

MY 'SWAN SONG'

My objective on this grand May morning was a carefree scramble around the shores of Loch Sionascaig, one of the loveliest mountain lochs in the Scottish Highlands, and none so honoured with such majesty and grandeur in her surrounding sentinels. Suilven (2,399 feet) and Canisp (2,779 feet) guard her north-eastern approach; the mirrored reflections of the formidable screes of Cul Mor (2,786 feet) and Cul Beag (2,523 feet) shimmer in the ripples of her south-eastern waters, whilst the segregated geological phenomenon of Stac Polly (2,009 feet) has the dual responsibility of guarding Sionascaig's southern shores, as well as the Lochs Lurgainn and Bad a Ghail, which lie in their sinister cradles between its serrated coxcomb and the mass of Ben More Coigeach (2,438 feet). The water she disgorges into the short-lived River Polly attracts the salmon and sea-trout up from the Polly and Enard Bays, and returns on the windblown spindrift across the Ullapool-Lochinver coast road which she almost laps on her western bank. The irregular outline of Loch Sionascaig (sometimes mapped as Skinaskink) reminds me of an active tentacled octopus.

Having parked the car near the bridge which spans the River Polly, I began the scramble upstream to the Polly Lochs, from where I meandered due east amongst a number of small lochs until the farthest point in this direction was reached, and this immediately opposite a cluster of small islets, the largest of which is half a mile

in length by a quarter in breadth. This was the charmingly wooded Eilean Mor (the Big Island). A good half-mile of the loch's deep water separated this island from the mainland crag where I decided to have my lunch. The proud heads of her gallant sentinels were a joy to behold from this grand and peaceful viewpoint.

'Why Lord maketh scenes so fair to behold.
And the span of my life so brief?'

To me a small woodie island in the heart of a mountain loch has an attraction as irresistible as it is magnetic, and the sight of rising trout around its banks is like a beckoning wand, to which I capitulate completely. I experience something when alone on a wild and remote island that I cannot even explain to myself in words. It was sunny and warm, and clothes were soon discarded for my usual bathing trunks and, with a made rod between my teeth, I was soon revelling in the exhilarating physical actions that propelled me across that half-mile of cool, peat-stained water. Immediately on landing on the tree-shaded bank I crossed the island into the warm rays of the sun on the far side—not exactly a comfortable journey in the nude and barefooted, but, being well schooled in the principles that the best things in life, the simple things that are so much worth while, are not obtained the easiest way, I made up my mind to enjoy it, and did.

Every nerve and fibre in the body and soul of me was tingling with active and joyous life, during this respite of carefree relaxation from the mad and 'bloody' world I had escaped from for a few weeks. I wished that war-mongers could hold their peace conferences in places like this, and then decided that they would only despoil it.

The benevolent spirit within me prompted the liberal offerings of a brace of luscious looking flies to the voracious feeders within reach of an easy cast, and soon there were five very disillusioned brownies dangling on the wee

hooks attached to the waist-band of my loin trunks for this purpose. (These are converted curtain hooks).

The sun was westering, leaving me in the cooling shadows, so I moved northwards to the head of the island, and into its unobstructed and soothing rays again. Another three were added to my finned skirt on this point, including one of two pounds, which, to my amazement after the first glimpse of it, allowed itself to be hauled in without the slightest resistance. It was a sound, firm, male fish, firmly hooked in the maxillary, and I could see no reason why so strong a trout should have capitulated so quietly.

It was my intention to call it a day at this stage, return to my clothing and the car, and push on to see some friends at Lochinver, but the unexpected happened when I moved around this north point. My presence was obviously as great a surprise to a trio of wild whooper swans, as their own was to me. Two of them advanced immediately towards me with their long outstretched necks and black-tipped beaks, out of which they emitted noises that sounded like a series of 'WHOO-WHACK-WHOO-WHACK'. I was soon to learn the appropriateness of this challenging declaration of war. The third bird remained perfectly still, as though it might have been asleep on a nest. Its beak was tucked into its wing, and I assumed this smaller species to be a hen bird, probably sick. My attention was focussed as much upon the peculiarity of this bird's indifference as it was on the pair whose determination to defend it was becoming more imminent. This, too, was surprising in such man-shy birds; in fact their presence there at all in mid-May was unusual, although they have been known to defer the long flight to their native Arctic regions well into June.

I was not contemplating any real trouble with these stalwart defenders, nevertheless, a couple of feathered

monsters, approximately some seventeen pound each, a yard and three-quarters in full length, and with a span of thirty inches in each of those powerful wings—formidable weapons, capable of laming the life out of a man—were things which commanded respect and discretion in the circumstances. I could not understand why they had not flown away on my first appearance, even though they were apparently nursing a sick friend.

Such were my ruminations, all in a split second or two, as I decided that to retreat as far as possible from the vicinity of the sick hen would be the wiser course. So, with a waistline garlanded with eight bonnie trout, the rod firmly gripped between my teeth and a weather eye on the birds, I waded into the cool waters and began to swim. The error of adopting this means of escape was realized within twenty-five yards of the bank, when to my horror I felt the weight of one of the swans as it swooped down upon me with a 'WHOO-WHACK' of a smack on the head with one of its wings. I realized immediately that the safest course would be to return to the island as quickly as possible, but this was not achieved with the willing approval of my opponents by any means. It cost me the top and centre pieces of my rod in my efforts to ward them off. I found, too, that some twelve pounds of dangling trout could be a handicap when trying to 'step' in water beyond one's depth, and that it was easier to slip the loin cloth off entirely than to pick each trout off its individual hook. Yards of line had been drawn off the reel to which the broken rod pieces were still attached at some little distance away. The loose line was sinking, and this hindered my progress in wielding the butt to advantage. Between them they beat me up pretty well.

Just before regaining the bank I did manage to swing a loop of the line around the neck of one of them, the idea being to draw it towards me, grip it by the neck, push my

fingers into its eyes and temporarily blind it. My own stamina was weakening, and life was far too sweet to yield it to a mere couple of swans. I just had to regain that bank within the next minute or two, and this was finally achieved by pulling the bird towards me, then diving under it, rising again within my depth. It was a great relief to feel my feet touching bottom again.

The bird didn't like being lassoed, and had it been a slip knot he could have been accounted for as, in his state of panic, he made a powerful take-off and flew to mid-loch, wrenching the butt and reel out of my hands. This was the last I ever saw of my precious gear. Seeing its mate in distress the other followed, and this gave me the much-desired breather as I crawled up the bank in search of some other kind of weapon in case they should return to the fray. A dead-wood branch was located, some three feet in length, and, as luck would serve me, the darned thing was near the sick hen. (I presumed all along that she was sick). My approach brought her to her feet, and in her seeming distress she yelled out a series of thundering 'WHOO-WHACK, WHOO-WHACK, WHOO-WHACK' S.O.S.'s for help. Without hesitation I did some whacking of my own, rendering her *hors de combat*. Unfortunately, the stick broke up in the process, leaving me defenceless again.

The lassoed bird had freed itself, and both were returning in response to the cry for help and the hen's screeches when being beaten. Their bulk looked formidable on the wing, and grew to the proportions of a couple of crashing bomber planes as they drew nearer to me. One swooped by with some smashing right wing blows across my tummy, and this when there wasn't too much wind in the bag to resist it. The second bird almost enveloped me with a lightning tattoo at close range, then the first antagonist returned with a sweeping attack on my thighs

and buttocks which sent me headlong into the leafy branches of an infant birch tree, where they followed up the attack to their advantage. For a little time I was 'out', and when I came to again, it was to see the two birds parading frantically up and down on both sides of the dead hen, nattering incessantly. I lay perfectly still during this welcome state of armistice, and for fully half an hour they kept up this peculiar form of ritual over their dead spouse, or whatever form of relationship she was entitled to. The up and down parade was alternated with an encircling movement, but the nattering ritual never ceased or changed. They could not fail to see my head and shoulders in the tree which was but four yards away. It might have been four miles for what notice they took of me, but had I as much as blinked an eye, however, the attack might have been renewed and, candidly, in my defenceless state I wasn't feeling equal to it. Those nerves and fibres that had tingled with joyous life and exhilaration on arrival were not tingling for the same reasons now. Those vicious quills had been slashed across my bare flesh like the lashes of a salted cat-o'-nine-tails, and had drawn good blood. My left eye was swelling to a close as a result of the beating they had given me in the water, and I felt that my whole body would be as discoloured as the optic itself.

It is amazing how soon one detects the discomforts of a slovenly-made bed in a hotel, yet the nude body can repose soothingly enough on a bed of pebbles, the face of a rock, on dry bracken and heather, and even amongst the branches of a birch tree. I presume the art is in wriggling into position and then remaining perfectly still, and this I had contrived to do during this interesting performance. The nattering ceased, and the birds were still. Were they contemplating vengeance? In desperation I decided to try the effects of a sudden shrill blast with the

aid of my fingers. With my lungs well filled, I whistled the wind out of me, and feel sure that a right and left from a twelve-bore could never have scared them as those sudden shrill blasts did. With a heavy lumbering take-off they were quickly airborne, across the loch and out of sight with the gathering speed of Hurricanes.

It seemed some time before I felt any inclination to extricate myself from the birch's embrace, and when I did, it was obvious that I was in no fit state to face that half-mile swim to the mainland. Deciding that a good rest was essential, I lay down in the sun and fell asleep. It was hours later when I awoke with a shiver and a completely closed eye, the sun deep west. But I was rested and refreshed, despite a soreness suggesting that the battle might have been with a pair of mules instead of wild swans. The seemingly endless half-mile was bridged, and a comforting fire got going whilst I dressed. The three-mile scramble back to the car was laborious to say the least, but I was equal to it and that was all that mattered.

It was days before my eye and flesh resumed their normal colour, and many weeks before I could suppress the instinct to take up an immediate defensive attitude when I saw the harmless domestic hen with wings outstretched.

Unlike the mute swan with its hissing noises, these wild whoopers made no attempt to attack with their beaks, formidable weapons though they must be.