

## DARK LOCHNAGAR.

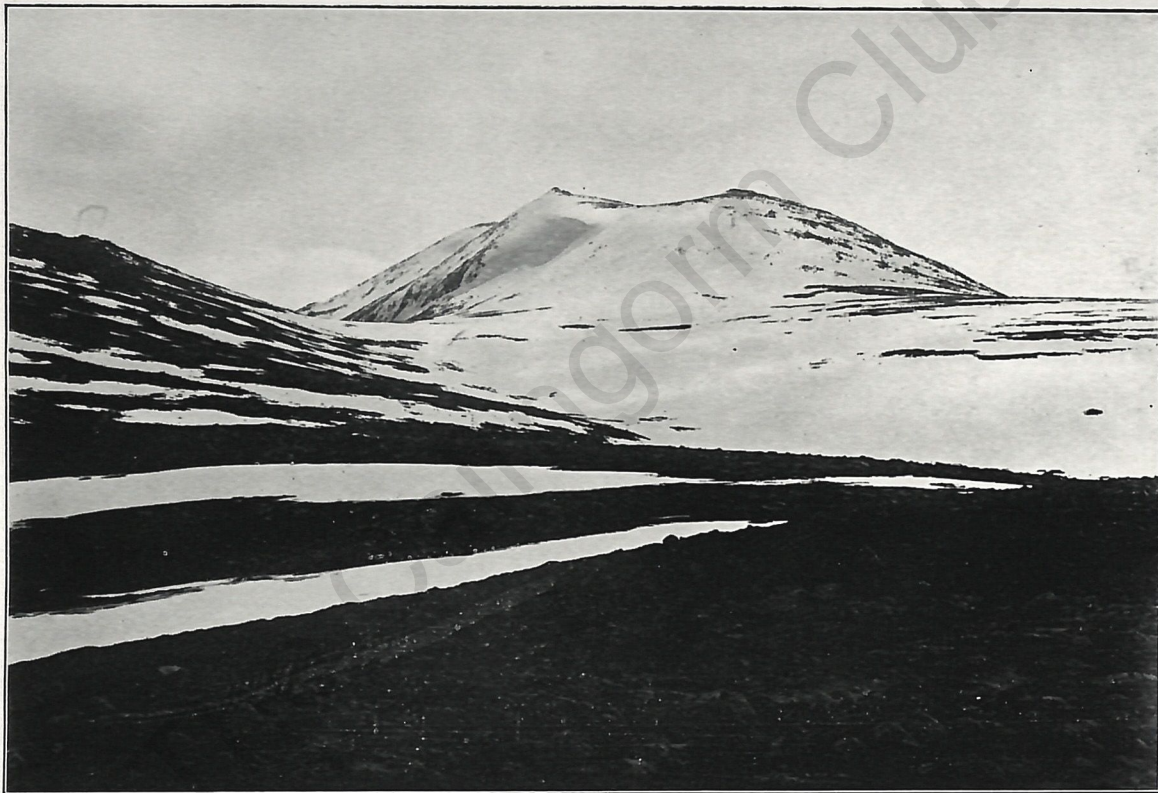
BY SETON GORDON, F.Z.S.

OF all the Scottish hills Lochnagar, 3,786 feet above sea level, was perhaps Byron's favourite. During the earlier years of his storm-tossed career, the poet had his home not many miles from the base of the mountain, and to it his wanderings took him many a time, in fair weather and foul. In his immortal poem "Lochnagar" Byron contrasts the placid English scenery with the wild grandeur of his favourite mountain :

"Away, ye gay landscapes, ye gardens of roses !  
In you let the minions of luxury rove ;  
Restore me the rocks where the snowflake reposes,  
Though still they are sacred to freedom and love.

England ! thy beauties are tame and domestic  
To one who has roved o'er the mountains afar ;  
Oh for the crags that are wild and majestic !  
The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar."

We have ascended Lochnagar at every season of the year—in spring when its dark corries are still deeply shrouded in their mantle of snow; in summer, when only a few sheltered snow wreaths remain at the foot of its lofty precipice; and in autumn when its summit is powdered with the snows of a mountain storm; but we had never penetrated to its summit plateau during the depth of winter, at a season which is, as a rule, noted for its tempests and its fierce squalls of snow and sleet. The day we choose for the expedition breaks in a most auspicious manner. The dawn at this season of the year is late, and it is not until close on nine o'clock that the rising sun lights up the snow-clad hills away to the north-west with a soft glow. Our way leads for some time along the valley of the Royal Dee, but after a time the



*Photo by*

LOCH-NA-GAR FROM THE NORTH.  
A MID-APRIL VIEW.

*Seton Gordon.*

river is left on our right, and we penetrate up through a romantic valley where a mountain torrent hurries to meet the parent river. On the banks of the stream countless birches sigh softly in the wind, and we pass a rough stone which marks—it is said—the spot where half-a-dozen of the clan Gordon were treacherously done to death by a foeman. Up to a height of 1,400 feet above sea level a good road leads up the Glen, but here we strike off, and follow a mountain track which follows the Allt-na-giubhsach (the burn of the fir tree). The sun is shining warmly on the hillside, and the ground is crisp with frost, but the season has been an exceptionally open one, and the heather on the hillside is still fresh and green. Though close on mid-day, the sun scarce tops the mountains which rise abruptly on either side of the glen, but the air is wonderfully clear and the hills look at their best. Every stone in the burn is thickly encrusted with ice, and now and again we pass enormous icicles, marking the sites of diminutive waterfalls which are fast in the grip of the frost.

Until we reach a height of 2,000 feet, not a vestige of snow is seen, but at this point a large drift lies across the path. It is now frozen hard, and on its surface are seen the footmarks of deer. A fox, too, has been in the vicinity, evidently in search of grouse—for the head of the burn is a favourite resort of these birds. A flock of Meadow Pipits are met with here, and their presence at this height shows clearly how remarkably mild the winter has been. Soon we reach the watershed between Dee and Muich, and here a magnificent view of the Cairngorm mountains is obtained. Though on Lochnagar the sun is still shining brightly, heavy clouds are resting on the summits of these Northern hills, and a piercing wind out of the north-west comes sweeping across the valley of the Dee from their snowy corries. At the height of slightly over 2,000 feet we pass the ruins of what in the older days was probably a watcher's bothy or smuggler's stronghold, but now nothing remains save the bare foundations, though numerous raspberry plants are still growing around the ruins. Due north of us, across the valley of the Dee, is a

somewhat interesting hill known as the Brown Cow. On the slopes of this hill an immense wreath of snow is formed during the winter and remains on the hillside until well on into the summer. Appropriately enough, the snow field is known to the natives as "the brown cow's white calf," and is a conspicuous landmark.

At a height of just under 3,000 feet, we hear the first ptarmigan. He is some distance away, and his whereabouts can only be surmised by his weird croaking call note. A little further on we flush a covey of these birds and they fly off down wind at lightning speed. As they pass overhead we remark on the wonderful purity of their plumage, which is spotlessly white, saving for a few of their tail feathers, these latter standing out in marked contrast. True children of the mist are the snowy ptarmigan. When the storms of winter sweep wildly over the mountains and all other bird life has sought more sheltered quarters, the ptarmigan are left in undisputed possession of their mountain tops, and seem to find a stern pleasure in battling with the snow and wind. As we gain an extensive table-land at a height of close on 3,500 feet, we put up a flock of snow bunting—hardy dwellers of the mountains who nest in more northern altitudes than ours, and the majority of whom pass the winter only in these islands. Unlike the ptarmigan, however, they are forced to descend to the lower grounds on the advent of a heavy storm.

From the plateau we have a magnificent view of the Loch of Lochnagar nestling in the corrie a full 1,000 ft. beneath us. The dark waters are thickly coated with ice, on the surface of which are a number of gigantic cracks extending in all directions. Evidently the waters of the loch were, at the time when they froze, at a higher level than they are at present and the ice has partially collapsed. The loch is almost entirely surrounded by precipices, and though the plateau where we are standing is quite free of snow, an extensive cornice overhangs the precipice on every side, and deep wreaths have been piled up amongst the rocks beneath us. A thin mist has now descended on the summit, though to windward the weather

has become much clearer, and suddenly through the mist the dark form of a golden eagle is seen battling with the gale. At times when a fierce gust of wind strikes him, he rises perpendicularly many yards into the air and as suddenly shoots down again like an arrow. He appears to revel in the gale and soon disappears into the mist, not, however, before he has caused great uneasiness—even consternation—among the ptarmigan in the neighbourhood. Though to the north-west the weather is dark and somewhat threatening, the view to the south is wonderfully clear, and hill upon hill in eastern Perthshire and Fifeshire stand out with great distinctness. To our east—some 50 miles down the valley of the Dee—we imagine we see the faint outline of the North Sea, but it is in the north-west that the view is the grandest. Here are situated the Cairngorm group of mountains—giant hills, most of them over 4,000 feet high—and though Lochnagar carries comparatively little snow, the Cairngorms are deeply covered. On these the sun—now low on the horizon—is shining with beautiful effect, lighting up their snowy slopes with a soft pink light, and even penetrating at times to their mist-capped summits.

After reaching a height of some 3,400 feet, the path leads for a considerable distance along a plateau skirting the precipices, and it is at the western extremity of this plateau that we enter the mist. All around us the ptarmigan are croaking, and we stalk and successfully photograph a pair as they run across an extensive snow field. A mountain hare in a coat of whiteness rivalling the snow suddenly darts out from a sheltering stone at our feet, and scampers off at top speed, being soon lost in the mist. Though a cloud is shrouding the hill, yet the mist is remarkably thin, and overhead the sky is clearly seen through it, while the sun's rays penetrate and impart a rosy tinge to the cloud. The mountain boasts of two summit cairns, but the one furthest to the north is the higher. Before gaining this, we pass close to the edge of the precipice, and look down into the swirling mist beneath us. Very grand do the rocks appear in the

uncertain light, for at this altitude the ground is covered deep in snow, and the black outlines of the cliffs stand out conspicuously against the surrounding whiteness. On every rock and stone the most wonderful crystals of snow have formed. They look for all the world like living plants, growing at every angle, but it is chiefly to the north that they face.

We remain at the top only a very few minutes, but during our stay the clouds suddenly roll away, and the view obtained is exceedingly fine. It lasts for only a few seconds, however, and then once again the mountain is mist-capped. On the sheltered side of the summit cairn, we discover the hollow where a mountain hare has passed the night; one would imagine that the quarters were somewhat exposed for the time of year, but with her thick coat, the white hare is almost impervious to the cold. As we emerge from the mist, a few hundred feet below the summit we see the form of an eagle sharply defined against the eastern sky. He is sailing in spirals, and suddenly shoots earthward at great speed. Without touching the ground, however, he rises almost as rapidly as he "stooped." A passing cloud hides him for a moment, and then he is seen to be making his way along the precipice directly towards us. We remain motionless, and the king of birds passes not many yards from where we lie concealed, scanning with his proud eye the corries far beneath him. The sun now is fast sinking in the south-west, and immediately opposite—in the north-eastern sky—its rays, striking on the ice particles in the atmosphere, form the faint outlines of a rainbow. Our descent is rendered somewhat precarious by the amount of ice on the hill, and going is necessarily slow. As we reach the low grounds the western sky is a deep turquoise blue, and in it numerous fleecy clouds stand out a brilliant crimson, while to the eastward the mountains catch the sunset, and are bathed in its soft light. On a prominent ridge to the west the dark forms of three stags stand out sharply against the evening sky, and the murmur of the burn is the only sound to break the stillness of this wonderful winter night.



*Photo by*

THE WESTERN SOURCE OF THE MUICH.  
THE DUBH LOCH (HALF-FROZEN) IN THE BACKGROUND.

*Seton Gordon.*