

## ***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

### DOING THE MILFORD TRACK WITH GILLIAN

In London in a pub in the early 1970s I made friends with a young man standing, as I was, with friends at the bar.

"New Zealand, eh?" he said. "I've been there. And I bet I've done something you never did. I walked the Milford Track."

"Actually I've done that too!" I was delighted to be able to reply.

About twelve years before I had finished my Library School course and ended the year "doing the Milford Track" with my Wellington friend Mattie. The idea appealed as a complete change from cooking for seven, cleaning house and coping with teenage children —not to mention a permanently irritated husband (at the time) and a couple of foreign in-laws.

Mattie was a skier and mountaineer from way back. Brought up in rural Southland, she had had many opportunities of venturing into New Zealand's famous alpine regions, and expected the organised three day scenic walk to Milford Sound from the top of Lake Te Anau's Franklin Arm<sup>1</sup> to be reasonably easy. For me, however, it was a different story. A city slicker by then hitting 40 with little experience of the Great New Zealand Outdoors in its more rigorous aspects, I felt I should get into training beforehand so that I would not hold the party up.

Poor after a year living on a student bursary instead of a proper salary, I bought a clumsy pair of working men's boots, made myself a red lined wind-breaker jacket with lots of pockets, and spent several weekends before we left Wellington tramping up and down hills in the Botanical Gardens. Perhaps this would be the last time I would be fit enough to do the famous tourist walk.

Well, well! Looking back, I could say it was tiring but not so very difficult, and I could certainly have done it twenty years later. But Mattie and I did have a cross to bear on that trip. This was the demands made on us by Mattie's friend Gillian.

Gillian was a tall, pretty, strongly built girl of nineteen who worked in the same office as Mattie. She was the daughter of a well-known judge and seemed to be very well brought up in all respects. She, too, wanted to go, but lacked any similarly inclined friends of her own, so she asked if she could join Mattie and me. When we all met to plan the trip Mattie and I expressed pleasure that the two old ladies were to have a vigorous young girl to help us over the rough bits.

How silly can you get! Appearances can be deceptive.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy is mistaken here. Glade House is at the head of the North-West Fiord of Lake Te Anau. Te Anau Downs is on the main lake. She may be confusing the fiord with the Frankton Arm of Lake Wakatipu. R.E.

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We flew to the South Island and transferred to a bus for Lake Te Anau. We drove further up the Franklin Arm to Te Anau Downs, and then took a boat to Glade House. the starting point for the walking track. We spent the night there, and after a talk from one of the guides at breakfast giving us instructions for that day, we crossed the water and set off on the pleasant, gently climbing path through virgin forest to the lunchtime meeting place.

We had to carry our cotton sleeping bags and our cut lunch (both provided by Glade House) as well as our clothing and other possessions. Our packs were not really heavy, but how we learned to hate them!

About four hours later we reached the assigned picnic spot where we ate our lunch and were given cups of billy tea prepared by our guide who had arrived an hour or so before us. From there we did a slightly steeper climb to Pompolona but snuggled below the peaks of the Alps near the tongues of a couple of glaciers. Again our guide had arrived before us. If one arrived when expected, between 4 and 5 p.m., there was plenty of time to have a shower, a cuppa tea, change clothes and be ready for our 6 o'clock dinner. The evening was for exploring outside till dark, then reading, playing games and falling into bed. It was a primitive hut but adequate. There was no radio, and T.V. had not yet been invented.

The next day followed the same pattern. We were warned always to be at the day's destination by 6 o'clock. Mattie and I, walking at a leisurely but steady pace, usually arrived about 4.30. However, there was a pair of middle-aged women who found the going very tough. They always started out at 8 o'clock, an hour before the rest of the party, and just managed to stagger in to our destination hut by 6 p.m. They were probably in their 60s. Mattie and I, both in our early 40s, felt sorry for them.

Most of the other members of our party of about 16 people were married couples from Southland who seemed to be farmers with their wives. We felt sorry for one fragile little lady who before long was feeling the strain very much indeed. She was certainly not older than her early 30s. Her husband was good-natured, considerate and very big and strong. He always carried her pack as well as his own, and sometimes put a protective beef-like arm around her and half carried her. But she was probably one at least of the party who wished she had stayed home.

The whole walk was exhilarating, beautiful beyond belief and truly memorable. And all we had to do was walk, and climb. Everything else was taken care of. Unlike usual family excursions into rugged country, when we arrived at each day's destination we had absolutely nothing to do. No children to see to, no food to unpack and cook, no dishes to wash, no beds to make up. That was wonderful.

But as for that Gillian! Well, let a veil be drawn.

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We had not been bush-walking for more than half an hour when the first of Gillian's constant mishaps took place. She had chosen to wear her shorts — her only pair — and the zip collapsed. Mattie spent twenty minutes of our precious time trying to fix that zip because Gillian seemed unable to move without someone doing this for her. I think Mattie used a large safety-pin in the end (of course not Gillian's — she had nothing for even the simplest contingency in her pack). But that was the end of the shorts. They were from then on unwearable.

Moan, moan from Gillian. What was she going to do?

"Wear your slacks, of course!" replied Mattie curtly.

"But they'll be too hot!"

Oh, well. She was Mattie's friend after all—I should stay out of things.

After another hour or so something happened to Gillian's shoelace. (Boots had not been necessary for that day's climb, the terrain being reasonably smooth and the weather fine.)

Did she have any spare laces? What a laugh. I think Mattie found something in her own pack that would do.

Long before our lunch break Gillian was pleading extreme fatigue and demanding rests. I took advantage of these (which became increasingly frequent over the next two days) to sneak the odd nude swim in a river when all other members of the party — except the two 60-year-olds who would be far behind — had moved on.

Long before we arrived at Pompolona Hut that first day Gillian was again complaining about her feet. She had blisters, her shoes wore too tight, her feet hurt. she couldn't go on.

"Didn't you practise with your shoes and boots before you came away?" I asked.

"Oh, yes — but they were alright in Wellington."

Mattie and I exchanged glances. Of course she hadn't practised.

Mattie pushed her on, regardless of her complaints. I think she even helped her with her pack, She certainly lightened it. What a bore Gillian was turning out to be! A right proper whinger.

We saw lots of glorious waterfalls on the way, but Gillian probably didn't see many of them. If they were not directly in our path she would flop by the trail while

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Mattie and I turned aside to walk the few hundred yards off the track to view the promised sights. The lush forest scenery, the birds and the quietness on that day were magical indeed.

At Pompolona Gillian miraculously recovered her energy and changed into a crisp sunfrock she had actually ironed there, to don for the evening. After a very simple dinner, absolutely delicious to us all after our day's labour, Mattie and I explored the moraines of the nearby glaciers, even climbing through the tongue under the ice to the other side, an eerie experience. There were also very lovely waterfalls nearby, and we could look ahead and up to the peaks of the mountains towering over Mackinnon Pass. which we were to traverse next day.

The two older ladies in the party were very exhausted that night. But we all slept like logs in the crisp, cold night air, in spite of morepork cries.

The next day was to be the tough one. After climbing over Mackinnon Pass we would drop down to Quintin Hut for the night. The third day was to be downhill all the way to the sea, but a very long walk. A launch would meet us and transport us to Milford Sound.

Mattie and I got up, dragged Gillian out of bed, dressed for the big climb, (boots on this time), packed our rucksacks. had our breakfast and took off. An usual the two older ladies had left a good hour before us.

As we climbed gently towards the steep ascent Gillian started, as usual, to complain about her feet.

"Gillian!" I exclaimed. "What exactly is the matter with your feet?"

"I don't know," she replied, "I think they are too small for my body!"

I stared at her. Surely, but surely Gillian's feet had had time to grow to fit her admittedly generous proportions. She wasn't going to get away with that argument with me. What Gillian lacked, decidedly was not good feet, but guts.

Suddenly her rucksack disintegrated, spilling out its contents at her feet.

Wails indeed from Gillian. How on earth was she ever going to climb over the Pass?

An usual, the resourceful Mattie came to the rescue-with the help of a nail. She managed to patch the rucksack together with a considerably lighter load inside it. And it was not hard to guess where the rest of Gillian's possessions were—in Mattie's pack. I probably took a bit too.

We started the big climb. and certainly it was quite taxing. My boots felt very

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heavy as I trudged up the steep grade, winding round endless bluffs as we ascended. I was also wishing desperately that I had no pack on my back. Gillian's bits and pieces were the last straw.

About a third of the way up, Gillian gave up. She simply sat down on the edge of the narrow path and refused to get up, Gillian, the youngest of the party, was going to lie down and wait for rescue. Later I wondered if she had designs on our rather handsome young guide, now miles ahead. It would have to be he who would rescue her. This seemed an unworthy thought at the time and I dismissed it.

Mattie now faced her greatest challenge — getting Gillian over Mackinnon Pass. Experienced trumper as she was, she knew a few tricks.

"Get up!" she ordered Gillian. "Get up at once!"

Gillian groaned and rose to her feet.

"Now move!" said Mattie, raising her voice a bit. She herself moved over beside Gillian and herded her forward for a few steps. Gillian was so astonished she did what she was told, like a zombie.

"One minute walking, one minute rest!" announced Mattie in a She-who-must-be-obeyed voice.

Gillian moved forward like a sleepwalker, Mattie close behind her looking at her watch.

When the 60 seconds were up, Gillian was allowed to collapse to the ground once more. But not for long. Mattie timed her like a referee. After the regulation sixty seconds she was made to get to her feet again.

This routine went on for well over an hour., Gillian was wailing all the way, protesting exhaustion, pain and the impossibility of taking another step. But Mattie, seething with silent frustration, got Gillian up to the top of Mackinnon Pass. I stuck around nearby, watching the proceedings with the greatest admiration for my friend Mattie and quite enjoying the unexpected rests I, too, was getting.

If it had not been for Mattie, her patience and sheer determination, Gillian would still be sitting on Mackinnon Pass today.

At last we reached the top., And we wore not even the last. Those two middle-aged ladies were still trailing up gamely, but well behind.

Lunch on the roof of the world was fun. Our packs were relieved of at least the weight of that day's sandwiches, and most of those vanished into our mouths. The rest were snatched away from our very hands by crowds of screaming keas, native

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parrots rarely seen at lower altitudes. They obviously knew all about tourist lunches. They swept down or crept out from the undergrowth to snatch shiny teaspoons and dart away. The forest had given way to high altitude vegetation, or lack of it. and there was little protection from the cold mountain breezes as we ate. There was only a small shelter for the guides to brew our tea, and we lay or sat on boulders in the open. But the relief of having actually reached the top was so great that any unwelcome diversions in the way of snatched lunches seemed very small beer indeed.

The panoramic view from that height was completely overwhelming.

Gillian was too worn out to even complain, for once.

Then came the descent down to the bushline on the sea side of the Alps, and Quintin Hut. This was a tramp of about three hours. Quintin seemed like El Dorado.

This part of the journey was surprisingly difficult, or I found it so, and I was very glad indeed of my working men's boots. We followed down a boulder-strewn ravine for miles, or so it seemed. This was incredibly rough because there was little cleared track and one had to keep altering one's stride to avoid or climb over rocky obstructions. Keeping one's eye on the ball, so to speak. was demanding, as the last thing one needed was to fall down and have to struggle up again with one's pack. On legs already weakened by the stiff ascent, one tended to flounder, or I did. The firm boots usually held me upright, at least.

But so taxing did I find this steep descent that I forgot about Gillian. it was every man for himself. and I was quickly separated from my two friends. What Mattie went through with Gillian I can no longer remember. It doesn't bear thinking about!

At last beautiful, wonderful, luxurious Quintin Hut loomed into sight between the trees — El Dorado indeed! Here was a well appointed, large hut with a permanent staff to cook and look after us. After a cup of tea to greet us, a marvellous shower to remove all the mud and a change of clothes (another party frock for Gillian) and a rest, we were served a dinner which was probably quite basic but tasted like exquisite French high cuisine — sans wine, of course. Mattie and I were by this time missing our pre-prandial gins, which I felt we had earned and sorely needed. But the only way you could have those was by carrying the gin bottle with you. What an idea! One took absolutely nothing extra for those back packs! Not even party dresses.

After the usual wondrous waterfall to visit after dinner, we settled down to a pleasant quiet evening in a lovely recreation room, walls lined with books and dozens of recreational games. Quintin Hut must seem like paradise indeed to any tour party coming over the top in really bad weather. It had been known, they told us, for such parties to be marooned at Quinton for several days, even over a week, till the storm died down and they could proceed on their way. After a week, even Mackinnon Hut

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would doubtless lose its attraction.

The next morning in the women's dormitory Mattie and I were getting dressed when one of the guides knocked on the door. He was leading a horse, a packhorse. We all stopped our packing and looked up with interest.

"My horse needs two rucksacks to balance its load," he said. "We're going to Sandfly Point where you are all going today, to be picked up by the launch for Milford. Would you two ladies (addressing the hardpressed couple) like to give me your packs? You seem to be the oldest ladies in this party."

"Oh. how wonderful!" cried one of the ladies.

"Ethel! Ethel!" cried her friend severely. "No!"

Ethel's face fell.

"We've done it all the way just like the others!" went on her companion, "And we're not going to give up now! We can do it all the way. and we're going to! He can just take someone else's packs for his horse."

Poor Ethel looked devastated.

"Well, who are the next oldest ladies? You two perhaps?" And he looked at Mattie and me.

"Yes, yes. I'm sure we are!" I cried, and Mattie, too, had a grin from ear to ear. We handed our two rucksacks over to him.

What luck! After our misfortunes with Gillian we could hardly believe it. That walk to the sea which was about to commence was eighteen miles, they told us. And to think we were going to be free as the air, dancing downhill like capering goats with nothing to carry!

But of course it was not to be.

Gillian decided she was about to collapse. No way could she possibly carry her pack another step. So Mattie and I took turns to carry that wretched girl's rucksack for the whole of that day. I, for one, bitterly resented it.

Gillian stuck to her guns about blistered feet, heat and exhaustion, for every inch of the way. I could gladly have murdered her.

Many hours and a number of spectacular waterfalls later we all stumbled down to Sandfly Point to await the arrival of our launch. When it finally came, we still had to wait for the late arrival of the poor ladies who were determined to do it like the

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others all the way. The packhorse had turned up hours before, so our packs were restored to us, The sandflies mercifully took a siesta, so it was a pleasant respite for us all.

When we boarded the launch Mattie and I just flopped. Gillian, however, seemed to revive quite rapidly, with new people to talk to, including young and handsome crew. The skipper gave us information over the loud speaker, suggesting that those of us who felt up to it might like to take a walk after our evening meal at Milford to the famous Bowen Falls. He mentioned that it was a pleasant evening activity regularly enjoyed by those staying at the Milford Hotel. Could those interested care to sign a list in the saloon so that a guide could be arranged?

"I'll be passing that one:" I said to Mattie. "We've seen dozens of waterfalls, and I'm stuffed. I won't be wanting to do anything after our dinner but go to bed for ever."

Mattie, herself pale with fatigue, agreed.

But Gillian? That Gillian! She positively rushed to the saloon to sign up.

Mattie and I looked at each other and threw our eyes skywards. At tile very thought of meeting a new crowd, Gillian forgot about blisters, too-small feet, aching muscles, lethal exhaustion. zipless shorts, a heavy pack with broken straps, and it was all go, go! I suppose she was hoping for exciting young things to flirt with, and the third party frock she would be wearing,.

All Mattie and I could think about was a bed!

We had now "done the Milford Track". And we had also been played for a nice pair of suckers!

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