



THE BREATH OF THE SNOW

OFTEN on entering a house I find myself saying, 'It's a bad night for the crops,' and then search my mind for the latest bit of gossip. A word of pity and there it ends. In Linneside the weather is our all, and we prosper as the crops do; but if our own bits of land are right, our feelings, I confess, are not far-reaching. In early autumn, the burns come down, leaving the mountain sides with ragged gaps and eating under the trees. The low lands are flooded, and ricks are like islands round the end of the firth. We hear of the crofter's only cow being carried away, and the bed-ridden wife watching its descent from the window. Strangely fast such things slip from our minds, and weather is the beginning and end, but never the middle, of our conversations. Perhaps the reason is that it is not ours to make or mend the weather. Surely it was the hissing of the coals that sent my pen on this wandering; for I started to say that to-night there is a smell of snow in the air. To many a one, I daresay, these words bear no meaning; for only where the wind blows in its purity can you scent the coming of the snow; but we, up here, have been counting the signs since the robin started singing so merrily amongst us. That was the last week in August, and since then we have summed up the bad, subtracted the good, and found winter. At any rate, the smell is clear enough

to-night. Just now if I step out to the porch, a keen-edged east wind draws the smoke from my mouth and like a hand casts it over the house; and the stars are twinkling sharply like the diamonds some grand women wear. But a quarter of an hour ago I was being driven home, all nature scolding. The wind was dashing a sleety rain along; the trees swung with a sound like creaking doors and threw their leaves in the air as a schoolboy would his bonnet on a holiday. Perhaps while I am spelling this out, another great bank of cloud, black in the centre and shading outwards into white like an eye, is rising up to cast itself upon us.

Such nights always turn our thoughts on snow. September past, it is always near us. One morning we rise to find the Ben is tipped, and steadily the white creeps down to us. The days are never sure of themselves. Rain follows frost without leaving us time to open an umbrella, and the sky gets dark as quickly as one would blow out a candle. The trees look starved, and in the fields you see women lifting potatoes with many shawls about their heads. On frosty days the hills stand out clear against the sky, and old men feel the sweet air bracing them. Sleety rain comes, and the hills are sad and blurred, and old bones are racked with rheumatism.

But apart from all this and the fact that the Thanksgiving Day for the harvest is past, I see other signs of the closing in of winter. Peggy who keeps house to me gets mightily quickened in the tongue as the days grow shorter. She lays my supper, and then, pretending to dust the mantelpiece, she begins:

'Now, indeed, I am hearing that the Fergusons along the way will be having a lot of new dresses, and I am sure it would be more like them to get their old debts paid first of all; for they say—any way Jeemie, that's my good-brother that works with Macfarquhar, was telling me that they will have a big account against them in Macfarquhar's books. Indeed, too,' Peggy would add, sniffing sarcastically, 'and it's themselves that keep their heads high with all the debt that will be on them!'

Or may be she says :

'Ay, ay, and it's fine goings-on they'll be at the Gillespies' next week. Of course you would be hearing it all.'

'No, Peggy,' I put in, just to please the body.

'Yes, indeed, it's a terrible big tea-party they will be giving. They're saying that the laddie Williamina is engaged to will be coming all the way from Inverness to it. But he'll be having to put up with a shake-down if he comes, for they haven't a spare bed in the house. May be, though, that old Granny Gillespie can give him a room for the one night at any rate.'

I listen to it—or most of it—Peggy would leave the house if I didn't; and, God knows, what is evil—and Peggy is a woman—never goes past me. As soon as I came in to-night she commenced :

'Ach, ach! I am telling you that you will be sure to be getting your death of cold without your thick flannels on in this raw weather. I was just busying myself looking them out for you. And, indeed, the weather has taken a terrible change. I was out by the day at Mrs. Fairbairn's, west the road there, and she was saying her Jockie's cough is just getting fearful to hear. She is very downhearted about it, poor woman. I will be afraid myself it's in the decline he'll be. And you couldn't be wondering. He was aye a through-other laddie with his poaching and carrying-on. And for all that there was always a kind word upon his lips, and he was a good son. And if it's the will of the good Lord that his last sickness is on him, the smile of him and the way he had with the bairns and the old folk will be missed more—just—just more than I could be telling you.

'And as I was coming east,' Peggy went on, warming to her work, 'who do you think I met but Rory Simpson's lassie, Maggan. There'll not be so much at the back of them Simpsons' pride as some people might be thinking; any way, it was suspicious-like to be seeing Maggan with her last winter's hat trimmed over again for this winter. You'll be

mind the big black one she had with the ostrich feathers in it, that hung down on to her back? Well, well, it doesn't matter: it's it she had on the day, and her sister's old dress. And Mrs. Fairbairn was saying to me that Mrs. Mathieson down at the Mill is getting a lot of her old clothes dyed, and made down for the lassies. And I wouldn't wonder at all. But I am thinking, too, that Mrs. Fairbairn has an ill tongue, when she'll be caring to use it. I saw herself making down her man's trousers for her laddie Tommy. Of course she wouldn't be telling me that, but I was seeing it all the same. But it's always the way: them folk will never be done speaking of one another. They're as jealous of one another as cats, and indeed I am thinking myself well out of it all.'

But I am just a little afraid, though, of course, I dare not breathe it, that Peggy, good woman, is looked upon as rather a leader in the gossiping society, whose queer ways she sometimes describes to me with unpitying scorn.

That, you see, is the way a woman's eye beholds the changes coming. In the great cities, I do not doubt, there are many signs, but we have only a little view of our fellows and a great one of the solemn hills. To me this gathering chill, this slow closing of bony fingers, means the loss of many quiet joys—the song of birds, the sight of green hills, the warm consolation of sunlight. It is a hard time, and yet, in this good air, the snows and frosts are sweet. To rise and see the ragged hillsides smoothed and carpeted in white as if the chariots of God had passed in the high silence of the night, and to see the sun glow on the snow crust as if from the chariots the occupants had strewn their path with diamonds, is a strangely glorious thing. But as you look you see the clouds gathering on the northern hills, and you remember our tragedy of last winter. You watch again the searchers out upon the moonlit snow and the sad burden brought in—young Sandy Donaldson, the Rhilochan post, with the mail bag frozen to him, his ears bitten dead and his strong heart dying. You pile the fires, and you bring a quiver to the eyes and a snap to the jaws

and the kind words that go to the lassie of the west who is waiting for him—'God be good to Annie.'

The north is growing darker now, and you leave the window for the fire. Its sparkle has a sweeter memory: and yet the prayer comes silently that when our winter time arrives it may be given us to slip into the eternal summer quietly as the snow falls.

JOHN MACLEAY.

