UNTING FOR HAASTIAS . - - - G.M. Bedford

(on her way to the Bot. Soc. gathering at Lincoln last January, Mrs. Bedford digressed into the mountains of Marlborough, and thereby hangs this tale EDH.)

Fifteen years ago I was afflicted with a mania for Haastias, one of the most extraordinary groups of plants in the world, and as with many manias, have been smitten intermittently ever since. Three in the genus, they are aristocrats among the New Zealand alpine plants. Especially was I obsessed by the vegetable sheep, Haastia pulvinaris, a large woolly cushion growing amongst the crags of the high shingle slips of Marlborough, not to be found under 5000 feet and often considerably higher. Being no intrepid mountaineer but prepared to expend considerable effort to see these plants, it was with feverish excitement that I made plans to penetrate their domain. In fact this trip was more in the nature of a pilgrimage, for with the passage of years I had come to regard them with reverence - they seemed so distant and unattainable from the north - and the opportunity did not occur. So when at last we were driving slowly up the bare glacial river valley, already more than 3000 feet above sea level, with the austere mountains rising sharply on either side, iced with snow though in mid January - I was awed and silenced. Far ahead loomed a formidable shingle slip, shadowed and bleak. We forded four streams - mountain streams, milky green from the snows, rushing over boulders. No joy ride those, after the torrential rain three nights previous. Under the dark shingle slip we stopped - this was where we must climb - it looked appalling from below. Slowly we wound our way upwards through the alpine scrub, all intensely interesting to us, finding many beautiful flowering plants amongst the low growth. The tussock petered out. Our breathing became more laboured and ears pounded; the stones became larger, too easily dislodged and more difficult to traverse. The view was breath taking - mountains and a jewel of a lake below, high, sun covered peaks in the distance - an incredibly perfect day after weeks of bad weather. Out on to the scree, just shingle and stones, and we plodded on. We were delighted to find all nine of the special scree plants adapted to grow in this moving terrain. All extraordinary plants, mainly grey in colour like the stones, very easily missed and growing only sparsely.

1. Anistome carnosula was exactly the colour of the stones, with soft yellow flowers embedded deeply within the ball of stiff divided leaves - the plants were five or six inches across.

2. Cotula atrata was quite startling and unexpected in its colouring - glaucous feathery foliage and stiff little button flower heads of bright chocolate brown. None of these plants were large, just a trailing group of leaves and two or three flowers.

3. LOBELIA ROUGHII was a tiny plant among the rocks, like soft dull holly, with often but two leaves. At first I thought they were young Ranunculus haastii. We were fortunate in finding it as it is far from common - neither flower nor seed did we see.

4. Ranunculus haastii - a wonderful plant often with only one succulent grey-green leaf, red edged. We were too late for flowers but found a considerable clump, obviously several plants - and three fat rather prickly seed heads.

5. Wahlenbergia cartilaginea was tinged pale green, a firm little rosette with hoary edged leaves.

6. Epilobium pycnostachyum was mainly bright red leaved and bushy, startling amongst the stones.

7. Notothlaspi rosulatum was an exciting find, darker than the stones, standing up primly above the scree - all small plants we saw, easier to see when looking up the steep shingle slope. A rosette of closely over lapping serrated leaves and a tightly packed head of white flowers above.

8. Poa sclerophylla - a thick little grass completely blending with its habitat.

9. Stellaria roughii grey as the stones, of looser habit than Anistome carnosula and with dull white flowers.

BUT STILL NO HAASTIAS !!!

Further above us was an outcrop of jagged rocks and there I hoped would be the plants we sought. At last I saw it, a large honey-coloured mound amongst the crags, a great felt cushion five feet by three, a marvel to look at and feel. Actually a shrub with a central rootstock, composed of woolly densely packed leaves on much -divided branches, so firmly compressed we could sit on it. I pushed my hand inside, it was warm and damp, though this is an area of low rainfall and the incessant wind always has an edge to it.

Finally amongst different kinds of stones I found Haastia recurva - impossible to see it from any distance, grey, merging into the stone colour, it is a straggling plant, the leaves hairy as if cut from a blanket, a strange fascinating plant. Time did not permit further exploration and I was disappointed not to find Haastia sinclairii, but I was very exhilarated and grateful for the superb and rewarding day we had.