

A UNIQUE DAWN CHORUS

ANTHONY ARCHER-LOCK

The last of the sun mellowed the northern face of the Cairngorms late on the 20th of June, 1973, prompting thoughts of a perfect dawn for the morrow, but at 2 a.m., my mountaineering companions, as we climbed towards the cairn at Fiacail a Choire Chais, were expressing their view on bird watchers who would go to the hills at night in thick soaking mist! Passing the cairn, we skirted the titanic masonry of Coire an t-Sneachda plumbing the invisible depths, to make rapid progress along the flank of Cairn Lochan ridge, the full moon casting a vast halo through the cloud at our side in this silent world of mystery.

From the direction of Curran Bothy, still well ahead, came the unmistakable song phrase of a snow bunting, wild, evocative, and so much in harmony with those desolate surroundings. As we paused to listen, the clear notes, sung with passionate vigour, reached us at regular intervals, adding a touch of magic to the scene. Then whilst we picked our way forward, there was an explosion of wings just below, as a pair of ptarmigan startled into the gloom, the male snorting his reel full of indignation at such an intrusion.

Curran Bothy loomed out of the fog, a silent monument of boulder dome overlooking the brooding waters of Lochan Buidhe and the snow wreath above the murmuring Feith Buidhe; an atmosphere which could not fail to cast thoughts back to those who had met with disaster only two winters ago. The silence was severe and watchful — did one detect a sense of guilt of mere indifference emanating from these solemn surroundings? Such figments of the imagination were abruptly dispelled by the reeling of another ptarmigan from a rock merely a few paces distant. In the mist he looked huge and proud. A pair of dotterel chased unseen with excited peeping above the snows, anticipating the first hint of the dawn.

For some minutes, silence once more fell around us, emphasised by the trickle of water and the muted roar effected by countless burns tumbling in the distance. From the scree above came one more phrase from the snow bunting before he left his song stone, a commanding boulder encrusted with dripping lichens of black and green, the top splashed white to confirm a constant use. Perhaps this sentry post had been occupied at intervals by snow buntings throughout the centuries; this little fellow of icelandic origin had returned for the third year in succession, perhaps with the same mate, to rear their brood.

From somewhere out in the mists there drifted the rather repetitive feeble notes of another songster, a stuttering performance with a touch of pathos, but occasionally strengthening as if by some supreme effort. This was no meadow pipit or wheatear. The song bore no resemblance to that

of any snow bunting I had heard, and certainly not to the bird which had entranced us before this dawn. Very perplexing! An ultra-cautious approach and investigation eventually revealed that we were listening to the first and only shore lark ever known to breed in Scotland. It was not possible to ascertain on this day whether he had already acquired a mate, but certainly one was to join him for a successful nesting. As if sharing this sense of surprise, a ptarmigan muttered from the scree beyond.

As the drizzle thickened, the shore lark ceased his little song, and the ptarmigan escorted his mate down the gravelly slope, watching importantly over her while she hungrily plucked shoots of crowberry, no doubt famished after a long spell of brooding. A wheatear chattered briefly from a pile of rocks and later, the shore lark offered just one more utterance. The time had come for the trek homewards, a signal for the long silent snow bunting to serenade our departure. Slushing through the gravel, we passed a cock ptarmigan hunched in the wet – for him enough was enough.

