

## The Wendy House

There's always a feeling of relief when the last weekend of October weeps off into oblivion and one can take to the hills in freedom again, free from possible confrontations with the Barbour-clad or the risk of rifle bullets whizzing past one's tooried top. The last is no joke. Twice in my modest lifetime of stravaiging I've had close shaves of this kind. Trouble is, with October away and the last leaves splattered on the ground, the warm weather tends to vanish. The fieldfare flocks blow in and the sun bows out.

But we still head for the hills. There's aye another Munro or Corbett or whatever to encourage event the sanest to test the latest in coloured clothing and fancy footwear. Having a part-time job, no car, and more time than cash in the bank, such swanky weekend raids are the gabbro that dreams are made of. Mine is a schisty reality.

So it was the train, bus and post bus got me up yon glen in the first place. About 10 years ago I reckon for I was still using my big blue Tiso sack, the ultimate in rucksacks designed both to carry plenty and last for ever. Mine eventually disintegrated with the strong canvas rotting from all the sweat salt of twenty years of hiking - or backpacking as the rainbow rambblers now cry it. Yon was a super sack and I've seen me hump a bag of coal into Peem's howff with it. I'd thought of going there this time but wanted to see if I could find a cave shown on the Sank of Alleric. Gordon of Craigdon was supposed to have hidden there after the Forty Five. It might make a useful howff. I knew most of the howffs and bothies in the glens.

There was no way I could afford a tent that could take the uninhibited tantrums of the hills in winter. Once I had a half-share in a Black's Mountain tent but we lost it up by Bachnagairn: went off for a day on the tops (investigating Creag an Dubh Loch actually) and came back to find it gone. We thought some blighter had pinched it till we realised an avalanche had come down and covered everything. What we found in the spring was beyond resuscitation. The only thing I've still got from then is my chipped enamel mug. Made in Taiwan.

Anyway I got off at Moodiebracks and took the stalkers' path up to Balmason and West Dulg. It ends at a ruin which used to be a braw bothy but one of the Aberdeen mob burnt it down, accidental like, when one of those new-fangled gas stoves went off like a spacecraft, stotted off several walls and landed in the hayrack. Now there's just a blacker-than-peat rectangle outlined in roughly-faced granite boulders. I had a piece there before going on for I didn't like the look of the weather. It's aye easy to be wise after events. I should have got back down to Moodiebracks. Big Mac, the keeper, would have let me use the old stable lads' bothy in an emergency, aye and had me in for a crack and a dram by the Rayburn. But hill folks are perverse critters. I hefted my rucksack and headed on up onto Meikle Corram, the patchy heather slipperly from long wetting.

The Meikle Corram is actually a muckle lump, like an inverted Christmas pudding, only not so solid, and high enough that you might well take a compass bearing off it to ensure hitting any desired continuation. By its tall, white cairn all you saw was a horizon circumference about a quarter of a mile off.

A rattle of hail had me cringing in the lee of the cairn. There was a mysterious noise over my head, a slight sizzling sound (like Capella's chippie) that set the saliva glands working but when my hair began to tingle it was then that adrenaline started pumping. I was leaning on the highest object in miles and it was playing with electricity. I scarpered. Last year I'd seen what a lightning strike had done to the trig point on Mount Battock. I didn't fancy spread over the Corram in wee bits: microwaved.

My plan of reaching the Shielin of Doune was abandoned. I went, crabwise, over Lee Knowe to avoid an area where I'd scribble 'bad bogs' on my map. (It was an area that made Kinder a garden) and picked up a path I assumed led down the Wolf Burn to the relative safety of Callander Glen. If the worst came to the worst I could go down to the Lodge.

Unfortunately the black threat had turned to white clag and the clean crispness of hail to dolloped sleeting rain - about the wettest of all wets. We may not have had all the modern literature on wind-chill factors, hypothermia, etc, but kent well-enough how desperate some drenchings could be. Then my path curled round a spur and began to climb. The effort just kept me warm but I couldn't imagine where I was. I may not have been lost but I was certainly mislaid. I tried to shelter the map and make sense of things but it promptly tore in strips and my specs were splashed so I couldn't see anyway. I was shivering. Warmth was essential and, as a roaring fire or a stiff double were not available, the only other heat source mun be self-generated: movement.

I moved, striding back down the path in forced fury, the icy rain splashing into my face and its fingering dampness tickling along every crepitatious possibility. Big Mac, of the Moodiebracks, had a vulgar comment about what happened to you when a normally cosy part grew cold. Despite frantic effort I was chilling all over. My hands, in soggy woolly gloves, had become stiff with the chill. "Down! Down!" the order echoed in my brain.

There was a fork in the path. Coming the other way a mere twist of boulders and heather had masked this and I'd shot off on the upward track but even taking the downward path I was none the wiser as to my true whereabouts. But it didn't matter. It led down. The stabbing cold gave up its assassination attempt. Simple drowning became a more cheerful - and likely - prospect.

A side burn gave me a scare for, thigh deep in its tawny spate, a boulder trundled onto my left foot and held me in teetering immobility. When I eventually tore free I was sent sprawling forward in splashy momentum and landed on my tummy over a boulder on the bank where I was spun round as my legs and feet were dragged downstream. My right arm, up to my oxters, lay in a puddle of water of such clarity that, in my mind, I photographed the dainty roses of sphagnum that lay below my nose. I crawled out, even laughed a bit, which only other hillgoers would probably understand.

Every burn in the hills eventually had to join some big water like the Mark, Tarff, Saughs or Esk with decent Land Rover tracks, farmers or lodges mile-stoning their comforting depths. I just needed to keep on downwards and I'd have to come to something, somewhere, "even if I have to swim for it" As I joked to myself. That such things could well go beyond a joke I knew only too well. Peter Gorrie, from Kirrie, had been drowned in the Water of Dye a year or two back. But I was still in control. It was OK.

After an hour of trudging I came on a wee wood and, what's more, I half recognised it and was sure there had been some howff hidden in its clawing depths. A faint path led off, the gurgling ditch crossed by a greasy sleeper, and twisted on over a ferny bank by some ruins. My spirits rose. It was definitely familiar from a previous visit, years ago no doubt. As soon as I saw the place I remembered. I'd called it a Wendy House then and shouted out the conceit in glad relief now.

That trip doesn't concern this one other than for explaining I'd gone into the wood to get out of the wind and found the miniature cottage. I can only think the Victorian owner of Invercross Castle (the Pullar-Guys if memory serves) had built it for their spoilt children to play in while their elders and beaters got on with the serious business of slaughtering grouse. The bare interior measure about fifteen feet by ten feet with the roof beams rather less than six foot above the once-flagged floor. As there was no door the interior was now carpeted with dry sheep droppings. There was a tiny window, glaze intact, and a hearth with a swee and an old black kettle with the cancer of a rust hole through it. No firewood though which made me sad, not just for my own predicament but for the knowledge that children no longer came to this place. It had the feel of being utterly forgotten, as lifeless as an old song sung into the wind.

Trying not to get things covered in sheep shit I struggled out of my sodden layers and a right struggle it was with numbed fingers and the adhesive quality of the wet clothing. In the end I wobbled scuddy bare on top of a soggy pile of garments, on top of my rucker, goose-pimpled as a gander and flapping my arms round myself to flair some colour back into the flesh. I'd two spare

pullovers and some socks carefully protected in polythene bags so I donned these, with one pullover pulled up my legs like extra-hairy long johns. I put on my underpants to hold the combination together. As the pullovers were navy surplus and my pants white I thought I probably looked like a belted Galloway.

I didn't care what I looked like. I could feel the warmth coming back like a desert sunrise chasing off an African night. Once I'd put the Primus together and held a brew in my tingling hands I wouldn't have swapped my Wendy House for Buckingham Palace. Pity I couldn't manage a fire though.

Supper was packet spaghetti with a fresh onion and some spices along with three thick slices of meat roll from Johnston of Johnshaven and a cup or three of real coffee. There was a conscious smug satisfaction, to be sitting in my treasured bag, toasty-warm and replete, while a rising storm assaulted the trees outside and the burn by the gable changed its voice from alto to bass. It would be a wild night and the morning would have clothed hills and glens in muffling white. There would be a glorious (if tough) hike down the glen - whichever it was - and I'd hitch home, with another good memory to place in store and a tale to tell in the Finella Arms on Thursday night.

When I'd written up my log I snuggle down properly. The candle light glittered off the crystals in the granite walls and the beams cast a fret of Meccano shadows. Slowly my eyes grew heavy. I tried to blow out the candle from where I lay but hadn't enough puff to reach the sill. I swore - and let it be - and pulled the downy warmth of sleeping bag over my head to shut out the light. "Goodnight all!" I muttered.

Whether it was the struggle I'd had that day or over-eating or all that coffee but sleep, when it came, was fitful and as riddled with dreams as there are holes in a Gorgonzola cheese. Like a beetle I crawled in and out these caverns of disharmony. Time and time again I imagined I was back on the tops with the storm taking its way with me. My tent (which I didn't have) had been torn away and I lay in my sleeping bag under the stairs. Logic does not influence dreams, that's for sure, for I may have been under the stars but the blizzard snows were drifting over me, deathly steady and deep, the consolidating snow pressing down, blanket on blanket in weight. I would wake out of claustrophobic nightmare to the comforting snugness of Fairy Down, thank God it was only a dream, and soon drift back into sleep again - and back into the drifting snows of the mind. The dream kept repeating. I even gave it a known place: Craigmahandle, on the Firmouth road, why goodness knows as I'd only gone over that old route (from Tarfside to Dinnet) in glorious May weather.

The repetitive dream became both boring and annoying. I felt I wasn't getting any sleep at all and, try as I might with diversionary thoughts, once I'd drifted off to sleep I'd be back on that far slope with the smothering press of snow on me again till I'd panic and struggle awake feeling as feeble as a newly-released avalanche victim.

I even thought of making a brew but that would probably only hit me in the bladder and lead to having to get out the warm bag for a chilling stand at the door. I cursed the long winter night and returned, yet again, to the prison of my dream.

The weight of the snow on me was unbearable now. I could hardly breathe. My nose itched. I tried to give it a rub but my hands were pinned. The heat was intolerable too however illogical that should have been. I saw myself in a coffin then, with the wrong size of lid so when they began to spade in the soil (only it was snow, not soil) the lid dropped neatly within the sides of the coffin to crush down on my body. I woke screaming.

Or was I awake? I tried to find and use my hanky only I couldn't move either of my arms up. And I was gasping for breath, a desperate panic for I just couldn't tell dream from reality, death from life. I swore something awful and clearly heard myself. I had to be awake then. Or was that part of the dream? I bit my lip. It hurt. I blinked my eyes, slowly, faster, to order. I was awake, surely to

God. Then had I been struck with paralysis? I really couldn't move my arms. They were pinned to my side, quite definitely. I could wiggle my fingers, and my toes it came to that, I could swing my head from side to side, but that was all. For the rest I seemed held in a vice. I'd been embalmed or something. This was madness not dreaming. I began to struggle against the grasping warmth of my bag. I had to get my face out to the air. But I couldn't. Was I drowning then?

Perhaps I did become mad, in brief panic, for with unnatural strength I forced my hands up to my face, the weight went from my chest and I tore open the top of my sleeping bag to gulp in the night air. The air stank. I groped for matches then realised I'd left the candle stump to burn itself out (I'd no torch). I could both hear and feel movement, other movement, not mine. I found the box of matches and struck one with a shaky hand. It flared and spluttered and went out. The third time I succeeded, let the flame really catch and held the match back over my head to see if the Goya-nightmares or Hieronymous Bosch horrors existed in reality as in my dreams. I was met by a cluster of golden orbs, pairs of yellow eyes all round my bed. No need for electricity. My hair stood on end.

My mouth opened to scream but what came out was laughter. Somewhat hysterical laughter. The laughter was relief. The wee house was full of stinking ewes, like myself seeking shelter from the storm.

It was midday when I thanked the farmer who'd given me a lift as far as Kirriemuir. I didn't tell him about the mad night. I didn't tell the folks back home. Nobody in fact, till now. In Kirrie I walked down past a NTS sign saying "Birthplace of J M Barrie" - the author of Peter Pan, of the Lost Boys, of Captain Hook, of the crocodile... It seemed thoroughly appropriate to me as I thought back to my dream night in the Wendy House up in the glen.