

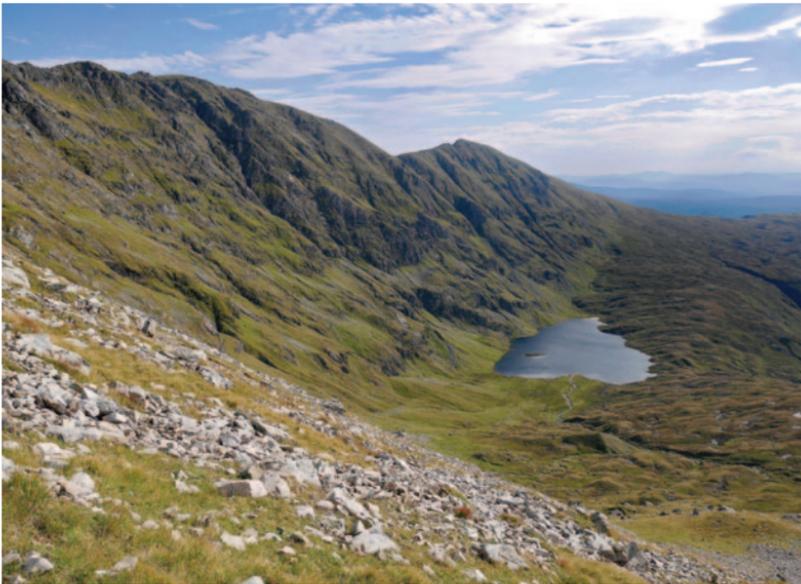
TAKING THE EASY WAY?

By Mike Jacob

... the fiends that plague thee thus

I AWAKE FULL OF gloom, in the small hours before sunrise. I have no choice but to lie there, stilled by the presence of the malevolent voices in my head as they whisper to me of failure and underachievement. My dawn chorus is a muttering of contemptuous jeers and taunts, of waste and colourless monotony. These are devils' thoughts. Another part of me tries, unconvincingly, to parry but, like a buzzing cloud of black flies, they part and bide their pestering time. Some will say that this is all part of the ageing process and a consequence of declining hormone levels. Perhaps. My only weapons are memories of the good times and, in an illogical sequence, I am walking with Phil Gribbon from Inchnadamph towards Ben More Assynt.

I try hard to concentrate, to re-create the day in my imagination. On the leisurely, ambling approach we skirt Dubh Loch Mor, sheltered from the wind as we kick steps in the wet snow up this steep western flank of the mountain ... and then the mental adjustment required as the weather turns unexpectedly from scudding clouds, sunshine and April showers into a full-blown blizzard on the narrow south-east ridge. Matters turn abruptly from relaxed to serious. We grope for protective clothing in our sacs as



Dubh Loch Mor under the South-East Ridge of Ben More Assynt. Photo: Tom Prentice.



*The south-east ridge of Ben More Assynt from the Glen Cassley side.
Photo: Grahame Nicoll.*

the wind roars up the hidden corrie to our right and then we head northwards. I sidle on a snow-plastered slab over a murky drop ... slip ... heart in mouth ... held by an ice-axe pick in a shallow crack ... phew. It becomes apparent that this is no passing shower as we choose a way over and round looming rock barriers.

We are barely aware of each other in the squally gloom, leaning this way and that in silent, buffeted accord until eventually the summit cairn appears. This is followed by another staggering struggle over ankle-twisting stones to reach Conival. Accurate navigation is impossible as the snow turns to penetrating sleet; the map a desperately flapping fish, demonic toggles on my hood trying to whip my eyes out as I concentrate on the iced-up compass in my frozen mitt, relying more and more on gut instinct. Should we alter course and run with the wind at our backs although that tactic will mean a wearisome detour? No, stick with it, stick with it, we decide.

The forces of Nature are tangible and can be counted; they can be battled against until victory is won or lost but, as we gradually lose height, the nature of the fight alters. The sleet changes and becomes marrow-chilling rain, relentlessly invading waterproof shells, violating jealously preserved havens of dryness ... and still it comes down, not in drops but like strands of wire although at least we are sheltered from the all-powerful wind. There's no escaping, it is hopeless to resist; stoically, it has to be tolerated, just like this insidious murmuring which trickles



A perfect day on Arran. The South Ridge of Cir Mhòr. Photo: Tom Prentice.

*Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

But behold! A ramshackle wooden shed with ancient agricultural implements and a floor of dry sheep-dung. So we pause, hunting in our sopping sacs for emergency rations, until we shiver uncontrollably and have no choice but to continue. I am brought, metaphorically, to my knees and I want to give in ... The refuge of sleep has deserted me. As the night slowly fades I listen for the songbirds' joy of a new day but all I hear are the mocking croaks of the corbies, gathered in the skeletal boughs of a wintry ash tree, twigs curled against the half-light like beckoning bony fingers.

Sunlight percolates through the curtains which slowly turn orange, like the closely-woven cotton fabric of my old Vango Force-Ten tent. Ali's hand reaches out of his sleeping bag, followed by a strong, tanned forearm, and the zips of the door are opened to reveal the golden glow of a dry Arran rock-face. It is going to be a perfect climbing day of well-oiled sinuous movement and an easy fitness that could eat up any number of rock-miles. If I tell you that there wasn't a midge in sight as we balanced from diamantine crystal to mica blade and as the world held its breath then you'll know yourself that this was one of those rare Spring days of warm climbing on a magical staircase to heaven. But now it all seems so distant, so remote that I have to question if it ever really happened?

I could have been at the CIC hut or a far-flung bothy. I had the chances



*'...a magnetic, bleak winter day...' on the hills above New Abbey in Galloway.
Photo: Mike Jacob.*

to go but I couldn't raise the enthusiasm, finding pathetic excuses; now salt is about to be rubbed in my wounds as I imagine others reaping the mountain rewards that I have helplessly abandoned. So I set out, belatedly, to walk up a nearby hill by the most convoluted route that I can contrive and thus find myself struggling clumsily through unimaginably-awkward ground. The heather and bog myrtle, ungrazed for generations, are waist high and conceal cleughs and gulches of glutinous peat and slimy moss. A damaged, arthritic joint starts its grinding, whining ache and I've not even travelled a couple of miles.

It's a magnetic, bleak winter day of scudding grey cloud and shafts of light, plantations of bronze larch and a distant silver Solway textured by the darker, sandy shallows of the ebbing tide. In the far distance, barely visible in the haze, are the snow-capped Lakeland fells, a captivating world away. A solitary mute-swan powers purposefully home towards its reed-fringed loch; although the bird is silent its rhythmic wingbeat drummed a favourite Dylan song ...

*Where black is the colour and none is the number
And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
And reflect it from the mountains ...*

There's a heavy squall of rain heading my way like a galleon in the sky, full-square before the wind. I attempt to race it to the triangulation-point but am reminded by my breathlessness that I have another, more-intractable problem. Just yards from the top, a wee black dog appears



Criffel with snowy Lakeland Fells in the distance. Photo: Mike Jacob.

from the overworked path on the other side of the hill, to be followed by a middle-aged woman in smart crimson Gore-Tex mountainwear. I groan, my desire for solitude is about to be thwarted by trite pleasantries. She scrutinises my scruffy attire and comments that I must have reached the top by, oh, the easy way and I guess from her manner that she's the bossy matriarch of some dog-training group or somesuch. I keep quiet but want to remark that

*Her jacket is red and her breeches are blue,
And there is a hole where the tail comes through.*

For the first time that day I smile inside and cannot restrain a chuckle. She takes a couple of wary steps away as the rain arrives and asks where I'm going next. I wave my hand vaguely through all the points of the compass as she prepares to return down her hard way. I head off through the heathery undergrowth towards the top of some small crags where a pair of peregrine falcons nest. Somewhere, in my own down, this indifferent encounter has triggered an emotional reaction. In the gathering gloom I stumble heavily over a tussock and automatically look over my shoulder. Fortunately, she is long gone ...

*And the Devil did grin, for his darling sin
Is pride that apes humility.*

*

And that's where my story, for what it's worth, would have ended, somewhere in the dusk above the wooded loch and the forestry carpark

where they found his car. It was to be an absolutely vile night of torrential rain and gales which blew down massive trees, demolished power-lines and was unabated the following flooded day. Did he, a doctor with a young family, after leaving his surgery as normal on that Tuesday evening, choose his time because of the imminent storm?

He made one final call before removing the SIM card from his mobile phone and placing it in the glove compartment. Decision made, easy, the way clear. To be honest, the decision was probably made days before. But easy? There is no easy way or hard way. There's just the only way. Then he started his grim walk into the darkness.

I've now removed most of the fluttering blue and white strips which delineated search areas on the hillside and amongst the conifers. They had become yet more superfluous plastic litter; intrusive reminders of a tragedy. I had assumed that he took a large overdose, washed down with alcohol, and set off up the hill and onto the moors or swam out into the suffocating embrace of the waters of the loch, eventually to succumb to the numbing effects of the drugs. It took over a week to find his body. He died somewhere not far from my home and where I slept through his pain, oblivious. I never met him, I didn't know him – but he has unwittingly put my own dejection into perspective.

Note: quotations taken from the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) unless otherwise stated.