

ON BEN MUICH DHUI AT CHRISTMAS.

SUNSHINE AND SNOW AND A GALE.

BY ROBERT CLARKE.

THERE is to your true hill-lover an extra fascination about the mountains in mid-winter: and so the Christmas week-end of 1922 again found the present writer located at Luibeg, at the Deeside end of "the Lairig," as the guest of his old friends, Mr. "Sandy" McDonald and Mrs. McDonald. It was my second sojourn with them within the twelve months, for on the first day of that year I had reached their home after a strenuous journey of over eleven hours through the famous pass from Aviemore, the passage during the last three hours being accomplished—if that word can be used to describe what was practically a prolonged flounder!—in pitchy darkness.\* On this occasion, the more orthodox route up Deeside was selected, as more suitable for a winter day, and I reached Luibeg on the Saturday evening, after a ten-mile walk from Braemar, just as the last gleams of daylight were fading from an almost cloudless sky.

The evening's promise was amply fulfilled next day. Sunday dawned gloriously among the Cairngorms. The snow-covered hill tops all around were catching the early beams of sunrise and glistening grandly, and everything pointed to it developing into a perfect hill day. My heart's desire for many years had been to climb Ben Muich Dhui actually in winter, and at last the opportunity seemed to have arrived. We had sat up late the previous night feasting and talking, and it was

\* See "Midwinter in the Lùirig Dhrù," *C.C.J.*, x, 196-203.

the shocking hour of 10 a.m. ere a start was made for the hill. "Sandy"—wise man!—set his face sternly against joining the expedition, but I had as companion Donald, his youngest born, a lad of only 16, but a true son of the mountains and a splendid climber. It was a sheer physical delight to be abroad and inhale the diamond-clear air. A slight over-night frost had transformed every sprig of heather and blade of grass into a gleaming cluster of jewels. The Luibeg burn prattled pleasantly in the hollow at almost summer level—a sure sign that on the heights winter held full sway. The bright sunlight lit up the foliage of the pines in the glen, and their boles appeared almost on fire. From every other knoll the grouse were calling merrily, and, but for one thing, one might easily have imagined it a fine August morning. This thing, however, most effectually dispelled the illusion. One had only to lift one's eyes aloft to realise what season it was. Carn Crom, on the right of the glen, and Feith na Sgor, on the left, were snow-clad half way down their sides, while the greater eminences of Carn a' Mhaim and Ben Bhrotain, dominating the glen to the west, were shimmering masses of silver. The steep cliffs on the latter which drop almost sheer into Glen Geusachan were standing out black and awe-inspiring against their snowy background. It was a noble picture, and we looked on it with delight as we made our way up the glen.

The over-night frost had firmed up the path at its soft parts, and we made splendid progress. At "the Sands," where the glen sweeps round to the north, we got our first view of "the Ben." It presented a grand spectacle. Apart from the precipitous cliffs which overhang Lochan Uaine, not a black spot was visible above the 2,000 feet level, and with the glass one could see that on its higher parts the snow was lying to a considerable depth. Less than another half-hour's walk brought us to the foot of the Sron Riach, the long, steep nose, broken up by several "steps" or terraces, by which the mountain is ascended from Glen Luibeg. Just before reaching this

point two herds of deer were seen. The first, seven or eight in number, betook themselves leisurely up the slopes of Carn Crom and crossed what is known among stalkers as the Dining Room Pass into Glen Derry. The other, fifteen strong, stags and hinds, bounded up the left hand glen at the foot of the Sron where the burns fork, and scampered up the steep snow on Carn a' Mhaim. This had apparently not been to their liking, for some half-hour later they appeared on the ridge 200 or 300 feet above us. As they stood a minute or two silhouetted against the sunlit snow they presented a lovely picture. Glen Derry had apparently attractions for them too, for they disappeared over the Derry Cairngorm ridge in an incredibly short time.

Though I had some misgivings as to the condition of the snow on the higher portions of the mountain, we tackled the ascent in fine spirits. Keeping the ridge for a start, we were soon in the snow. At first it was only a few inches deep, and, though it gave a little to the weight, it was quite dry, and we gradually, if slowly, ploughed our way upward. As we approached the first of the breaks in the ridge we were suddenly confronted with a new and distinctly unwelcome factor. In our walk up the glen hardly a breath of wind was stirring, so that it was with something of a shock that at the point mentioned we encountered a strong icy blast from the north-west, which swooped down upon us over the col that joins Carn a' Mhaim to Ben Muich Dhui. It was none of your passing gusts, but a very business-like blast which apparently intended to carry through its mission most thoroughly, and I can bear first-hand testimony that it succeeded! We were loath to leave the ridge, where the snow was firmer and not so deep, but there was no disputing with the intruder, and we had perforce to betake us to its lee side, where there was comparative shelter. This was, however, dearly bought, for the snow here was much deeper and softer, and it was trying work making our way through it. Here and there a little piece of a yard or two, frozen hard, would be encountered, and we

would begin to hope that we had at last reached the long-expected harder snow. This hope was always dashed, however, and we had just to set-to anew on our upward way. By slow and toilsome stages we had climbed to about the 3600 feet level, and in the shelter of a convenient boulder we rested for a time and surveyed the glorious view that had been gradually developing.

The sun was still shining as brightly as ever, and only here and there did a white cloud appear to lend variety to the sky's otherwise unsullied blue. It was for the most part a white world that met the eye in every direction, with occasional exquisite splashes of brown and green where the moorland and the pines in the surrounding glens and low country were visible. Looking eastward just across the valley the fine line of the Derry Cairngorm ridge made a beautiful foreground, with the great sweep of the Sput Dearg cliffs meeting it grandly at the head of Glen Luibeg. In the gullies of these cliffs the newly-fallen snow was lying to a considerable depth, and the tender blues of the shadows which the strong sunlight cast was a thing of indescribable beauty. Beyond Corrie Etchachan the fine shape of Ben Mheadhoin reared itself, the rough contour of its rocky tors softened by their deep coating of snow. Farther to the right Ben Chaorruinn and the mighty mass of Benabournd flashed grandly at intervals as a cloud came and went across the sun while we gazed. Lochnagar and the White Mounth were fully in the sunlight, and over Ben Bhreac the circle of hills in Glen Shee, beginning with Glas Maol and ending with the Ben Uarns at the head of Glen Ey, made a picture of surpassing loveliness. Further to the south Ben-y-Gloe and Ben Dearg were easily picked up, and the graceful cone of Schichallion showed that it had likewise shared in the snowy favours. Many far-off hills to the south and south-west were also clearly seen, but the softening effects of the snow on their contours made it impossible to identify them with certainty. From where we stood the distant view to the west was not extensive, for, in addition to several cloud

masses that had begun to put in an appearance, the immense bulk and greater height of Cairn Toul across Glen Dee effectively blocked the prospect. This, however, was more than compensated for by the grand spectacle which that mountain itself presented. A cloud rested on its brow, hiding the actual summit, but its mighty corries shone gloriously in their winter garb, and its massive and Alpine-like grandeur was emphasised by the softening effects of the snow on several of its neighbours. It had worthy companions in the Devil's Point, with its grim and forbidding precipices on the left, and the gigantic cliffs of the Garchory on the right. In the great corrie under the Angel's Peak the depth of blue shadow was intense, and the effect was as though the whole corrie was lit up by phosphorescence—a truly wonderful sight. The view to the north and north-west was, of course, hidden by the mass of Ben Muich Dhui itself. It was indeed a noble prospect, and one upon the like of which for beauty and grandeur I had never before been privileged to gaze. One was really not concerned about identifying individual hills. It was the general æsthetic effect of the scene that mattered, and this was thrilling in a very high degree.

Leaving the shelter of our boulder we once more took our upward way. In a short distance we were, willy-nilly, once again forced on to the open ridge, the ground sloping away very sharply on the right towards the deep basin in which Lochan Uaine lies. Fortunately, there was not much of this exposed part to be negotiated; and, gaining the almost level terrace overlooking the loch, we raced towards the foot of the last steep ascent that leads to the top of the Sput Dearg cliffs and so to the summit plateau. Though we were slightly sheltered here in the "lythe" of the hill there was no mistaking the tremendous force and icy keenness of the blast, which at this altitude was enjoying an unchecked course over every snow-field between us and the Atlantic. The place was most certainly one for an overcoat—in fact, for several overcoats—and my youthful companion had

none. Disdaining the advice of his elders, he had left his at home, and though he never uttered a syllable of complaint he must—in the language of the Sheriff Court reporter—have felt his position keenly!

I had hoped to find the snow about this level, swept as it was by such a frosty wind, somewhat firmer, but discovered that the previous twenty-four hours' heavy rain in the low country had here fallen as the finest of snow, on which the frost had not as yet had time to exert its hardening powers. An attempt on the coating that covered the great boulder-field close to the cliffs at once showed that the top was not to be gained by that route. A slight frozen crust gave way under one's weight, and one reached the boulders after penetrating about eighteen inches of dry but powdery snow. These boulders were old acquaintances of mine in their summer-time nakedness, for in past years I had jeopardised more than one friendship by insisting that over them—or by way of their many crevices and caverns!—lay the only proper and direct route to and from the top, even though on their western edge, a bare hundred yards off, lies a nice grassy corrie, with a stag-track in it, up and down which it is the easiest possible thing in the world to make one's way! At anyrate my boulder-route had no charms for me to-day, and so we bore round to the aforesaid corrie, to find it full of snow without even a crust on it. As there was some little shelter from the wind here, we at once struck up it. The snow was deeper than any we had yet tackled, and as the angle was very acute, the work was exceedingly toilsome. After struggling upwards for about 200 feet and finding no improvement, a halt was called and a council of war held. There was still about 300 feet of actual climbing in our corrie ere the plateau would be gained, and another good mile in an upward grade, against the hurricane and across the snowy wastes of the summit, before the cairn and the north view could be reached. It did not take us long to make up our minds, and, like wise men, we decided that the extra effort and the

exposure were not worth it. We had certainly not "bagged" our peak—my companion had already done that more than once in his brief mountaineering career, and my own tale of ascents must be getting in the neighbourhood of the three figures—but we had "bagged" a very grand view—such a view as probably at least one of us will never look on again—and we were satisfied.

It was now 1 p.m., and we had been climbing in the snow for about two hours. As a result a very healthy appetite began to assert itself; and, with a final look round the glistening snow-world, we started down the corrie, which has a grand sweep of fully 1,500 feet down to Glen Carn a' Mhaim. With the snow in slightly harder condition than we found it, it would, I should say, prove a grand ski-run for experts, and I present it with all deference to those members of the Club who indulge in that pastime! Even without ski we descended it in great style, though care had to be exercised in dealing with several small semi-frozen streams that join the Allt Carn a' Mhaim, whose headwaters take their rise high up in the corrie. That burn itself, which flows in a small hollow, was completely covered with snow, and only came into view at the level of the glen, about the 2,500 feet line. Long ere that was reached there was a very marked diminution in the strength of the wind, and, incredible as it may sound, hardly a zephyr was stirring for the last few hundred feet of the descent. This mighty transformation was effected by the col between Carn a' Mhaim and Ben Muich Dhui, which acted as a perfect wind-shield. We were still well above the snow-line, and the glen-floor was laid with a firm and dry white carpet. Selecting a bare spot beside a boulder, we discussed a delightful lunch of cranberry jam sandwiches and a drink from the flask (no: you're wrong—'twas but a tea-filled thermos!) From the steep, snow-covered slopes of the Sron Riach on our left and Carn a' Mhaim on our right several flocks of ptarmigan—white-plumaged as the snow itself—croaked their respects, while a good

way up the latter mountain, at about the 2,700 feet line, a pair of grouse announced that they were in good health. Grouse at such a snow-covered height must, I should think, be very unusual. Their presence there was probably explained by their having come upon a small bit of bare heather not visible to us, which the deer had scraped clear of snow in their search for food.

From where we sat a delightful view to the south and south-east was had, a curious effect being produced by the presence in the middle of it of a smoky brown horizontal wisp of cloud which divided it sharply into two. Below the cloud was stretched the brown of the moorland and the green of the pines in the far-away glens, while above it the white peak of many a distant hill shone out, the top of the picture being finished off by the lovely blue of the sky. There was still lots of daylight to spare, and, still in the finest of weather, we sauntered slowly back to the starting-place of our ascent, and thence down the glen. Just where it turns to the east, and where the footbridge that carries the *Làirig Dhrù* path over the Luibeg comes into view, a flock of snow buntings swept past us down country from the solitudes of Glen Dee—a sure indication that winter had set in in earnest in their seasonal haunts on the heights. Luibeg was reached just as the sun was setting. It was much too early to go indoors, and my host and I strolled for an hour among the grand pines around and beyond Derry Lodge. The low winter sunset was not visible from here, but the clouds to the south were reflecting its dying glories in varying tints of scarlet. Gradually the light began to wane, and the trees and the moorland and the hills themselves took on the sombre and mysterious shades that come with the twilight. Save for a distant sleepy good-night call of the grouse to his mate, and the gentle ripple of the Derry over its pebbly bed, not a sound broke the stillness. One could almost “hear the great heart of Nature beat.” A solitary star glittered like a jewel over the snowy crest of Ben Bhrotain, soon the

silver crescent moon uprose behind Ben Bhreac, and the sweet peace of a perfect winter evening descended like a benison upon the glen.

In keeping with the season, we feasted right royally that night. Christmas fare in various forms figured on the well-laden dinner table; and the fruits of the earth and the products of the confectioner's art—gifts of distant friends to my host and hostess—were there in abundance. Then chairs were drawn round the fire of blazing pine logs, and for hours we talked the pleasant, intimate, cheery talk that flows effortless between friends, "the hill" naturally forming an oft-recurring topic. For the delectation of the visitor a "talking machine" of the early period was likewise brought forth, and we were regaled with the love and other ditties that acquired high favour in the "halls" a quarter of a century ago. How many-sided is the mind of man, and how responsive to its immediate environment and "atmosphere"! I verily believe I derived almost as much pleasure from the amorous banalities of Miss Florrie Forde and her contemporaries issuing from that time-worn phonograph at Luibeg as has been mine listening in rapture to a great artist pouring forth her soul in the glorious love-music of "Tristan" amid all the pomp and circumstance of Covent Garden itself! It was late ere we parted for the night; and I went to rest in the serene conviction that nowhere in all the land had a happier Christmas Eve been spent than by my unworthy self in that lone sheiling so far removed from other human habitation, with only the wild things of the mountain-side as neighbours, and watched over by the stars and the snow and the everlasting hills.