**The Cave**

Andrew and Shonagh strode steadily along the path that skirts the Scare Hill and goes on to the second summit of Millstone Hill and passes an old disused quarry. They paused momentarily to look back and saw again the rich blanket of yellow, graciously supplied by the broom, that carpeted the lower slopes of the Hills in June. It felt really great to be out on the Hills and enjoying the fresh, mountain air.

They did not rush along but kept to a steady pace. Both were experienced enough hill-walkers to know that all one got for rushing along pell-mell was breathless, hot and tired before you’d really got anywhere. A steady pace allowed you to make good progress and gave you time to enjoy the plants and animals with which the Hills abound. Even above the tree-line, at about 350 metres, there was still plenty of plant life and animal life for the amateur naturalist to enjoy.

But most of all you enjoyed the sense of freedom that walking in really fresh air gave you. The grime, dust and exhaust fumes of the towns and cities were left far behind and being fairly early in the morning there were few other people on the Hills. By early afternoon there might be a couple of hundred people taking advantage of the good weather and it was nice to feel that you had the Hills to yourself at least for a time.

Being summer and a beautiful day, Andrew and Shonagh were dressed quite casually. Their jerseys had been removed and tied round their waist by the arms and they didn’t carry rucksacks because they were going right over the top and down to a picnic lunch on the other side. No need for excess weight. They had their boots, lightweight walking trousers with many pockets, fleecy checked shirts and the scent of the Scots pine - what more could they want?

Danny scuffled and snuffled around at their feet, never getting in the way and darting backwards and forwards as he discovered, delighted in and discarded the vast array of smells and scents that perfumed the Hill. For a dog with a good nose a hill, with plenty of wildlife and plants, is always a treasure trove and a day on Bennachie was always an aromatic adventure for Danny. He loved getting his hair combed and brushedby the heather as herushed through it. He never barked or made a nuisance of himself and never allowed Andrew or Shonagh to get too far in front of him. Some dogs are just the wrong type to take on to the hills and need to be kept on a leash or ‘Left at hame!’ as Stewart had said on more than one occasion when they had met a dog who hadn’t the knack of behaving on the hills, but Danny kept himself to himself and stayed with his owners most of the time. Yet, in spite of that, Danny could not resist the chase when a rabbit or hare decided to cross his path.

‘ It’s going tae be really scorching by the afternoon,’ said Shonagh.

‘Aye,’ replied Andrew, ‘I’m glad we’ll be over the top by the time it gets really hot. There’ll be a lot o folk about by then too. The sun’ll bring out the townsers.’ Andrew’s contempt for those who live in towns and cities, and use the countryside as though it were a theme park, was clearly evident in his voice.

‘Some o the townsers are all right,’ countered Shonagh. ‘We canna all live in the country and some o them are really keen walkers. You mind that couple from Edinburgh we met in the Lake District last year; they’d climbed in the Alps and were really good. They told us some super stories about the Lakes and the folk who live there. It was really interesting. All those poets must have made the place a wee bit over-crowded!’

Andrew smiled. ‘Aye, ye’re right. I’ll hae to mind nae to show my prejudice so easily. They’ve as muckle right as us to be here, I suppose. And who can blame them, they must think they’re in paradise walking here after dodging the traffic in the toon!’

‘Nothing to dodge here but the broom and the heather, or heaths, as your father keeps reminding me some of the plants are more properly called. Kens a lot about plants, your father.’

‘ It used to be his hobby when he was young. It was knowing about corn that got him the job in the distillery in Keith. Botany was his subject at the varsity, so I suppose you could say he just turned his hobby into his job, in a way, although I dinna think a lot o folk associate whisky with corn and scientists!’

‘I prefer the beasts to the plants,’ said Shonagh. ‘I like to see the way they move and act, especially the roe deer. They seem to live a life of perpetual wariness. They’re always listening, even when they’re eating. And when they hear something they don’t half shift. I dinna suppose we’ll see any unless we’re still around at dusk when they leave the woods to eat.’

‘Aye,’ said Andrew. ‘I dinna fancy being a deer o any kind. You canna spend all your life being on guard. You’d never get time to rest. I suppose that they do rest when they find a nice wee hidey-hole, but even then they’d hae to watch out for foxes.’

‘D’you think a fox would attack a roe deer?’ asked Shonagh. ‘Are they not a bit big?’

Andrew looked thoughtful for a moment, ‘Well, I suppose not. Not unless they were desperate, but a young roe deer would be fair game for a fox if the mother roe deer was away getting food or something. I mean they take lambs sometimes so they’d take a wee roe deer.’

Shonagh looked doubtful, but agreed. ‘You’re probably right, but I think a fox would be in trouble if mother roe deer found it near her fawn. Monsieur Reynard would soon find himself.....’

Shonagh was interrupted by a shout from Andrew, ‘Look out! He’s off! Go get him, Danny!’

While they had been talking a rabbit had been disturbed and taken to the heather in a scattering of paws and a scratching of claws as it skittered across the granite of the path. Danny needed no other invitation and was soon hot on the trail of his prey. Shonagh and Andrew stood smiling as they watched the stiff, upright tail of the wee dog periscoping through the heather in pursuit of the white bobbing tail of a rabbit who was obviously more at home with the terrain.

Danny must have been in a determined mood for, unlike other occasions, he did not give up the chase when the rabbit started to pull away from him. Danny showed his mettle and looked as if he might even be gaining on the fleeing rabbit. They soon disappeared from sight around a wee mound that was home to a splash of heather and a stunted birch tree.

Andrew waited for a couple of minutes and then called on his dog. No answering bark and no sign of the wayward hound. ‘Come on, Danny! Here, boy! Here, Danny! Come on you daft beast!’ Andrew stopped and listened. No answering sound. A frown appeared on his face. He tried again. ‘Danny! Here boy! Come on! Here Danny!’ Still nothing. He glanced at Shonagh. ‘What do you think? He never usually strays out o shouting distance.’

‘Nae like Danny to go so far and nae come back. You dinna suppose he’s hurt himself?’

Andrew remained calm, ‘No, we’d hae heard him if he was hurt. He’s a quiet dog, but he soon lets you ken if he’s not all right.’

Shonagh decided it was better to be making a move. ‘Let’s go over there. Maybe the wind’s stopping him hearing you.’ She knew this was unlikely as there was no wind to talk of, but she felt she had to say something.

‘Right, let’s go. We’ll just follow the path he took. You dinna actually think he caught the rabbit, do you? I mean, if he has, he’s probably stunned with surprise.’

Shonagh laughed, ‘Aye, bumbazed by a bunny!’

They headed for the mound around which Danny had last been seen. As they walked Andrew kept calling for Danny. Shonagh kept quiet, for, although Danny would respond to her normally, she realised that he was more likely to respond to Andrew on this occasion. She also noticed that a note of concern and urgency had entered Andrew’s voice. ‘Where can he hae got to? He never stays away for long.’

‘Why don’t I go down towards that plantation and you cover the ground up here?’ suggested Shonagh pointing to a large area of Douglas fir that had been planted by the Forestry Commision. ‘We’ll cover more ground that way and if he’s stuck somewhere we’ve more chance o hearing him.’

‘Suits me,’ said Andrew who was getting worried about Danny. ‘He could hae got himself stuck in some gorse bush or even some stray bit of wire. Seems strange, though, that we canna hear him. He must hae covered more distance that we thought.

Andrew rounded the mound and headed across the face of the hill while Shonagh strode purposely down towards the plantation. Shonagh shared Andrew’s concern because what worried Andrew was always likely to worry her and, in this case, she was also very fond of his family’s wee dog.

Shonagh entered the plantation calling fairly softly at first, but raising her voice as a deeper silence seemed to envelope her. She was hardly any distance inside the plantation and yet the outside world seemed a long way away. The small trees and the low scrub whin and gorse bushes seemed to cut off external sound. She searched up and down looking for signs, listening for sounds and, with her throat beginning to show signs of wear at her constant calling, was almost ready to return, disappointed, to see how much success, if any, Andrew had had. Just as she was about to turn back she heard the faintest sound of a dog’s bark.

It was very faint and appeared to be coming from the centre of a fairly large patch of gorse and broom bushes. She went over and inspected closely the area around the bushes and peered closely at the snarled and entangled mass of whins and gorse which looked as if it had been woven by a demented demon, but could see nothing. She could still hear the barking but the bushes were like a carpet and did not move; the only thing that gave any hint of animal life being present was the frail sound of a dog barking. Shonagh just did not understand it. She could tell plainly where the sound was coming from but could see no sign of life. Also, it sounded as though the barking was coming from inside the Hill!

Shonagh made her decision. She undid her bright jumper and laid it on a handy bush so that she would know exactly where she had heard the sound. She then checked her position against two prominent trees and made her way back to where she had entered the plantation. On reaching the edge of the wood she immediately called out Andrew’s name.

He appeared about 50 metres above her. ‘What’s up? Have you found him?’ Andrew inquired excitedly.

Shonagh paused to get her breath, ‘You’ll nae believe this, but I’m sure I’ve found where Danny is, but I can’t see him. I hear him O.K. but even that is very faint. It’s weird. The sound is coming from a clump of whins in the wood there. It’s faint, but I’m sure it’s Danny and it seems to be coming from inside the Hill!’

Andrew looked quizzically at her and then said, ‘Show me where it is. Can you remember?’

‘I marked the bushes with my jumper. Come on, I’ll show you.’ Together they moved as quickly as the ground cover would allow towards the mysterious clump of bushes.

Shonagh retrieved her jumper when they reached the bushes. At first she thought she had been hearing things for there were no sounds at all coming from the bushes now. She called out loudly, ‘Danny! Danny, here boy!’

Immediately there was an answering bark - not much, but there could be no doubt that Danny was in there somewhere. Andrew did not hesitate, he forced his way through the bushes ignoring the sharp thorns that tore at his clothes and unprotected hands. Shonagh paused only for a moment before following him in. There was no sign of Danny but they could still hear him barking.

They located the sound and found a small entrance behind a gorse bush that covered what was obviously the entrance to a small cave.

‘Would you believe it!’ said Andrew. ‘A cave!’

‘Can we get into it?’ asked Shonagh.

‘I’ll have to try and force the gorse branches back a bit to get a better view. Can you hold them a minute?’

Shonagh, careful to avoid the spikes of the bush, held some of the branches back while Andrew got down on his knees to peer into the opening. He pulled out his torch and shone it into the dark interior. ‘Hey, it looks gey big. I think if we get through the entrance we could both get inside, but there’s no sign of Danny except that there’s nae doubt that’s him barking. Maybe the cave stretches back a lot further than I can see.’

‘Be careful, Andrew. Make sure you can get oot again,’ Shonagh anxiously warned.

Shonagh watched as Andrew disappeared into the cave. He called out to her, ‘Hae, there’s a fair bit o room in here and I can hear Danny, but no sign of him! The sound’s coming from an opening in the corner. Can you manage to get in here and give me a hand? Hold on and I’ll try and hold back some o the gorse to make it easier.’

While Andrew did his best to hold back some of the gorse, Shonagh squirmed and wriggled her way through the small entrance. Andrew had left the torch on the floor to provide some light so that Shonagh could at least see what was in front of her.

‘Danny must have gone through that wee hole in the corner over there,’ said Andrew. ‘Maybe it’s too steep for him to get back out, but that’s certainly him who is barking.’

‘It must be pretty deep,’ suggested Shonagh, ‘because he still sounds as if he’s a fair bit away. Do you think we’d be better off going to get some help?’

Andrew gave Shonagh’s suggestion some thought, ‘Well, I think it’s probably best to see what we can do first ourselves. I’ll have a look at the opening and see if I can see anything.’ Andrew lay flat on the floor of the cave which was remarkably dry and poked his torch down into the opening. ‘It’s quite a large opening and it feel like its pretty smooth rock after a couple of feet. That’s maybe why Danny slipped down.’

Shonagh crawled up alongside Andrew. ‘I think I could get through easier than you. If I go feet first you could hold on to me or lower me down using the jumpers as a rope.’

Andrew considered Shonagh’s proposal, ‘Well, O.K. but you’re sure now. I don’t want you getting hurt or anything.’

Shonagh smiled to herself in the darkness of the cavern; just like Andrew to think of her. She took her jumper and handed it to him, then lowered herself into the opening. She went very carefully, easing herself slowly down into what seemed like a long. smooth drainpipe. Andrew held on to her tightly helping to ease her down.

‘Can you feel any footholds at all?’ he asked as her shoulders approached the opening and Andrew began to have misgivings about lowering Shonagh until she was out of sight. After all they had no idea how deep this hole was.

Shonagh turned round, ‘Take my hands and give me a wee bit o room. I think I can feel something near my right foot that might take my weight.’ She lowered herself still further and Andrew watched anxiously as her head disappeared into the hole. Everything seemed to be going all right and Shonagh confirmed she’d got one foot planted on what seemed a good foothold when, suddenly, she slipped and began to slide rapidly downwards!

Andrew grasped tightly on to her hands, but the weight of Shonagh was pulling him into the hole. In desperation he tried to steady himself and, in order to hold on to Shonagh, was forced to put his own head and shoulders into the hole. He tried to jam his shoulders across the opening but the soft earth at the edges gave way and he found himself slithering more and more quickly forward and down the hole with Shonagh dragging him on. The shaft was almost vertical and they could not stop themselves from sliding ever more swiftly down the granite tube. They must have gone about twenty metres when, with a scream from Shonagh, they rocketed out of the shaft and fell in a tangle on to the floor of yet another cave.

Shonagh, coming out feet first, made the best landing and that, and some loose earth that had gathered at the bottom of the shaft, softened Andrew’s headfirst descent. Both rolled on the floor, but neither was really hurt.

‘You O.K?’ asked Andrew slightly breathlessly and trying to hide his anxiety.

‘I think I’ve skinned my elbow, that’s all,’ said Shonagh adding a low, but not terribly serious moan which quavered slightly even as she tried to portray an air of calmness.

‘I think you saved me from any harm, but how are we going to get out?’ queried Andrew hoping, beyond hope, that Shonagh might have an answer. Before she got a chance to answer, noisy barks and a great deal of tail wagging reminded them of the reason they had got themselves into their present predicament.

‘Danny!’ cried Andrew, ‘Well, at least you’re O.K.’ Andrew’s relief at seeing his dog unharmed was interrupted by Shonagh sounding slightly alarmed.

‘It’s light, Andrew. I can see quite clearly!’

‘Of course you can see. That wee bump wasn’t going to make you blind!’ was Andrew’s retort.

‘Think, Andrew. Think! We’re about 30 feet below the surface o Bennachie. How can it be light? There are nae windows on the Hill and that wee shaft we’ve just come down widna let in any light at all!’

Andrew quickly realised that Shonagh was right and that his relief at their safe descent and their finding Danny had masked the real problems that they now faced and the mystery of the light. ‘ You’re right!’ he said,’and it’s not shining from any particular source. It’s weird. It just seems to glow all around us. I wonder what’s causing it? Nae too bright, but we can see so let’s be grateful and it might help us find a way oot. I’d better hae a look at your arm before we go any further, then we’ll see if we can get oot.’

‘Right,’ said Shonagh trying to sound as calm as she could as she rolled up her sleeve, ‘we seem to be in some kind o tunnel so perhaps it leads to some sort o exit.’

Andrew looked closely at Shonagh’s arm, ‘Seems to be just a graze. It’s a pity we dinna hae some plasters with us or a bittie o ointment. Should be all right. We might find water somewhere and we can try and clean it. Otherwise we seem to be fine. Nae problems. All we’ve to do is find our way out o here!’

Andrew was startled by the fear that had suddenly entered Shonagh’s voice, ‘Andrew, I think oor problems are just beginning. There’s a man standing over there and he’s staring at us in a gey peculiar way.’

Andrew spun round and looked right into the large, staring eyes of a man; a small, strangely dressed man, but a man none the less and he was staring right back at them!