

BALLOCHBUIE IN WINTER.

By JAMES McCoss.

The solid earth whereon we tread
In tracts of fluent heat began,
And grew to seeming—random forms,
The seeming prey of cyclic storms.

THE first morning of January, 1928, was clear and calm with 12 degrees of frost, and the snowy Cairngorms were flushed with a beautiful rose colour, which reflected a ruddy glare on dark objects.

It is now nearing the close of this short winter's day, and these hills, most of them, quite inaccessible under prevailing conditions reveal their far-flung snow-slopes in a pale lifeless and sullen hue, suggesting that the time is close at hand for shelter before one is overtaken by the approaching 15 hours of darkness and probable further fall in temperature.

We have descended from Cac Carn Beag, and our clothing is a mass of ice, as we have been battered with drift carried by a merciless south-west wind. At the wide saddle between Meall Coire na Saobhaidhe and Cnapan Nathraichean where we stand there is no tumultuous surge between moss-held banks, the streams are silent and the lochans are asleep, the tufted grass is far below the snow, and there is not a single sign of life, even the hard croak of the ptarmigan is not heard, and winter holds complete mastery at the col. The rocks are covered with an inch of ice, and the powdery snow lying above the original snow-cap is

packed hard by the wind in places. This old snow-mantle having thawed and frozen alternately bears one's weight and walking is delightful where it lies bare.

Amidst those glorious surroundings my companion and I headed for the small lochan at the source of the Ballochbuie Burn. In the corrie we are sheltered from the wind, and an impressive silence reigns. There is no soundlessness like it. Over the top of Sleac Gorm (as the slabs of Cnapan Nathraichean are called) snow-banners are streaming, which tell of the blizzard still in progress. Sleac Gorm itself is singularly clear, glittering, and silent, and seems quite indifferent to the fury of the storm bursting on the Blackshiel side of the hill.

Steep snow-powdered rocks are always most attractive, and how strong and massive they seem to little humans passing below. Surely, if beauty be an object of worship, those glorious hills with rounded shoulders of the purest white are well-calculated to excite sentiment of adoration. One wonders if the fairies are in this silent corrie, or perhaps the spirits of those who loved the hills, and have gone to the other side are watching us as we flounder through the deep snow. Who can tell? The condition of the snow is fairly good as far as the lochan, but beyond, it does not continuously carry our weight, and locomotion becomes most laborious. Thirst began to assert itself, so with an axe the snow is cleared from the ice of the stream, a hole is made, and we lie down and drink our fill.

Near the trees of the forest we come to a well-defined pathway in the snow, about nine inches wide, made by wild animals, and we are glad to follow it. We can trace the footmarks of the deer, the fox, and the hare. In the forest we see many signs of wild animals and their struggle for existence, and great stretches of mossy turf have been scratched clear of snow, and foot-marks are everywhere. Surely "Reynard the Fox" has been here, as the snow is scattered with fur.

Hinds watch us as we pass, and seem to wonder what is our business. Through the forest of dark pines which are gathered like a cloud at the foot of Carn Fiaclach gleamed the white slopes soaring far above, crowned by the solitary torch of Jupiter, and to the left the seven days old Moon. Both become blotted out, however, and the sky seems dulled by approaching snowflakes. At last, as the shades of night are falling, we arrive at the road and are welcomed by a robin with a very red breast, and later through the trees we see what appears to be a will o' the wisp, but we find on nearer approach that it is only an old woman carrying a lantern. Through the deep snow we turn up the steep path on the Old Bridge of Dee and homewards just as the long night with a snow-storm is closing down on the forest and its four-legged folks.