

There's A Sheep in My Rucksack

We first heard the sheep some three hours into our ascent of the Buchail Etive Mor, the great crag that broods over the valley of Glencoe. The pair of us were three days into our climbing holiday in the Scottish Highlands. My companion was Brian Mole, known to his friends as "Mr Mole" or "Moley". Indeed, with his pointy face, chubby frame, big strong hands and his cheerfully sensible disposition, he was the very embodiment of Kenneth Graham's loveable rodent.

We had set out that morning cheered by an azure sky whitely dappled with fair-weather clouds. But by noon the clouds had banded together to blot out the sun and had descended the mountain to envelope us in thick grey mist.

We were taking a rest at a comfortable belay high on the face when Moley cocked his head to one side.

"Isn't that a sheep bleating?" he said. We must be near the top. Sounds a bit distressed though."

"So would you be," I said pointing across to the right where, through a sudden rift in the cloud, the creature had come into view. It was stranded on a ledge.

"Must have fallen," I said.

"Fat chance of getting back up from there," said Moley.

Fifty feet further up we reached the top of the crag where we sat down in the tussocky grass for a sandwich and a hot coffee from the rucksack. We were uncomfortably aware of the pitiful bleating rising up to us through the mist. We exchanged a long look. "It will be nearly dark by the time we get back to the village," said Moley. "And the poor bugger could starve or fall off before anyone would bother to slog up all this way."

"OK," I said. "Who is going down?"

You are," said Moley. "You're lighter, I'm stronger. Most of the pulling will have to be done from up here. Besides, you're the better climber," he added grudgingly.

As close as we could judge above the sheep's ledge, we looped a nylon sling with a metal snaplink around a spike of rock. Then we threaded our main climbing rope through the sling and lowered both ends over the edge. I abseiled on the doubled rope down the slab. After about forty feet the easy slope abruptly changed to the vertical. Looking over the edge I saw the sheep some fifteen feet below. I slid down to the ledge which was a good three paces wide and about eight long.

The sheep stopped bleating and stared at me. I stared at the sheep. I approached the animal avoiding any sudden movement. It retreated to the far end of the ledge where it stood with its tail over the abyss. I moved closer. The sheep started to bleat again. I detected a note of panic.

"It's all right, Sheep," I said soothingly. "I'm a mammal just like you."

Suddenly it started to slip, its back feet scrabbling on some loose rock. I dived full length and caught it by the scruff of the neck as it went over the edge. It was an unusual situation to be in: nose to nose with a terrified sheep as its hind quarters dangled over a 500 feet drop. It started thrashing about wildly — its sharp little hoofs opening a cut on my forehead. As the warm liquid trickled into my eyes, I managed to get a grip on one of its horns. With the other hand I reached down to grasp it under the tail. I heaved and heaved. By God, it was heavy. Eventually I managed to roll over sideways ending up with the animal on top of me. Then, by holding a front hoof in each hand and gripping it firmly with my knees, I got on top of it. I unclipped a sling from around my waist, intending to tie its back legs together.

Unfortunately, I was facing the wrong way so I had to do it behind my back while the sheep wriggled about like a stranded fish. Tying its front legs was easier.

"That's got you, you little bugger," I said. "Now for stage two."

I dragged the struggling animal along the ledge to the dangling rope which I passed under its belly and secured with a bowline. Then, cupping my hands, I yelled: "Take her up Moley."

Now Moley is a strong bloke. But it is hard to get a grip on a half-inch nylon rope and overcome the friction that occurs as the rope slides over an edge. And that sheep must have weighed a good forty pounds. Nevertheless, it started upwards in a series of short jerks — all going well until it reached a slight bulge in the rock some ten feet up. There it stuck.

"Let her down a few inches," I yelled. "Then give a sharp pull."

Moley did as I suggested. But, as the sheep jerked upwards, the rope somehow slipped over its legs and lodged around its throat. It started writhing frantically in what looked suspiciously like death throes. Quickly I stretched up and grasped its back legs trying to take the weight off its neck. An unfortunate decision. The sheep, in *extremis*, emptied its bladder onto my upturned face. I quickly ducked — only to get the balance down the neck of my anorak.

"Slack, for God's sake slack," I yelled up to Moley.

He evidently caught the urgency in my voice because the sheep suddenly dropped into my arms, knocking me to the ground where I clung to the animal in a damp and pungent embrace. I wondered what the hell to do next.

Then, from above, the calm voice of reason: "Untie the rope, George"

I did so and was surprised to see it disappear up into the mist. I held the hobbled sheep down with my foot on its neck. I was taking no chances.

Soon a rustling above heralded the return of the rope with Moley's commodious rucksack attached.

"OK, I've got it," I yelled. "What's the plan?"

"Put the sheep in the rucksack," came the reply.

It was a big rucksack. But then it was a big sheep. I squatted astride the sheep's head as I tried to squeeze its tethered hindquarters into the rucksack. It was like trying to get a mother's foot into her baby's sock. But after several cursing, sweating minutes I had squeezed it in up to its hips. I had started to pull the drawstring tight when the sheep decided enough was enough and gave me a painful bite on the left buttock. My last remnants of compassion evaporated.

"I'll fix you, you little sod," I growled — and sat down firmly on the side of its head tying the drawstring as tightly as I could. I stood up holding my backside as I surveyed my handiwork. The arrangement looked decidedly top heavy. I could not see how it would help Moley to ease the sheep's passage over the bulge "What's keeping you, George?" Moley's impatient voice floated down.

"It's OK, Moley, I've got the sheep in the sack and I'm tying it onto the rope."

"No, you silly bugger. *You* tie on and put the rucksack on your back."

It was all right for Moley sitting up there in comfortable safety. I'd like to see him tackle that bulge, even without a sheep on his back.

The only way to don the rucksack was in the sitting position. But standing was something else. The sack, with two thirds of the sheep protruding above my head, was hopelessly top heavy. Then: inspiration! I sat down again, eased out of the straps and took out my Swiss army knife. Maneuvering the blade down past the sheep I was able to cut two slits in the

bottom corners of the rucksack. I then untied its back legs and forced them through the holes. At last, with the animal on my back and securely ensconced up to its chest in the rucksack, I turned to face the rock.

Reaching up for the first handhold I took comfort in the knowledge that the sheep was facing backwards. If I did make it to the top, at least I would get there with my ears intact.

In the end, I scabbled my way inelegantly over the bulge, skinning both knees in the process. Mercifully the sheep kept still, no doubt frozen in terror. At the top I flopped down exhausted while Moley released the now highly vocal animal. We watched it gallop away into the mist. Or, rather, I did. Moley was staring in disbelief at the huge rents in the bottom of his expensive new rucksack.

The next day found us shopping for provisions at the butcher's in Glencoe village. We told him about the episode.

"Och, aye, that's sheep for ye," he said. "No gratitude."

"No gratitude," echoed Moley.

"Let's have a pound of those mutton chops," I said.

Anonymous