs represent the convergence of both forces which are pursuing him, the police (who have attached them to his wrists) and the spies (who have attached them to hers). But, as Hitchcock has pointed out to Truffaut, the handcuffs have psychological implications as well: "Being tied to something . . . it's somewhere in the area of fetishism, isn't it?"¹⁵ He amplifies this by enumerating examples of "sexual aberrations through restraint."¹⁶ Hannay's excessive reliance on clothing for protection has already been noted: he wears his overcoat in the theater, and

with seemingly adult people behaving in what society at the time thought was a completely irresponsible way" (Leslie Halliwell, *The Filmgoer's Companion*, Fourth Edition [New York: Hill & Wang, 1974], p. 190).

¹⁴ Albert J. LaValley has pointed out the sexual connotations of this in his introduction to *Focus on Hitchcock* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 10. The same volume contains a portion of Peter Bogdanovitch's interview with Hitchcock, in which Hitchcock states: "In *Thirty-Nine Steps* maybe he feels guilt because the woman is so desperate and he doesn't protect her enough, he's careless" (p. 29).

¹⁵ Truffaut, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

keeps it on when he is with Annabelle in his flat. His "aberrations" with Pamela at the Inn are a source of comedy as she is forced to remove her stockings (with the encouragement of the innkeeper) while Hannay's hand lightly caresses her leg. As they lie together on the bed, Hannay displays a restraint which can be explained only in part by his fatigue. While he sleeps, Pamela slips the handcuff off and finds that his "gun" is only a pipe. Once the physical bond is broken, Pamela is free to discover the truth about Hannay. She now helps him, and the principal threat to them is Scotland Yard. With the confession of Mr. Memory at the Palladium, Hannay becomes legally free, and in the final scene we see him acknowledge a different sort of bondage, as he reaches across to take Pamela's hand, the cuff still hanging from his wrist. Working with Pamela, Hannay has freed himself from external threats and from his own passive, restrained sexuality. Perhaps escape from this nightmare world is only possible through a union with someone of the opposite sex.¹⁷

By having his protagonist remain a fugitive throughout the film, Hitchcock has completely changed the nature of Buchan's problem. It is no longer an intellectual puzzle ("Can Hannay identify the spies?") but rather an emotionally fraught situation ("Can Hannay solve the problem in order to free *himself*?") Hitchcock refuses to provide an answer until the closing moments of the film. This is very much in keeping with his preference of suspense to mystery. In interview after interview, Hitchcock has gone to great lengths to distinguish these two:

I feel that mysteries are fine in books, when you can spread the clues throughout the story and then reach the climactic moment when you find out that the butler did it. But I don't feel it works in a film when you have to wait the whole length of it for the surprise denouement at the end. It's like this: If you touch off a bomb, your audience gets a ten-second shock. But if the audience knows that the bomb has been planted, then you can build up the suspense and keep them in a state of expectation for five minutes. . . . Mystery is mystifying; it is an intellectual thing. Suspense is an emotional thing."¹⁸

Hitchcock alters Buchan's novel to achieve precisely this emotional effect. The movement of each sequence is from precarious security to uncertainty: this is also the pattern of the film as a whole, with the suspense being resolved in the final moments.

Hitchcock's principal concerns — the development of suspense, and the exploration of man's elemental fears and his relationships with woman — are clearly not those of Buchan, and yet he has transformed the story in accordance with his own interests. This is generally his method of adaptation: he does not seek fidelity to his source, but rather takes an idea, or the kernel of a plot, and rethinks it in terms of his own thematic and formal interests. As a result, Hitchcock's vision of life — where every month is a "crazy month," and we are apt to awaken at any moment and find ourselves living in a nightmare

¹⁷ Often, in Hitchcock's films, the hero and heroine overcome their personal problems at the same time they vanquish their foes. For example, the self-centered photographer in *Rear Window* (1954) finally becomes committed (and symbolically married) to his fiancée when she discovers the crucial piece of evidence in Thorwald's apartment: Thorwald's dead wife's wedding ring, which she slips onto her ring finger.

¹⁸ Bob Thomas, ed., *Directors in Action. Selections from Action, The Official Magazine of the Directors Guild of America* (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1973), p. 31.

— informs all his adaptations, however diverse the sources. Of no work is this more true than *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

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Two scenes from *The Thirty-Nine Steps* with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll. Courtesy of Janus Films, 745 Fifth Avenue, New York 10022.