THE LONG FLIGHT

TERENCE HORSLEY


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To
Uncle Harold and Aunt Margaret
with best wishes from
Keppel.

Christmas 1947.

W. Roger

THE LONG FLIGHT

By the same Author

SPORTING PAGEANT

FLYING AND FISHING

FISHING FOR TROUT AND SALMON

SOARING FLIGHT

THE SEVEN HAD RISEN FROM THE EDGE OF A LAKE WHICH NO MAN HAD SEEN

THE LONG FLIGHT

TERENCE HORSLEY

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FOREWORD

I have seen the grey geese fly in from their arctic homes. They have come against the moonlit sky, triumphant, and the thin clamour of their voices seems a measure of their victory. Behind them lies the emptiness of the sea-girt horizon; ahead, the promised land, moonlit fields and silver estuaries.

I have seen the duck follow them, usually lower over the water, and always silent. At one moment the dunes on the coast are deserted, the next the whistle of pinions betrays their arrival. They too have crossed the sea. They too have won their winter sanctuary. To see them fold their wings, easing and ruffling them into their sides, is to feel the content of a great physical effort safely accomplished.

Off the mouths of the estuaries, where the fresh water meets the incoming tide, the salmon jump. They are on their way home, nearing the end of a cycle which began many years before and has been beset by hazards every hour of the way.

Nor are birds and fish alone among living things which meet the forces of nature, triumphing or succumbing according to their degree. There is the airman, who has the courage and stamina of the others, and the men who live close to the earth so that its relentlessness is never far out of their minds.

Each of these in their turn are the heroes and heroines of my stories. They possess the qualities of which the creatures of our planet cannot have too much—courage, tenacity, and knowledge of the fickle Goddess whom we know as Nature.

HALE
1947

Terence Horsley

THE LONG FLIGHT

The storm was at its height when the leader saw a smudge in the darkness which was darker than the night itself. He might have swerved at so sudden an intrusion were the beat of his wings less well matched by the cut and thrust of the gale. But they had been on the wing now since the dawn of the previous day, and though the rhythm of flight had not varied by a stroke, either shorter or longer, faster or slower, he knew the power of the tumbling air about him and reserved his strength. There would be an end to this, when the white tongues of the sea would no longer leap to meet the grey underside of his wings, and in the stillness of a quiet dawn there would be light airs and a soft line to the new land. Until then, nothing mattered so much that the rhythm should not be broken.

So the smudge grew out of the storm, until it took the shape of a pair of long pointed wings braced in a curve of pursuit which brought them to the tail of the Vic formation which he led. Here, they were synchronized, to become related shadows in the darkness, so that the Vic on one side was now longer than that on the other. The threat melted into the storm to be carried away on its driving breath as a slither of spray rose to lick the silky column of his neck. Eight greylags held to the south-west, nine hours out from land, where before there had been seven.

The seven had risen from the edge of a lake which no man had seen for a dozen years, where the willow thickets were dusted with the first fall of winter snow, and the pines thrust spires into an icy silence which was not to be broken for five long months. In that windless dawn, as the last trout had risen to the last spent gnat, and the ice shot its silver stilettos over the black water, they had taken to the wing, circling and climbing, as though

striving for the light itself. They had seen the old nest on the network of floating roots, more familiar than the day itself, the spout of the river where it left the lake and creamed over the shingle, and, beyond, the uneven reaches of the water-jewelled forest sloping south to the limits of the hardening horizon.

It was an impulse, stronger than fear, which headed the skein so that the sun hung below the tips of their port wings. It held them south-west on a course which drew a line across the wastes of the continent. Hour after hour, the point of the Vic had stabbed towards the cliffs on the coast which five of their number had never seen, and men had looked up from their scratches in the land and shivered, reminded that winter was at hand.

The skein had crossed the coast that afternoon to feel the first breath of the wind which they now fought in the darkness. Something had gone wrong . . . a rapidly forming vortex of low pressure had brought the air gushing out of the west, salt-soaked, and rising in fury about the new depression. The instinct which guided migration on long sea passages had been cheated by a trick of the North Atlantic weather.

One of the young birds was the first to drop out of the formation. A moment before, its wing beats had been as strong as ever; in another moment they had faltered, and there was a gap in the starboard line which was quickly closed by the new arrival. Every member of the flight was aware of the casualty, but neither regret nor curiosity checked the relentless thrust into the wind. But it was one thing for a youngster to succumb, but another when, suddenly, the great grey goose who had kept rigid station for so long behind her leader, hesitated, crumpled, and created in an instant a second gap. The gander swung round sharply in the darkness, uttering the long plaintive cry which he had used for more seasons than he remembered to call his spouse. Up into the darkness, in wide circles, he climbed and called, while the formation broke and scattered before the gale.

On the bridge of a fishing vessel, hove to in the storm half a mile away, a man looked up under the dripping peak of his cap, straining his ears. He

THE SKEIN HAD CROSSED THE COAST THAT AFTERNOON . . .

heard the call through the sobbing veil of darkness, and then another call, stronger, more strident, as a trumpet might blow to rally the beaten remnants of a tired army. The great gander, newcomer of two hours before, was gathering about him four young greylags. Out of the maelstrom of the wind, the man's ears caught the chuckle and chatter of geese, gathering, until they came as one cry across the bows of his ship. Then for an instant he saw something which he had not seen in all his years at sea . . . a tight formation of five greylags caught in the light of the binnacle as they flew less than ten feet above the breaking crests. Their voices were garnered by the gale, but for long afterwards he heard the single cry of another goose, sometimes circling the ship, sometimes low across the water where the white froth lit the darkness like a lamp.

The course had been changed. The skein flew more to the west, more into the teeth of the wind. Now they were flying even closer to the water, as though they sought the shelter of the rollers themselves. The four young birds kept station as rigidly upon their new leader as they had upon their old, conscious perhaps of a fresh strength communicated by blood which was not theirs.

No bird, no living thing, could have seen for more than four hundred yards that night, and a man could not have found his hand in front of his face. But a sure knowledge, more certain than the approaching dawn, told them that there was land ahead. Two more of the company were destined never to see it. They dropped, knowing it was there, certain of its existence, but without either regret or fear for the life they missed or the dark future below which they inherited. There was no question of making a last effort. They had flown to the limit of endurance.

So in the grey light of a tattered sky, three geese rose and fell over the waves as they came to the level beach. Above the tide mark, where the litter of the years bleached and rotted in the salt-wind, they dropped. They remained without moving for the rest of the day, while the gale blew itself out and the roar of the sea fell to a growl.

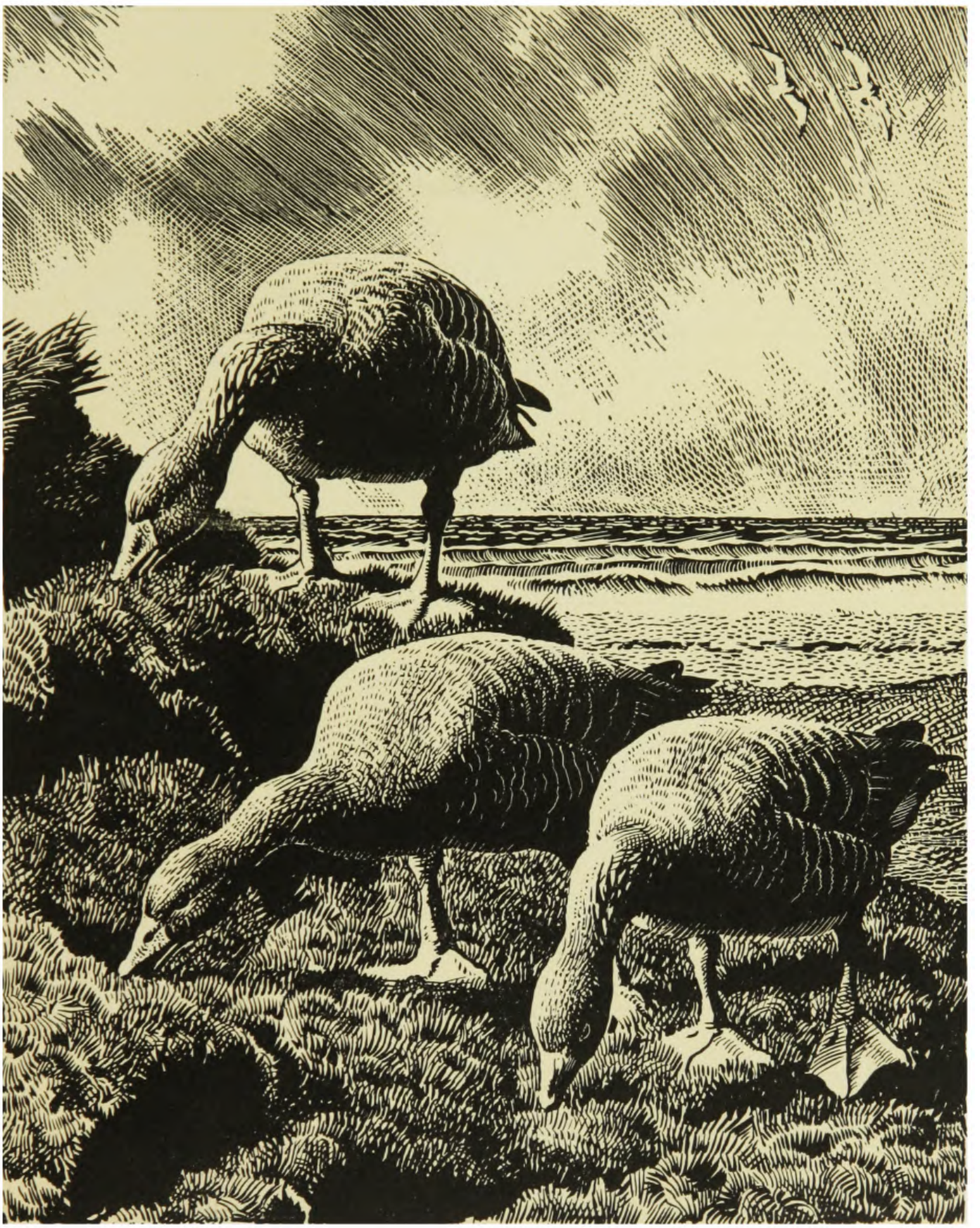
Towards dusk, the big gander ruffled his wings, eased the great muscles

which drove them, and with swinging head tasted the breath of the wind as it came across the short grass behind the shingle. In another moment he was rising to circle the beach, calling. The two who were left raised their heads, chuckled deep in their throats, and even as they gave tongue shrank back into themselves. Twice more the gander circled before he stiffened his wings to cut down through the eddies and pitch by their side. The young goose, large for her age, who had flown for so many hours on his port hand, two feet below and six feet behind, was aware of the urgent demand made upon her. She raised her neck and swept it across his darker back in graceful acknowledgement, while the young gander, on her opposite side, felt the blood in his veins begin to tingle. So when the leader again spread his pinions, there were two others beside him.

The little formation flew as one bird over the licking waves, turned, and drove upwind across the beach towards the shoulder of a rounded hill. They knew that this was only an island—had known it in the blackness of the previous night while they were thirty miles away. But the rain-wet grass of its arched back offered good grazing, and under the shelter of the hill the gander pitched. For an hour they remained feeding, while the light drained from the sky and a grumble seemed to rise up out of the sea to fill the twilight. As the last grey bar seeped out of the horizon, they returned to the beach, to be wrapt in a blanket of darkness.

Before dawn, in the false light which plays tricks with the eyes of gunners on the mainland, the geese returned to the short grass. They remained feeding throughout this second day, save for an hour at noon when a watery sun pierced the scudding clouds, and they rested.

As darkness came again, the wind shifted into the north. The gander had been waiting for the change, knowing it to be on its way; and as the polar stream gathered strength, its cold breath swept the clouds out of the sky and unrolled a carpet of stars. This time, when the gander swung his neck through the path of the wind, there was no hesitation by his companions. They rose together, heading across the sea, and climbing. Now the wind was on their quarter, and as the skein rose higher, the current



THEY REMAINED FEEDING THROUGHOUT THIS SECOND DAY

B

swung through north into the north-east, so that at two thousand feet it was adding twenty knots to their speed. This also the gander had known. So they flew against the stars to open the smudges of new islands on the sea ahead.

They were flying easily, perhaps not so strongly as on the day they started their migration, but with reserves which would bring them to the mainland. There was a new note in the chuckle of their voices, as though the darkness was behind them and ahead was the light and rich plenty. A woman in North Ronaldsay, in labour with her child, heard them in the watches of her pain, a cry that rose and fell along the reaches of the upper wind, so strong, and so sure of life that she herself found fresh courage. In Stronsay and Shapinsay and aboard warships in the pool of Scapa, men heard them. Then the lights of the Skerries, Stroma, and Dunnet Head drew a line across their track, and beyond it the leader saw the bulk of Sutherland, reaching south-west, to where the mountains rose into a wilderness of stars. Beyond those mountains was a water in a marsh waiting for him.

In the background of their flight was now a great weariness. It would have reached up to their muscles and stayed there but for blind desire. They were nearly home. The wind cried it out and the stars echoed it, the lochans flashed it in a thousand eyes, and the wet rocks of Morven and Scaraben rapped it out in twinkling reflection. The gander flew between the peaks, level with their crests, and followed the line of the sea on his port hand which ran true from Wick to Dornoch. There was light in the east when he crossed the Helmsdale river, a flush back of Kinnaird forty miles across the firth. It kindled into the first pale flame of dawn as he topped the ridge above the level flats of Loch Fleet, and saw six miles ahead the shape of the water which had lived with him since the beginning of time.

He raised his great voice, and accompanying him, the birds on either hand rent the air in greeting. Wings were stilled, and the whistle of rigid pinions flung down their warning from fifteen hundred feet. They swept

the pines of Clashmore, dropping under the noddling crests where the flames of the new day were already kindling the western skyline. Beneath them, a silver tongue of the firth bit into the mountains, carving out bays and stabbing into marshy creeks where its tide whispered among the reeds. Five miles away, a single light twinkled in a cottage on the other side of the water, and another light, a dozen miles to the east, burned where the hook of Tarbat enclosed the sea.

There were dunes at the back of the broad bay, and a sheet of burning flood-water. Further south, the tide was ebbing across the muddy flats—and to these the gander dropped in a last swift glide.

He was fifty feet above a break in the dunes, where the offal of the tide lay in a curving line, when he saw the movement. It was no more than the shadow of a shadow, but it reached back into his past, and in that same instant, measured by the decimal of time which has divided life from death upon a million occasions, he slipped sideways down the path of the wind. The young goose on his port hand had seen no movement, but she was welded by bonds more subtle than she knew to the flight of her leader, so that even as his wing tips flexed she followed his manoeuvre. There were many knots of slipping drift on their flight as the shadow belched a flame. The movement carried them clear of the column of hail which tore through the air with a shriek unmatched by any wind. The hail struck the gander who had been on the starboard hand full about his throat, and the rattle of its outer pattern broke on his pinions. He had crumpled before the leader flushed the air and stabilized his flight.

Down below the shadow moved. Black, muffled, with a single gleam of light on the barrels of his gun, he stepped across the hollow into the brightness of the unshadowed day. With slow steps, for the soft ooze clutched at his rubber boots, he began to make his way across the mud to where a grey brown patch lay in a trough of its own creation. On the other side of the firth, under the groin of Cambuscurrie, a symphony of braking wings rustled. Two greylags, a gander wise in his years, and a young goose ageless in tradition, had come home.

HOME-COMING

The last fix placed Malin Head 083 degrees 340 miles. In the words of the steward to the only wakeful passenger, the air liner was an hour and a quarter from land and less than two hours from her British base.

She was flying at 23,000 feet in an eighty knot wind from the nor' nor' west . . . a smooth, rushing wind without a ripple in its flow, so that within the pressurized hull, it appeared a calm.

The passenger, glancing through the thick, air-tight window, saw an unbroken field of cloud stretching to the horizon. It was like an Arctic scene among the icepack such as a lookout might see from the masthead of his ship. Above it, the canopy of stars was arched in a blue-black vault.

The passenger shuddered. He was not an imaginative man, but there was something colder about it than the mere forty-five degrees of frost which lay on the other side of the window. He turned his eyes on the steward.

'An hour and a quarter?' he repeated.

'About that, sir . . . '

'It doesn't feel like it and it doesn't look like it . . . yet right now I'm nearer home than I've been for thirty years.'

The steward smiled tolerantly. He had brought many men home and had seen its emotion in every disguise. Home was the same to rich and poor alike, although if you happened to be a Scot and had made a fortune in America, home-coming was a very religious thing.

He folded the passenger's dressing gown and laid it on the top of his suitcase.

'Would you be requiring anything more, sir?'

There was no answer. The passenger was staring again through the port, eyes fixed on the field of cloud, as though they were seeing things beyond it. The steward withdrew.

Twenty paces away, beyond the silver-fitted door, where there was no pile carpet and no primrose light to chase reflections across the panelling, the captain looked out of another window. It was broader and longer and thicker than the one in the passenger's cabin, and it offered a view which the passenger could not share. The captain could see ahead.

He saw the floor of the cloud rising. It gave the impression of a gentle snow-slope, so that an explorer would have said there was land beneath. It would demand an alteration to height if it continued, and maybe a fresh consideration of the final approach to the shore.

'Get another weather report,' he said into the intercom.

He disengaged the automatic pilot and placed his hands and feet on the controls. As the gyroscopes slipped out of gear, he felt the life of the aircraft flow up into his fingers. Waiting for a moment until he had sensed the trim, he pulled back gently on the wheel until the cloudfield sank and the aircraft was in a shallow climb.

In the compartment immediately aft, the radio operator flicked down the switch of his microphone and called the pilot.

'Radio to captain . . . I can't raise base . . . I'll try again in a few minutes.'

The captain nodded. He had already opened up the throttles to seven pounds of boost and increased the revs to twenty-two hundred. With these settings he could maintain the cruising speed and leave the navigator's plot unaffected. But he called the flight engineer and told him what he had done —a matter of routine, for the engineer had heard the alteration in the note of the engines and had seen it confirmed by eight of the fifty-five dials on his panel. As the captain spoke, he was synchronizing the last of the motors on his duplicate set of pitch controls.

'Radio to captain . . . I've been unable to raise base . . . the static is exceptional.'

'I heard you,' said the captain . . . 'try again, and meantime ask Mr.

. . . BULBOUS PROTRUSIONS WHICH WERE SPLIT BY CAVERNOUS SHADOWS

Symes to step up here.'

He wasn't worried. Too many electrical storms had passed over his head without doing him serious injury. Moreover, his attention had become focussed on a more immediate problem. A wall of cloud was developing along the starlit horizon. It had the appearance of an ice reef, and though it looked negotiable at this distance, it probably reached to many thousands of feet over their present altitude. To the right and left, it stretched for as far as the eye could see, and here and there were bulbous protrusions which were split by cavernous shadows.

The door into the cockpit opened, and the second pilot poured his bulky form through it as though it had been a fluid. In the same movement he put on the headpieces and drove their plug into its socket.

'Anything wrong?' he asked.

'I'm climbing . . . the weather looks unusual . . . wireless contact lost and the temperature's dropping . . . what do you make of it?'

The newcomer waited before he replied. He had assimilated in a few moments many of the conditions of flight . . . that the height had been increased to twenty-six thousand feet . . . that the engines had been opened up . . . that the course was 079 magnetic . . . and that the automatic pilot was out.

Now he looked across the green half-light of the cockpit to the transparent panels leading to the outside world. He saw the barrier of cloud and the slope leading up to its precipices. It seemed closer every second, and he estimated that at its lowest it was seven thousand feet above them.

'Over the top?' he queried.

'No,' said the captain. 'We'll have the freight complaining . . . the stuff is not less than thirty-three thousand . . . which will make the cabin fifteen thousand feet . . . '

The second pilot knit his brows. It was certainly too high to go over the top, and that meant going through it or round it. Neither prospect accounted for the frown . . . it was the unexpectedness of the weather following the forecast—and the unusual height of the cloud in the late

autumn. He raised his microphone again—

'What was the temperature at twenty-three thousand?' he asked.

'Minus twenty,' replied the captain. 'It's dropped another fifteen degrees.'

★ ★ ★

The passenger observed the alteration to course. The stars swung across the circular disc of his window and steadied in a constellation of fresh patterns. To him, it meant the nearness of the end, the light at the mouth of a tunnel and the half-vision of the world beyond which he had not seen for so long. The thought brought a smile to his lips, so that his face glowed from the warmth of it. He took a pencil from the tray at his elbow and wrote a message. In another moment he had summoned the steward.

'Have this sent,' he said. 'It must get through before we land.'

As the steward came into the corridor, he read, 'Angus McQuail, Auchna-rhoid. I can hear the stags roaring and the pipes playing in the glen.'

The steward shook his head and went forward with the paper to the little door where the carpet ended. Passing through, he laid it on the rubber-topped desk at the operator's elbow and bent his head to the other's ear.

'Urgent,' he said.

The operator glanced up, his eyes dancing in the fire of his shaded lamp.

'Leave it,' he said. 'I'm busy.'

The steward saw him turn to his key, and waited while he called the land. There was evidently no answer, for presently he laid down the receivers, and reaching back over his chair, touched the navigator on the shoulder. The navigator turned, and the operator shook his head. It seemed to the steward that the message was going to be unlucky. It was no concern of his—but it was a shame to take ten dollars from a passenger for nothing.

A red light winked over the navigator's head and froze him into attention. Loud and clear the voice of the captain came over the intercom.

'I'm going through it . . . course 079 magnetic . . . speed two five zero . . . height twenty-seven thousand feet . . . losing five hundred feet a minute down to eighteen thousand . . . I'll take a correction when you've worked it out.'

The navigator repeated the figures and turned swiftly to his board. Within ninety seconds he had called the captain again and given him a twelve degree amendment to his course. As soon as the figure was repeated he threw in the switches of the radar and searched the sea on the hundred mile scale. Faint flickers of light danced on the florescent screen in the wake of the scanners . . . they were sea returns. He had expected no more. By dead reckoning, the coast of Ireland was still 170 miles away.

The cloud had scarcely been entered, when the leading edge of the wing was clothed in a livid violet sheath, while every protuberance mounted a flickering crown of fire. Around the frame of the cockpit windows it began to dance in elfish abandon, and even along the instrument panel it winked. To those unaware of its character—among whom were many of the passengers—it seemed certain that the aircraft must burst into flames. Only the captain appeared unmoved, his face without expression, and his eyes held fast upon the instruments. The second pilot, helping to steady the kick and surge of the controls as the storm centre was reached, was moist in the palms of his hands. He was hoping that the captain would turn back.

There was much movement on the aircraft now. It was less violent than it would have been in a lighter built machine. But tremors rippled down the fuselage and the woodwork groaned under the stress. The forces were revealed more startlingly outboard, where the wing tips flexed as the strain altered from second to second.

The captain picked up his microphone and spoke to the operator. 'Go aft,' he said 'and tell the passengers it is only static. There is nothing to be afraid of.' He had scarcely hooked up the instrument when a red light

seared through the blackness outside, and for a moment the aircraft appeared to be enveloped in flame. Both pilots instinctively ducked and shielded their eyes, and as it passed, the light burnt on in their brains. When it cleared, they saw that the play and flicker of the static along the wings and around the fuselage had gone—that the well of darkness through which they flew was complete.

'Maybe you were right,' said the captain, voicing the second pilot's unspoken words.

A check of the instruments showed that the aircraft was still on an even keel and that her airspeed was unaltered. For a moment there appeared to be no damage.

It was a sudden pressure from the rudder bar, followed by a slewing of the upper needle of the turn-and-bank indicator, which revealed that the airliner had not come through unscathed. The port outboard motor was losing revs, and instinctively the captain opened up the inner motor and throttled back those on the starboard side. As the trim was restored, he glanced downwards along the port wing to see a tongue of flame leap and flicker through a joint in the outer engine cowling.

As he looked, the flame took heart and grew, till it trailed in a yellow ribbon three feet long. So big was the ship and so great the distance from the cockpit, that it only looked a small flame. But the captain was in no doubt of its possibilities, and he tripped the switch which feathered the propeller.

'Port outer motor on fire . . . petrol off,' he sang to the flight engineer, '. . . stand by the fire button.'

In the adjoining compartment the flight engineer turned the cocks which cut off the petrol, and then waited with his thumb resting on the first of four buttons from which he had lifted the guard.

A passenger down the fuselage started shouting. There was a noise of splintering woodwork, followed by a thud, and then quietness, save for the uneven beat of the engines.

The second pilot took over the controls, and now the captain watched

the burning motor while he held the microphone to his lips. The fire had outlined the wing in bright relief, and its reflection glowed on the scudding mist.

For a moment the captain was undecided. The use of the extinguisher would put the engine out of commission, and though the ship would fly well enough on the remaining power, he hoped that the flames would die, and that eventually he might be able to restart the motor.

But as he watched, a new and longer tongue of flame came from the cowling, and delaying no longer, he gave the order.

For perhaps half a minute the flames danced and rippled along the edges of the cowling. Then quickly, as though a hand was withdrawing them, they grew shorter, wavered, and died. The foam bubbled and seeped across the duralumin plates, choking the flames within, and even cooling the hot metal. In two minutes the fire was out. In its place, there began to creep the ghostly flicker of white ice, spreading along the edges of the wings.

When the lightning struck the aircraft, the passenger was lying with his eyes closed and his memory among the years back to which he was now being carried. The brightness of it filled his head with red light, so that it annulled his being and submerged even the sounds of flight in the fierceness of its moment. The violent flicker of the static had been nothing to this; indeed, he had taken little note of it after remarking its beauty, for he remembered that such phenomena were said to be common at great altitudes. But this was different. As he recovered from what seemed to be a physical blow, he became alive to the possibility of disaster. It was a chilling undercurrent of disappointment rather than fear. He had waited so long that to die now was unthinkable.

It was the cry of panic, heard throughout the pressure hull, which checked his thoughts and brought him, rigid, to his feet. It was repeated, and the terror of its tones unleashed his muscles as though by a trigger. Without awareness of what he did, he left his quarters, and ran lurching down the centre gangway to where, at its termination, a sealed door led

to the outside world. Here he found a man with face distorted clawing at the levers which closed the opening. Gathering himself against the pitch of the aircraft, he hit the man with all his strength. The body collapsed, as he had seen a stag collapse after a shot through the heart. He stood over it, bewildered, and sick at heart.

While he remained there, he became aware of another at his side, and looking up he saw the wireless operator.

'I guess I hit him harder than I meant,' he said.

'You saved me the bother,' said the operator. 'Give me a hand to get him into his cabin.'

They half lifted and half dragged the body along the passage, and throwing it on to a bunk, leaned against the bulkhead for support, exhausted and perspiring.

'It's the altitude,' said the operator. 'It takes it out of you.'

As they stood there, they became aware of the fire. The light of it glanced on the frame of the window and drew their eyes like steel to a magnet. It bereft each of speech, until its import had sunk into their minds. Then grasping the handrail of the bunk for closer support, they watched it in silence while the fuselage tossed and pitched in the rough air. Between them, the third man sprawled on the cushions, his face white and his chest heaving in broken rhythm.

'Well,' said the passenger, 'is this the end of the journey?'

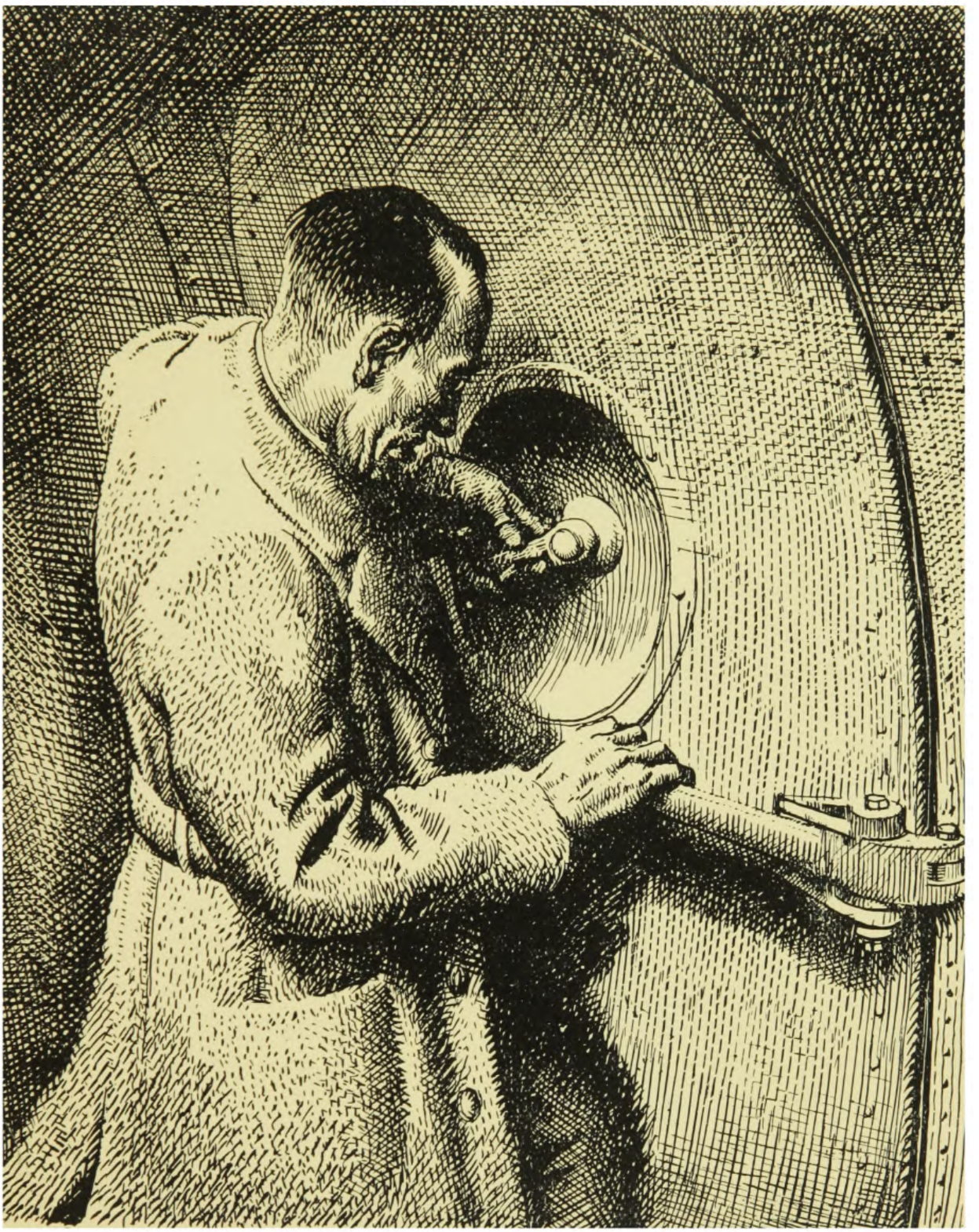
'I don't know,' replied the operator. 'It depends on the fire.'

They looked again through the circular port, and the glow of the flames suffused the primrose lights of the cabin with a more rosy warmth. It shone on the damp skin of their faces.

'How do you get to a fire like that?' said the passenger. He was remote from himself, so that it seemed as though another voice was speaking.

'You press a button on the control board . . . I've never seen the result . . . I've never had a fire before.'

So they stood and watched, and it was then that the flight engineer pressed his thumb into the emergency panel. To the men in the cabin, it



. . . A MAN WITH FACE DISTORTED CLAWING AT THE LEVERS WHICH CLOSED THE OPENING

was as though God had answered their unspoken prayers, for they saw the flames wilt and retreat into the engine nacelle.

'We'll make it,' said the operator.

The extinction of the fire put life into the operator's limbs, and turning he left the passenger and made his way for'ard. In the gangway the steward was coming from one of the cabins.

'All well,' said the operator, smiling.

'All well,' replied the steward.

They stood face to face listening. The rhythm had come back to the motors, and the ship was riding more easily.

As the operator reached his desk he saw the red light winking above the board. Clamping the intercom to his ears, he acknowledged the signal.

'Captain to radio—we need a bearing badly.'

'Wait,' said the operator.

He made his switches and saw that the main generator was dead. Nor was this alone the fault. By a freak of the flash, the aerial circuits of the transmitters and receivers were burnt out, and the leads through the pressure hull were charred. The flash had wrecked the radar, the radio compass, and inevitably the radio altimeter. Only the internal circuits were working —the intercom and the lighting system, which was supplied from a generator on a starboard motor. The supply could be switched, but such was the damage to the sets that the problem of communication seemed insoluble.

The operator reported to the captain, and by consent the navigator's plot became the most important single factor of safety. The plot had been kept since take-off seven hours before, and as each wireless bearing had been received, the position by dead reckoning had been checked and corrected. The last bearing had been logged fifty-five minutes before.

'Where do you reckon we are?' said the captain.

'About forty miles north-west of Malin Head,' replied the navigator . . . 'that is if the wind hasn't changed.'

'I'll try to climb into the clear,' said the captain, 'and you can get a shot

of the stars.'

'We'll have the sun in another twenty minutes,' he reminded him.

The captain opened up the three engines to twelve pounds of boost and twenty-six hundred revolutions.

The aircraft climbed. From 17,000 feet the needle swung infinitely slowly across its dial until at 22,000 feet the climb was less than 50 feet a minute. Around the hull the mist still pressed in unvarying consistency, though a pearly light now percolated from above.

'I reckon that's used a hundred gallons of fuel,' said the second pilot.

'We'll use some more,' said the captain, and moving his controls once again, he increased the revolutions by two hundred and the boost to plus eighteen pounds.

The engines were now consuming fuel at a rate of 210 gallons an hour each, or nearly three times their normal consumption. It gave the aircraft a remaining endurance of a hundred minutes.

But the climb was resumed. The altimeter moved again, and slowly approached 25,000 feet. Ice began to form once more, but the de-icers were able to keep it in check. The cloud was still as thick as before, though the light was brighter.

Reluctantly the captain throttled back and called the navigator.

'No luck,' he said. 'It has every appearance of a deep occluded front—and I don't understand it. What do you think?'

The navigator considered before replying. He was a careful, stolid man, and was never embarrassed by intuitions. Dawn had now come, and there was almost sufficient light to read his chart without the use of the electric. But outside the visibility was not a dozen yards. The wing tips were out of sight.

'I reckon it's frontal,' he said. 'In any case, we'll be over Prestwick in 14 minutes.' There was another pause, and then he asked—

'How's the fuel?'

The flight engineer cut into circuit. 'Three hours safe,' he said . . . 'at

plus four and nineteen hundred revs.'

The captain asked the operator for news. The operator was plain spoken. 'You'll have to find your own way home.'

'Steer 068 and hold your height,' said the navigator. The captain protested. He couldn't do it without reducing his endurance.

'O.K.,' said the navigator. 'I'll give you corrections as you go down.'

Silence fell upon the intercom and the aircraft flew on. But although there was quiet every member of the crew was concentrated about his business.

The navigator's problem was the change of the wind which might be expected at a lower altitude. He expected it to back from the north into the west, and go round towards the south. But at what altitude the changes would come, and with what alteration to velocity was guess work.

Three minutes later the navigator cut in to announce they they should be over Prestwick. Outside, the mist was as thick as ever and the light from above no stronger. They were at twelve thousand feet.

'I reckon this is a real Scotch mist,' said the passenger to the steward. He had sought him out in the pantry and asked for breakfast. In reality, he was seeking more than this—he was seeking an assurance that the land which he loved and to which he was returning would give him a safe welcome. The steward guessed it, and because he was an airman first and a steward second, he smiled, and agreed that it was certainly a thick bit of Scotch mist.

'Ought to be in pretty soon?' said the passenger.

'We certainly ought,' said the steward. 'We'll be going down any time now.'

He carried the tea and toast to the passenger's cabin and laid the tray on the bunk. 'I should take this now, sir . . . while it's hot.' When he left the cabin, he went forward and spoke to the operator.

'Wireless packed up,' said the operator . . . 'don't know where we are . . . or do we?' he said to the other man in the compartment.

The navigator glanced at the chart and answered seriously, 'we are

somewhere over Scotland, flying east. The skipper's looking for better weather on the east coast.'

The second pilot stepped into the cabin and saw the steward. He asked, 'Are the passengers all right?'

'They're fine,' said the steward. 'What about us?'

'We're all right,' said the second pilot . . . 'there'll be fine weather on the east coast.'

But there was no fine weather, and thirty minutes later, the captain turned and held a little to the north of west. He thought that the best chance was to come down over the sea and nose his way inshore. At no time had he descended below four thousand feet, knowing the possibility of hitting a mountain top.

It was now that the urgent voice of the flight engineer called the captain. A test of the outer port tank had revealed an alarming loss of fuel. It looked like a severed line, although there had been no indication of it until this moment. He had checked it after the fire when he cut the tank out of circuit, and its reading had been normal.

'How long have we got?' said the captain.

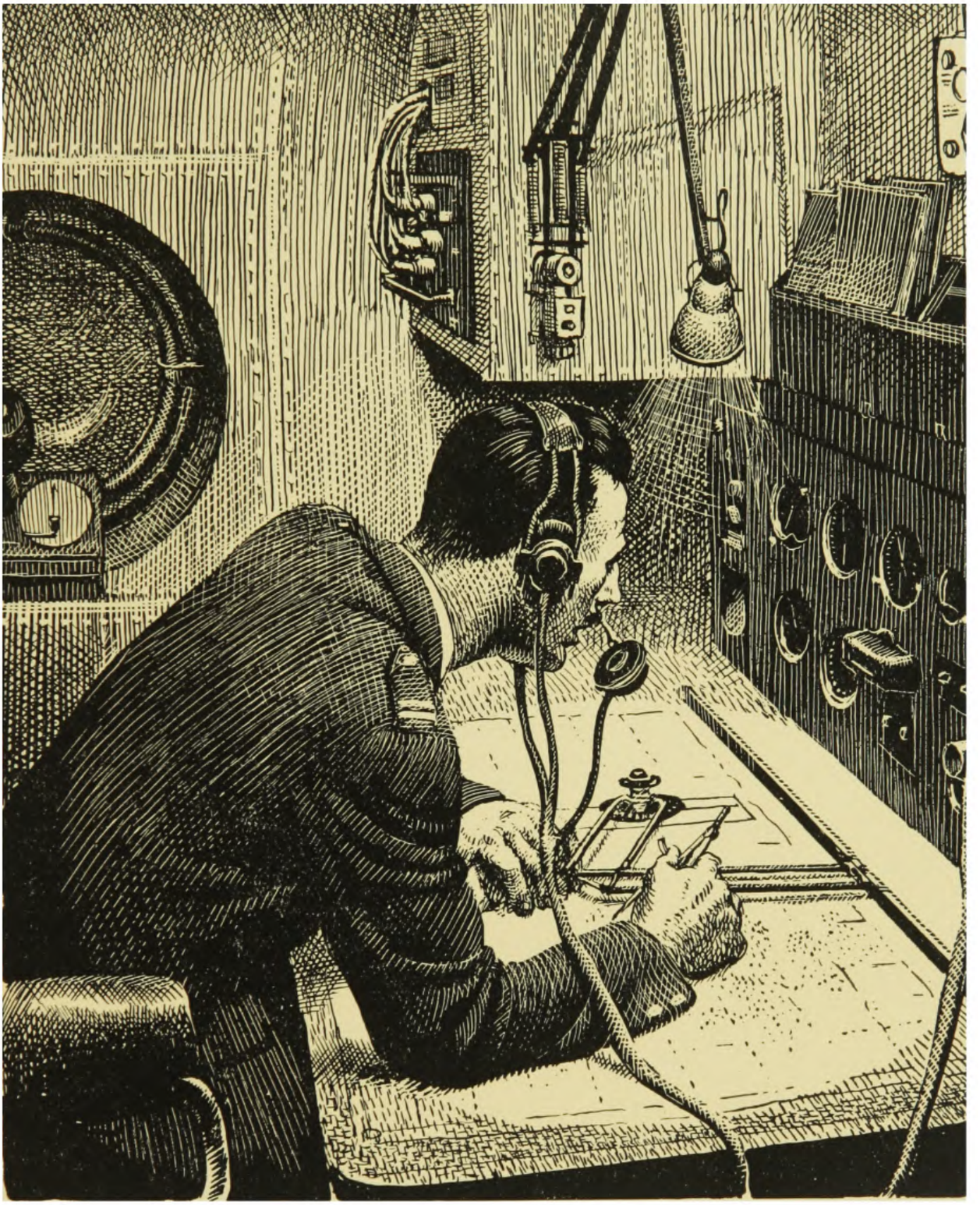
'I'll work it out and let you know.'

The captain kept his microphone switch pressed.

'Hallo navigator . . . I want to come down to a thousand feet where it's safe and have a look around . . . I should think the sea off the North of Ireland would be as good as anywhere.'

The navigator looked at the hair lines which traced an increasingly complicated pattern across the chart. His mind was in doubt, for many alterations had been made to the course and over five hundred miles had been flown in winds which had reached eighty knots since he had last been able to check the position. Something in his voice warned the captain of his anxiety. When the captain spoke again, the tones were casual, almost bantering.

'If you've lost yourself, George, I've a crystal in my pocket . . . a gipsy gave it to me . . . it's infallible.'



SOMETHING IN HIS VOICE WARNED THE CAPTAIN OF HIS ANXIETY

'It's not that, skipper . . . it's the wind . . . what the hell has the wind been doing?'

'I wouldn't know,' said the captain. 'Have you been taking it into consideration?'

The navigator was nettled. Of course he had been taking it into consideration. He wasn't an apprentice just out of school, and his reply told the captain as much. The captain smiled. The navigator was all right. He was a safe man.

'Then it's easy,' said the captain. 'We'll assume that your estimation of wind is correct. Give me a course to the sea off the north coast of Ireland.

The flight engineer broke into the circuit. 'Better not make it too long,' he said. 'We've got fifty-five minutes flying time left.'

The captain knitted his brow while his eyes sped over the faces of the flying instruments. It was not the first time that he had been confronted with an awkward situation and it would probably not be the last.

It had been a mistake to go through the weather: he recognized it now. He should have climbed over the top and risked a passenger dying of heart failure.

'Fly two-eight-one and descend to a thousand feet at three hundred feet a minute.'

'Two-eight-one,' repeated the captain.

He might even have gone under the weather, or for that matter tried to get round it to the south instead of to the north. Without doubt, he might have done anything except fly into the flash. He smiled at the thought, and next to him, the second pilot wondered what there was to smile at.

The aircraft was at six thousand feet making 180 knots through thick, but stable cloud. The ice had begun to flake off the wings, and the ship was lighter, riding easily on the three good motors. At the after end of the hull, the steward had opened the hatch which led to the baggage compartment. In a recess built into its side were the rubber dinghies which the second pilot had instructed him to unstow.

There were life-jackets, too, but he had been told not to issue them

until instructions were received.

He was working on a dinghy whose pack had become jammed in the shelf, when he heard a voice at his elbow.

'Let me give you a hand,' said the passenger.

The steward turned, and permitted the passenger to help him to drag the dinghy clear.

'We'll stow it by the emergency hatch,' said the steward.

The passenger helped him to pull it along the companion way. It was heavy, and the exertion left them breathless. After straightening their backs, the passenger and the steward stood face to face for a moment, and in the interchange of their glances, there was complete understanding. Without speaking the passenger turned and continued his way to the toilet.

★ ★ ★

The airliner hit the upper slope of the saddle which joins Glas Maol to Carn an Tuirc. Thirty feet of extra altitude would have carried her over the ridge and into the canyon where the young Isla gurgled in its bed of rocks.

There was snow on the ridge. It lay heavy and white, the same colour as the mist, so that neither pilot saw what it was which caused the shuddering jar, and the shriek of tearing metal beneath them. The blow was oblique, but it was decisive. It threw the weight of the captain on his harness, so that the belt bit deeply into his flesh, and his heart pounded in reaction to the pressure of his blood. Yet he remained in possession of his faculties, and even saw briefly the spurt of snow thrown up by the impact. It appeared in that instant an impersonal thing, as if it had ocurred to another aircraft, leaving him unafraid.

The second pilot was less fortunate. The straps of his harness had hung loose from the pillars of his seat, and he had been flung forward to strike the rim of the starboard window. All other persons in the airliner, with

the exception of the passenger in the toilet, were injured to a greater or lesser extent.

Yet so precisely was the blow about the point of balance that the aircraft ricocheted back into the air on an even keel, wings, fuselage, and tail unit mainly intact.

At seventy feet above the crest of the ridge, she hung poised for a second with propellers twisted and stopped, the radiators beneath the engine nacelles carried away, and the pressure hull torn open for a distance of thirty feet. It was her loss of speed and the subsequent stall which precipitated the closing moments of the disaster. The nose dropped, and at an increasing angle she went down. When she struck again she was on the further slope of the ridge and the line of her advance almost matched the steepness of the hill. A second wave of snow leapt from her prow, and she plunged down. Yet such progress could not continue. The moss-hag of the crumbling mountain gave way to the spur and bluff of igneous rock. Members of her bright skeleton were bared and severed to an orchestra of sound. It was a ledge no wider than a wing span that finally opposed the slide. Here the full weight fell suddenly upon the main spars, folding them abruptly around the rocks. The engines left their mountings, and continued as free boulders down the mountainside. The fuselage, digging into the hag, struck the solid rock beneath, and telescoped like a paper tube.

Yet there was about the momentum of the mass an upward component to the tail unit, and it caused a clean fracture of the fuselage fifty feet forward, between the after dressing room and the kitchen. This part rode upwards and outwards, broke free, and finally struck the hillside forty yards on. Here, with its momentum lost, it scrunched to a standstill.

For a second, the thunder of the engines, already far beyond any other part of the wreckage, continued. Then they too were silent, and over the mountain descended the quiet to which by right of solitude it was heir.

Far down the glen, in the still morning air, came the skirl of a pipe, and from a peak on the opposite side, a stag roared. The passenger was home.

THE LAIRD'S TROUT

It was a long narrow pool flowing under the bluff of a high bank. The water was the colour of amber, sunfilled, restless, and under the rocky ledges full of shadows which lent suggestion to half-formed mysteries.

High up, on a spur of grey rock which broke from the face of the bank, sat the head gillie. He had the same ageless quality as his background, and had it not been for the curl of smoke from his pipe and the movement of a hand which was the colour of mahogany, he might have been overlooked as a stump which clung to the hillside. Below him, more obvious by the startling colours of his clothes and the yellow flash of his rod, stood his gentleman. He fished the swirl where the current rubbed the edges of a backwater, a place to which he had been directed. As he fished, he grew angry, and the pace of the rod became swifter. The high bank, and the need for a left-handed cast were making it difficult for him to get out an adequate line—and for one whose adequacy in other things was widely accepted, the shortcoming was intolerable.

Presently he put up his rod and clambered up to his gillie. Thrusting it into the other's hands, he stood sweating, regarding the servant with disillusioned eyes.

'The pool's no damn good . . . we shouldn't have left the loch.'

The pair climbed to the crest of the rise, and turned upstream until the land flattened again, and a tongue of the loch lay below in the mouth of the hills.

No breath of wind disturbed the mirrored tapestry of its surface. Nor was there any sound save the undertone of the insects—something which

had been present for so long that it was unnoticeable. Above them, the ball of the sun burned in a blue sky. They stood and regarded it, neither caring to express the words which were in their minds. The best trouting water in Scotland was no better than the worst at such a moment, and for a fortnight, the blaze of a cloudless June had reduced all fishermen to a common level.

'I've got important guests . . . they're complaining,' said the tenant.

The gillie was not listening. He stood rock-like in the baking heat, his eyes fixed upon the surface of the water. It meant nothing to him that the fish were not takeable. There would be better times, and they would come round as they had done in all the years he had lived in the glen.

'Well—what are you going to do?' demanded the tenant, stung by the old man's indifference.

Deliberately the blue eyes of the gillie were turned into his own and for a moment they were held locked: then the other's fell, and the gillie took his pipe from his mouth.

'The troot are dour,' he said.

There was more in his mind. But speech with the gentleman from the south was hampered by a barrier between them. It was built of the unnamed things which half a century puts into the characters of men. To have said more would have pledged him to more than he cared to express. He had done all he could—suggesting that the gentleman should fish in the late evening after the sun had gone down, and into the night on the late rise. But the gentlemen had returned to the castle to drink heathen drinks and eat dinner when they should have been out on the water.

They moved to the boat where it was drawn up on the hard, and sitting on the thwarts, contemplated the afternoon. Over the rim of the hills a cloud was building, and to this the gillie's eyes were turned. It was no part of his employment to wish ill to his charges, however they compared with his real master. The laird would wish him to give of his best, and the best he had given, with few words, but with punctuality and courtesy.

The cloud grew. It swelled as though it were being blown up by a

bellows, and it mounted the sky. The tenant became aware of it, and as it spread, the sun turned to copper and the weight of the air pressed heavily and silently down. Presently it would burst, perhaps over their heads, and there would be a deluge, with lightning and the clap of thunder which would rock the hills. The tenant had not seen the like of such a cloud before.

'Maybe you'd wish to take shelter?' said the gillie.

'We'll go home,' said the tenant.

So the boat was chained to a post, and the two men hurried into the shadow of the trees along the way of the gorge, and raced the storm to the gates of the castle. They parted beneath the porch.

'You'll fish tonight, sir?' asked the gillie . . . 'it will be a rare chance.'

'Damn the fish,' said the tenant. 'Get some trout yourself if you can, and bring them to the castle.'

'How many would you be wanting?' said the gillie.

The tenant glared at the servant, his eyes red with the soreness of the sunburn. But he, too, was learning the art of silence, and did not reply.

'They're fashed at the big hoose,' said Donald to his wife. 'They canna keep civil tongues in their heads.'

'You shouldn'a blame them, Donald,' she replied. 'They havn'a the skill nor patience of yoursel'.'

'But I've told them, . . . I've told them they'll no catch troot till the sun's doon.'

'Aye, Donald . . . but a gentleman needs his dinner . . . and what's a troot to be set against guid food?'

'You're a heathen, mother,' he said, and sat himself at the table where the middle cut of a salmon lay on a clean white dish.

Meanwhile the storm broke, and soon the eaves of the cottage were running to the deluge which poured through the trees. The earth seeped up the water, hissing, and the undergrowth drank it thirstily. But the initial shower was but the tuning up of an orchestra which soon burst into the full movement of its symphony, crashing with its cymbals and unleashing

THE CLOUD GREW

the flame of its desires in red tongues which seared the sky. The rain came, so heavily that for a while they could not hear each other speak across the table.

In the middle of it young Donald came in, shook the water off his clothes in the porch, stripped himself of all but his trousers, and slid with glistening skin into his place at the table.

'Are we fishin' the nicht, father?'

'Aye,' said his father, 'we're fishin'.'

They came to the pool at the moment when the gentlemen in the castle were sitting down to a game of cards. The rain had stopped, the sky cleared, leaving the remaining light of day washed into the sky in a pageant of colour which no cloth of gold or human device had ever matched.

Young Donald breathed deeply, drawing the cool sweet air into his lungs. Old Donald stood up erect, looking like a statue poised on the lip of the gorge. He was listening. The noise of the river came up to him, louder and stronger than it had been a few hours before, and a creamy frill of foam rode against the cliffs. On the opposite shore, the tongue of shingle had shrunk, and the river, which swept around it, had lost its translucence for a deeper and more metallic coat of mail.

In the swirl, where the current and the backwater met, two fish were jumping, one of them a sea trout whose silver side was like the blade of a polished sword.

'Tak' the bottom end,' said Donald to the boy, 'and if ye keep anything under a poond I'll scalp ye.'

Young Donald grinned and began to work his way down the cliff. His father moved upstream, and dropped to the level of the river by an easier route. There was no hurry about his movements. His limbs flowed smoothly like his thoughts, without stumbling, without doubt as to where they were leading him. He was a man who saw the present and the future as a single entity, denying the measurement of time, while recognizing the profundity of the moment. It was a moment now about which he had no doubt. The storm had cleared the air, raised the river by four inches, and

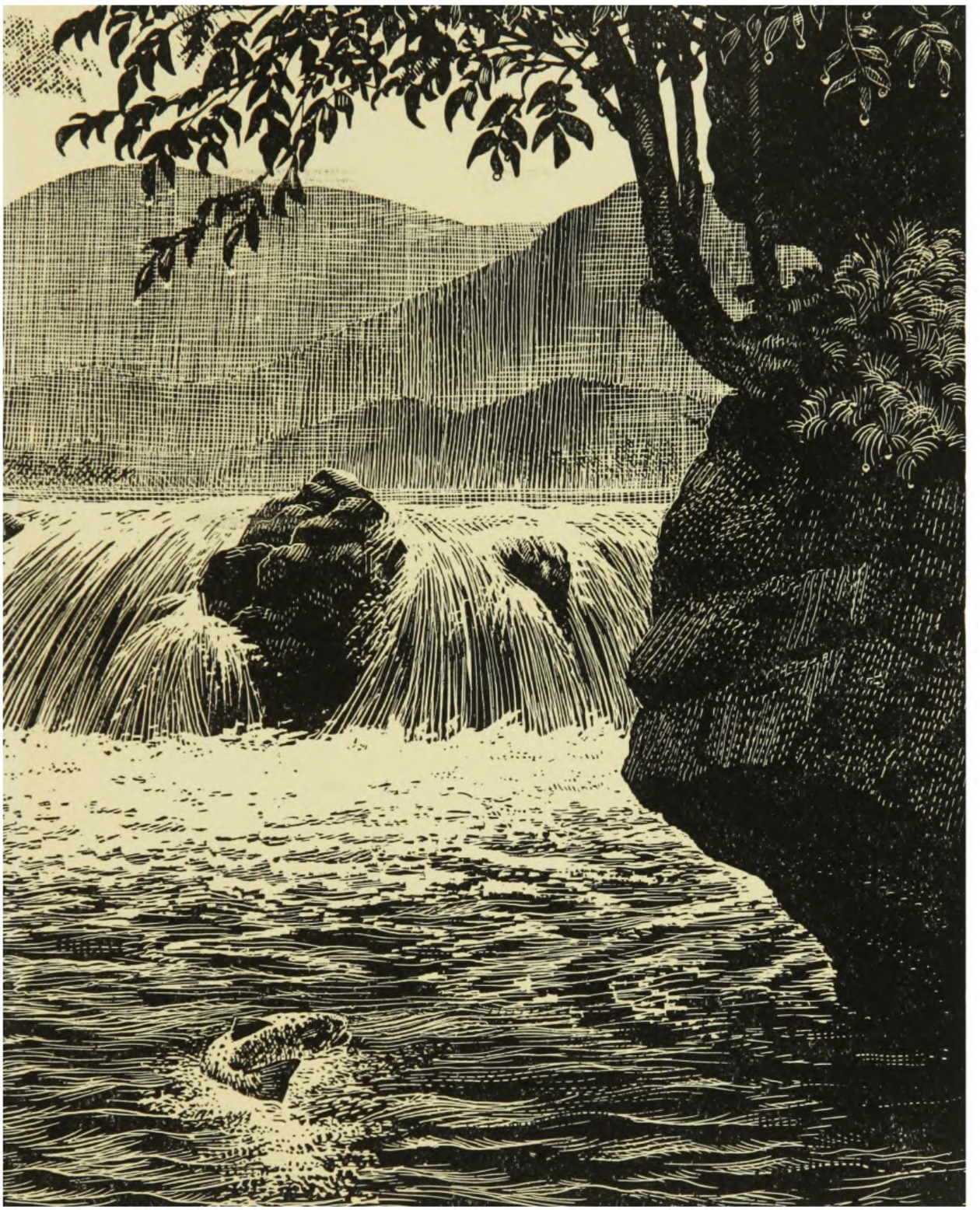
as surely as the coming night, had put every trout in the pool on the move. He guessed that he was going to see fish bigger and better than any guest in the castle would see them that year, and he knew beyond the bounds of reasonable doubt that the single fly on the end of his stout cast would attract them.

So when a brown trout of three pounds jumped in the deep glide at his feet, he was neither surprised nor elated. That it had risen to the surface for the first time since the last big rain was as clear as had been its hiding place beneath the ledge when the water was low. To have even seen such a fish might have been regarded as luck. But Donald had no use for the word. He accepted the inevitable sequence of a great rain in June which followed a month of hot, dry weather.

Donald cast. It was a left handed flick of no more than a few yards which placed the fly upstream of the rising fish. A child could have done it. He let it drift down until it passed him and hung in the current where the water washed the rocks. As he drew the fly towards him to cast again, a trout rose with a splutter of white foam and took the fly. Donald reeled the fish to the bank, grasped the line, and lifted it out of the water. Unhooking the barb with a twist of his wrist, he tossed his catch back into the stream—a brown trout of half a pound.

He cast again, and this time the big fish took the fly within a rod's length. As it turned, it made a heavy swirl in the water, and Donald struck. The weight of it arched the rod until the point quivered below the level of the butt. Then as though driven by all the pent-up energy which had come into the river from the sky, the fish went upstream. Twenty yards away, where the water tumbled into the pool over a ledge, it came to the surface to churn it into a foam like a sea-trout clean from the sea. The next instant, it was making downstream, outstripping the reel, and passing below the fisherman, to snatch the line tight ten yards away. There was no stopping it—not even on good gut which was thick enough to handle a grilse.

Donald followed, the reel spinning free, clambering as best he might in



. . . WHERE THE WATER TUMBLED INTO THE POOL . . . IT CAME TO THE SURFACE

the failing light over the outcrops from the face of the bank. Before he had it under control again, he was close to young Donald at the lower end of the pool.

'Yon's a great fish,' cried the boy. 'Fetch it close and I'll have it out for you.'

But the trout chose that moment to make a last run across the river, and there with its energy spent it dropped downstream.

'Mind ye,' cried the boy, 'there's an ould tree lyin' there . . .' and in the dim light, but a moment too late, his father saw it. The strain which he put on the rod, designed to bring the fish immediately to the surface, locked the line solid in an unseen snag. For a moment he held it there, and then relaxing, allowed the line to fall slack.

'It was a nice troot,' said old Donald . . . 'it was for the laird himself.'

'Ye've no' lost it, father, have ye?' said the boy.

'Aye, I've lost it,' said the old man, and began to work the rod in the hope of freeing the line.

The boy watched him, and then away across the river, in the gathering shadow, his eyes detected an unnatural swirl in the water a yard below the place where the tree-stump broke the surface.

Without waiting to tell what he had seen, he slipped off his jacket and slid like an otter into the river. Old Donald put up the rod and watched his son borne in the current down and across the stream. He saw him reach the opposite bank, clamber on to the shingle, and run upstream again to where the tree lay a dozen feet out from the shore. He remembered the time when he himself would swim a river rather than admit the loss of a cast.

In another moment, young Donald, with white water breaking over his shoulders, braced himself against the submerged obstruction. Secure in his grip, his father saw him explore the water with his arms, and though it was now too dark to make out what he did in detail, he presently heard a shout to draw in the line. So old Donald took up the rod again, and finding the line free, wound it to his hand. The cast was unbroken and the fly secure.

Soon the boy was back in mid-river, striking for his own shore. He drew himself out on to a ledge of rock where he rested while his father came downstream towards him.

As old Donald approached, young Donald contracted the muscles of his stomach, thrust his hand into the top of his breeches, and drew out a brown trout of three pounds.

'The laird's troot,' he said.

They bent close and looked at it. It was indeed the laird's trout . . . small in the head and deep in the girth, with ruby spots on its side glowing like jewels in the dusk.

'Ye'll no' tell the laird I had it down my troos?' said the boy, a note of anxiety in his voice.

★ ★ ★

In the morning the sun climbed back into the sky, merciless in its power, and presaging another day of torrid calm. The clean bite of the evening before had gone, and though the wet earth still steamed in the damp places, the conditions for fishing were little better than they had been the previous forenoon.

It was seven o'clock when young Donald set out on his bicycle for the morning train, carrying with him the big brown trout wrapped in long sweet grass with sacking sewn about it. It would be in London that night. On a dish in Donald's cottage was another trout.

'That's a puir troot to bring home, Donald,' said his mother when she saw it.

'It's no' staying,' said Donald. 'It's for the castle.'

The old man regarded the little fish with critical eyes. 'I said I'd scalp the lad,' he grumbled, 'but I'll stay my hand this once.'

''Tis no fish to take to the castle, Donald . . . could ye not catch ony more?'

'Aye,' replied Donald, 'we had five . . . but none just as guid as the one that's gone to the laird. They were better back in the river.'

THE SALMON

If all the eggs had hatched, she would have had nearly seven thousand brothers and sisters. But the hazards of winter took their toll, and by the time spring came their number was reduced to little more than a thousand. A flood washed away more than half the eggs before the redd had been covered, and though some found a new lodging under stones downstream, few escaped the attentions of the trout and the birds.

Frosts came in January. They bit into the bed of the shallow burn and halted the development of the eyed-ova. Then snow fell, piling up on a north-east wind until the mountains bore many million tons of it upon their backs and the stream was bridged from bank to bank. The same storm drove the deer out of the corries into the main valley in search of food and shelter. Some were shot by outraged farmers within a mile of where the salmon redds lay beneath their roof of snow.

Yet it was the subsequent thaw which took the greatest toll. In a night in February the temperature rose twenty degrees, and by noon on the following day the sides of the hills were running and the valleys filled with torrents. Even the burn found a voice which would have surprised a summer angler accustomed to its titter. Boulders shifted uneasily, and the lighter pebbles of the redds rolled along the road of the flood to pile into new bars of shingle. The same flood bore the battered body of the mother salmon into a litter of broken timber and rotting straw, there to be noticed in the spring as another kelt who had died on the altar of parenthood.

Yet it was this flood which heralded a gentle spring. Under a canopy of warm mist which spread itself over the hills, the temperature rose. The black snow-water ran away, and by the beginning of April the alevins were

wriggling upwards through the gravel to reach the surface, grow aware of life, and many to fall victim to every creature larger than themselves. Six hundred more young salmon disappeared in this universal quest for food. Then the alevins, with the yolk sacs still clinging to their bodies, felt the same urge. They, too, became hunters, seeking among the gravel and behind the weeds the cellular life which lived in the water. The survivors waxed strong, and took on the shape of salmon to come.

It was chance, and perhaps an early developed instinct for roving, which led the young salmon downstream. She was an inch long, defenceless, and ignorant of the ways of predatory fish. But a light fresh helped her on her way, and the tinge in the water, gathered from the peat hags, hid her from the eyes which watched behind stones.

So it was that she came to richer feeding grounds—where in May the duns hatched, and where among the watercress of a ditch were delicious snails.

All that summer she darted through the shallows hunting everything smaller than herself which moved, but hiding whenever in doubt of some new shape. Sometimes the alarm was no more than a network of shadows cast by wind-blown trees, sometimes a vibration like thunder—which was the trundle of wheels over the shingle of the ford below. One evening at dusk, when she was racing a yellow trout for a nymph which was drifting between two sticks set in the river, she received her introduction to fear. A streak of light bent down and passed through the water at her side, consuming her companion, and in the nearness of its passage, sending vibrations tingling through her body. Twice more that year she escaped the strike of a heron.

When Autumn came, she was fully three inches long, and at every device for escape or for the capture of food, she was a match for her fellows. Then the rains came, and in the hills there was a little snow—sufficient to lower the temperature of the water by many degrees. At this time, she sought out a stone, one well grounded upon its bed and with a shelf under which to hide.

Here she burrowed into the fine gravel and forgot the things which belonged to the warmth and the bright light. Balanced in her cooling world, she suspended life in a winter doze while the floods poured over her head and the offal of a season flowed down to the sea.

In March she left her stone, driven by awakening interests. She was thinner and darker, and during the first weeks of spring, slower in the pursuit of food than she had been the season before. But as the river was bountiful, and because luck was still on her side, she regained her condition and by July she had grown another inch.

It was on a day in this month when she pursued across the sunny gravel a thing of flickering silver of which she had never seen the like before. It had the song of life in its dance over the small stones, and when it hung in an eddy its poise was like the suspended spring of a shadow. Twice she lunged at it, only to see it flash ahead as she missed. The third time she had it firmly between her jaws. But in the moment of realization, it assumed a character which stamped itself for ever afterwards as a dark place in her memory—an oasis of fear of which the details were immediately lost. She was never aware, for instance, of the fisherman who dangled her above the stream, or felt his hand as with a twist of his wrist he freed her of the barb.

She was conscious only of coming from beneath a stone when the late light of the evening was on the water. She was off her food for two hours —a long time for a salmon parr.

Her second winter was spent beneath a stone like the first, but the place was ten miles farther down the river—a place to which she went with an early spate. The water was stronger here. It had bitten into the face of a hill, uncovering its ribs to form subterranean ledges where great fish a hundred times her own weight lurked in the shadows. In a pool by the side of the main stream, she found her stone.

★ ★ ★

In the third season, as the nymphs were hatching in the shallows, she went down to the sea. One morning as a thundery shower put a fresh song into the current and a stain of amber into its colour, she felt the urge to be gone. That day there was joy in her small body, called out by an unknown, irresistible urge, very different from the instinct which prompted her to chase every insect floating upon the surface.

This was migration—and it was like the alternating of light and darkness, a thing over which she had no control, and yet in yielding to its demand, gave it welcome.

As she came to the creamy swirl of the first rapid, she was joined by others of her kind. From every shallow and every tributary, the column of descending smolts grew longer, and the nearer it came to the sea the faster it travelled. Each member of that trek was changing its appearance as the miles were consumed and the stream grew into a great river. The smudgy bars on their sides were fading, the light of their starry spots dimming beneath a coat of silver, until their descent was like a shower of newly minted coins.

In the estuary, flowing through a waste of long reeds to which the wild duck came in winter, a concourse of birds awaited them. It was as though the smolts had been signalled from afar, for there was gathered on the sea-slimed beaches, where the green hair weeds waved in the tide, every red-throated diver which haunted the coast, every cormorant and merganser and goosander, and a great company of gulls beside.

As the tide ebbed, the sea beaches dried and the channel narrowed, crowding the host into a stream upon which the birds dived like a cloud of hostile aircraft upon a defenceless target. The losses were tremendous, but the number of the smolts was legion, and for every little fish that found a home in the gullet of a long-beaked raider, another reached the swell of the open sea and was gone to the adventure which awaited it.

On the evening of the day she passed through the shadow of the lighthouse, she entered the green world of the weed forests lining the coast. She struck for the deeper water without pause, and only stopped when she

THE BIRDS DIVED LIKE A CLOUD OF HOSTILE AIRCRAFT

felt on her side the warm embrace of an arm of the Gulf Stream. It was here, suspended close to the surface like a cloud of pink light, that she found the plankton—the minute crustacean life which became the fulfilment of her heart's desire. Drifting with its cloudy mass as it swung with the tide, she lingered through the long summer days. In a month she was the size of a herring, and in three months, while the sun still blazed in an august calm, she might have been mistaken for an adult sea trout. Her weight was more than a pound.

Now she moved far to the north, cruising to the fringe of the Arctic seas, and finding fresh delights. There were shoals of brisling, fresh from the Norwegian fjords, and dense packs of sprats from the sand bars of more southern waters. It was thus that, when winter came and her desire for food grew less, she was as strong and as fast, and fully twenty times heavier than the day on which she had left her river six months before.

Those early days in the sea lengthened into months and the months into years. She became a silver torpedo plunging into the green depths until among the twilight of its subterranean cliffs, she sought new kinds of food . . . crustaceans with hooked beaks and white fish with bulging eyes. When she dived, the pressure mounted on her silver sides and from her glands the air was blown, like air from the tanks of a submarine, restoring her equilibrium.

In the first winter and in the winters that followed it, she lay in shallow water, rocking in the swell and swaying to the waving forests on the sea bed. In these cold months, when the twilight was always deeper and the lick and curl of the wind sent its rollers a dozen fathoms down, she neither hunted nor fed, save at those rare moments when chance carried an easy prey across her path. The winter was a time of quiet, of drift and waiting. But when spring came, life flowed back into her veins and she would shoot to the surface sunshine and break through a wave-crest in a smother of spray.

During her second year she added ten pounds to her weight, most of it in a few weeks on the sand bars of a bank where the herrings were clustered.

After three years, she weighed more than thirty pounds and was fifty-seven inches from nose to tail. Her great muscles would drive her at twenty knots and tireless, she would travel a hundred miles to follow the shoals.

The beginning of her fourth year found her again in the Arctic, off the shores of Iceland. She was among the white fish, and grew familiar with the shadows of the trawlers which swam like clouds through an emerald sea. By midsummer her weight had increased to forty pounds, so that had there been any to see, she would have been called a great salmon.

It was on a midsummer night that a disturbance rippled through her consciousness. For four years and three months no tremor of desire had ruffled her life. But now suddenly, like the urge of that day long ago in the upper reaches of her river, she felt a call to be gone. At first it only turned her head to the south. Then the call became more urgent, and mounting into a blind desire, drove her night and day through the summer sea. For three weeks she travelled, no more than a dozen feet beneath the surface, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, save the need for haste.

She struck the coast of Scotland at Dunnet Head, entering the twilight of the shallows beneath the ironbound cliffs. Without pausing, she turned east and rounded the cape a mile from the shore. There were others with her now, the first salmon she had seen for many a month, silver torpedoes with a purpose, all driving to the south along the margin of the land. She came inshore to taste the fresh waters of the Helmsdale, the first fresh water she had known for four years. It called up dim memories which filled her with excitement.

But she passed it by, and pressed on up the Moray Firth, turning with its coastline, and running east by the long sands which fringed the flats of Nairn and Elgin.

The rankness of fresh water was continuously in her gills now . . . the waters of Findhorn, Spey and Devron staining the sea far offshore. They stimulated fresh excitements, but none held her for their own. The call which was recorded in her inner being came from farther on, and even when she found herself among a shoal of other salmon, many of them

males with ripening milt, she passed without hesitation the mouth of the river where they lingered.

A mile from Stonehaven she was seen by man for the first time since she had been caught as a parr. As on that other occasion, she owed him her life—and not only her own, but those of twenty-four thousand eggs ripening in her body. It was a collision, strangely timed, and the cause of it a wandering seal more than a hundred miles from his hunting grounds. She had been seen by the seal as a flicker of refracted light, close to the surface, and simultaneously the salmon had seen the shadow sliding with tremendous speed towards her. Flexing her muscles, she plunged forwards with every ounce of her power, gaining six feet in the first critical yards of her flight.

Perhaps the seal was too confident—for it was not often that a fish drew away from him with such speed. Yet, once in full pursuit, he gained swiftly, and three times the salmon had to fling herself clear of the water to escape. As she jumped for the third time, she crossed the bows of a becalmed coble within the length of an oar. The shadow of the hull fell on her as she spurted sideways and crossed under the keel. In the same instant, an oar was dipped, its blade cutting across the path of the seal so that the white flash of its paint caught his eye and turned him from his path. The check was only momentary, but it was sufficient. The salmon was gone.

The man in the boat rubbed his eyes. It was no uncommon sight to see a seal chasing a salmon, particularly in the firths to the north. But it was a long time since he had seen so big a salmon, so closely pursued.

South . . . deep into the south she travelled. Twice the coastal nets would have caught her had they not been lifted for the season, once along the beaches of St. John, and once as with mounting excitement she tasted the tang of her own river. She was running close inshore and trembling with distant memories.

She darted among the stakes upon which the nets had so recently hung, while a hundred yards away the waves beat on the level sand. After another

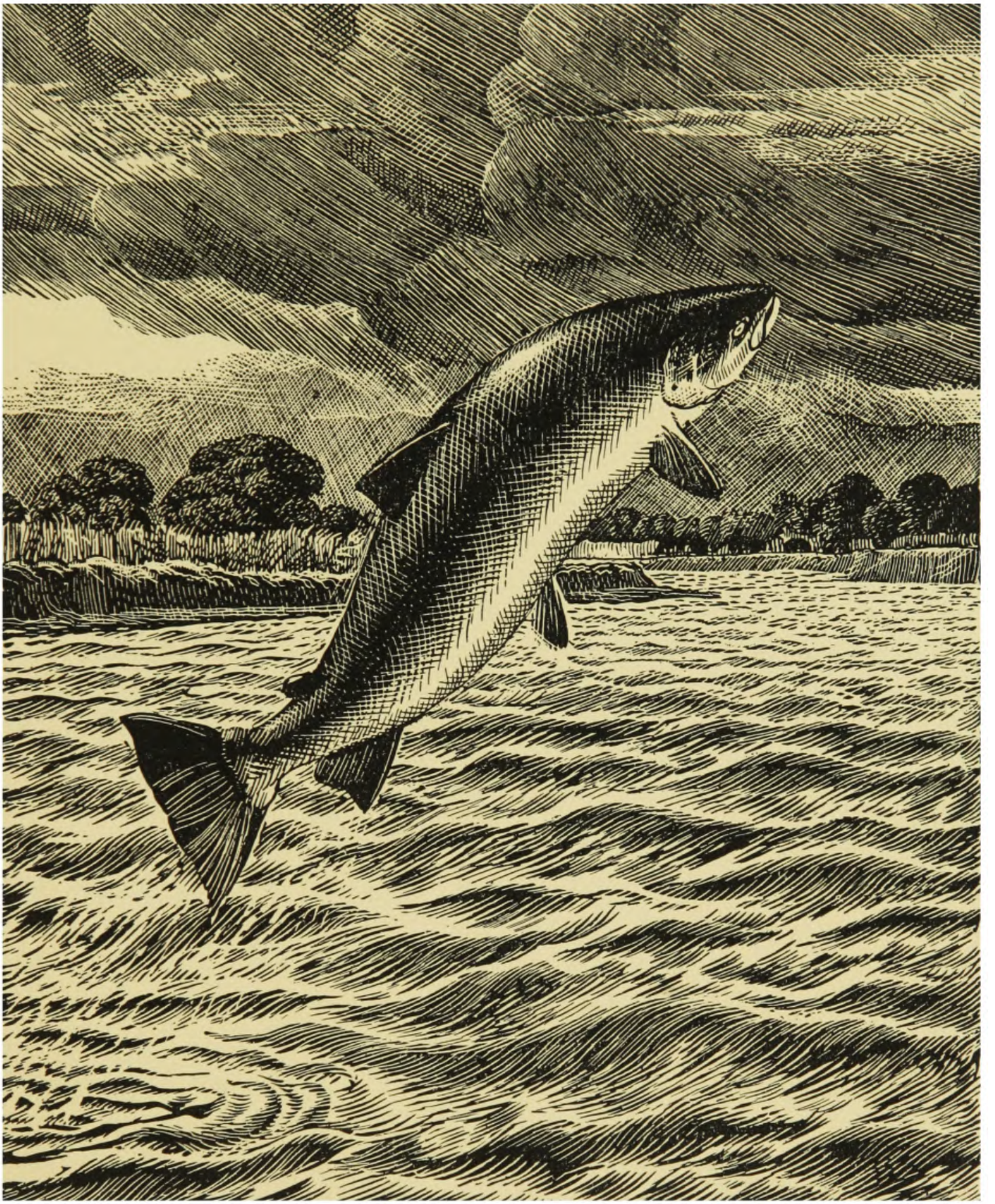
mile she came to the opening in the coast, and though its shape roused no positive memory, she knew her road.

The tide was running. It gurgled among the crannies and beneath the stem of the lighthouse, surging through the channel and among the wooden piles of the docks. She followed it on past the piers and past the bridge, where it spread again over the flats of the inland basin, and so to the east into the womb of the land itself. Within an hour she was in the river enclosed by the marshes on one side and the low meadowland on the other. On the south bank, the leaves of the trees were turning and there was a dank smell to the earth. On the north side the reeds were crackling with autumn age. Between them, in the river, the hair weeds lay upstream to the stroking of the tide, and through their tops, the belly of the salmon brushed lightly.

This moment was greater than all the moments of her previous life. It was overpowering in its intensity, so that she repeatedly jumped in her excitement, and once, skidding across the surface of the water, almost beached herself beside some rotten piles which shored the crumbling bank.

All the months and years of her sea life were fading into an obscure background, as though she were awakening from a dream which had no substance. Ahead of her now, burning like a light in her eyes, was the flame of a great desire—the demand that she should overcome all things and reach the place of small waters where utter fulfilment should be hers. There was nothing beyond that day, close as it might be. It was replete in itself.

So it was that she ran with the tide until she came to the hole in the river below the old bridge. During the next hour, the sea pushed back the fresh water for a further hundred yards where it paused, yielded to the press of the down-coming current, and began to run back through the estuary. The salmon went with it, leaving her hole, and in spite of the desire in her body, allowing herself to be carried again towards the sea. Instinct told her that the time of fulfilment was not yet and that the shallows



SHE REPEATEDLY JUMPED IN HER EXCITEMENT

ahead would bar her passage.

So she returned to the long flat above the open basin. Under the shadow of an overhanging bank where the water was deep, she waited. For three more days she followed the pulse of the sea, rising to the hole below the bridge, and dropping back again as the tide receded. But on the fourth day, she held her position, perhaps persuaded that as the tide fell, she would be safe—and a mile closer to her goal.

It was here that she saw a fisherman's lure for the second time in her life . . . a gaudy sprat, spinning slowly as it dropped in the current towards her. She moved to one side to let it pass.

That night it rained, and before the morning tide she knew that this day would be the beginning of the thing for which she had come so far. As the sea thrust back the river, she was overcome by a new and even stronger sense of excitement. Within the space of a minute she had jumped and flung herself across the surface like a flat stone thrown by a boy. Twenty yards away a fisherman was casting his line, and tempted by the strange display in front of him, he drew a few more yards from his reel and threw it into the neck of the pool where the salmon might be expected to come to rest. It was a mere gesture, for he was fishing for the young sea trout which frequented the tidal waters in the late summer, and which were to be caught on small and brilliant flies mounted on the finest tackle. A more patient angler might have substituted his gear for something better adapted to the capture of so great a fish; but for every thousand salmon which in the course of a year passed through the bridge pool, less than a dozen were ever taken. The excitement of the river and the call of its upper reaches was too great to permit their distraction in the tidal waters.

The salmon saw the glint of silver flicker for an instant in front of her. On this day of days, as she sensed the opening road through the shallows, her instincts were without guidance. She snapped at the bright fly as she saw it. In less than a second her memory of it was passing, for she neither felt the check of the line nor the prick of the tiny barb which snicked the

gristle about the edge of her lower jaw. But as the fisherman tightened, and the unnatural drag brought a sideways pressure to her head, she fell into a wild and unreasoning panic. It was a panic born of fear of the unknown. She threw herself clear of the water, twisting and falling back with a splash which sent the spray scudding across the smooth stream, and then as she felt the renewed strain, she turned her head to the sea in flight towards the incoming tide.

In a second she was free, a yard of the finest gut trailing from the angle of her jaw. With the strain gone, she paused, turned upstream again, and still blindly impelled by fear, threw herself through the pool she had just left and into the shallow beyond. For a few yards, her dorsal fin was out of the water, and the fisherman who saw her bow wave realized with a tinge of regret that none would believe that he had hooked this great salmon—perhaps the biggest ever to be seen in the river.

For four miles she ran through the rising water without pause. In the first mile there were three tumbling shallows through which only the drive of her panic forced a passage. Then she came to quieter pools, and her advance became steadier, like a long distance runner who gains his second wind. The terror of the morning receded, and the urge to reach the headwaters once more enveloped the whole of her consciousness.

So it was that she came to the great pool below the dam. It was an amber coloured swirl spurting fountains of raindrops, its wavelets glinting in the grey light of the water-laden clouds. At its head, driven by the weight of the weir pool, a gush of foaming silver poured through a narrow gap in the dam. Rising through the swirl, she flung herself into its solid funnel, rose towards its lip, and hanging in the current ten feet above her previous level, felt the power of it on her flexing muscles. For perhaps five seconds the thrash of her body matched the power of the water below the crest of the weir. Then her strength ebbed, and a wave striking her side, momentarily tipped her equilibrium, like an aircraft whose wings have stalled in a gust of wind. The instant's loss of control rolled her on to

her back and the current swept her broadside across the mouth of the spout.

So like a dead stick, turning over and over, she was flung down and plunged into the pool below. It was not until she had been swept thirty yards downstream, that she recovered, and with a flick of her tail, wriggled out of the channel and found quiet behind a rock.

For two hours she lay there, a weal on her side growing black where she had struck a sharp rock in her descent. Other salmon, whose numbers were ever increasing, swam close to her, disappearing into the thickening gloom of the flood towards the funnel. But one salmon which came near stayed, a male fish of perhaps twenty-five pounds on whose lower jaw the hook was already well developed. He came to suspend his silver body in the gentle current at her side, the undulations of his muscles bringing him to within an inch of the other fish. Once their sides touched, and though neither gave a sign of the presence of the other, there was a new emotion and a new purpose in that corner of the flooded river.

The female was the first to move. She slid silently from behind the shelter of the rock, swam upwards for a dozen yards, and then feeling the force of the stream, accelerated. Her speed brought her to the foot of the pass, but turning aside, she sought a breathing space before the final assault in an eddy curling about its mouth. It was a place of boiling air bubbles overhung by a block of concrete which the ice-floes of a former winter had displaced from its foundation.

In these seconds, a steel hook reached swiftly down into the water, and the salmon, seeing its glint as it slid towards her, twisted and was caught by the rush of the main current. A yard above where she had rested, a poacher withdrew his gaff, acknowledging his clumsiness and determining to do better with the next fish that passed. He had never seen her clearly enough to appreciate her size.

Ten yards back the salmon gathered herself, and then running fast, shot up the centre of the water column, seeking the thickest part where the current was solid. For half a dozen yards the grip of her body on the

descending flow was without slip. But below the crest, and no more than her own length from the calm above, a fault in the stone-work broke the even flow. It was here that she had experienced her first failure, and here where the thrust of her tail again expended itself in white spray. Yet by dint of a final and greater effort than ever, she advanced another foot, and her body, again gripping solid water, slid over the edge into the smooth and silent deep beyond. For the moment she was utterly exhausted, and did no more than hang in the channel above the fall, and it was here, some minutes later, that she was rejoined by the male fish.

They stayed in the weir pool throughout that night, and then all the next day as the flood mounted and drove them into the side where the weeds were awash and the earth banks crumbled under the caress of the water. No other salmon came up the pass that day; no other salmon in the pool succeeded in leaving it. They sought shelter wherever the force of the current was broken.

Towards noon the rain ceased, but for another twelve hours the level continued to rise, turning only in the small hours of a new day and leaving as its mark a line of twigs and leaves, and here and there a wisp of straw.

Yet when the sun rose, the river had dropped more than a foot, and when the fishermen were astir, it was eighteen inches below its highest level. Where a few hours before a leaf was invisible a foot below the surface, now it could be seen at twice that depth. An angler approaching the pool from the fields knew that it would be fishable in another hour, and mounting his tackle sat on a fallen tree to wait. He saw the move of the running salmon, the plunge of fish like a dolphin's gambol as it renewed its progress in the clearing flood.

For a little while, however, the pair did not continue their journey, though they swung out into the river leaving the bank, lying comfortably in the deeper water.

The current was now no greater than the walking speed of a man, and it was held effortlessly so that the undulations of their bodies could scarcely have been perceived.

Both fish saw the yellow glint of the sprat which was spun past the lie by the fisherman. The hen fish ignored it, but the male turned and followed the sprat across the river before he too left it and rejoined the female. The man was unable to see the interest his bait had created, and his next cast brought it ten feet farther downstream where in the coloured water it was invisible. A few minutes later, the pair began to run. It was now as though there was a mutual understanding between them, so that the urge to be gone came at the same instant. They ran out of the pool by its narrow neck, jumping twice with a forward thrust of their bodies. Even above the sound of the water the fisherman heard the splash of the female, and as he turned his head he was in time to see the water closing over her.

For two days and nights they moved upstream, resting only after a fresh weir was negotiated. The last of the flood brought them to a wide pool where the river flowed out of the mountains and passed through a gorge. Here slabs of rock lay horizontally to the land and formed ledges and terraces which reached to the bed of the channel.

At the head of the gorge was a narrow gate formed by two mighty plinths between which the river spouted in a never silent fall. It was not a difficult place when the level of the river was right. But in a flood the water was too heavy, and in a drought it was too broken. There was a moment on a rising water when it was neither the one nor the other, and at this time, every fish in the gorge pressed forward into the hills.

From now, the journey up river was an agony over a broken road. The passage through the gate of the gorge was made on the third attempt, but not before both fish were heavily scarred on the rocks. Then it rained for a week, and the pair hid like sticklebacks under the lee of a stone until they were driven further as new high levels were reached. They found shelter in the roots of a fallen tree, but when the weight of the water suddenly wrenched it from its foundations, they fled again, and for a full day breasted the flood close to the shore, once to be carried over the lip of the bank and across the floodwater beyond it. In the impenetrable

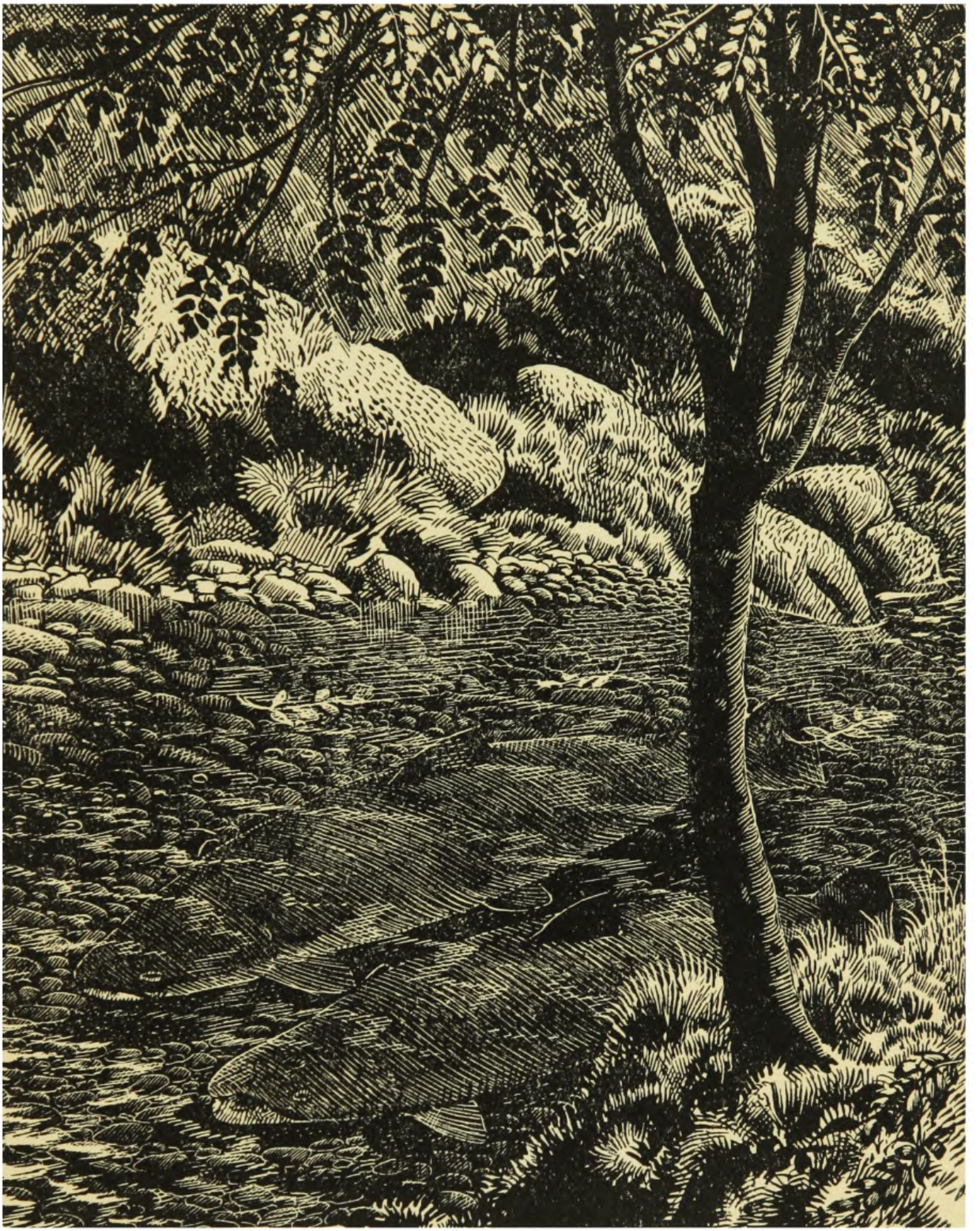
gloom of the stream, the direction and force of the current alone gave then a guide as to where they travelled.

When the waters subsided they rested a while, and then expending their dwindling energy in a chain of stony rapids, they came to the opening of the burn where memories born of instinct told the hen fish that the end of the road was near.

The way led by broken runs across brief shallows, leading from pool to pool as the mountain valley was penetrated. Each shallow presented an increasing problem, not alone for itself, but through the sheer weariness of their bodies. The female had lost nearly an eighth of her weight in the passage upstream, and the male was weary unto death. No lure, no perfection of a fisherman's art could have tempted them now. Driven alone by the tremendous urge to be done with their purpose, they went on until under the shadow of a rowan they came to the gravelly pool where seven years before the female had first seen the light of day.

A watcher saw them come. He drew in his breath as he observed the size and splendrous shape of the hen fish. The male was great enough to draw an exclamation of surprise, but the female was undoubtedly the greatest creature that had ever entered the burn. More than half the length of her back had been out of the water as she had wriggled through the final shallow and now in three feet of bubbling water, with stickles singing in the autumn sunlight ahead and behind, she seemed to fill the pool. The next morning when the watcher returned, both salmon were still there. He watched them with delight in his heart and with no weapon in his hand. Either fish might have been taken with no more apparatus than a wire noose; but he was interested alone in the completion of a great cycle whose beginning, although unknown to himself, he had watched from this very place so long before.

Each day he came to the glen and to the little rowan, and stretching himself on the short mountain grass, watched the two fish. Once another male fought his way up the shallow, and was charged in anger by the cock who drove the intruder to the tail of the pool. When another female



THE NEXT MORNING BOTH SALMON WERE STILL THERE

arrived, the newcomer paired with her, and there was peace. But there was scarcely room for the four fish. The pebbles which the great female now scooped with her tail from the bed of the stream were carried down to fill a similar redd which was being made by the second female. Between them the whole bed of the burn gave the impression of being excavated.

The agony of the day when she began to extrude her eggs came and passed. Now she dropped back a little each evening, resting and gathering her strength for the morrow's exertion when, flinging herself to her side, she gave new life through the outpouring of her own. Above the newly dropping eggs, the male spread his milt, and the cost to himself was even greater than the cost to the female.

On the eighth day, the work was done. The redd was covered, and twenty-four thousand eggs lay in the interstices of the stones, with chances of life as good as had once been her own. The fact that no other member of the original hatch had lived to return that year was of no account. This one fish had achieved the miracle, and all nature was satisfied. The salmon herself was filled with a strange content—almost an inertia, so that for several days she stayed near the redd, where the man could have picked her out of the water with his hands. That he did, in fact, bare his arm to the elbow, and lowering his hand, remove from her jaw a trailing piece of gut, was evidence of her weakness. To the man it was a trifling service he could render her, and the rusting barb which came away with it, an object of curiosity. He wondered how so great a fish could have been attracted by so small a fly.

She regained the main river late in December—a matter of singular fortune, for it was the fair weather of those weeks which alone preserved her slender grip on life.

The male was carried away from her side in the gentle fresh which cleared them both from the burn. He was too weak to breast a current which a month before he would have hardly noticed.

Then in February, when she was a little stronger, and the snow was melting on the hills and making the river a fit highroad for returning kelts,

she snapped angrily at a blue and silver torpedo which flicked past her nose. It was no more than a gesture of returning strength, but it was a fatal one, for the barb of a powerful triangle was this time embedded deeply in the roof of her mouth. She felt no pain, nor on this occasion the panic she had felt before. Rather it was a dull resentment, fired as the minutes wore on by a capacity for endurance. Throwing her full weight against the strain, she bored to the bed of the river, and it was many minutes before an increasing pressure from a new direction forced her head towards the bank. She was very tired, and the purpose of life was remote and not clearly seen.

Easy enough, perhaps, to make one supreme effort and break herself free. But though the power was there, the desire was insufficient to drive the flagging muscles. So it was that the man on the bank had his view of her, the tremendous spread of her flanks, the shallow belly, and her unhealed wounds—the greatest fish he had ever seen. A fierce resentment at her sorry appearance overtook him, so that he forced her to the side, grasped her tail, and dragged her roughly on to the bank. Unhooking his triangle, he stood back and spurned her with his foot.

'Ugly brute,' he muttered, and grasping her tail, flung her heavily back into the river as a thing unclean, untouchable, and of less value than the offal of a stag.

Slowly, and with the pain of infinite effort, she worked across the river, and hid herself in a hole where the current was gentle with her.

JAMIE

Jamie was born before his time in the cottage on the edge of the sea loch. That night a gale was driving the swell from the open Atlantic between the rocky headlands, and the spray of it was whipping against the window behind which Catriona crooned her Gaelic endearments, and where in the firelight stood the massive form of his father, shaking the doctor's hand, more red in the face than even the wind and sea could make it.

Jamie was dark and undersized, though the spark of life was as deep seated as the granite in the hills. They put him in the lobster box by the grate, and watched him with admiring eyes and silent tongues. Through the winter he lay warm and snug, thriving on the flow of his mother's milk and gurgling his contentment. The fire was fed from the peat stack set against the wall of the croft. Old Jamie had cut it against his coming, spending seventeen days in the bog instead of a bare week, and making sure that this time his babe should not die through exposure to the damp which came seeping through the walls.

Jamie thrived. The sea sang his cradle songs and the wind scolded him when the weather was wild. As soon as he could walk, he tottered across the brief turf which was grazed by his mother's geese to the rocky burn in its final tumble into the sea.

The moving water fascinated him, so that he would watch it, dreaming of strange delights within the mist of its pools.

One day he saw a silver flash rise up out of the water, and his eyes following it, saw it again and again as it leaped the little falls until it disappeared beyond his sight. In later years, he was to wonder how a salmon

could force its way up so small a channel.

When he was five, his thin legs carried him uncertainly down the twisting road by the sea loch to the schoolhouse. With the sons and daughters of crofters who had cottages along the edge of the water, he learned his letters.

'Jamie,' said his teacher, 'you're going to be a great scholar.' She was a slip of a girl from the Western Isles, and underneath the veneer of her training was the vision of the Celtic poets. She saw the same vision behind the dark eyes of her newest pupil, sensing their baffled questions, but directing the feverish inquiry of his mind into the channels of learning. If his eyes wandered to the window, beyond which he heard the suck of the tide and the call of the sea birds, she gently called his name, and Jamie would blush and smile, and his fingers seek out the wooden letters by which he was already making words.

One day in May, when he was nine, he was taken by his father to help stack the peat. For a week Old Jamie went out early and returned late, cutting the bog which lay in the main strath.

'He's too young,' said Catriona.

'Young enough,' replied his father, laying a rough hand on the boy's shoulder. 'We'll stack it together, Jamie lad, and you'll see how we lay it so it dries in the wind.'

It was the boy's introduction to work, and as he lifted the heavy rectangles of wet peat on to the stack, he realized that it was a part of life, like the schoolhouse.

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His father was omnipotent. He was a god—though he didn't know the meaning of the words. His greatness was magnified one day as he lay on the overhanging bank of the burn watching a trout. The trout was suspended in the crystal water, a remote and tantalizing beauty. It was about seven inches long.

Jamie was trying to catch it, using a fish hook and a worm which he lowered on a piece of string. Always the trout swam away.

Then his father had come, and the first Jamie had seen of him was his long body stretched beside his own.

'Can't you catch it, Jamie, lad?'

'It's very timid,' he had excused himself. 'The worm will swim down, but the hook frightens him . . . '

'I'll show you,' said his father.

In a few minutes he had returned from the house with a fishing rod made of greenheart, with brass fittings and dull steel ferrules where the pieces joined. There was a line, and on the line a length of the finest gut, which Jamie knew was what grown-ups used for fishing.

His father caught the trout.

'I'll make you a rod, Jamie, and if you go quietly like you went after this one, you will be a great fisherman.'

To Catriona he remarked—'He's learnt to look with his eyes and be quiet.'

The new rod emerged from a thick piece of hickory, and the sight of Old Jamie hunched on a stool as he whittled the wood became a familiar delight. The boy sat beside him and watched. He was without impatience, like all things which searched for life in this wilderness. When his father let him swish the rod through the air, he felt that it was a live thing, and from that moment, he knew that there was nothing which his father could not do.

In the winter, when the family were hungry, Old Jamie would bring back food, sometimes early in the morning, when young Jamie would see him coming from the direction of the mountain with a load of meat on his back and blood on his hands. He knew about the rifle, and he knew that the meat was called venison and came from the deer which lived on the mountain. But his inquiry went deeper, and the killing of the beast, the ways of it, soon made an insatiable void in his mind.

'All in good time, Jamie . . . when you grow up I'll teach you where

to look for a stag and how to come to it. When you have learnt, it will be as easy as taking a trout.'

'As easy as that?' he had inquired, feeling disappointed.

'Some men cannot catch trout,' his father had replied.

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The boy began to take an increasing part in the work of the croft. It was the only fenced ground in the valley, an oasis among the rocks and the moss and the cotton grass. He helped to hoe the potatoes. He would watch with anxiety for the sun when the oats were ripening, and in the winter he carried thousands of stones off the ground, feeling a proprietorship over it through his work. When a tourist walked with a fishing rod across the pasture, he ran to him, suddenly passionate, and told him that he was on private land.

By the time he was eleven, he could milk the cow, and that year in the late autumn he was allowed to go with his father and Donald MacDonald, who shared the boat, to set lobster pots in the sea loch. So he learned the meaning of the winter hours. He learned, too, that there was a place forty miles away with a railway, and that the blue lobsters which came out of the green sea went there each day in the van which carried the post, and that the next morning they were hundreds of miles on in London where the King and Queen lived.

In the autumn of the year he was twelve years old, he went into the mountain with his father and came back in the dawn of the following day carrying the quarters of a stag. There was blood on his hands.

'Jamie lad, we'll not speak of this,' said his father. The boy understood.

The following evening the rifle was taken out of its case again, and from the door of the cottage, Catriona watched father and son set off up the burn towards the hills. Her eyes held the same light of puzzled anxiety as when Old Jamie went to set the lobster pots on a blustering winter's morning. The boy was still a child: the rifle was the symbol of manhood

. . . AND CAME BACK IN THE DAWN . . .

and necessity.

Where the sound of a shot would not be heard, a tin was set on an outcrop of rock, and young Jamie had his first lesson in handling the weapon. His shoulder was bruised, but his eyes were glowing like coals when he returned. He said nothing.

On many nights before the snow fell the practice was repeated, until he learned to hit the tin from a hundred yards. Now he began to practice in the half light before dark, and in the mist, and on the slope of the hill.

Always his shoulder ached, and the dark blue bruise became almost permanent. But he hid it from Catriona, although his father saw it one day, and putting his warm hand on the place, wrinkled his broad brow in perplexity.

'You want a pad,' he said, and then kneeling on the wet earth, he lightly drew his son's shirt over the bruise and took the rifle.

'Shooting is not the half of it,' he said. 'It's only the beginning and the end.'

Sometimes Old Jamie took the rifle himself and lying on a rock aimed down the mountainside to strike the tin from two hundred yards. 'You must shoot like that,' he said, and young Jamie nodded, wondering whether he would ever match his father.

When spring came, the boy worked like a grown man. He cut the peat, tilled the croft, and went to fish. But because there was no routine to life —the bread for their mouths coming this way or that with little design for the morrow—he went sometimes into the forest to spy out the land. He would be gone all day, and sighting a herd of deer would approach them upwind, learning to use the cover of the rocks and the folds of the ground.

He carried nothing but a stick.

'I came up with a calf today,' he told his father. 'I touched it.'

'That is good, Jamie . . . if you do this when the autumn comes you will be a great stalker.' From his height he looked down on the boy, standing astride like a benevolent colossus with hands on his hips. He saw there

was something delicate and precise about his son which he could never emulate.

When the autumn came, Jamie remembered what his father had said. The deer were no longer careless, grazing on the sweet grass of the low ground. They ranged the high-tops, hinds and young stags nose to wind, and often gathered in a cleft where the air currents swept in from both sides, guarding every approach.

Within another year, he had learned the western side of the forest, and only once had he collided with authority. As he stalked a parcel of deer in the corrie which led to the final assault of Mundaraven, he had rounded a rock and almost fallen upon the Duke's stalker. It was August, when the stags were in velvet, and neither carried a rifle. But the boy and the man looked at each other for a minute without speaking.

'Jamie McRobert,' whispered the Duke's man.

'Aye—and you'll be Mr. Hamilton,' said the boy.

'Whsst . . . ye'll disturb them,' and looking over the rock to where a hind stood with her head raised on the edge of the corrie he added—'You're trespassing, lad.'

'I'm only looking,' whispered the boy.

A smile crossed the head stalker's lips, but his voice was stern when he admonished him, knowing him for the son of his father.

'Get ye out of it,' he said, 'and don't come here disturbing the deer again.'

Jamie melted away between the boulders without a word.

The following year brought the wettest summer of the century. All through July the wind drove the laden clouds from the west, precipitating their contents on the granite heads of Gromstack, Mundaraven, Glynt and More. The fish ran early, and the gentlemen came from London to enjoy the sport. For a month no man, whether guest of the Duke, or crofter hired as gillie, remained dry for longer than half a day. Wettest of them all was old Jamie McRobert, for he was given a gentleman who cared nothing for the rain, provided only that he was taking fish. Night after

night, jacket clinging to the breadth of his wet shoulders, old Jamie walked the five miles along the twisting road by the sea loch to his croft. Day after day, his clothes still flavoured with damp, he set off carrying his bag and the long-handled gaff.

'Maybe it'll not rain so much today,' said Catriona. But it rained just the same, and by the end of the month, he had the first twinges of rheumatism. A week later he had taken to his bed.

'I've been wet before, mother,' he said. 'I don't understand it.'

His joints swelled, and for a month he lay in silence, helpless. It was a month when the crofters were earning good money against the profitless winter.

Catriona began to economize. The furrows on her fair face grew deeper while she worked in the cottage. Young Jamie, more sensitive than a boy of his age had a right to be, was aware of an impending disaster. For a while he troubled himself. He saw his father in the big brass bed, interpreting more swiftly than an adult the anxiety of the passing days. Then one morning, as the sun climbed over the blue hills at the back of the croft, it became clear to him that he must take his father's place. He must work for the Duke—the grey god who had silver hair and whom his mother had once pointed out to him driving by. In him, he knew, the destiny of the crofters was invested.

So he half ran and half walked the deserted miles to the strath where the big river cradled the lodge, and hammering with his fist on the iron-studded door, demanded of a maidservant that she should call the Duke. So resolute and grave did the voice of the crofter's son appear, that she obeyed, and though she left young Jamie on the step, she timidly announced to his Grace the presence of a caller.

So it was that Jamie entered for the first time a gentleman's house, where silver hilted daggers hung on the walls and the heads of stags nodded from a great height above him.

As these things imprinted themselves on his mind, his eyes were fixed on the grey figure of the man who came from a great distance over the

rugs and stone paving of the floor to stand above him.

In that moment he knew that he had done wrong in coming to the lodge. But he saw also that there was no retreat.

'Well,' said the Duke not unkindly, 'who are you?'

'I'm McRobert, sir,' he said, 'and I'm thinking you'll need a man in the place of my father to show your gentlemen where the salmon lie.'

'And why shouldn't your father do that?' said the Duke.

'He's in his bed.'

'And you want to take his place?' asked the old man solemnly.

'Aye,' replied Jamie, with equal gravity. 'My mother is needing money before the sheep sales.'

'Did your father send you?'

'No,' said Jamie, 'I thought of it myself.' Then as the Duke appeared to be considering the matter, he added, 'There's seven fish in the Bridge pool this morning, and if you wish I could show you how to take them.'

The Duke laughed. 'Go down to the head keeper,' he said. 'He'll give you a job.'

'Thank you,' said the boy.

For a moment the old man regarded him without speaking. Then he smiled, 'He who is not with me is against me.'

Jamie did not know what he meant, but he went out through the door feeling that he was a man. Behind him, the Duke murmured grimly, 'Another McRobert.'

The crisis came in late October when his father was still bound to his bed. The money box was empty. The McRoberts were no longer able to pay their way, and the lobster fishing was delayed by a storm which had damaged the boat. For a week there had been no meat in the cottage, and though the McRoberts would have denied that they were hungry, the face of Catriona was pinched, and the eyes of the boy when she called him to the table were unnaturally bright.

It was then that Jamie thought of a stag—his first stag. If he could bring the quarters of a beast down from the mountain, there would be

food for a week—and he had heard the doctor say that his father needed meat.

He went to the door and looked out across the tumbled wilderness which climbed towards the mountains.

There was a north wind. It was the wind which brought the deer along the flanks of Mundaraven to the seaward side of the forest. He knew this. His father had told him that if the wind blew from the north for three days, the deer would be in the great corrie which split the mountain on its southern face.

All the land to the south-east would be deserted. By every ridge, and every corrie in which the wind brought them warning, they would be moving north and west. Sometimes, as Jamie had seen for himself as he had spied the forest, there would be five hundred beasts scattered over the mountainside.

There was meat enough here for every man he had ever met.

He didn't tell his mother. She would know soon enough when she saw the rifle gone. She would look then in the cupboard behind the chair and see that his father's sleeping bag was missing, his telescope, and his long knife. In the morning, early, he would be back—just like his father was always back.

The way into the forest lay up the banks of the burn and across the watershed where it had its source. It was treeless country, scattered with lochs and tarns, bare of habitation, and without road or track. At high noon, an eagle or a pair of ravens might soar the distant ridge. Towards dusk, the shadow of a fox or a marten might flicker among the peat hags. But the country of the deer lay beyond even this wilderness, across a shoulder of Mundaraven where a strath broke ultimately into the corries which divided ridge from ridge and peak from peak. Here was territory, boulder-filled and unmarked by man.

Jamie came into it after three hours, and looked up to the summit of a rocky knoll a thousand feet above his head. It lay at the foot of the great southern corrie, and he must climb it if he was to mark whether there

were deer in the glen.

So it was past noon when he finally withdrew the telescope and began to quarter the ground. He was close beneath the clouds, and the ultimate narrows of the corrie, where the sides closed in to form a barrier nearly three thousand feet above sea level, were shrouded in mist. Below him, as though he were looking down a tunnel, was the rocky floor, running clear for three miles before it joined the clouds.

Piece by piece he searched the ground. Within the circle of the lens, he picked out a parcel of deer high up the eastern slope on a green runner. But it would be four hours before he could come up with them, for the wind guarded the approach from the north. He would have to climb the ridge and come down upon them from the farther side. Although he felt able to accomplish such a stalk, he hoped for nearer game.

The telescope found him other beasts, and at the limit of his vision, where the mist and the rising ground converged, he saw a great herd of, perhaps, a hundred. By following the north-west ridge, joined to his spy-tower by a narrow neck, he could come up to them from windward. The distance was too great to assess the quality of any particular beast, but out of so large a number, he felt that he would discover his chance.

Perhaps he would get a shot before the light failed, and be back on the lower ground to seek a shelter for the night.

So he descended from the spy tower, crossed the neck, and climbed again to the north-west ridge which ran in a straight line to the barrier. The high-top was level, with short heather, and occasional bogs. But the mist was down upon the crest, so that when he stumbled suddenly upon a parcel of deer and put them to flight, he feared that he would rouse the whole forest. Unless they broke into the cleft which split the ridge half way down its length, they would run into the great herd ahead of him.

He travelled the ridge for three miles, skirting the cleft which dropped into the womb of the mountainside, and came in the mist to where the walls of the main corrie were linked by the barrier. Here the high ground swung north, and following it for a little while, he judged that he must be

THE TELESCOPE FOUND HIM OTHER BEASTS . . .

above the head of the corrie itself, and perhaps a thousand yards from the deer.

The wind was now blowing in his face, cold and wet. Around him the black peat showed bare in patches, and out of them rose the crumbling hags of the decaying mountain. As he began to descend, he unslung the rifle and carried it so that he could immediately withdraw it from its case.

Soon the ground opened in a cleft. It was the beginning of the corrie, and he guessed that the herd was immediately below. Now he paused every few steps, listening. The mist thinned, and then in a moment a gust swept it aside and left him motionless in his tracks.

He was looking down into the corrie under the roof of the clouds. He could see its floor stretching into the distance beneath him, and in the farthest distance the foundations of the spy tower from which he had looked so long before. Of deer there was no sign.

Slowly he dropped to his haunches and scanned the sides of the corrie with the telescope. More than a mile away, high up on his left, he found a few deer moving slowly to the south-east. They were restless, and it seemed as though the forest was on the move.

So it was still with infinite caution that he dropped down the cleft, and then leaving it, made for the bone of a little shoulder which hid the ground beyond.

As he raised his head, he saw instantly the herd for which he had been looking. They were bunched on the mountainside on his own level, and by the slant of the wind might scent him at any moment.

He stayed long enough to examine them through the telescope, long enough to mark grazing on a strip of runner, a stag the like of which he had never seen in the forest. He was a beast of fully sixteen stones, with a head which must make him the mark of every stalker in the north. So large a beast with so fine a head was far beyond Jamie's slender experience. Perhaps this, he thought, was the royal of which his father had often spoken, the beast of which stalkers and pony-men had been boasting.

Leaving the shoulder, he made upwards along the bed of the corrie, to

go forward on hands and knees until he again sighted the herd. Now he was above them, and not four hundred yards away.

He set his heart on the great stag. Though he would never bring its head down the mountain, he would know that he had grassed a finer beast than many a man had grassed in a lifetime.

It was thus that he wriggled forward foot by foot, the bag on his back impeding him, and the rifle a burden as he dragged it by his side. The gap closed. An outlying hind was safely circumvented, and an open runner approached, bare of cover, beyond which he could not go. The last few yards were travelled inch by inch, until he was lodged half under the protection of a spur of rock breaking from the hillside.

It was several minutes before he took the rifle from the case. He had his breath back now and his heart was no longer thumping. If the stag should turn, it would give him a chance.

He withdrew the rifle until the butt was beneath his elbow and turned the leaves of the sight. The distance looked to be a little over two hundred yards, but with the fall in the ground the shot would have to be aimed low.

He thought of the tin, shining brightly on the hillside when he had practised at just this angle.

As he squinted along the sights, the stag raised his head and he saw that there was a shot to the base of the brain. He was going to fire, when he remembered that his father had told him never to take a stag in the head unless he was within a hundred yards. It absolved him from responsibility, for what his father had remarked was law.

For ten minutes he watched, waiting a chance. But the beast was grazing again, his rump towards him. At last he could wait no longer. The light was failing and a chance at so fine a beast might never come again. He compressed his lips and sent a low whistle rippling down the corrie. For a second nothing happened. Then beast after beast raised its head. Some hinds struggled to their feet and stood motionless. But the stag remained aloof, grazing, as though too lordly to trouble himself about a boy. No doubt he had heard the whistle. No doubt instinct told him that a dozen

hinds and half as many young stags would warn him if there was real danger.

But when the boy whistled again and the note tingled in his ears, he sharply raised his head and turned half round to see from where the sound had come.

It was Jamie's chance. While the stag stood still, he squeezed the trigger. The impact of the heavy bullet smote him above the heart, and three or four inches farther back than it was aimed. Strange chance guided it through the ribs and beneath the spine, to travel onwards without touching a vital place.

Two hundred yards away, Jamie saw him spring forward, gathering his haunches beneath him in accelerating speed. The whole herd was now on the move, so that in an instant they became a milling mass which gradually spread out into a line as they poured up the hillside.

Within a minute, the corrie was deserted.

As they disappeared, the first whip of rain descended and hissed on the rocks. Simultaneously, a swirl of vapour hid the summits.

The boy rose to his feet, and half ran to the place where the stag had stood. On a stone, clouding with the spread of the rain, was a drop of blood. His heart leapt as he saw that the stag was wounded. He had once followed such a beast with his father, and had come upon him dead within a mile. It would depend upon where he was hit. If the bullet had passed through the gralloch, he would keep his head uphill, which would be to the good, for the summit was scarcely five hundred feet above. Compelled to descend the stag would die. He imagined him lying on the short heather on a downward slope, the magnificent antlers spread before him.

The footprints were clear in the soft, peaty side of the mountain between the rocks, and he followed them, finding another drop of blood within a hundred yards. Indeed, the beast was hard hit. The tracks joined those of the rest of the herd, and following them without difficulty, he came in under an hour to the highest plateau where the altars of a peat hag stood man-high out of the mist.

Here the wind blew with a savage intensity. The rain had turned to hail which was carried along parallel with the mountain top, blowing in his face. As he went on, head bent, he could see perhaps fifty yards. Each hag took on the identity of the stag as it grew out of the mist.

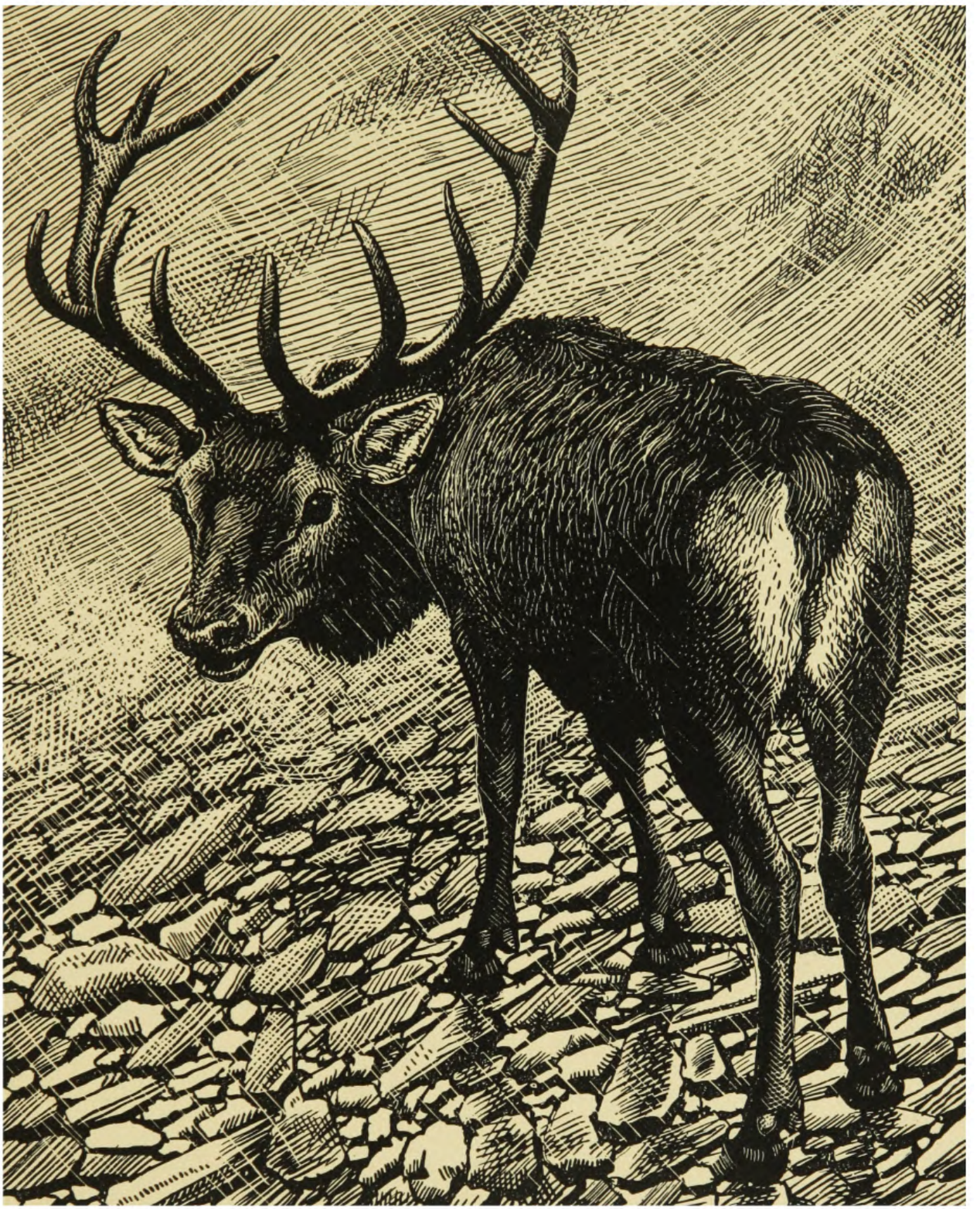
Only five hundred yards away, unknown to the boy, the wounded animal sniffed the air. The human taint was carried to him and, wearily, with short decisive steps, he turned and followed the rest of the herd. He was sick, his strength ebbing.

Following came the boy. When the tracks crossed the black ooze of a bog, he sank above his ankles, and struggled back to the hard ground, finding a way round. The hail now began to pulp his face, and the fingers clutching the rifle were white with cold and had lost their feeling. Uncomfortable, tired, he could only picture the stag just ahead, and he pressed on. When he saw fresh blood on the short heather where the beast had stopped, hope rose to a new level. The stag was still moving north into the wind, and though the mist must hide the last slope of broken stones leading to the peak of the mountain, he hoped that he would not have to travel so far.

Three hundred yards away, unseen, deserted by the rest of the herd, the stag stopped again. At his feet was a slither of stones cascaded from the final summit.

He turned, and looked back into the mist from whence came his pursuer. The nostrils were distended and his lungs pumped little clouds of steam into the wind. Catching the scent of the boy again, he set his feet over the rough stones, and stumbling, made on upwards. His steps became short and spasmodic, with halts for rest.

It was as the stag reached the summit that the hail suddenly ceased and the mist once more cleared. In the failing twilight, he stood for a moment against the sky, head held high to the swirling clouds, and here from far below, he was seen by Jamie. Through the space of that distance, it was as though their eyes met and a final challenge thrown between them. Then the clouds gathered again and all was hidden.



DESERTED BY THE REST OF THE HERD, THE STAG STOPPED AGAIN

'He can't go any higher,' muttered the boy.

Like an ant across the face of the mountain, he crawled upwards. Night was descending, and the colour of the mist in the corries below was growing black. Yet even before he reached the summit, the clouds were again swept aside by the wind, and so remained until he stood clear upon the crest. Looking down, to where a restless ocean of vapour broke against the black sides of the hill, his eyes caught a movement. It was the stag, and in that instant he saw it stumble, the white of its belly showing as it rolled over.

A new storm burst about his head as he ran down the hillside. Through a curtain of driving hail, the belly shone like a torch against its background and when he came close, he saw the antlers spread before him as he had seen them in his vision.

He bled the stag, gralloched it, working with a fever of impatience against the coming night. As he worked, the shadow of a raven passed through the driving hail, crossing and recrossing.

Jamie was slow. To articulate the joints and obtain the haunches were almost more than his skill or his strength could manage. Yet at length he had the work completed. The fore parts were stowed in the bag. The remainder was tied separately with cord and slung across his shoulder with the rifle.

Now in complete darkness, he set his face up the hill, crossed the peak, and slithered down among the stones towards the lower corries. He had the wind at his back, and a measure of shelter from the slope behind. Yet as the night deepened, the fury of the weather increased. In the darkness, his feet sank in patches of soft ground, and half-concealed stones cut his shins. He was very tired, more tired than he knew when the heat of pursuit had kept his thoughts from all else.

But the forty pounds of meat on his back, enough to make his father strong again, was a thought which echoed and re-echoed in his mind. The jarring shock of his boots striking the ground was almost forgotten.

In the dark, he slipped. He was falling before he realized the implica-

tion, and within the second, he felt the freedom of space about him.

His body struck the side of the hill at the foot of the shallow cliff and bounced. He had no pain, no sense of accident. His eyes were open, and the alternating shadow of the sky and earth revolved.

Presently, he was still. No more was his thin body able to withstand its burdens. The fall had robbed him of his will.

Through the night he lay on the slope. Sometimes, he whimpered, often he thought himself at home, and called to his father to help him with the weight he carried.

In the morning, as the sky was rent by a sword of silver, he grew aware of the things around him. The bitterness of the cold was in his bones when he tried to move, and he knew that it would be very difficult for him to cross the hills. Yet the urgency for movement was instinctive.

He saw that the bag was safe. Yet when he raised himself to his knees, he realized that he could not carry everything. It never occurred to him that he was lucky to be alive after so serious a tumble, after so wild a night in the open.

He was unhurt. He was only very cold. His feet supported him, and by rubbing his legs he found he was able to walk. Maybe, it would be all right, and he would bring the meat safely home.

Yet before he turned his face into the depths of the corrie, still far below, he cut a haunch of the stag from his cord and abandoned it. When he picked up the rifle and saw that it was undamaged, his spirits rose. He was a McRobert, and like his father, was returning successfully from the hill.

His feet advanced one in front of the other, slowly, but with a mounting rhythm which in a hillman is tireless. But the steep face of Mundaraven, whose side he had to cross, destroyed it. He began to tire quickly. High up on the slope, he abandoned a second haunch of venison. For a while he felt the lessened weight, and reaching the crest, he looked down into the tumbled disorder of the hills.

Once he found himself wandering from his course, and fought with his

mind to guide his feet more truly. His eyes were slits, beaten by yesterday's hail, and he had only a swimming vision of the wilderness from each new crest. The slopes were a torment to his lungs; the weight of his feet seemed unbearable.

A raven was following now. He sensed, rather than saw the spread of its black wings above him. He thought that if he abandoned another piece of meat, it would go away.

At about noon, he leaned against a boulder and supporting the bag on its top, took out one of the two remaining haunches. He left it on the rock.

But an hour later there was still a raven following. He turned to the sky and chased its shadow with his eyes until they held it focused. He would not abandon the last haunch.

The ground became a little easier. For some while he had been walking automatically, the pains gone from his body, the wounds no longer hurting where the straps of the rifle and the bag cut into his flesh. Forcing his eyes into the distance, he saw that he was already on the farther slope of the watershed, and that the young burn which passed the cottage door lay at his feet. The message of his eyes sang in his head. He was nearly home.

★ ★ ★

Old Jamie, newly out of his bed, came up the side of the burn, his body lumbering as though it were poorly balanced upon his feet. The source of his strength came from his mind, and it was unlimited. He moved fast among the boulders.

In less than an hour he reached the watershed, and from afar off saw the dark shape of his son huddled by the new stream.

Old Jamie had found his meat.

THE RECORD

His chance came on a summer day when the dust devils fluttered like tongues of flame and the noon sun made an oven of the earth.

There was no wind—no current of air which blew from one quadrant of the compass to another. But there were the dust devils—children of the thermals which sprang from the baked earth to feed the hot funnels of rising air. For a moment, each one created a little wind of its own, first from one direction and then from another, to die again and leave a scorched calm on the field.

'It's a chance,' said the man with the sailplane.

'I'm game, if you want to try,' said the other.

They stood on the field and squinted upwards into the blazing light. A cloud was forming on the horizon, and as they watched, it grew in its proportions, presaging a mighty cumulus of the kind which is parent to the thunderstorms. Overhead were other new-born clouds, mounting and swelling as the hot air from the thermals suckled them.

'I'll get ready,' he said.

He had always wanted to do this, ever since he had found the fulmars riding the east wind on his native cliff. To be borne on the wind was surely to possess the secret of earthly peace? As he had lain on the cliff top and watched the fulmars, he had determined that he would master the art of soaring flight, even as they had mastered it.

He was ready now, not merely to demonstrate his possession of the fulmar's secret, but to ride the breath of the sun himself, seeking the penultimate height to which man might strive on artificial wings.

It was not that he wanted the record. His love of the sky went deeper

than public acclamation. In his searchings he had ridden the quiet ridge of the fulmar's cliffs, he had searched the clouds on the breath of the sun, climbing the hot funnels which rose from the earth and, cooling, gave the clouds their birth. Now he wanted to go farther, as though real peace was attainable only through trial of strength and the conquest of the sky's last stronghold, the thunder castles of a day such as this.

As he climbed into his sailplane he said nothing of these things. It would have been an invitation to ridicule.

★ ★ ★

The launch was unpleasant, not merely to himself, but to the pilot of the little aeroplane who had agreed to tow him to a thousand feet, where he would cast adrift. The surge of the rising air made it difficult to maintain station above the tail of the tug. As the aeroplane entered each updraft it rose, leaving the glider below it. This pulled down the aeroplane's tail. The next instant the glider entered the thermal, and the positions were reversed, save that the rope now tended to tip the powered craft on to its nose.

Thus it was that after eight hundred feet, the glider pilot cast off the tow, and the power pilot, feeling the disappearance of the strain, was thankful to wipe the palms of his sweating hands and dive down through the bumpy air to the security of the ground.

It was hot in the tiny cabin, a poor compliment to the spirit which had sent him into the air. The heavy clothes stuck to his back, and there was perspiration on the lining of the oxygen mask which dangled from its straps. Yet he was free. The song of the wind was gentle, and though the sun beat through the transparent panels around his head, he knew that it would be cold enough presently.

The craft had long slender wings. They were made of spruce and covered with the finest fabric, whose varnished surface glinted like the sun on a calm sea. They were powerful wings, capable of withstanding a strain of

three tons, providing that it was spread evenly. Between them was a polished pear-shaped fuselage, designed with the craftsmanship of an architect in streamline.

As the aircraft flew, it made a sound like the note of a hollow reed, a single tone without the confusion of harmonics. It seemed to slide through the air, immensely efficient, losing no more than a foot of its height for every thirty feet which it advanced.

In the hands of the pilot whose fingers rested so lightly on the control column it was as responsive as a racing yacht to the wheel.

There was only a moment in which the peace of stable flight could be enjoyed. A savage thrust, like a short sea which strikes under the bow of a yacht as it leaves the harbour, canted the sailplane on to its side. Simultaneously, a blow seemed to be struck beneath the seat of the pilot, driving the craft upwards and to the left. Righting her, he steered through the suddenly tempestuous air while he gauged its powers, and then, assessing them to be sufficient, he threw the sailplane into a turn.

The air rushed upwards. It rose from a sun-blasted patch of chalk on the ground below, a place where a bubble of hot air was rising through a cooler layer around it. A needle on the instrument panel jerked across its dial to record a rise of four feet per second. Simultaneously, another needle began a more leisurely climb, and recorded the total of the gain. In three minutes it had risen from seven hundred to seventeen hundred feet.

It was easy—too easy, this initial ascent to the clouds. He had made it in the same way on a dozen occasions, riding the first rough patch of air in close circles, correcting the push and tumble of the eddies with the sensitive controls, and listening with a growing content to the creak and stretch of the timbers about him.

He was no more than exploiting the secret of the rooks he had watched so often circling towards the clouds. He had flown with them in the same funnels of rising air, and sometimes out-distanced them. Today he was putting his skill to a sterner test, and his eyes were on the great cloud

. . . RIDING THE FIRST ROUGH PATCH OF AIR IN CLOSE CIRCLES

which was filling the sky along the western horizon. Already its turrets reached 15,000 feet above the earth. They grew out of each other and multiplied as he watched, swelled, and here and there sent long pillars of crystal vapour shooting to greater heights. If he succeeded in reaching them, it would be time enough to boast that had passed from the playground of the birds to the battleground of the gods. The elation of the flight made him think of it in this way.

At three thousand feet he flicked down a switch and started the electric turn-and-bank indicator. In another minute he entered the base of a lesser cloud, and now rising at 10 feet every second, climbed through the grey twilight of its folds.

At six thousand feet, he centred his controls, and flew out of the side of the cloud with the knowledge that he had sufficient height to reach the incipient storm upon which his hopes and fears were centred.

The distance was perhaps seven miles. He flew towards it through a sun-shot ocean at forty miles an hour. For three miles there was not a ripple in the air, and the temperature which had dropped by thirty degrees provided the breath of a spring day.

As the great cloud began to fill the space of his forward view, he checked the instruments which he would need—the barograph which would automatically record the height, and the flying instruments which were to guide him in the blackness of the artificial night.

Then a wave of air seemed to take hold of the sailplane and rush him towards the ground. He had entered a downdraught on the weather side of the cloud and was carried at a mounting speed and through an uneasy race of unstable air beneath its purple base. The cloud now loomed above, blotting out the sun and throwing the earth into a strange twilight. From four thousand feet, he was carried down to two thousand, and already saw an end to his ambitions.

At eighteen hundred feet the current which was mocking his hopes reversed itself, and as he crossed from one airstream into the other the aircraft groaned and took a great load upon its wings. For a single moment

the hand of the accelerometer on the instrument panel showed a figure of 3 G, and as he saw it, he knew he had found an artery of the growing storm.

In a second or two the strain had gone, and he was climbing once more —this time into an inverted dome of vapour, arched above him in the grey and sunless tones of a cathedral at dusk. The variometer was showing a climb of twenty feet a second as he again threw the aircraft into a circle, and at this speed he flew up the sides of the dome until the walls closed and he was enveloped in the darkness of its fabric. When he lost sight of the earth he was at 5,000 feet. The air was smooth and the extent of the upcurrent was generous. At no point in his circle did the instruments show a climb of less than twenty feet per second.

His experience of blind flight was no new thing. Long since, he had learned in lesser clouds to ignore the guidance of his instincts, replacing them with the evidence of the instruments.

Looking out of a side panel he saw the wings disappearing into the mist. Their tips were invisible and the light poor, so that his world had the quality of a dark room.

He clipped the oxygen mask over his mouth and gave the cock on the cylinder buckled to his harness half a turn. He heard the gentle hiss of the gas above the small sounds of the fuselage and the deeper note of the wings.

He was at 9,000 feet and flying at 43 m.p.h. when the sailplane was struck by the first violent gust. For a moment the airspeed increased to 60 m.p.h. and the rate-of-climb indicator jerked across the face of the dial, rising and falling in a race of eddies which were difficult to navigate. Simultaneously, he saw on either hand a thin white line grow along the edge of the wings. He watched it thicken, fascinated, knowing that it was capable of sprouting fast, to destroy the lift, and send him down out of control. As he watched, it began to snow, thick heavy flakes which parted on either side of the windscreen as though it were a plough.

The noise of the fuselage now had many new voices, while the kick and strain of the gusts were reflected in the controls bucking beneath his

hands. He was at 10,500 feet, probably no more than half-way through the core of the cloud, as he realized that the conditions were impracticable.

He straightened up the rudder and centralized the stick. The bottom needle of the turn-and-bank indicator came back to zero while the compass ceased its gyrations. He was now flying straight and level, hoping for better conditions. He had been flying thus for a few moments when the toss and torment of the air quietened and he flew through the wall of darkness into comparative peace. This was held for perhaps a mile, when without warning the needle of the variometer swung the whole way across its dial to show a descent of twenty-five feet per second. The hand of the altimeter rolled back until it receded to a mere 8,000 feet. It seemed as though he were to be spewed out of the cloud with nothing gained.

But now, as suddenly as he had met the downcurrent, he passed into another funnel of rising air. He held his course, and then again threw the aircraft into a circle. This time he climbed at an increasing speed through a new artery. A minute later he had regained his original altitude.

The ice which had formed on the wings resumed its growth. But so great was the upcurrent that the aircraft continued to rise, and by increasing the speed to 50 miles an hour he still retained control. At 17,000 feet he noticed that the air temperature was ten degrees below freezing point. It began to hail, at first in small stones, and then larger, until they were the size of peas.

The violence of the air increased and it became difficult to maintain a steady speed. At 19,000 feet he gave another half-turn to the cock of the oxygen bottle, and simultaneously decided that after five minutes he would have broken the record and satisfied his desires. He would be glad to get out of the cloud, for the rattle of the hail was demoniacal, and the surge and gush of the wind so unsteady that he had doubts of his ability to maintain stable flight.

Half a minute later the hood of the cockpit disappeared into the darkness. It was as though the internal pressure of the cabin had suddenly increased to blow off the cover like a cork out of a bottle. The broken

woodwork around the hinges showed its place. Simultaneously, he found himself hanging in his straps as though the sailplane had turned over. The instruments gyrated wildly, and no longer gave him a clue as to his attitude. Only the altimeter was steady at 21,000 feet. Now the hailstones grew larger, to bombard and pulp his face. They blinded him, so that he was no longer able to see, while over the rounded nose of the fuselage the wind tore in icy blasts through his clothing.

It was impossible to do more than centre the controls in the hope that the sailplane would resume level flight and so bring him out of the side of the cloud. For a moment he thought that his hopes would be realized, for the A.S.I. steadied and showed that he was flying at 58 miles an hour. Simultaneously, the other instruments showed signs of more stable flight. It was at this moment, when his hopes were highest, that his face and chest were battered by a new and vastly more powerful cannonade of hail. At the same moment the port wing appeared to be struck a great blow. There was a sound of splintering wood—an explosion of sound which dwarfed the other noises of the storm. Through a slit in his eyes he saw the port wing break away and disappear into the mist.

In the moment of disaster he remained unafraid. The pain of his face and the necessity for keeping open the slit of his eyes was too urgent for fear. Above all else he wished for a moment's quiet where he would be no longer battered by the hail.

Yet while he muttered to himself in distress, he recognized the need for action. His frozen fingers plucked at the harness which secured him to his seat, and at the third attempt, he managed to withdraw the safety pin.

A tremendous force was holding him down into his seat, but as a new explosion of sound broke about his ears, the strain was momentarily released, enabling him to fling himself clear of the cockpit. As he went, he grabbed the steel ring of the barograph, wrenching it out of its recess and carrying it with him as he left the sailplane. It was an instinctive gesture, inspired by a reflection of light through his half-closed eyes on

THERE WAS A SOUND OF SPLINTERING WOOD . . .

the plated handle. In its drum was the record of his flight.

Outside the sailplane, in the darkness, he discovered peace. The wind ceased to tear his clothes, and the drive of the hailstones was no longer vicious. The sounds had gone, and he had the impression of floating in still air. As he looked under his lids, he saw emerging out of the gloom the long shapely lines of his broken wing. It floated upwards and past him, disappearing into the mist overhead. It was followed by other fragments of torn plywood, by a map case, and lastly by one of his own boots.

He pulled the ripcord of the parachute with his free hand, and after what seemed an eternity was subjected to a savage retardation by which the straps of the harness bit deeply into his body.

So great was the force of it that the heavy barograph was wrenched from his grasp by its own momentum, and disappeared into the mist. His evidence had gone.

For a moment he lost consciousness, starved of oxygen, and frost-bitten about his extremities.

Later he was aware of returning light, dim, nebulous, with a grey shape below him. He appeared to be out of the cloud and floating earthwards surrounded by a wall of water which overtook and outstripped him. He was still unable to see, and he had no feeling save the smart and stab of his skin.

Presently, a black shape loomed swiftly from below and he recognized it as the earth. Drawing up his knees, he prepared for the shock, and a moment later he was aware of the cessation of all motion.

He tried to roll over on to his face and grasp the earth. As he did so the earth seemed to recede and he found himself suddenly and dangerously falling again. He was brought up with a tremendous jerk by a grip about his neck, strangling and throttling his breath. He clawed ineffectually at a silk rope, swung pendulum fashion for a minute and then ceased to struggle as blackness overtook him.

They found him, his feet a few inches above the ground, his neck noosed in a shroud of his parachute.

THE WILD DUCK

It was the year the sea froze. From the estuary of the Rhine to the Elbe, and north across the Skagerrak, it sealed the coast of Europe like a white cement. Even in Britain it stilled the smaller bays of the east coast; and along the open shore, the line of high water was marked by a wall of broken ice.

Many more duck than usual had come in that year. It was as though the autumn winds had warned them of the weather ahead. They arrived from the marshes of the Baltic, the lakes and rivers of Sweden, and from far up the Norwegian coast. For a week of calm weather at the beginning of October, the pale autumn sky was marked by the wedges of their flight. At dawn and dusk they flew over the watery skyline and flopped down into marsh and loch and sheltered bay. There were mallard and teal which had recently passed over the smoking chimneys of Reikjavik, widgeon and pintail from the Siberian tundra, eider, golden-eye, pochard and scaup from all the shores of Northern Europe—a great company of migrants seeking the granaries of the south.

Among them was a mallard, bred under the warm caress of the midnight sun at the head of an arctic estuary. He flew the final three hundred miles without resting, ten feet above the sea, to cheat the north-west wind which was sweeping between the Shetlands and the Norwegian coast. Five other mallard had accepted him as their leader, and within a few moments of each other they cut a feather of spray on the light swell which rolled into a sheltered bay.

It was October, and the winter had not yet laid her grip on the land. The beech trees were unbronzed, the brambles black with fruit, and seawards a thousand gulls drifted like summer yachts along the face of the

cliffs. It was a strange prelude to such a winter. There were salmon swinging with the tides of the estuary, waiting for the rain which would give them passage of the shallows. Upstream, in the amber pools, were sea-trout which still came to the surface at night to feed—so warm was the air, so light the shadow of winter. By day the fishing vessels stood out from the coast, and boys were left to set the lobster pots. Along the break of the rocks, among the hollows, and in the caves where the doves had their homes, there was a strange quiet. The long weeds swung lazily in the breathing sea, and when the tide went back the rocks dried in the hot sun.

At dawn on the first day, the mallard led his skein over the cliffs in search of food and water. They crossed the coast nearly two hundred feet above the ground, and as though on the unspoken orders of their leader, every pair of eyes scanned the dark earth over which they passed. There was no movement, no sound in the awakening dawn save the whistle of their own pinions. They dropped to a little pond a few hundred yards from the sea, where the reeds grew high and the water was pinned to a little circle. It was a pond made for the soaking of flax, but now it was a deserted isle in a field of harvested wheat.

They were slaking the salt of the sea from their throats when the drake caught the faint scent of man. It was a familiar, unpleasant odour, associated with danger and disturbance. Although it was the first time it had come to him since he had left these shores in the previous spring, his senses were not at fault. Yet such was the influence of the intervening months that he did no more than give a warning squawk, remaining with his head turned upwind, watching. There had been a time when he would have instantly taken to the wing.

The strength of the scent increased, and presently there was a crackle of stubble from the far side of the field. The drake squawked again, and without more ado rose over the top of the reeds with a clatter of wings. Five other birds followed, and in a steep climb they made away from the sound. As they completed a circle they were in formation two hundred

feet over the pond. The smudge which moved across the field stopped, and turned his face.

'So you're back again,' said the man to himself; and shivering with the thought of winter, he increased his pace.

The drake saw the white of his face and quickened his wings. He climbed higher, and swung away from the field, the young birds following. They were headed towards the blue of the distant mountains whose slopes were as yet untouched by the breaking dawn.

At five hundred feet the drake appeared satisfied. He slowed the strike of his wings and set a more gentle pace through a shallow valley. Behind him the sea-glint faded, and ahead the richer tones of the autumn hills grew out of the shadow as the sun rose. The skein was on the wing for nearly an hour before a water lay below set about by weeds in a cradle of the hills. It was little more than a pool, a barren place, lying between two valleys. The rusting heather seemed to pour into it from the surrounding slopes, save where a few silver birch, bent and gnarled like cripples, clustered about the northern shore.

The skein circled. Their leader was in no doubt of its safety, for already the mirror of its surface was spotted by more than a hundred other visitors. Nor was he unsure of its welcome, for he had spent most of the previous winter on this same water. But he still circled, watching. Presently—he straightened his wings, banked steeply, and slipping sideways lost height. Checking his descent above the western shore, where a trickle of water had gouged a channel out of the peat, he sat back on his wings, braking fiercely, to stall as outstretched webs touched the surface a dozen yards out.

It was a wild community which he had joined, sensitive to every scent carried on the breeze and every movement on the face of the hills. No other duck within thirty miles were so shy. All of them had come from the sea, and a week before the lochan had been deserted. For some strange reason the native duck did not use it, and until October came, the rings of rising trout were the only signs of life on its surface.

. . . OUTSTRETCHED WEBS TOUCHED THE SURFACE A DOZEN YARDS OUT

Twice a week a shepherd from the neighbouring valley followed the boundary fence which climbed the eastern slope. As he appeared on the horizon half a mile away every feathered inhabitant rose. Nor was their climb a leisurely affair, but a steep ascent made with the full power of their wings. Three circles carried them far above the surface, and in tight wedges they flew north-west to a temporary haven across the hills. No man had ever come upon the loch in full daylight while the duck remained.

It was as though only the wildest of the wild came here, the strong, and the independent. They were either mallard or teal; for no golden-eye, or pochard, or pintail—common in the district—ever remained.

There was discipline, too. Though unrelated, and of distinct species, they left the water at dusk within a few minutes of each other and flew down the slopes of the hills to where the farmland reached up from the plain. They fed in the barley stubbles, and then among the potatoes as they were lifted. In the first false light, they flighted back to their sanctuary.

To this quiet place, three or four times every year, a man came with a gun. At his heels trailed a dog, blacker than the night through which they toiled up the long slopes. The dog and the man were more closely a part of the lochan than the duck themselves, for though they came so infrequently, they knew its every mood and were in league with it to betray its visitors.

They came on the second night of the gale which broke in blind, unreasoning fury towards the end of the month. Two days before, the summer had lingered, gentle, serene. By the next morning it had fled like a belated guest.

'We'll go tomorrow,' had said the man, and the dog looking up from beside the fire had wagged his tail. That night they listened to the wind tearing the heart out of the trees beyond the window.

The duck went down to feed as usual. The mallard led his flight to a field of oats which an earlier gale in August had laid low. It had never been cut, and it was wonderful feeding for duck by night and for a few pheasants by day. The wind and the darkness did not trouble them, and it

was not until the first grey of the dawn that they moved.

But on the return journey the wind was against them, cold and fierce out of the south-west, coming in short gusts which made a labour of their flight. Close to the ground, where the uneven surface put a brake on its speed, it was just possible to make headway. So it was that they flew low, following the gully which led into the hills and brought them to the tumbling ocean of heather. Here they no longer had the occasional shelter of the coverts, and were compelled to breast the full current of the wind. At one place, where the airstream had been parted by the shoulder of a hill, they were flung by a tempest of eddies into the bottom of the gully. It was almost light as they drove up the final rise to the lochan. The man lying behind the bank of peat saw them forty yards away.

A second afterwards the drake was aware of the danger. It was a glint on the moving barrels of the gun which gave him warning, and in spite of the buffets of the wind, he flung himself sideways and upwards. He was a dozen feet off the track of his former flight when the red tongue of flame leapt from the mouth of the gun.

He was safe. He climbed across the blast of the wind to be swept down the path of the burn. Three other members of his skein joined him. The man had sensed the action of the leader as he had drawn his barrels down the line of flight. Switching with lightning precision to the second bird, he had taken her thirty yards out before she had turned, and then seeing the dim form of another lifting above the horizon, he had fired the second barrel. Already the black dog was moving with the speed of the wind to retrieve the bodies.

The drake returned to the lochan two days later. The remaining members of the flight had preceded him by twenty-four hours, and ever afterwards, the association between them was looser and less clearly defined. They would often follow the adult bird, but he on his part seemed to be unaware of them. He flew higher and faster than any of his fellows, was the first to scent the approach of the shepherd, or to see him as he came over the hill.

When he returned from the low ground in the morning, he came in under the shield of darkness. Unlike the other duck, he reconnoitred the edges of the pond in high, wide circles. He would feed by day, too, showing a rare trait for his species by diving for the underwater weeds and the occasional shrimps which were to be found amongst them.

As he became a lonely hunter, an insatiable feeder, and above all the most suspicious and wary of any duck on the lochan, he also grew the thickest plumage and attained the greatest weight. When the frosts came in mid-November he weighed four pounds, and the glossy sheen of his neck had the radiance of an emerald.

The frost cleared the water within three nights. It sent spears of ice shooting across the surface, and within twenty-four hours there was a thin coating from bank to bank. A day later there was not a duck to be seen. They had gone down to the river in the main valley, or sought unfrozen water in the lowlands.

The mallard himself moved out of the hills. He went alone on the second night, flying first to a familiar potato field, and then when dawn came, climbing to a great height and turning his head to the south.

He flew across a lesser range of hills, and came to a great loch where already a thousand of his kind were drowsing in the shallows. The frost followed, and in a few days he became an entity among the wandering skeins which went from place to place seeking food and water. Their black wedges were to be seen of an afternoon, high up against the sky on their way to new ground.

The frost relaxed for a week, and then returned more viciously than ever. But even during these days the rivers remained open, and over on the coast, the brackish pools which lay behind the dunes were free, though the crusted reeds rattled in the wind. For food, there were rotten potatoes in the fields, and though most of the stubbles had been scoured, there were the ranker weeds beside the unfrozen streams.

He flew one night to the tide-washed basin fifteen miles to the north, discovering a bare sustenance in the thin green plant life which lay on the

mud as the tide went down. Before daylight, the gunners from the little port crawled into their pits, and when the light came, the basin was ringed by the red flashes of their guns.

He was lucky to escape, for he flew directly over a man who rarely missed his target. As it was, the shot rattled on his wings, and had it been heavier, he must have been brought down. He never again returned to the basin. He found seclusion among the brackish water of a pool twenty miles farther south, and shared it with several other mallard of his temperament. Each night, a hundred yards away, the wild geese came to the shore. Their cackle was a warning against the approach of man. Yet within a week he had been shot at again, this time from a pit among the sand dunes which he had to cross on his way to the fields. The wind blew high that night, and he was lower than usual. He was saved, perhaps, by the presence of three other birds who had elected to join him. One of them fell with a dull thud in his rear.

It was on the morning of the following day that the snow came. It fell continuously for twelve hours, and then it froze with a keenness which had not been experienced for many a year. More snow followed, and within a week it lay a foot deep over the lowlands, and in the streets of the coastal towns it remained dry and unswept. Now the frost at night gripped the land in a vice.

Wherever the streams were not bridged by the snow, they froze, and in the pools among the hollows of the rocks, the water froze between the tides. No longer was there food to be found on the land. Not even the berries on the hedges were accessible. Partridges ran over the snow-covered fields, too weak to fly. Grouse on the higher ground died, and in the forests, the red deer sought the shelter of the lower valleys, and at night raided the farms. From the banks of every river, from the salty pools and brittle marshes, the duck were forced back to the sea, where they rode in frigid isolation, grubbing where they could among the zostera on the ebb of the tide. It was then that the black frost followed on the heels of the white frost, and the mercury dropped another fifteen degrees.

HE FOUND SECLUSION AMONG THE BRACKISH WATER OF A POOL

It was an unheard-of frost in the British Isles. The short days were sunless, the sky covered by an apron of cloud which stretched in an unbroken sheet from horizon to horizon. There was no wind, and no sound, save the suck of the sea on the beach.

On the second morning of this new frost, the mallard sensed the increasing urgency for migration. There were spears of ice forming offshore in the bay where he rested. The breath of the sea was shallow as though it were dying, and where it curled over the beach it left a white rime as it ran back.

He left the water soon after dawn, drawing a long feather of spray behind him before he cleared the surface. A slow take-off was unusual, but his limbs were cold, and the sea sticky with its nearness to freezing.

A hundred other duck, all of them mallard, seemed to catch the urgency of his spirit, for at the same moment they, too, left the bay and fell into the shape of a straggling V behind him. Within a minute there were other duck upon the wing—a flight of teal, and then some widgeon, and lastly, rising with a great commotion from the central estuary beyond the sands of the ness, came a concourse of grey geese. They threw themselves forward on labouring wings, and from their throats came the long strangled cry of their kind. It echoed far over the ice of the frozen river, and as they climbed, a man looked up to see the concourse approaching him. He saw the mallard high in the sky, and the tightly packed teal, and then the widgeon, and last of all this advancing armada of grey wings which moved so slowly and yet flew so fast. He saw them pass up the central estuary, their heads to the south, and he watched them until their wings melted into the morning sky. Long afterwards the sound of the geese came to him on the still air. The migration had begun.

Without food and without water, the company was soon thinned as they travelled. No living thing with warm blood in its veins could survive indefinitely in this cold. It drove the survivors to the south, without rest or pause until, in the dusk, weariness of wing brought them down.

The mallard sought the margin of the sea, pitching beyond the curl of

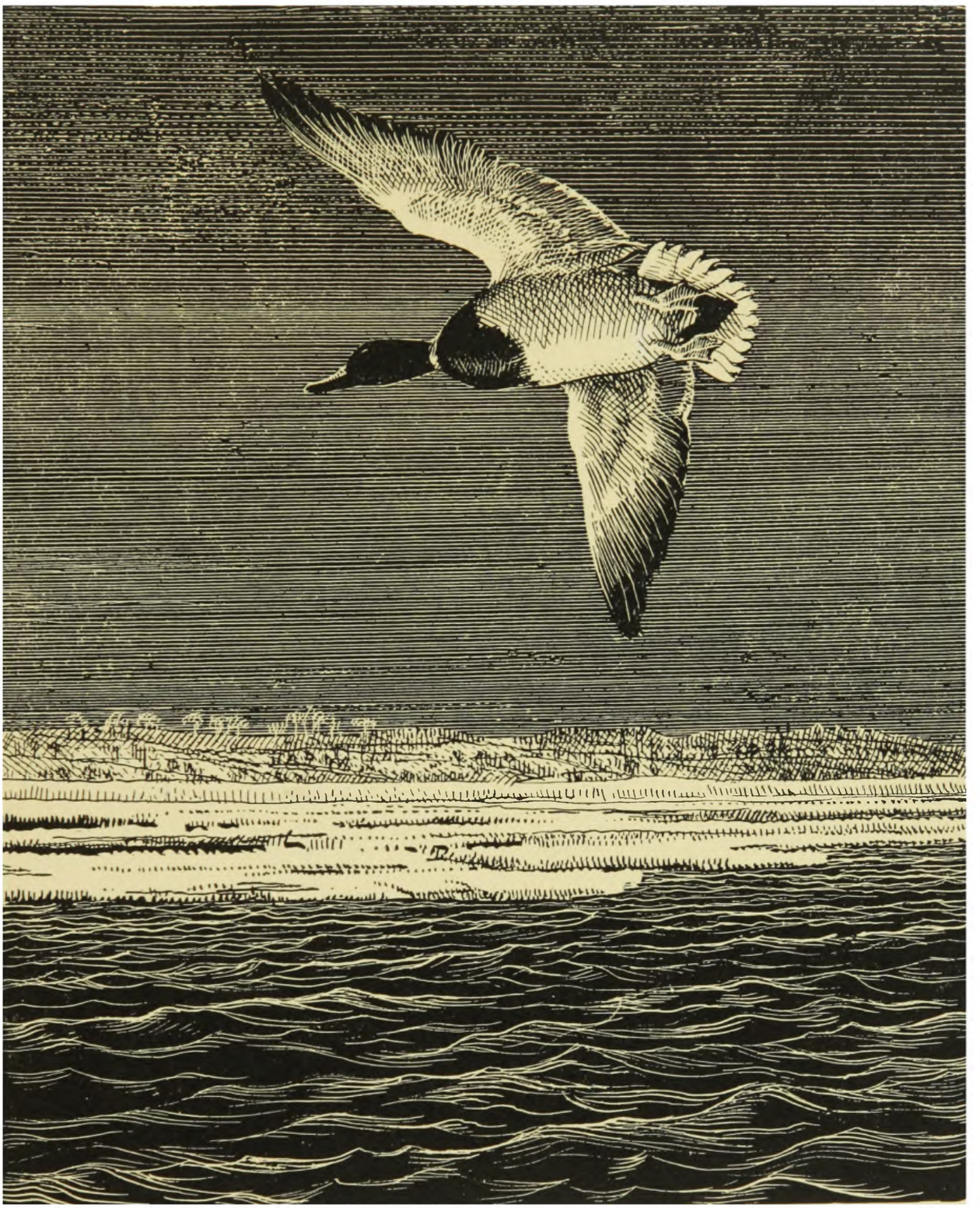
the waves where they laved the bitter, salted, dunes of the North Yorkshire coast. Less than a dozen other birds were with him, and of this number, two were dazed and incapable of grubbing for the weeds as the tide ebbed.

On the next morning, the mallard was on the wing as the first light streaked the horizon over the sea. His sense of urgency was deeper than the others, and he flew alone. He flew a wing span over the lazy swell and a hundred yards out from the shore. A lonely gunner gave him the blast of his fowling piece from behind a groyne as he went by. The range was wide, and the shot sent little spurts of water dancing on the sea below him. Had they struck his body he must have fallen, for his strength was a shadow of the power he had possessed a month ago. Nor did the sound of the shot or its evidence disturb him. Alone, among all things, was the vision of the south, the vision of water, of warmth, of food for his tired body.

That day, in a great weariness, he saw the frozen marshes of the Norfolk coast, the dykes, and behind them the even pattern of the geometrical fields traced in the surface of the snow. It was almost dark. A little wind had sprung up which went rustling among the brittle reeds and sent whispers through the naked trees. His instinct told him that it was the forerunner of a gale, and its prospects sent his life to a new low ebb. Only the unconscious will to survive perpetuated the beat of his wings.

It was then in the last light, that he heard the call of a duck and recognized his own species. It carried half a mile across the flat land, a voice in the desolation that he understood. Without interruption to the stroke of his wings he swerved inland towards it, and in the shadow of a dyke, where there was a little clearing in the snow, he pitched suddenly, knowing that he could fly no more.

The duck was under a wall of freshly laid straw. She had heard his pinions as he had approached and she had called him. Behind her, around the straw, was an earth dyke, and in the angle where it turned there was a trough of water on which the ice had been newly broken. Beside the trough, the rough timbers of a shed stood against the dark sky, and beyond



WITHOUT INTERRUPTION TO THE STROKE OF HIS WINGS HE SWERVED INLAND . . .

them, thirty yards away, was the bulk of a low building. A rustle of plumage belonging to other ducks came from the shed, and from across the dyke a square of yellow light sprang from the building.

There was grain on the swept earth and potatoes split by the frost. The duck, as if anxious to give him his cue, began to feed.

In the morning, as it grew light, the wind came out of the north. It blew suddenly—at full strength—sweeping over the marsh, and driving before it thin columns of frozen snow. They broke against the dyke and on the timbers of the shed like particles of glass. Towards the sea the stems of a million reeds shrieked in ineffectual protest, and on the shore itself the white lick of the waves curled higher and flung their undertones among the music of the mounting storm.

The door of the cottage opened, and the tread of a man rang on the frozen earth. The sound reached the drake, and instantly he rose from behind the dyke, caught the full force of the wind on his breast, and climbed swiftly. Immediately after him the duck rose. She flew lower, and drove through the wind in a narrow circle about the cottage. The drake circled also, fighting his own instincts to be gone, but held to the place by the behaviour of the duck and the memory of the shelter. Three times he flew round the cottage while the man was outlined in the mist of snow. Then the drake turned and flew at last towards the sea. Behind him, the duck dropped back to earth, waiting for the man to bring food and break the ice.

As the drake approached the coast, he saw ahead of him a spout of flame from a fowler's gun. The sound of it was borne away on the blast of the wind. But nevertheless he climbed until the snow-covered marsh was no more than a blur in the spindrift. Presently, riding off-shore in the water, he saw more flashes along the coast, and without resentment recognized them as among the hazards of existence—hazards from which he was momentarily safe.

With the strengthening of the light the shooting ceased. The few fowl which had remained on the coast were back from such feeding grounds

as they had discovered, and rode uneasily on the mounting waves. There were half-starved mallard and widgeon, teal, pochard and long-tailed ducks from the north, and resting in the deeper water were a handful of eider.

Later in the forenoon the sea rose under the drive of the wind, and sheets of spray laid a smoky haze over the surface. Then the mallard came to the shore, and rested in a frozen creek while the wind went over his head.

In the evening, waiting for dark, he flighted to the place beside the cottage, and as he circled, he heard the duck call. From a window of the cottage the man watched. He had been waiting against his coming, and the ice was newly broken in the trough and there was fresh grain on the ground.

The duck kept apart from her fellows who sought shelter under the lea of the open shed. She remained with the drake, close to the straw, and when he fed, she also muzzled among the food. By no other sign did they mark each other's presence. But the man knew that there were stronger bonds than the weather which were now binding him to the place.

The storm blew itself out in the night, and when day dawned the wind was from the west and the frost held the land in a tighter grip. Again the man came out from his cottage, and again the drake rose before he had moved a yard. The duck took wing with him and flew at his side for four full circuits before the male bird turned east towards the sea. Each night and morning the flight was repeated, the drake spending the daylight hours on the water or on the mud flats above the tide.

One day, the duck went with him to the coast, and they joined a great company of widgeon on the flats to the south. Late in the afternoon, as the tide was racing up to the sea wall, they took wing and flighted while it was still light. It was the urge of the duck which persuaded him. But even then, he flew across her head and forced her high as they came inland. It was as well he did so, for again there was a shot below them, this time from the angle of a sea wall, and following upon it, the duck staggered in her flight. She lost a wing beat, slipped sideways, and was a dozen feet lower before she recovered. The drake called and they went on, till the

duck flopped suddenly into the sanctuary. Ten minutes later, after scrutinizing the cottage and the surrounding land for a sign of movement, the drake spread his wings and joined her.

All night the duck sheltered in the straw without moving. In the morning the man came out, and watching the drake mount into the dawn sky as he approached, he was puzzled by the absence of the duck. He found her where she had dropped into the straw, and picking her up with gentle hands, he saw the blood of a wound, and carried her into the cottage.

That night, when the drake returned, he circled many times before he descended. Standing on the hard ground, he repeatedly called the duck, and when there was no reply, he took wing again, and in the light of a young moon flew high over the flat country. His voice was heard against the cold stars in many a marshland cottage.

At dawn he returned again to circle the sanctuary, but finding the man moving about the yard, he returned to the sea. Each night for three nights he returned, and on the fourth night he heard an answering call to his own. Instantly he descended, without even a cursory inspection for his safety. The duck awaited him, and for five minutes they stood together, and from their throats came a low whistle like a croon.

The weather changed. The turn came with the wind which backed into the south and brought a warmer airstream. It loosened the ice in the creeks and softened the iron crust of the earth. There was food to be won again from the flats and among the weeds of the marshes. The salt took away the snow, and on the farm land, where it lay over the rich black earth, it began to melt.

Now the duck flew with the drake each day, and they mated. When they returned at dusk, they came as one bird directly to the sanctuary and without reconnaissance.

Before the spring came, the drake had grown used to the man. He allowed him to approach and throw grain into the enclosure, and he would come to it with the other duck. As the ice disappeared, he followed the others to the water of a pond which lay beside the dyke. The man began

to call the drake with the sound used by the duck when she wished to feed. At no time was the drake deceived, but he recognized it, and presently he would come to the call, knowing that fresh grain or potatoes, and sometimes a warm mash was ready.

The duck built her nest among the litter beside a garden shed less than twenty yards from the cottage. She took straw from the shelter by the dyke, and lined her nest with her down. At no moment was the drake far from her side, although each morning he would circle the sanctuary, and this in the full light of day. Presently, on a spring morning he walked at the head of nine ducklings down the garden path and so across the waste ground to the pond.

The procession was followed by the man, who came to stand at the margin and watch the ducklings take the water. One by one they were urged from the edge until the family was in full sail across the pond. At the far side, close among the reeds, the duck marshalled her brood, but the drake, his work done, returned towards the man. A yard from the shore he paused, the column of his emerald neck rigid, as though held by the eyes of the other. For a moment, the man and the wild duck looked at each other, and then, a last relationship established, the man turned on his heel and the drake twisted his neck to preen his plumage.

Overhead, the sun shone.