

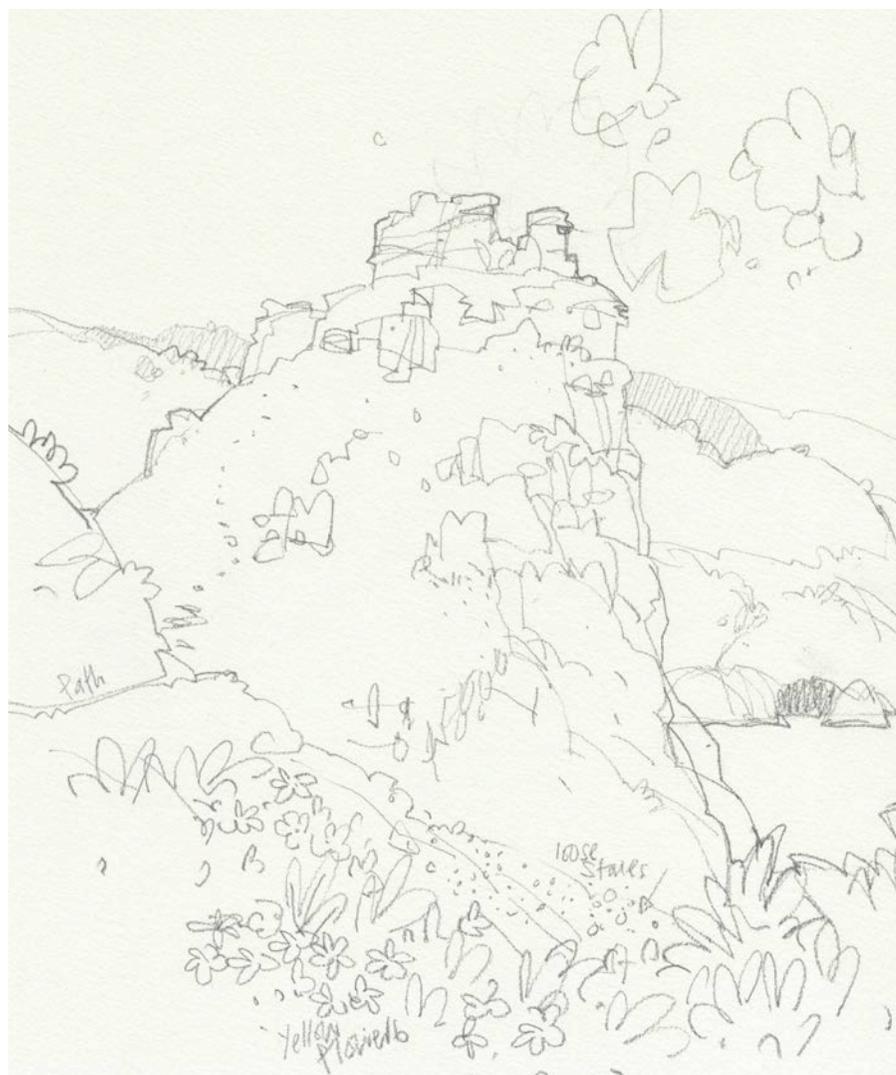


## LYNMOUTH TO COMBE MARTIN DAY - 3

The next morning, I ate a huge breakfast and sipped a cup of tea whilst talking to two fellow walkers. Both had started at Minehead and were doing a chunk of the path. Jess flirted with Kipper the terrier while his mother, Kelly and I discussed the walk so far. I was relieved to hear that she had also found the going tough - I had thought I was the most unfit girl in the world, but it wasn't just me struggling. I had decided to make an early start and so would miss the delights of the cliff railway to Lynton in favour of a hike up the zigzag path that was the alternative route. My fellow walkers had decided to ride the train and so were in no rush. I grabbed a couple of bananas from the communal fruit bowl, said my goodbyes and off we went.

I was aching from head to foot, and took an age to get warmed up. Jess had lost her mojo and was walking as gingerly as I was. She had realised at last that this was her new life - and was not thrilled. We soon regretted the early start as the path went on and on, up and up. I felt out of sorts, grumpy and still full from breakfast, but once on the flat I got into my stride and my mood lifted. At the top of the zigzag path I had an embarrassing few moments when I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to open the latch on a gate. I was completely stumped and had visions of having to wait for a kindly passer-by to open it for me, but eventually the old method of shaking it while shouting obscenities worked and it swung open! Once through the gate, we found ourselves in 'The Valley of Rocks' - an eerie landscape of huge rock formations dwarfing us as we passed by, their names only adding to the atmosphere: Devil's Cheesewring and Jagged Jack, Jack being the local name for the devil. As we walked on, Jess suddenly stiffened and her ears pricked. I squinted ahead and saw the most ridiculous looking goat I had ever seen. I grabbed Jess' collar and hastily put her lead on, not knowing how she would react to this comedic apparition. He was splendid - huge horns sweeping back from his heavy brow, long fringe of hair obscuring his eyes, ears at right angles and what looked like a shaggy jumper coming down to his knees with bare legs beneath. Jess was agog and straining to get nearer, but I held her back as he gave us one more quizzical look and then jumped off the path and onto a tiny ledge on the sheer cliff to our right. We peered over and saw a few other wild goats clinging to an outcrop and looking very much at home. I didn't want Jess to start getting ideas about mountain climbing, so dragged her away.

After the highlight of the goats I felt quite jolly and sauntered



along with a spring in my step. I even stopped for a cup of tea at The Lee Abbey tearooms, served in a proper, elegant china cup as we sat in their garden under the shade of a small tree. Shortly after setting off again and feeling a little gung-ho and fired up with caffeine, I decided to follow a suggested detour around a headland. I regretted it about one second in, but carried on after asking myself "what would the wind-up lady do?" I knew that she would have jumped at the chance to add another mile to a fourteen mile day! We slogged around three fields and then gasped up another never-ending hill, cutting through a forest only to end up two hundred yards further on from the place where we had turned off. I reined in my swearing just in time to see my breakfast compan-



'A Magnificent Beast'

ions - Kelly and Kipper - also emerging from the wood onto the road. We fell in together and marched up the road towards the cliff path. Jess and Kipper were getting on, and it was really nice to have a companion to talk to - although Jess was great company, it was nice to talk to someone experiencing the same struggles as I was - it made the challenge I had set myself seem more manageable somehow. Unlike my previous experience I could keep up, although this was probably down to the fact that Kelly was carrying a huge backpack with everything in it, including dog food. I felt like a fraud - this lady was not only walking the entire coast path but she was also camping! It turned out that she had stayed in the B&B the night before because she couldn't find a campsite, but her plan was to camp every night. I was extremely impressed, and decided there and then to pull my socks up and stop wailing about my hardships - at least I had a hot shower, comfy bed and Masterchef to watch on TV every night!

We passed through more woods, with waterfalls splashing over moss covered rocks and lush looking ferns, and then emerged - after some more steep climbs - onto a narrow path hugging a cliff with very little wriggle room and a sheer drop to our right. Then the inevitable fog turned up and the world went white. I was glad to have company and Kelly was very reassuring, with much more experience than me at this long distance walking lark. She kept saying:

"I'm not worried, everything is fine."

Without her I would have found the fog very unsettling, even in her company, I had to fight to keep down a feeling of claustrophobia as the fog deepened and our world shrunk further still.

Once off the cliffs, we set out over the silent moors. Every now and then, with no warning, a horse or handful of sheep would loom out of the



blanket of white causing us both to scramble to get the leads on the dogs. On and on we tramped through the mist along narrow paths cut deep into the earth, loose stones made the going tough and forced us to keep looking down at our feet. Despite the conditions, we talked amicably as we walked and this really helped to lighten the atmosphere and created a feeling of camaraderie that I hadn't felt since starting the walk.

We had a final hurdle to get over - 'The Great Hangman' - the highest point on the whole coastal path at one thousand and forty three feet. Standing at the bottom, looking up towards the mist-shrouded top, I took a deep breath and mentally prepared myself for the climb. First, we sat by a shallow pebbly brook in the shade of some trees and had a drink and bite to eat, the dogs eagerly lapping from the crystal clear water and then off we went. I gestured to Kelly to go first but she declined and so I pressed on ahead, I took it really slow and steady but the steep terrain began almost immediately and it wasn't long before I was trying to ignore my screaming calves and heaving lungs. I tried to breathe quietly, aware that Kelly was on my heels and embarrassed by my lack of fitness, but this just made things worse and in the end I allowed myself to puff away like a steam train. Up and up we climbed along narrow, rugged paths clinging to the side of the hill, stopping now and then to catch our breaths. Then the steepness relented and it was just a slow, determined slog to the top.

Once there and with endorphins rushing around my body I laughed like a maniac and we shook hands, relieved that we had got over one more hurdle. Now at the top it felt desolate with the cool fog hanging over our heads, a huge stone cairn dominated the summit and we rested in front of it and took a few photos of each other, me grinning like a loon, before setting off once more. As we marched along the top, the path ahead of us cut a trough between deep purple swaths of heather and yellow gorse. The fog finally moved off and we were rewarded with a fantastic view of receding headlands as the sun slowly started to set and we were able to see a clear path down to Combe Martin.

At the bottom of the hill we decided to meet up the next day and walk together, I waved goodbye after thanking her for her company and reassurance and Kelly marched off to find the campsite on the outskirts of the village while I, guiltily, went to my cosy B&B.





A look back before the fog...



'Out Of The Mist'

Once inside I knew I had fallen on my feet - they had a bar! Joy of joys! I had a pint there and then and chatted to the very welcoming owner. He encouraged us to relax and unwind, so I had another pint and the world became a happy place. I didn't have the energy to go out again for something to eat, and had resigned myself to a hungry evening when he offered to cook! I was totally thrilled and readily agreed. Another guest turned up and he and I chatted amicably in the cosy sitting room while we waited for supper. When it arrived we were not disappointed - the owner was a superb cook and I stuffed myself full of chicken filled burritos and spicy guacamole while Jess slumbered at my feet. Replete and relaxed I woke her and we ambled up to our bijou room.

It was slowly dawning on me that the walk in my imagination and its stark reality were poles apart. The plan had been to mooch along, stopping here and there for a spot of painting, fishing and even reading. The reality was that I would wake up, have breakfast, pack and then walk anywhere between twelve and twenty miles. I would then collapse with exhaustion and sleep until the next morning. I had no energy to paint, there was no



time to fish or sit reading and excessive mooching was completely out of the question. However, I was feeling inspired and as I walked and soaked in the fantastic views and places, ideas were tumbling around in my head. These would be scribbled down in one of my many notebooks as I walked along, with a small sketch to help me remember. I decided to simply concentrate on the walking, doing the odd sketch and using my camera to jog my

memory. The painting could wait until I was home.

Once I had decided on this new tactic I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I had simply under appreciated the toll the actual walk would take on my body and mind. Now, freed from the self-imposed extracurricular activities, I began to thrive.



17.2 miles  
40,583 steps  
Grading - Strenuous