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LOCHNAGAR IN MID-DECEMBER.

BY CHARLES DAVIDSON, M.A.

The sedge is withered from the lake
And no birds sing.

AUTUMN had gone out in sandal-footed brown, and Winter in his snowy mantle tarried long in coming. So one day, a week or so before the winter solstice, four of us, with no idea of scaling dizzy heights or wriggling up Black Spouts by means of ropes and ice-axes, or surmounting *cols* and *arêtes*, etc., set out from Aberdeen to enjoy the air of the mountain-top of Lochnagar. Somewhat yawnful, the little band—philosopher, Don Quixote, psychologist, and one youthful ardent, restless sprite ready to set the world aright like some bright Alcibiades back-chatting Socrates—set out from Aberdeen in the gray dawn. Each sat in his own corner, hoping for silence, and gazed out on the landscape gradually unfolding itself as the train sped on. Grays and browns prevailed, and faded yellows with faint purplings on the birks, and on these and on the larches could one with eye of faith foretell that soon the fairy prince would kiss their sleeping charms into vivid life. The Moor of Dinnet, sere and russet in the first pale rays of the rising sun, recalled the purple glories of three months ago, and from here to Ballater the wan sun lit up the hill-tops with a faint radiance, frail, ephemeral and ghostly, unreal.

Back to the realities, however, in Ballater. The harpies of that little town charged us a shilling a

pound for apples, threepence each for a banana and other things "confeering." But being Peter Pans, or Peter Simples, with the exception of Alcibiades, who wanted to put the natives right in the elements of political economy, we paid our pence and entered our fiery chariot *en route* for Altnaguisach. (Pardon me, you Celtic scholars, but I prefer to spell it so). And up the road we sped, meeting none of the kindly race of men, and not a note of any bird did we hear. Where was the fluty note of the cheery oystercatcher and where the wallochin' teuchat? The hillsides, where not covered with the purple birch, or the larch or fir, were yellow with what a farmer might call a rig of barley or of corn; it was but withered grass. Silence everywhere.

Dismissing our car, we start the longish ascent along the little mountain stream. Mosses and lichens abound on velvet couches, emerald green and gray, beautiful to the microscopic eye. And all the way up to the summit it was this vivid green life in mosses and lichens that caught the eye. Death in winter? Not at all. The promise of life everywhere. And our thoughts flashed over to the Emerald Isle . . . Up to the top we struggled by the Ladder, and pausing at the well we could not help maligning the summer climbers who left behind them their sandwich and chocolate papers. Should we commend to them the lesson which Lord Mount-Edgumbe inculcated in the people of Plymouth several years ago? Annoyed extremely by those who had the free entry to his grounds carving their initials, etc., on his trees, he set up a huge blackboard at the entrance with words painted on it to this effect:—"Would those people who want to carve their names on my trees please do so on this blackboard instead?" What was remarkable on the way up was the rich background of brown and gray and slate against which the white mountain hare and the ptarmigan in winter dress stood out in striking contrast. The snow-buntings in semi-winter garb had a much lower visibility. This was our

first sight of life since we left Ballater, for not a soul had we met on the way. As we neared the top a furious gale developed, blowing right in our teeth. So strong was it that when we got to the plateau on the summit we had to lean towards it.

I do not know the names of the two protruding crags on the top, for I am only an amateur in mountaineering, but when we came on to the flat field area where are all the great slabs of what seemed primeval chaos we came on one big block where there were deep cup markings, five or six in number. They were in a fan-shape. Alcibiades at once decided they were prehistoric markings, and talked of the stone of sacrifice. Were they like Bill Stumps, his mark? The view from the top was superb. We saw the murky haze denoting Aberdeen and all down to the east, but on the other sides there was a shroud of mist which began to gather in upon us and restrict the view. Looking down to the Loch, however, everything, as at Coruisk, was wild and frowning, the gargoyles at the beginning of the corries grinning as if delighted to hurl men to death down to the black waters below. Dark Lochnagar. . . . Hundreds of snow-buntings, flying in flocks from here to there, were everywhere.

Fearing to be caught in the mist, we hurried down, but on the way we sat in the shelter of a big boulder to smoke a pipe. Having left the buntings on the higher ground we watched coveys of ptarmigan in their snowy winter plumage wheeling and scurrying before us. Poor birds! instead of being protected by their white coloration, they were outstanding targets for their natural enemies.

In our shelter we asked ourselves why the ptarmigan were wheeling round in such restless circles in coveys of five, ten, or twenty. None could supply an answer. Suddenly from the fog-bank on the right appeared a majestic figure planing down with not a movement of his wings. It was a golden eagle. And this was a golden day, a mid-winter day stolen from summer.