

CHAPTER XV

A MIXED CREEL OF A PERIPATETIC ANGLER

I HAD breakfasted early in the friendly and convenient confines of the hotel kitchen. By the truth of the sun's unfailing ascendancy over Ben More Assynt—Sutherland's highest mountain peak at 3,273 feet—the time was 5.30 a.m. By the dictation of Westminster, clocks, even in this remote part of the world, were forced to lie, and the time was advanced by two hours. It was the dawning of a grand June day, with a rousing sting in the tang of the crisp morning air that had the salt of the sea in it, stimulating mind and body to healthy vigorous action, and the heart into song. Och, man, it was good to be living! The object of my early departure was the combined pleasures of fishing the numerous fresh-water lochs at the base of Suilven, a most extraordinary mountain reputed by eminent geologists to be the oldest rock formation in the whole world. A climb to the summit was one of the day's objectives, where my sixth dated penny would be placed within the cairn.

For the first half mile I revelled in the roadside companionship of the lower reach of the Culag River, which flows between the Culag Loch and the road bridge spanning its estuarian waters. Five-thirty a.m. is a grand time to be listening to the morning praises of birds in song, blending with the rhythmic modulations of a fussy, prancing little river, always in such a frantic hurry to reach the sea. Its terminal pool beneath the road bridge might engage a sea-trout angler with interest at eventide, when the hour, the tide, and the fly are propitiously



PLATE IX

AN INSPIRING MEMORY

For teachers and pupils of the romantic Culag Loch School, Lochinver, where Suilven still remains, peek-a-booing behind wisps of passing clouds. The bathing pool is seen flanked with border stones. The water-lily area lies to the right, off the picture (Culag means—a cosy, sheltered corner).



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chosen. A running salmon might prove a likely addition to the creel, if the necessary permission has been obtained to fish for it.

On a small promontory jutting out into the Culag Loch stands what has often been acknowledged as one of the world's most romantic and beautifully situated children's schools. In former years over a hundred pupils and their five teachers from their remote homes in the wild and distant glens used to attend here daily, having walked many a hazardous and trackless mile in all winds and weathers to reach it. From all directions the children came to this school, with little variation in the winter attendances, as portrayed in the old time registers. The present day attendance is fewer than forty children and three teachers, the majority of whom are conveyed to and fro by free motor transport. Even so, a goodly number have some wild ground to cover from their hill-croft homes to the motor road.

No asphalt recreation grounds here, no green and luscious meadow or grassy fields, but heather-decked rocks and the surrounding loch water are their natural playgrounds. Within a stone's throw of the school door lies a small woodie island which can be reached by the well-balanced and fleet of foot over some stepping stones. Birds nest here, and have long since learned to trust the children with their young.

The children certainly play hard and learn well, and fortunate indeed are those privileged to receive guidance and inspiration in such a school as this which is ever under the watchful eye of the domed might of Suilven (2,339 feet). The dome itself is known as Caistel Liath (the Grey Castle). Little wonder that teacher and pupil alike may be inspired with lofty ideals in this romantic temple of wisdom and learning, and that the influences of such an environment remain ever alive in their hearts.

The mother tongue, the Gaelic, was an essential in the school's curriculum in the old days, and with the Gaelic in their hearts, combined with good English on their tongues, and the inspiring strength and nobleness of Suilven in their sinews, muscles, and characters, there was little that could ever dismay these hardy young Highlanders in the duties and purpose of living in any country outside their own. Indeed, it would astound the uninitiated to be acquainted with the records of eminent men and women who owe their successes to the solid foundation of their great learning and achievements acquired from this, and even remoter, Highland schools. They rank amongst Prime and Cabinet Ministers, and foremost leaders in the world's professions and commerce. These unpretentious looking temples of wisdom within the parish of Assynt are not without their high-ranking Generals, Ministers of State, and others prominent in executive positions.

Lochinver's contributions to war-time seas and battlefields are exceptionally high, as instanced by the number that were destined never again to return to play the old game of peek-a-boo with Suilven and its enveloping mists. The handsome Highlander War Memorial erected in the village in 1920 to commemorate the loss of sixty-four gallant men (every fourth man who served) in the 1914-18 war, stands as a noble example of loyalty and sacrifice whenever Westminster has set alight the 'Fiery Torch'. Yet it is Westminster which has decreed that their native Gaelic shall no longer be included in the curriculum of these Highland schools, thereby destroying a valuable substance in the character of the modern child in forbidding it to speak its native language.

No angler worthy of the honour and privilege of casting a fly on this enchanting Culag Loch could resist the varied and irresistible attractions that envelop him completely,

and it is for this reason that I have deliberately digressed from the subject of angling to contribute some factual details connected with the history of this unusual and romantically placed school and its pupils. There is so much more in this fishing game than merely catching fish, and nowhere, I think, is this assertion so beautifully portrayed as when angling on the Culag Loch.

The loch is approximately one square mile in superficial area. The southern half is covered with a field of waving reeds and water lilies of unsurpassable beauty, and not by any means uninhabited by excellent trout. These make for grand sport when the angler has the courage to cast his single fly amongst them. The northern section is perfectly clean, but here the water is naturally over-fished, and what remain therein are small but very game fighters. Salmon inhabit the loch on their way to the spawning redds away up in the wilds of Glen Canisp, and these may be angled for by permission from the Estate Factor or the Culag Hotel Management, and the payment of certain dues.

The Culag Loch has always attracted me as the ideal water on which the angler's wife and children may potter about in the 'wee boatie', and enjoy some grand fun amongst the smaller trout, which to them would assume the proportions of giants. It is the ideal and safe water to teach the children to fish, and is well within a mile on the motor road from the Culag Hotel. Eventide is also the ideal time when the courageous angler might try his skill with the specimens that lie amongst the water lilies. One fly is sufficient, and this should be tied within thirty inches of the line, and on a dropper cast of about six inches. The tail of the cast should be loaded with a small round shot to keep the whole of the cast taut when shimmering the fly back towards the rod. Should you hook your trout, it will be necessary to haul it in with all speed, never allowing it to get its head below water if possible.

Whether or not you fish the loch, you will certainly fall in love with the picturesque environment of the Culags, which is but one small corner of Lochinver's charm and grandeur as a whole.

Loch Bad Na Muirichin

Today the Culag Loch is not included in my angling waters, and I proceed along the road skirting its western bank for half a mile. Here the close proximity of the exquisite blooms of the water lilies, cradled on their broad shimmering green and russet leaves, makes them look temptingly within reach. It is as well, however, that the uninitiated should know that they are zealously guarded by a most deceptive barrier in the form of an almost liquid peat-bog having the appearance of solidity. Such 'sinkers' are general around water-lily beds, and should be guarded against by those tempted to gather these beautiful creations. They have a reputation of being bearers of ill-luck amongst the Highland folk, a fact which should be borne in mind before taking them indoors.

At the extreme south-western corner of the loch the road rises steeply in winding loops, and descends again into the little hamlet of Strathan, where one or two of the picturesque cottages afford homely accommodation to the summer visitor.

There is an acceptable short cut available to the pedestrian angler by following the course of the telegraph poles out of the hamlet. The track leads over the brae ahead until a burn is reached. Follow this burn upstream to its effluent at the western extremity of Loch Bad na Muirichin, where the hotel boat is moored for the use of anglers only. The walking distance from the hotel to the boat is just over two miles, reduced to half a mile for the motorist whose car may be safely parked within the gate of the sports field bordered by the burn. The loch is attractively



PLATE X

HIGHLAND ARISTOCRACY

A hard-earned creel, as beautiful and resplendent as the water-lilies amongst which they dwelled in the mountain lochs around Lochinver. The heaviest trout here is in the centre of the back row, 3¼ lb. There are very few trout in this creel below 16 oz.
All Dry Fly enthusiasts.



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picturesque, triangular in shape, with a superficial area approximating two square miles. From its wooded southern bank a large promontory issues into the centre, in the vicinity of which are several small islands.

Foregoing my prerogative to use the boat, I made my rod and proceeded along the southern bank, where the long bush-like heather, coupled with a thicket of birch trees, made the going difficult with an assembled fishing rod. There is always the prospect of hooking a good trout which lies below an odd 'poke-hole' or two through the overhanging branches of the trees. An orthodox cast is rarely possible, but an adventurous and effective presentation can be made by thrusting the rod point through the 'poke-hole' and permitting a dry fly to perform a lively dance below the quivering point of the rod. This Terpsichorean display attracts the voracious feeders below, and if in the right mood for attack there will be no mistaking the intention of securing your offering, resulting in a 'foolish one' practically hooking itself. The approach, however, must be non-vibratory, silent, and discreetly obscure, since these better specimens are definitely shy of man and boat.

The real fun begins when the trout realizes its foolish error, and becomes obsessed with a sudden inspiration to reach the other side of the loch by devious routes in the quickest possible time. For five minutes the battle is fast and furious, with the bared drum of the reel frequently exposed. The greatest difficulty is in keeping the line clear of the overhanging trees and heather when the trout veers, at some distance, towards the bank, thereby forcing the line into the foliage. I recall an instance when I was obliged to wade neck deep to secure an entangled captive some twenty yards below the 'poke-hole'. The capitulation, however, is absolute at the close of play, and seldom do they revive at the sight of the landing net awaiting

them. If this method of angling should seem to lack finesse in the orthodox art of luring a trout to the creel, rest assured that it lacks for nothing in a high spirit of adventure, grand and exacting sport, with game powerful warriors whose almost impenetrable fortresses afford them every advantage over the angler. If you want what is left of the specimen trout in Scottish waters, there is seldom any alternative these days but to march boldly into the heart of the arena, issue the challenge against whatever the odds against you, and be prepared to engage your opponent under any of the conditions he may subject you to.

Only one trout, weighing one and a quarter pound, was engaged and creeled during this morning's 'poke-hole' adventures, resulting in a sporting contest comparable with that already described.

Encircling a thicket of impenetrable heather to gain an entrance to the promontory, I was suddenly halted by the sight of the most extraordinary conflict I have ever witnessed between two creatures of the wild, these being a buzzard and a common adder. The adder was as large in length and girth as any I had previously seen in the Highlands, and it was sheer ill-luck to have stumbled upon the scene with my camera tied up in the rucksack. The bird held the reptile's head firmly in its powerful beak, whilst the right claw strove to pin it down by the tail. Its broad, blunt, moth-like wings were outspread as if about to take off into the air with its venomous victim. But the adder was thrice coiled round the buzzard's neck, obviously exerting some disconcerting pressure on its respiratory organs. Its mewling cry was as plaintive as it was faint. Although I withdrew as quickly as possible to extract my camera from the rucksack I could see that my presence had already alarmed them, as both released their deadly holds; the bird flew away, but the adder remained as

though stunned or momentarily stupefied, suggesting that it might have been fighting a losing battle. When I prodded it with my landing net it moved quickly enough, but not far ere it felt the weight of my heavy climbing boot upon it. I do not usually slay adders, or any other creatures of the wild just for the sake of killing them, but this large specimen might have proved dangerous to visiting anglers, probably less familiar with their habits than I, who frequently land on this promontory to fish and partake of refreshments. The destruction of such a beautifully constructed creature was anything but a pleasure to me.

Having reached the far bank of the promontory and divested myself of clothing, I revelled in a breath-taking and refreshing immersion in the cool waters of the loch, swimming silently from island to island, searching familiar hidie-holes from their banks where old time successes were repeated to the extent of half a dozen very nice trout, the best of which weighed one and a half pound, the remaining five keepers averaging just under the pound weight.

I had purposely avoided using the boat. Previous experience had long taught me that the larger trout in this and several other lochs in the area are definitely boat shy. They generally lie under shady projections of rock or foliage below the banks, and I have yet to find a cast at any angle from a boat that will interest them. It is far better to 'shimmer' one dry fly only above the hole, keeping oneself and the rod as far back as possible. Tread the ground very lightly, and avoid vibration in the vicinity of the prospective hidie when approaching it. Once hooked they panic, and move like scalded cats in an endeavour to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their captor in the quickest possible time, usually concluding with a sulk in some obscure hidie-hole

across water. One must be prepared to indulge in short spurts of swimming to one or other of the adjacent islands, if the captive is to be pursued to the kill.

The fly is usually taken with such voracity that the possibility of the trout's parting with it is very remote indeed. The range of vision is sometimes confined to a few square inches on the water, and the strike is not always seen. But believe me it is felt, and it behoves the angler to keep his fingers clear of the line at this crucial moment, lest he should find them sawn off as it speeds off the reel. Make no attempt to check its progress, just let the panicked captive have his head for as long as he wants it. He'll take it anyway, and there's very little one can do about it during the first mad rush. There is far more resistance in that screaming reel than he imagines, and sooner or later he will realize the fact. He sulks at the end of the run, and when stirred into action again puts up a spectacular display of acrobatics, concluding with another run, then, sudden and complete capitulation. Not more than one in twenty shows any sign of revival on sight of the landing net. Sometimes they get around corners, and it becomes necessary to swim to follow them; they get entangled, too, in a maze of bared underwater roots, and to save the cast and the trout one must dive down to release them. It is a peculiar feeling, handling a lively trout under water when threading it back through the maze it has entered. It is freed from its entanglements, and given another chance, but invariably it does not last long after being handled. There is no manner of angling, in my opinion, that offers such grand sport, or tougher battles, than this evenly contested way intended by Mother Nature herself. There's a bit of the Tarzan flavour about it, and I for one get a great kick out of the game.

The average boat creel is usually satisfying on a lively wave, and a goodly specimen is likely to be found



LOCH BAD NA MUIRICHIN FROM THE WEST

The grotesque symmetry of Suilven's 'Grey Tower' begins to change its form. Canisp also comes into view on its left.

PLATE XI

LOCH UIDH NA CEARDIACH

The lily-fringed eastern extremity of the loch is seen in the foreground. Loch Fionn stretches beyond. Suilven on left.



amongst the average of about two and a half to the pound. A dry fly does very well here, and I think should be more frequently used on this and other mountain lochs than it is. *Searching* with a dry fly offers good sport, and quickens the combined action of the eye and the wrist, more so than when casting over a known quarry.

Dressed again, the first pipe of the morn going well, I relaxed completely for fully half an hour, revelling in the joys of the happy, contented, carefree life that the grand simplicity of so great a power as Nature herself was infusing into the heart and soul of me. There is such a lot to be gained physically and spiritually when one capitulates completely to the soothing balm of Mother Nature's remedies.

Loch Gleannan na Gaoithe

My next objective was the nearby Loch Gleannan na Gaoithe, which lies on a slightly higher elevation above Muirichin, and is separated from it by a short-lived burn, the length of which could be covered by a dozen casts between the one loch and the other.

Loch Gleannan na Gaoithe is one of several mountain lochs between Muirichin and the major Loch Fionn to the east. Each of these approximates half a square mile in superficial area, and all of them hold game trout of varying sizes. The clear-banked, fishable areas harbour, as may be expected, the smaller fry, averaging about four or five to the pound. This loch and another, Loch Uidh na Cear-daich which adjoins Loch Fionn, are exceptions, and these harbour some magnificent warriors of large proportions, but they are elusive.

The scramble for nearly half a mile along the remainder of Muirichin's southern woody bank was as commensurately tiresome as the former approach to the promontory, and I was not sorry to reach the clearance in the vicinity of the 'wee burnie' with the point of my rod

intact. There are some very productive 'poke-holes' in this stretch, too, but these were not entertained as originally intended.

The dark waters of the Gaoithe had not, hitherto, been subjected to my serious attentions, and on this occasion I was encouraged to take a little more interest in its contents when two or three very likeable trout rose invitingly, though hopelessly out of reach. The south bank is as heavily wooded as Muirichin, and very difficult to fish. There is no boat here. I did manage, however, to get a few interesting casts from a small clearance near the effluence of the burn, but only by wading waist deep. I felt all the same, that I wasn't getting amongst the cream of this piscatorial society, but the effort resulted in creeling three very acceptable keepers out of seven captives, the trio maintaining the average of those caught on Muirichin, each one giving a very game account of itself.

There is every indication that good specimens are thriving in the security of their elusive lairs under the overhanging trees on this southern bank. I regret now that I did not swim across to ascertain the depth of the water under these trees. It is possible that one may wade it in boots and shorts. This is a matter of interest on my next visit to Lochinver.

The treeless, rockbound north bank offers some lively sport amongst the quarter-pound class, and these fight gamely enough for their freedom.

Loch a' Ghlinne Sgoilte

Almost parallel with the Gaoithe, but segregated by a hundred-foot ridge, is Loch a' Ghlinne Sgoilte, the superficial area of which is comparable with the former. The loch, however, yielded nothing, as expected, to the creel. If you are content to amuse yourself amongst shoals of tiddlers, averaging six to the pound, this is the place, and

no harm would be done in thinning them out. Great place for the family youngsters all the same!

The three-quarter-mile gully that lies between Sgoilte and the next loch was rather squelchy—not that I don't enjoy the music of squelchy boots, but there was much more energy to be expended before this day was through, and it is always a sound policy to try and conserve as much as possible during the first half of it. Boggy ground is much more tiring than rock scrambling, so I rose to the higher ridge again and traversed it comfortably to the head of Loch Uidh na Ceardaich, which practically adjoins the western extremity of Loch Fionn, separated only by a narrow neck of boggy morass.

Looking in all directions from the top of the ridge I found the old familiar views as new and awe-inspiring as ever. Ahead of me lay Loch Fionn (sometimes referred to as Fewin), a gleaming jewel in the morning sunshine, stretching south-easterly for fully two and a half miles, and almost to the head of Loch Veyatie. To the east, the overpowering mass of the wonder of Suilven towered above me like some glowering monster, daring any man to approach its frowning slopes and crags. Looking at the 'Grey Castle' from as far distant as Lochinver and beyond, one can admire the symmetrical beauty and construction of this phenomenal dome, but on reaching the close proximity of its northern or southern slopes, one finds a stern, rugged, formidable master, who demands respect and obedience from the most experienced and hardened climber.

Loch Uidh na Ceardaich

Loch Uidh na Ceardaich is an old familiar haunt, often fished when approached from the head of the Kirkaig Pass. It was always an irresistible temptation when crossing over to the Suilven side of Loch Fionn. Long swaying reeds and a beautiful field of water lilies fringe the edge

of Ceardaich to a considerable extent, particularly at the eastern end. Its superficial area is similar to the two former lochs referred to. There are some exceptionally good trout lurking under the broad round leaves of the lilies, some of which are absolutely unapproachable from any angle with the longest cast. From the top of the overshadowing ridge I watched them rise through my binoculars. They jumped like gleaming jewelled crescents, and fell back on those broad green and russet leaves that held them but a fraction of a second, just long enough to give the impression of something indescribably beautiful in nature's display, yet most natural, offering, as though meant for people of some mystic world far from my own. The dark blue water, the broad green leaf, the exquisite porcelain of the bloom, and that fraction of a second when the jewelled gleam of a colourful loch trout is resting across them. It is a picture that nothing could ever efface from my memory. It was one of those exclusive masterpieces, portraying beauty as only God and the angler see it.

Let me warn you, however, that wealth and beauty are usually attended with certain dangers. The beautiful trout amongst those glorious lilies are no exception, since their approach is simply fraught with danger in a most unexpected manner for the unwary. Perhaps an account of a former experience here a few years past will enlighten and benefit you!

REMEMBER THE LILIES!

Three years past, I had indulged in a somewhat similar day's peregrination, including the ascent of Suilven. On the homeward track I rested on this same ridge above Loch Ceardaich, and was fascinated by the beauty of the rising trout amongst the waving leaves.

It was eventide, with some eight or nine miles separating a tiring man from his dinner and bed. I confess to some excitement at the sight of such fine trout feeding so

voraciously. Time, hunger and distance were forgotten, and the rod assembled again. To the line I made and attached my special reed cast, the make-up of which may interest you: Gut cast, No. 1X or 0X, six feet in length; a six-inch dropper at about two feet six inches from the line; the tail weighted with a medium weight lead split shot, firmly secured; to the dropper a single 'Shaggy Whaup' fly is attached or (for the benefit of the angler who buys his flies, and misses half the pleasure of angling by doing so) I would suggest Hardy's 'Woodcock and Red Hackle' unsparingly tied on a No. 3 hook, or something similar in appearance.

This reed cast has proved all I claim for it in my lifelong experience of fishing in such entangled waters. The weight of the shot keeps the cast taut as the fly is dancingly drawn over the surface of the water and the leaves, or through the reeds as the case may be, with little or no trouble. When a trout is hooked it is essential that you should enter into the fray with no thought of mercy on either side. A firm hold must be kept on your quarry from the very moment it strikes, such a jungle-like battleground being no place to allow the enemy to manoeuvre amongst the forests of leaf and flower stems that lurk below. The sooner it is hauled in—a shockingly ignominious term to apply to a lovely trout—and safely garnered in the landing net, the better. There are no alternative means of fishing them out of these aquatic jungles. So much for the reed cast and its practicability.

All set for the fishing, I descended to the water's edge and found it necessary to wade in a few yards if a short and controllable cast was to be placed on the inner fringe of the lily-bed. It was some time before anything worth while took any interest in my offerings. The water had felt deliciously cool and breath-taking when I entered it, then after a while it seemed to grow warmer. The long,

waving, tubular stems of the leaves and flowers created a queer sensation on the bare submerged legs, as though a number of young octopuses were persistently searching and feeling for some particular spot to nibble at. It might be as well to mention that I am usually dressed in light shorts, which are quickly dried by the wind and the sun after wading.

Eventually a good trout did take an interest in the fly, and immediately I tried to retreat towards the bank with it, only to find that I had quite unconsciously sunk well above my knees in a turbid quagmire of peat-mud, and through which the entangling stems and roots of the aquatic plants were growing. Much trouble and serious anxiety might have been averted had I discarded the trout and concentrated on releasing myself immediately, but unfortunately the seriousness of my predicament was not realized as the struggle continued with a captive playing a captive.

When the horror of my position did eventually dawn upon me I instantly broke the cast and flung the rod to the nearby heather bank. The possibility of being completely absorbed in this turbid bed, or even the thought of being trapped waist deep in such a remote loch, miles from the nearest habitation, was decidedly unpleasant. For hours I fought to a state of exhaustion for my freedom and the life I so much love living. I was haunted in the later stages by the fear of becoming unconscious, a state that could only result in my collapse into the water and drowning. That root-bound quagmire held down my heavy climbing boots in its unrelenting vices, and the long waving stems seemed to weave a merciless grip around my knees and my ankles. In desperation I reached and reached, until at last I had gathered together some two dozen stems into a twisted bunch, upon which all my remaining strength was exerted with a firm, steady

pull. The combined roots stood the strain, and the mud began to yield on the right leg and foot, but the left limb was immovable. The right boot was now within reach of my hands, likewise a gralloching knife on my waist belt, with which the lacing and tongue of the boot were slashed and the foot bared. The whole operation had proved as exhausting as it was hopefully progressive.

I was now perched like a stork on its one leg, waist deep in the quagmire, contemplating the possibilities of reaching to the lacing of the left boot with the blade of the knife. This meant stooping and burying my head deeply into the mud whilst scooping a passage to the boot below. I cannot recall a more unpleasant or fearful experience, or one fraught with such discouragement as each attempt failed. The time taken in trying to clear a passage to the boot was far in excess of my respiratory powers, which were weakening considerably under the strain. The awfulness of plunging one's head into the mud beneath the water, and holding one's breath in it, can only be realized by the horrible experience of the operation itself.

Another seeming century of time was taken in a frantic effort to tread the root-entangled mud away with the bared foot, an operation which was rendered more difficult as the long tubular stems wove their way between my toes and around them, the release of which compelled more bending into the mud. Those stems were tough, and as relentlessly entwining as the merciless tentacles of a confident octopus.

To this day I feel there must have been a period of complete unconsciousness. There is a gap in the incident which I cannot bridge. My last recollections were of a horrible feeling of something creeping behind one of my ears when my head was submerged in the mud. It scared me more than anything connected with the incident, and I can only presume that, having reached the full limit of

my respiratory powers, I must have swallowed some of the mud and water as I raised my head to the surface again. No doubt there was a mild form of panic which hitherto I had fought hard to avoid.

I remember faintly that I was 'being urged' to keep on reaching towards the distant leaves and flowers, until sufficient stems had been gathered together to twist into a 'rope', with which the final effort was to be made to effect the release of the left leg. I knew that if it failed I should die. I recall that firm, steady pull, and that 'something' urging me encouragingly on when some of the stems gave way under the strain. That was a horrible moment. Maybe it was just a timely breeze that put more stems into my hands. I don't know, but there were none within reach when I was collecting them, other than what I had gathered. At long last the leg began to move, and I recall the joy and relief when I felt the whole of me floating in the water covering that exquisite field of beautiful water-lilies. I dared not try to wade back those few yards to the bank, since the first foot down would have subjected me to the same predicament.

I often wonder what my old friend Sulveren thought, as it gazed upon the face of one of its ardent lovers floating hopefully on that bed of emerald and porcelain beauty—floral beauty, sufficient to charm an angel, yet so treacherously associated with the ugliness of a lingering death at its roots.

When the heather bank was reached I was too exhausted to think of anything other than to lie down upon it for years. It was eight o'clock when I entered the water, and now it was midnight with a shadowing dusk upon the hills and moorland. Shaking off the dangerous and persistent desire to sleep in such circumstances, I crawled to my rucksack, and blessed that flask of brandy that had remained intact for nearly two years. A deep dram helped

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When the heather bank was reached I was too exhausted to think of anything other than to lie down upon it for years. It was eight o'clock when I entered the water, and now it was midnight with a shadowing dusk upon the hills and moorland. Shaking off the dangerous and persistent desire to sleep in such circumstances, I crawled to my rucksack, and blessed that flask of brandy that had remained intact for nearly two years. A deep dram helped

a great deal to thaw my petrified body in the cold night air, restoring sufficient energy to pull up a few tufts of heather with which a warm and comforting fire was started, and by which my clothes were soon dried. Hunger is always a reassuring sign that things are not as bad as they seem, and its appeasement was necessary ere that nine-mile trek to the hotel was embarked upon. A one and a half pound grilled trout, and the spare sandwich the 'educated' mountaineer and hill-walker always saves for such emergencies, were satisfying enough.

It was no easy fight to resist the temptation to lie down and sleep by the comforting fire, a feeling that overcomes the mind and body when in a state of exhaustion, and one fraught with danger under certain circumstances. My chief concern now was to get back to the village before it was roused to form a search party, an anxiety and inconvenience that should be avoided by every possible effort and exertion. Having advised John Skinner, the sadly missed Culag Hotel proprietor of those days, that the summit of Suilven was one of my objectives, I knew he would begin to think in terms of accidents and arouse the men of the village.

So thawed, dried, rested and feasted, I sought, and finally reached, the head of the Kirkaig Pass over a mile of undulating rock and moorland. A great confidence is restored when a known track is reached in such circumstances, and the four-mile pass, ranging high above the roar and melody of the River Kirkaig, leading to the border bridge and the main road, was soon traversed. My troubles seem to have been forgotten as I listened to the strange, mysterious whisperings of the voices of those lonely hills of home in the heart of the night.

The new day was dawning as I reached the hotel, tired enough to seek the comforts of my bed in which I wallowed for long into the day. It was some days before

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I really recovered from the effects of that gruelling experience, but these were spent on a herring boat away out in the Minch, where at long last the sickening odour of that filthy peat mud was blown right out of my system.

My chief purpose in referring to this incident is so that my experience may be accepted as a warning to the unwary, angler and flower-picker alike, against the unseen and unrealized dangers lurking at the roots of these beautiful lotus blossoms of the west.

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To return to the present, the same reed cast was assembled, to which a medium size 'Shaggy Whaup' was applied. A local friend had advised me of two special stone stances near the north bank, places where large stones had been thrown into the quagmire and which, although submerged, could be stood upon with safety. These had to be prodded for, and were eventually found.

From these vantage points some good sport was enjoyed, including a battle royal with the best trout of the day. He got his head down below the leaves, and believe me, he took a lot of persuading that a landing net was much more comfortable, at least from my point of view. He bumped the scale at one and three-quarter pound, as firm and beautifully conditioned as any I have ever creeled. The trout were in a generous mood this morning, appreciating the sou'westerly breeze that seemed to stimulate their appetites, and a lively mood for play. Six very desirable keepers were in the bag within a good hour, five of which averaged a pound each in weight, with barely an ounce between them, the one and three-quarter pound trout excepted.

There are smaller trout amongst these water lilies, but when their larger brethren are keen on their feed, they

are made to scatter in all directions, a fact which can be observed when a smaller feeder takes any interest in a fly.

Some lively sport may be enjoyed in the western half of this loch which is clear of aquatic growth, and perfectly firm and safe for wading into. An occasional half or three-quarter pounder gets mixed up with the smaller ones sometimes. Three to the pound is a fair average in this clearer water, and there is no disputing their fighting qualities. There were no unpleasant mud traps on this occasion, and I felt amply rewarded for any inconvenience suffered during my former memorable visit to this beautiful loch.

Suilven and 'The Tower of the Four Winds'

The day's major objective was Suilven. I had enjoyed the best of the morning's fishing ere the helpful breeze began to die down, leaving the waters everywhere like some immense plateaux of highly polished mirrors in which the surrounding peaks preened themselves. The calm was like a clarion call to the clegs, which, when mustered, became amorously attached to every inch of exposed flesh they could get at. The slaughter was terrific, but reinforcements were unending to fill up the gaps. It was a little too early in the season for the midges.

With the sun passing its zenith in a sky of celestial blue, broken only by wisps of fleecy clouds on the far horizon, I commenced my walk along the north bank of the Fionn Loch, halting at a waters-meet a mile east of Loch Cear-daich. Three somewhat insignificant burnies meet just above the track, and here I rested for lunch. The morning's catch was deposited in the landing net within the ice-cold confines of the junction pool, and the remainder of my gear on the bank beside it, here to remain until my descent from the summit of the old 'Grey Castle'. A burn is always a safe, natural object to be associated with on the

hills. It can usually be heard at some distance, especially during the night, and will always lead one towards more negotiable territory when mist-bound or astray.

This seemed a peaceful enough spot to enjoy my lunch, but not as deserted as I had thought it to be, for soon I was blessed with the companionship of a hill shepherd and his two friendly dogs. They were ignorant of my presence a little above their track, but the imitated bleat of a distressed ewe soon brought the dogs up, with the enquiring shepherd in their wake.

Indeed, he was glad to join me in a couple of brace of scrumptiously grilled trout and a buttered bannock, and his companionship was as welcome as it was interesting. He was on his way to Lochinver from Elphin, traversing a crowline route along the banks of Loch Veyatie, the mile-long Fhearna River that carries its waters into the Fionn Loch, continuing the way I had already come by Loch Ceardaich, Loch Muirichin, and Strathan. He would be returning by the same route during the evening, and would cover some twenty-six miles on the double journey. Strange as it may seem in this age of modern transport and postal facilities, his mission was that of a bearer of glad tidings which he had received in a friendly letter from Canada, and which he wished to share with an old buddy who was equally interested. A personal letter from the King himself would have been of little or no significance compared with the treasure that envelope contained, in the way of a few reassuring words that all was well with the exile who wrote them.

The shepherd of the hills has always remained as high in my esteem as the summits of the hills we both love. From the biblical teachings of my boyhood days he became foremost in my mind amongst all men on earth, for was he not the first to be honoured with the glad tidings that the Good Shepherd himself was born to us? I

attribute the peacefulness of my contented nature to my boyhood associations with hill shepherds.

My companion was of the older and less sophisticated generation whose illiteracy was a blessing. He could neither read nor write, but his lifelong intimacy with Nature and her ways, and the natural simplicity in his manner of discourse, taught nothing but a convincing and beautiful truth. For over forty years he had been employed as a shepherd of the hills, and never a grander character could I wish to meet. He was richly endowed with a wealth of peace and contentment, far beyond the purchasing power of the world's material riches. His worldly wants and desires were commensurate with the means at his disposal for procuring them, having neither asked for nor received greater reward for his labours than sufficed for the frugal existence of himself and his family. Yet none was happier, more contented, or more at peace with God, the world, and himself than this faithful guardian of the stupid ruminants that led him o'er corrie and crag in all winds and weathers. A hill shepherd is far from being the simpleton some folk seem to think he is, and I would like to meet the scientist who could invent machinery to do his work. He cannot even be directed to his work, since no one would know where to direct him.

We both had our objectives to reach before the day was through, and had reluctantly to break up our pleasant discourse. I arranged to leave the remainder of the trout for his collection on the return journey. Who better entitled to them than he?

He was a good shepherd, and I have sometimes wondered how 'Good a Shepherd' he may have been!

Suilven stands majestically alone, a segregated mass of Torridon sandstone upon an undulating platform of grey Hebridean gneiss. Most of its neighbouring peaks have a capping of white Cambrian quartzite, often mistaken for

a mantle of snow in certain lights. There is, however, no such protective cover on the summit of Suilven, hence the broken serrated condition of the one and a half mile long summit ridge, and the deeply scored flanks and gullies.

It is not, of course, the single dome or cone its phenomenal and grotesque appearance from the west suggests, and often enough have I experienced some difficulty in convincing visiting friends that the south view from Loch Sionascaig, or the north view from the Elphin road, are of one and the same mountain. As observed from Lochinver it has been referred to as the Matterhorn in miniature, and likened to Ailsa Craig. Personally, I look upon it as ever the incomparable Suilven.

The western face of the 'Grey Castle' offers as formidable and hazardous a climb as the most experienced rock climber could wish for. Eighteen ninety-two is quoted by Mr Bagley, a noted mountaineer, as the first year that this formidable buttress was conquered. It is, however, on record that well over a century ago a sailor, whose ship put into Lochinver, was observed through the ship's telescope to reach the summit, and as only the west face is visible from the loch, it appears that Mr Bagley may have been misinformed.

Many attempts have been made to interpret the English version of the name Suilven.

'The Sugar Loaf'. This is a name in all respects contrary to common sense, and derogatory to the dignity of such a tower of majesty and great strength.

'The Pillar Fell' (a high land not fit for pasture). Suilven pastures her goat-like ruminants from base to summit every year. As for the word 'Fell', this I think might be confined to where it is better understood than in the Scottish Highlands, i.e. to the fell-walking country of Westmorland and Cumberland. It does not apply to Suilven.

'The Mountain of the Eye' is another name often

quoted. The term has no direct bearing on the formation of the mountain. It is purely a coincidence that the word 'Suil' in the Gaelic means 'Eye' in English. This opinion was imparted to me by several eminent scholars in the Gaelic. The wayfarer cannot, of course, wander anywhere within miles without the observant sentinel always keeping an eye on him. This may seem a little more appropriate, but why bother to interfere at all with such a sweet sounding name as Suilven—'Soo-il-ven'—itself? To the climbers who stand on the summit of this great dome, 'The Tower of the Four Winds' might sound appropriate enough.

Today he was beckoning a kindly welcome to an old friend. The base of the gully was two miles away over an undulating floor of gneiss and moorland. This would be the south gully. To the average experienced hill-walker the scramble is mere child's play provided he has a good head for dizzy heights, failing which it *must not* be attempted unless he is roped to a reliable guide or escort. Suilven takes its toll of the careless and unwary like every other hazardous feature of nature. Irresponsible people should give some thought to the responsibility they place on the shoulders of others before venturing into the unknown amongst the hills.

It was a warm, though pleasant enough scramble to the ridge plateau, a green verge which is usually the limit of the majority of expeditions up this mountain, and very wisely, too! The views from this plateau are satisfying and awe-inspiring enough, but great indeed is the reward for the energy expended in scrambling up the sheep track to the utmost height of the 'Grey Castle', where the traditional stone is placed upon the cairn.

Despite the heat-haze visibility was fairly good, and the first object I looked for was the Culag Loch and its romantic little school. At five miles distance, and 2,300

feet above it, the impression was strikingly fairy-like, with the children dwarfed to the size of the 'wee folk' themselves. It seemed no larger than the area portrayed on my map.

The neighbouring hills were impressive, too, especially to the south, where Cul Mor, Cul Beag, Stac Polly, and the Ben More Coigach range looked like a giant's segregated stepping stones amongst the innumerable lochs, glittering in the sun like priceless jewels. Beyond were jewels of a different kind, as the eyes rested on the treasures dropped into the billowing seas of the Minch. They are the Summer Isles, as romantic in associations as in name. To the north-east, the challenging buttresses of Sail Ghorm and Sail Gharbhe in the Quinag were barely visible. To the east, the neighbouring Canisp (2,779 feet), 440 feet higher than Suilven, looked that much higher and obstructed the view of Sutherland's highest peak, Ben More Assynt. Most impressive, too, was the wide sweep of the coastline in view, with the headlands of Rhu More Coigach and Point of Stoer most prominent. The silvery sands of Clashnessie, Stoer, and Achmelvich were also pronounced in their contrast with the deep blue of the sea. The inlets and bays between the headlands were reminiscent of Norwegian fiords in miniature, and even from this distance they looked as wild, rugged, and forbidding as they really are. In every direction in between, water glistened, and it seemed that the superficial area of land only just exceeded that of the water contained in the hundreds of lochs that glimmered in the sun like heliographic mirrors in action . . . I fully realize how far short I am in my interpretation of this heavenly scene, and I give it up as beyond all power of description. It is unfortunate that such intimate glimpses of heaven must remain the privilege of the few who are physically capable of getting that much nearer to it.

The sun was westering towards the Outer Isles as I climbed down again, a little more breeze came through the gap in the ridge, and as I gazed down over the precipice I just wished that the lone young woman visitor who crashed to her death in June, 1948, in a howling gale that struck her unexpectedly, had had such a day as this for her climb. The spirit of adventure is not without its penalties, and Suilven knows how to inflict them when least expected—a very good reason why I always advise the inexperienced never to venture alone. Yesterday, the father and sister of the unfortunate girl travelled north, and under the guidance of Murdo Ross and another of the Glen Canisp keepers, visited the scene of the tragedy and there erected a small cairn.

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A honey-buttered bannock, and a deep draught of nature's purest wine from the burn at the waters-meet were satisfying, and no bed in the world could offer such joys of relaxation as I enjoyed at full length in the sun-kissed heather. Every possible thing that the word 'freedom' means was embodied in the comforts of my natural environment.

A fair kindly breeze swept cheerily across the waters of the Fionn Loch, and conditions looked most favourable for some evening sport along the whole mile of the serrated bank that led back to Loch Ceardaich of the lilies. There are enough wee bays and headlands, nooks and crannies, along this bank to gladden the heart of any angler, and none gladder than mine as the rod was prepared for the pleasing prospect.

The rod, eleven and a half foot of easy action Greenheart; a Hardy 'Perfect' reel; No. 2 Kingfisher D.T. line; and a 2X level gut cast built up to eleven feet as follows,

made up my gear: the tail, a medium-size worm fly with a red tip; mid, a 'Blue Zulu'; bob, a 'Shaggy Whaup'. A proved and productive cast in a following breeze, especially when long casting is essential, such as that demanded off Fionn's banks if the larger trout are to be engaged. A long and delicate line at rapid intervals, with an immediate and agitating action, seems more attractive to these fishes than a slower withdrawal with deeply sunk flies. Quite eighty-five per cent of the evening catch were victims of the bob and mid flies, each taken as the flies skimmed over the water. Twice there was a brace of trout to contend with on the one cast.

The keepers were nice fish, half pound to three-quarter pound each, representing as good an average in quantity and quality as I can remember creeling off the banks of Fionn. There are better trout for weight here, three to five pounders being frequently seen in the creels when trawling from the boat. (The Culag Hotel boats, by the way, are moored near the river's effluent at the head of the Kirkaig Pass).

It was a great temptation to respond to a challenging rise amongst the water lilies as I passed the head of Ceardaich on my way to the Kirkaig Pass. I stayed here awhile hoping that my shepherd friend would be coming along to relieve me of the extra Fionn catch as well, but this was not to be. It was a carefree burden, nevertheless, as I jaunted along the Kirkaig Pass, high above the roar of the waterfalls, and the melodious companionship of the river for some four miles, until the County Border bridge was reached, and the road to Lochinver.

In the estuarian waters below it, two fellow guests from the hotel were doing very well, having grassed a couple of nice fish within an hour. I was tired enough to accept their welcome invitation to run myself back to the village in their car, returning for them later, which I did at

midnight as arranged. Their efforts after I left them produced nothing more out of these waters.

So ended another eventful and happy day in my career as a peripatetic angler, and one which refutes any suggestion that fishing is dull and boring.

SONG TO SUILVEN

The sea waves whisper your name,
Suilven, Suilven;

Out of the past it came
When the Norsemen harried and slew,
And your great grey dome, like a flame,
Beaconed the raiding crew.
Suilven the mighty of fame,
As stern as the gods they knew.

The moor winds sigh in your praise,
Suilven, Suilven;

Through the long hot summer days,
Breathing, alive, but still,
Or when rich autumn's haze
Lingers upon the hill,
Or the winter's gale displays
Mad lust to uproot and kill.

Green velvet covers your feet,
Suilven, Suilven;

And tiny flowers and sweet
Bejewel your garment's hem,
And the clouds of heaven meet
On your brows like a diadem,
And the loch is a silver sheet
Which mirrors a perfect gem.

My heart is ever your own,
Suilven, Suilven;

I see you standing alone,
Mighty, beautiful, grand,
Timeless splendour in stone
Guarding a timeless land;
A footstool for God's great throne
Where the angels of comfort stand.

—MARGARET MOFFATT BROWN