

2<sup>nd</sup> prize, prose

## The Story Behind the Story

By David Syme

David Syme taught in Edinburgh before tackling the Munro round on retirement.



### Newspaper Friday 14th November

*At 9 pm on Wednesday two climbers phoned the police to report that the third member of their party had gone missing. Despite a search of the area where he had been last seen they were unable to find him, and so they alerted the rescue services. Extreme weather ruled out the deployment of a helicopter or drone, but a rescue team from Lochaber Mountain Rescue Service with a search dog deployed at midnight. The search was called off in the early hours of yesterday, but further teams were expected to continue the search later in daylight. The missing climber became separated from his companions in the Grey Corries in poor conditions.*

I suppose I was lagging behind Alan and Ken by a few metres. It had been a long, hard day, most of it buffeted by the wind. Now, as dusk was falling, we were trudging along a good path, hoods up, bent forward, Ken following closely behind Alan, our leader. We had two hours to walk before we reached the car, probably at about 8 pm. I stopped to blow my nose. No need to tell the others, it would only take a few seconds. I took off my left glove, tucked it between my knees and pulled out my handkerchief. A gust of wind blew stinging hail into my face, so instinctively I stepped to the right to avoid the worst. To my horror the black glove fell and moved rapidly over the stony ground. I raced after it. It tumbled, stopped briefly, set off again down a long slope. It seemed to be toying with me, pausing, darting forward, swooping over the mossy ground. When it reached a flattish patch of old snow it slid faster. I stopped at the edge of the snow and watched it slide and twist... And then it flew straight onto the side of a large boulder and stopped, pressed against the stone by the wind. I leapt onto the snow, relieved to see the glove motionless, and set off towards the boulder with a long stride. The old snow had an icy crust and was so firm you could skate on it, and it caught me unawares. I lost balance, lurched forward and landed heavily on my knee, then flopped forward onto my chest. I was badly winded but seemed to be otherwise uninjured. I looked up just in time to see the glove detach itself from the boulder and continue its passage downwind.

It took me some time to raise myself to a sitting position. I had broken the fall with my left knee; there was a long tear in my trouser leg, and I noticed that the kneecap had been lacerated by the coarse, icy snow. Ken was carrying a good First Aid kit, so that would be all right. I wrapped my handkerchief round the knee, carefully stood up and looked around. It had turned quite dark, even on the snow, and I saw no sign of Alan and Ken. I shouted twice, but realised that the conditions would make this merely wasted effort.

I stood up cautiously and turned to walk back to the path, but at the first step my left knee buckled and I was shocked to realise that it was seriously damaged. I was in trouble. I sat down and reviewed my situation. Alan had all the navigation kit; GPS, map, compass; Ken carried torch, whistle, First Aid and emergency blanket, and what had I been carrying? Lunch for all three of us. All consumed hours

ago apart from one Snickers bar. I had no trekking poles, no phone, no torch, no whistle or flare. We had not expected one of us to leave the group. I was relying entirely on Alan and Ken to find and rescue me, and they were a long way back up the hill. My knee started throbbing. It felt twice its normal size. If I couldn't put weight on it, could I crawl? No. The pain was excruciating, and I couldn't crawl on one leg only. I decided to pull myself, sitting backwards, down the slope to gain shelter behind the boulder. I was at least out of the wind. I had a mat to sit on, a spare pullover and one of those flimsy, silver survival blankets. I emptied my daysack and, to give it weight, filled it with snow, which I had hacked off with my right heel, then I placed the daysack prominently on top of the boulder and prepared to wait for the others, ready to ask sarcastically "What took you so long?" when they found me.

But they didn't find me. I sat with my back to the boulder, legs extended in front of me. I had wrapped the pullover round the injured knee, but it became hard and numb, and I lost feeling in both feet. After an hour I started shivering, really shivering. Why was my phone back in the car? Because I felt that a day in the hills should be a day without interruption from others. I did not want to answer some mundane call in the grandeur of the mountains. We had a safety phone, of course, or rather Alan had one. What would I have given to have my phone with me now! I ate the Snickers bar, its chocolate coating stiffened by the cold. It helped. I imagined what the others were up to. Why had they not found me yet? It was past midnight, the wind was as strong as ever, so I did not waste energy on shouting. My gloveless hand was my watch hand, so it was easy to keep track of the time. At 2 am I stopped shivering. I gave up the attempt to keep myself warm by rubbing and stamping my good foot. A warm glow crept slowly over my body and I drifted off into sleep, a deep, deep sleep.....

### **Newspaper Saturday 15th November**

*Late on Friday morning the Lochaber Mountain Rescue team recovered the body of a climber from the Grey Corries, believed to be 36 year old James Locke from Edinburgh who went missing on Wednesday. His companions, also from Edinburgh, were at a loss to explain what had happened to their friend. Alan Nash (38) shook his head in disbelief: "One minute he was walking behind us, the next minute he was gone."*