

each, secretly, given up hope of reaching camp that night, neither would openly admit the thought. Our exhaustion was just muscular. So 'Go slow,' urged Mortimer. 'Halt often,' said I. This counsel of conservation saved us. Mortimer, whom I admire as a man of spirit and untold energy, would never, I said to myself, admit failure. So neither would I, as yet. I had got to the clenched-jaw stage, consciously forcing each step, when at last our stream ran out on open, undulating hill-slopes. They were exposed to wind and the snow lay lighter—a mere twelve inches. Our uncertainty of the route cleared away when the River Mhic Nobuil appeared black and foaming in the torch-beam. As we followed the three-mile course down the glen the falling snow gave place to sleet, and sleet to pelting rain. We made camp at 9 p.m.

Our sodden clothes would have flooded the floor of the tent had we gone in. So we stripped to the skin in the wind and darkness, then dived inside to pull on dry sweaters and sleeping-bags. We heard the music of a purring primus, watched pure snow change in the pot to grey slush, then to bubbling clarity . . . we brewed up.

We were silent over our mugs, each preoccupied for a while with his own thoughts about that tough, thirteen-hour job on Liathach. Our thoughts, it appeared, were short and simple.

'She iss machestic!' exclaimed Mortimer at last.

'But she iss not to be tampered with,' I added.

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The Moor of Rannoch

THE FAMOUS HEAT-WAVE of June 1949 persisted into July. The drought afflicting the whole country became chronic. West highland villages had to get water brought in by carrier, and that was something I had not heard of before. Conditions for rock-climbing had never been better: I could think of some new routes that I wanted to try. And yet—I thought also of the Moor of Rannoch. It is the greatest moor in Scotland, one of the most accessible too, yet curiously enough the least explored. It is vast and trackless. Perhaps that intimidates walkers? While mountaineers, who like deserts if they like anything, notoriously prefer their deserts vertical.

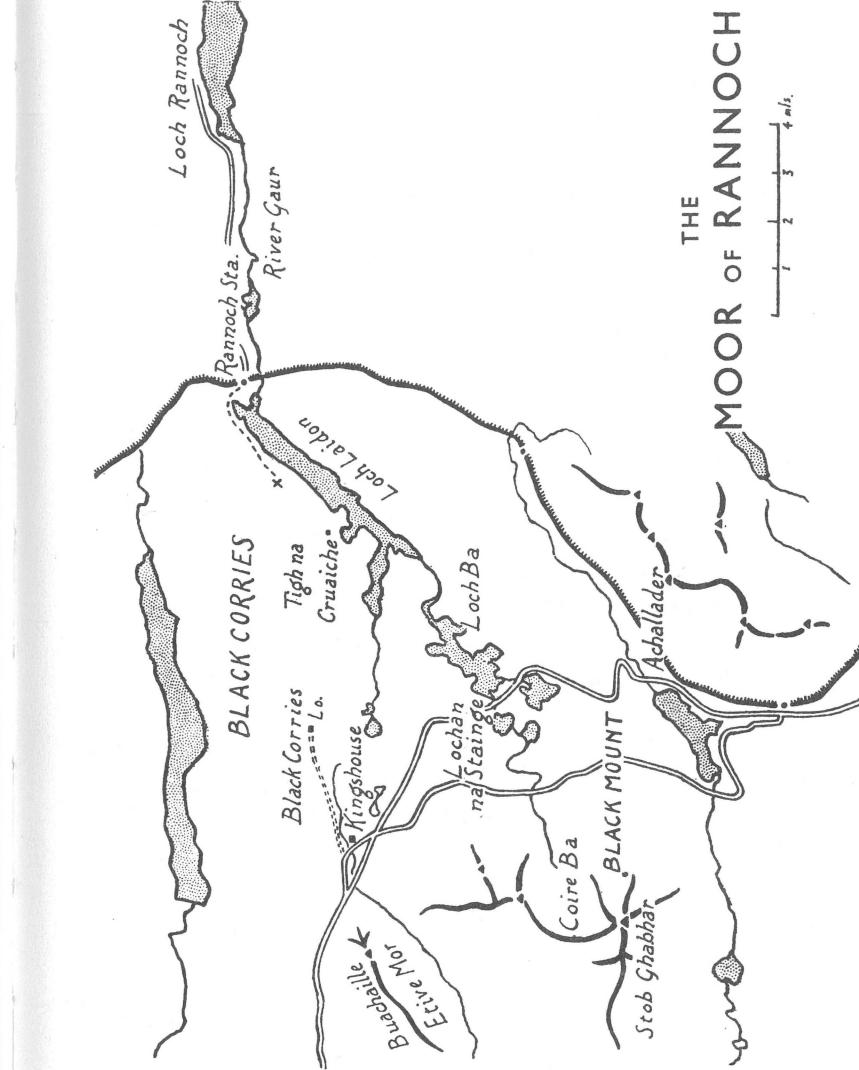
Too long had I been counted among the latter. At first, while my ignorance was darkest and heaviest, Rannoch Moor was damned just because it was flat—that was enough! Later, when cold reason was admitted to my counsels, it was damned because it was bleak, bare, featureless, and quite excessively extensive, therefore no fit place for a hill-lover, to whom a peak is paradise; and no whit short of hell in foul weather, when damp mists sink on to it, prospectless, and the bogs are full, or when snow-winds scourge it. So that in the end Rannoch Moor had to conquer me through my heart, and reason had to *follow* perception, not lead. Which is just. It was that eastern view from the Glencoe summits that won me—the sparkle of the numberless tarns at noon—the phosphorescent gleam of their night-eyes—the spike of Schichallion pushing up beyond blue haze at the farther rim, thirty miles away. I had been fascinated, too, by the distant sight of wild swans and great flights of smaller birds coming on to Loch Ba and Loch Laidon, which stretch in a linked waterway ten miles across the moor.

The scene from my watch-tower on the Buachaille showed

me that the most interesting way of crossing the moor would be to keep close to the main chain of waterways, which rise in the Blackmount at Coire Ba of Stob Ghabhar, and run east through Lochan na Stainge, Loch Ba, and the five miles of Loch Laidon to Loch Rannoch—a distance of fifteen miles. Loch Rannoch continues beyond the moor fifteen miles to Schichallion, thence by the Tummel and Tay to the North Sea. The moor's northern boundary is the group of low hills called the Black Corries, the south boundary the high group of Achallader. Its entire area is said to be fifty-six square miles. My reason, now stripped of its old prejudice, informed me that from the centre of this unvisited moorland all the mountains circling round its rims would be seen anew, and charms not as yet known to me revealed. And of the moor's own secrets what did I really know? Not a thing.

On an evening of mid-July I arrived by road at the south-west side of the moor and camped between Lochan na Stainge and Loch Ba. I came alone. Let me confess at once that I prefer being alone among hills, provided that I am not climbing in the technical sense; prefer it also on moors, unless in dirty weather. But on this occasion I was not quite alone. I had as company a Golden Labrador bitch called Heather. She is a fine mountaineer with sufficient tops to her credit and ability enough on rock and snow to satisfy the Scrutinising Committee of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, from membership of which club she is disqualified only by sex. Her big black pads give her a grip on slabs and a quick, confident technique superior to that of her envious owner. Like me she is twice as much alive among hills as at sea level. And she doesn't talk. She just looks; which is quite enough.

We pitched the tent well to the east of Loch Ba because damp grey mist was rising off all the lochans. The day had been very hot. The fog, however, in appearance if not in temperature, was much like a mid-winter's ground mist. It cohered in banks, gently rolling sometimes this way and sometimes that, for no apparent reason—the night being windless. The sinuous sway



of its forms would have been a perfect medium for the weird display of light had only the moon been full. But the stars were strong in a black sky and the mists greyly chill.

I had deliberately pitched the tent on top of thick heather and thus had a springy couch under me for my night's sleep. The other Heather curled up at my feet. After the experimental nibbles at my toes were over she made an excellent hot-water bottle.

We rose at sunrise. Not a trace of mist remained; nor was there any cloud in the sky. So striking was the latter fact that I realized how often in the past I must have talked about cloudless skies without ever having spoken strict truth, save in reference to a narrow view from close country. In the wider mountain skyscape, always, in some quarter of that mountain sky there has been cloud, perhaps a long bar of cumulus low down at the horizon, or a few puffs glimpsed through a pass. But to-day east, north, west, and south—clear sky, peculiarly and luminously empty like a heavenly vacuum. From behind the blue a colourless radiance shone, more than usually suggestive of infinite space and of the reality of that infinity. Provided that this were seen at all there could be engendered only one attitude of mind, that of a reverential awe.

After sharing the dog's breakfast I struck camp and left the tent at the roadside to be collected later by passing friends. By six we were away. The early start was necessary because I intended to make a double traverse—ten miles north-east to Rannoch station, then thirteen miles west back to Kingshouse, Glencoe—and because I had a strong suspicion that distances on Rannoch Moor were to be measured in time, not miles.

The first passage along the east side of Loch Ba gave us the heaviest going of the day; the heather was longer there and the ground broken by hummocky ridges and old water-courses. A short and twisting river linked Loch Ba to Loch Laidon. It was at these two ends of the two lochs that I had seen wild swans fly in and duck come down among the heather. In the breeding season black- and red-throated divers visit the lochs and behave

like submarines when alarmed, slowly submerging until only the head and neck remain above water, like a periscope. The wide mosses farther away from the lochs harbour greenshanks. And that is the limit of my knowledge about Rannoch bird life, which is certain to be very much more extensive than I ever dream. These lochs would repay the bird-watcher. I should be most interested to know, for example, what birds find food or shelter on the wooded islands. They are small islands, well wooded with birch, yew, and pine—indicating that Rannoch Moor might yet revert to its Old Wood of Caledon days were it not for the hungry deer. I should like to be spared the wolves, the brown bear, the boar, and the outlawed brigands, but the natural forest that sheltered them I would have back if I could. New growth seems to flourish on the water-protected isles, which are inaccessible except to a man prepared to swim a hundred yards—and, if he wants to botanize or bird-watch, to push a raft with his clothing in front of him.

On reaching Loch Laidon I thought that the ground improved, although a certain amount of leaping from tuft to tuft was still part of the day's work. On the other hand there were surprisingly few peat-hags. I remember no more than one or two, still exposing the bare bones of the Old Wood, but I imagine that in other parts of the moor they must be abundant. On the line I chose, always close to the loch, the moor was well drained, and over its whole area I judge it to be equally well drained by the countless tarns. I met no bogs. One gets across in dry weather with dry feet.

Admittedly we had the moor in perfect condition. A west wind was blowing, of the kind we may truly call a zephyr, but the heat was semi-tropical, and away from the waterways must have been as consumingly fierce as the south Syrian desert. Unlike Loch Ba, Loch Laidon had a fairly straight margin: we could travel close to the shore, which we found indented by innumerable tiny bays. These were filled with a clean and gravelly sand, most tempting on a hot day. We had one bathe near the start, and ten minutes later, feeling as hot as ever, we

had another. There were going to be more. Faced with the personal example of Heather's ever-readiness, I began to see my own repeated dressing and undressing as a pointless waste of time. There was little or no chance of meeting any one during the day. So I stripped once and for all and stuffed my clothes into my rucksack. The zephyr could now get at my skin, and the need for frequent dips became less urgent.

But for the bays our day would fast have become a sheer trial of endurance—worse by far for Heather than for me, her great handicap being fur and a lack of sweat-glands. During the first few hours' enthusiasm she covered three times as much ground as I, ranging out eastwards in wide circles. I let her do this to see what game she might start up. It astonished me that she drew a blank. Not one hare, not a rabbit or grouse, did she raise—absolutely nothing. The moor at this time of day seems to be bare of all animal life. Throughout our traverse I never once set eyes on a deer, although every winter great herds congregate by the roadside. I assumed that they would all be up in the corries of the Blackmount. The lack of other life is stranger.

We came to the north-east end of Loch Laidon where the River Gaur flowed out sharply right towards Loch Rannoch. The river must have been fifty yards wide. I hoped that it might be all the shallower on that account, and tried to get across by wading, my rucksack balanced on my head. Before I was a third of the way over the water had crept up to my chin, and by natural buoyancy my body was tending to float and capsize. Since the water looked much deeper and swifter in front, I came back and moved on a few hundred yards, then tried again with no more success. In the end we had to make a half-mile detour downstream to a ford, where a line of great boulders offered a dry route. After all my vain efforts to wade I was determined to wade at the last, and did so through chest-deep water. On the other hand Heather, who had already swum the river twice, and been forced each time to return in high dudgeon because I had failed to follow, was determined that since the ford was now

found she would use it. She bounded clumsily on the polished boulders, not being able to get a good purchase on them with her wet paws, and landing each time in a splashing sprawl. But she was over long before I was.

We had now been going four hours. Cutting out the last few hundred yards to Rannoch station we rounded the head of Loch Laidon. There we struck an excellent track going half a mile back along the farther shore, *en route* to Kingshouse, then suddenly degenerating into a mere sheep-track. This northern shore was decidedly pleasanter than the southern shore. The sun was shining in front instead of behind, and there were wild flowers by the path. One little bay was full of water-lilies, and another, about a mile down the loch, had the best of all the sandy beaches. We turned aside on to the latter. It was backed by short granite crags, and covered deeply in coarse clean sand, on to which the sun had been beating several hours daily for a month. It was hot to lie on. There I lay, my back upon the warm granite, and lunched with Heather. On this side of the loch the shore shelved more steeply; one could dive in after a knee-deep wade. From time to time one or the other of us would rise and go down to the water for a plunge, then come back and sprawl. An hour passed away. We just luxuriated. Sometimes I would wonder whether to have one more swim in those blue waters or to go on towards the wide, sunlit corries of the Blackmount, or to the glens of Glencoe where the peaks were darkening against the sun. The walk to Kingshouse would certainly be the shorter, and even so was consuming time in a way that I had not believed possible. Twelve more miles, said the map? I had better allow six hours for it.

In due course we continued three miles up the loch-side, until at the ruined cottage called Tigh na Cruaiche the track swung away to the west, aiming straight for Glencoe. The so-called 'track' had long since become a purely imaginary line on the map, having no basis in a present reality. At the south wall of the ruin a barn still provides roof and shelter in foul weather. I could think of no better headquarters for a natural historian

bent on adventure, or for bird-watchers or fishermen; for only a hundred feet below, a great bay of the loch contains seven islands, two of which are well wooded. No one will find comfort at Tigh na Cruaiche; only bare shelter and perfect solitude.

We had still to cover four and a half miles to reach the Black Corries Lodge. This part of the day we both found most exhausting. Heather was now following close to heel of her own free will. For my part I found the ground badly folded and the heather too thick. Only now was the day-long breeze strengthening and beginning to feel rather too cool on my unprotected skin, so that when the lodge came into sight I was glad enough to put on clothing. The average height of the moor is a thousand feet; the lodge around twelve hundred: it thus commands a wondrously wide prospect across Loch Ba to the Blackmount. Had the tarns all been tiny the moor might have resembled a cratered battlefield; but the waters were broad and long enough to add beauty to desolation, both of their kind matchless. The circling hills of the east and west Blackmount, and the deep ranks of Glencoe, were in proper perspective, full in stature, clean-carved by corrie and glen, a deep and dusky blue in the hollows. I realized that not until this day had I ever seen the Glencoe hills as they really are. From the glen itself the mountains are sadly foreshortened, but this fact is never guessed, never realized, until one goes miles out on to Rannoch Moor.

I have no especial love for road-walking—a road is a tyrant, directing a man in ways planned for him, and most wearing on climbing-nails, which are costly. But I have a good word to say for the road from Black Corries Lodge to Kingshouse: it is only four miles and downhill all the way. I could appreciate that, in the circumstances. I was very tired. And a good dinner being only one hour away, I found myself still full of enthusiasm for the moor of Rannoch; for its own sake as well as for its new revelation of old hills. At last I knew it—and at that checked myself. Moors, like mountains, are not known so easily as first visits tempt one to think. However, I had seen something of it in summer. What of winter? In winter I

knew only the moor's western fringes. I had watched the sun shine low over wind-rippled snow-fields, and glance across frozen lochs, make of an ice-bound tree a flashing chandelier and strike fire from the frozen tower of Buachaille. A winter traverse of the whole moor would give a man these and other things, and an adventure into the bargain for which he would have to be as fit and as well clothed as for a mountain expedition. I had had enough experience of Rannoch blizzards to know that they rival Cairngorm blizzards in everything save wind velocity. In new, deep snow a crossing in one day would hardly be possible, but on old snow, in hard frost and fine weather, all should be more than well.

It may be that I exaggerate the worth of the day? It does seem to ask strenuous work and a sacrifice of either comfort or convenience. However, greater worth has always in my own experience asked greater effort, and the reward has borne proportion to effort, on one plane or another. Summer and winter there is a day for Rannoch.