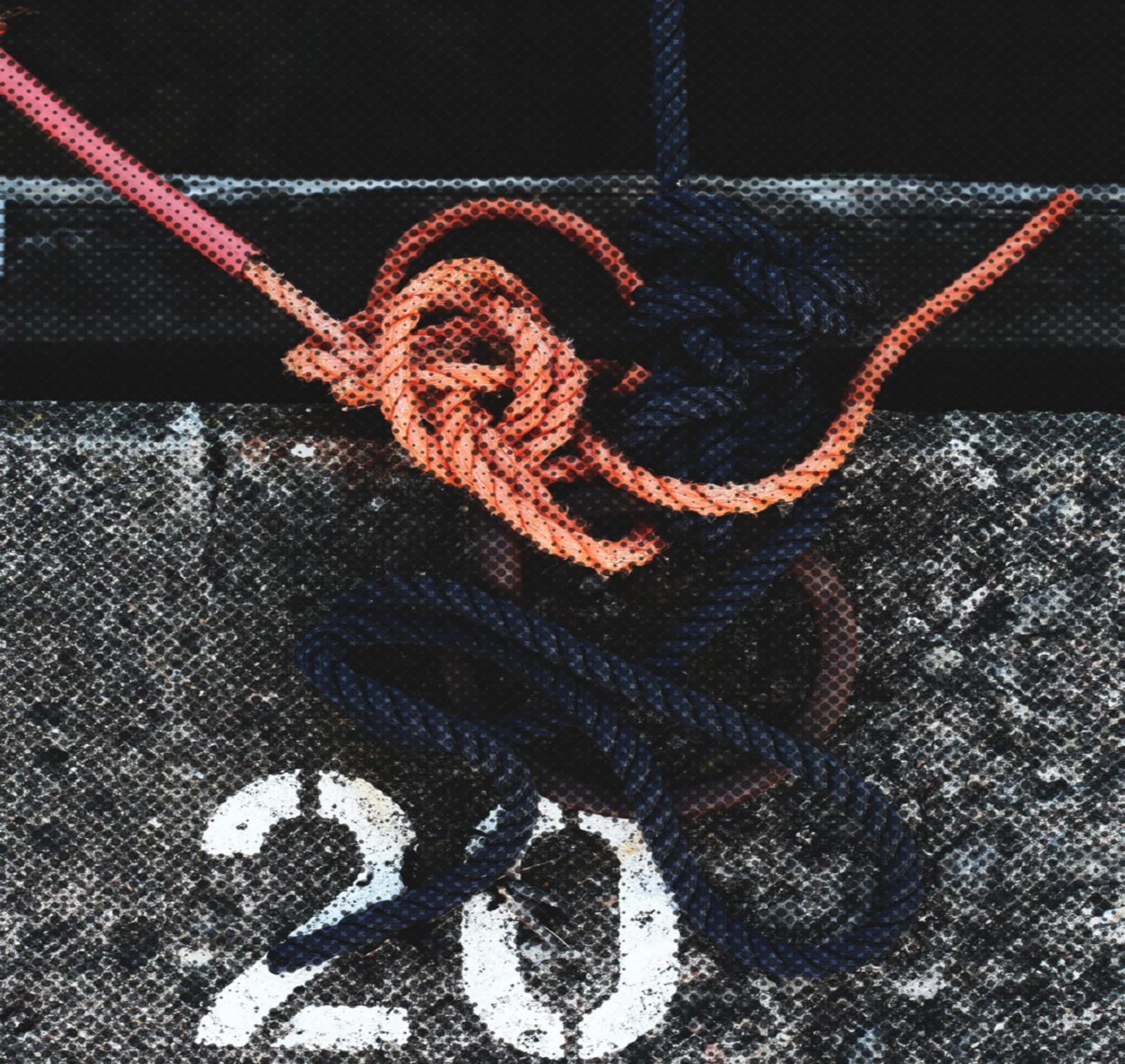


**Ian Macpherson**



*Wild Harbour*

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# **Wild Harbour**



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THIS MORNING I said to Terry, 'I thought I heard guns through the night.'

'Were you awake too?' she asked.

Even before she spoke, as soon as the words were out of my mouth I was sorry I spoke, and hastened to say:

'That was funny, both of us lying quiet not to disturb the other.' I knew by the way she looked at me that she was not deceived.

'They sounded very near,' she said; 'in the direction of Inverness.'

'Oh, I don't know,' I returned. 'With this east wind it's very hard to tell how far away sounds are. I remember in nineteen-eighteen we used to hear the guns in France, often on a Sunday morning, if the wind was right, so near and clear you'd think they were close by. We knew when a battle was coming on by the noise, swelling out of the east like a heavy sea. Lord, what an age ago that seems! We didn't know each other then, Terry. How old were you? Seven? I was eight when the War finished, Gone eight, I used to say, bigsy, you know, making a grown-up of myself. But I can remember the guns and when there was fighting in the North Sea—'

'I heard that too,' she broke in. 'It was always a rumbling noise then, not distinct and separate like last night. Last night's noise resembled the Fleet at gun-practice in the Moray Firth. You know how we used to see the glare and flash in the sky before we heard the sound of the guns. I saw fire in the sky last night, on the horizon over there.'

'Wildfire,' I suggested. 'If it was, I hope we get this place properly tight and snug before the weather breaks. You

always see wildfire when a storm's brewing in the hills.'

'I hope it was wildfire,' she said after a brief silence, and then: 'I'm going to start spring-cleaning.'

I began to laugh and say something about Nero, but she interrupted me angrily.

'You know how important it is for us to keep a grip on ourselves,' she cried; 'even if we are fugitives in a cave—all the more because of that. We daren't let ourselves grow careless. It might be all right to lounge and laze just now while the weather's good, but if we get into a slovenly way we'll never get out of it, and by winter we'll be savages, dirty and cold and demoralized. It wasn't to degenerate into savages that we came here.'

'No,' I said moodily; 'we had a lot of good reasons, but they don't look so good now. Och, Terry, don't heed me. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I don't mean it really. Only when I see ourselves making ourselves at home here, and settling down as if for ever, I feel it's going to be for ever. That sets me wondering what's happening, if anything's happening, or if we ran away from nothing at all but our own imaginations.'

'The noise wasn't wildfire,' she answered. 'I wish I could find an occupation to keep your mind busy, boy. I've got my job thinking out meals and how to economize our stores—why don't you write?'

'Write!' I exclaimed. 'Good God, is that what you'd like me to do? Didn't you hear the guns last night, don't you know the whole world's in a flame? What'll I write, now; fairy-tales maybe for cities drowned in gas, or shall I scribe

moralities on the rock with a nail for future generations to wonder at my wisdom?'

'You needn't be so hasty to take me up wrongly,' she protested. 'What I was going to say was that you could write an account of the things that happen to us, about our coming here and living here. If we get out of hiding other folk might be glad to know how we lived, and if no one cares except ourselves, we shall be glad of something to keep us in mind of the past.'

'Shall we need written mementoes for that?' I asked bitterly. 'Oh, I think you could find a better occupation than that for me, Terry, something useful, like counting the clouds, if I'm too idle. Or I could take a hammer and break down rocks to dust—or go to the succour of my king and country—'

'Hush! hush!' she entreated. 'We came here because we thought it was right, because we would not be bullied into doing wrong or assisting at wickedness. If we commence to doubt that—'

'What cures doubt?' I demanded.

'Faith,' she replied simply, 'and my work in this place. Do you think, Hugh, it's easy for me to plan spring-cleaning when I know the world's in agony?'

She turned to carry stuff from the back of the cave to the entrance, now sunlit and warm, for the clouds had passed from the morning sky.

'That will soon dry out any damp,' she said with satisfaction. 'Look, Hugh, do you remember when we made up these?'

She showed me some notebooks and scraps of paper.

'What is it?' I asked. 'The lists we made! listen to this, Terry, "syrup, treacle, lard"; how much of that have we? What a hope we had to imagine we'd fetch everything we needed to make life comfortable into this place. It's a wonder we didn't mark down a kitchen range.'

'We didn't quite bring everything we hoped to bring,' she agreed.

'It seems years ago, in another world. It was in another world. We were children playing at desert islands.'

'Oh fine Crusoes! We didn't rightly believe that war would come. Catch! they'll be useful for lighting the fire some morning when we forget to dry heather. As if we were plotting a picnic! Lovely picnic!'

'Has it been so very dreadful, Hugh? I'd never dream of burning them. The excitement we had when we made them! and you'd come running every now and then to tell me something we'd forgotten—opening the kitchen door and spoiling my baking.'

'Aren't you going to burn them?' I asked. 'I thought you were spring-cleaning and getting rid of rubbish.'

'Must you go on hurting me?' she asked suddenly.

'I didn't mean to hurt you,' I said miserably. 'Oh, Terry, I'm sorry.'

'It's all right, now,' she replied. 'I felt low for a minute. I thought I might be a bother to you, or getting on your nerves. You're not angry because I want to do spring-cleaning, are you, Hugh?'

'I knew this was bound to happen,' she said a little later. 'We were too exalted these past weeks.'

'It was such fine weather,' I said, 'and now there's an east wind.'

'It was lovely weather; but Hugh, we must keep a note of what happens.'

'For the foxes to read when they've their den to themselves again?' I asked with renewed bitterness.

'For ourselves to read, and other people, when this is all over.'

'What if it's never all over and we crouch here till we die, and the world goes back to savagery—have you thought of how it'll be when we grow too old to skulk and hide and make shifts and stalk deer for to-morrow's dinner? Shall we come to thrive on grass and heather, or simply starve—what heart can I have for writing?'

'If you were crouching in a trench, Hugh, in wet and mud, and I was crouching in a cellar waiting for the sound of aeroplanes, and bad news—you'd have a certainty that we'd both crouch there for ever—and help the world back to savagery. If you're unhappy here and hankering to go, you hurt me more by staying. I'm not going with you. I can't chop and change my mind every time there's water in the wind. I came here and here I stay until the world changes its mind, for I'll not change mine.'

'What is there to write,' I asked, 'except the days of the week, and you mark that? Nothing happens; I haven't a pencil—'

'I have pencil and paper too,' she began in a matter-of-fact voice. But her voice trembled and she exclaimed, 'I hope nothing ever happens!' and then she commenced to laugh and cry alternately, saying, 'Hugh, I couldn't bear to



lose you, I couldn't live without you, I'd sooner be dead. You won't leave me ever, will you? I don't care what happens to the world if I have you.'

I suppose I cried too, for the civilization that brought us to exile had first unfitted us for the life of outlaws. When that May storm was past we stood together in the mouth of the cave. The wind had fallen and the sun shone, altering the tumbled desolation round us from the appearance it bore while the east wind blew. Nesting grouse called in the valley, and an early deer calf, high in its lair in a corrie, lamented its hunger and its absent mother.

'If we could sleep winter through—' I sighed.

'We have all summer to make ready in,' Terry answered. 'We'll manage without sleeping, Hugh. Haven't we peats and bog-fir and a store of matches?'

'What am I going to write?' I asked.

'Write,' she bade me, 'how we saw war coming. And war came. Write that we would not be militarized nor suffer the shame and injuries people would put on us for hating war. Tell how we left our house by night. Soon we'll have enough grouse feathers to make a feather-bed, and our peats are ready for stacking—'

'Yes!' I cried, infected by her enthusiasm; 'and we made stuff to pickle eggs, and built a wall at the end of the cave—'

'A million things to write,' she said. 'Here's a pencil; put it all down every single thing we did.'

So I took a notebook in one hand and my telescope in the other, and slung my little rifle over my shoulder in case a grouse or hare came within range since we could not afford to let slip a single chance of getting food, though it was

breeding-time and I was loath to kill. When I had spied to make sure that the country was vacant except for ourselves and birds and beasts I sat down in the lee of a great stone, warmed and illumined by the midday sun, and began to recall how we came into the hills, while Terry put water in a basin to clean the rocky cavern where we hid.

It was strange, but as I tried to recall the past which was so near in point of days, I found that the past, distant and near, was faint and scarcely to be recalled. Things no more than a month old, the fret and confusion of our escape which I thought was indelibly marked on my memory, proved suddenly as insubstantial and dispersed as the puffs of mist which float across a sunlit morning hill, dappled by clouds and sun. I could remember many times when Terry and myself said, 'We'll never forget this to our dying day,' and the fact of the event which made us speak so was clear enough in my memory, but I could not feel it. These old events seemed like things I had been told, and heard with a vagrant mind.

I looked round the wild empty scene; it had its terrors, winter, and storm, sudden cliffs and green bogs, but they were not such as fretted the humanity we had fled from; no sign of man or man's handiwork save a distant fence and burnt patches of heather on the moor was there to remind us of the man-made horror we had left behind us. Yet a mere month ago we were the fools of rumour, a prey to whispers, racked by fear and loathing. To-day the sun shone. We lived in the remote world which is not divided from men by miles alone; a greater distance than the rough hill barriers divided us from our kind; the callous earth,

unchanged in war and pestilence, occupied time as if there were no men, and we lived there, in that strict country.

The wind abating to a breath lulled me. Even the brief unhappiness of the morning, which owed to the east wind, faded into the past, and I should soon have been asleep had not a movement on the hill-slope facing us taken my eye. I had reached a state of continual unconscious vigilance. Quite automatically, with my mind still turned backwards, I took my glass from its case and rubbed the lenses with my handkerchief and looked towards the facing hill. I saw a herd of deer, twenty or thirty stags with the new horn just visible, milling uneasily. They rushed now in one direction, now in the other. The wind though light was steady. It was impossible they could have seen me at the distance. I had not moved enough to attract their attention and I had taken care to blacken the brass of my telescope so that it should not shine in the sun and betray me. Once, long ago, I had been saved from a gamekeeper who tried to catch me poaching because I saw his telescope gleaming in the heather, and it taught me a lesson. Anxiety commenced to replace my beatific calm, until I heard Terry speak. She was standing at the door of the cave shaking out a deer-skin.

'Isn't it the loveliest lovely day!' she cried.

'Terry!' I retorted, 'what on earth are you doing, standing there? Don't you know to be more careful? Lie down and keep quite still.'

It was amusing to see the sudden change that came on her face, and the haste with which she flung herself on the ground, not even waiting to make sure that the place she chose was dry or smooth. She lay for a few seconds in

absolute silence. Then she raised her head with exaggerated caution to peer about her, dropping her head almost as soon as she lifted it.

'Ostrich!' I murmured.

'Can I come up, Hugh?' she whispered. At my nod she crawled and dragged herself to where I waited.

'Did I do right?' she inquired anxiously. 'Is there any one? Was I bad? You were only giving me a fright!' Her startled eyes reproached me.

'All the deer in the country were watching you,' I stated.

She breathed her relief and sat up laughing.

'I thought for certain some one had seen me. My heart came into my mouth. What would we do if it had been a man, Hugh?'

'Leave here and find another hiding-place,' I told her grimly.

'Leave our cave! We couldn't do that, after the work we've done. What a fright I got. My heart's going like a jakey mill. It doesn't matter for deer.'

'It might, Terry. They should be lying at peace just now, and if a gamekeeper saw stags running away from this direction a few times he'd soon grow suspicious. It's not the deer seeing us that matters but other people seeing the deer. Lie down and let them settle.'

'I should be working,' she protested feebly. 'What a gorgeous day! Who'd imagine there was trouble in the world?' She crouched low in the heather.

'Och, no need to lie so close as that,' I laughed. 'So long as you don't go moving abruptly there's no fear. Stags

haven't very good eyes and the sun's against them. That's a pretty noticeable jersey you're wearing.'

'Don't you like it?' she asked, wide-eyed. 'I thought it suited me.'

'You know, Terry,' I continued, 'the biggest danger we have to contend with is that we'll become too contented here and give up all thought of the future.'

'I like being contented,' she returned.

'It's not easy to believe that men are killing each other,' I went on.

'How is the diary going?' she asked. I showed her the blank pages of the notebook.

'Terry,' I said, 'when we were so miserable, only a month past, I thought I'd never escape remembering.'

'It was an unhappy time, Hugh.'

'I'd never like to go through a time like it again. But Terry, it's as if it never happened for all I can feel of it now. Like a dream, or a tale in a book, or old gossip. I can scarcely believe there was a time when we weren't here. This country seems the only reality, and you can't feel with your heart that the affairs of men are important; it's hard to believe there are men, in a country so empty, so self-sufficient, as this.'

'A woeful dream, if it was a dream,' she whispered. 'A dream that murders men. Maybe this forgetting defends us.'

'Against—madness,' I took her up soberly. 'We were walking on a thin edge, Terry, when we were so uncertain and divided in our minds.'

'We were lucky,' she said. 'A great many couldn't have lived here, even if they had the opportunity. If you hadn't

learned to poach—'

'If we hadn't been poor—' I went on. 'It's queer to be lucky by force of hard circumstances. If we hadn't been forced to poach, and dig bog-fir, and make shifts because we hadn't money to buy meat and coal and comforts we couldn't have lasted a week here.'

'You'd imagine things were shaped for a purpose,' she agreed. 'It was complete chance that made us find this cave. A thunderstorm—'

'And bad temper,' I said, and laughed.

'I remember finding it; I remember as if it was yesterday,' she said in a ruminative voice. 'Oh my, we were wet and cross and miserable! The midges almost ate us alive. When was it, nineteen-thirty-two, twelve years ago.'

We had gone fishing for pike on Loch Coulter, a tarn which lies a mile off the road between Dalwhinnie and Laggan Bridge and now shines beneath us to the east of our home. In the afternoon a thunderstorm came over. We hauled our boat ashore and walked up a gorge westwards in the direction of Ardverikie Forest and the high hills, looking for shelter and a place where we could kindle a fire and boil our kettle. Each boulder that tempted us to halt had another more tempting shelter-stone a few yards above it. We were at that stage between dry clothes and sopping when the pelting open seems preferable to a refuge which merely slows down the rate at which one grows wet and we clambered dismally from one inadequate covert to another up the steep north side of the ravine. I think there is iron in the cliffs which overhang that slope. Flashes of lightning dazzled us, so near we heard them crack like whips, and

thunder reverberated amongst the peaks with scarcely a pause. Under that great sound the rising streams grumbled and rain beat on the earth.

A cloud of midges drove us half frantic and we climbed higher to escape them, though we carried them with us, through heather two foot long, over scree and gravel slides. We were soaked to the skin long before we discovered the cave, beneath a bulge of cliff. It was not strictly a cave. An immense slab of rock had fallen from the precipice. At the foot of the cliff it tumbled inwards to lean against the parent mass from which it broke away, making a long narrow tent open at both ends. Rubble had accumulated along the ridge. Heather took hold in it, and tough grass interspersed with tiny rowan trees wove a matted thatch which kept out the rain. It was dark and cold in the cave but since we had found what we were searching for we were perversely determined to make use of it in spite of the fact that we would have been warmer, and could not have become wetter, in the open.

The storm passed and we crawled out of the cave to sun ourselves and view the scene.

'Would this be one of Prince Charlie's caves?' Terry wanted to know.

'He passed this way to Benalder,' I told her, 'so no doubt it would be a Prince Charlie cave if people knew about it.'

'But why don't people know?' she continued. 'I'm sure there are dozens of places far more remote and wild than this and you can scarcely get near them for hikers and sightseers.'

'No one comes this way,' I explained, 'not even a gamekeeper. There's very little game; too many ravens and foxes and wild cats in this tangle of rock, and eagles from Benalder hunt here. Look, over there, under the Farrow, you can see the head of the Durc, where the eagles nest. Besides, it's a sort of dead corner with narrow angles of half a dozen moors and forests meeting. Each angle by itself is too small to be worth shooting. As for hikers, there's nothing majestic or romantic here, nothing but empty desolation.'

'I like it,' she declared. 'Well, we have our cave in No Man's Land, Hugh. What a place to hide in! like the Macgregors had, for desperate outlaws!'

'In summer,' I agreed. 'What are you looking for?'

'Things. Rock-drawings and flint arrow-heads.'

'Fox's dung more likely, and stinking bones.'

'Don't be cruel, Hugh,' she retorted. 'Now if you walled up one end the cave would be very snug. I'm sure people have lived in much worse places.'

'What food would there be?' I asked scornfully. 'You can't grow things here. What about the snowdrift? Were you thinking of flitting up here, Terry?'

How bitterly our jests reproach us when the thing we mocked comes to pass. I answered myself eleven years later, in 1943, when war was in all our mouths, and daily rumours shook the world. We had never revisited the cave. We had spoken about it only once, to one man, a stalker who lived near our house and came often on a winter night to play draughts and recall the war in France where he had fought for four years. But wherever the conversation began,



it always ended with Duncan telling us that we were degenerate compared with our ancestors.

'You don't require to talk to me, Hugh,' he declared dogmatically one evening in the summer of 1943; we were sitting before our house smoking and watching dusk hide the village of Newtonmore.

'You know as well as I do that folk to-day couldn't live on what made their fathers as strong as giants,' he went on vehemently. 'Take any man in a town and put him out here in the hills to live by himself and he wouldn't last a week. A week! not two days.'

'That's not fair,' Terry argued. 'You can't take a man in a town and compare him with country folk of old.'

'Take a man in the country, then,' Duncan persisted. 'Take myself, take Hugh. If we were forced to live by our own efforts, how'd we thrive? It stands to reason we couldn't do it. Our senses are blunted. We depend on a multitude of people to make our clothes and food and tools for us. We have noses that can't smell, ears that are deaf—'

'Nevertheless we have intelligence,' I stated.

'Brains don't keep you warm,' he declared.

'But they do,' I went on. 'And though we haven't the noses of deer nor the eyes of eagles, we hunt deer and capture eagles. All the same, you're asking too much, Duncan. Why, your very wild beasts, your deer for instance, can scarcely survive a winter, a bad winter, amongst these hills without artificial feeding. You give them bruised oats and Indian corn, don't you?'

'They're degenerate too,' he retorted.

'It's comparatively simple for men to live the savage life or like Robinson Crusoe in tropical fertile countries, Duncan,' I continued. 'Speed and strength and alert senses wouldn't avail a man much if he were flung out into the Grampians to live by what he could kill and grow. He'd die, pretty soon, however savage and undegenerate he was.'

We drifted into discussing how long one could survive the climate, the cold and hunger, of the mountainous north, if one were left entirely to one's own devices for food and shelter, clothing and fire. We agreed that without a great many tools and stores of clothing and such things as salt, one would die soon.

'And when your ammunition was all used up,' Duncan jibed, 'where would you find shelter?'

'There's shelter waiting in a cave in the rock above Loch Coulter,' I said. 'With a little work it could be made warm and tight. There are tons of peats and fir roots waiting to be dug just beside it. You could learn to use a bow and arrow. You could catch pike.'

'How would you avoid scurvy?' Terry asked. 'Would you dig a garden? Where would you get seeds? As far as I can see you would require pots and pans and dishes and needles and thread—'

'And a furniture removal van,' Duncan laughed.

We laughed with him. How easy it was to make a joke then. To laugh now is to raise apprehension in our minds, for so many things that we smiled to think on have come true, have come true and no jest.

'Trust the housewife,' I lamented. 'If ever you think of living the savage life, Duncan, consult Terry.'

'Oh, I don't think it's impossible,' she protested. 'It would be a dreadful life, but one could live. After all, Hugh, we ourselves require very little to keep us alive except clothing and flour and salt, and we could manage with less. We grow vegetables, we dig peats.'

'If living's all,' I said.

'If living's all.'

I used to think that these years of rumour, when war loomed, could never be remembered save with pain. Yet as I regard that decade, to-day, I wonder that I ever endured them, not because they were unhappy, but because they were futile and wearisome. I feel that custom alone made us live amongst the fears and murmurs of storm, and deferred our escape.

We started to speak once more about our cave in the autumn of 1943.

'You were in France,' I said to Duncan. 'You've seen—' I paused as a new thought came to my head. 'Duncan,' I said, 'did you know—did you ever know that you killed any one?'

He turned his dark-lined melancholy face towards the horizon of the Monadhliahs and kept silent until I began to think I had said what I should not.

'Once,' he said, in a low voice, 'the Jerries were coming over in the dawn, but light enough to see the sights of your rifle, a surprise attack, no guns, no noise, nothing but them—and us.'

He paused a moment.

'You know how it is when you've lived with a gun in your hand as I've done,' he appealed to me. 'The sights come in line afore you know it—I had a bead on a Jerry. He was dead,

Hugh, as sure as God I had him dead like the hind I got last week, before ever I pulled the trigger. I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it.' His voice grew harsh.

'Likely some one else did,' he said.

'Not you,' Terry whispered.

'Would you go back?' I asked, after a while. 'Yes?'

'Yes. We'd not be asked,' he said in heavy tones. 'We'd be conscripted. Well,'—he shrugged his shoulders,—'every man has it coming to him some time.'

'Conscripted? Good God!' I cried, 'would you go for that? They'd call me up amongst the first. I wouldn't go.'

'It's easy to say that now.'

'Why should you be called up, Hugh?' Terry inquired in a strained voice.

'Oh, having been in the Terriers.' I avoided her eyes. 'I think you swear to take up arms in defence of your king and country.'

'You'd go?' Her voice had the horror of death.

'We wouldn't be asked,' Duncan explained.

'Christ, I wouldn't go,' I said in a rage. 'No, nor I wouldn't be flung in jail and beaten and abused, neither. I'll tell you what I'd do, I'd take a rifle and plenty of ammunition and hide amongst the hills, and if they wanted me they could come and take me, but not alive.'

'Back to your cave, Hugh,' Duncan said.

'Any place would do me,' I rushed on. 'Oh, I'd fight all right, I'm no pacifist when it comes to defending my own right, but I'll not fight in any bloody stupid war. War's not fun any longer; it's murder, and I'm not a murderer.'

'You'd be a lot safer and more comfortable in the army, Hugh,' Duncan declared. 'You might get a cushy job. Better than lying out on the hill, cold and hungry, scared of every sound and move.'

'Half an hour ago you were praising the men of old for lying out on the hill,' I told him.

'They could do it.'

'So can I, and so I shall,' I answered wildly. 'I saw as much of the army as I want and I've heard enough of war from you to know I won't take part in it. Better starve and shiver than be a frightened slave.'

When Duncan went away Terry said, 'I didn't know you'd been a Territorial, Hugh.'

'I was a stupid young fool,' I told her shortly.

'But why?' she wanted to know. 'It's not the sort of thing I'd imagine attracting you.'

'I was hard up and a crowd of us fancied the holiday. You get five pounds for attending the summer camp.'

'My little mercenary! Were you a good soldier, Hugh?'

'No, I was not. I don't want to hear more about it. I told you I was a young fool.'

'How in the world did you let yourself be disciplined?' she persisted.

'I didn't,' I admitted wryly. 'It was all so damned stupid. It revolted me. After all, I was good material. I could shoot, I had hit living moving things, which was more than most of the other men had done or would ever do. I had trained eyes, I knew how to take advantage of cover. But because I didn't wear my kilt just so, and polish my buttons properly,

the best they could do with me was make me clean out lavatories, shovelling filth to learn the art of war.'

'Poor Hugh!'

'If there was any sign of intelligence in the business a man could take pride in doing it well, even though he knew it was a bad business at the best. But to charge in a bunch over open country with fixed bayonets and horses galloping, in the year nineteen-twenty-eight, as if the Great War was a myth! If I had a rifle with decent sights I could have killed most of the whole army. Duncan uses an army .303 for the hinds; they're fine weapons, dead true and practically flat up to a couple of hundred yards. He put on leaf sights. All you have to do is flick a leaf up or down when you're changing your range. That's not difficult enough for the army. The army doesn't want good, simple, workman-like sights. What's not good enough for killing deer is quite sufficient for defending your life and your country. And that's only one example of how much they learn from experience. Maybe wars are justified sometimes. They used to have a sort of justification before they became too big and dreadful for any justification. Justified or not, they're a stupid way of settling things, and as far as I ever saw, stupidly run.'

'They'd call you up?' she asked a little later.

'Right away,' I agreed.

'I think you'd go.' Her voice was harsh.

'I would not.' I was angry with everything, even with her.

'You say that now. When the pipes begin to play and all your friends to leave—'