

THE WHITE MOUNTH IN WINTER.

BY ALEXANDER MCKENZIE.

“When ye White Mounth frae snaw is clear,
Ye day o’ doom is drawin’ near”.

IN the days when the mountain chain on the south side of the Dee was familiarly known as “The Mounth”, Lochnagar, even then recognised as the monarch of the range, was peculiarly entitled to the name “White Mounth”—snow naturally resting longest on its summit. Even at the present day, the deer forest which embraces Lochnagar is known as “The White Mounth Forest”.

While Lochnagar is fully appreciated in summer and autumn—as the pages of the Journal bear evidence—and a succession of tourists visits in thousands its river base, and hundreds ascend either by “the Ladder” from Ballater or Glen Callater from Braemar, yet in winter few penetrate the corries of the White Mounth, or climb its snow-clad slopes. Nevertheless, its winter glories appeal to the lover of nature, and will richly reward the climber. The dangers of a winter ascent are more fanciful than real, and even the real will yield to ordinary prudence. As we left Ballater on a beautiful January afternoon, winter had drawn its brush across the land with due regard to altitude. The village itself was snowless; the Coyles of Muick had their little peaks of serpentine and grass almost untouched by the winter months, but Conachraig was not without drapery, while Lochnagar was dazzling in its alpine-arctic garb. Great lines of snow filled the rocky gullies of the eastern corrie, and the Cac Carn Beag overlooked, with shrouded dignity, the strath of the Dee. We lingered on the bridge of Ballater drinking in the beauties of the scene, appreciating them as only imprisoned townsmen, with the liberty of a couple of days, can revel in the stern grandeur of the Highlands. But the sinking sun warned us that if

we wished to enjoy a day-light walk up Glen Muick, we must be jogging, and so with knapsack on back we pushed on to Inschnabobart.

The early morning was clear and crisp, and seemed to invite one to the open to enjoy its bracing qualities. But such invitations are, alas, too often treated like good resolutions, and it was not till eleven o'clock that we stepped off the road on to the pony path at Allnagiubhsaich Lodge. The first halt was made in Clashrathan, at Cameron's Well. The sheltering snow protected the spring, with the result that the temperature of the water was warmer than anticipated, and so reminded us of certain springs which have the reputation of being cold in summer and warm in winter. The Cuidhe Crom now attracted attention, for it began to coquet with a storm on the summit. There seemed to be occasional falls of snow, and soon the prospect was obscured by mist. Anon a glimpse would be obtained as though to lure us upward, but, fair or storm, we had determined to put the White Mounth under foot. A "short cut" was made across Clashrathan, halting again at the Fox Cairn Well. One of our party has had to search under snow for this Well in mid-winter; this January day, however, it was as open and exposed as in July. With the ascent of the Ladder, our first little difficulty began; the path was mostly filled up with snow, here and there concealing little patches of ice. A new course had to be struck, but the top of the plateau was reached with little extra exertion. Sheltered heretofore by the mountain itself, we now, however, found ourselves fully exposed to a blast which, for the remainder of the ascent, demanded continual attention to the maintaining of our equilibrium. The wind blew with vehemence across the deep corrie, at the bottom of which the loch reposed under a covering of ice. There was exceedingly little snow on the wind-swept summit, but treacherous sheets of ice had to be dodged and negotiated with the utmost care. The top was reached only to be immediately left, for prospect there was none, and with the thermometer at 33° there was little inducement to linger at an altitude of nearly four thousand

feet. Concerning the density of the mist and its bewildering effects, it will be sufficient to record that the party, guided by a forester to whom the summit of Lochnagar was as familiar as Fleet Street to a London journalist, unexpectedly found itself almost on the brink of a precipice—another instance of misplaced confidence. Once more under the crest of Cuidhe Crom we were in shelter, observing with a grim satisfaction that the mist had disappeared, leaving the top quite clear. Suddenly Glen Muick was filled with a golden glory, for the uncovered sun seemed to pour down on the glen, filling it with, as it seemed, clouds of fire. Strath Girnock shared in this magnificent display. We reached the road before four o'clock, and although of course the grand light effects had vanished, they had left an impression on us which will not soon be effaced.

Beyond a few deer under the 2000 feet line, there was exceedingly little animal life seen. Several grouse were startled in the heather, while far up the mountain, one or two ptarmigan flew, ghost-like, into the storm, croaking weirdly as they fled.

The following March found us once more in Glen Muick. Despite the exceeding "softness" of the day, we set out for the Cac Carn Beag, following the stereotyped route as far as the foot of the Ladder. Thence climbing the saddle between the Meikle Pap and Cuidhe Crom, we descended towards the head of the loch, with the view of making the ascent by the Black Spout. Walking among the boulders and through soft snow was toilsome enough, and a halt was accordingly made at the "forking" in the Spout. It was while seated there that the party witnessed one of the most interesting incidents that can be seen on a mountain—the fall of an avalanche. The day was now comparatively dry, but the precipices were dripping with water, and one sank at least a foot at every step in the snow. There was a gentle south-westerly breeze, but the corrie sheltered us from the wind, and generally perfect stillness prevailed. The loch was completely covered with ice, rendering the scene more death-like. At times, however, great rumbling noises were heard in the neighbouring gullies as though

heavy express trains were rushing through tunnels; but nothing could be seen. Then there would be utter silence, only to be broken in a similar manner. As the day was young, we lingered at the "forking", and soon the pranks of nature ceased to startle us. But a greater noise than we had yet heard—a noise which is best described as a mixture of the previous sounds with that of artillery added—brought us to our feet in an instant. Barely two hundred yards to the eastward, snow and debris were pouring or rather rushing down a narrow gully with a velocity which seemed to us at least ten times greater than that of the Falls of Muick, which we had observed in the walk up the glen. The gully left, the avalanche spread itself all over the talus at the head of the loch, only the extreme softness of the snow preventing its finding a bed on the loch. It was a magnificent sight; the terrible rapidity with which the gully seemed to vomit the avalanche was most impressive. We had scarcely recovered from the excitement when another avalanche, but on a much smaller scale, came plunging down the Cac Carn Mor branch of the Black Spout. It was unaccompanied by stones. A little of the snow diverged from the line of descent, spent as it reached our halting-place.

Taking these incidents as hints, we resumed the ascent, the angle of which soon rose from 30° to 50°. At the top, where an overhanging snow-cornice had to be cut away, the angle increased to between 70° and 80°. We returned by the top of the corrie, admiring the picturesque appearance of the snow-clad crags, and observing with considerable interest the points where the avalanches had started.

The following morning, we examined the crags with a telescope, and found that at least one half of the snow had disappeared—most probably in a similar manner to what we had witnessed the previous day.