
CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS
WHERE
THE GOLDEN
EAGLE SOARS

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Where
The Golden Eagle Soars

A story for lovers of nature about wild
life in the Highlands of Scotland

by

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to tell the reader (of any age) something about one of the most fascinating countries in the world; the hills, lochs and glens, that are known as the Highlands of Scotland; and at the same time sound a warning of the dangers which year after year cost careless visitors their lives. It is of course hard for them to believe that in this thickly populated island there are still places so wide and open that a man can lose himself utterly, and falling from exhaustion, die, perhaps never to be found.

The Highlands are the last stronghold of the native birds, beasts and fishes, that once roamed the forests of Britain: the great red deer, the wild-cat, the sable-like pine marten, the golden eagle and other seldom seen predatory birds, the huge capercailzie which is the giant of the grouse family, the wild goose, the ptarmigan which summer and winter live on the high tops, and a host of smaller birds now rare in the south, such as the crossbill, the redshank and the grey wagtail. In the clear sparkling waters of the rivers the salmon and the sea-trout run, fighting their way through rapids and over waterfalls; in the sombre lochs and tarns still lingers that strange jewel of a fish, the pink, green and scarlet char, a relic of the Ice Age.

Here the author spent ten memorable years, walking the lonely hills and wading the rivers, and so can say from his own experience that this is both a nature lover's paradise and a haven of rest for those who for a while would escape from the clamour of cities.

It is not necessary to stay at a mansion house to see and enjoy what this inspiring country has to offer. There are plenty of small hotels where one can be sure of finding hospitality, and for the hiker there are hostels at intervals. But—be careful. Take local advice before you leave the beaten track, for, like most things worth while, there are pitfalls for the unwary. This is where the pavement ends, and one false step can mean trouble.

W.E.J.

Chapter One

A Stranger in Glenarder

The day was hot, even for the Highlands of Scotland, where the midsummer sun, without the smoke of factories to filter its rays, can strike down with a force that may come as a surprise to visitors from the south who have too often seen the lonely hills depicted only in the grip of winter.

The tiny railway station of Tombrecht, deep in its sheltering glen, robbed by towering braes of any breeze that might have brought relief, shimmered in waves of heat that made the platform quiver and sent the boy who had it to himself to seek the meagre shade of some overhanging silver birch.

From this slim haven of retreat, Malcolm Macallan, sixteen, fair, tall for his age, dressed in well-worn home-spun tweeds, an open-necked woollen shirt, hand-knitted stockings and brogues half hidden by heather-spats, gazed with clear blue eyes along the single-line track that accompanied a river on its winding way through the hills as he waited for the daily train that brought the mail, the newspapers, and once in a while a passenger, either to his home, Glenarder Lodge, or to one of the scattered crofts that cling to the braes of Arderside.

The only sound was the constant murmur of the river as it babbled its way to the sea, its note unchanging, as soothing to the ear as a whispered lullaby; which may be why the song is sometimes called, by those who live with it, the *husheen*.

Vagrant whiffs of warm resin, fir and pine needles, fell gently on the nostrils from woods that stood at intervals, like battalions on parade, along the flanks of the more distant hills. Blending with the faint miasma of burning peat that hung over the station agent's cottage it produced the aroma that tells a returning Scot he is in Scotland.

Curiously, although the sky was cloudless there was no glare. There were no harsh outlines anywhere. The distant scene was as soft as though sprayed on with an air-brush. The twin rails creeping cautiously through the valley, as if not quite sure of their way, seemed only to enhance an atmosphere of remoteness.

Suddenly, from within the low stone station building, to break the melody of the river with a harsh discordant note, came the jangle of a bell, to be followed, after a pause, by a distant whistle. A minute later, from the direction of the river, came a man of uncertain age, red-haired, his face bronzed and freckled by long exposure to wind and sun, a fishing rod in his hand, sturdy legs, that so often mark a man who seldom walks on level ground, encased in waist-high waders. Leaning the rod against a tree he crossed the rails and joined the boy on the platform.

"Good morning, Mr. Hay," greeted Malcolm, smiling. "One day you'll miss the train."

"Och, it wouldn'a go wi'out me," was the cheerful answer.

"What would happen if you were in a fish when Willie Grant gave you the whistle to let you know he was coming?"

"Wully'd wait a while, na doot. He'd no expect me to break in a fush," replied the station agent, picking up from a seat the faded peaked cap that was his badge of office as stationmaster, porter and booking clerk.

"Anything moving?" inquired Malcolm.

"Na. The fush are stale, and stiff as boards. With the river awa' to nothing and the watter as clear as gin the beasts'll no move till there's a starm in the hulls to gie us a spate. I thought

mebbe I could pick up a troutie in the white water behind yon rocks. I saw the Lodge brake comin' doon the brae. Ye'll be here for the papers, I'm thinkin'."

"No. I've come to meet a friend of mine. He's going to stay with me for a while."

The agent cocked a shaggy eyebrow. "A Sassenach?" (Englishman).

"American."

"Can he fush?"

"Yes, but he's never caught a salmon. He's keen to try. He's the fellow who saved my life last term when I was south at school."

"Aye, I heard tell o' that fra' Donald, who had it fra' your mother. How did it happen?"

"I was walking by the river near the school when a silly ass came along on a motor bike and knocked me in, unconscious; in deep water, too. Luckily for me a chap saw it happen. He dived in and pulled me out or I wouldn't be here now. That's how we came to know each other."

"What was an American doing there?"

"His father's a pilot at the United States Air Base not far from school. That gave us something in common right away. I told him my father had been killed flying in the war and after that we got along fine. He's my own age, and happens to be as keen on natural history as I am. His people gave me a lot of hospitality, so, naturally, when school broke up for the holidays I asked Frank if he'd care to spend a few weeks here with me. Being of Scottish descent, and never having crossed the border, he jumped at the chance. He should be on this train."

"What might be his name?" inquired the station agent, suspiciously.

"Macpherson. Franklin Macpherson. Frank for short. His ancestor was one of the Inverness-shire Macphersons."

"Ah weel. The Macphersons are nae sa' bad."

Malcolm smiled. "You and your old wives' tales about the clans. Don't you dare to tell him that one about the sheep the Macdonalds claim were stolen by the Macphersons."

"Na-na. I'll no say a worrd. I'll admit it happened a wee while ago."

"I'd call a hundred years more than a wee while. But here comes Willie with the train. I hope Frank made his connection at the junction."

The train trundled in, the driver leaning out of his cab to call to Malcolm, "Any fush?"

Malcolm made a gesture in the negative. "Have you heard of anything being caught higher up the river?

"Three at Balnalan yesterday."

"On prawn, I'll bet," sneered Malcolm. "That's no way to kill a fish."

"They'll no look at anything else."

The train with its two coaches crawled to a halt. From the guard's van was thrown a mailbag and a bundle of newspapers.

"Tombrecht," called the station agent.

The door of a compartment was thrust open and a boy, dark, and perhaps a little heavier built than Malcolm, scrambled out, carrying in one hand a suitcase, dragging with the other a heavy kitbag while under his arm he held a bundle of fishing rods. He shouted a greeting.

"Take your time; there's no hurry," called Malcolm, walking to meet him. "Welcome to Glenarder. Never mind the luggage. Sandy here will put it in the brake." Having shaken hands he stepped back, looking the visitor up and down with a curious, slightly amused smile on his face.

"What is it?" asked Frank, anxiously. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong, but I see you're . . ."

"You mean the kilt? Recognize it?"

"Of course. Macpherson hunting tartan."

"Then why look at me like that? Any reason why I shouldn't wear it?"

"None at all. Any Scot is entitled to wear his clan tartan, but . . ."

"But what? I expected to see everyone wearing a kilt."

"Not nowadays. You'll only see kilts on special occasions. I was thinking that not being used to it you won't find it very comfortable."

"Why not? It feels swell."

"You may think so now, but you'll change your mind if you're caught on the hill in a storm. When it gets soaking wet, and that's bound to happen, you'll think it weighs a ton. When it's too long, as yours is, and the weight of the water in it drags it down, the bottom will chafe the back of your knees till there's no skin on them. The first thing when you're walking these hills is comfort. But we can talk about that later. Here comes Sandy. He'll have put your gear in the brake."

"What's he grinning at—my kilt?"

"No, your shirt, I imagine."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's a bit on the bright side."

"In our forests at home it's wise to make yourself conspicuous."

"For goodness' sake! Why?"

"If you don't you're liable to be shot by another hunter."

"Well, that won't happen here because, one, our forests don't have trees, and secondly, on our ground there won't be any other hunters. Apart from that, take my advice and don't wear cotton. Wool's the stuff. It absorbs the sweat, and you don't feel the cold if the wind swings to the north, as it may, should you be sitting down having a rest."

"I seem to have a lot to learn."

"Everyone in new country has something to learn if he wants to keep out of trouble. No matter. We'll soon have things organized."

The station agent came up. Malcolm introduced him. They shook hands.

"His rods are wee bit on the light side for a heavy fush," advised the agent, looking at Malcolm.

"We'll get that sorted when we get home," said Malcolm. "Come on, Frank. Let's get along. There should just be time for me to show you round the Lodge before lunch."

They went out to the brake, a dilapidated Ford V-8 fitted with extra heavy tyres, which in a few minutes was cruising quietly down a narrow road towards a bridge that spanned the river, here about thirty yards wide. The Lodge, Malcolm explained, was on the opposite bank.

Reaching the bridge he brought the brake to a halt in the middle. Not far away, on the bank, a short, stocky, fresh complexioned young man, wearing tweeds and body waders, was standing near a small wooden building pulling the line off the reel of a rod that rested against a rail provided for the purpose. Hearing the brake stop he looked up and made a signal.

"That's Duncan, our gillie," informed Malcolm. "He's caught nothing."

"How do you know?"

"He signalled. He's drying his line, which looks as if he's packing up. It's often like that at this time of the year. The water gets warm and the fish don't like it. They pack in the pools

like sardines. Just look at 'em down there."

Frank stared. "Do you mean salmon?"

"Of course."

"I don't see any."

"I can see twenty, at least. You'll soon get the knack of spotting 'em. Watch for a window and follow it along with your eyes."

"What's a window?"

"A piece of flat water that follows a swirl."

"I can see some long weeds."

"Those are salmon. There aren't any weeds in our rivers. The spates don't give 'em a chance to grow. The bottom is either rock or shingle."

"The water doesn't look very deep for fish that size."

"It's about twelve feet, where you're looking."

"What!" Frank sounded incredulous.

"It's deceptive because it's so clear. It can still deceive me, and I know the bottom of this river like I know my own face."

At that moment a streak of silver a yard long leapt high into the air to fall back with a splash.

"Gee! Did you see that," cried Frank, excitedly. "What a fish!"

"Not far short of thirty pounds, I'd say."

"What made him jump like that?"

"They do it all the time. No one really knows why. Some people think it's to try to knock the sea lice off them—little creatures they pick up in the sea. Others think it's to get oxygen. Some say it's because they know there's going to be a change of weather. You see, those fish are waiting to run up to the spawning grounds, but they won't move until there's more water in the river. The dickens of it is, when they're in this state they won't look at any lure. But we must stop talking now. I'll tell you all about it later. If you're going to fish for salmon you'd better know something about them. We might come down tonight, at about dark, and try for a sea-trout in the tail of the pool."

Frank looked disappointed. "Trout seem poor game after that beauty we saw jump."

"You've never made a bigger mistake in your life," declared Malcolm. "If you get stuck in a four or five pound sea-trout you'll think you've hooked a railway train. If salmon fought like sea-trout, size for size, I doubt if you'd land many. I'll call Duncan and give him your rods. He'll make them up and put them in the rodbox—that long thing you can see beside the hut—ready for use at any time. I never take mine down."

"Is that safe? Don't they get stolen?"

Malcolm looked shocked. "That sort of thing isn't done here. People leave their things lying beside the road to be collected later, or picked up by someone else. No one would dream of touching them."

"Say. That's wonderful."

"Call it civilized. I've heard people from the south say we're fifty years behind the times. We may be in some respects. We prefer things that way. Anyhow, it doesn't say much for progress. Cities might do worse than put their clocks back and recover some of the good manners they seem to have lost. The farther away you get from towns the less you'll hear of robberies." Malcolm called to the gillie and beckoned.

While they were waiting a flight of a dozen or so fairly large birds, black and white with long, bright orange beaks, came screaming up the river. Reaching the bridge they swept up over it in perfect formation before resuming their straight flight. As they passed, Malcolm's voice joined in the chorus. "Good morning—good morning."

"What are they?" asked Frank.

Malcolm answered, laughingly: "Oyster catchers. I love the oyster catchers. To me they're part of the river. They're harmless, cheerful, friendly folk, and always so spotless that they look as if they'd just come home from the cleaners. When the river freezes up in winter they go down to the sea, and their return, shouting their heads off as if they were tickled to death to be back, is one of our first signs of spring. And that means something here, I can tell you, to everybody and everything. I always throw my cap in the air when the advance party comes tearing up the river. I do the same when I see the first skein of wild geese flying high, heading north. That's a great thrill. I feel sorry for the people who live in cities and miss such moments, although, to be sure, the weather means more to us than it does to them. Here, our long brutal winter is public enemy number one, and we're glad to see it on the way out. Of course, the country can look beautiful under a blanket of unbroken snow, but that's a poor compensation for the hardships it imposes."

"I guess so."

"Which reminds me," went on Malcolm. "If you hear an unholy din in the middle of the night, as if ten thousand witches were arriving on broomsticks, it will only be the oyster catchers having an argument. Scores of them roost on a stony island in front of the house. The din starts at a definite signal and ends just as abruptly. Like a tap being turned on and off. I don't know why they do it. Some people think it's the moon rising that starts them off, but I believe it's when they're disturbed by an otter. We've a wonderful lot of bird life here, both by the river and on the hill. I'm never tired of watching their intimate habits. One is always learning something new and there are always mysteries of why they do certain things to be solved."

"That suits me fine," said Frank, warmly. "I guess a lot of your birds will be different from ours back home in the States so you'll have to tell me about them. One of the things I've missed since I've been over here, living where we do, has been birds."

"If you're interested in birds you've come to the right place," asserted Malcolm. "After the south you'll find them surprisingly tame—that is, except those that are on the official Black List for the mischief they do. It's queer, when you think of it, that men should take it upon themselves to decide what should live and what should die. But there it is. We can talk more about that later. Here's Duncan."

The gillie came up and touched a cap festooned with flies of many colours and sizes. Malcolm did the same.

"Duncan," he said, "meet my friend, Frank Macpherson. I'm going to show him how to grass his first fish."

"They're awful stiff the day."

"I'm afraid they will be till the river grows a bit. Here, take Frank's rods, make them up and put them in the box. I'm thinking of bringing him down tonight to try for a sea-trout in the tail of the pool, so you might make up a fly rod with a seven-five cast and a small black gnat."

"Fine. Don't harass them by starting too early. They'll no take till the light's off the water."

"I shall wait till the bats come out. Now we must push on or we shall be late for lunch."

“Did you notice the big beast?”

“No. Where does he lie?”

“Behind the Pulpit Rock.”

Malcolm took a few paces and looked down. He whistled through his teeth. “Phew! What a giant! How long’s he been here?”

“He wasn’t there yesterday so he must have run in during the nicht.”

“He must go close on fifty pounds.”

“Nearer forty.”

“We must have him.”

“I doubt you’ll do it. He lies deep, and you can no get a fly near him on account of the bridge.”

“How about spinning a minnow?”

“You’d never get one down to him in that weight of water, with the bridge in the way.” The gillie’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “There’s only one way you might make him mad enough to take hold.”

“A prawn?”

“Aye.”

“He’s a cock fish so perhaps it wouldn’t matter. Do you happen to have one?”

“Na, but I know where I could get one.”

“Then get it, and make up a prawn tackle. We’ll have a try in the morning.”

“The only way to get down to him would be to drop it off the bridge.”

“Well?”

“If he does lay hold you should have some fun,” said Duncan, grinning broadly.

“Be here in case I need help.”

“I wouldna’ miss it.”

“Ten o’clock?”

“Fine.”

“Now we must go.”

The two boys got back into the brake, which continued on its way up the thickly wooded brae.

“What a joke it would be if you started off by landing a forty pounder,” said Malcolm.

Frank looked startled. “Do you mean you want me to drop that prawn?”

“Why not? It should be an experience.”

The brake went on.

Trouble on the Hill

"Not much traffic here," observed Frank, presently.

"No," agreed Malcolm. "That's the danger."

Frank frowned. "I don't get it."

"You so seldom see another vehicle you're apt to get careless and imagine you have the road to yourself. If you do meet a car it's as well to suppose the driver of it can't see you."

"Why can't he see you?"

"Because the chances are he'll be looking at anything but the road. If the driver is a stranger he'll probably be admiring the landscape. If he's a local man he may be a farmer, wandering along in bottom gear with a spy-glass to his eye counting his sheep on a distant hillside. With no fences to stop them sheep blunder along the roads, too. Cattle are worse, particularly the black Aberdeen-Angus. They come down at night and sleep on the road. Being black you can't see 'em. Or you may bump into a deer, dazzled by your headlights. One night I had one jump clean over my bonnet. Gave me a rare fright, I can tell you. If you lose control you can easily go over the brae, and it's a long drop down to the river. So you see, there are just as many hazards here, if not more, than you meet in a city, where things are kept in order."

"I'm glad you warned me," said Frank, seriously. "I'd never have guessed it."

Malcolm smiled. "As I've already told you, you'll have a lot to learn while you're here."

"That's okay with me, Mac," returned Frank, using the abbreviated name he had found for Malcolm. "You show me the ropes and I'll do my best to pick 'em up."

"That's the spirit. It's the visitors who won't be told anything who get into trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Yes, and before you leave here you'll understand why."

The brake ran on between steep banks of pine, fir, mountain ash and silver birch. Just before reaching the open country at the top of the brae an animal bounded across the road to vanish in the undergrowth on the other side. Malcolm, who had dry-skidded to avoid it, took his foot off the brake. "See what I mean," he said, significantly.

"What was it—a young deer?"

"A roebuck. He'll get himself shot."

"Why?"

"I'd wager he's been in Gordon's roots. That may mean trouble for me. I hate shooting the pretty little beasts but the Ministry of Agriculture and the Forestry Commission are hot on them being kept down. The bill for damages can be steep."

"They eat the roots?"

"It isn't so much what they eat. One will walk along a row of turnips and bite the top off every one. To make matters worse they say a sheep won't touch a root that's been bitten by a deer. Don't ask me why. In the forestry plantations they kill the young trees by standing on their hind legs and stripping the bark from top to bottom. The trouble is, there are now so many plantations, and the trees are so thick it's almost impossible to get into them. We've a solid block of a thousand acres on our ground. We're finding it a nuisance because it's a perfect sanctuary for vermin. The Forestry Commission can take what land they want. Murray,

the head forester, was at me the other day about the damage being done to the young trees by roe. As if I can help it. But we can talk about that presently."

The brake was now running across an apparently limitless ocean of heather. To the left a succession of waves mounted a long slope to a deeply indented skyline, with the pinky-purple spray of heather broken by sprawling clumps of gorse and dark green close-knit spikes of juniper. Red-brown streaks showed where the peat had been exposed by minor landslides or broken open by erosion, sometimes to reveal an upthrust ridge of the underlying limestone. As Frank remarked, it looked as if the landscape had been tilted up for them to see.

Away to the right, beyond the river valley with its crowding pines, larch, firs and birch, rolled range after range of rounded hills, rising and falling, pink on the nearer slopes, mauve in the middle distance and fading at last in piles of deep blue shadows that could only be mountains.

"If you're game I have a plan to camp out in that direction," said Malcolm. "It's the most perfect spot imaginable, with everything laid on, fresh water from a spring and an old luncheon hut to sleep in. No one, except perhaps our gamekeeper, goes there from one year to another, so the ground is never disturbed. That's what the wild creatures like, so we should see some interesting things. With luck I'll be able to show you our eagles. There are plenty of berries there of one sort or another, blaeberries, snowberries and so on, which many birds adore."

"What are those queer bare patches I can see?"

"That's where the heather has been burnt off. It's an awful job; and it can be dangerous, too. You have to choose the day carefully, in late autumn or winter, because should the fire get out of hand, and that does happen, you can burn the country for miles, trees and everything."

"Why burn the heather, anyway?"

"Chiefly to provide grazing for the sheep. They eat the fresh young shoots in spring. There's nothing else."

"Is it public land?"

"No, but every crofter has the right to put so many sheep on the hill according to the rent he pays. The sheep can't eat the old stick heather, as we call it, so unless you get rid of it by burning, and that's the only way, they starve. Some do starve in a hard winter, anyway. What's an even worse nuisance is the bracken. Look at that enormous patch of it over there."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It kills the heather, and there's getting more and more of it. We used not to be troubled with it."

"Why? Why should it suddenly increase now?"

"I'll tell you. For centuries the only cattle here hardy enough to stand our winter were the native, shaggy, big-horned Highlanders. They'd eat bracken, and so in time bleed it to death. They've been replaced almost everywhere by the black Aberdeen-Angus, which are said to carry more beef. They won't eat bracken, so now it spreads and is smothering everything else. Nothing can be done about it, so it looks as if Scotland, instead of being a land of purple heather, will be a jungle of bracken."

"How much of this land is yours?"

"Nearly all that you can see."

"Say, that's an awful lot of ground."

"We run back from the river for about twelve miles. That isn't a big estate in these parts, where forty or fifty thousand acres is not uncommon. We've only about twenty thousand."

"Then what do you come to?"

"More heather. The next estate. From our back door, if you were crazy enough to try, you'd walk the best part of forty miles before you saw a house, a road, or a living soul. It's all wild country, as you'll see. There's the Lodge, below us on the right, near the river."

Malcolm indicated a long low mansion house, with a turret at each end, standing with several outbuildings in its own grounds, protected from the north by a thick belt of firs.

"Say, that's some house," exclaimed Frank. "Why do you have a place that size?"

"Because it happens to be like that. Believe me, Mother wishes it was a quarter the size."

"How many people live in it?"

"Five. Mother, myself, a cook and two maids—local girls. The cottage you see just beyond the trees is where Donald Macdonald lives with his wife. He's our gamekeeper. He was born here and his father and grandfather before him, so he knows his way about. He's a great character. You'll meet him presently. The Lodge was built in the days when people had plenty of money and friends came up for the fishing and shooting. But that's all finished. People can't afford to entertain any more."

The brake ran down a winding road, badly in need of repair, towards the Lodge, and in so doing passed the gamekeeper's cottage. Several dogs, labradors and spaniels, standing on their hind legs clawed at the iron bars of their kennels as they set up a clamour of barking. With them, looking incongruous, was a Cairn terrier. A buxom woman, who was hanging out washing, waved.

"That's Mrs. Macdonald," said Malcolm.

"That reminds me. I noticed you touched your cap to the gillie. Do you usually touch your hat to an employee?"

"If he touches his hat to me, certainly. Heaven forbid that Duncan should teach me manners. There's nothing subservient in that, as some people in the south seem to think. With us it's merely a sign of mutual respect."

"What are the dogs making all that fuss about?"

Malcolm smiled. "They know the brake and hope they may be going out hunting."

"What's a Cairn doing there? A pet I suppose."

"Not on your life. We don't make pets of dogs in these parts. Pals, if you like, since you're always working together. Here a dog has to do something for its living. That Cairn you saw is Teresa. She's as tough as they come. The Cairn was originally a sporting dog, not a lapdog, as too often it is now in England."

"What's her job here?"

"Bolting foxes from their earths. These hills are not short of villains and the fox is one of them. Here we show him no mercy. We can't afford to. I suppose the poor brute can't help being a fox, but the things he does puts a price on his head, or to be precise, on his tail, for which the Ministry of Agriculture will pay ten shillings."

"What's his crime?"

"Killing lambs. By killing them as they're being born, a favourite trick since the ewe is helpless, he kills the mother, too. On the hills among the rocks he can't be hunted in the ordinary way, but he has to be kept down somehow or there would be no sheep and precious little poultry. Having seen some of the things foxes have done, such as killing more than they need to eat, for the sheer devilment of it, I don't mind shooting one, given a chance. I allow traps, provided they're visited every day to make sure the poor brute doesn't suffer; but I

won't have poison used, which is the way some of the farmers would deal with them if they had their way. I suppose it's pardonable."

"The fox has to live."

"So has the farmer. There's plenty of food for the fox on the hill without him raiding the farmyards."

"Do you shoot anything else beside foxes?"

"One or two villains. I'll tell you about them later. Donald mostly attends to that. In the winter we have to kill rabbits and hares, and perhaps a deer, to provide meat for the dogs. Being thirty odd miles from a town we can't just slip round the corner and buy it from a butcher, anyway not when the road is iced up or we're snowed in for weeks at a time. The dogs eat a lot of oatmeal, but for the work they have to do it isn't enough. Take the sheep dogs, for instance. They're out in all weathers, summer and winter. A farmer would be helpless without his dogs. He wouldn't be able to find his sheep, let alone bring them in. Sheep and cattle wander miles away. Meat of some sort is essential for a dog if it's to keep fit. After all, that's its natural food. Without it a dog gets anaemic. In its wild state it would find its own food. It would be unfair to deprive it of it because it works for us. My dogs sometimes get a feed of salted salmon. They like that."

"You don't mind killing things?"

"I don't *enjoy* killing anything, if that's what you mean, but in a place like this there are times when it has to be done. I agree that everything has a right to live, but for some illogical reason most people dislike killing some things more than others. Sympathy often goes to a creature that's pretty to look at, when in fact its character may be worse than something that looks repulsive. Some creatures by their very natures arouse our hatred. Stoats and weasels, for instance, I can shoot without a qualm because they're such shocking little murderers, killing not so much for food as for the sheer joy of it."

"You don't mind killing salmon?"

"Fish, to me, come into a different category. They're cold-blooded. They all kill and eat each other, anyway."

"There's nothing else for a fish to eat except another fish."

"That's true. There's nothing more beautiful than a fresh-run salmon, but, let's face it, it happens to be good to eat. I hate hitting a salmon on the head, and in fact, if one has put up a good fight I often throw it back into the river. Many gillies feel like that. You watch Duncan. When he gives a salmon the 'priest', that is, an instrument for knocking a fish on the head, he always raises his cap and says, 'sorry old man'. If one gets away you'll hear him say, 'Good luck to you. It's my sport but it's your life.' "

"That's the right spirit."

"The trouble about killing things is, when man steps in, in his determination to have everything his own way, killing this and trying to preserve that, he almost invariably upsets the balance of nature; and that can have such far-reaching results that you'd be amazed. Later on I'll give you some examples. Here we are."

The brake turned sharply through an open gateway into a cobbled courtyard surrounded by outbuildings, most of them in a sad state of disrepair.

"Well, this is home," announced Malcolm, bringing the brake to a stop. "Welcome to Glenarder Lodge. When I've shown you round I hope you'll regard it as your own home. Here's Donald, coming out of the gun-room. You'd better call him Mr. Macdonald till you know him better. We don't use Christian names until you're on close terms with a man. If

Donald seems a bit blunt take no notice. He's nearly seventy and should have retired, but he won't give up. Between you and me I suspect he hates handing over the ground he's looked after for so long to someone else. He gets rheumatics, and that makes him a bit crabby. He's a wonderful keeper; he has eyes like a hawk; he misses nothing. He's more a friend to me than a servant."

Malcolm had stopped the brake outside a garage which from its size had obviously once been a coach-house. The two boys got out.

Said Malcolm, softly: "I have a suspicion there's trouble in the wind."

"What makes you think that?" asked Frank.

"Donald usually wears his best suit when he intends to be near the lodge. He's wearing the old clothes he puts on for the hill."

"You keep talking about the hill. What hill? Do you mean one particular hill?"

"No. Any high ground. The moor generally, although as a matter of fact most ground when you leave the road is hilly."

The keeper walked to meet them. Although apparently not a man of remarkable physique he had a tough, forbidding, even fierce look about him. Clean shaven, his face was lean, with the skin, the colour and texture of leather, drawn into deep lines. There was still no grey to be seen in his black hair when he raised his tweed cap on being introduced to Frank, nor in the bushy eyebrows that bristled over dark, piercing eyes. His most prominent feature was his nose, which was large, and hooked like the beak of a bird of prey.

"You've been on the hill, or you're going," said Malcolm. "Is anything wrong?"

"Aye," growled Donald, in a deep voice.

"What's the trouble?"

"A dog."

"Ah!" breathed Malcolm. "Gone wild?"

"Aye.

"What's it doing?"

"Killing sheep."

"Where?"

"His lair is somewhere in the Black Banks."

"How long has this been going on?"

"I saw him first ten days ago. I've seen him three times since but there's no getting near him. I've also seen his work."

"What sort of dog is it?"

"Alsatian."

"Recognize him?"

"Na. He's a stranger in these parts."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I reckoned to get the devil. But there's no getting near him. He knows a gun when he sees one. I thought I had him once. He's taken to digging out rabbits. I spotted him at it. He had nearly buried himself. I saw the dirt flying up in the air. But he must have been watching. Long before I was in range he was off like a streak o' lightning."

"Well, do what you can, and let me know if you get him."

"Be careful if you go on the hill. Yon beast's dangerous."

"I'll watch it. I must go now. Come on, Frank."

As they walked towards a side door of the house Malcolm went on: “That’s another sort of villain we sometimes have to deal with, although fortunately not very often.”

“What do you do in a case like this?”

“There’s only one thing to do when a dog turns to crime and becomes an outlaw—shoot it, before it wipes out all the sheep on the hill. Once a dog decides to go wild and takes to the hills he’s beyond redemption. He gets a taste for blood. He never comes back. He has to be killed. There’s no argument about that. He’s worse than a wolf because he has more intelligence.”

“It seems awful to have to shoot a dog.”

“If he decides to behave like a wild beast he must be treated like one. Don’t you make any mistake, Frank. That animal knows perfectly well what it’s doing. He’s signed his own death warrant. Respectable dogs seem to sense that, too, and they’ll kill him if they get half a chance. Take it from me, dogs understand more than some people imagine. One day I’ll tell you a tale of a dog I knew—but here we are.”

Malcolm broke off as they reached the door. He pushed it open. A short corridor gave access to a room of some size, furnished more for comfort than any other purpose.

A woman of middle age, tall, well-groomed, wearing a tweed suit, who had been writing letters at a desk, rose and came forward, smiling, hands outstretched.

“Mother,” said Malcolm. “This is Frank.”

“Now I can thank you for what you did for Malcolm,” said Malcolm’s mother, warmly. “I’m delighted to have you here.”

“It was kind of you to ask me, ma’am,” returned Frank, as he took the proffered hand.

“Malcolm will show you your room. You must be tired after your long journey and no doubt you’ll want a wash. Don’t be too long. Lunch is nearly ready. We can talk then.”

“Come on, Frank. I’ll take you up,” said Malcolm. “We’ve given you a room next to mine.”

Chapter Three

Mostly about Dogs

As soon as lunch was finished Malcolm took Frank to his room and there persuaded him to change into some spare clothes of his own, which were, he advised, more serviceable for the river and the hill.

"This is the same tweed Donald was wearing, and also, if I'm not mistaken, Duncan the gillie," observed Frank.

"That's right," confirmed Malcolm. "Like most lodges we have our own tweed—that is, of our own pattern. It's made at a little mill not far away. The fleeces are from local sheep. The natural oil is left in instead of being washed out, as it so often is down south, with the result that it's practically waterproof."

"What's the idea of having your own particular pattern?"

"It's an old custom, originally intended I think, for recognition. No one else is allowed to have our pattern, and the same with the other lodges. I know them all for miles around, so if I see a man, even if I don't recognize him, which is unlikely, I know where he works or where he's staying. Anyone seeing you in that tweed you're wearing will know at once where you are staying. Our stockings are also made of local three-ply wool. Mrs. Macdonald knits mine. You need hard stuff for this country. Here's a pair of spats for you. You won't want them today but you'll need them when we go to the hill."

"Why?"

"They cover the tops of your shoes and prevent bits of heather and stuff getting in. You must have your feet comfortable. I have mine made specially long, half-way up the calf, as a precaution against snake bite."

Frank stared: "Say! Don't tell me you have snakes here?"

"Only adders. They're not very big but they can be dashed venomous. I've never known a man die from a bite but he can be pretty sick for a long time. We once had a stalker who was bitten on the hand. He put his hand on a rock to pull himself up a bank and a snake was lying on it. He was in hospital for nearly a year and lost all his hair. If you were bitten far out on the hill I doubt if you'd get home. That's why, when I go out alone, I always leave word exactly where I'm going. Apart from snakes all sorts of accidents can happen. We used to have two spots very bad for snakes but my father got rid of most of 'em. I seldom see one now."

"How did you get rid of 'em?"

"By putting some goats on the hill."

"What do the goats do?"

"Smell 'em out, stamp on 'em and then eat them."

"You don't say!"

"Dogs and sheep are the worst sufferers. They may die. A dog can run over one and a grazing sheep can be bitten on the nose. A friend of my father's who lives on the Isle of Mull, where the adders can be bad, gave him the tip. Susan, my spaniel, has been bitten. I thought she was dead. She recovered, but she was a very sick dog for weeks. Old Sheila, her mother, knows all about snakes. I think dogs have an instinct about them. I'm pretty sure they can smell them. When I see old Sheila jump sideways like a cat I know what's in front of her."

"What do you do?"

"Kill the snake. I've no time for the beastly things. I always carry a phial of permanganate crystals with a little razor-sharp blade in it to cut the puncture. If you're quick most of the poison will run out with the blood. By the way, our goats are still on the hill. They've grown enormous, with magnificent heads. They've gone quite wild, of course, but they're harmless."

Frank looked at himself in the mirror and agreed that the neutral-coloured shirt Malcolm had lent him was less conspicuous than the one in which he had arrived. "At home," he said, "as I told you, it's the practice to wear bright colours when hunting in the woods. That's to avoid being accidentally shot, although even then it sometimes happens."

"It seems to me, Frank," answered Malcolm seriously, "that some of your people ignore the first rule of the gun, which is never to pull the trigger until you can see clearly what you're shooting at. I had a good example of that only the other day. Taking the twenty-two rifle I was out after a rabbit to feed the dogs when I saw a roe bolt from a field of roots and take cover in a thick patch of young silver birch scrub. As I've said, there's only one thing to do with a deer that takes to raiding crops. Standing behind a tree I waited for it to come out. Presently I saw a bush shake and that told me, or I thought it told me, exactly where it was. I had raised the rifle ready for the shot when out stepped a little girl, John Coutt's daughter from down the road. She told me she'd been sent to fetch a parcel from the station and had taken a short cut through the wood and across the railway lines, which was naughty of her. I go cold even now when I think of how close she came to being shot. That shows what can happen."

"You would have shot the deer because it was at the farmer's roots, I suppose."

"Not entirely. One deer might not do a great deal of damage, but the trouble is this. Once a deer finds its way through or over a fence put there to keep it out, it will not only come back every night but it will lead others out—more and more of them, until the entire crop of turnips or kale, intended to feed the farmer's stock in the winter, is wiped out. Obviously, that mustn't be allowed to happen, so the buck or stag that thinks it's smart has to pay the penalty."

"In other words, it's the gang leader that you go for."

"Exactly. Believe me, I don't enjoy killing things, but here it has to be done or life would become impossible. I have less compunction about it when the culprit, bird or animal, is itself a killer, killing for no reason other than sheer blood lust."

"What about the deer? What do they eat when the snow's on the ground?"

"They can manage. Unless the snow is frozen hard over a long period they can cut their way with their hooves to the moss and grass underneath. The result of that is, everything on the hill follows the deer to feed on the patches of heather they've exposed."

"But foxes don't eat heather."

"True enough, but the rabbits and hares and birds do, so the foxes and stoats must follow them for food."

Frank nodded. "I get it. Talking of heather I'll tell you something. When I got my first glimpse of the heather a queer feeling came over me that I'd seen it all before. Instead of being in a strange country I felt I'd come home."

"Naturally. A Scot, which you are, really, never gets the heather out of his blood. Well, now you're all fixed up for clothes come and have a look at my den. It's in the turret. No one except me is allowed to touch anything there."

He led the way to a rather small, circular room, with three windows facing in different directions. "From here I can see both the river and the hill," he remarked.

On the threshold Frank stopped and burst out laughing. "What an unholy mess!" he exclaimed.

“It may look like that to you, but I can put my hand on anything in a jiffy,” returned Malcolm, indignantly.

Frank surveyed the room with amused interest.

There was hardly an inch of wall space that was not occupied by something: pelts, skins, feathers, looped fishing lines, coils of wire, leather belts, rope, cord, photographs, sketches of animals and birds, and various odds and ends not so easy to identify. Some shelves carried rows of books, jars, bottles and boxes. Leaning against the walls were joints of fishing rods, gaffs, nets, some lengths of ash saplings and a variety of walking-sticks.

There were three pieces of furniture: an old cane easy chair, a kitchen chair and a well-stained deal table littered with such things as fishing reels, bottles of oil, tools, odd feathers and pieces of fur.

“What the dickens is all this stuff,” Frank wanted to know.

“This is where I work,” Malcolm pointed out.

“Doing what?”

“Remember, we’re a long way from any shop, so I do my own repairs, mostly to fishing gear. I make my own tackles and dress my own flies. Apart from anything else, in a river like ours, full of old trees and rocks, on which to get hooked up, you could spend a small fortune on tackle. I think half the fun of fishing is making your own stuff. It gives you something to do on a wet day and there’s extra pleasure in inventing something which works. Apart from saving money I produce exactly what I want, and knowing what the thing’s made of can be sure it won’t let me down. Nothing is more infuriating than to lose a good fish because your tackle breaks. I start with the best stuff. Take hooks, for instance. If a hook is made of steel that’s been over tempered it may snap. If it’s too soft it will straighten out and you’ve lost your fish. I use Swedish iron. You can’t beat it.”

“What can I smell?”

“Probably amylacetate.”

“What do you use that for?”

“Making cellulose—that is, liquid celluloid. It’s indispensable for all sorts of things, particularly baits. Yesterday I made up a few golden sprats in case we get a spate while you’re here. Fly isn’t much use when the river is big and black. Don’t ask me why a salmon prefers a golden sprat, which is something it can never have seen before, to a silver one, of which it must have seen millions in the sea.” Malcolm took from a test tube rack a shining bright little golden fish, impaled lengthways by a knitting needle. “If I bought this bait, made up, in a shop, it would cost several shillings, and I might lose it on a rock first cast. That’s not funny. This one cost me less than a farthing. What I do, at the beginning of the season, is buy half a pound of sprats from the fishmonger. They’re silver then, of course. I dip them in aquaflavine to turn them gold. Then I dip them in cellulose to make them tough. The cellulose costs next to nothing. I buy two penn’orth of amylacetate. In it I dissolve a small piece of celluloid—actually a chip or two off an old tooth brush. So, for a few pence I have enough baits to last me a year. To buy them would cost pounds.”

“What are these bits of fur and feather, and the reels of silk?”

“For making flies. They’re another expensive item if you have to buy them. I invent my own patterns. I have one, which I call Glenarder Fancy, which is a real killer. Why pay five or six shillings for a fly when you can make one in a few minutes for less than a penny?”

Frank smiled sadly. “I wouldn’t like to tell you how much I’ve spent on fishing tackle.”

“I’ll cure you of that nonsense,” promised Malcolm, confidently.

Frank picked up an ash stick about six feet long with a crook at the top end. “What’s this thing?”

“That’s what we call a *cromach*. It has a dozen uses on the hill.”

“Such as?”

“If you fall in a hole you can reach up with the crook and pull yourself out. You can use it to steady yourself going down a steep bank. You can pull down things that are out of reach—oh, all sorts of things. But we’ve been here long enough. Let’s go out and see the girls—that is, my dogs. This is a place for a day when the river is unfishable.”

“Is it sometimes like that?”

“You’ll be surprised.”

A few minutes later, having left the house by the side door, Malcolm stopped outside a long wooden outbuilding. “This is the gun-room,” he announced. “Everything for the hill is kept in here. It’s really Donald’s department. He keeps the guns clean, checks the cartridges, and so on. We might as well look inside as we’re here.”

He pushed open the door and they went in.

The room was a large one. From pegs on the walls, adorned with roebuck horns, deer antlers and other trophies, hung canvas and leather game bags, cartridge bags, gun cases, boxes of cartridges, belts, binoculars, a telescope and other sundry equipment. On a green baize-covered bench were bottles of oil, rags, tow and cleaning rods, both wood and steel. Racked on the wall in a glass case were several guns and rifles.

“That pair of twelve-bores at the end with the seven millimetre deer rifle belonged to my father,” said Malcolm. “I use the rifle occasionally, but for small game I use the point two-two or the twenty-bore. You can get a bit gun-weary on a long day with the heavier stuff. When we go camping I shall only take those two to give us something for the pot. There’s no need for us to live entirely out of cans. My cooking may be a bit rough but one can’t be too particular on the hill. I keep utensils permanently at the hut. It’s miles from anywhere. I don’t suppose anyone has been near the place since I walked out in the spring. Even Donald doesn’t go there more than about once a year, and I don’t blame him. It’s a fair hike over some rough going. That’s why it’s such a wonderful place for wild life. The creatures are never disturbed.”

“How far is it?”

“Only about seven or eight miles.”

“How long do you reckon to stay there?”

“As long as we feel like it. Say a week or ten days at least.”

“When do we start?”

“I thought the day after tomorrow.”

“We shall have heavy loads to carry, I imagine.”

“Oh no. Jeanie will haul most of the stuff there.”

“Who’s Jeanie?”

“Our garron. Like Donald she’s getting a bit up in the tooth but she can still do the trip.”

“What’s a garron?”

“It comes from the Gaelic word *gearran*. A small, rough sort of hill pony. They’re at home in this sort of country, where an ordinary horse would get bogged, break a leg, or do something silly. Let’s go and have a word with her. She’s in the paddock behind the kennels.”

“You don’t have the dogs in the house?”

“No. They’re both healthier and happier in their own quarters. Of course, the kennels are well fixed up, under cover and off the ground, with fresh straw every few days. Straw keeps

dogs clean, and they love it because they can dig beds in it."

When Malcolm opened a gate behind the gun-room a thick-coated pony threw up her head, whinnied, and walked forward. "Hello Jeanie, old girl," said Malcolm, stroking her nose. "Feel like doing some work? All right, all right, I can see you," he went on, turning to where two springer spaniels were clawing at the bars of their kennel. One was black and white with brown eyebrows. The other was liver and white with a freckled muzzle. He opened the iron gate and the dogs gambolled out, stumpy tails wagging. "The black and white is Sheila; the other is Susan, her daughter. All right, that's enough," he went on sharply, turning to the dogs. "Sit!"

Both dogs obeyed instantly.

"I see they're well trained," said Frank.

"Of course. A disobedient dog would merely be a nuisance: It would do more harm than good. As I've already told you, dogs here have a job to do."

"Do you train them yourself?"

"As far as training is needed. Actually, pups learn most of their business from the mother, although much, I fancy, is instinct coming from generations of doing the same thing in the same place. Old Sheila wouldn't stand for any nonsense from Susan when she was young and apt to get excited. If Susan did anything wrong, or failed to obey an order, her mother would give her a smart snap, as much as to say, behave yourself."

The two dogs had jumped on their bench and the boys sat on each side of them.

"I could tell you some tales about dogs," went on Malcolm. "They're wonderful friends. I'm sure they understand a lot more than many people suppose, and I could give you a good example of that. I reckon old Sheila knows the meaning of at least thirty words. I regard her more as another human being than an animal. Why not? After all, dogs have been the friends of man since history began, and probably before that. Yes, after thousands of years together men and dogs have got to know each other pretty well. It's a pity men aren't always as conscientious about their work. I know every dog around here for miles, and they all know me. We have long conversations together when they're at home. But not on the hill. Oh no. If I meet one looking for a stray sheep and speak to it by name there's no tail wagging or anything like that. He'll throw me a glance as much as to say, 'not now; can't you see I'm working?' "

Malcolm glanced at his watch. "In exactly an hour from now, if you look at that farm on the fringe of the heather you'll see Gordon's four dogs go streaking up the hill. They're off to bring in the cows for milking. The cows may have wandered miles away. Nobody tells the dogs to go. They know the time and they know exactly what to do. Gordon may not even be at home."

"Jolly good."

"No, that's normal dog behaviour here. In winter time I could show you a sight that would astonish you. Twenty or more dogs sitting outside the village school waiting for the younger children to come out."

"Why?"

"To shepherd them home, of course. Some of the kids live miles away across the heather, far from any road. Duncan had to walk six miles to school across the open moor, crossing the river on stilts. What an outcry there'd be if children down south had to do that! Yet the very fact that they have to do that makes their education an achievement and they often finish at a university. But as I was saying, when it gets dark early, or a blizzard is blowing, a child could

easily lose its way, or maybe fall over a cliff. The dogs see to it that doesn't happen. They sort out their own children and escort them home."

"Are you kiddin'?"

"Certainly not. If a dog arrived home without its charge the parents would know something was wrong and make a search. In fact, I've known that happen."

"Were the dogs trained to do that?"

"Apparently not. It started many years ago. As I understand it the dogs started by going a little way to meet the children. The distance they went became longer and longer until at last they went all the way to school with them. Then they took to going to meet them. Now pups learn the business from their mothers. It must have been sheer instinct in the first place that told the dogs that what the children were doing was dangerous."

"I call that wonderful," said Frank.

"Trust a dog to know what to do."

"What was that tale you were going to tell me about a dog?"

"It's a bit harrowing."

"I can take it."

"Very well. Remember, this is true, every word of it."

"Three years ago," began Malcolm, "we employed a trapper to keep the vermin down. His name was Stuart Campbell. He lived in one of our cottages. He had a dog, a labrador, named Ben. They were both getting on in years. I'd known them since I was able to toddle. You never saw one without the other. For years and years, summer and winter, they ranged together over hills where a man is seldom seen, where the eagles soar and the only sound is the scream of a mating vixen or the belling of the stags in the autumn gloaming. You can imagine the understanding and affection that grew up between them. One might say each was the world to the other. Stuart was a big, rugged Highlander, and Ben was as tough as his master, as indeed he had to be to roam the hills day after day whatever the weather, summer shine or winter storm. Stuart had never married. His mother kept house for him. She was what we call a *thrawn* woman, hard-working, as a woman here has to be."

"What exactly do you mean by thrawn?"

"Tough. Dour. Grim. A bit aggressive, perhaps, as a result of the hard life. Well old age is not to be denied, and the day came, when Ben was fourteen, which is a good age for a dog, when his strength began to fail. He could no longer walk the hill. All he could do was lie beside the peat fire and dream away the hours with one ear cocked to catch the footstep of Stuart returning. That was when the trouble began.

"Stuart's mother began to grumble, saying the dog stank, which was probably true. It was time he was put down, that is, put to sleep for good. But this was something Stuart could not bring himself to do. Kill his best, indeed, his only friend, he could not; and so the time went on, the thrawn old widow grumbling more and more and Stuart shrinking from that act of Cain which is the price some have to pay for what their dog has given them.

"At last the day came when Stuart could stand the bickering no longer. He had been on the hill all day. He had just come in and started his supper when his mother set on him again about the dog. Springing to his feet in a passion he shouted: 'Dinna fesh yoursel', woman. When I've had my bite I'll tak the gun to him.' Upon this, as Stuart recollected afterwards, the dog looked steadily at him for a moment and then walked out of the door.

"Well, when Stuart had finished his meal he took his gun from the corner where it stood and putting in a cartridge called Ben by name. For the first time in fourteen years there was no

response. Stuart went outside and called again. Still no answer. He searched the byre and the peat shed; he went up the hill, calling; but of the dog there was no sign. Neither Stuart, nor any other man, ever set eyes on Ben again.

"Stuart came to me in the gun-room and told me what had happened; and as he told his tale he shook with sobs that seemed to be tearing his heart to pieces. Which shows what a dog can do to a man, and a big strong man at that. He knew what had happened. So did I. Old Ben had understood, and had done his master his last service. He knew perfectly well what Stuart had said and what he intended to do. That was more than he could stand and he had taken his own way out to save them both the agony."

"What do you think he did?" asked Frank, huskily.

"I had no doubt about it. Neither had Stuart. Ben had crept away into the hills he had so often walked with his beloved master, and there, in some lonely corrie, he had lain down to die. You know, Frank, I sometimes think dogs understand men better than some people understand dogs."

"Is Stuart still with you?"

"No. His mother died and he left the district. And I know why. He couldn't get Ben out of his mind. Every time he walked the hill he'd see Ben there walking beside him. That's why he went."

"Where did he go?"

"I have no idea. He went without a word. Highlanders are like that. They're a queer breed. They hate saying goodbye. It takes another Highlander to understand why they do things. We replaced Stuart with a man from the Western Isles. He only stayed a week. Do you know why he went back home?"

"No."

"Because he missed the mewing of the seagulls. The next man had been a stalker. He'd been born in a cottage on the high tops, among the deer. He left us because he said he couldn't stand the trees. They made him feel shut in. He took another job as stalker on the high ground where in winter he'd be shut in for weeks on end."

"He must have been crazy to choose that sort of life."

"It's all a matter of how and where you're brought up. People here think folk who live in cities must be out of their minds. They can't understand it." Malcolm nudged Frank's arm and pointed to a croft on the fringe of the moor. Behind it, four small black and white animals were streaking through the heather up the hill, fanning out as they went.

"There go Gordon's dogs to bring home the cattle, as I told you," he said. "Notice how they take different routes. When one spots the cattle he'll call the others and they'll work them home together. They don't need a watch to tell them the time."

"I guess there are two sorts of people in the world," observed Frank, "those who understand and appreciate dogs, and those who don't."

"How right you are," agreed Malcolm. "To me, dogs are people. Of course, the close relationship and understanding here between a man and his dog is partly due to the conditions. Some dogs rarely see anyone except their masters. Keepers, shepherds, stalkers, and so on, lead lonely lives, and with no one else to talk to except their dogs, week after week and month after month, summer and winter, the animals become almost human. They get to know every word, and even the slightest signal. But let's go in and have some tea."

Birds of the River

"I think," said Malcolm to his mother after tea, "we'll take a walk across the paddock as far as the river. I want to talk to Frank about it."

"You're not going fishing?"

"Not until later on. Towards sundown I'll drive Frank as far as the Bridge Pool to try for a sea-trout. Don't worry if we're late home."

"Very well dear. Will you have supper here or at the hut?"

"At the hut, if you'll have some sandwiches cut for us. Don't forget a little bottle of milk for making tea."

"Do be careful if Duncan isn't there."

"Of course. But we shall see you again before we go to the hut. For the moment we're only going to look at the birds on the island. We shall take the dogs with us for a run. You know we're going to start camping at the far hut the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'm having the things you'll need put together. Are you taking guns?"

"The twenty-bore and the twenty-two rifle so that we can get something for the pot."

"Do be careful."

As they walked away Malcolm said to Frank: "Mother is always anxious about guns. It's understandable. Accidents happen regularly, even with people who have been shooting all their lives. That means there must have been carelessness somewhere. It can happen in a flash. Last year a keeper I knew very well on the next estate was killed. A shooting party had stopped for lunch. Some fool, instead of unloading and putting his gun flat on the ground, leaned it against a boulder with the cartridges still in it. True, he had put on the safety catch but that wasn't enough. A rabbit bounced out of a tuft of grass. A dog made a grab at it. It collided with the gun and knocked it over. The barrels struck a rock. The gun went off. A keeper, who was just sitting down a few yards away, got the full charge. He was killed on the spot."

"What a shocker. You can't be too careful."

"How right you are." As he spoke Malcolm opened the gate of the kennel and the dogs bounded out, tails wagging.

"Heel," ordered Malcolm, and the dogs fell in behind.

A short walk down the field and through a narrow belt of pines brought the river into view beyond a short expanse of stony ground decorated with tufts of heather and littered with the debris of many spates. Above the noise of rushing water could be heard a confused clamour of bird calls.

"In front of us is the stony island I told you about," informed Malcolm. "The birds know perfectly well we can't get to them so they're not likely to move; but if we can get close without them seeing us so much the better. We'll creep up behind that clump of whins."

"How do they know we can't get to them?"

"You'll see. Here we are. This will do." Malcolm raised a hand at the dogs and they lay flat beside them.

One glance was enough to show Frank why the birds were safe.

A little in front of the whins the bank broke away in a sheer drop of about ten feet to a narrow channel through which the water bounded in a series of short curling waves for about a

hundred yards when it broke into a mass of white spume that hurled itself into the comparative calm of the next pool. Rocks and boulders were everywhere, in the river and on the banks.

Beyond the channel was the object which, by confining the waters in a narrow neck, caused the rapids. It was a ridge-backed, treeless island of stones some fifty yards long and twenty wide. For its entire length it was crowded with large, water-loving birds of many species, all keeping in their respective groups. Conspicuous were gulls of several varieties and the unmistakable orange-billed black and white oyster catchers, of which there was a large colony. Some were preening their feathers. Others marched up and down. As many more were in the air, flying over the river. The noise they were making as they all raised their voices at once was beyond description.

"Well, there are some birds for you," said Malcolm, smiling.

"Say! What a party. Will you name them for me?"

"Presently. First of all I want you to have a good look at the river itself, not only here but above and below. Forget about the sluggish, polluted, weed-choked rivers you may have seen in England, crawling along at a constant depth. This is a typical highland river. Today it's in one of its gentle moods; but a storm in the hills can turn it into a raging fury. At all times it must be treated with respect. Width is no indication of depth. You can step from a shallow shelf of rock into twenty feet of water. Even where the water appears to be placid it's travelling much faster than you'd imagine. Without waterfalls it drops a thousand feet in a few miles, tearing from pool to pool over a bottom that's like a switchback that has no 'ups', only 'downs'. It's only possible to fish the pools. That's where the fish rest on their way to the headwaters of the river. Between the pools the water is often shallow, but don't imagine you can wade across it. You can't. It's always going like a millrace and will sweep your legs from under you. If there are no trees on the bank you may be able to follow a bolting fish from one pool to another; but don't you attempt it; that's no trip for a beginner. It's dangerous even for gillies born on the river, and so know all there is to know about it. You're taking this seriously, I hope?"

"Sure. Every word."

"What I'm really trying to tell you is, this river can be a killer, so never take a chance. I'll give you some examples of the sort of thing that can happen when we go to the hut tonight. Now I've got that off my chest I'll tell you about some of the birds. Most of those you can see on the island breed there. Most of them lay eggs which, exactly matching the stones in size and colour, take some finding. The same with the chicks."

"What are those?" Frank pointed to where several pure white birds were circling in graceful curves above some flat water higher up. "They look like enormous butterflies."

"Terns," answered Malcolm. "Their flying is delightful to watch. They remind me of ballet dancers."

"What are they doing?"

"Fishing. Catching parr, that is, young salmon coming down the river. They must have incredible eyesight. As you see, they float about at a fair height. A salmon parr is only a tiny silver thing but when a tern dives it never misses the mark. There's one diving now. Up she comes with a fish in her beak. They can keep up that lazy flapping for hours on end. I can watch them for hours, but the Fishery Board has no love for them."

"Why?"

"Obviously, because of the number of young salmon they kill. The party you can see must have killed quite a few even while we've been here. The gulls are even worse, particularly

those big ones with the black backs. They're not only fish killers but also terrific egg thieves; any eggs they can find, anywhere; and young birds. Not only here but on the hill. They must destroy a great many grouse by taking the eggs and chicks. They have a price on their heads for that reason, but I won't shoot them. Now, here's a funny business. You see that little bird with a white breast sitting on the rock just in front of us, bobbing up and down?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"A water-ouzel. That's its rock."

"What do you mean, its rock?"

"Every ouzel takes possession of its own particular rock. The one you see is always there. Watch it."

Presently the bird walked briskly down the sloping rock and without stopping disappeared under the water.

"What's it doing?"

"Having a meal. If you could see it, and I've watched them scores of times, it will be walking about the river bed turning over small stones looking for odd salmon eggs, trout eggs, or anything else that may take its fancy. Many people say it's quite impossible for a bird to walk about under water, but it can, and does, and very queer it is to watch. Don't ask me how it stays on the bottom. That's one of the mysteries I haven't been able to solve. Now you've seen it for yourself. Here he comes."

The ouzel walked back up the rock and taking up its original position sang a song.

"The ouzel is one of the few birds I know that sings all the year round," went on Malcolm. "Ice and snow make no difference. He just can't help singing. He has another queer trick. Every now and then he'll throw himself on the water and opening his wings go floating down on the surface, still singing. When he thinks he's gone far enough he flies back, always to his own rock. I think they spend their lives in the same place. Certainly they nest in the same place year after year. They build a roof over their heads, like wrens. But here comes something else worth watching. You see the bird like a big duck, with a brood behind her coming down on the stream? That's a goosander, one of the worst killers of young salmon we have on the river, for which reason it also has a price on its head and is shot without mercy by the keepers and water bailiffs."

"What's it doing? If it isn't careful it'll be carried down the rough water."

"Watch."

The goosander back-pedalled. Its young, seven of them, climbed on their mother's back. The hen came on, bouncing from wave to wave with the chicks still on her back. Suddenly she was swept under water.

"Watch the pool below the white water," said Malcolm, tersely.

A minute passed. Then the goosander reappeared below the rapids with the chicks still on her back. In the calm water they dropped off and again took up positions in single file behind their mother.

"That sure beats me," declared Frank. "How did the young 'uns hold on in that swirling foam?"

"I can only think they hold on with their teeth."

"*Teeth?*"

"Yes. Like many fish-eating birds they have sharp, backward-pointing teeth, so that when they grab a fish it has no hope of getting free. The goosander can swim for incredible distances under water. It dives at the first sign of danger. But it has one curious habit that often

costs it its life. When it flies it invariably heads down the river towards the sea—not straight, but following every bend in the river. Knowing that, a man has only to sit by the river with a gun quite sure that any goosanders put up by his partner, who starts higher up the river for that purpose, will come over him. It's the same with a similar bird, the merganser, another fish-eater with ferocious teeth. The bird with an extra long beak, flying up and down over that marshy piece of ground on the opposite bank, is a curlew. The male warbles a fascinating, unmistakable song, to his mate when she's brooding. That's another sure sign that spring is here."

"What about the winter? Do you have any signs of that being on the way?"

"Plenty. The grouse come down to the low ground to stuff themselves with corn. The woodcocks arrive from Scandinavia and Northern Europe. They come in thousands and rest here before going on to Ireland to escape the really hard winter. They arrive here so exhausted after their long flight over the North Sea that you can almost pick them up. You know to the day when they'll come."

"How?"

"Provided there isn't a gale they choose the night of the first full moon in November. A few stay here to breed, but not many. One year a severe frost set in just as they arrived. The ground became as hard as iron, with the result that they couldn't get any food. They live by simple suction, sticking their long beaks deep into soft patches of boggy ground. I was picking up dead woodcocks everywhere, with their beaks broken off from trying to force them into the frozen surface. But perhaps the most certain sign that winter is near is the arrival of the snow-buntings. Clouds of them. They're brown when they arrive, and it never fails to astonish me how quickly they turn white at the first flake of snow or nip of frost. Many of our creatures here change their coats to white for the winter."

At this moment a pair of medium-sized birds, yellow-legged, grey-brown above and white below, came fluttering along the bank, half running half flying. When they saw the dogs they set up plaintive cries that sounded like "oh-dear, oh-dear-oh dear".

"Sandpipers," informed Malcolm. "I'm very fond of the little sandpipers; they do no harm to anyone. You'll see them everywhere along the river. They always start this 'oh-dear' business when they see the dogs, possibly because they nest on the bank in the silliest places. They get in a terrible panic if you go near them, fluttering round your feet. They're nearly tame, anyway. I've had them stand beside me, watching, when I've been fishing. The yellow wagtails are even more tame. I've often had them land on my hat when I've been wading."

"What on earth for?"

"To try to pick off the salmon flies, which are of course hooked into the cloth. They must take them for real flies. They get so angry when they can't get them off. They've given me many a good laugh. I've never seen the yellow wagtail in the south, only the pied, which are common enough. But if we're going down to the Bridge Pool tonight we'd better be getting back. On the way I may be able to let you hear, if not see, another rare bird we have here. I meant to have stopped on the way down."

"What is it?"

"The crossbill. He has a beak like a pair of scissors, and he needs it. He's a gay, jolly little fellow. There's a colony in that belt of firs we came through on the way here. They swing about like budgerigars in the very tip tops of the trees, so they're not easy to see; but you can hear them twittering and cutting up the fir seeds on which they live. They do it at fantastic speed. Come on."

The boys got up and retraced their steps to the firs, the dogs doing their best to keep to heel in spite of the noisy dive-bombing attacks by numerous gulls which now saw them for the first time.

"They don't do that in the ordinary way," remarked Malcolm, laughing at a near miss that caused Susan to clap down her tail. "All this fuss is because we're near their nesting ground."

Under the trees they stopped. From above came a brisk twittering. A steady shower of the husks of fir seeds came spinning down. Frank tried hard to see the little birds responsible, but could not.

"They seldom leave the topmost twigs," observed Malcolm, as they went on. "If it's all right with you we'll collect our sandwiches and go straight on to the Bridge Hut. It's much too early to think of sea-trout but I'm never tired of watching the salmon jump. You get an idea of where the big fellows are lying. You've brought body waders as I suggested?"

"Sure thing. They're in my kitbag."

"Then if you'll fetch them I'll collect the sandwiches and be getting the car out. The dogs can go back to their kennel. They've had their walk and while they're all right on the river bank in daylight they might get in the way after dark. They're always too anxious to help land a fish, and I'm always afraid of one of them getting a hook through the lip. See you in the yard presently."

Chapter Five

The River

Half an hour later, having parked the brake off the road, Malcolm was on the bridge looking down into the water. “The big fellow is still there,” he told Frank. “If I hadn’t seen him in broad daylight I’d have thought a new rock had rolled into the pool. He can wait till the morning when, if Duncan can get hold of one, we’ll trot a prawn down to him. Let’s go down to the hut.”

They went down to the fishing hut and sat on the seat which, under a verandah, ran the full length of the wooden building, leaving a way through to the door. Fish were showing everywhere, arcs of silver, like flashing scimitars. A pair of wild ducks floated away. A water-ouzel bobbed curtsies on a rock on the opposite bank. All was quiet. The atmosphere, pale gold in the light of the westering sun, was one of complete serenity.

“I love this hour on the river, particularly here beside this quiet pool. We call it the gloaming,” remarked Malcolm.

“It’s beautiful,” agreed Frank.

Malcolm pointed at a splash in the extreme tail of the pool. “There’s a fish just come in. New arrivals will often take while they’re roaming about looking for a place to settle down. But we won’t bother with him. I want to give you a few tips about wading.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“Why do you think mother said to me, when she knew we were going to fish tonight, be careful?”

“I wondered about that.”

“I’ll tell you. Because this river can be a death trap.”

“Say! Are you trying to scare me again?”

“No, but I don’t want to have to tell your people you’ve been drowned.”

“Are you serious?” Frank’s voice rose high with incredulity. “The river here looks okay to me.”

“And to other people who won’t listen to advice. Every year these rivers of ours take their toll of lives.”

“For Pete’s sake! Why?”

“In the first place because the depth of the water is deceptive. The water is so clear, and the bottom so clean, that it’s always deeper than you think. Never forget that. The next point you’ll discover is the weight of the water on your legs. As I’ve already told you, this river drops a thousand feet in a few miles and there’s all the weight of the water above you to contend with. Put on your waders and come down to the tail of the pool.”

Frank pulled on his waders and wading brogues, and after Malcolm had checked them they walked a short distance to where the river, broadening perhaps to forty yards, flowed without a ripple over a bed of small stones.

“Do you think you’d be able to walk across here?” queried Malcolm.

“Sure. Nothing easier.”

“How deep would you say it is in the middle?”

“Two feet, mebbe.”

Malcolm shook his head. “Say six feet at least. Don’t ever try to cross. You wouldn’t get half-way.”

“But that’s ridiculous!” cried Frank.

“All right,” said Malcolm. “Let’s see. Will you do exactly as I tell you?”

“Sure.”

“Then get in. Take it slowly.”

Frank slid down the bank into the water. It came nearly to his knees. He walked a few yards, by which time the water, just above his knees but leaping to his waist, was beginning to boil behind him. He stopped. “I’m going to fall,” he shouted.

“Face upstream,” said Malcolm, tersely.

“That’s a bit better.”

“Now listen,” ordered Malcolm. “If you fall don’t try to get up quickly. If you do you’ll fall again. Never mind getting wet. Get to your knees, facing upstream, before you try to stand.”

“I get the idea.”

“All right. Now start coming out. Take it slowly. Pick your feet up so you don’t trip over a large stone.”

Frank, swaying, his face pale, slowly returned to the bank.

“Now do you see what I mean?” asked Malcolm.

Frank grabbed the bank and pulled himself ashore. His face was white. “I wouldn’t have believed it,” he gasped.

“Had you fallen and got into a panic you’d have finished in there.” Malcolm pointed to where the water, foaming between rocks, hurtled down to the next pool. “You wouldn’t have come out of that alive. Your brains would have been knocked out on the rocks. Let’s go back to the hut.”

They walked back and resumed their seats. Frank, subdued, said nothing.

“Wading is largely a matter of practice,” went on Malcolm. “You get to know the river, what you can do and what you can’t do. Never trust it an inch. If you hear it change its note, or should you see leaves floating down, get out as fast as you can.”

“Why?”

“Because that will mean a spate is on the way. If it catches you in the water you’re finished. I’ve seen this river jump six feet in ten minutes. I’ve known it rise eighteen feet, into the hut, in an hour. It needn’t necessarily be raining here. The weather can be perfect. But should a storm break in the hills, miles away, within minutes every tributary and burn in the storm area will become a raging torrent, pouring black peat water into the main stream. You’ll know nothing about the storm until the river warns you. Even knowing the river as I do, and what can happen, I’ve more than once been caught and only escaped by the skin of my teeth.”

Again Malcolm pointed, this time to a fair-sized islet, large enough to support scrub and several tall trees, that occupied the middle of the river a little lower down.

“It’s not difficult to wade out to that island if you know the way to go,” he said. “One evening I waded across to it to fish a run that usually holds some sea-trout. It was a lovely evening; not a breath of wind, not a cloud in the sky. I was fishing away happily when I heard the river change its note and saw that some stones above me were awash. A minute before they’d been high and dry. I started for the bank by the way I had come. It was too late. Dragging the rod behind me I plunged through the bushes to try to get off the other side. No use. I nearly went down, but saved myself by using the butt of the rod as a third leg. I was trapped on an island which in high water becomes inundated. In a few minutes the river was in roaring spate, pouring over the island.”

"What did you do?"

"I climbed a tree. I was there all night. It wasn't very comfortable, I can tell you, knowing that any minute the tree might be washed away."

"Did your mother know where you were?"

"Yes. Duncan, who was fishing the next pool above me, heard the river start to growl and came racing down the bank yelling to me to get out; but it was too late. There was nothing he could do. Donald came, but there was nothing anyone could do. So there I was, watching drowned sheep and what have you floating past. A gillie higher up the river was drowned in that same spate. In coming out of the river his foot slipped and jammed between two rocks, holding him fast. Nothing could be done, so there the poor fellow remained while the water rose over his head and drowned him."

Frank looked horrified. "Say, you *are* trying to scare me!"

"Yes; because I must make you understand how treacherous these rivers really are. I don't want to have to write and tell your mother you won't be coming back, so I'm giving you some examples of the sort of thing that can happen. I had another narrow escape to give me a fright in the Easter holidays only this year. I was fishing down a spit of gravel in the middle of a pool we call the Little Bend. It tails off to a point in deep water. I'd often done it in previous years. What I forgot was, the river bed is altered every winter by the ice coming down. My method was to fish to the end of the spit, with deep water on both sides of me, and then wade back to my starting point. Imagine my horror when I discovered the water was too heavy for me to walk against it. So there I was, with deep water in front and on both sides of me—and no going back. The spit had sunk a little and the water was just too high."

"How did you get out?"

"I made diagonally downstream for the bank even though I knew the water would be over the top of my waders. I was still a few yards from the bank, with the water nearly up to my armpits, when I was carried off my feet. Throwing away my rod I tried to swim to the bank; but it isn't easy to swim in waders; if there's air in them your legs come up and your head goes down. Had it not been for an overhanging branch, which I grabbed in passing and so pulled myself ashore, I wouldn't be here now."

"Why wade at all?"

"Because there are so few places where you can make a proper cast from dry land. It isn't enough to cast a fly straight out, at right angles from the bank, to where the fish are lying. You always fish downstream and try to hang the fly over them, if you see what I mean. If you fish from the bank the fly tends to swing round too fast for a fish to get hold of it. If you can get just a few yards nearer in waders it makes a lot of difference."

"Do salmon eat flies?"

"No."

"Then why do they take them?"

"There are many theories about that but no one really knows the answer. As a matter of fact, from the moment a salmon leaves the sea for the river it never eats anything again unless it's lucky enough to get back to the sea, which is most unlikely, a year later."

"I don't understand. How do they live?"

"On the fat they've stored up in their bodies, between the layers of flesh. You'll never find anything in the stomach of a salmon caught in a river. Of course, the longer it stays in the river the thinner it gets. Its stomach practically disappears altogether. By the following spring it's as

lanky as an eel. It's reckoned that only about four per cent ever get back to the sea. They die in hundreds."

"Tell me this. Is the salmon a sea fish or a river fish?"

"That's a matter of opinion. It spends about half its life in the sea and half in the river. The same with the sea-trout, which are a species of salmon. The life cycle of the salmon is one of the mysteries of nature, and if you're going to fish for them you'd better know something about it, although, really, nobody knows why a salmon does anything."

"Go ahead. It's lovely sitting here, watching them jump."

"It's a long story but I'll make it as brief as possible. A salmon is born from an egg laid in the upper reaches of the river or one of its tributaries, perhaps in a tiny burn no more than a foot across. These little fellows, called alevins, start working their way downstream towards the sea. A year later, when they're five or six inches long, when they're called parr, they're still going backwards to the sea, a prey for a dozen sorts of predatory birds—gulls, goosanders, mergansers, cormorants and what have you."

"Why do they go backwards?"

"They couldn't breathe if they swam downstream. Their gills wouldn't work. You can kill a fish by dragging it downstream. By the end of the second year the young fish, those that have so far survived the hazards of the journey, are about nine or ten inches long. In that state they're called smolts. They're still making for the sea, and it's when they reach the estuary that their troubles really begin. Thousands of birds are waiting for them, not to mention seals. However some manage to reach the sea. Out of about ten thousand eggs laid by a hen salmon, most of which are smashed up in the ice and boulders or eaten by cannibal fish like the ordinary brown trout, which grow very big, water-ouzels, sandpipers, etc., perhaps half a dozen have so far survived. These disappear in the sea. Where they go, what they do and what they eat during the next four years nobody really knows. What we do know is, at the end of that time they start back as full grown fish, weighing anything up to twenty-odd pounds, each one making for the place where it was born to repeat the process. Great shoals of them come down the coast, parties breaking off the main body as they come to their own particular river."

"How do they know their own river after being away for four years?"

"Again we don't know. Some people think it's by smell, others by a sort of instinct. Only once in a blue moon does one get into the wrong river."

"How do you know?"

"You can tell what river a fish belongs to by its shape. They vary. Here I could tell you which tributary it's going up. Those that are going to stay in the main river are shorter and deeper than those that will have to climb waterfalls and heavy rapids. Anyhow, when they reach the estuary their troubles start all over again. Professional fishermen put out stake nets for them. They're chased by armies of seals. In the river it's the rod fishers and otters that take their toll. But still, urged on by a mad passion that's impossible to understand they fight their way forward, jumping falls, flung back by spates, harried by otters, but always heading for their birthplace. By September they're losing weight fast. The cock fish are no longer the polished silver beauties they were when they entered the river. They turn red and brown—in fact, all the colours of the rainbow, for which reason we call them soldiers. They also develop a long protruding lower jaw, hooked at the end, presumably either for fighting or to look ferocious when the battles of the cocks for the hen fish begin. Some have already been wounded by otters, seals, or from collision with rocks at the falls."

"They must be crazy."

"They are. Anyway, some finally reach the spawning beds. There the hens make their nests and drop their eggs, which are fertilized by the male fish. This done they start drifting back towards the sea, but most of them are now so weak that they never reach it. Remember, they've probably been in the river for a year without food. It's reckoned that only about three or four per cent get back to the sea, to return a year later, silver and fully recovered and bigger than ever. Those are the really big fish, like the one we can see from the bridge. They may then weigh up to sixty pounds. They rarely get back to the sea a second time, and for a fish to return to the river for a third season is very rare indeed."

"How can you tell?"

"By the size and markings of the scales."

"Have you ever caught one of these monsters?"

"I've hooked them, but I've never landed one. There's a lot of truth in the saying that the big one got away. Of course it did. I was once in a fish for seven hours, by the end of which time I was nearer death than the fish. I never even saw it. At the finish it tore away up the river as if it had only just realized it had been hooked, and having taken out all my line, a hundred and sixty yards of it, broke it as if it had been a piece of cotton. In this very pool I was once fastened to a fish for four and a half hours before it decided to go back to the sea, taking the top of my rod with it. Well, now you know what a salmon does, but why it does it is another matter. That, of course, applies to a lot of things in nature, which is why natural history, to my way of thinking, is the most fascinating study; particularly when you live in a place like this. Every week, every season of the year, there's something interesting to watch, and once in a while you see something remarkable, either on the river or on the hill." Malcolm's eyes switched to a pair of large black birds which, at tremendous speed and going as straight as the flight of an arrow, were winging down the river. "I wonder what those two beauties have been up to," he murmured, with a slight edge on his voice.

"What were they?"

"Cormorants. They shouldn't be up here at this time of the year although they often come in spring. Their place is at the seaside. No doubt they've been raiding the shallows higher up for salmon. Talking of queer things, one of the most extraordinary battles I ever saw was fought here, right in front of the hut, between a salmon of eight or nine pounds and a cormorant. Either the bird was out of its mind or, what's more likely, had made a mistake. It certainly tried to bite off more than it could swallow. Cormorants, which are really big sea birds, often come up the river. They live on fish, mostly herring I believe, which they swallow whole. Like the heron they have no crop. Their necks are elastic and expand to allow a fish to go straight down into the stomach. They can manage quite big fish but I can't see one swallowing a whole salmon, although this one must have tried it.

"I saw the bird come up the river and dive into the tail of the pool. I was annoyed because I was afraid every fish would bolt. A minute or two later I heard Duncan, who was fishing above me, shout: 'What does that fish think it's doing?' Looking at where he was pointing I saw the tail of a fair-sized salmon sticking straight up out of the water. Imagine my amazement when the salmon whipped over and up came the cormorant. So they went on, rolling over and over, sometimes the salmon on top, sometimes the bird. There was so much splashing and threshing that I'm convinced the cormorant couldn't let go. It looked like being drowned. After all, the fish was in its element, but the bird wasn't. The cormorant has a hooked beak, and I feel sure it must have got stuck in the fish. This went on for twenty minutes before they broke apart. I didn't see the salmon again. The bird was too far gone to

fly. Looking half dead, with most of its feathers knocked off, all it could do was float down the river to a rock, where it lay for a time looking very sorry for itself. It was a fantastic business, and if I hadn't seen it I would have found it hard to believe."

"With this sort of thing going on you make me wish I lived here," Frank said. "What about the sea-trout? Isn't it time we had a go?"

Malcolm looked at the sky. "It's still too early. Let's have supper first. I'll put the kettle on the spirit stove for a cup of tea."

Chapter Six

The Sea-trout Oblige

Supper finished, Malcolm again considered the sky, from which the last hues of sunset were fading, and the river now darkening in the shadows. “There’s still a little too much light on the water,” he decided. “It’s a waste of time to start while there’s the slightest reflection of colour showing. Provided there’s no moon, at any time after dark the trout will come on the take. For twenty minutes, not more than half an hour, they’ll snatch at flies as if they were ravenous. When I say snatch I mean that, for which reason more often than not they’re lightly hooked and get away in the first mad rush. That isn’t surprising, the way they throw themselves about. But at least they’ll take. They always do, for a little while. When they stop it’s all over. You can pack up and go home. They lie in parties according to size, the big ones together, the medium ones next and then the small ones. Exactly where they are you only find out by fishing; but when it gets dark, for some reason only known to themselves, they drop back from the deep water to the shallows at the tail of the pool. The fact that it’s dark makes the fun more exciting, not to say difficult. Half the time, when you hook a fish, you don’t know where it is, and should he get you in a tangle, or take your fly, it isn’t easy to sort yourself out. I always take a torch, a long handled landing net and a spare cast with the fly on. That’s another thing. You have to use very fine gut or they won’t look at you, so it’s easy to get broken. Well, let’s get your rod out of the box. It’s still early, but you might be having a practice cast or two. If you should meet a fish get out on the bank as soon as you conveniently can.”

“Okay.”

Malcolm took the rod from the box, collected from inside the hut the equipment needed, and together they walked slowly towards the bottom end of the pool.

“The bats are coming out. That’s a good sign,” remarked Malcolm. He glanced sideways at Frank, who was carrying his rod. “Do you always carry your rod like that?”

“Like what?”

“Point foremost.”

“Does it matter?”

“It does here.”

“Why?”

“Because if you walk into anything in the dark you’ll snap the top joint. Always carry your rod butt first.”

Frank grinned. “I’m learning.”

Malcolm stopped. “This is the place.” He looked up and down the river, now the colour of ink. There was not another soul in sight. A few bats waltzed in their usual erratic flight. The only sound was the unbroken murmur of the water as it fought the rocks lower down. He found a seat on the grassy bank. “In you go,” he ordered. “Not more than six steps. If you hook a fish stand still until he settles down—if he does. And should you fall, remember what I told you.”

Frank slid down the bank into the water, took the prescribed six steps, pulled some line off his reel and began casting. “How’s that?” he asked after a minute or two.

“Try a little more length if you can manage it.”

Frank made another cast and was pulling some more line off his reel ready for the next when it happened. The reel screamed and he nearly fell.

"Keep your point up," said Malcolm, crisply.

"He's taking all my line," shouted Frank, as the reel continued its wild scream.

Fifty yards away a silver object shot out of the water in a series of spectacular somersaults. It was followed by silence.

"I can't feel him. I think he's gone," said Frank, in a melancholy voice.

"Reel in and see if your fly's still on. You didn't lower your point fast enough when he jumped. If he caught you on a tight line he's either cut your gut with his tail or torn the hook from his lip."

"The fly's still here," informed Frank, having pulled in the line.

"Good. Carry on. Remember to drop your point when a fish breaks surface."

Frank made three more casts when the performance was repeated. The reel howled as the line was torn from it and again came the wild leaping by the creature at the end of it. There was more screaming of the reel. More jumping. This happened several times. Malcolm spoke only once. "Take in slack as quickly as you can if he comes back at you and make for the bank, but not on a tight line."

Again the fish slithered and splashed over the surface of the water.

"He's got above me," cried Frank.

"No matter. He can't stand this pace for long."

Panting with excitement Frank reached the bank and Malcolm helped him up, remarking: "You're into a nice fish."

The battle lasted for another five minutes, Frank giving cries of despair as the line sometimes went slack and Malcolm telling him to reel in quickly but let the line run free when the fish, on catching sight of them, made its last desperate run. This it did, tearing half the line off the reel. That was the end. The sea-trout, exhausted, allowed itself to be brought in. Malcolm reached down with the net, and in a moment the fish lay gasping on the bank. He struck it on the head with the handle of the net and it lay still.

"A bonny fish," he said. "Five pounds if he's an ounce. He'll make us a grand breakfast. Give me sea-trout to salmon any day."

"Can't I send it to my mother?" asked Frank, still breathing heavily from excitement or exertion.

Malcolm shook his head. "No use. Sea-trout are bad travellers. In this hot weather it would be stinking before it got there. Salmon, for some reason or other, are different. We'll send your mother the first one you catch. Have you had enough fishing?"

"Not likely."

"Then carry on before they go off the take."

Frank caught two more sea-trout, quite nice fish but neither as large as the first. Then, suddenly, the trout stopped taking.

"That's all," announced Malcolm. "Let's weigh the fish for the record and see about getting home. It's after eleven. I keep a record of every fish caught so that the Fishery Board can compare one year with another."

Back at the hut the fish were weighed and found to be four and three quarters, three and a half, and three pounds respectively. They were put in a canvas bag and the rod and landing net were put away.

"Well, what do you think of sea-trout fishing?" inquired Malcolm, as Frank was pulling off his waders. He lit a candle.

"It's the tops," declared Frank. "My! How they fight. Tell me. Are there no other fish in the river beside salmon and sea-trout?"

"One or two, although nobody bothers with them. There are brown trout, which can run up a weight of nine or ten pounds; but by that time they're black, ugly brutes, and regarded as vermin because they're such cannibals. They live chiefly on salmon eggs and parr. I know that to be a fact because I once caught one in a spate, spinning a sprat. It only weighed five pounds, but when I cut it open to see what it had been eating to make it so fat, out rolled nine six-inch parr, freshly swallowed whole. Even then it wasn't satisfied because it took my bait. Without the parr its weight was less than three pounds, so here was a glutton that ate its own weight of food every day. I put the parr in a jar of formalin to preserve them and showed them to the Fishery Board water bailiff when he came along."

"Any other fish?"

"Eels. Loathsome brutes. Thousands come in from the sea. They have a life cycle similar to the salmon, only in reverse. They cross the Atlantic to the Sargasso Sea to breed. The young—called elvers—come drifting back in thousands to our rivers. I must admit they do a certain amount of good by cleaning up any carrion in the river, like sheep that have been drowned in a spate, and the dead kelts, salmon that have died after spawning. One of the most horrible sights I ever saw was a dead sheep high and dry on the river bank. When I put my foot against it to push it into the river I discovered it was full of eels. They came pouring out —*ugh*. There are lampreys, too, smaller, eel-like fish. They're one of the worst enemies of the salmon. The mouth of a lamprey is a sucker. Once it attaches itself to the side of a salmon the wretched fish has no hope of getting rid of it. Its blood is sucked out and it dies. Should a salmon show the slightest sign of injury, say, from a seal or otter bite, or a wound from collision with a rock, the brutes are on it like a pack of ravening wolves."

"How disgusting."

"One day I was just pulling in a salmon when it was set upon by eels. The foul creatures wrapped themselves round the fish and tore it off the hook. Not only did I lose my fish but the end of my line was in such a slimy mess that I had to cut it off and throw it away. I once watched a tremendous battle between a twenty pound salmon and a monster eel. It went on for at least half an hour. When they came into the shallows I beat the eel off with my gaff. But that didn't save the salmon. It was in a dreadful state, with its fins, and every scale on its body, torn off."

"I can understand why you don't like eels," remarked Frank, grimly, as he hung his waders on a peg to dry and began putting on his shoes.

"We have another fish in the Highlands which is a bit of a mystery," went on Malcolm. "The char. It's such a beautiful creature, red, silver and green, that you'd take it for a tropical fish. Normally, it lives only in the cold depths of the deepest lochs. Scientists say it's a relic of the Ice Age, although how they work that out I don't know. You're not likely to see one. I've seen only one in my life, and that I foul-hooked while spinning in some rapids for sea-trout. I shall never forget the iridescent blue sheen on its gill covers. I would have preserved it, but the moment it was dead all the colours faded. It had no business to be in the river. Duncan's father told me what it was. He reckoned it had been brought here, as an egg, on the foot of a bird."

"How could that happen?"

"It's fairly easy for a wild duck, or goose, or some other wading bird to step on some spawn, which sticks, and so gets carried to another river or loch. I once caught a pike which could only have been brought here like that. The only other fish we have are big fresh-water mussels. There are thousands in the shallows. When the water is very low I sometimes amuse myself throwing some on the bank and then opening them."

"For what reason?"

"Pearls."

"*Pearls.*" Frank's voice nearly cracked with incredulity. "Say! Are you kidding?"

"No. All these rivers have mussels in them, big ones, too. Much larger than the mussels you find in the sea. The tail of this pool is stiff with them, although as they lie edge on and are three parts buried in the sand or shingle there's a knack in spotting them. Pearling is slow work. You may open a thousand mussels without finding a single pearl. On the other hand you might come upon half a dozen in an hour. It's all a matter of luck."

"Have you found any?"

"Quite a few. I have some at home. Remind me to show them to you. Of course, they haven't the quality of the pearls that are found in oysters in tropical seas, but they're true natural pearls, made in the same way by the fish in the shell. The best one I ever found I sold to a jeweller for ten pounds."

"Then they must be pretty good."

"They're quite nice. You'll see heaps of empty shells on the river bank where the local boys have been pearl hunting, in the same way that down south they go out for chestnuts and conkers. The gipsies, or tinkers as we call them here, are great at it. I know one old man who has a small tobacco tin full, having been collecting them for years. Poor though he is he won't sell them, although he once gave me a beauty for allowing him to go into the river to look for them. Mother had it put on a gold pin which she wears as a brooch. You'll see it."

"This is all news to me," asserted Frank. "If anyone else had told me I wouldn't have believed it."

Malcolm smiled as he got up. "You'll see a lot of surprising things if you stay here long enough. Pearls are not the only precious, or semi-precious, things we find here. But I'll tell you about that when we're on the hill. Don't let me go without loading some cartridges with chalk."

Frank stared. "*Chalk!* What on earth for?"

Malcolm smiled mysteriously. "You'll see. Now we must be going. Mother will be worried if we're not soon back."

For a moment Frank lingered, looking at the swiftly flowing river, still singing its song as it danced towards the sea, on which a newly risen moon was dabbing silver. "It's lovely," he breathed.

"I think so," agreed Malcolm. "Look! two more people going fishing." He pointed to twin, V-shaped, ever-broadening ripples, moving swiftly down the middle of the river.

"I don't get it," complained Frank.

"Otters. They're the best fishers on the river. I never interfere with them, perhaps because they're so pretty, not to say entertaining. I've sat for hours watching a litter of cubs playing like kittens. There's a slide in the next pool below; that is, a place where they come ashore. Naturally, Duncan hasn't much time for them; not so much because their arrival in a pool will send every fish in it scuttling, or because they live on fish. The trouble is, like so many creatures, which includes men, they kill far more than they need. It's nothing to walk down

the river in the morning and find two or three dead fish on the bank, every one with no more than a single bite taken from its shoulder. That's how you know what killed them. The only thing in their favour is they also kill a lot of eels. In fact, I have an idea they prefer eel to salmon, if they can get it. But the worst murderers of fish today are the gangs of poachers who come in cars from the big cities in the south. In the old days a Highlander caught his fish by what he called 'burning the water'; that is, he would light a torch to attract the fish and then spear them. The modern poacher has more up-to-date methods. He's only concerned with money. To scoop all the fish out of a pool with nylon nets is bad enough, but to poison the water, killing everything in the river for miles below, is worse. Unfortunately it's all too easy."

"How do they do it?"

"They throw a can of cyanide in the head of the pool. When the poison touches the delicate gills of a fish it dies in agony. Not only are big fish killed but also the parr, on which we rely for future fish. After being poisoned a river can be dead for years."

"Do you get poachers here?"

"Once in a while, when the water's low, as it is now. Duncan and Donald, as well as the bailiffs employed by the River Board, are always on the watch for them. So for that matter are all the local people, who are allowed to fish the river. They hate these dastardly raiders and there have been some pretty grim battles with them. But we really must go or mother will say I've kept you out too late for your first night."

Malcolm blew out the candle and picked up the bag.

Chapter Seven

The Big Fish

The following morning when the boys arrived at the river, after an enormous breakfast of fresh sea-trout split and fried in butter and oatmeal, Duncan, in waders, rod in hand and gaff over his shoulder, was already on the bridge, waiting. Having parked the brake off the road they joined him.

"Is he still there?" asked Malcolm, eagerly.

"Aye. You can see him fine. He's a muckle fush. I ken he'll go for this." Grinning broadly Duncan opened his hand to disclose a huge red prawn wired to a flight of three hooks, painted red and placed to look like the legs of the prawn.

"My gosh!" exclaimed Malcolm. "What a horror."

"I would have thought that was enough to frighten any fish to death," muttered Frank.

"The bigger the better," Duncan said, still smiling. He was obviously looking forward to the operation.

"Why make the thing that colour?"

Malcolm answered. "It has only been boiled. For some queer reason salmon won't look at a prawn or a shrimp unless it has been boiled. I fancy it has something to do with the smell, which is pretty rich. Anyway, I've never known a fish to look at a fresh prawn." He looked at the rod Duncan was holding, an old fourteen foot, spliced, two-piece greenheart.

"You'll need something to steady yon beast should he take hold," averred the gillie. "I put up this old rod in case he smashes it against the bridge. There's plenty of lead wire on the tackle to take yon doon." He handed the rod to Malcolm who passed it on to Frank with a smile.

"This is your party," he said. "Now listen carefully. There's no question of casting. All you can do is drop that ugly brute of a bait straight down, if possible in front of the salmon's face. The behaviour of a salmon with a prawn is always unpredictable. In a position like this there are several things it might do and it's as well to be ready for any of them. It may completely ignore the thing. If so—well, that will be that. It may bolt out of the pool as if it had seen the devil, in which case the other fish in the pool will probably take fright and go with it, leaving us with an empty pool."

"And no hope of more coming in until we get a spate," put in Duncan.

Malcolm ignored the remark. He went on: "Let us assume that the salmon rushes at the prawn and takes it in its jaws to crush it to death. That may well happen, and it is of course what we hope will happen. Very well. Having done that it may lie still, chewing up the prawn, unaware of any danger because its jaws, being of hard gristle, won't feel the hooks. Hooks don't hurt a fish, which is why it is able to fight so hard. When it feels you strike it may think the prawn is an exceptionally tough little guy for its size. That would be the best thing to happen because it would give you time to get off the bridge on to the bank. On the other hand, should it panic, it will shoot either upstream or downstream. If it goes upstream it will be just too bad."

"Why?"

"Because it would either tear off all your line and break it, or drag the point of your rod under the bridge. As you wouldn't be able to follow, either the line or the rod would have to break. That may not happen. The fish may decide it was a mistake to leave the sea and head

back for it like Donald Campbell out for a new waterspeed record. Everything would then depend on whether or not you could get down to the bank and follow the fish before it takes out all your line and snaps it as if it were a piece of cotton. Frankly, even if you did get to the bank I don't think you'd have much hope of stopping the fish if it really decides to bolt. That would probably depend on where it was hooked. If the hook was in the hinge, that is, the corner of the mouth where the upper and lower jaws meet, you might, by pulling its head on one side, be able to steady it. Whatever happens, if the fish takes the bait everything will depend on speed. You'll have to think and act like greased lightning. But don't lose your head. I'll tell you what to do as far as that's possible." Malcolm turned to Duncan. "Were you waiting to say something?"

"I've a suggestion to make should the beast go upstream. I've put a spare gaff on the bank below the bridge in case I lose mine."

"What's the idea?"

"Before you drop the prawn I'll get in the water at the neck of the pool. Then, should the fish bolt upstream, dragging the rod against the side of the bridge, rather than hold on till it breaks Frank should let go of it."

"Drop it in the water?"

"Aye. I might be able to get my gaff round it, or the line, as it goes through the white water at the head of the pool. I've seen it done. It's a chance to save the rod, maybe with the fish still on. It won't go so fast through yon heavy water."

"For goodness' sake be careful," said Malcolm, frowning. "Don't you get in deep. There's an awful drag there."

"Aye. But that'll slow the fush."

"Yes, but I don't want to have to gaff *you*, as you float down the river."

"That's why I put a spare gaff below the bridge." Duncan was grinning, his eyes dancing, obviously happy in anticipating the proposed experiment. "I'll no fall," he promised, and set off to take up his position.

Malcolm turned to Frank. "Are you ready?"

"Sure."

"Then off we go. From up here we shall be able to see everything that happens. Pull off plenty of line for a start. You'll need it. The water's deeper than you think. Then drop the prawn straight down on the fish, or better still, a little above it if you can, to give it a chance to sink. Duncan's ready. You realize that the difficulty here is due to the impossibility of wading below the bridge—that is, under it. It's much too deep. And it's no use going round the end of the bridge if the fish has gone under it. You'd be one side and your line the other. You'd simply break your rod. That's why Duncan has suggested it would be better to let it fall in the water. That is, should the fish bolt upstream."

Frank nodded. "I get it." He pulled several loops of line from the reel. "That enough?"

"Yes. That'll do. Away you go."

Frank took the prawn in his hand. For a few seconds he leaned over the parapet, the bait poised, dangling. Then he let it fall.

From that moment pandemonium reigned.

The speed with which the big fish moved surprised even Malcolm. It did not wait for the prawn to sink. Hardly had the red bait touched the water when there came from below it a curving silver flash like the upward stroke of a sabre. There was a fleeting glimpse of a great pink mouth open wide and the prawn had disappeared. Without its rush slackening for an

instant the fish shot under the bridge, tearing line off the reel in a non-stop howling screech, the rod bent far over the parapet and Frank crying, in a voice of mortal agony, "Oh—oh—oh —"

"Don't touch that reel—you'll lose a finger," yelled Malcolm.

In a matter of seconds the line was out to the spindle, with the top half of the rod, bent like a bow, out of sight under the bridge. Frank, ashen, was still hanging on.

"Drop it," screamed Malcolm.

Frank obeyed and, the strain released, staggered backwards, making incoherent noises.

Malcolm darted to the opposite parapet and cried, shrilly: "Look out! He's coming up."

Duncan waved acknowledgement, and leaning against the current groped a precarious way forward. When he was up to the waist in churning foam, with spray on the upstream side of him leaping over his head, Malcolm screamed: "Stop! Stop, you fool! Duncan! Come back!" He threw up his hands helplessly as the gillie remained poised, gaff outstretched, eyes on the boiling rapids.

"He's mad," groaned Malcolm, as Frank joined him.

Unable to do anything they watched. Suddenly they saw the gaff flash out and back; saw the line racing over the gillie's hands. The rod appeared. Duncan hurled the gaff ashore and held the rod high, or as high as possible, for it was bent nearly double. It straightened like a steel spring released from tension. Duncan began backing cautiously towards the bank, reeling in.

"It's gone," said Malcolm, in a voice heavy with disappointment. "No it hasn't," he went on, his voice rising to a crescendo, as again the rod was bent double and the reel wailed like a banshee. The line was pointing downstream.

"Look out," shouted Duncan. "He's coming back. I canna hold him." With that the rod was whipped out of his hands. His arms went up in a gesture of despair.

Frank had never seen anyone move faster than did Malcolm at that critical instant. Racing to the end of the bridge he bounded down the slope to the river bank. Without pause he snatched up the spare gaff in passing and ran on to about half-way down the pool.

"Watch for the rod! Watch for it!" he rapped out in a voice tense with excitement to Frank, who had followed him.

A minute passed. Then Frank shouted: "I see it. There it is!"

With the weight of the reel sinking the butt the point of the rod was slightly clear of the water, perhaps ten yards from the bank.

Malcolm was not wearing waders but he didn't hesitate. Into the smoothly-flowing water he went. In a few strides it was up to his armpits. As the rod drew level the gaff reached out. The big steel barbless hook closed over the rod. He pulled it towards him and hurled it like a lance, butt first, to Frank. "Lay hold," he yelled. "Reel in. He may still be on." He thrust his way back to the bank.

Frank reeled in at feverish speed. "He is."

"Then run. Try to recover some line. If he leaves the pool he'll be away."

Frank ran down the bank winding as he went. As it happened he did not have far to go. The fish had stopped in the middle of the stream and the line, now taut, revealed its approximate position.

Malcolm, dripping water, shoes squelching, hurried up. "Raise your point to keep as much of the line as possible clear of the water," he advised. "Otherwise the weight of it in mid-stream may break you or tear the hook out of his mouth. Good. He's taking a rest, trying to

work out what's happened to him. That gives us a chance to get our breath back. Keep the line tight but don't be too hard on him."

Duncan came up, grinning, perspiration streaming down his red face. "He's near the far side. I saw the swirl. We'll have him yet."

Minutes passed. Breathing returned to normal. Frank stood like a statue, the butt of the heavy rod in his thigh to take the strain, the point well up, but the top joint arched like a rainbow. Duncan leaned on his long gillie's gaff. Malcolm sat on the grass.

"He's sulking," he said presently. "Just keep a steady strain on him, Frank. Not too much. He'll get tired first."

"I'm not so sure of that," returned Frank, grimly. "My right arm's going numb."

"Then take over with your left for a bit to give the blood a chance to get back into the other."

Frank complied, opening and closing the fingers of his right hand to restore the circulation.

A quarter of an hour passed. The fish did not move.

"He's dour," decided Duncan. "That's often the way with a heavy fish. If he's stuck himself behind a rock he's likely to be there for hours. Shall I slide a key-ring down to shift him?"

"Not yet. Give him a bit longer."

"Why a key-ring?" asked Frank, changing hands.

"It's a trick to move a stubborn fish. You slip one over the line and let it slide down to him. When it bumps on his nose it gives him a fright." Malcolm laughed, the tension relaxing. "I shall never forget the day Duncan was gaffing a fish for me when somehow the line caught under one of the flies on his cap. It lifted the cap off and it went sliding down the line. The fish saw it coming and went off at such a rate you'd have thought it had only just been hooked. Not prepared for anything like that I nearly fell in the river. The next moment Duncan was shouting: 'Ma bonnet! Ma bonnet!' I said, 'What about your bonnet!' Said Duncan: 'It's no ma bonnet I'm thinking of. There's two pounds worth o' flies on it.' Then the fish, in its panic, broke my cast, and there was Duncan's bonnet floating down the river. However, we fished for it with spinning tackle and hooked it just as it was leaving the pool."

Duncan chuckled. "I mind the day fine. I'll no forget it. I'd spent half the winter tying those flies."

Malcolm rose. "We shall have to do something about this," he declared. "He isn't going to shift. If we're having a rest so is he."

Duncan looked at his watch. "It's an hour since you showed him the prawn."

"Let me have the rod for a moment, Frank," requested Malcolm. "We'd better make sure he's still with us. It's no use standing here if the hook's stuck into Scotland." He took the rod, put a little extra strain on it and recovered two feet or so of line. As soon as the strain was slackened it was pulled back. "He's still there," he announced. "I'd say he's tucked himself behind a rock and maybe forgotten he's been hooked. We'd better remind him or we shall still be here when the cows come home. Try some stones, Duncan."

The gillie looked around and picked up some large pieces of rock. The first one thrown did the trick. The salmon went up the river as if it had been fired from a gun. Frank, with a gasp of alarm, went with it.

"That's fine," asserted Malcolm. "Having to fight the stream as well as the rod should take some of the steam out of him."

"As long as he doesn't go under the bridge."

The fish reached the bridge and stopped. More time passed.

"I can't feel my arm," said Frank. "It's dead. I think one of you had better take over."

"Oh no," replied Malcolm. "Not two against one. That isn't fair to the fish. You started it and it's up to you to see it through." He winked at Duncan.

Suddenly the tip of the rod sprang up. "He's gone," groaned Frank.

"Not necessarily. Maybe he's running back at you. Reel in—fast."

Frank started to reel in, but he did not get far. The point of the rod was dragged down and again the reel howled in protest at the speed the line was being torn off it. The angle was directly downstream.

"After him," ordered Malcolm, crisply. "Try to get level with him and try some side strain to pull his head round."

With a stricken expression on his face Frank was taken willy-nilly down the river to where some alders lining the bank, with their feet in the water, barred further progress. "It's no use," he muttered, through clenched teeth. "I can't hold him."

"How much line have you got left?"

"None. I'm down to the pin."

There was a swirl far down the river near the opposite bank. For a moment a black object showed above water.

"Yon beast has a tail like a shovel," observed Duncan, calmly.

"What can I do?" cried Frank desperately.

"Try walking him up. It's your only chance now. He may come."

"What do you mean?"

"Put the rod over your shoulder and walk up the river."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course. If he refuses to move you'll have to stop. But he may follow, like a dog on a lead. Try it."

Frank obeyed. At first the fish moved slowly, but presently he was keeping pace. The expression of surprise on Frank's face was comical.

"Carry on," Malcolm said, smiling. "He's behaving like a perfect gentleman. Right up nearly to the bridge—if he'll come."

They had nearly reached the bridge when the fish came nearer to the bank and Frank recovered a lot of line.

"Two hours," remarked Duncan, cheerfully, after another glance at his watch. "He's tiring."

"So am I," retorted Frank. "I guess I shall be dead before the fish."

"Keep him moving. Don't let him rest."

"How?"

"Try pumping him," suggested Malcolm. "Raise your point and show him the butt. If he gives way, wind in quickly and do the same thing again."

Frank complied, and the fish, submitting to the strain, came closer in. There was a long silver gleam in the water as it rolled.

"Aye. He's nearly had enough," Duncan said. "Go on pumping—gently does it."

Slowly the fish was brought into plain view and his size was fully revealed. "I must have him," panted Frank, white to the lips and streaming sweat.

For a few seconds, passed in dead silence, it looked as if Frank was about to have his wish there and then. The fish was rolling in two feet of water within three yards of the bank. But the creature must have seen Duncan creeping behind it with gaff outstretched, for making a sudden recovery it tore down the river at a speed that nearly snatched the rod from Frank's nerveless hands. He let out a cry of despair.

"That's his last run," declared Duncan, confidently. "We'll have him next time. He won't go far."

But the fish went far enough to bring a frown of anxiety to Malcolm's face. In fact, it crossed to the far side of the river and did not stop until it was beyond the alders, where again Frank had to halt. The rod was bent double, not so much from what the fish was doing as from the sheer weight of the water as it poured out of the pool into the rapids.

"Shall I try walking him again?" panted Frank, in a thin voice.

Malcolm shook his head. "No use. You can lead a live fish but you can't tow a dead one up the river any more than you could haul up an empty barrel. You've one chance left. Hold everything. If the line doesn't break the current will swing him over to this side."

"Even so, he'll be amongst the trees."

"No matter. Duncan may be able to get out to him. Hold on."

Frank, lips parted to show clenched teeth, leaned back on the rod. Slowly the fish, now on the surface of the water, began to swing over.

"He's coming," said Duncan tersely, and gaff in hand raced down the bank behind the tangle of alders. "Give me a hand in case I'm not able to lift him out," he yelled to Malcolm.

Malcolm followed the gillie. Through gaps in the branches he could see the big fish rolling helplessly nearer and nearer to the bank. All now depended on the tackle. Would it hold—just for one more minute?

With Duncan he stopped at the point where he judged the fish would reach the bank. With Malcolm holding his hand the gillie leaned over the racing water at a dangerous angle. The gaff reached out beyond the salmon. The point jerked home into its flank. It was dragged in. Malcolm released Duncan's hand so that he could put both hands to the handle of the gaff. With a final tremendous effort, with Malcolm's help, Duncan hauled the fish to dry land. The brass-headed 'priest' which he took from his pocket struck the fish between the eyes and mercifully ended what little life there was left in it. Malcolm whipped out his knife and cut the end of the line to save the time that would have been needed to remove the hook from the gristly point of the fish's lower jaw. "Bring it along," he told the gillie and raced back to where Frank was lying on the grass, holding his numbed right arm, a picture of utter dejection. The rod lay beside him, the line trailing down the river.

"After all that he broke me," he said miserably, as Malcolm ran up.

"He did not."

"I felt the line go slack."

"That was because I cut it."

"*Cut* it?"

"I had to, so that Duncan could bring the fish along. He couldn't walk up the river, and he couldn't walk up the bank with the line on the far side of the trees. Here he comes now."

"Do you mean we've got it?"

"Of course."

Frank staggered to his feet as Duncan, grinning all over his face, appeared, dragging the fish by the head. He dropped it beside Frank. He looked at it and removed his cap. "Sorry, old

man," he said, softly. He looked at Frank's sweat-streaked face. "Great work, sir," he congratulated. "Yon's a bonny fush."

"Forty pounds," guessed Malcolm.

Duncan shook his head. "Not quite. He's been in the river a wee while so he must have been well over forty when he left the sea."

"Let's weigh him," said Malcolm.

They walked slowly to the hut, the gillie carrying the fish. A big brass spring balance was produced and hung on a nail. The fish was suspended from it by one of its gills.

"Thirty nine and a half," read Duncan.

"That's near enough for forty," suggested Frank.

"Sorry, Frank, no. We don't cheat ourselves. Thirty-nine and a half it is, and that's the weight that will go down in the book. Still you've nothing to complain about. Not many people have landed their first salmon at that sort of weight. Forty pounders are exceptional for anyone. As I told you, those are the ones that get away. This one nearly did. Had you been alone you'd never have got it out. How do you feel now about salmon fishing?"

"Wonderful."

"What are you going to do with your fish?"

"May I have it?"

"Of course."

"I'd like to send it to my father."

"Naturally. A fish of this size is better smoked, but as that reduces its weight by half you'd lose half the glory. Actually, the smaller fish eat better than these big fellows, which get a bit coarse."

"I don't care how it eats. Neither will the boys at my father's depot."

Malcolm smiled. "Good enough. I'll give you a label here and now and you can address it. Duncan will put it in a bass and take it to the station. It'll go on the next train. We'd better see about getting home for lunch."

"Lunch?" Frank looked astonished.

"It's one o'clock. It's three hours since you met your fish."

"My! I wouldn't have believed it. How the time flies."

"It always does when you're fishing," asserted Malcolm. "That's another lesson you'll have to learn. Come on. You'll have a great tale to tell about today and mother must be the first to hear it. Half the pleasure of fishing is talking about it afterwards. By the way, have you any money on you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You owe Duncan ten shillings."

"For what?"

"Gaffing your first fish. It's the custom here."

Frank laughed. "I get it. Thanks for telling me; and thank you, Duncan. That's the best ten bob I've ever spent."

The gillie touched his cap and the boys hurried to the brake.

"This afternoon," said Malcolm as he drove home, "I shall start to put together the things we shall need on the hill. It's a pretty long list, I can tell you. I always make a list and check it as I load up. I feel it would be maddening to get miles away and then discover you'd forgotten something. It's easy done, as Donald would say."

Chapter Eight

The Way to the Hill

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, under a cloudless sky, the yard, when Frank and Malcolm went out, was already a scene of activity. Donald was there, with Jeanie the hill pony, a pack saddle on her back and a large pannier hooked on either side. A pile of luggage lay near. Sheila and Susan were standing by, regarding the preparations with obvious satisfaction. Under the direction of Malcolm's mother maids were coming from the kitchen with parcels of food.

"We shall never eat all that," opined Frank, looking at the growing pile.

"You'll be surprised what we shall eat," answered Malcolm, emphatically. "This won't be enough. We shall augment the larder when we get there."

"And all this other stuff."

"Camping, with me, doesn't necessarily mean roughing it. I believe in making myself as comfortable as possible."

"Shall we carry the guns?"

"No. We shan't need them on the way and you'll find a cromach much more useful. The guns can go on top of the panniers, with our pieces."

"Pieces of what?"

"In this part of the world a piece is a snack for the midday meal. But I think we're ready to start loading. The hammocks go in the bottom. Donald will do the packing. He's done this a good many times before."

Donald began loading with the efficiency of experience while Malcolm ticked off the items on his list as they went into the wide mouths of the wickerwork panniers after being judged for weight to ensure a balanced load. The food went in last, except for the guns which, in canvas slip-cases, were strapped, lengthways, on top. Malcolm slung a spy-glass in a leather case over his shoulder.

"You prefer a telescope to binoculars?" guessed Frank.

"For this sort of country, yes. It gives you a better definition at long range. Most professional stalkers still use the spy-glass, as we call a telescope." Malcolm smiled. "By the way, did you hear the oyster catchers last night?"

"Did I hear them! What a din! If you hadn't warned me what to expect I'd have wondered what on earth was happening. You told me to remind you about some cartridges loaded with chalk."

"Thanks. They're in my pocket." Malcolm turned to Donald. "I take it you've seen nothing more of that bad dog?"

"Na. But he's still at it. Yon beast's as cunning as the de'il. But I'll get him. Ye've oatmeal for the bitches?"

"Yes."

"And a bit o' grain for Jeanie?"

"Aye. We'll look after her." Malcolm stroked the pony's nose. She wore no bridle. Only a headstall and guide rope. "You know the business, old lady, don't you." He turned back to Donald. "Did you put me in that little tin I asked for?"

"Aye. It's in the hammock in the right hand basket," said Donald, testing the harness.

"What tin's that?" asked Frank, curiously.

"You'd never guess," Malcolm told him, with a broad smile. "Well, that seems to be all. We've a long hike ahead of us so there's no point in wasting time. We'll move off. Goodbye, mother dear. Expect us when you see us. We shan't hurry back unless the weather breaks." He picked up Jeanie's lead rope. "Off we go. Come on, lass."

The little party, with the dogs at heel, moved towards the gate, watched by the household. A last wave and the campers were on their way.

"Which way do we go?" asked Frank, when they were on the road.

"You'll soon see. I haven't attempted to describe the route because it would mean nothing to you. When you've seen it you'll realize why. In five minutes we shall leave the road and that'll be the last you'll see of civilization for some time. We take a track through that stand of timber ahead. It's a Forestry Commission plantation. It's uphill all the way of course."

They reached the dark, close-packed firs, and a little later Malcolm turned right into a silent, gloomy avenue, with an impenetrable jungle of interlaced branches on both sides. It ran steeply uphill and to save breath nothing was said for about half a mile when Malcolm stopped and whispered: "There's a firebreak crosses the track just ahead. You may see a roe in it. There's one not far in front of us."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen the tracks."

"I thought those marks were sheep tracks."

"No. Deer slots. You can't mistake 'em. The toes are longer, and more pointed." Malcolm grimaced as from somewhere in front came a harsh grating sound, something between the bark of a dog and the bleat of a sheep. "It's winded us, and warning everything we're on the way. No matter. It may still stand in the firebreak to have a look at us. They're inquisitive beasties."

They went on a little way and came to the break in the trees, an unplanted gap some ten yards wide, a precaution against fire, should one occur, sweeping right through the plantation. It was filled with a growth of rank heather. Standing in the middle of it, facing the track and perhaps fifty yards from it, was the roe, a buck, in his fawn summer coat. After one comprehensive stare he bounded off.

"He's away," said Malcolm.

With the dogs, no longer under orders, trotting along in front, the march continued to the brow of the hill, where the plantation gave way to a level area of open moor dotted with clumps of gorse, broom, rushes and an occasional silver birch. Conspicuous was a group of magnificent old Scots pines. Into this the track dwindled away to a narrow footpath. Beyond, the ground rose in a great, uphill, heather-clad sweep, to a towering horizon.

"That's Cairn Arder," said Malcolm. "It rises to a little more than two thousand feet. We're going over it."

For a moment Frank looked startled. "Do you mean we've got to climb to the top of *that*?"

"Not quite. Just below the top we strike a deer track that will take us round the shoulder to the far side. You see that group of natural timber, the pines, just in front of us? With luck you may see a capper there. They seem to like it. They seldom come to the ground because living on pine needles they spend most of their time in the tops of the trees. By tapping the trees I may be able to make one fly out."

"What exactly is a capper? I'd better be able to recognize it if one does fly."

"Capper is short for capercailzie. Actually it's an enormous grouse. The cocks are about the size of turkeys. The hens are smaller. They fly at terrific speed, much faster than you

think. Their size makes their speed deceiving, for which reason they're one of the most difficult shots for a gun. Not that I shoot them. For years I was told they were no use to eat because feeding on nothing but pine needles made them taste of resin. One day I decided to test it, an old keeper having told me that the trick was to take out the bird's crop as soon as it was dead. So I shot one, and had it cooked. I found it perfectly all right except for the flesh being a bit dry, having no fat on it. But that goes for most things here. There isn't much to get fat on. Let's go on."

They walked up to the trees. Malcolm sent the dogs in to hunt in case a capper was on the ground. Nothing came out, so he picked up a piece of dead wood and struck it against a tree. This had the desired effect. There was a tremendous noise of flapping overhead. A moment later a huge bird shot out with the speed of an arrow, followed by a smaller one.

"Gee!" cried Frank. "That's some bird."

Malcolm laughed and whistled in the dogs. "It's far and away the largest game bird in the British Isles. Seen close he's a handsome fellow, too. Years ago the capper became extinct, largely as a result of its stupidity. They make no sound at all for most of the year, but in the mating season the cock stands on the ground and makes the most ridiculous noise you ever heard. That apparently is his idea of singing, to call up the hens. In that state he becomes absolutely daft, so crazy that you can walk right up to him. That's how he got himself exterminated. But a keen naturalist introduced a fresh stock from Norway and now they're increasing at amazing speed, largely as a result, I think, of the unlimited cover provided by the forestry plantations. But we must move on."

"Just a minute. What's been happening here? This bare circle round the bottom of the tree."

"Oh, that's a roe deer ring. They go off their heads, too, at mating time. A doe starts running round a tree and the buck runs after her. They keep it up for hours on end. So these rings are made. They always seem to go to the same tree, and I have an idea some of these rings must be centuries old."

"I'm learning plenty," acknowledged Frank, as they walked on.

After crossing the open ground the path wound down into a narrow glen, at the bottom of which babbled a burn of sparkling water, the banks lined with alders.

"The alders love water," remarked Malcolm. "There's a ford a little higher up. We'll cross there. That wood on the opposite bank is a wonderful piece of cover. You'd be surprised if you could see what's in it at this moment; pretty well every form of wild life we have, fur and feather. There are even pheasants, although what they're doing at this altitude only they know. They're corn eaters, and usually stay on the low ground. It took me some time to find out what they live on. One day I saw an old cock pheasant doing a sort of dance on a tree stump. I couldn't imagine what he was doing. Through my glass I saw. He was jumping up for wild rose hips."

They went on along an ever dwindling path that ran between a variety of lush growths—rank green grass, rushes, myrtle, bracken, dwarf birch and great clumps of heather in full bloom, pink, carmine and occasionally white.

At a clump of yellow bog-asphodel Susan stopped, rigid, one foot up, nose pointing, tail quivering.

"I wonder what she's winded there," murmured Malcolm.

"I didn't know she was a pointer."

"She isn't. She was never trained to point. That was something she acquired herself, so there's probably a touch of setter in her ancestry."

Susan looked back over her shoulder for orders.

"What is it, then?" said Malcolm, sharply.

Susan dived in and a fairly large bird flew out to take a swift, zig-zag course to the nearest trees.

"Woodcock," said Malcolm. "It must be a homebred bird. They're great travellers. I found a nest last year, and in the evening watched the mother carrying her young ones, between her legs, to the water to drink. When they were old enough I put Glenarder rings on their legs to find out where they went. That was in early April. They nest early. One ring was sent back to me in the following July. You'd never guess from where."

"Where?"

"Portugal. It's fun to ring birds to find out where they go. Here's the ford."

As they turned to the ford, where the water ran over a shingle bottom only a few inches deep, a large fish darted, or rather, splashed, away upstream. The water was so low that its back was out of the water.

"Hello," ejaculated Malcolm. "He's here early."

"Was it a salmon?"

"Yes. He's here in good time, although by the end of October this burn will be full of fish." After they had walked across the ford Malcolm went on: "Now we'd better save our breath. We've a long pull in front of us. There's no path, but I know a good hare track, where the going will be easier than dragging through the heather. These tracks made by animals from point to point must be ages old, the way they've been cut, as if it had been done with a knife. What's Sue pointing at now? Go on, lass. What is it?"

Susan plunged forward and a large dark-coloured bird flapped heavily away—with difficulty it seemed. It did not go far before plumping back into the heather.

"Blackcock," observed Malcolm.

"I understood the blackcock was a handsome bird."

"So he is, but not at this time of the year. When they moult they get in an awful mess. In fact, as you saw, they can hardly fly. It's a proud bird, as we say, and hates being seen with no tail and half its feathers out. Had it not been for Susan we could have walked on it without moving it, they sit so tight. They're queer birds, but I'll tell you more about them later. Let's get up the hill."

The long climb began, with broods of grouse rising from time to time and occasionally an old cock watching them from an elevated position on a rock and scolding them with his strange guttural croak that sounds so much like "go-back, go-back, back, back." The sound is common enough on the moors and seems to go with the wild landscape. Rabbits and hares were plentiful, often sitting bolt upright to watch the invaders of their domain go past. The party now moved in single file, Malcolm leading, keeping to a six-inch-wide line of bare earth, the hare track of which he had spoken, that ran as straight as if it had been drawn by a ruler to the top of the hill. He stopped only once, and that was to point to an emerald green patch of grass, as short and smooth as a lawn, that made a conspicuous mark in the rolling sea of heather.

"That's a blackcock lekking ground," he said. "Where the cocks fight for the hens while the hens stand and watch. Those particular areas must have been used for centuries for that

purpose, for the heather to be destroyed like that. However, in spite of all that the blackcock are getting fewer and fewer. They sometimes go for years without producing any young."

"What do they eat?"

"They seem to be fond of the buds of birch and hazel, which is why you often see them sitting in trees." Malcolm took off his jacket and threw it across Jeanie's saddle. "It's getting warm," he remarked. "You'd better do the same."

They plodded on steadily up a track which to Frank seemed to be getting them no nearer to the top of the hill. Several times he thought they had reached the top, only to discover that it was a ridge beyond which the ground continued to rise. The heather was now becoming short and sparse, with outcrops of rock, weathered almost white, breaking through the peat.

"Here we are," said Malcolm at last, stopping at a clearly defined track a yard wide that ran at right angles to the line they had followed. "This is the deer track. It runs for miles, keeping fairly level. This is where we take a rest."

"That suits me," replied Frank, mopping his streaming face, for the sun, approaching its zenith, was now hurling heat at the shadeless hill. But for a slight breeze it would have been hotter.

They lay down on the ground, the dogs beside them, Frank drinking in the view.

Behind them it was blocked out by the summit of the hill, ridged faces of peat and outcrops of rock. In front and on either hand a magnificent panorama fell away for mile after mile to end at last in a line of blue peaks. The intervening ground was a vast patchwork quilt of purple heather and black squares of forestry plantations.

"It's like looking down from a plane," said Frank.

"The mountains you see in the distance are the Cairngorms," returned Malcolm. "That white streak is a drift of snow hanging on in a north-facing corrie. Even in summer I've never known the Cairngorms to lose all their snow."

To left and right the scene was different. It consisted of nothing except mighty dome-shaped hills, rising and falling one behind the other for as far as the eye could see. Some were split by forbidding corries, as if the slope had been cleft by a giant axe. Everywhere the predominant colour was the rosy pink of flowering heather. There was not a soul in sight. There was not a sound. The place had an atmosphere of remoteness.

"Why do all these hills have rounded tops?" inquired Frank presently.

"Geologists say they're the stumps of mighty mountains, worn down by erosion. The process still goes on. In a million years this may be a plain. There's an example of what happens right in front of you; that boulder, split in halves. One day those pieces will crack again, and again, until they become small pieces of rock, getting smaller and smaller until winter snow or summer storms wash them down to the burn. There the action of the water will roll them into pebbles until at last, in ten thousand or a million years, they finish as grains of sand. To these hills time means nothing."

"I can see this would be an easy place to get lost."

"To find your way about you must learn the curves of the skyline. That's all right while you can see them. In heavy rain or fog one can only go by the shape of isolated rocks and boulders. They have names. That one in front of you sticking up at an angle is the Coffin Rock. Others are, for instance, the Armchair Rock, Table Rock and the Pyramid Rock. If I can find one of those I know exactly where I am."

"What are you staring at?" asked Frank.

"I see three sheep on the face of that hill opposite. They started running. Now they're looking back. They wouldn't have moved had something not frightened them." Malcolm uncased his spy-glass and lying on his back with the instrument to his eye, the large end resting on his feet, made a survey.

"See anything?"

"No. But there must be something there. A fox perhaps."

"What about that wild dog?"

"Could be." Malcolm recased the spy-glass.

"You don't miss much."

"That's because I'm always looking. It becomes a habit. Of course, I know what to look for. If you know the habits of creatures, and what they eat, you know where to look for them. Those two villains look as if they're going somewhere." Malcolm pointed to a pair of black and grey birds flying across their front.

"What are they?"

"Hoodies. That is, hooded crows. They're the bane of a gamekeeper's life. I hate them. They're beastly, brutal things."

"What do they do?"

"What *don't* they do! They're the worst egg thieves in the Highlands. Let any bird leave its nest for a moment and they're after the eggs. They even have the nerve to rob an eagle's nest if the old birds are out of sight. They must kill thousands of young birds and they've been known to peck the eyes out of lambs. They're really dreadful creatures, for which reason they're hunted so mercilessly by farmers and keepers alike that it's a miracle that any survive. It's strange that some birds, like the osprey, the kite and the white tailed eagle, should be wiped out while others, hunted even more ruthlessly, should increase rather than decline in numbers." Malcolm sprang up. "Those two hoodies have gone down. There must be something there. Let's see what they're at. We shan't get near them, of course. They're too cunning to allow themselves to be stalked."

He picked up his cromach and continued along the deer track which now ran a level course just below the top of the hill. Frank, with the pony and the dogs, followed close behind. As the little cavalcade rounded the shoulder of the hill the two hoodies sprang up and flapped away, confirming Malcolm's assertion that they kept a close watch for danger. The meal at which they had been interrupted lay in plain view in the heather. It was the carcase of a full grown sheep. It lay in a welter of blood and wool, the fleece having nearly been torn off it. Malcolm stopped, examining the ground closely.

"Those two birds couldn't have done this," declared Frank.

"Of course not."

"A fox?"

"No. A fox wouldn't pull down a full grown ewe."

"What was it, then?"

"Only one creature on this hill could have done this."

"You mean—"

"The dog. This poor beast is still warm. The blood hasn't had time to congeal. That brute of an alsatian can't be far away." Malcolm unslung his spy-glass.

Chapter Nine

The Outlaw

"What are you going to do?" asked Frank.

Malcolm answered in a low voice, indicating the rising ground on the right of the track. "Just over the brow is the region we call The Black Banks. It's a succession of slopes of broken peat. Donald said he thought the hound had his lair there. I'm going to have a spy. The dogs will stay with you." So saying he ran up the slope nearly to the top, a matter of only fifty or sixty yards, and then went on all fours. Finally he went flat, inching his way forward by dragging himself through the heather.

In half a minute he was on his way back, worming until he was below the brow and then breaking into a run.

"I can see him," he told Frank, in a fierce whisper, as he unlashed the twenty-bore from its pannier. "I couldn't actually see him but I could see peat flying in the air. I'd say he's digging out a rabbit or hare. There are a lot of burrows there."

"How far away is he?"

"Only about a hundred yards. I think I can get in range. It looks an easy stalk." Malcolm whipped the cover from the gun and slipped in two cartridges from the belt round his waist.

"What are you going to do?"

"Shoot him. What else?" Malcolm's expression, and his voice, were grimly definite. "That brute will do untold mischief and may cost mother a small fortune in claims unless he's put down."

Frank looked slightly alarmed. "Be careful. He may come for you."

"He may go for you should he run this way. You'd better keep near me. He won't come near the gun. He'll be too wise for that. Here, take this. He's about a hundred yards away, half left. You'll see the pile of peat he's kicked out." Malcolm passed the spy-glass. "Bring your cromach." He turned to the dogs and raised a hand. "Sit." Jeanie was grazing on some tufts of coarse grass.

With Frank at his heels he hurried back up the slope. Reaching the brow he adopted the same procedure as before, Frank doing the same thing. Together they peered through a fringe of heather. "See him?" whispered Malcolm.

Frank was using the glass. "Wait," he breathed. "There are two of 'em."

"Two what?"

"Dogs. I can't see the big 'un. He must be down the hole. Sitting outside as if he's on guard there's what looks like a dark-coloured mongrel terrier."

"The devil," hissed Malcolm. "So he's got himself a partner in his dirty work. He must have been down to the low ground and induced a farm dog to come away with him. I see the little rascal. This alters things. If he spots me he'll give the alarm. That's what he's there for. I reckoned on the big dog being down the hole."

"What are you going to do?"

"I shall try different tactics. I doubt if stalking will work."

"What else can you do?"

"Make a rush in the hope of getting within close range before the big dog can get out of the hole. He may be some way in, feeling quite safe with a watcher outside. You see how

cunning a dog gets when he goes wrong. Oh yes, he's got all that worked out. I'm going to run straight at him."

"What about me?"

"Keep close and be ready to use your cromach should I miss him and he comes for us. Are you ready?"

"Sure."

"Then come on."

Malcolm leapt to his feet and raced towards the spot where peat was still erupting.

Things did not work out as he expected. The terrier saw them at once, as it was bound to, but it failed in its duty. Instead of giving the alarm it put its tail between its legs and in a flash had slunk into the heather where, being small, it disappeared from sight. It was never seen again. Peat was still being kicked out of the hole.

At a distance of thirty yards Malcolm stopped running and with the gun at the ready advanced at a slow walk. In this way he closed the gap to a distance of five or six paces. Still the peat was being thrown out by the unsuspecting animal below.

A minute passed. Two minutes, in breathless silence. Frank raised his cromach, holding it in both hands. Malcolm stood tense, the gun half raised. The digging stopped.

"He's listening," breathed Malcolm. "He must be suspicious."

A sudden scuttle and the dog stood at the entrance, a great beast, black with muddy peat, its eyes bloodshot, jaws slavering. It must have realized it was trapped and acted accordingly. Without a second's hesitation, with a ferocious snarl it sprang at Malcolm's throat like a tiger, launching itself through the air in one tremendous leap as if it had been fired from a catapult.

Malcolm's gun blazed straight into the animal's chest from a range so close that the weapon was knocked flying from his hands and he was hurled over backwards. He was up again in a flash recovering the gun and reloading, while Frank sprang forward with his cromach raised to strike. But these precautions proved unnecessary. The outlaw lay where he had fallen. He never moved again.

"When he saw me with a gun he knew his time had come," said Malcolm, soberly. His face was pale.

So was Frank's, when he replied: "What a devil! I thought he might be tough but I wasn't prepared for a charge like that."

"Frankly, neither was I," admitted Malcolm. "He saw the gun and knew it was no use running. As I told you, these dogs that go wild know too much." Malcolm was rubbing his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing much. I gave him both barrels, and without time to get the butt tight into my shoulder it kicked like a wild horse. But that may have been partly due to the brute going straight into the muzzles of the gun and banging it into me. I'm glad my shoulder took the crack and not my jaw, or he might have broken it. Well, there he is. I hated doing it but there was no alternative."

"What a monster."

"When a big dog reaches the state he's in it's only a short step from killing sheep to mauling children. A human criminal can be locked up, but you can't do that with a savage brute like this, knowing that if it got out it might kill somebody."

"What's the shooting about?" said a gruff voice.

Both boys spun round to see Donald striding down the slope, gun under arm. “Ah!” he went on, as his eyes fell on the dead animal. “I thought that might be it.”

“What are you doing here?” inquired Malcolm.

“I thought to take a walk round the Black Banks for signs of yon brute. I saw a pair of hoodies rise and thought mebbe they’d been at carrion left by the dog.”

“They had. A dead sheep. We put them up. He must have killed the sheep this morning,” Malcolm indicated the dead dog.

“Ah—weel, I see he’s dug his own grave, which saves me the trouble.”

“There were two of ’em. He’d fetched himself a mate—a terrier.”

“Aye, that’s what happens. A bad ’un will always try to lead others astray. The farmers may have been losing some of their bitches presently if ye hadn’t made an end of him. Och, it’s a sad thing to see a dog go this way. When a dog has a bad streak in him there’s only one place for him. He knows he’s doing wrong.”

“What about the terrier?” asked Frank.

“He’ll away hame. He knew he was doing wrong, too. Now he’s had a fright he’ll away hame and stay there.”

“Will you attend to this if we push on?” requested Malcolm. “We’ve lost time. I reckoned to be at Paul’s Hill by lunch time but it looks as if we shan’t get further than Altihoisch.”

“Aye. You go on. You can leave this to me.”

Malcolm led the way back to where the animals had been left. The two dogs were still sitting, waiting and watching. Jeanie was still nuzzling about in the coarse grass. As Malcolm picked up the lead rope Sheila trotted off a little way, looked at the ground and then at her master.

“She’s asking for a drink,” he observed.

Frank looked surprised. “Is there water there?”

“No, but there will be.”

They walked to the spot where Sheila was standing and found a patch of moss. She wagged her stump of a tail.

“She’s a knowing old bitch,” said Malcolm, driving his heel in the moss, several times, very hard. Into the hole thus made oozed a few drops of water. Both dogs drank. From his pocket Malcolm took a small piece of sponge and wiped the dogs’ noses.

“What’s the idea?” asked Frank.

“You’d know if you’d walked here with your face in the heather. Look at your legs.”

Frank looked down and saw he was yellow to the knees.

“Always watch your dogs,” went on Malcolm. “On the hill they suffer terribly from thirst if you don’t happen on a burn. The pollen from the heather gets in their eyes and noses. In fact their noses can get so glued up they lose their sense of smell, which to a dog on the hill is more important than sight. That’s why I always carry a piece of sponge. I should have given them a wipe down before this, knowing how the pollen flies on a hot dry day, but that business with the dog put it out of my head.” Malcolm picked up the lead rope. “Sorry, old girl, but you’ll have to wait till we get to the burn,” he told the pony.

“I understand what you mean about your dogs being hill-wise,” said Frank, as they went on.

“They know moss means water. They like me to make a hole, but if I hadn’t old Sheila would have dug one for herself.”

After covering about a quarter of a mile, still on the deer track, a bend brought a new landscape into view. It was still much the same as before, a vast panorama of rolling hills giving an up and down skyline. The only difference was, the hills were taller, some with tops not so round.

Malcolm stopped. “We leave the track here. It would take us miles out of our way. There’s our next objective; we’ll halt there for lunch. There’s plenty of good water.” He pointed down into a yawning valley, or rather, a junction of two valleys which afterwards went on as one. Conspicuous in the surrounding sea of heather, at the point where the two valleys met, was a small patch of green.

“Downhill, for a change,” remarked Frank.

“Yes, but don’t forget we have to come up the hill on the way home. It’s a long pull but it isn’t too bad. You’ll find the deep heather at the bottom a bit tiring but there are worse places.”

Frank pointed a finger at a dark moving speck high in the blue sky. “Look! An eagle.”

“No. A buzzard. They don’t do much harm. Their meat is mostly carrion. There are a lot of them about.”

Malcolm led the way down the hill, a drop, as Malcolm explained, of something in the order of a thousand feet. The last two hundred yards, as had been hinted, were the worst, for not only was the heather waist high but it grew out of deep sphagnum moss that clogged the feet. It also concealed many rocks. At the bottom was a burn, which was crossed without difficulty, and there, a few yards beyond the top of the bank was the piece of green sward, the grass as smooth as a lawn, as Malcolm explained, by being constantly nibbled by rabbits, hares and deer. On the far side of this was a sprawling heap of square cut stones.

“It looks as if there was a house here at some time,” observed Frank, when Malcolm joined him after waiting for the animals to have a good drink at the burn.

“There was,” confirmed Malcolm. “It was a tiny croft called Altihoisch.”

“Do you mean to say people lived here, in an outlandish place like this?”

“They certainly did. You’ll see ruins like this dotted about in all the glens. This place was occupied even in my time. I knew the boy who lived here, with his mother, an enormous woman known locally as the Auld Wifie.”

“The boy couldn’t have gone to school.”

“Of course he did.”

“How did he get there?”

“Walked to the road the way we’ve just come.”

“Every day!”

“Every day. Out in the morning and home at night.”

“Suffering mackerel!”

“He had no bus to take him to school. I sometimes wonder what the kids down south would think if they were faced with his job every day.”

“What about the winter?”

“When the snow was down he was of course shut in.”

“What did he and his mother use for food?”

“In the autumn he and his mother would go to the nearest village—over there, about ten miles from here (Malcolm pointed) and lay in stores. A sack of flour, a sack of oatmeal, a bag of sugar, a pound or two of tea, and that was that. They would also salt down a barrel of

salmon and another of venison. What more did they want? With plenty of peats inside for fuel, which they cut in the summer, they were as snug as bugs in a rug."

Frank stared. "For the love of Mike! And they had to haul all that stuff here."

"Of course. There was no one else to do it."

"What became of this unlucky kid?"

"He did very well for himself. When his mother died he went away. From Inverness he worked his way to Aberdeen University. The last I heard of him he was managing director of a big rubber estate in Malaya. He'll come back one day to have a look at the old home. Scots usually do. Education is like many other things. When you have to fight for it you make the most of it." Malcolm grinned. "Now you know why we Scots have a reputation for being tough."

"But why would anyone live here?"

"This was their life. They were born to it and wouldn't have it any other way."

"But why did the house so quickly fall into ruin?"

"My father pulled the roof off it."

"Why?"

"To save having to pay rates on it. That's quite usual here now the people have gone. This wild life is rapidly coming to an end. People won't face it any more."

"That doesn't surprise me."

"It's only come about comparatively recently. A very old man I know—he must be close on a hundred now—once told me that when he was a boy there were nearly three hundred Macdonalds living in this glen. It's easy to understand why, after fighting for a living in this poor soil, they did well when they found themselves on really good ground in Canada, Australia and New Zealand."

"I'm beginning to understand why so many of them emigrated."

"That's another story. Give me a hand to lift these panniers off to give Jeanie a rest."

"Are you going to tie her up?"

"No. She won't leave us."

The panniers having been lifted off Malcolm went to a little cairn of stones, removed the top one and from the cavity below produced an aluminium can, a bottle and two tumblers.

"What have you got there?"

"A bottle of lemon squash. Go to the burn and fill the can and we'll have our lunch."

"Do you leave this stuff here?"

"Yes. I have secret caches all over the place. You never know when you may need something. When a place, like this for instance, runs out of stock I tell Donald, and the next time he comes this way he puts in a new bottle and a small tin of biscuits."

Frank filled the can with clear sparkling water from the burn. When he returned Malcolm had spread their "pieces" on a flat stone.

"I had intended to be at the hut by now," said Malcolm, as they set about their lunch. "Not that it matters. Our time's our own."

"How far away is the hut?"

"About two miles. It's up there." Malcolm pointed to a deep gloomy glen behind them. With steep, towering sides, it appeared to plunge into the very heart of the hills.

Chapter Ten

The Hut in the Mountains

The lunch sandwiches, supported by glasses of lemonade ice cold from the burn, were taken leisurely, for as Malcolm said, they would still arrive at the hut in ample time to settle down before nightfall. Jeanie was allowed to graze on anything she could find while the dogs lay close, grateful for a biscuit apiece and odd scraps of crust.

"They're too interested in what's going on to be hungry," said Malcolm. "That's why they never get much to eat during the day. One good meal in the evening is enough. Overfed spaniels soon run to fat and that's bad for them. Don't give them any cheese."

"No! Why?"

"Old keepers say it affects their sense of smell. It may be true, but I've never been able to prove it. I don't take for granted everything I'm told. Why should I? After all, I live here, and can usually sort out facts from mistaken notions."

"This is a lovely spot. Why don't we camp here? I can't imagine anything better."

"I'd rather have a roof over my head in case a storm blows up. That's no joke in the open, as you may learn. We'll go on to the hut."

"What are these huts, anyway."

"For the purpose I've just mentioned. Not so long ago big shooting parties would go far out on the moor. Instead of lugging their food and spare cartridges with them the things would be taken straight to a certain hut by ponies, and there the hunters would forgather about lunch time. The ponies would then carry home any game that had been shot. Nobody would want to carry perhaps two or three hundred brace of grouse."

"That's an awful lot of grouse."

"They have to be shot. If they're not shot they get a disease and die anyway. A moor will carry just so many grouse and no more. If you overstep the mark the ground gets foul. A nasty disease breaks out and you lose the lot. They die in thousands. The moors can be left without a bird on them. But that's a long story. Men, meaning well, were responsible. They reckoned that if they killed the natural enemies of the grouse, all the hawk tribe, foxes, wild-cats, stoats, etc., there would be more grouse. Things didn't work out that way. Nature arranges its own balance, and once you interfere with that, queer things can happen. Moreover, it's not easy to put things back as they were. It would take many years, anyhow, and by that time a lot of things can become extinct."

"Tell me what sort of things happen. I find this most interesting."

"I'll give you an example. As the result of killing off what was called vermin there was no fruit in the orchards."

"I can't see any connection there."

"It went like this. Apart from killing grouse the vermin kept the mice under control. Even a fox likes a mouse. With no vermin there was soon a plague of mice. If there's one thing mice like it's the honey of the bumble bees that nest in the heather. With the place swarming with mice there were soon no bees. It needs bees to pollinate the fruit blossoms. So, no bees, no fruit. So honey bees had to be imported. You'll see rows of hives about the hills. In fact, heather honey is now quite an industry. That's the sort of thing that can happen when you start messing about with nature. When men do that they usually defeat their object. Kill your rabbits, which are the staple diet of vermin, and foxes raid the farmyards. So do some of the

birds of prey. The hen harrier in particular. From our point of view the trouble with the hen harrier is, he won't touch carrion—or anything dead. So as he eats twice a day he kills twice a day. Imagine what twenty harriers hunting your moor could do! Everything is scared stiff of them. A harrier has only to appear in the sky and there won't be another thing in sight. They're one of the most difficult birds to kill. You can't get within gunshot of them and because they won't touch carrion it's no use baiting a trap."

At this juncture a brood of grouse swept down the valley. It was followed by more.

"I'd say there are harriers about now," went on Malcolm. "We didn't flush those birds." He lay back and studied the sky. "There they are," he went on quickly, pointing. "A pair, with a young one behind. You're lucky. You don't often see this."

"What on earth are they doing? They seem to be throwing, or dropping, something, from one to the other."

"The old ones are training their youngster. All wild creatures have to do that. Watch!"

The birds soared over at a great height, passing an object between them.

"I've never seen them miss a catch," said Malcolm. "Nothing on the hill dare take its eyes off its young ones. If it does, something grabs them. The hen harriers never leave theirs. While the hen stays on guard the cock bird does the hunting. When he's got something he comes over the nest fairly high and calls. The hen goes up, straight up, in a spiral. When she's near the cock, below him, he throws her the family dinner. She catches it and takes it back to the nest. As soon as the young are old enough to fly properly the old ones teach them how to do it. I'd say those up there are practising with a piece of rabbit."

Frank nodded approval. "That's real smart."

"That's another odd thing. Why should the hen harriers increase when a brilliant flyer like the peregrine falcon dies out? I've only seen one peregrine in my life. I saw it stoop at a grouse that was going like the wind just above the heather. The peregrine came down at it like a bullet. Just as it was about to strike, a hare, which must have been squatting, lost its nerve and jumped up. That put the hawk off his stroke. I don't think he could make up his mind which to go for, the grouse or the hare. In the end he got neither."

"Bit of luck for the grouse."

"The hare certainly saved its life." Malcolm changed the subject. He thrust a finger towards a small flat rock which, like a man-placed stepping-stone, just cleared the water in the middle of the burn. "You see that stone?"

"Sure."

"On that stone," continued Malcolm, "there was caught the biggest wild-cat in all Scotland. It's now preserved in a museum in Edinburgh. Donald caught it. That was about three years ago. He knew it had its lair not far away. He told me about it. There was hardly a creature left alive on this part of the moor. What hadn't been killed had moved to healthier quarters. Only the cat and the eagles remained. Donald was at his wit's end to know what to do about it. He'd tried everything. You see, you can't have a creature like that about the place. Then one day he came into the yard, unslung his game-bag and from it took the most enormous, hideous brute, I ever saw in my life. It was the cat. He'd got it at last. I asked him how he'd done it. He told me he was walking along this burn on the look-out for signs of the creature when on that stone he saw a wet footprint. Just one. It was the pug mark of a big cat. Knowing that cats hate getting wet, particularly the hairs in their ears, he realized that this was where the creature crossed the burn. One jump to the stone, another to the far bank. You can guess what happened. The next time the cat jumped on the stone there was a trap on it. It fell

into the burn and was drowned. It must have been very old. Its fangs came right down over the lower jaw and its claws were two inches long. I've only seen three true wild-cats, dead, in my life, and that was one of them."

"What do you mean by *true* wild-cats?"

"There are plenty of hybrids as a result of domestic cats being enticed away from their homes. Like dogs that take to the wilds, they never come home. They turn savage and breed with the wild ones, and I can tell you this. The wild strain is so strong that no matter what the colour of the escaped cat may be, black, white, or ginger, in two generations it has the same coat as the true wild ones, which is tabby. There's no mistaking the true native cat. It has a short, stumpy tail, with a bushy end. On it there are nine black rings. They say that's the origin of the cats' nine lives—one ring for each life. You often get them with seven or eight rings, which is proof of mixed parentage, but seldom with nine. The wild-cat also has longer legs than the tame cat and is much rougher round the face and neck."

"Did our ordinary domestic cat come from these wild ones?"

"No. They're a different breed. They came to us from Asia, where they've had tame cats for thousands of years. But, of course, they're all cats. You can't tame a wild-cat. It has been tried often enough and found impossible. People have taken kittens before their eyes are open, and brought them up, but it's no use. All you get for your pains is a vicious snarling, spitting, spiteful brute that hates everything and everybody. You can tame lions and tigers and teach them tricks, but you'd be wasting your time trying to do anything like that with a Scottish wild-cat. It remains a skin full of hate and fury all its days. You haven't seen real glaring hate till you've looked a wild-cat in the eyes."

"Will it attack you?"

"Only if you corner it. It'll keep out of your way if it can, and living among the rocks it usually does." Malcolm laughed. "I shall never forget the first one I saw. I was about six and was walking through the wood we passed on the way here when I saw a tabby cat curled up in the stump of an old dead tree. Thinking it was a house cat I put out my hand and said 'puss-puss'. My goodness! It leapt straight up in the air with such a noise of spitting and snarling you never heard. It tore away in enormous bounds and I realized then that I'd tried to stroke a wild-cat. They're not difficult to trap. There's a lot of truth in the old saying 'curiosity killed the cat'. It kills many. Not only cats. It seems to be a weakness in nature. If you kill a wild-cat and leave it on the hill you can be sure that during the night the body will be visited by every cat within a radius of miles. It's the same with foxes. Kill one and others are drawn irresistibly to the spot. Gamekeepers and farmers are well aware of this. They surround the dead body with traps and so catch another. Deer are the same. Many a stag has been lured to its death by a piece of red rag on a stick. It seems to fascinate the silly beast. It comes closer and closer until it's within range of the hunter who is waiting for it. I've caught hares and stoats in the same way. The best bait to catch a rat is a dead rat. A heap of feathers on the hill will draw birds in the same way. They *must* come to see what has happened."

"You might say that of people when there has been an accident."

"True enough. It must be the same sense of curiosity. But it's time we were getting along. From now on the going isn't too bad. We climb a little but the way I go is mostly on the level."

The march continued, Malcolm leading, following the ghost of a track that often disappeared from sight under long heather. As Malcolm had said, it was mostly level, winding in and out of hollows along the flank of a hill that fell back several hundred feet at a fairly

sharp angle. Just below was the burn, a silver thread gleaming among rocks, great tufts of sphagnum moss and overhanging heather. Beyond it another hill, the exact counterpart of its opposite bank, rose high to form an undulating skyline against a canopy of eggshell blue. The burn was in fact the lowest point of a giant ravine through which over aeons of time it had carved a bed. But there was nothing gloomy about it. Daylight poured in through the broad band of blue far overhead. Apart from the dominant purple-mauve of the heather the only vegetation was an occasional little Christmas tree.

With soft peat underfoot the little procession made no sound as it plunged deeper and deeper into the recesses of the hills, the flanks rising ever higher until the sun, far past its zenith, could only touch the tops, to turn them into hems of glowing carmine. A solemn silence seemed to be falling from the sky, only to be broken from time to time by the rasping of an old cock grouse as he told them to '*go-back, go-back*'. Once a large black bird, sitting on the stump of a long dead tree, croaked dismally before flapping heavily away.

"Raven," said Malcolm, laconically, as he halted for a breather. "Not much farther," he added, cheerfully. "You really *are* in Scotland now."

Frank pointed to one of the little Christmas trees. "Did somebody plant those?" he inquired.

"No. That's regeneration. The seeds must have been blown here by the wind or dropped by a bird. Or they may have been deep in the ground. There was a time when practically the whole of Scotland was heavily wooded but the trees were either cut for timber or burnt off to make room for sheep. The old Highlanders used it extravagantly, anyway. They thought nothing of cutting down a tree just for a splinter from its heart."

"For what purpose?"

"To make a candle, or a torch. If you take the heart of a pine, sharpen one end and stick it in the ground, then light the top, you have a lamp that will burn for hours. They had nothing else to give them light on a dark night, and, after all, there were plenty of trees. The trees would return if they were given a chance, for as you see, there are plenty of seeds; but they haven't a hope. They're bound to be burnt off before they're ten years old. To make grazing for sheep you burn ten per cent of your moor every year, so it follows that if you do your heather burning properly, by rotation, the entire moor is burnt off every ten years. In the late autumn the air in these parts is full of the reek of burning heather. You have to watch yourself then, because if you're caught in the path of a fire with the wind behind it you may be overtaken. The fire travels faster than you can run and it doesn't stop until it's pulled up by a road or a river. It may even jump those. Heather, when it's dry like this, is inflammable stuff. I've seen the flames leaping twenty to thirty feet. You can't be too careful. One of the worst fires I ever saw was caused by a man shooting at a rabbit running through the heather. The wad from the cartridge must have carried a spark with it. It fired the heather and away it went. If the peat under the heather also happens to be dry, and takes fire, then you are in for trouble. You can't put it out and it may smoulder till the winter snow does the job for you."

"Where does all this peat come from, anyhow?"

"It has been millions of years accumulating. The moss which so often grows under the heather dies. More moss grows on it. And so it goes on, year after year, the weight of the top moss compressing the dead stuff underneath. Scientists have reckoned it may take a thousand years to make an inch of peat. Everywhere on this moor there is a blanket of peat at least five feet deep, and I could show you places where it's thirty feet, so if you reckon an inch for a thousand years you can judge for yourself how long the process has been going on. The

bottom layers are nearly as hard as coal, which is why it makes good fuel. The top layer, which we call foggy peat, burns too quickly. Good stuff will burn longer than coal and it used to be the boast of a good housewife—and still is in some places—that her fire had never been out since the day she was married. That's why, when two people get married, the toast is 'lang may your lum reek'. Lum is chimney and reek is smoke. Over some villages, summer and winter, you'll see a blue haze. That's peat smoke. It tells a wandering Highlander that he's come home."

As Malcolm went on Frank said, in a curious voice: "I feel more and more that I've come home."

The party had not gone far when, rounding a sharp bend in the ever deepening ravine, Malcolm stopped again, raising a hand for silence. Going back to Frank he whispered: "There are some hinds on the slope beyond the burn so there will probably be a stag not far away. The hinds have heard us, or winded us, so go slowly and don't make a sound."

Moving forward a step at a time the hinds came into view, five of them, standing up, gazing in the direction of the invaders. After a long stare they began to move off, without haste, up the hill, with frequent glances over their shoulders. Malcolm stopped again, eyes scrutinizing the burn yard by yard.

"I see him," he breathed, pointing.

"Where?"

"There."

"I can't see him."

"He's lying down, probably asleep. You can just see his antlers above the heather. He's a fine stag. A Royal. That is, he's fully developed."

At that moment one of the hinds called, a wild cry that seemed to fit the scene.

"That's done it," said Malcolm. "An old hind is always on guard."

The stag rose up instantly from the bed of moss on which he had been lying. He gave the boys one penetrating stare and with head erect was off up the hill in the wake of his wives.

"Magnificent," said Frank, in a voice that thrilled with admiration.

The stag joined the hinds who waited for him on the ridge. For a moment they all stood there at gaze, silhouetted against the blue; then they disappeared over the brow of the hill to be seen no more.

"I wouldn't have missed that for anything," murmured Frank. "They didn't seem very frightened."

"Because here they're never shot at. Creatures soon get to know where they're safe. As a general rule you'll find the further you get from civilization the less liable to show fear will be the birds and beasts."

Malcolm resumed his position at the head of the party which again moved forward.

Twenty minutes later, after rounding the final shoulder of the hill, the hut came into sight, and Frank gasped at the beauty and the strangeness of the scene.

The hut stood on a little plateau of short, emerald-green turf, surrounded by rain-washed rocks and boulders, at the point where three great hills came rolling down in waves of luxuriant heather to form a small, natural amphitheatre. Between each hill and the next yawned a deep ravine, and down each ravine a burn wound a sinuous course forced upon it by a thousand spates, rocks, the stumps of long dead trees and banks of water-worn pebbles, large and small. Just below the hut the three watercourses met to form the one that had been followed since the midday halt. Close at hand water dripped in a miniature waterfall from a

low face of rock to form a little pool surrounded by short stiff rushes, myrtle, meadowsweet, and some dwarf bushes blue with blaeberries.

The party had to cross one of the burns to reach the hut which, Frank was surprised to see, was a well-built affair of boards painted green. It was of some size with a roof of corrugated iron. The windows were hidden behind shutters held in place by strong bars of wood thrust through sockets.

"Welcome to a real highland home," said Malcolm. "We've a lot to do so let's get busy. For a start let's relieve Jeanie of her load."

The panniers were lifted off, then the saddle, and the pony allowed to graze at will.

"She won't go away," remarked Malcolm, as he took a key from under a slab of stone and unlocking the door threw it open. "Now we'll let some daylight in," he went on, withdrawing the bolts from the windows and laying the shutters on the ground.

Frank entered, looking around, again with some surprise, at the cooking utensils that hung from nails on the walls. Some crockery was piled on a stout wooden bench that occupied the centre of the room with forms along the two longest sides. The floor was plain earth, trodden flat.

"This is good enough to be a permanent residence," observed Frank approvingly.

"It wouldn't be much good putting anything flimsy here," returned Malcolm. "The first storm would blow it away. Apart from that, when I'm camping out I believe in making myself as comfortable as possible. Roughing it, as it's called, may be all right, but there's no point in it if it can be avoided. Let's get everything inside. When we've done that we'll sling the hammocks out of the way and put a pile of heather in the corner for the dogs to make their beds in. They love this as much as I do."

"Do you sometimes do this alone?" asked Frank, wonderingly.

"At least once a year."

"Don't you find it a bit lonely?"

"With a pair of dogs and a pony how can you be lonely? Donald may look in from time to time—on mother's orders I suspect—to make sure everything is all right; apart from that you're the first person who has shared this hut with me. What do you think of it?"

"Swell," answered Frank, enthusiastically. "This suits me down to the ground."

Chapter Eleven

Settling In

By the time the panniers had been unpacked, the animals fed, the hammocks with their blankets in them slung, firearms and mackintoshes hung on hooks, foodstuffs stored away and everything generally made shipshape, the sun was far down behind the western hill with the sky fading to green and gold, causing the heather to take on a deeper, richer purple. With the hills giving up the heat they had absorbed during the day the air remained soft and warm.

"We'll put these in the refrigerator," said Malcolm, stringing two quart bottles of milk by their necks and lowering them into the pool. "Milk will keep for a long time in that ice-cold water. Donald may drop in later on with a fresh supply, but I'm not sure about that."

The spring itself was an elfin place, a face of flat, horizontal rock, through which water trickled between moss, lichen and tiny ferns.

"This is like a fairy tale," remarked Frank.

Malcolm touched the little patch of meadowsweet by which they were standing. "Maybe that's why, in the Highlands, we call this Pixie Lace. Now we can see about supper. Do you care for fish?"

"What fish?"

"Trout—brownies."

"Sure, when I catch them myself, although I must admit that the first mouthful tastes a bit like mud."

"You can taste the river in all coarse fish but I can tell you how to get over that. You won't taste mud in these mountain trout because there isn't any mud. The tip with coarse fish is to clean them, scale them, and leave them for an hour or two in a dish just covered with milk. Milk will take the taste and smell out of most things, and that includes river fish."

"Where are you going to get the trout?"

"In the burn."

Frank looked astonished. "Are you telling me there are trout in that trickle of water?"

"Plenty. How many can you eat—a dozen? They're not very big, of course. Six or seven inches at most. With cats and herons always at them the big ones don't have much chance."

"I haven't noticed any trout."

"Like the salmon they're experts at camouflaging themselves. They lie over a colour nearest to their own. In fact, they change colour to match the bottom. In the case of the salmon every scale is a little mirror which reflects the bottom. That's why they're hard to spot until you get the knack. A brown trout can change its colour in a few minutes. The trout in the hill lochs are mostly black when you catch them because the bottom is peat; but if you put one in a burn with a light gravel bottom you can watch it take on the colour of the gravel."

"I never knew that. I'm still learning."

Malcolm went to the burn and returned with his arms full of dead sticks that lay along the bank. He dropped them by some slabs of rock arranged to leave the cavity in the middle. "We make the fire here," he went on. "We'll put the kettle and the coffee pot all ready before we light the fire; then we'll see about the trout." He went to the hut and returned with a handful of green birch twigs. "We shall need these, too."

"For what?"

"Cooking the fish. You'll see. These are better than a frying pan. Moreover, they save messing up the pan, which we shall need for breakfast. I like fish, but I don't like my eggs to taste of them."

"Come to think of it, if there are no trees up here, how come all these dead branches piled up along the burn?"

"I'll show you in the morning."

"How many trout do you aim to catch?"

"A couple of dozen—more if we want them." Again Malcolm went to the hut and returned with what was obviously the top joint of an old fishing rod. There was no reel, the line being wound round the tip in primitive fashion. In his other hand he carried a small tin. "I leave this old piece of rod here, then I know whatever happens I shan't starve," he remarked, smiling.

"So *this* is why you wanted the tin. What's in it? Bait?"

"Worms. Little fellers. In the hills where there aren't many worms the trout don't fiddle about looking at 'em. They grab. But, of course, these hill trout have never heard of a fishhook and wouldn't know what it was if they saw one." Malcolm's smile broadened as he unwound the line and twisted a small piece of worm round the hook. With this he advanced to the burn and lowered the bait carefully at a place where the water had been deepened by the scour of large rock. The tip of the rod jerked instantly and within a second an eight-inch speckled fish was kicking on the grass.

"You kill 'em, clean 'em and wash 'em, while I catch 'em," requested Malcolm.

When a dozen fish lay on the bank in a neat row he handed the rod to Frank. "Here. Have a go. Try a fresh place. You'll find they lie behind or under the rocks."

In ten minutes another dozen trout had joined the first, all of a fair size, the smaller ones having been put back in the burn. As Malcolm pointed out, the hook he used having no barb they would not be any the worse for their adventure.

The catch was now taken to the fire, which was lighted, and until it had died down to red hot ash the time was occupied in cutting bread and butter and bringing out anything else that might be required. Each fish was then impaled on a skewer of wood, and so arranged, with the other end of the skewer stuck in the ground, to hang over the glowing embers.

"What about plates," said Frank, as they sat one each side of the fire watching the fish begin to frizzle while the drops of oil that fell from them made little spurts of flame. The dogs, which had followed the proceedings with obvious understanding, lay on the ground beside them, forelegs splayed out and chin resting on a paw in the usual manner of spaniels.

"Fingers are easier," asserted Malcolm. "Besides, it saves washing up. Try one of the fish. I think they're about done."

Frank complied.

"How is it?"

"Marvellous. Best fish I ever ate."

"No food tastes as good as that which you've produced yourself," declared Malcolm, putting the kettle on the embers.

After that the meal proceeded in silence, the dogs being given the last two fish which were not required.

"Aren't you afraid of the bones sticking in their throats?" asked Frank.

"It never seems to happen. Foxes and most other things eat dead salmon they find on the banks and the bones don't seem to worry them. I suppose it's their natural food. In England people have queer ideas about feeding dogs, anyway. This mincing meat as if it was for a

baby! They don't seem to realize that a dog's stomach and digestive organs are not like ours. You saw me feed Sheila and Sue. I gave them their meat in a big lump. They not only prefer it that way but it's better for them. Keeps their digestive organs functioning properly. A lump of meat, according to the size of the dog, and a handful of dry biscuits or rusks for roughage, is all they need. Of course, I'm not talking about fancy lap dogs that have to be pampered. I'm talking about real dogs; dogs that work. A dog is what you make it. Salt is bad for the skin and makes them thirsty. Remember, a dog can't sweat through its skin. It comes out of its mouth. That's why it pants to get rid of surplus heat. Sugar is bad for them, too. Mine have never tasted anything sweet—yet look at them. Not an ounce of spare fat and coats shining like silk. Those are the signs of a fit dog. Too many dogs are killed by kindness. Incidentally, mine are trained never to touch anything unless I give it to them. They wouldn't eat anything they found. That's a necessary precaution here where the farmers and keepers may put down poisoned baits for vermin."

The meal ended with cheese, jam and biscuits, with coffee. By the time it was finished the breathless silence of sunset had settled over the hills with mysterious shadows filling the ravines. The sky had turned from pink to crimson.

"There's a picture for you," said Malcolm, pointing.

Seven herons in single file were winging their way with slow, lazy flaps, across the dull crimson background of the darkening sky.

"Those birds have been doing a spot of fishing too, no doubt," continued Malcolm. "You'd be surprised what they can stuff into those long elastic necks of theirs. When they get home they cough up their catch into larders for a rainy day."

"I shall never forget that picture," returned Frank, still watching the birds. "It's like a painting."

"Because we're so much farther north, the gloaming lasts longer than the twilight they get in the south. In fact, at this time of the year it never gets really dark because in two or three hours after the sun has set it's on its way up again."

"It's wonderful—as if everything was holding its breath to watch."

"This is the time the nocturnal creatures are thinking about coming out. Look at the rabbits and that blue hare on the hill opposite, sitting up watching us. If we weren't here they'd be across for a nibble of grass."

"*Blue* hare?"

"We call them blue to distinguish them from the brown hares you find on the low ground. They're not actually blue but a sort of slaty-grey. Like many other things here in winter they turn snow white; but either something has gone wrong with their camouflage arrangements or else the weather has changed, the snow coming later than it used to. They turn white much too soon, with the result the poor fools can be seen for miles. They look like small sheep galloping about. That makes them an easy prey for the eagles, which mostly live on them."

"What about the rabbits?"

"They've more sense than to turn white. To me the rabbit is one of nature's miracles. Every one and everything is against it. Everything has been done to exterminate it because it eats the farmers' crops and nibbles the forestry trees. Hundreds of men in these parts live by trapping rabbits to send to town markets for food. Almost every animal and bird on the hill hunts it. Yet look at the rabbits! They're everywhere. They can't fight back. All they can do is run. He is despised and derided as an object for nothing but contempt. Rabbit is another word for coward. What a life he must lead. He's one of the few creatures born without any sort of

protection. Most creatures have something—venom, horns, fangs, tusks, spines or an offensive odour to discharge, like the skunk. The rabbit has none of these things. From the day he is born, naked, blind, with closed ears and utterly helpless, to the day he dies, he lives under the shadow of death by gun, trap, snare, tooth, beak, claw or talon. Without a friend or ally he has to endure constant and relentless persecution."

"Seems sorta tough."

"Tough! Never for a moment, day or night, is he safe. What sort of a life is that? Even in his burrow, his one retreat, he can be attacked by poison gas, stoats or ferrets. Every time he steps out he may put his foot in a trap. At any instant death may strike from above, around or below. Yet he accepts these risks calmly and without complaint. He has the nerve to go miles to visit friends in another burrow or look for a bite to eat. He even dares to sleep in the open. Yet they call him a coward."

"I'd be a coward if I had to live in those conditions," put in Frank, moodily.

"If the rabbit was a coward he'd have been extinct long ago," declared Malcolm. "Remember, he still stays on the low ground when the stags and the eagles, the cats and the foxes, the very things that hunt him, have fled to the mountains for sanctuary. The mammoths and the great lizards, in spite of their armour plate, have gone. The elephant, the rhino and other monsters, even the whale, are on the way out; yet here is the rabbit, still with us, and looking like staying with us."

"He sure seems to have solved the secret of survival."

"I'll tell you this," said Malcolm, earnestly. "When all the rest have gone the rabbit will have the last laugh. When men have blown themselves to pieces with hydrogen bombs, when their cities are smouldering ashes and the sky grey with radio-active dust, when the din of destruction dies away there will emerge from the ruins a furry little beast with a white patch on his tail, to gaze upon a world that is at last his own—the rabbit. The survival of the fittest. The great unconquered."

"What about this ghastly disease that was introduced to wipe them out—myxomatosis?"

"He has even solved that one. True, he took a hard knock but now he's getting over it. They get the disease, but having developed immunity they recover. Men will have to pay for that outrage. Now the rabbits are getting their own back."

"How?"

"When they get well they're so hungry that they eat everything—trees, corn, roots, anything. The next generation probably won't get the disease at all and then there will be more than ever. Which will serve men right for doing such a dastardly thing."

"I'm with you," agreed Frank.

Silence fell. It lasted for some time, while the curtain of night dropped slowly from the sky. The hush was profound.

After a while Frank raised his head in a listening attitude. "Can I hear *music*?" he queried, in an astonished whisper.

"Aye. That'll be Angus Macintyre practising the pibroch on his pipes. He's a stalker, and has a shieling a few miles away as the crow flies, beyond that ridge." Malcolm pointed. "It'd be nearer twenty miles if you had to walk it. This is the place to hear the bagpipes. Down south people sometimes think it's an amusing instrument when they hear it played on the stage; but I don't think the pipes were ever intended for that. This is the place to hear the pibroch, in the wide open spaces with the gloaming creeping down the glens and not another sound to be heard."

"Are you telling me! There's something so wild about it that cold shivers are running down my back."

"That was the idea," replied Malcolm, smiling faintly. "The clans like the enemy to know they're on the march. Do you feel like another walk tomorrow or would you rather rest?"

"I'm all for walking. I can't see enough of this country. Where shall we go?"

"We might have a look at the eagles, but I must take you to the Black Loch one day. The eagles are nearer. They live about three miles up there." Malcolm pointed to the deep ravine, now dark with night. "Strictly speaking they have no business to be there, because eagles are birds for the high tops; the rocks, not the heather. That's what Donald always says when he wants to get rid of them, for the simple reason that you won't find a head of game of any sort within a mile or two of their nest. Nothing wants to live near an eagle. He's the real boss of the hill. Why the eagles like this place I don't know, but they always have been here and it looks as if they always will. A few miles on, the ravine splits into two. At the junction the hills rise steep on all sides. There are burns in the bottom, and through the ages the spates have piled up an enormous mound, two or three hundred feet high. One side is sheer; the other covered with heather. At the very top the eagles have their eyrie. Beside it a boulder sticks up like a thick gravestone. One of the birds, if not hunting, is usually to be seen sitting on it. It's whitewashed with the droppings of years."

"I would have thought Donald liked to see eagles about."

"No. It seems inherent for many Highlanders to hate eagles, with the result that they've always waged war on them. It's really surprising that they've survived. It was a case of give a dog a bad name and hang it."

"You don't believe that?"

"The eagle may kill some grouse but that's about all the harm it does. You'll hear tales of golden eagles taking babies, and children have been brought up to believe that. Farmers will tell you positively that they take lambs but I've yet to meet anyone who has actually seen it happen although I've asked scores of people who raise sheep. These are fairy tales that have been passed on from generation to generation. Eagles prefer hares to anything. I did once meet a stalker who swore he'd seen an eagle stoop at a fox. If so that was probably a mistake. The only thing I've seen an eagle carrying was a rabbit or a hare."

"I've heard it said that eagles mate for life."

"That could be true if they're left undisturbed, but that hasn't been my experience here. As I say, why eagles insist on staying here, and nesting where people can get at them, is a mystery. To my knowledge three eagles on this moor have been killed but there is always a pair. Three years ago a whisper reached me that a number of keepers had banded together in the winter to hunt foxes. There were six of them, and as an eagle came over they all shot at it. It fell dead. I taxed Donald with it but he would neither deny nor confirm it. All he would say was, he didn't shoot, knowing it was against my orders. It was the hen bird that was killed. The cock disappeared, but after three weeks he was back with a new hen. That has happened three times, with the same result. Kill one and the other goes off and finds a new mate. There's always a pair. As I say, why they should insist on coming back is something I don't understand."

"I understood the golden eagle was protected by law."

"It is, but that doesn't prevent people from killing it if they get the chance. But the biggest danger to the eagle is the egg collector. A golden eagle's egg is worth five pounds, and for a series of four or five eggs laid by the same bird in successive seasons collectors will, I'm told,

pay fifty pounds. You can imagine what a temptation it is, therefore, to a keeper, who hates eagles anyway, to make some extra money."

"How many eggs does an eagle lay?"

"Two. They're a sort of dirty white with light red spots. They hatch in April. The golden eagle isn't really gold, of course. Its colour is more of a brownish bronze. The Wild Bird Protection Society pays men to watch the eggs, but a lot still disappear. No one will admit taking them just as no one will confess to killing an eagle. One thing I do know is, he cleans up a lot of carrion. Should he happen to find a dead sheep he'll so gorge himself that he has to take a good many hops to get airborne. I've heard it said that eagles have been killed by shepherds because they had so stuffed themselves with rotten mutton that they couldn't fly at all. That may be another old woman's tale, of course. Because they have been known to eat dead sheep may be why they've got a reputation for killing lambs."

"How do they attack their prey?"

"They soar at a great height, round and round, in the manner of sailplanes, I imagine, since they rarely have to flap their wings. You'd suppose from such a height they wouldn't be able to see anything on the ground; but they do; and when they see what they're looking for they simply fold their wings and down they drop like a ton of bricks. When twenty or thirty feet from the ground out go their wings and they swoop, or to use the proper word, stoop, on their prey. As they pass over it they snatch it up in their talons and take it to some place to kill and eat it. To their nest if they happen to have young ones. The nest is a great pile of sticks."

"We might have a look at the nest to see what bones there are about."

"That will need thinking about if the birds are around," replied Malcolm dubiously.

"Have you been to the nest?"

"Oh yes. Two or three times, after making sure that the birds weren't at home. Once they caught me at it and I had a very uncomfortable five minutes, I can tell you. You only realize what a big heavy bird the golden eagle is when it's close to you. The wing span is enormous, and the draught they make when they come near you is like a whirlwind. But if we're going to make an early start tomorrow we'd better see about turning in. I shall picket Jeanie, allowing her plenty of rope, to make sure she doesn't wander too far away. You might empty what water there is left in the kettle on the fire to dowse it." Malcolm touched the dogs, already asleep by his side, and got up. "Come on, you girls. To bed."

He walked to the hut and lighted a candle. The dogs went with him, and having walked in circles on the heap of heather he had put in a corner for them, to make a bed to their liking, after a yawn or two settled down.

"We'll leave the door open," said Malcolm presently, when Frank joined him.

For a minute they stood in the doorway, gazing at a world now black and silver in the light of a newly risen moon that hung in the sky like a highly polished sickle. The silence was so intense that it could almost be felt.

"It sure is peaceful here," remarked Frank softly.

"If you can't sleep here," answered Malcolm, "I don't know where you could."

For a little while Frank lay propped up in his hammock, hands under his head, gazing through the open doorway beyond his feet at a scene that seemed to touch some far distant chord of memory. It seemed to whisper: "You've done this before. Don't you remember?"

The only sounds were the gentle snoring of old Sheila and the quiet munching of Jeanie on the grass.

Still groping for something that always seemed to be just beyond his reach Frank must have fallen asleep, to be awakened, at what hour he did not know, by such a noise that sent him tumbling from his hammock feeling blindly for the matches that lay on the table beside the candle. Before he could find them the noise came again, a blood-curdling, wailing howl that ended in a sort of moaning sob.

"Mac, Mac, what is it?" he gasped.

"What are you doing?" came back Malcolm's voice, heavy with sleep.

"This frightful din."

Again came the noise, now duplicated and rising to a shrieking crescendo that tailed off to a series of spits, snorts, snarls and grunts, horrible to hear. Sheila growled. Jeanie, outside, blew through her nostrils.

With shaking hands Frank managed to light the candle. "What—what is it?" he stammered.

Malcolm was shaking his hammock with suppressed laughter. "Oh that," he managed to say. "It's only cats. Go to bed."

"*Cats!*"

"Yes."

"It sounds to me more like ten thousand devils tearing each other to pieces. I've never heard cats make that hellish din."

"That's because you've never heard *our* cats. You've heard ordinary cats courting on the tiles?"

"Sure."

"Then multiply that by three for size and this is what you get." Malcolm sat up, still laughing. "Sorry I forgot to warn you it might happen."

Frank grunted his disgust.

The noise was repeated, now at a distance. It was followed by a thin wavering scream.

"That wasn't a cat," muttered Frank, wide-eyed.

"No."

"What was it?"

"Fox—or rather, a vixen, calling her mate."

"Suffering mackerel! I thought you said this was a peaceful spot."

"So it is—when you get used to it. These little diversions are only to remind you where you are."

"Are you telling me!" Frank got back into his hammock and blew out the candle.

There were no more diversions. Or if there were he didn't hear them.

Chapter Twelve

Dangerous Ground

When Frank awoke in the morning Malcolm and the dogs were already on the move. The fire had been lighted. The kettle was blowing steam and bacon and eggs were sizzling in a frying pan.

Frank sprang from his hammock and pulled on his shoes. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“No hurry. Did you sleep well?”

Frank grinned. “After that devils’ concert.”

“I shall have to tell Donald about those cats. If they have a lair nearby they’ll drive everything else away.”

Frank looked at the sky. It appeared to be entirely covered with grey cloud at under a thousand feet. “Is it going to rain?”

“No. This is only early morning mist. It’ll soon lift. Then it’ll be another scorcher.”

“What’s the time?”

“Five o’clock. Come and have some breakfast.” Malcolm gave each of the dogs a handful of broken biscuit. Jeanie was already munching a little oats put down on a piece of grease paper that had been used for packing.

Frank took his towel to the burn, had a quick wash and scrambled into his clothes. “Brother, am I hungry!” he exclaimed, as he took his place beside Malcolm, now pouring coffee into enamel mugs.

“This is the life to give you an appetite.”

Frank took a plate and helped himself to bacon and eggs. “What’s the programme? Eagles?”

“If that suits you.”

“Suits me fine.”

The meal finished the plates and mugs were being washed in the burn when from the mist overhead came a sound as weird as could be imagined. It was a sharp metallic jangle. Two pairs of eyes looked up, and for a moment even Malcolm looked puzzled. Then understanding dawned.

“What was that?” asked Frank, his eyes saucering with bewilderment.

“Eagle.”

“Say, are you kidding?”

“No.”

“Since when did eagles wear bells?”

“That wasn’t a bell. It was a chain. I remember, now, Donald telling me about it. That was some time ago and with the excitement of you coming I’d forgotten about it.”

“About what?”

“An eagle with a piece of chain on its leg.”

“How could that happen?”

“Donald, who heard the bird before he saw it, reckons it could have happened two ways. Either someone had an eagle in captivity, tethered by a chain which it broke and got away, or else one put its foot on a rabbit trap and managed to break free, taking a piece of chain with it. It must have been something of that sort.”

“Wouldn’t the trap hurt its leg?”

"Not much, if at all. Like many birds here, the grouse, the ptarmigan and the blackcock, its legs are feathered right down to the toes. Like me, our birds have the sense to wear spats."

"Then the eagle has taken no harm."

"So it seems, although, like a house cat with a bell round its neck, it must make hunting difficult. That eagle has evidently been here for some time, in which case every creature for miles must know the meaning of that jangling chain and duck for cover when it hears it. The bird must either find carrion or go hungry, I'd say."

Everything cleared up Malcolm took the twenty-two rifle from its hook.

"Are you going to shoot something?" asked Frank.

"Perhaps. But if I do it won't be to kill anything."

"That doesn't make sense to me."

"It will. You bring your cromach." Malcolm shut the door of the hut. "This way." With the dogs at heel he set off up the hill.

"I thought you said the eyrie was up the ravine?"

"It is, but to approach that way would mean walking up the burn, which is treacherous going. The ravine winds about, too. I'm taking a direct route. It's a bit of a pull through long heather to the top of the hill but from then on it's more or less a flat plateau. Save your breath, you'll need it."

Frank soon found this was no idle warning, and he had his first experience of walking uphill through waist high 'stick' heather with thick sphagnum moss, mixed with rocks, below. He found the cromach helpful, but he was breathing heavily by the time the brow was reached. Then, leaning on the cromach, he gazed ahead with astonishment spreading over his sweat-streaked face.

Before him lay a flat tableland of brown and purple peat from which sprouted an occasional isolated clump of carmine 'bell' heather. Between these the whole area was strewn with what appeared to be sun-bleached bones, piled in places like whitened skeletons.

"Say! What's all this," he cried; "an old battlefield?"

Malcolm smiled tolerantly. "No. This is part of the story I told you on the way here when we were talking about trees. What you see is all that's left of an old forest. These are the roots and stumps of trees thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of years old. Now you know where the sticks we use for firewood come from, and why they burn so well. I think they must still have a little resin left in them. The trees were destroyed by wasteful and indiscriminate burning. Only the roots, deep in the peat, escaped. Ages of storms and winds have worn away the peat so that they have become exposed. You'll find areas like this all over the Highlands."

"I would have thought the roots would have rotted long ago."

"They must have something in them that preserves them. Or it may be in the peat, which is well known to have wonderful preservative properties. A human body buried in peat doesn't decompose. Bodies that must be thousands of years old have been found looking almost the same as the day they were buried."

"How is it known that they're thousands of years old?"

"By their clothes, trappings and weapons, and the depth at which they're found. I must say that it's a depressing sight to see what must once have been a magnificent forest looking like this. Let's move on. Watch your step for holes and cracks in the peat. Just ahead is what we call broken ground, and that can be really danger—" Malcolm broke off, looking up at the rising mist as from somewhere in it came the unmistakable jangle of a chain. "That's that bird again."

“There it is,” cried Frank, pointing with his cromach.

From out of the mist, dropping like a stone, came a large, dark coloured body. Had it not been for the head with its cruel curved beak it would hardly have been recognizable as a bird.

“It must be stooping at something,” said Malcolm, his eyes scanning the landscape. Then his voice rose to a wild yell: “Susan!”

While the talk about trees had been going on no notice had been taken of the dogs. Sheila had lain down, but Susan had wandered on some forty or fifty yards, sniffing, as a dog will, at interesting smells. Whether it was Malcolm’s frantic shout, or whether it was the rattle of the chain that caused her to look up, was afterwards a matter of surmise. It might have been both. At all events, she looked up, and saw the great bird at the moment it opened its wings to steady its fall. With the bird behind her, and rapidly overtaking her, she came streaking back to the boys who were now running to meet her.

The eagle did not stop. Skimming the ground at tremendous speed it was within two yards of Susan, its talons down, when Malcolm yelled “Look out!”

There was a clang of chain, a rush of air and a blast of wind through feathers and in a split second all was confusion. Frank struck out instinctively in self defence as the bird flashed between him and Malcolm, who fell headlong. The cromach struck a wing with a resounding smack but it did not affect the flight of the bird which, its chain jangling, zoomed up into the mist to disappear from sight. The two dogs were cowering, tails down.

“It came for us,” declared Frank, helping Malcolm to his feet.

Malcolm shook his head vigorously. “No. I don’t think it even saw us until it was right on top of us. Its eyes were on Susan. It never took them off her. It stooped at her, and meant to get her. Would have done, too, if we hadn’t been here. If I hadn’t seen that I couldn’t have believed it.”

Frank nodded. “I thought it was attacking us; that’s why I struck out; but looking back I’m sure it was Sue it was after. Your shout of ‘look out’ made it swerve a fraction otherwise it would have knocked one of us over. As it was it passed between us. Until that moment, I agree with you, it didn’t know we were here. Then, I’d say, it was as scared as I was.”

Malcolm picked up two splendid chestnut-coloured primary feathers which Frank had knocked out of the bird’s wing. “Keep these for a souvenir,” he suggested, handing them to Frank. “They’ll prove your story if you ever dare to tell it. You must be one of the few people who could claim to have struck a golden eagle with a stick.”

Frank put the feathers in his shirt.

Malcolm gave Susan a pat. “Teach you to stay to heel, my girl,” he scolded.

Susan, looking sheepish, wagged her stump of a tail. As for Sheila, if it’s possible for a dog to laugh, she was laughing.

“Let’s move on,” said Malcolm. “Here comes the sun. This way.”

“Wouldn’t this be nearer?” Frank was looking at the contour of the hill beyond the ravine.

“Yes, if we could fly. We’ll stay in the heather.”

“Why?”

“Presently I’ll show you. As I was telling you, this is what we call broken ground, where the peat, which here is thirty feet deep, is split into chasms by the weather, earth tremors or something. Fall into one of the cracks and you’d be lucky to get out.”

After they had walked on a little way, Malcolm, having called the dogs close to heel, pointed to a rift in the peat that ran on and on across the plateau for as far as the eye could see. “Look down into that,” he invited. “Don’t get too close. The edge may crumble.”

Frank walked up to the yawning split. “I can see bones. What are they?”

“Deer, sheep, hares and rabbits, and maybe dogs, that fell in and couldn’t get out. You can’t climb up a vertical face of peat. There are several of those about here. Now you know why people sometimes disappear. The Access to the Hills Act of Parliament, which allows people to go pretty well where they like in the Highlands, may have meant well, but I sometimes wonder if it was wise. As I said when you first arrived, people won’t be told. They can’t imagine anything happening to them, much less will they believe that this is some of the most dangerous ground in the world—until you know the signs. That’s why you read in the newspapers of search parties going out to look for people who haven’t returned to their hotels or hostels. It happens all the time. I could tell you some tales about that, but not now. Incidentally, it’s a bit tough on the local people who, after a hard day’s work, have to hunt these hills in the dark in all weathers. They get no thanks. It’s about time they got some recognition for what they do. Even knowing the ground they have to take risks. While we’re talking of dangers you might as well see this.” Malcolm pointed. “You see that nice broad patch of what looks like green grass?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s go over to it. You follow me.”

Reaching the edge of the green, which covered several acres, Malcolm stopped. “This is close enough. If you were alone you’d think you’d come to a nice stretch of easy going, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure would.”

“Before you’d taken half a dozen steps you’d be out of sight for ever. That’s a bog. What looks like nice short turf is no more than a skin covering a lake of black peat mud.”

“That’s awful.”

“You see, Frank, what happens is this. This green area is actually a depression. The storm water that runs down the inside of the surrounding hills has no way out to the sea, or, for that matter, any river or burn. So it has to stay here, the depression filling up like a big dish. After a time moss forms on the top. Perhaps some grass seeds get blown on that, to take root, and there you are. Nothing to show what’s underneath. If there was more water draining in than there is, there would be a loch, or lochan, as we call a small loch. Under the peat there is rock, so the water can’t even soak away. Now I’ll give you another tip that might one day come in useful. You see that little rosette of spiky grass—there are several of them. That’s called stargrass. It will only grow on a fairly firm foundation. So if ever you feel ground rocking or quaking under your feet step on the nearest tuft of stargrass. Stand still. Never panic or try making a rush. Back out quietly the way you came, stepping from tuft to tuft until you’re back on firm ground. Get the idea?”

“Sure. And you can bet your life I’ll remember it.”

“I don’t want to give you an impression that such traps as these are common. You might walk a hundred miles without seeing one. But they do occur, so it’s as well to be prepared. This is an exceptionally bad piece of ground. Apart from broken ground, bogs, and an occasional precipice, there’s always the weather to keep an eye on. It can change in a flash. In fog or a heavy rainstorm it’s the easiest thing in the world to lose your bearings. That has happened to me, even knowing the ground as I do. In a matter of minutes a thunderstorm will turn every little burn into a roaring flood impossible to cross. The water pours off these hills like the roof of a house.”

“I can imagine it. Have you had any casualties here?”

"Several. On at least one occasion the eagle's nest was the cause, although I didn't suspect it at the time. It was one day last April twelve-months. I was walking on the road when I saw two young fellows coming this way with rucksacks on their backs. Wondering where they were going I watched them—one gets in the habit of doing that sort of thing here—and saw them turn up through the Forestry Commission, as we did when we left home. I hurried after them and asked them where they were going. They said they were going to climb the hill, bird-watching. I said, I wouldn't go today, and pointed out the sky was solid overcast. Oh, said one, laughing, we don't mind a little rain. I said, it may be rain down here, but on the high ground it'll be snow. That didn't worry them, either, so off they went. I couldn't stop them. Within an hour it had started to rain, the sort of steady drizzle which here can last for days on end. I went along to Donald and told him there were two fellows on the hill. We watched for them to come back. They didn't come back. When, at nightfall, they hadn't shown up, Donald went up the hill to look for them, firing his gun at intervals. He couldn't find them. The next day we made inquiries and found they'd spent the previous night at a youth hostel in Glenavon. They hadn't returned. Donald got a party together—Peter Ross the policeman, the postie, Gordon the farmer, Sandy Hay the station agent and some more, to make a proper search. It was still snowing so they hadn't much hope from the start."

"I see what you mean about these visitors being a nuisance."

"Exactly. The search was kept up for three days. Then it was abandoned because we knew that if the fellows were still on the hill they were dead. If nothing else had happened to them they would have died from exposure. You may walk and walk and keep on walking, but you can't do that indefinitely, and the moment you sit down for a rest, in wet clothes with an icy wind blowing, it's all over. I never go on the hill myself without leaving word exactly where I'm going."

"Were these two fellows ever found?"

"Yes. The following August. Donald, with two old friends of my father, were out shooting grouse and came upon the bodies. After lying there for months you can imagine the state they were in. Peter Ross the policeman went up and did what he could, but could find no marks to identify them. He and Donald took spades and buried them where they lay. Nothing else could be done."

"Did you ever find out who they were?"

"Never."

"Nothing in the rucksacks?"

"They were just pulp. Only two things had survived."

"What were they?"

"Two eagle's eggs."

"So that's what they were after."

"Unless they stumbled on the eagle's nest by accident. I don't know. We shall never know. But that sort of accident is all too common in the Highlands. If people would only listen to advice. . ." Malcolm, who had been sitting on a tuft of heather, got up. "We'd better push on. I reckoned to be back at camp by lunch time but it looks as if we shall be late. Come on you dogs."

Chapter Thirteen

The Eagles' Nest

With Malcolm leading the way an easy walk of half an hour across good honest heather brought the big ravine once more into view, and Frank saw that they had cut across the arc it had made between the hills. They did the last hundred yards crawling, or where the heather was short, in prone positions. In this way they reached the lip of the ravine, which here, with steeply sloping banks, was about two hundred yards across. Piled up in the middle, at the point where a secondary burn ran in, was the towering cone-shaped pinnacle of rock and stones just as Malcolm had described it. The top was level with the sides of the ravine, and so in line with their eyes.

"Look," whispered Malcolm, passing Frank the spy-glass.

From the topmost point of the cone, standing erect, projected the white stone; and on the stone, looking majestic as he surveyed the landscape, sat an eagle. A little below, on a heather-covered ledge, was an enormous pile of sticks. Standing on the edge of it was a second eagle, with a smaller one, still carrying a lot of white down, tearing at something it held down with its talons.

"They've managed to raise a chick," said Malcolm softly.

"It's eating a rabbit or a hare," observed Frank, with the spy-glass to his eye.

Softly though he had spoken the eagles must have heard him, or perhaps they saw the movement as he raised the glass. At all events, with harsh cries, the two old birds took off, mounting in an ever widening spiral with slow but impressive flaps of their huge wings.

"They've spotted us," said Malcolm, sitting up. "There's no point in keeping under cover any longer."

The two great birds went up to a fair height and then started to circle. The young bird continued with his meal, sometimes stopping to look up at his parents.

"Well, Frank, there you are. There's your eagles' eyrie," said Malcolm. "Have a good look at it. This is an unusual opportunity to see such a family, because, as I told you, this is really a queer place for eagles to nest. But there must be something about that pile of rock they like, because there has been an eagles' nest here for as far back as anyone can remember. There are plenty in the Cairngorms, of course, usually above the vegetation line. It may be the easy food here that appeals to them. They have a wide range in every direction without much risk of running into a bullet or a charge of buckshot. I like them here. That's why, apart from them being protected by law, I won't have them touched."

"You noticed the bird on the stone had a bit of chain on his foot?"

"I did. That was the one that stooped at Susan. I've never been able to make up my mind whether that spire of rock, rising from the floor of what you'd call a canyon, was piled up there by storm water coming down the burns, or erosion that washed the surrounding ground away leaving it there."

"It looks mostly rock, so I'd say erosion. The rock would stand if soft ground, peat and stuff, was washed away."

For half an hour they stayed watching the birds, the old ones circling, never going far away.

"Do you want to climb up to the nest?" asked Malcolm.

Frank considered the project.

"Apart from anything the birds might do—and they're watching us—it would be a long and stiff job," Malcolm pointed out. "I know. I've done it, but never when there has been a young 'un there. I'm pretty sure they'd resent any interference at a time like this, and if they knocked us off that knoll with their wings, or caused us to fall in any way, it would be a serious business. Probably broken bones. You see, needing both hands to climb you couldn't defend yourself."

"I think you're right," agreed Frank. "It isn't worth taking a risk. If we got to the nest we wouldn't be able to see much more than we can from here."

"I hoped you'd say that," admitted Malcolm. "Apart from anything else you'd probably be sick."

"Sick? Why?"

"An eagles' eyrie stinks to high heaven, from blood and corruption."

"That settles it as far as I am concerned."

"In that case we might as well be moving towards camp. There's something else I want to show you on the way back."

"Okay. Let's go. I've seen enough."

"We'll go back a different way. You'll see why."

Again Malcolm led the way. After covering a short distance he stopped, pointing at the mangled carcase of a bird which, surrounded by feathers, lay in front of them.

"I suppose the eagles did that," surmised Frank.

"No. They'd have taken it to their nest. It must have been a hawk of some kind."

"What is it?"

"Ptarmigan. Which means it must have been carried here from some distance. We aren't quite high enough for ptarmigan. They seldom come below three thousand feet, even in winter. Here we're only just over two thousand. Queer bird. It's one of the grouse family. How it survives the winter on the high tops beats me. It turns white in winter. In fact, it changes its plumage four times a year, to suit the different colour of the ground at the different seasons. Susan! Leave it! You can see it's dead."

Malcolm went on.

Frank had completely lost his bearings when, half an hour later, Malcolm took a diagonal course down the sloping bank of a small corrie he had not previously seen. On the opposite side of the usual burn the side of the hill had collapsed, leaving a long scar in the form of a cliff from twenty to a hundred feet high. The foot of this was a litter of broken rock.

"Landslide," observed Frank.

"Yes. The rock over that side must have some faults. Pieces are always breaking away. That's why I brought you here. We're going to walk along this side, and I want you to watch for a sparkle. If you see one tell me."

"Okay. What's the idea?"

"We're going to look for precious, or semi-precious, stones. You remember when we were talking about pearls in the river I told you we had other treasures."

"Sure. I remember."

"Well, these hills are full of rock crystals formed in the same way as diamonds. We call them cairngorms. Actually they're a form of topaz, and can vary in colour from deep smoky purple to yellow and even pale lemon. There are also sapphires, and other stones. I'll show you some I've found when we get back to the house. For hundreds of years they've been used by people here as ornaments. Chiefs of clans would have them set in pins in their bonnets, on

their sporrans, sword handles, and so on. Some are quite large, a couple of inches across even after they've been cut. They're very valuable. It isn't much use digging haphazard for them. You've two chances of finding them. One is this way, where the rock has broken away leaving a clean face. If the sun happens to be shining from the right direction you see the sparkle. The other way is to walk over the rock at the bottom of a burn. The action of the water over thousands of years wears away the rock, leaving the crystals, which are harder, sticking up like small pointed nine-pins. The trouble is, it's almost impossible to get the stones out, certainly if they're big ones, without putting a flaw in them. I've worked for hours with a hammer and cold chisel, chipping away the rock, then at the last minute, hit the gem instead of the rock. That ruins it. One tap and it's full of flaws, hardly worth the labour of cutting and polishing."

"But what has the rifle and chalk bullets to do with it?"

"That was a tip given me years ago by an old stalker. You see the gem sparkle. You walk to it. Can you find it? No. All you have to go on is the sparkle when the sun strikes it, but the moment you move, even slightly change your position, the sparkle has gone."

"I get it. You only see the sparkle from one position."

"Exactly. It's useless to look for the crystal if you can't see it sparkling. I know. I've tried it too often. That's where the rifle comes in. When you see the stone sparkling, without moving your position you shoot at it with a piece of chalk. The chalk makes a white splash where it strikes, so if your aim is any good at all, even if you don't hit the stone you know it must be within a few inches of the white splash."

"Say, I call that pretty smart," asserted Frank admiringly.

"All right. Let's start walking. Take it slowly. If you see something shining in that face of rock, or even in the rubble, stop instantly and tell me."

"Okay."

A hundred yards was covered in slow time and then it was Frank who called halt. He pointed at a tiny star of light flashing on the cliff face.

"I see it, but it's no use," said Malcolm. "I mean, we can't get to it. To reach it someone would have to be lowered down the cliff from the top. We've no rope. Pity. Never mind. We may see something lower down. Let's carry on."

They had nearly reached the end of the crumbling hillside, and were, in fact, opposite a subsidiary landslide, when Malcolm ejaculated: "Ah! That's better." He pointed with the rifle. "Can you see it?"

"No."

"Come here."

"I've got it."

"Watch."

Malcolm loaded the rifle with one of his special cartridges, took aim and fired. There was a puff of white at the base of the fall.

"You were pretty close," declared Frank.

"Let's go over. Mind how you go, particularly when you step on a rock. It may tilt under your weight and either break your ankle or tear the muscle of your calf. It's easy done, as Donald would say."

They clambered down the bank, Frank making good use of his cromach, crossed the burn and made a cautious ascent of the boulders that littered the foot of the fall.

Disappointment was waiting. The crystal was there, gleaming with internal yellow fire, and they had no difficulty in finding it, for the chalk had smudged within an inch of it. But it protruded from a loose piece of rock weighing several pounds, as firmly embedded as if it had been driven in with a hammer. Frank seized it, for it projected nearly three inches, and tried to tear it out.

"You won't get it out like that," averred Malcolm. "You'll only do it by chipping the rock away with a tool. You realize that crystal was formed millions of years ago, when the rock was in a molten state, so we're the first human beings ever to see it."

Frank was staring at the gem. "How far are we from camp?"

"About a mile."

"What's the going like?"

"Fairly easy. Why?"

"I'm not leaving the first cairngorm I've ever found. It's coming with me. Here, take the cromach." So saying Frank seized the piece of rock and hoisted it on his shoulder.

Malcolm laughed. "Well, that's one way of doing it."

The rock slipped and fell with a crash, drawing a cry of anguish from Frank's lips as it broke in halves: but the gem remained intact. Malcolm picked up the piece that held it and holding it up to the light put an eye close to the stone. "You're lucky," he said. "I can't see a flaw, and now you've only half the weight to carry."

Again Frank hoisted the stone. "Lead on," he requested.

"We might as well stick to the burn now we're in it," decided Malcolm, and set off.

After a while he offered to take a turn with the rock but Frank wouldn't hear of it. "This is my chore," he said, changing shoulders.

After a walk of rather less than half-an-hour the ravine suddenly and without warning debouched into the big ravine beside the hut. Frank staggered up the bank and dropped the rock on the turf.

"That's a relief," he panted, turning the rock so that the crystal pointed upward. "I'd no idea we were so close home."

"Give yourself a drink and take a rest while I get out some food," suggested Malcolm. "It's a bit late for lunch and too early for supper, so we'd better make it what we call here a high tea—which is a popular meal, anyway. The dogs will want their piece, too." The pony whinnied. "Hello old girl, glad to see us back," he concluded, patting the pony's neck.

Frank, of course, insisted on helping, lighting the fire and putting on the kettle for tea. The food laid out, Malcolm handed Frank a whole roast bird—cold, of course. "Sink your teeth into that," he invited.

"What is it?"

"Grouse."

"But I thought they weren't in season yet."

"Quite right. They open on August the twelfth. There's no law against eating grouse at any time, but it's illegal to kill them before the twelfth."

"How did you get these if you didn't kill 'em?"

"They committed suicide." Malcolm grinned as he tore off a leg.

"Are you kidding?"

"No. The day before you came I took a walk under some new electric cables they've stretched across part of the moor—you know, the grid system. I picked these up below the wires. They'd flown into them and killed themselves. There are always a lot of casualties

when new obstructions are put up. Just as wild animals have their regular tracks birds have their age-old lines of flight. They have no reason to suppose there's suddenly an obstacle in the way and they crash into it before they see it. I think it happens particularly at night. How's your grouse?"

"Fine. Wonderful."

"I chose two young birds. To my way of thinking this is the way grouse should be eaten, on the open heather where you can toss the bones over your shoulder. Here, try a tomato with it."

"I suppose accidents must happen on the hill as well as anywhere else," said Frank, carving another slice of bread.

"You'd be surprised. They happen all the time. Of course, unless you see it happen you rarely know anything about it, because an injured creature hasn't a hope of survival even though, left alone, it might have mended. It doesn't get a chance. It's easy meat for anything that comes along. Maybe, more often than not, it's a merciful ending. I've seen plenty of tragedies."

"Such as?"

Malcolm pulled another joint off his bird. "I once rescued a rabbit that was in a deuce of a mess. Caught in a spate it had climbed up the inside of a hollow tree to escape being drowned. There was a hole half-way up the trunk. Through it the poor beastie had tried to get out. But the hole was too small. It got its head out, and part of its body, but it jammed at the haunches. When I came along it was hanging there upside down, having torn off a circle of bark in its efforts to claw itself free. I managed to get it out and let it go."

"I guess it never knew how lucky it was."

"I guess so, too. Another day I saw a rabbit rolling about in a most amazing fashion. It seemed to be trying to run on three legs. I couldn't think what on earth it was doing. With a little difficulty I caught it and found its rear half lashed up with wire."

"A snare?"

"No. It had got through, or tried to get through, some galvanized wire netting—a wire fence put round a field of roots by a farmer to keep the rabbits out, I imagine. Anyway, the silly beast had got tangled in the wire, and in trying to free itself had broken off some of the wire. This it had pulled tight round its hind legs lashing them together. I had a dickens of a job getting the wire off. It was cutting into the flesh. If I hadn't come along the first dog, stoat, weasel or hawk, would have had it. These tragedies to the wild life must go on all the time. When we were fishing from the bridge did you notice a telephone wire crossing above our heads in a single span?"

"I did."

"That was only put up last year, and the number of birds that killed themselves by flying into it was pretty awful. You see, they'd always had a free passage, and even if they noticed the wire they may not have realized its strength. Ducks, oyster catchers, gulls, even a cormorant, fell victim."

"Does that still happen?"

"Oh no. It doesn't take them long to understand the danger, after which they keep well clear of it." Malcolm threw away the well-picked carcase of his grouse and reached for the cheese. "Had an interesting day?"

"Swell. Wonderful. What's the programme for tomorrow?"

"I thought of walking as far as the Black Loch."

"Why black?"

"Because it is black. Black as ink. Actually, there's nothing much to see when you get there, except that it's a dramatic-looking place, utterly lonely and remote. I don't think anyone goes near it from one year to another."

"What about Donald?"

"You wouldn't get him within a quarter of a mile of it. The first time I went was about four years ago and I made him take me to show me the easiest way of getting to it. He raised every possible objection, making it clear that he was scared of the place. He growled and kicked and squirmed when I tried to get out of him what was wrong. Would he tell me? Not he. At the finish I said, all right, if you don't want to come I'll go alone, using the map and the compass. That shamed him into coming, but I could see he hated it. When we got to the loch, which lies in a deep basin between the surrounding hills, he sat down. 'Well, there it is,' he growled. 'Now you've seen it. But I'll no go doon to it.' And he didn't. I went on alone while he waited."

"Did he never tell you why he wouldn't go near?"

"Of course not. They never will. But it was quite clear to me that he believed the place to be haunted. I could show you many such places. At night you wouldn't get a local man within a mile of them. You'd never get a Highlander to admit he was superstitious. He'll laugh such an idea to scorn. And he may believe that. But I know these people, and I can assure you that they're as full of superstitions as an egg is full of meat. They won't touch this, they won't pick that, something else must never be taken into the house because it's unlucky. Superstition is as firmly rooted in them as this heather is in the peat."

"Queer."

"Not altogether. You see, they believe that the spirits of the dead move about under the ground. Did you ever hear that song. 'You tak the high road and I'll tak the low, and I'll be in Scotland before ye'?"

"Yes. I've heard that."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Come to think of it, no. I took it at its literal meaning."

Malcolm shook his head. "Nothing like it. The song refers to a Highlander who was under sentence of death. His girl went to see him. When he said, you take the high road and I'll take the low, what he was really saying was, my spirit, travelling under the ground, will be back home before you."

There was silence for a few minutes. Then, gazing at the sun setting behind the hills, Malcolm went on: "There is, in one part of the moor, a group of ancient pines. I noticed Donald would never allow me to go near it. Always if we were walking in that direction he would swerve away. One day I kept straight on towards the trees. He fell into an absolute fury, yelling at me to keep away. He stopped. I went on into the trees. What did I find? A great stone with a name carved on it, which I cleared away the moss to read."

"A grave."

"Yes. Donald didn't speak to me for the rest of the day. Later on I went to a man of the same name and asked him about the grave. He was reasonable, and told me that under the stone was buried a chief of the clan, in his tartan fighting outfit, sword in hand, all ready for the last trump. Donald knew that, of course, and while in physical matters he's as brave as a lion he's scared stiff of that dead man's ghost."

"Did you ever find out what's wrong with the Black Loch?"

“Possibly. Years ago there was a notorious outlaw in these parts named the Wolf of Badenoch, Badenoch being the general name for the district higher up the river. One day he led his followers to Elgin, the county town of Morayshire, where, among other things, he burnt down the cathedral. Elgin stands on the river Lossie. The Lossie rises from a spring near the Black Loch. There’s a legend that the Wolf and his gang made camp in the depression that holds the loch the night before he marched on Elgin, which he reached by following the course of the river. That’s all I know, and it may be the reason why the Black Loch is now given a wide berth. To be quite fair, in some strange way these old superstitions are often supported by coincidence. The day I went to the grave in the trees, on the way home I slipped and sprained my ankle. ‘What else did ye expect,’ growled Donald.”

Frank looked at Malcolm suspiciously. “I guess,” he said slowly, “you’re a bit superstitious yourself.”

“Me! Superstitious!” Malcolm laughed. “Don’t be silly. I’m a Highlander.”

Faintly through the gloaming, from afar off, came the plaintive, haunting, wail of pipes. “There’s Angus at it again,” he murmured. “He’s playing The Flowers of the Forest, the lament for those who died in battle.”

Frank shivered. “I can understand you people being superstitious. That sound sends cold water down my back.”

“Maybe because you’re a wee bit Highland yourself,” answered Malcolm.

“I’ll admit it’s spooky sort of country,” breathed Frank, looking round, a little fearfully, at the shades of night fast closing in.

“Talking of water,” returned Malcolm abruptly, getting up, “how about washing the pots and getting to bed.”

Chapter Fourteen

The Black Loch

The night passed without incident, even the cats remaining silent, so as soon as breakfast was over and the animals attended to Malcolm slung his spy-glass and picked up his cromach.

"I shan't take the rifle or the gun today," he said. "They won't be needed. Bring your stick. Are you ready? I've got the sandwiches."

Frank, who had been examining his cairngorm, put the rock that held it in a safe place. "I must say that's a lovely stone," he said, picking up his cromach. "I'll have it made into a brooch for mother."

"It'll cost you something to have it cut," warned Malcolm. "It must be properly done by a lapidary. But only when it has been cut and set in a gold mount will you see the real beauty of it. Come on. We've a long walk ahead although most of it is fairly easy going." He set off up the hill with Frank and the dogs following.

For an hour, after the top of the hill was reached, the going, as Malcolm had promised, was reasonably good. Then, on the edge of a broad, flat expanse of wiry grass, Malcolm stopped. "This is a bad bit," he said. "To go round it would take us miles out of our way. It's quite safe, there is that about it. We call this area The Plains."

"It looks all right to me."

"You may change your mind before we get to the other side. It's about a mile across." Malcolm pointed with his cromach at a V-shaped cleft in the hills on the far side. "That's the point I'm marching on. Keep straight, if you can."

It did not take Frank long to discover why he had been warned to be prepared for something difficult. The grass was thin and growing out of a deep bed of soft, loose, sphagnum moss, into which the legs sank to the knees. This made every step an effort. To walk in the ordinary way was impossible. One foot had to be raised high and placed in front of the other, which then had to be lifted out of the clinging tangle of moss and brought forward. It was like walking on a thick bed of cotton wool. Conversation lapsed. The dogs were soon panting.

The crossing took an hour, and when the friendly heather on the far side was reached, Frank, panting and steaming perspiration, threw himself on it with a gasp of "Thank goodness!"

"Come on a few yards," said Malcolm, who was just as hot. "I know a spring. Let's have a drink. Make haste or the dogs will be in it and stir up the mud."

Frank staggered on, and reaching the spring threw himself down to drink. Malcolm did the same. When they had finished the dogs lay in the water with their long ears afloat, lapping as if their thirst was unquenchable.

Malcolm wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and regarded with disapproval the ground they had covered. "It's dead," he said. "Utterly useless for anything. As you may have noticed there wasn't a living thing on it, not even a grouse. Nothing will nest in it."

"That doesn't surprise me," returned Frank, grimly. "Let's rest for a bit. That sure is tiring stuff. Worse than soft sand. Is there any more of it?"

"Not that we have to cross," answered Malcolm, smiling, as he found a seat on a hump of heather.

"I understand why you don't often go to the loch," growled Frank.

Malcolm laughed. “That’s one of the interesting things about this country. From a distance it all looks alike, but as you see, it isn’t.”

After a pause he went on, pointing along the flank of a hill to their right. “There’s a party of stags moving off. I count nine. We’ve disturbed them.”

After a good look Frank said: “Once or twice you’ve used the word stalker. What exactly is a stalker. Why does Angus Macintyre, the piper we’ve heard, live where he does?”

“A stalker is a man who lives on the high tops among the deer. It’s his job to watch them, count them, check what growth they’ve made, and so on. If you want to shoot one he’s the man who takes you out and shows you the ropes. He can pick out the stag in the herd that has the best head. No man leads a more lonely life, shut in, in winter, sometimes for weeks at a time. Last winter Angus was snowed in for ten weeks. But those who are born to it seem to like the life.”

“What does he find to do all the year round?”

“You’d be surprised what there is to watch, things which people who live in cities know nothing about. The wild creatures are for ever changing their habits to suit the weather. They’re better weather prophets than we are. They have to be if they’re to live. You think the bagpipes have an eerie sound, but to get an idea of what a wild, savage country this really is, you should be here in the late autumn and hear the stags roaring their challenges to each other, to do battle. The parties of stags break up as each one goes off to find his hinds, fighting any other stag he may meet on the way. You can hear the clash of their antlers for miles. The visitors who come in cars and charabancs, never leaving the road, have no idea of what goes on.”

“Do the stags kill each other?”

“Very seldom, although wounds are common. The defeated stag usually knows when he’s licked and retires. Trouble may come if they get their antlers locked, as occasionally happens. If they can’t free themselves they both die. Here, every male must fight for a wife; the grouse, blackcock, cappers, all fight like fury. I’ve often brought a stag close to me by hiding and bashing two sticks together. A stag hearing that thinks it’s another stag answering his challenge and comes along all steamed up for a fight. At the first sign of bad weather the grouse start to pack, too; hundreds of them together. Like black clouds they swarm down to the low ground to raid the stubble for grain. The stooks of corn, if they’re still out, are smothered with them. Everything has to stoke up for the winter, when they know food will be hard, if not impossible, to find. When we see things feeding ravenously people will say, it’s going to be a hard winter. Certainly the wild creatures on the hill are better weather prophets than we are. I’ve proved that. We make mistakes. They don’t. When I see birds streaming from one side of a hill to the other I know the wind is going to change. They know before it happens. Nature has made provision for that.”

“Instinct.”

“Something of the sort.”

“Then why do things become extinct?”

“Because things happen that are not in nature. For instance, I think it was chiefly due to the disappearance of the trees, millions of which have been cut in two world wars, that caused the pine marten to become almost extinct. In fact, I read in a magazine that it *was* extinct, but I wrote and denied it. Certainly there are very few left in a wild state, but I think they’re coming back now, like the capper, because more trees are being grown. The pine marten lives in trees. With no trees he was an easy mark for the hunter. Fortunately, a gentleman living in Kingussie

could see what was going to happen and bred a few in captivity. Later, he released them. But I'm afraid the poor beast is having a hard time. Its pelt is very like that of the sable, which it resembles, for which reason a good pelt is a valuable fur. That, naturally, is a temptation for people who don't care about nature, to shoot them, or trap them. The new Forestry Commission plantations may save them. We have a pair on our ground. I've only seen them twice, but I've spotted their tracks in the snow so I know they're about. Like the fox it has the unfortunate habit of raiding a farmyard for a chicken, and I'm afraid ours may lose their lives by stepping in a trap put down for rats."

"That would be a pity."

"One thing we still have which I'm told has been pretty well wiped out in England and that is the old red squirrel. They say the imported grey ones have killed them. Man's interference again. I hear the greys have worked their way as far north as Perth, which means it's only a question of time before we have them here. I hope not, because, as they kill thousands of young birds, we may lose some of ours that are already rare. But it's time we pushed on. We still have some way to go. Come on you girls—out of that water."

Malcolm struck off across slightly rising ground towards the cleft in the hills previously noted. The heather was short, with firm ground underfoot but with increasing outcrops of grey rock. There were places where it was piled high and it became necessary to make detours to avoid it.

After some minutes of this Malcolm stopped, holding up a hand.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"Did you ever see the death dance of a weasel?"

"No."

"Look. Straight ahead."

Frank looked. Some seventy yards or so in front, on a piece of open ground, a small brown animal was leaping high into the air in a series of acrobatic twists and turns, for which, apparently, there was no reason.

"What's it doing?"

"Mesmerizing a rabbit. There must be one close. It won't move. It can't, although at every jump that little brown devil is getting nearer to it."

The dogs were standing tense, alert, quivering, noses pointing.

"Get it," snapped Malcolm, and they raced forward, the boys trying to keep pace. But the weasel saw them coming and in a flash had darted into a crack in a big cairn of loose rocks, leaving them unable to follow.

"We shan't get it out of there," said Malcolm. "Those little brutes are one of the few things I really hate."

Susan appeared from the heather with a rabbit in her mouth. She put it down at Malcolm's feet. Unharmed, it remained still.

"What are you doing? I don't want that," said Malcolm sharply, to Susan.

Sheila appeared with another rabbit. She put it down and looked at Malcolm inquiringly.

"Leave it," said Malcolm sharply, and threw the rabbits on one side. They remained where they had fallen, their eyes showing the whites.

"You see," said Malcolm to Frank. "They're petrified." After a few minutes he shooed the rabbits away. They went slowly, as if their limbs were made of lead.

"That's the effect a weasel has on them," explained Malcolm. "They'll have recovered and moved off before the weasel reappears, I hope."

"It's pathetic," was all Frank could find to say. "Where is that little beast?" he went on suddenly, in a fit of anger, and striding up to the cairn thrust in his stick between two blocks of stone for as far as it would go. "Come out and try to mesmerize me, you little brute," he shouted.

The next instant, with a loud cry of alarm, he was staggering back as from a cavity somewhere in the rocks leapt a brindle-grey mass of spitting snarling fury, fangs bared, stiff legged, back arched, bristling, every hair on end. For a moment it stood there, on the topmost rock, the very embodiment of demoniac rage, hate and evil. Then it leapt down the far side of the cairn and presently could be seen bounding towards the nearest hill taking everything in its giant strides.

Malcolm, convulsed with laughter, was at the same time shouting at the dogs to stop the frenzied barking which the appearance of the cat had produced. When he had succeeded in this he sank down helplessly, rocking, his face in his hands.

"What's so funny," demanded Frank wrathfully.

"You should have seen your face," Malcolm managed to get out, between sobs.

"I thought that vicious devil was going to spring at me," muttered Frank, still angry.

"It might have done, too, had the dogs not been here," answered Malcolm, suddenly serious. "If it had it might have torn your eyes out. They always go for the face."

Frank, still slightly pale from shock, saw the funny side, and smiled weakly. "I wasn't expecting anything like that," he explained.

"It was probably having a nap. They hunt mostly at night. Let's be fair. You'd be furious if, just as you'd dropped off to sleep, somebody poked a stick in your ribs." Malcolm got up. "After that engaging little interlude we'd better push on."

"I must admit it shook me," confessed Frank, as they resumed their march. "Not in my wildest nightmare could I have imagined such a ferocious beast."

"I warned you that our cats, although not as big as some, make up in courage for what they lack in size," reminded Malcolm.

"Brother, are you telling me," returned Frank, soberly.

After a walk of about half an hour, made at good speed over easy ground, Malcolm stopped at the brink of a steep declivity and pointed down with his cromach. "There it is," he announced. "The Black Loch."

Far below, surrounded on all sides by purple slopes that seemed to reach half-way to the sky, lay a perfectly circular pool, perhaps a hundred yards in diameter, of what might have been tar, so black and still was it. Not a ripple ruffled its sinister surface. The only living creature to be seen was a grey heron which, standing on a rock at the edge of the water with beak sunk and shoulders hunched, was regarding the loch with the gravity of a judge. It might have been part of the rock itself, so motionless did it stand. For the rest, the scene was as lifeless as a photograph. Not a sound broke a brooding silence. The atmosphere created was one of utter and complete isolation.

"I would say," remarked Malcolm pensively, "that we are at this moment as far away from another human being as would be possible in Britain."

"Are we going down to it?" asked Frank, after contemplating the picture.

"If you like, although there isn't really much point in it. You can see what the heather on the slope is like. It would be easy to go down, but getting back up here would be an awful drag—worse for the dogs than for us."

"There's nothing there?"

"Nothing. I don't know why, but even the wild things that like solitude seem to avoid the place."

"Are there any fish in the loch?"

"According to Donald a few small black trout. They're small, I suppose, because there's no feed for them. Some insects in summer, perhaps, that's about all. I suggest we walk along to the spring and eat our lunch. It's only a short distance, just below the lip of the crater—which is what this depression is, I imagine."

As they moved on Malcolm again pointed with his stick at a conspicuous rock, stood on end, on the top of the hill immediately opposite. "That's our march—that is, our boundary," he informed. "At that point the grounds of several lairds meet."

"I don't see any fences."

"Nobody troubles to fence. It would cost a fortune and could serve no useful purpose, anyway. No one, as far as I know, ever comes here. The nearest house is our Lodge, and you know how far away that is."

Reaching the spring, a tiny silver thread oozing from a shelf of rock, sitting in the heather they unpacked their sandwiches. They were eaten in silence, the dogs, having had a drink, at their feet watching hopefully for scraps, panting in the fierce heat of a relentless sun. Only one remark was made. Malcolm, indicating a tiny black speck that was describing wide circles high in the blue sky, said: "Eagle."

The meal finished Frank got up and for no particular reason wandered off along the side of the crater.

"Don't go far. Keep in sight," warned Malcolm.

A few minutes later Frank was calling. Malcolm hurried to join him. "What is it?"

"A cave. And there's something in it."

Malcolm strode up and surveyed what turned out to be a shallow excavation in the side of the hill, the entrance supported by a rough arch of rocks. On the ground inside lay a large metal bowl, the remains of a small cask, and a length of twisted copper pipe. There were the dead ashes of a fire. Above it the roof had been blackened by smoke.

A slow smile spread over Malcolm's face. "What do you think you've found?"

"A prehistoric home."

Malcolm shook his head. "There's nothing prehistoric about this, or even historic. I can tell you what this is—or was. An illicit whisky still. I wonder if this is what gave the place a bad name, and caused people to keep well clear."

"Why come all this way to make whisky?"

"I'll tell you. There was a good reason. Whisky, our national drink, has of course long been made in Scotland. In olden times most farmhouses had a still. When a hundred years or more ago, the government put a tax on it, and sent Customs men to watch, there was a fine old row. You can guess what happened. The people took their stills to some remote place and continued making illegal whisky. There was a big demand for the stuff in the south so quite a traffic went on. Several tracks across the mountains are still known as smugglers' roads. The stuff was put into casks which were carried by ponies, cross-country, avoiding all roads, to Perth, where it was sold. The smugglers moved in gangs, and they were a tough lot, as you can imagine. Tales are still told of the battles that went on between them and the preventive men who sometimes waylaid them. The smugglers used to carry a hare's leg, the hollow bone, to form a tube. It they met anyone they forced him to suck up some of the whisky through the tube, because that made him an accessory. In court, as a witness, he would have to admit that

he had drunk some of the whisky. The smugglers only moved by night, hiding up during the day. There were some dark goings on in the Highlands in those days, I can tell you."

"What a racket!" breathed Frank, grinning.

"America wasn't the first country to have a liquor racket," returned Malcolm, smiling. "This place seems to have been one of the secret stills, or a halting place on the way to the south."

"Jolly good place, too."

"I'll bet Donald knows about this. He wouldn't tell me. No oyster can keep as tight as a Highlander. Donald's grandfather probably had many a swig of whisky as the smugglers crossed his ground."

"What happened at the finish? Does the racket still go on?"

"It might. It certainly went on until fairly recently, but one seldom hears of an illicit still being found these days."

"The same sort of thing went on in Ireland."

"So I believe. Here the Customs men finally won, as they were bound to. The end really came when the game became no longer worth while. Some of the farmers, who are now famous distillers, applied for a licence and went into the business honestly." Malcolm laughed. "But that isn't to say a dram or two doesn't leak out through the back door, so to speak. After all, the men who work in the distilleries are still Highlanders. But it's time we were starting back. Take a piece of that pipe with you for a souvenir. We'll pull old Donald's leg about it when he shows up. I expect he'll be along to see if we're all right."

The journey back to the hut began.

Chapter Fifteen

The Storm

Three days passed, smoothly, easily, in comfort and in pleasure. Short excursions were made with no other object than to lie at various points of vantage watching the habits of the wild life with which the hills abounded. The weather remained perfect, with a cloud a rare visitor in a sky of azure blue. Larks trilled constantly, and the heather, now in full bloom, buzzed with bees collecting pollen for their winter store. Every evening a dish of trout helped the fast-dwindling food supply, for the life was conducive to healthy appetites.

One day they picked up a leveret that had just been killed by a stoat. It was taken to the hut where it was skinned, jointed, and boiled for the dogs, the bones having first been removed. Malcolm shot a brace of woodcock in some bracken on the edge of a bog, and Frank was surprised to observe that neither of the dogs would pick them up. They marked them but would not touch them, turning away with noses wrinkled in disgust.

"That's another little mystery I've never been able to solve," said Malcolm, as the two birds sizzled on skewers of birch over the fire. "To me a woodcock smells much the same as any other game-bird, but few dogs will touch them. I once put one in old Sheila's mouth and she spat it out with such an expression of revulsion that I had to laugh. For a minute or two she walked about sliding her muzzle in the heather to get rid of the taste or the smell. It's the same with golden plover. I've never known a dog pick one up. To dogs there must be something nauseating about certain birds, which is all the more odd when you think of the muck they don't mind sniffing."

Most of all Frank enjoyed the solemn hours of the gloaming, when silence settled over the land, lying in the heather watching the world turn to gold and crimson in the glow of the setting sun. The hilltops seemed to turn to fire. Always for a few minutes, as the great red disc of the sun sank into the western hills, in a hush that was profound, everything was painted a lurid crimson, the hills, the hut, the dogs, even themselves.

One such evening they had a graphic example of how swiftly death could strike. They were watching a kestrel hover, taking advantage of an invisible up-current of air caused by the side of the corrie, when it was approached by a blackbird screaming abuse. The kestrel moved on disdainfully, but the blackbird, with more confidence than sense, followed, still hurling insults. The hawk bore this for a time and then appeared suddenly to lose patience. It was all over in an instant. Whirling in its own length the kestrel flew at the smaller bird. There was a despairing shriek, a little cloud of black feathers, and the hawk flew on, the blackbird, dead, hanging in its talons. The kestrel flew on a little way, settled on a rock and proceeded to tear the stupid blackbird to pieces.

"Got him," Frank had muttered, as the mid-air collision occurred.

"Well, the blackbird certainly asked for what it got," remarked Malcolm philosophically. "That's what you get here if you open your mouth too wide. Blackbirds often flock together to mob a fox or cat. The animals not having wings, that's understandable. But why they should take chances, as they sometimes do, with their chief enemies, seems daft. It's like me or you beating a tiger with a stick. Incidentally, the war against winged vermin, as the hawk tribe is classed, did our song birds a good turn. The blackbirds, thrushes and larks, have increased enormously."

"They won't go on increasing if they start behaving as that fool bird did just now," predicted Frank, lugubriously.

"I haven't seen any lately, but one of the smartest hawks we have is the merlin," went on Malcolm. "He's only a little fellow not much larger than a thrush, but can he fly! And he's afraid of nothing. Nor for that matter is the hen-harrier. It's a wonderful sight to see one stoop at a brood of grouse on the wing. Grouse can fly fast, but they've no hope against a harrier. Down it goes like a bullet, straight through the grouse, and *bang*! down goes a grouse with its head neatly chopped off."

Such conversations as this passed the time pleasantly.

About noon of the fourth day Donald appeared, gun under arm, across his back two bulging game-bags from which presently were unloaded fresh milk, eggs, bread and butter and a piece of cold salmon. There was also some roughly cut up meat for the dogs. "Your mother was thinking you might be running short," remarked the old gamekeeper, his leathery face breaking into a smile.

"Quite right," returned Malcolm. "On these jaunts I always underestimate how much I can eat."

Said Donald, somewhat inappropriately, Frank thought: "The birds are as wild as hawks." He spoke meaningly.

"You think there's going to be a change in the weather?" rejoined Malcolm quickly, apparently grasping the implication.

"Aye. I'd think that. This heat will break with a muckle starm."

Malcolm explained to Frank. "The birds always get wild and unsettled when there's a storm on the way."

"What have you been doing?" asked Donald, filling a well-smoked pipe.

Malcolm told him about the eagles and the cats; but he noticed that while he was talking the keeper's eyes were on the piece of pipe Frank had brought from the old secret still.

"Where did ye get that?" Donald wanted to know, at the end, his eyes full of suspicion.

"Where do you think?"

"The Black Loch?"

"Aye."

"So you found it at last."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

Donald looked round furtively as if expecting an eavesdropper. "It's best not to talk about some things," he muttered.

"Nonsense. Those days are past."

"Mebbe—mebbe. But I wouldna be too sure o' that. I mind the days there was wild goings on in yon hollow."

Said Malcolm to Frank, with a sidelong glance. "You see? He's still canny. He can't forget the past."

"I ken the day knives were out at yon Loch," stated Donald, grimly. "It's a bad place for any mon to bide."

"Forget it, Donald," answered Malcolm impatiently. "What do you think of this cairngorm we've found. Show him, Frank."

Frank fetched the rock. Donald examined the stone critically. "Aye, it's a richt bonny one, is that," he conceded.

"If you're going home with an empty bag you might take it with you, and maybe get the stone out of the rock by the time we get back."

"Aye. I'll do that." Donald shouldered his bag, the rock in it, and departed. His last words were: "Keep an eye on the weather. I wouldna trust it. It'll be a muckle starm when it comes, I'm thinkin'."

Frank was to remember that. He was also to learn the meaning of the word 'muckle'.

It was three days later, before he was out of his hammock, that he heard a long, distant rumble. Malcolm heard it, too, for he was out in a moment, looking at the sky. The whole of the western area was a livid, ominous shade of indigo. Broods of grouse were heading eastwards.

"Pack up," he said, tersely. "Let's go."

"What's the hurry?"

"Plenty," answered Malcolm, tersely. "We've those burns to cross, and a delay will mean we won't be able to get across. Hark at them. They're beginning to talk already."

Frank looked at the little stream just below the hut. It looked the same as usual but there was a curious urgent note in the noise it was making. Another peal of thunder set him moving quickly. A flash of blue lightning zig-zagged against the indigo cloud.

"It won't be here for some time yet," he opined, casually.

"It won't have to get here to beat us," replied Malcolm, curtly. "Give me a hand with these panniers."

There were many things to do before Malcolm had put up the shutters, locked the door of the hut, and after a last look round to make sure nothing had been forgotten took Jeanie's headrope and said briskly: "Let's awa' hame, lass."

The thunder came again, nearer. Malcolm strode on, the animals putting their best foot forward. "They know what's on the way," he told Frank. "Keep going. Every minute may make all the difference."

They reached the old house at Altihoisch to find the burn a black, rushing, boiling torrent. The masses of floating foam were as black as the water itself. "Follow me," shouted Malcolm. "This is the best place. There's a gravel bottom here. Use your cromach." So saying he strode into the burn, the water which, on the way out, had barely covered his shoes, now reaching to his waist. For the first time Frank realized fully the need for haste.

They were half-way up the long slope to the stag-path when the storm struck them in a screaming whirlwind of flying water. In an instant the landscape was blotted out, visibility being reduced to a few yards.

"Don't lose sight of me," shouted Malcolm over his shoulder. "If I'm going too fast, yell. Get hold of Jeanie's tail and hang on to it."

Half blinded by the lashing rain Frank struggled on through a world that seemed suddenly to have turned to water. It poured down his face, down his neck, down his legs. Water poured down the hillside, turning the hare track Malcolm was following into a river with a greasy bottom. Panting he heard Malcolm shout: "Okay. Here's the deer path. Level going now. Keep close."

What, on the way out had been a pleasant jaunt, now became a nightmare. Thunder crashed. Lightning flashed as if all the artillery in the world had opened fire. The track was a bog of soaking peat into which the feet sank, squelching, to half-way up the calf. Frank thought the path would never end. How Malcolm found his way was beyond his imagination.

Slipping, sliding, stumbling and occasionally falling he struggled on. Finding himself lagging he called.

Malcolm stopped to wait for him. Said he, shaking water from his face: “Imagine you were alone and this rain was snow. Which way would you go?”

Frank pointed: “Straight on.”

“You’d have thirty miles of nothing in front of you and then fall over a cliff into the sea,” replied Malcolm, grimly. “You’re seeing two sides of the picture and this one isn’t so good.”

“Are you telling me!”

“This way.” Malcolm turned sharply to the right and headed downhill.

“How are you going to get the dogs across the burn if it’s in spate?”

“You’ll see.”

“Why don’t you put collars on them so we could help them?”

“Our dogs don’t wear collars. For one thing there’s no need, and for another it would be asking for trouble.”

“How? Why?”

“A dog hunting in rough stuff can get a stick or a branch under a collar. That fixes him. He either chokes himself trying to get free or he dies of starvation.”

Frank did not reply, having had his answer.

Soon after this there came the sound of a muffled gunshot somewhere ahead.

“That’s Donald, guiding us to the burn in case we’re off course,” announced Malcolm.

Five minutes later there was another shot, not far away.

Malcolm hailed, and a few minutes later they came upon Donald standing on their side of the burn. His weather-beaten face cracked into a smile when he saw them. “I guessed you’d be awa’ hame,” he said. “I’ve fixed a rope.”

Frank saw that a stake had been driven in the ground on both sides of the burn. Between them a rope had been stretched taut. As for the burn, he could only stare at it in horror and amazement. It was an inky, madly rushing torrent, three times as wide as when he had last seen it. A dead sheep floated past.

“Make haste,” said Donald shortly. “She’s still growing.” He threw his two game-bags on the ground and opened them wide. “Come awa’ little bitches,” he ordered.

It was obvious that the dogs knew exactly what to do. They worried themselves into the bags. Donald fastened the covers, leaving only their heads protruding. This done he shouldered the bags, one each side, and walked into the flood on the upstream side of the rope. The water came to above his waist. Having crossed, dropping the bags he picked up a cromach and held the crook out over the water for as far as he could reach.

“Over you go, Frank,” ordered Malcolm. “Hook the crook of your cromach through Donald’s as soon as you can reach it and he’ll pull you in should you be swept off your feet. Hang on to your cromach.”

Frank obeyed the instructions, and after a struggle managed to get across, Donald with scant ceremony hauling him up the bank. By that time Malcolm had unfastened the rope on his side of the burn and attached it to Jeanie’s head collar. “Come on old lady,” he told the pony, cheerfully, as, stooping, Donald picked up his end of the rope and pulled. Malcolm, being lighter than Frank, was swept off his feet, but he hung on to Jeanie’s tail and was dragged to safety. The dogs, released from their bags, shook themselves as if nothing extraordinary had happened and waited for instructions.

“Come on,” Malcolm told Frank. “We haven’t far to go. What do you think of the Highlands now?”

“I still think it’s grand. You wouldn’t expect a little thing like this to make me change my mind—I hope.”

“Not if you’re the fellow I took you for. Personally, I always get a kick, a feeling of elation, when I’m fighting the weather. It makes me feel I’m a man.”

“It sure is a man’s country,” confirmed Frank.

The remainder of the march home was really plain sailing, although that is not to say it was comfortable. The Forestry Commission was a gloomy, depressing place, very different from when they had passed through it on the way to the hill. A sullen, steady roar, became audible.

“What’s that noise I can hear?” asked Frank, as they trudged on down the slope towards the road. “Is it the wind?”

“No, it’s the river,” answered Malcolm. “She’s in roaring spate, and unless this rain stops soon she’ll be over her banks. That puts paid to any idea of fishing for a few days, unless you feel like dropping a worm in a quiet backwater. The fish will pack into such places to get out of the current.”

Presently, when the river came into view, Frank could only stare at it aghast. Filling its bed to the top of its banks it was tearing along, foam flecked, and throwing up clouds of spray, in a series of curling waves. The noise it made was frightening. He made a remark to that effect.

“You should see it in early spring when we get the first thaw and it’s bringing down masses of ice from the high tops. You daren’t go near it then. Two masses of ice will squeeze another piece so that it flies clean out of the river—like a wet orange pip between your finger and thumb.”

Frank was remembering some of the things Malcolm had said on the hill. “Imagine if this was snow . . . what if you were alone. . . ?”

The road was reached, and a few minutes later the little cavalcade turned into the yard.

“All right you boys, you can leave this to me,” said Donald gruffly. “I’ll take care of things.”

“Give the dogs a rub down. I’ll be out to them later.”

“Aye. I’ll do that. They’ve plenty of fresh straw.” Donald felt in his pocket and took out a long, hexagonal-shaped crystal, that seemed to glow with hidden fires. He handed it to Frank. “Yon’s a richt bonny stone,” he said. Then, smiling: “Ye’ll remember the day, na doot.”

“I shall never forget it. Thanks, Donald.”

As they turned away Malcolm said to Donald: “And thanks for coming up to see us across the burn. Help yourself to a dram of whisky. You know where it’s kept.”

“I will that,” rejoined the gamekeeper. “It’s a braw day the noo.”

The boys went in through the side door. Malcolm’s mother was waiting. “Don’t stay and talk now,” she advised. “Get upstairs to your baths. They’re all ready. Throw your wet clothes out. Margaret will pick them up and take them to the drying room. I’ll have some hot soup waiting by the time you come down. How are you enjoying your holiday, Frank?”

“The best I ever had,” declared Frank, enthusiastically, as he turned to follow Malcolm to the bathroom.

[The end of *Where the Golden Eagle Soars* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]