

Sandalium infantis, by Val Quince (Chester U3A)

She sat by his side, holding his hand, watching him carefully and waiting and she remembered...she looked back over the years...it hadn't been a bad life, they'd done so much together, had wonderful times, seen marvellous sights, had fun, laughed together and cried at times. She thought of that last trip they'd done, both of them in their late sixties but still sprightly and fit enough to partake in a fairly strenuous high level trek in one of the more remote and less well trekked valleys of Nepal. That day in particular had been hard...they were up at fifteen thousand feet now and the air was thin, but pure and clean....like breathing in a well chilled Chardonnay one of their party had said. They were on a track contouring along the northern side of the valley; vegetation was sparse, just tussocky grass, the ground strewn by huge boulders, the soil thin and eroded. She'd moved off the track to attend to a call of nature and as she crouched behind a conveniently large rock she saw a small cluster of dark blue flowers. On investigation she was amazed at how exquisitely beautiful the tiny plant was....long strap like grey-green leaves, maybe six inches in length and a strong central stalk with at its top two flowers, hanging together. The colour of the flowers was so intense, so deep a blue she was reminded of the gentians of the Alps but then there was the shape which made her think of the lady's slipper orchid, but then this plant also had a tightly frilled cuff of the palest pearly blue which contrasted so beautifully and then four dark crimson strands which hung from the 'slipper' like tiny laces. Sue was entranced and intrigued....she had a great love of plants and had over the years, during many trips to far flung spots, developed an enthusiasm and quite a knowledge of botany. She very often returned from these trips with a variety of different seeds, collected from plants growing in the wild and remote places in which they'd trekked. This time was to be no exception...within minutes she'd found a similar plant which had already flowered and had a magnificent seed head...'you beauty' she said...'let's see what we can find out about you and maybe you'll even grow for me'.

Over the next few years Sue nurtured the seeds and to her great delight a tiny plant was produced, no flower spike however but she noticed that a small bulblet was growing and finally just the previous Autumn at last she was rewarded by the first blooms...every bit as exquisite as she had remembered from the first sighting. In the meantime she had done some research on the plant and discovered that it had been first found by one of the great Victorian plant hunters in the 1850's, also in a remote valley at high altitude...but in North West China. Reginald Hooker had given it its Latin name *Sandalium Infantis*... for very obvious reasons and hence it's common name of Baby's Shoes. She read that the seeds were highly poisonous and had been used in small doses by Victorian quacks as a curative for all sorts of ailments.

That trek in Nepal had been the last for them both. Shortly after their return Derek had, quite out of the blue, begun to have problems with his balance. Initially he'd pooh-poohed that there was anything wrong but eventually she'd persuaded him to see Dr Ryton their GP and there followed months of tests and hospital visits and more tests and scans and X-rays. Derek had never been a patient man and the few times in his life that he had been unwell had been an irritable and intransigent patient. As his

illness progressed he grew more and more difficult and Sue was often stretched to her limits coping with him. Eventually they were given the news...Derek had Motor Neurone Disease...a progressive wasting illness for which there was no cure and little in the way of medication to help alleviate the distressing symptoms. At the best he could expect another three years of life or it could be as little as nine months, depending on how quickly the illness took hold. For the first few weeks after being told they were in a state of complete shock and on Derek's part denial.....all his life he had been a strong, fit, strapping man, six foot three, well muscled and used to the outdoor life...always active and rarely unwell he just could not come to terms with this awful diagnosis. He grew more and more depressed, slept hardly at all and when awake was prone to violent outbursts of temper, followed by moody silences. Sue struggled to cope with both the dreadful diagnosis and the complete change in Derek's behaviour. Only once did he make any reference to his condition and that was following the news of the very sudden death of a close friend, Chris, who had been a lifelong mate and climbing companion. 'Lucky bugger' Derek had said, 'at least he didn't have to suffer, all over in a flash for him' when they heard that Chris had been swept away by an avalanche in the Andes. There had been a moments silence between them and then Derek had grabbed Sue by the hand and said 'You'll see me right, won't you luv, you'll see me right...when it's time' She'd known what he meant immediately and had nodded her agreement, in too much emotional turmoil to answer him.

The last six months had been a long spiral into a black pit of despair from which there was no respite. Derek's condition had deteriorated very suddenly; now wheelchair bound and with no control over any bodily functions he had managed one day, shortly before his speech went, to say to Sue 'Remember what you promised, remember.....you'll see me right, won't you?' 'Yes, my luv, yes, of course I will'

That lunchtime she'd prepared pureed apple for him...next stage, when his swallow reflex went, was a feeding tube and she knew how much he'd hate that. She found herself putting salt into the pulpy mess and knew that a decision had been made. She'd not given him a drink afterwards as she usually did...he needed to be thirsty for what she had in mind.

Now it was teatime and she'd watched as he laboriously swallowed the liquid through the large straw....thirstily he'd drained every drop; she wondered if he'd registered the bitter taste, but doubted it somehow.

Not long now she thought and checked his wrist for a pulse....she stroked his hair away from his forehead and kissed his cheek.

She lifted her own cup to her lips and took a long swallow...oh, how bitter it was but no matter....draining the cup she grimaced and lay back in her chair. 'Thank you Sandalium Infantis, thank you...you've seen us both right'.