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Rising 8th Graders’ **Summer Reading Program** *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (John Buchan)

This study is adapted for summer study from the Penguin Readers’ Teacher Support Program.

A. Before reading

1. Imagine: Spy on the run.

This story takes place mostly in the countryside of Scotland. The protagonist is escaping from his enemies. Rivers, valleys, a few groups of trees, and quiet houses dot the landscape. Imagine you are attempting to cross a large area of countryside like this. The police are in pursuit. Where will you hide? Where will you sleep? When will you travel? How will you eat?

2. Conjecture: What are “the thirty-nine steps”?

3. Predict: Before you read this novel (and before watching any of the several film versions), try to predict what the story might be about. Incorporate the words below:

arrest code cottage detonator dynamite

lord spy politics war minister

telegram tide secret murder escape

B. Chapters 1-2

1. While reading

Why is Hannay interested in Scudder’s story? Is Hannay’s decision to hide Scudder a good idea? What might happen to both men?

Imagine that, rather than changing clothes with the milkman, Hannay goes to the police when he finds Scudder’s body. Hannay tells his story; the police ask questions. Likely the police do not believe him.

Imagine you open Scudder’s secret book. Write what you think is on the first page.

2. After reading

Imagine you are Hannay, Scudder, the milkman, or Karolides. Describe what you are like, what you do, and how you feel. Without identifying yourself, would a classmate guess who you are?

Research: WWI. Look up information about what happened between England and Germany in the months before the First World War.

C. Chapters 3-4

1. While reading

Write: The mysterious spy.

Imagine you are the young innkeeper in Chapter 3. Hannay has confided his secret to you and you have seen the spies trailing him. Write how you would start his story in your first book as a mystery writer.

Write: A letter requesting help.

Read the letter in Chapter 4. Imagine you are Sir Harry. Add more information that your uncle ought to know about the mysterious Mr. Hannay.

2. After reading

Is Hannay a good spy? Generate a two-column list of his strong and weak points.

Develop a secret code. Use letters, numbers, or pictures representing letters. Write a message using your code. Give a key word, providing the real letters and the corresponding code version. See whether someone can crack your code!

D. Chapters 5-6

1. While reading

Focus on the way Hannay turns himself into Turnbull. What does he do to his clothes and his hands? What does he borrow from Turnbull? What advice does he recall from his old friend back in Rhodesia?

2. After reading

Decide how you would transform Hannay into another person—not from the novel. Decide how Hannay ought to alter his face, clothing, hair, voice, and mannerisms. Who will he look like? What is his new occupation or identity?

Predict: What are Hannay’s next steps?

Will the spies continue their pursuit or will they conclude that he has died? Where will he go next? Whom will he ask for help? Where will he hide?

E. Chapters 7-8

1. While reading

Imagine that Sir Walter receives the news of Karolides’ murder in a telegram. What is the message? Reminder: Telegram messages are terse since the charges are by the word!

2. After reading

Decide: A true story or a lie?

In Chapter 7, Hannay visits Sir Walter and tells him his story. How true is Hannay’s account? How does Hannay alter his own story? How many times has Hannay changed his story when different people are his audience?

Point of View: Imagine you are one—or several—members of the Black Stone. You have followed Hannay everywhere. From your own perspective, recount the events of these two chapters.

F. Chapters 9-10

1. While reading

What mistakes did the Germans make? How did Hannay manage to discover these mistakes?

Change the ending of this mystery tale. In so doing, determine what elements of these final two chapters must be altered.

G. Vocabulary Development.

In this area, record and define unfamiliar words as you read.

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