

Pennine Way 1973

"Iss diss de vasserfalle on zee map?"

"Pardon?"

The voice had made me jump. Having survived terrible diarrhoea, I was nursing a queasy stomach and wobbly knees on the bank of the River Tees. For about ten days I had walked northwards from the start of the Pennine Way at Edale, drinking untreated water from brooks without any ill effect. Ignoring stories of sheeps' corpses and liver flukes in the water, I had refilled my water bottle or drunk from cupped hands whenever I had found quickly flowing water. My favourite spots were just below waterfalls where the peaty water was bubbly and clear. The dire warnings about diarrhoea caused by the notorious Pennine bug went unheeded. Every night I had camped alone, miles from habitation, in total quietness apart from the sound of rushing water or wind moving the grasses. It was wonderful. It was freedom.

It was September and I rarely met any human being except when I entered villages. At Middleton-in-Teesdale I had returned to the path having filled my backpack with food and I fell in step with another walker. We found our walking pace was similar so we chatted our way up the Tees to Langdale. He was youth hostelling and I was tempted by the idea of a shower and a bed. Irony of ironies, the next morning I awoke feeling grim. The Pennine Bug had struck. All around me were dangerous smells of fry-ups and socks. I had to complete a mandatory cleaning duty between dashes to the toilet but I left the hostel without any breakfast.

I faced a 14 mile walk across the watershed of the Pennines to Dufton in the Eden valley. I felt dizzy, weak and internally turbulent. I dumped my backpack by the river and rested, then around 10am lugged it back onto one shoulder. It was much too heavy for long walks anyway and when I swung it across my back I staggered. Each knee took it in turns to give way. In my prolonged efforts to get my second arm through the strap I fruitlessly chased round like a dog chasing its own tail.

The River Tees was beautiful; broad and shallow, noisily running over a stony bed. The close-cropped grass made walking comfortable. The day was warm and breezy and the valley began to climb very gently. After about an hour, I stopped by a low waterfall barely higher than a kerbstone. I brewed up a cup of black tea and risked eating a Mars Bar. Apart from the river, the moorland was empty and still.

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On the opposite bank a fit-looking white-haired man stood. He had appeared from nowhere. He looked like the professor in a Rupert Bear story. His accent was difficult to understand above the rushing water and I was startled.

"Er, yess. I sink so." Why is it so difficult not to ape someone's accent? He nodded and set off downstream. After I had walked a further mile or so, I suddenly realised I was well again; extravagantly well. Surely not the Mars Bar! My stride lengthened, I straightened up, I looked about me, appreciative even when the featureless landscape

became riverless. The river had turned away northwards to Cauldron Snout where it flowed out of a reservoir. Once again I thought what a great place it was to be. The route crossed the watershed, a rock-strewn expanse dotted with ruined mine buildings, so much part of the terrain that their camouflaged stonework was hidden from sight until I was almost upon it.

The unchanging tramp through the afternoon was suddenly broken. I stood on the edge of a high cliff. Below me was spread a perfectly sculpted U-shaped glacial valley. The walls were capped by towering ramparts of horizontally bedded sandstone and I stood at the exact head of the valley. This was High Cup Nick. It was stunning. In the distance, pale, soft and blue-green was the flat lowlands of the Eden valley and on the horizon vague shapes of grey-blue peaks in the Lake District. Hidden by the green foothills below me was Dufton—my destination. The walk along the rim of the cliffs was awesome. The descent was long but easy.

About a mile from Dufton, a blinding migraine struck me. In the village I found a walled farmyard and the farmer's wife let me pitch my tent on the grass. From the terraced stone Post Office I bought a pint of milk and a large packet of plain chocolate digestive biscuits. In broad daylight I retired to my sleeping bag with flashing lights before my eyes and I zipped the tent shut. Three hours later I awoke, migraine gone and ravenous. I polished off all the biscuits and the milk and slept again until daylight.

Ahead lay a long climb up to the Pennines' highest summit, Cross Fell.