

Two Recent Films: *Traitor*, *Taken*

The world has become small, and films recognize that fact by plots that have their subjects scurry around. *Quantum of Solace*, the new James Bond, dizzies its audience with its frequent changes of location. Similarly, *Traitor* takes place in Africa, the Near East, Europe, and North America (including both Canada and the United States). *Taken*, on the other hand, relatively limited in locale, assembles its characters from hither and yon. It sends its American hero, Bryan Mills (played, appropriately, by an Irishman, Liam Neeson) to France, where he cuts a swath through Albanians, Englishmen, and Arabs, as well as the odd Frenchmen. Of the two, *Taken* is the more disturbing film although its use of violence is on a smaller scale than *Traitor*'s. There's a limit to the number of people even the most reckless individual can kill, whereas in *Traitor*, the Muslim terrorists aim high. Significantly, however, on screen more people are slaughtered in *Taken* than fall victim to terrorist attacks in *Traitor*.

The salient difference between the films is that between hope and despair. They both concern innocent victims of organized violence, but the motivations of the groups and individuals involved are poles apart. I begin with *Traitor*, in which the Muslim fundamentalists, who want to bomb America, if not out of existence, at least out of complacency, believe that their aims are worthwhile, even virtuous. The motives of their opponent, a mole within the organization, are more elevated. He is Samir (Don Cheadle), also a devout Muslim, but one who quotes the Koran *against* killing: "He who kills one man, kills all mankind." Nevertheless, to be credible he has to teach his fellow conspirators how to construct and detonate bombs, and then to demonstrate his skill as well as his commitment to the cause by blowing up the American consulate in Geneva. That he actually does so is highly improbable, given that he is working for the American government. It was an elaborate scheme, in which there was to be no loss of life,

although eight people were reported killed in the blast. Among the fake victims, unfortunately, were two men who happened to be in the building at the time. Our hero is deeply affected; the purpose of his undercover work is to prevent the murder of innocent people. We viewers, too, are forced to question the legitimacy of any cooperation with terrorists whose business is murder. You cannot play with matches without getting burned.

The plot is satisfactorily complicated, with a mandatory twist at the end. Collateral damage may be limited—to kill an innocent is not always, it seems, to kill all mankind—but the terrorists receive their comeuppance. The deaths of the guilty and of the odd bystander are legitimized by the foiling of a master plot to murder hundreds of ordinary Americans. The usual chases and narrow escapes are part of the film, with one clever novelty: the central office of the F.B.I. is unaware that the hero is not a real terrorist, so that their efforts to capture or kill him overcome suspicions that have arisen among his Muslim colleagues. The film ends with America saved and Samir's heroism publicly acknowledged. Thus the film is a contemporary, typically gritty, version of those novels by John Buchan—*Greenmantle*, *Prester John*, *The Thirty-nine Steps*—in which seemingly invincible forces of international mayhem are foiled by a larger-than-life hero. However contrived by today's standards, they are based on hope, the belief that virtue is stronger than vice so that the right side will ultimately win. That Buchan's Anglo-Saxon heroes have been replaced by a black Muslim merely serves to make the tried-and-true plot politically correct. I was going to write, "James Bond take note," until I learned that he has already done so: the next Bond film, they say, may have a black actor in the lead.

In *Taken*, on the other hand, the hero has not the slightest concern for foiling the machinations of an international kidnapping ring that supplies young women for the white slave trade. If the central character had been black, the film could have been an interesting sequel to *Traitor*, in that he is a disillusioned former C.I.A. agent who has retired from the organization, but with his

murderous skills intact. Divorced, his life now centres on his daughter, Kim (Maggie Grace), a beautiful seventeen year old, who is seized by some very nasty Albanians when she arrives on holiday in Paris. The exciting plot is fast paced, with a series of variants on a car chase and every other sort of chase that, combined with the staggering violence of the father, seem farfetched in retrospect but are gripping during the film itself. I felt a *frisson* run through the audience at the first instance of the raw brutality with which Mills killed anyone who was involved with the disappearance of his daughter.

Like *Traitor*, the hero in pursuit is pursued; it is in motivation that the films differ. These criminals are in it for the money, and the “hero” is concerned for the recovery of his daughter and only her. At one point, he admits as much: “Give her back to me and I shall leave, no questions asked.” The cynicism of the crooks is captured by the suave Englishman who repeats even as Mills shoots him, “It’s just business; there’s nothing personal.” But Mills is just as cynical. In one scene he interrupts dinner with the family of a French friend by shooting his wife in the arm as a preliminary to shooting her through the head and then killing her husband. It’s may be unusual behaviour for a guest, but there is no time for niceties. Fortunately, the Frenchman decides to co-operate, and having obtained what he needs Mills sprints from the room to his next murderous encounter. Coincidences and daring pile up as high as the corpses, and poor Kim is saved in the nick of time from a fate that really would have been worse than death. Mills is then able to return with his daughter to America, leaving Europe behind, presumably with a new batch of criminals on the loose, ready to reopen: business as usual.

A parallel for this movie will not be found in the pages of John Buchan. Rather, in an odd sort of way it somewhat resembles *Oliver Twist*. The child, snatched from its rightful home and placed among criminals—all Bill Sikes and Fagins; there’s no Nancy or Artful Dodger here—is miraculously unchanged by the degrading experience. The final scenes of the novel are as sentimental as

anything Dickens could imagine, and with the same sense of unreality. Everyone is blissfully happy, unaffected by the ordeal. Mills is even able to provide his daughter with something she wants more than anything: an interview with a famous pop singer. There's no need to recount this part of the plot other than to note that it establishes her father as more important for Kim than her stepfather, whose gift had merely been a riding horse.

It has often been noted that Dickens's endings have a *deus-ex-machina* contrivance to them. Despite himself, in his novels it is evil that is potent and goodness that is weak. In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton explains why:

There was a tendency in those hungry for practical results . . . to call upon spirits of terror and compulsion; to move Acheron in despair of moving the gods. There is always a sort of dim idea that those darker powers will really do things, with no nonsense about it.

Chesterton was right, of course. There is despair at the centre of *Taken*. "Those darker powers" are all pervasive, and only now and then can a single person by a combination of force and luck escape from under their control. This individualism is a central feature of the entire film. Mills has left public service because he wants to be near his daughter. In other words, the citizen has no obligation to the common good because there is no longer any hope of defending or establishing it. The only good is affection between people, in this case between Mills and his daughter. The plot can be summarized by the old formula, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, except in this case the boy is the girl's father. The Europe of the film, therefore, represents society at large. Those who have the means will, one way or another, carve out a place of security for themselves.

Mills, ultimately, is not much different from his opponents. He attacks them, not because they are evil but because they have disturbed his private paradise. Apparently, he couldn't care less

about white slavery. One wonders, however, if Kim, a brand snatched from the fire, will be safe in big-city America, even if it is California. And what about that father of hers? His readiness to return to brutal violence, his disregard for human life, and his fixation on his daughter are unsettling. Something unpleasant is smouldering close to the surface. As in *A History of Violence*, where another ex-thug is surprised into reactivating his old training with disastrous results, so here. Sooner or later, something is bound to occur—an overly amorous boy friend, perhaps, or a mishap on that horse—that will set the father on the rampage again. An unstable man is unstable, in America or France. As the film closes in happiness and light the viewer senses the presence of a powder keg with its short fuse already lit.