

AONACH EAGACH

By Hamish Brown

Glencoe. North Side. *Man, traversing Aonach Eagach E to W slipped at the pinnacled section of the ridge and fell down S side for 200m. Body recovered by Glencoe MRT. (3 7 hours)*

The very brevity of accident reports like this acts as a sort of palliative, recording nothing of the reality, the horror of the happening, the slow ebbing of heartbreak in the sorry afterwards but then neither the bereaved, those present, nor those who picked up the pieces want to expand the record and bring back the memory of the happening. Nobody goes to the hills with the idea of being a casualty statistic. Well, almost nobody.

Jean Brennan had had her share of accident statistics. Nearly two years

earlier she, her husband Tom, their young Andrew, had intended picking up the grandparents at Saline for a day at the zoo but Jean had all the symptoms of flu and said she was going to dope herself and go to bed. They would have to go without her. Under protest they did so. Tom took Andrew and they drove along the B914 to Saline, picked up Jean's parents and headed for the Forth Bridge. They were just running up out of Steelend en route to the motorway when two cars, racing each other, side by side, came belting round onto them. One youthful driver, who would be flat on his back for life, was the only survivor. Jean, not surprisingly, was shattered and it was many months, into years, before she began to pick up again what she considered the broken pieces of her own life. The process was accelerated by the kindly presence of the hills and the friendship of a man.

One day while she was driving over the Cleish Hills she had one of those stabbing reawakenings of her horrors; her throat closed up, she could hardly breathe and the tears flooded out. She pulled in off the road and sat hunched over the wheel while the "heeby jeebies" lasted. She then climbed out of the car and wearily wandered along the track neither knowing nor caring where it went.

Jean came out of the scented pines to find herself looking at a loch which lay golden in the evening light, backed by lumpy sunset hills, with a fisherman or two quietly casting from the shore. The singing silence of the scene was such a shocking contrast to her own inner turmoil that she stopped as if struck by a blow. Then she was beset by a run of hiccups. Jean held her breath tried touching her toes and so on, all to no avail. She actually laughed at herself (the first time since the fatal crash) and headed for the bank of the loch.

There was a fishermen's hut there and she read "Loch Glow" on a notice. Jean laughed aloud because this was so apposite with the sun reflecting off the water. She strode off round the gurgly rim into the dazzle and on up the first bump northwards (Park Hill she would discover later) where she sat on the rufous tussocks as the sun dipped away beyond the scarp of the Ochils.

A man came along, bearded and weathered, boots on his feet and a thumb stick in hand. He looked as if he belonged there as happily as the breeze itself.

"Aye" he greeted.

"Oh, hello," she replied, with a bit of a catch in her voice.

"Great; isn't it?"

"Why, yes."

"Come here often?"

"No. I've not been before. I" and, before she knew it, Jean was pouring out her sorrows as she had not done before. He sat beside her and scarce said a word. Just nodded now and then. Jean didn't burst into tears again at the end of her recital. They remained sitting in silence. The glowing sun met the horizon and flared up golden rays into the clouds, trembled and dipped out of sight.

"We'd better shift," the man said. He helped her up. "I once had to read a poem at a funeral. It was by the climber Winthrop Young. Let me give it to you." He spoke it clearly. Jean registered some of the words. "There is much comfort in high hills and a great easing of the heart ... I lose in them my instant of brief ills - There is great easing of the heart and cumulance of comfort on high hills."

"Cumulance of comfort on high hills," Jean whispered to herself that night. The Cleish Hills were hardly high, but they had comforted, and, for once, she fell asleep with a memory that smiled rather than screamed. There would be more hills and more of Erchie Russel, the manny who could recite poems like that.

A couple of years later Erchie Russel was driven to taking steps to murder Jean Brennan.

Erchie was a kindly soul really and had - at first - been quite happy to meet Jean on his regular evening walks on the Cleish Hills. He was a painter and lived in a cottage at Easter Cleish Farm with an old stable for studio-workshop. He was a solitary type but not lonely. He joked that he was married to his work and a wife would have been a fatal distraction. The hills were his relaxation and most nights he would clear his head of work by a stroll among the hills and lochans above the hamlet. He drew strength and inspiration from them and also went on trips all over Scotland with the Kinross Mountain Club. His work sold. He was that rarity, a really contented person, and felt he would need to live to be a hundred just to produce a fraction of the ideas that volcanoed out of his mind.

Erchie was quite happy to let Jean into the periphery of his self-contained world but that was not where she stayed. He, rather grimly, recalled a childhood story of the camel and the Bedouin tent. In the frozen desert nights the camel always felt grieved at being left outside while the people had the shelter of a tent. One particularly cold night the camel stuck its head in the door. Lovely warmth! The man was going to chase the beast away but the children pleaded on its behalf. But the children pleaded on its behalf. The face in the door was so funny. "All right then, but no further," their father conceded. A few nights later he noticed the camel had got its feet inside as well. He said nothing but then the animal pushed further in and rather cramped the space in the tent for the rest of them. He remonstrated but was over-ruled by the family. Inch by inch, night by night, the camel crept in till, eventually, there came the night when the camel's entire bulk filled the tent and the family cooked supper and slept outside under the cold stars.

Jean became the camel inching into the privacy of his life and he resented the insidious intrusion. There was the day a walk led down to Easter Cleish and he, all too innocently, suggested a cup of tea. Jean never seemed to be out the house after that he thought a few weeks later. She'd bring flowers and shift a vase to the windowsill for them, she brought a toaster (bought at a car-boot sale) to replace his half-working one, she sat and darned his hiking socks and, the cracking point, tried to "tidy" his studio-workshop.

She had also joined the KMC (Kinross Mountain Club) and the members tended to partner them together. Sharing a picnic she would sit close to Erchie, pressing against him. Walking, she was always one step behind. Once, when he paused to look at a hairy caterpillar in the heather, she stood on his heel. "Stop crowding me!" he had hissed.

I don't know whether Jean was conscious of what she was doing but she was not the first woman ever to metamorphose from mourning to man-hunting. A solitary maverick like Erchie was something of a challenge to female instincts. One night when Erchie had realised he had a camel well inside his tent he scrawled in his diary, "I could kill the bitch!", language that would have

surprised and shocked Jean. She, poor soul, would never see there were pulsing depths in Erchie which she had no access to and he, having written those words, lay awake for a long time that night pondering them.

A week later there was an article in the *Scotsman* on "The Art of Perfecting Murder". While written for entertainment it made Erchie think. Forty percent of murderers were never caught and nobody could guess how many murders there were which remained undetected because they had been 'perfect' crimes. The same day an article in the *Scots Magazine* mentioned that there was something like sixty people who had gone missing in the Highlands over the last century and had never been found. That article was also written a bit tongue-in-cheek, the writer saying he walked in hope of finding a missing Victorian hillgoer who had had a pocketful of gold sovereigns on his person.

Erchie thought of Browning's *My Last Duchess* and the catalogue of little sins that led to Ferrara's finally acting, "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." Another literary memory (if you could term Agatha Christie 'literary') had a man simply pushing his wife off the cliffs at Dover and reporting she had just slipped. There was no way it could be proved as other than an accident. How easily something like that could be arranged in the hills. Erchie fantasized on these lines to such an extent his work began to suffer and he became unusually irascible. Something would have to be done before the camel had him out of the tent altogether.

The simple answer of course would have been for him to tell Jean to leave him alone, not to see him any more, not to visit the cottage or approach him in any way but the working of men's thoughts are seldom simple either. He couldn't be cruel to Jean. She had suffered enough after all. He couldn't hurt her with such a brutal rejection.

But he could kill her.

When the KMC meet's secretary proposed a visit to Glen Coe one weekend with the objectives of Bidean and the Aonach Eagach, Erchie's heart gave a bound. The latter would be the perfect place for an 'accident', especially as it would be quite a hard route for the relatively inexperienced Jean. If he proposed to traverse the ridge she, he smiled to himself, would insist on accompanying him. Which is exactly what happened as everyone on Michie of Muckharfs bus heard as she arranged it on the drive up the A82.

Half the bus passengers were after the Aonach Eagach so Erchie set a cracking pace up the steep flank to Am Bodach in order to be ahead of the others, alone with Jean. She puffed along behind him silently; anyone less infatuated would have yelled an adjectival "Slow down!" To Erchie this dogged following was the last confirmation he needed. By God! He would make sure she never reached the other end of the ridge.

They traversed from Am Bodach to the Munro, Meall Dearg. From there a path wends down to reach the narrow crest of the Aonach Eagach proper which undulates along for a couple of ragged kilometres (the skyline view that fills the north side of Glen Coe) before rising to Stob Coire Leith and on to Munro number two, Sgorr na Fiannaidh, On the ridge proper there are plenty of narrow places and brief problems, slippery slabs and wee pinnacles, all with considerable 'exposure' - that honeyed word meaning plenty of air below the boots.

Erchie felt remarkably calm about what he intended to do. He felt being rid of Jean would be like taking off a heavy rucksack at the end of a long hill day. A blessed relief. He had traversed the Aonach Eagach the year before and knew the perfect spot. A short black wall had to be scrambled up and it would be the easiest thing in the world to 'slip' there and let his flying feet knock Jean off the narrow crest into the void.

They picked their cautious way along the crest, Erchie being quite helpful at any difficulties and Jean proving quite competent. Only occasionally did she let her mind stray. Was Erchie being

unusually kind? Might he, at last,.....? They came to the wee wall, its smooth holds damp and greasy, the cliffs sheer on either side. Agatha Christie couldn't have designed a better spot for murder.

Ermie made sure of his right handhold and began to turn. Now was the moment. A quick push of a foot - and that would be that. At that very moment Bill Binnie, the KMC club secretary, came into view and called out, "Hey. Ermie, what's the hurry the day?"

The shock made Ermie lose his grip so he shot off down.

"No! No!" he screamed.

But he only slid a few feet. One flailing foot caught Jean, who had turned at the unexpected voice, and pitched her off the ridge. Bill and Ermie watched as the silent, limp figure curved through the air, seemingly in slow motion, to then thump onto the rocks and fly off again, a process repeated several times before Jean crashed onto the screes and lay still. The sight was almost unreal but the soft, repeated thuds would echo in the memory for a long time.

The leader of the Glen Coe Mountain Rescue Team put an arm round the white-faced Ermie outside the Clachaig. "Don't blame yourself, mate. It was an accident." He grinned, encouragingly, with an old joke, "You'd think you'd tried to push her off".

The coroner heard what Bill Binnie and Ronnie Hamilton, who had been a step behind Bill on the ridge, had seen and what Ermie described and recorded Yet another of those damn-fool mountain accidental deaths. They should ban the blighters. (He preferred hang gliding himself.)

Almost a year later Ermie Russel was in Edinburgh. Three of his paintings were being hung at the RSA and there was a first London exhibition looming. He popped into Tiso's in Rose Street for some mitts. The new *SMC Journal* was on display and he quickly flipped through its pages to the long Scottish Mountain Accidents section. There it was.

Glencoe. North Side. Woman, traversing Aonach Eagach E to W fell at the pinnacled section of the ridge and went down S side for 190m. Body recovered by Glencoe MRT. (33 hours)

Ermie set off for the Haymarket and the train over the bridge to Dumf where he'd parked his car at the station. He returned home to Cleish as that rarity, a really contented person. There was still so much he wanted to do. He'd need to live to be a hundred to produce just a fraction of the ideas that volcanoed out of his mind.