

THE CAMARADERIE OF THE HILLS by Martin Collins

Have you ever caught yourself wondering, after yet another rain-sodden trek across the peat-hag ridden desolation that is Drumochter, just what on earth it is that makes you do it?

What precisely could it be that impels you to rise at some ungodly hour; to blearily fumble your way to the kitchen in order to force high carbohydrate substances down your protesting gullet whilst pulling on grotesquely tight, multi-layered and luridly coloured clothing; prior to racing out of your door in an effort to arrive at the Wellmeadow just in time to scramble onto the Pegasus bus for a stomach churning, switchback ride down Glenshee, or along Loch Earn, courtesy of Ronnie, the driver from hell; finally being disgorged onto the roadside into a force 9 gale with horizontal rain and the sound of some lunatic's cheery voice saying 'back in 8 hours, don't be late'?

Could it be the challenge? The opportunity to pit yourself against the extremes of weather and terrain, to reach an isolated summit against all the odds?

Could it be something deeper and more philosophical? An occasion for your spirit to rise above the vicissitudes of your workaday life in order to commune with nature or your God. Well, maybe. For me though, it's the opportunity for something far greater than these – the chance to spend another day in the wonderful company of my mate Graham.

It's fifteen years now since I moved to Scotland from the soft south, and thirteen since my dear friend and neighbour, Ida Brown, knocked at my door one day and said, "We both need to get out more. Let's join the Hillwalking Club".

It seemed a great idea. From my time in the Highlands of Surrey I knew hills to be lovely round green things, on top of which you could park the car and spread out the gingham table cloth, so I readily agreed.

That woman! She never said she was talking about MOUNTAINS!

And so it was that, in the course of the next 18 months, I nearly died – many times. From Carn a' Chlamain (sunstroke) and Beinn a' Ghlo (exhaustion); to Ben Oss (sunstroke and exhaustion) and Slioch (sunstroke, exhaustion and dehydration), I careered across the Scottish landscape. But worst of all was Ben Alder, where I nearly expired from a broken heart after they left me on my own.

Were it not for the ministrations of a guardian angel called Betty, who came to me in my darkest hours with small pieces of easily digestible fruit, a kind voice and a winning smile, I might not be here today.

So did I lurch from one crisis to another, until that fateful day when, in the midst of my despair, I would hear those words that would transform my life and fortune in the hills - "Hallo, I'm Graham."

For some time I had been aware that my struggles were being observed by this handsome, yet somewhat remote, figure although each time I returned his gaze he would lower his eyelids and shyly look away. But from that day it became clear that I had met a man with a mission – and the mission was me!

Graham had decided that he was to teach me 'THE WAYS OF THE WILDERNESS.'

It was as if I had been adopted by a kindly uncle, an older man it's true, but one who's long history of jungle warfare equipped him with the knowledge that I sought.

And so began my education. On every meet Graham would give me practical lessons in survival techniques.

In the Ochils, whilst I relaxed with a well-earned hot drink, he alerted me to the dangers of electrified fencing by putting a hand on my neck whilst simultaneously grabbing a live cable.

On Meall Corranaich, he demonstrated the potential perils of cornices; by hacking at one as I sought to climb beneath its shadow, and then hurling himself over the lip towards me when insufficient snow came down.

On Beinn Alligin he taught me I should take nothing for granted in the hills; by filling my rucksack with rocks on that precarious ridge when I stopped briefly for a rest.

And in the Nevis Gorge, he made me realise that walking in the dark without a head torch could potentially be fatal; by concealing himself behind a rock at that path's narrowest point, and then reaching out to tap me on the shoulders as I walked by; before crouching on all fours and loping off into the night.

How we laughed at that one!

But these were not just practical exercises for me.

Time and again, Graham would expose himself to real risk in order to further my knowledge.

On Sgurr Choinnich Mhor, he demonstrated the esoteric art of climbing with dislocated limbs having swung, ape-like, across the 3-strand wire bridge at Steall.

On Stob Ghabhar, he proved to me that an ice-axe and crampons were not just optional extras, by selflessly plunging through a cornice and showing me that you can't get back up without them.

And, most memorably, in the Ochils he illustrated the potential menace posed by Scotland's fauna, by being the first recorded case of a man being both stalked and then physically attacked by a red grouse.

Just how much can you owe to one man? He was Hero to my Lysander, Holmes to my Watson and Tarzan to my Jane.

And then came that wonderful day when, with all these experiences within me, I journeyed into the wilderness on my own.

On a day of unparalleled beauty, beneath a sky of cobalt blue, I stood triumphant on the craggy summit of Beinn Airigh Charr and surveyed the world. As I took in the glory of my surroundings, a pair of golden eagles swept past me along the ridge towards Slioch. Beneath me a herd of scimitar-horned wild goats picked their way in single file across the lower crags.

All about me the peaks of Letterewe and Torridon soared above a carpet of the purest white cloud. And at that moment I ached for Graham to be standing there beside me. To remember all that we had been through together and all that he meant to me.....

Just one nudge and he would have been off - 1500 feet of thin air before his body hit anything, and no-one any the wiser.

Still, *there will be other meets.*

Eh, Graham? Mate.