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Beauty is Everywhere

It is an undeniable fact that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, no matter in what form. However, the point must be made that the emotional state of the beholder has to be considered, for this can throw aside any ideas of loveliness. As I grow older, my periods of reminiscing happen far too frequently whenever I draw to one side the veil that reveals the distant past. I then can see the stunning beauty of the perpetual snow capped Monte Petrella, the most beautiful woman I had the good fortune to meet, and the lochs, rivers, hills and glens of Scotland and their delightful loneliness. Why is it that I have always found loneliness so pleasurable?

In that soaked in history ancient Italian province of Latina, Monte Petrella towers majestically above the Aurunci mountains situated on the northern banks of the fast-flowing ever-twisting river Garigliano midway between Naples and Rome.

During those two weeks of unforgettable terror, February 8th to the 20th 1944, my section suffered from perpetual rain, snow and gales without a minute of shelter on the rock strewn point 711 on Monte Ornito, so named because of its height in metres above sea level. Within two days my section of nine Guardsmen had been reduced to four in beating off several German attacks. Finally, we forced them to retreat in great panic as we yelled our heads off in a bayonet charge, taking fifteen prisoners. One of the prisoners was slightly wounded in the stomach and very frightened, so I carried him on my back to our 711 starting point. Here he gave me a packet of very wet cigars, then produced a photograph of his wife and two small daughters. Ever since the great upheaval of the Germans at the end of the war, I have always hoped that my prisoner and his family would be united. I gave him a lighted cigarette and a round tin of fifty.

Two years of great comradeships were in tatters as I silently shed tears on this godforsaken, shelterless point 711. I endeavoured quickly to form some sort of order out of all the mayhem around me, especially as I tried to waken up recently killed Guardsmen.

I was appalled, not only at the great loss of many friends, but also at the cries of the wounded and the great number of dead Germans around me. The slaughter was such that shortly afterwards, when lying next to my bren gunner, Joe Stelling, we observed two Germans walking up a mountain track towards us. Joe swung the bren to a better firing position, but before he could fire they entered a small shepherd's stone shelter. "I'll get them when they come out", he whispered. I then laid my hand on his shoulder saying, "For Christ's sake Joe, haven't you seen enough killing today, let them go". He and I often talked about this whenever we met at our annual memorial weekend in London. Joe passed on in the 1990's. I have often wondered if these two lucky Germans lived on to a better life as Joe and I did.

I left those hellish mountains with one Guardsman, then I entered hospital suffering from trench feet and physical exhaustion.

Is it any wonder that I viewed Monte Petrella as something of great beauty amid all the horrors of total warfare and the perpetual gale and snow-swept shelterless mountains. During the long, bitterly cold hours of darkness I longed desperately for daylight and the great beauty of Petrella. Since then, in my many visits to Italy, I have looked at Petrella in great wonderment. May all those who fell near her rest in peace.

Whenever I climb any lonely hill in the Cheviots, I am reminded of that beautiful nun I met on a lonely mountain track between the two villages of Baiano and Quadrella in the mountains east of Naples.

Here at Baiano I was convalescing from my front line actions and the peaceful climbs into the nearby mountains was a balm I so desperately needed and certainly cherished. Her beauty was unquestionable and such that I have never forgotten her. My first sight of her created within me a feeling of great astonishment and I was quite unable to understand whatever she was saying to me. Her smile was not forced but very sincere during the whole of our brief encounter; godliness and purity radiated from her.

I asked her in my then scant knowledge of the Italian language if I could help her in any way. Her reply in a perfect Oxford accent was an added surprise when she asked if I could help her in obtaining some medical supplies and other goods.

When I informed her that my camp at the foot of the mountain could be of some help there was some relief in her face. Our near two miles journey down to the camp proved to me that my companion was quite used to negotiating any steep and uneven track.

The camp medical officer I knew quite well, so I was confident that most of the nuns needs would be met. This he did, as well as giving her other items from the camps stores. I volunteered to carry some of the supplies back up into the mountains, but she insisted that she would carry as much as I did. This was no desk bound Christian, but a hard working sister of mercy.

We stopped to rest on several occasions and while doing so she'd talk about the many places she had visited. I refrained from asking about her past as I reasoned that this would have been an intrusion into her personal life.

We eventually came to a dilapidated church, which I visited in 1996, half hidden in the trees, and was greeted by three elderly nuns. My companion then very quickly organized the carrying of her supplies between she and the three others. She politely declined my offer to carry on helping, pointing out that darkness was not far away and would make my return to the camp hazardous. She was right. Long after darkness had set in, I stumbled with some difficulty back to camp. Before we parted she asked my religious denomination. She blessed me, saying afterwards, 'May your God go with you and remember this, time is a great healer'. With great sadness I watched the nuns as they slowly made their way up into the mountains, then before finally disappearing, my lovely nun turned, waved and was suddenly gone.

Had she not been a servant of God I would have moved heaven and earth for her favours and had I been successful, a cave in these mountains with her by my side would have been Shangri-La. That she devoted such an abundance of love for that she could not see, but only feel, amazed me. Whenever I remember her I silently bless and wish her well. I still possess the small religious picture of Maria SS. di Montevergine she gave me before we parted.

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Whenever I watch a river flowing in its many moods, I am reminded of that mud-stained river Garigliano in Italy. If this river was associated with my mental and physical wounds, then the Scottish rivers, glens, lochs and mountains was a near remedy. Here, the overpowering silence

coupled with the beautiful surrounding landscape is a sanctuary I will never let go until the Archangel himself pries my hold.

Fishing in these peaceful solitudes gave me a false impression that all the world was as content as I, believing that the wild brown trout, salmon and its cousin, the sea trout, enjoyed unfettered freedom in the many waters near me. But, they had many enemies, the worst being mankind. Before I fished for the first time, the lonely Loch na Choire near the quaint fishing village of Aultbea in Wester Ross, I had been warned by the local octogenarian expert that “It's a dour loch mon and hes ti bi fished hard mon”. Fish hard I did for three long sweltering hot days without any success, though I must confess that on several occasions I abandoned the piscatorial arts to climb the nearby Meall a' Choire. From here I could see the magnificent landscape to the East and South, bringing a contentment I would always treasure. To the West shimmered the flat calm Minches with ships of all shapes and sizes plowing their ways in many directions. This stretch of water has been described as the wildest around the British waters. I have seen these violent moods and they are a spectacular sight. Hardly had I made my first cast on the fourth day when my copper coloured lure was taken with a violent thump that set my heart racing. My well and truly hooked fish tried every trick in its book to rid itself of its torment. I then became anxious that all my knots were secure and would hold. Gently reeling in until the weight of the fish was felt brought a further dash for freedom and more heart thumps. After more runs my captive gave up the unequal struggle. Gently I reeled in my exhausted prize to the loch side and into my shaking net.

Laying my flapping three pound brown trout on the loch bank I immediately recognized the great beauty of my first brown trout. The cream belly and the brilliant red spots was a beauty I could not destroy. I was horrified at the thought. Gently I prised the hook from its mouth then slid it back into its watery home. These four days were not wasted however, for I greatly enjoyed the solitude and all the great beauty around me. Wherever you look there is beauty, for the bible tells us, ‘Seek and ye shall find’.