

Chapter 6

The hardest miles

The next hour or two will be the hardest,' Hector warned. 'The crux in climbing terms.'

He wasn't joking. The loch was now at its narrowest. Utterly wild. If it hadn't been for the constant hum of traffic heard from the tortuous A82, the setting could have been Patagonia.

'"Caledonia stern and wild"?'

'Absolutely.'

'You can often gauge the depth of a loch by imagining the flanking slopes going on down till they meet. Here it's about 500 feet.'

They stopped at a shingly strand for a paddle where a hurrying burn skittered into the loch. The oddly-named Island I Vow lay offshore. (The name is simply murdered Gaelic.)

'Must have an interesting profile too, rising out of such depths.'

'They should import a monster or twa frae Loch Ness. Stert a breedin programme. Think what that wid dae fir tourism.'

On cue something splashed in the loch. Somebody thrown a stone? The ripples had begun to spread out when something bobbed up, paddled over and hopped onto a rock where it sat, bob-bobbing, white breast clear. 'A dipper!' they all said at once. The bird dived in and out of the water several times, then flew off northwards. There was a bigger splash offshore. They just saw convulsive spray flying then a big bird rose, a fish in its talons.

'What the f...?'

'Osprey!' – which was the ornithological highlight of the trip.

A train caterpillared along the other shore, Glasgow bound.

'Reminds me of a trip when I was at the university,' Specky said. 'I'd set off to hitch to Glen Coe from Balloch but never got a lift. I could

never be bothered just standing to thumb so had walked and walked. About two o'clock in the morning I'd had enough. Somewhere over there, I took a track under the railway and found an open-sided hut beside the line, so I put down my mat and sleeping bag and went out like a match. I woke thinking the end of the world had come: everything was roaring and shaking, the night in flames and reeking brimstone and fire. My heart nearly stopped. Then it was gone.'

'So?'

'A bloody steam train, probably some luxury touring special, full of sleeping punters, and it chose to empty its fire box right at the hut.'

Dave said, 'Did ye ken the original idea wis tae hae the railway built along this side o the loch?'

They lay awhile to let their feet dry.

'Mustn't waste time, today.'

'No wi ma Betty waitin,' Dave added.

'I wonder where our "Which way's Crianlarich?" lad has got to.'

'Or Mr Payne in the erse.'

'I'm surprised we don't meet more but I suppose we're all going the same way at roughly the same speed.'

Having said that, they heard voices. Walkers nearing. An unmistakable Yorkshire voice declared, 'Moi feet is killing me.'

The trio, somehow, found this hilarious.

The steepness and roughness eased off at a small shingly bay. Too soon for another stop. Somehow they hadn't taken a promised swim. And the weather was changing again. Time was stealing away the miles. There was an odd similarity to approaching Rowchoish: a miniature glen leading up to a bothy among the tame ranks of plantings (larch in this case) and Doune bothy just down the far slope, a Mountain Bothies Association shelter in one of the restored farm's outbuildings. They might have been tempted to stay but they had 'miles to go and promises to keep' so just took a look inside before moving on for the head of the loch. The eye was led northwards to the bulk of the back sides of Beinn Oss and Beinn Dubhchraig, which are really thought of as Tyndrum hills. Tyndrum! They were getting on:

One foot in front of the other

One foot in front of the other

As the little dog said.

They must be about halfway on their day's walk to Crianlarich, they thought.

They followed the shore – for the last time. With a certain amount of longing they looked across to the hotel at Ardlui. A drizzle had started. It would be so easy to call up the ferry.

‘Wouldn't a pint go down well?’

‘Ah wis tryin no tae think about it.’

The wet increased enough for Hector to unearth an umbrella. Dave had not seen this trick of his and was a bit mortified. Later, he said to Specky, ‘A broolly wis bad enough but did he hae tae hae wan that wis red an covered in f...in penguins?’

Specky just grinned. ‘He buys them by the dozen at police lost property auctions. I toyed with the idea myself but just forgot in the rush of getting ready.’

There was a strangely shaped boulder that took Dave's fancy and he dug out his camera. Specky wandered on ahead.

‘Haud yir broolly ower, please.’ Hector obliged. ‘Specky's gien me a lot of ideas, ye ken. He may be a walkin encyclopaedia but he sees things. Seen his glesshoose door?’

‘Yes. He told me about that.’

‘The devil tae dae. But if he hadna persisted ah widna be here the day.’

‘Oh, you deserve each other,’ Hector grinned.

Before Dave could work that out Specky yelled at them to hurry up. ‘There's a big hairy caterpillar.’

When Dave ‘shuggled’ the heather, the caterpillar fell to the ground and curled up like a fuzzy ammonite.

The path led them above Ardleish Farm, the farm buildings in various stages of decay. They passed the Dubh Lochan, a lochan with a tonsured fringe of reeds and yellow flags.

‘Say bye-bye to Loch Lomond.’

‘Ben Lomond is more conic a hill than Conic Hill,’ Specky said, looking through the smir of drizzle at the Munro as it rose above the wilds of Craig Rostan.

‘That wis some walk. Ah'll never drive up the A82 efter this wi'oot mindin the day.’

This was another of the discovered joys of continuous trekking: there were so many good ‘looking back’ moments, each paying into very personal

memory banks while, at the same time, there were the ‘looking forward’ moments, speculative, compulsive, with mysteries to be met – the right and left feet of the present which, really, is the only place we can ever be.

The Way descended the wooded ‘den’ (as Dave called it) to reach the flat valley floor where the River Falloch wended along a three-mile reach without a contour line. This allowed a canal to be cut linking the river right to the doorstep of the Inverarnan Hotel. Few canal reference books note this oddity, which dates to about 1850 and allowed cruising boats to reach Inverarnan. Inverarnan Hotel was originally a drovers’ inn.

‘We’ve still six and a half miles to go.’

‘Should be OK.’

They crossed the bridge over the Ben Glas Burn, which, descending 1,000 feet in 1,000 yards, is really a continuous spread of falls, sadly not seen unless over on the A82. In spite it is a magnificent sight, a loose braiding of many strands. Wordsworth suggested this area should be called the Vale of Awful Sound. The farm does B&B and there are wooden ‘wigwams’ (bivouac huts) as well as camping space.

For an hour they followed the east bank of the River Falloch, which changes steadily in character from a douce, dark river to a pulsing, pushing flow that has carved out a seeming endless variety of gorge features, most notably the Falls of Falloch. There was no safe crossing in that hour of walking.

The glen ends with open slopes, dotted with Scots pines, and rising to the rugged Munro cluster of Beinn Chabhair, An Caisteal and Beinn a’ Chroin. ‘Beinn a’ Chroin was the last of the Munros *and* Tops round made by the Reverend A. R. G. Burn in 1923,’ Hector noted. ‘The second Munroist.’

‘They aw seemed tae to be reverends. Robertson. Burn.’

‘They had the time,’ Specky laughed.

The first golden stars of bog asphodel were appearing as they squelched down alongside the tree-choked gash of the river’s course to see the Falls of Falloch, ‘one great apron with an oval pool at the bottom’ (Coleridge).

‘Ah’m glad we dinna hae tae cross.’

‘The book says you can’t.’

That’s not quite true. W. H. Murray in his classic *Mountaineering in Scotland* tells of how he and two friends leapt across a narrowing above the falls. On the return Murray fell in and was swept away over the falls and trapped in the pool’s undertow till a chance current threw him out.

At Derrydaroch ('A bit more euphonic than the English *oakwood*') the official route crosses to pull up above the A82 on the line of the old military road (Caulfeild's, not Wade's) built over 1752–53. This passes along the top dyke of Keilator farm, so gives good views, but the BFs simply wended on up the glen, once again, following their noses rather than the set procedure.

The scenery was particularly attractive with the green skirts of the rugged hills dotted with big, dark Scots pines and the riverside bright with birch. Lousewort and the 'three friends of tormentil, milkwort and lowly bedstraw' were common. There were odd orchids too. A wagtail family was fussing about. They fell silent, just enjoying the experience of being fit and happy in the best of all worlds.

Dave, noticing a string of Highland cattle closing in from behind, pushed on to walk in front of Hector and Specky. Hector noticed the beasts and just smiled. Dave saw him and flushed. 'The f...ers have horns twenty feet wide,' he muttered. Not long afterwards a barring conifer blanket smothered the glen's slopes, so it was over to the road – over a bridge, under the railway, and along the farm road. They simply turned along the A82 for the mile and a quarter into Crianlarich, noting that the top of the road crossed a barely noticed major watershed: the Falloch draining via Loch Lomond into the Clyde on Scotland's west coast; ahead, the River Fillan eventually draining by the River Tay into the North Sea.

They had left the night's details to be worked out once they and Betty met up at Crianlarich. Betty might condescend to join them in the hostel but was more likely to find a B&B. 'I'll ferry things fir youse but I'll nae cook,' she had warned. Six o'clock in the station car park sounded like a safe meeting.

They dropped down into the beginning of the hamlet. You could hardly call Crianlarich even a village ('an urban sneeze'). The place had spread a flux of buildings along the limbs of Glens Falloch, Fillan and Dochart.

'Hey! There's a tearoom at the station,' Specky noted.

'Ah bet Betty'll be in it.'

'It's only five o'clock.'

'Well, plenty time for us then.'

They went down steps to reach a dark underpass, the walls wet stained, but halfway through more steps led up to the station.

‘Bacon butty for me,’ Specky said, sniffing as he entered. Swallows had chosen to nest on top of the station lamps, one immediately above the tearoom door.

‘Gets warmth from the lights no doubt.’

The stationmaster was chatting at the counter and everyone said hello to each other. They took their various cholesterol supplements to a table. The cafe was long and thin, almost as if it was part of a train. The decor and furnishings were ‘functional’. (Specky, trying to be diplomatic.)

‘Betty will be haein tea in some B&B you can bet. Bletherin awa nae doot.’

‘Well, as long as she’s brought our messages ...’¹⁰ Hector’s voice trailed off. He was chief cook.

‘What’s she bringing?’

‘Ma God, we’re ony on day fower and yir fantasising about f...in food already.’

‘No, just curious. I know Betty’s quite a cook.’

‘Mm. Weel, she said leek an tattie soup; a steak pie (her ain); trifle, ah think.’

‘Sounds real hostel food again. I’m all for these meals on wheels.’

‘Here, look at the time.’

Betty’s Peugeot wasn’t in the car park.

‘Not quite time.’

Ten minutes later Dave snapped, ‘She’s late!’

‘Oh, it only needs a couple of mimsers along by Loch Lubnaig and any estimate goes way out.’

There is a limited amount of entertainment to be got out of the station car park at Crianlarich. By the time Betty was half an hour late they were bored, beginning to worry and regretting the six o’clock timing which had set off Pavlovian responses. And the midges were out. If Hector and Specky refrained from comment, Dave didn’t.

‘Bloody woman! Ah’m stairvin!’

He paced the car park like a POW restrained by barbed wire.

‘Ah’ll gang an check the cafe.’

‘It may be shut.’

‘Watch ma bag.’

He clanged into the underpass and as he did so a figure entered from the other side. They almost collided at the stairs. There was a dual, simultaneous exclamation, roughly translated as, ‘Where the hell hae ye

been?’ as diminutive Dave and Betty (‘built like a combination of Ben Nevis and the Paps of Jura’ – Specky) confronted each other.

‘I wis at the hostel tae gie ye a richt piece o ma mind. Could you no be bothered waitin in the car park?’

‘We’ve been stanin in the f...in car park since before five!’

‘You have not!’

‘We have f...in so. The others are there the noo.’

‘Where?’

‘*There*, ya gowk,’ and Dave pointed whence he’d come.

‘Well, I’ve been *there*.’ Betty pointed whence she’d come. ‘In the car park.’

‘Car park?’

‘Aye, that wis the idea.’

‘But we’re in the car park, *there*.’

More or less simultaneously they both said, ‘Oh no! There’s two f...in car parks!’

Betty had left her car at the hostel. Dave was given an ecstatic welcome from Whisky. They offloaded the goodies Betty had brought, made arrangements for Tyndrum and watched her drive off for her B&B. The youth hostel lay over a burn, edged by shrub roses, rowans with berries already forming, flowers up the drive and hanging baskets over the porch door. The building sprawled among the trees like an opulent bungalow. They were given a friendly welcome at reception, noted the bustle of supper preparations by the many Way Way walkers and were soon involved themselves. Damp socks were hung up in the drying room.

The walls were covered with various maps and large prints of the hills, and a group of photos showed the old wooden shack on stilts that this building had replaced. On semi-open-plan style, it had an uncluttered dining room, vases of flowers on the windowsills, arty lighting arrangements – and the television was not switched on! They liked their home for the night.

‘An nae Bill Payne.’

They told the warden about him.

‘You’ll find all types,’ she smiled. ‘Look.’

Three girls, quite unlike outdoor types, were dragging a big wheeled case that had broken its handle. The spectators were so mesmerised by the sight that no one went to their aid, besides which they were going into the women’s quarters. As the girls went puffing and clattering out of sight, one of them said, ‘Bags first go with the hairdryer.’

The warden sighed. ‘God knows what they think they’re doing. They have their bags taken door to door and they walk quite inadequately turned out. Each bag has to be paid for so they cram everything into one big case to save money and then can hardly move it. And they call it backpacking!’

‘She did say “hairdryer”?’

‘Oh aye, that’s nothing. You wait till you see them later. Painted toenails will be the least of it.’

After a pause the warden continued, ‘You may catch up a remarkable couple in the next few days. In their eighties. He was struck down by some wasting ailment and now can hardly bend and has a shrivelled leg – and she’s diabetic. They had small packs but still looked tired on arrival here. But they said they’d take a day off and bag a Munro. They had to get to the post office anyway as their daughter had sent on parcels of everything they needed and they’d send back their change of clothes, used maps and so on. When they walked in, I asked, ‘Walked far?’, thinking Rowardennan quite a step for the look of them, but she smiled and said, “Just from Leeds.”’

‘Walked from Leeds? Or belonging to Leeds?’

‘Walking. And aiming for Inverness. Next year Inverness to John o’ Groats.’ After a pause the warden continued, ‘When told he would never walk again the man apparently said, “Sod that!” Used to walk to a pub every day and would increase the distance regularly. He could only be comfy on bar stools of a certain height so had this height marked on the stick he carried. If a pub’s stools didn’t measure up he’d go on to the next pub. Said this was his real therapy. Then they started at Land’s End two years ago. Ended at home last year. Said he was beginning to feel a bit old so really pushing on this year.’

‘Good excuse tae gang ben aw they pubs,’ Dave said. ‘Ah’ll buy him onythin he likes. F...in marvellous.’