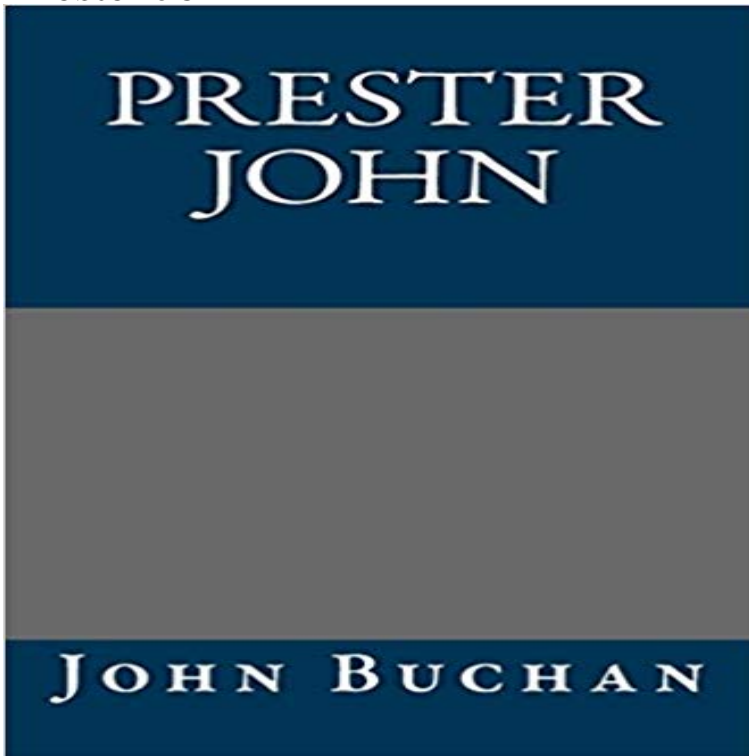


## Prester John



I mind as if it were yesterday my first sight of the man. Little I knew at the time how big the moment was with destiny, or how often that face seen in the fitful moonlight would haunt my sleep and disturb my waking hours. But I mind yet the cold grue of terror I got from it, a terror which was surely more than the due of a few truant lads breaking the Sabbath with their play. The town of Kirkcaple, of which and its adjacent parish of Portincross my father was the minister, lies on a hillside above the little bay of Caple, and looks squarely out on the North Sea. Round the horns of land which enclose the bay the coast shows on either side a battlement of stark red cliffs through which a burn or two makes a pass to the waters edge. The bay itself is ringed with fine clean sands, where we lads of the burgh school loved to bathe in the warm weather. But on long holidays the sport was to go farther afield among the cliffs; for there there were many deep caves and pools, where podleys might be caught with the line, and hid treasures sought for at the expense of the skin of the knees and the buttons of the trousers. Many a long Saturday I have passed in a crinkle of the cliffs, having lit a fire of driftwood, and made believe that I was a smuggler or a Jacobite new landed from France. There was a band of us in Kirkcaple, lads of my own age, including Archie Leslie, the son of my fathers session-clerk, and Tam Dyke, the provosts nephew. We were sealed to silence by the blood oath, and we bore each the name of some historic pirate or sailorman. I was Paul Jones, Tam was Captain Kidd, and Archie, need I say it, was Morgan himself. Our tryst was a cave where a little water called the Dyve Burn had cut its way through the cliffs to the sea. There we forgathered in the summer evenings and of a Saturday afternoon in winter, and told mighty tales of our prowess and flattered our silly hearts. But the sober truth is that our deeds were of the

humblest, and a dozen of fish or a handful of apples was all our booty, and our greatest exploit a fight with the roughs at the Dyve tan-work.

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