

VICTORIA.

Over Two Walls

By E. K. Mitchell.

From the Upper Murray the Australian Alps rise, an unbroken wall, straight from the bush beyond the green flats. From this Victorian side of the Alps there are none of the gentle rolling hills one finds coming towards them from the Monaro. The Alps drop 6,000 feet in three miles, down to the Geehi Flats, where the river winds swiftly through nearly ten square miles of silent, hidden flats before the sheer rise of the Geehi Wall. The only opening in the Geehi Wall is the "Murray Gates" and the river goes through to the more open bush and clearings to where it joins the Indi and flows on, a wide stream.

We decided early in the year that on June 20 we would go out to the fishermen's hut at Geehi and wait our opportunity with the weather to go straight up and over the top to the Chalet. Ski tours from the Victorian side depend, not only on the weather, but on horse transport arrangements with the Scammells. We arranged for one of them to take us out and then wait at the Geehi Hut with the horses till we came down again. Owing to muggy and indefinite weather we got in touch with Scammell and put off our departure for one day; then, when we could no longer alter our plans, came an unexpected frost and it cleared up. We wasted one good day in riding to Geehi instead of spending it going over the Alps. *If* we had started on the day originally planned we would have got over and back before the next four feet of snow fell, followed by continued blizzards and snow storms for nearly a fortnight.

As it was, we got on our horses at Waterfall Farm at about two o'clock on the afternoon of the 21st, our food, sleeping-bags and alpine tent on the pack horse and carrying our ski slung across our shoulders on webbing slings—actually girths made by the local saddler, with double straps at either end which buckled round the ski. These are excellent for carrying ski on horseback, as one can change shoulders and shift the weight in many different ways. The ride to the hut took about three hours and was, nearly the whole way, a gradual ascent through fairly open bush, for the most part unfenced leaseholds. One comes to the top of the Geehi Wall very suddenly. The ground drops away sheer, there are tree-tops below, and, towering above and terribly close, rise the Alps.

One goes straight down the Wall by way of a creek bed to a treefern gully, slithering down for nearly a thousand feet, then along, just below the Wall, past the huge, narrow Murray Gates to the quiet, semi-cleared flats enclosed by the two walls. One wombat, proud possessor of a very nearly black skin, watched us for a second and then vanished and several black rabbits scurried off, followed by Scammell's dog. We saw no wallabies, though earlier in the afternoon we had caught a glimpse of a kangaroo. We forded the river over and over again and eventually arrived at the hut just as the evening mist folded down.

The hut is extremely comfortable, the only one in the mountains with a concrete floor. It has a good large fireplace and, instead of bunks, has folding canvas beds and a huge tin locker containing eiderdowns and canvas chairs, tins of food, fishing rods, a mirror, and a lamp—a mixed bag but a useful one and adequately protected from the rats.

Scammell tied the horses up near the hut with their fodder, all in preparation for a very early start, while we, in the eerie gloom and with only the sound of the swift-flowing stream to disturb us, went chopping firewood. Soon we

had a fire burning. The lamp threw queer shadows on the rough timber walls; we cooked our meal and very soon got into our sleeping bags on bunks round the fire and slept. As always happens, it took longer to get ready the next morning than we had expected and we didn't get away till 7.20, still doubtful whether the day would clear. The mist lay very densely, but earlier we had seen stars shining and we hoped that the mountains would be in sunshine.

The three hours ride up the Hammel Spur is a very strenuous one. Once we had left the flats and crossed the river for the last time we had to "ride" all the way, standing in our stirrups and giving the horses every possible aid. The track went straight up, almost perpendicularly, between scrub and tall trees, wet, slippery stones underfoot, soaked earth and, finally, snow. Occasionally the



E. K. Mitchell.

Leaving the horses at Hammel's Spur.

mist would part with an invisible movement, leaving us an unreal memory of an immense, over-shadowing white bulk; one felt that one could put out a hand and touch Mount Townsend. The mist thinned and at last we were above it and with the mountains; we looked down to the Murray Valley below, mist-filled like an inland sea and bound by ever-fading blue islands and bluffs that were really the hills of our home. Away to the right was the star-fish-topped mountain, Pinabar, with its thick snow cap and, further still, Bogong and the High Plains, while close in, on the New South Wales side of the border, Youngal and the Granuale just topped lightly.

On the left was the Grey Mare Spur, with its thickly timbered flanks deep in snow; as we rose higher, the Broadway Top came into view, while the Alps themselves loomed in front of us. We passed through the belt of mountain ash to a low gum scrub. Here we saw a flock of black parrots, the rarely seen omen of bad weather, square headed birds with a short, bluff-looking, yellow crest. Scrub heavy with snow is not good to ride through and for walking it is little better. We realised as we grew nearer the end of the track, that our original idea of going through the saddle between Townsend and Abbott was not going to be practicable owing to the number of rocks showing, so we put on ski on a



North from Kosciusko.

A. Ford.



Fresh Tracks.

E. G. Adamson.

little plateau above Byatt's Camp and took a line that would skirt Abbott and go over a wide saddle into the Wilkinson Valley.

At about 11.20 we left Scammell and the horses, standing, as it seemed on a sheer edge, with all the mist-lake below them. We went on over some extremely unpleasant going, across and up a gully. The scrub must be very thick there and high, and the snow had not formed a sufficiently firm covering over it; one constantly went through and got tangled up in the shrubs. Once above this it was steep but straight-out climbing, to the wide saddle, which we went through and came out above the Wilkinson, with Kosciusko and the Main Range beyond. The Wilkinson Valley, looking down it from beside Abbott, ends sharply and in space, high above the bush-filled gorges and thick timbered hills and one sees, straight down it and far away, Pinabar and the Bogongs.



E. K. Mitchell.

Looking from Hammel's Spur. Mount Pinnabar (Victoria) in middle distance.

The Wilkinson was not completely closed, so we went round the head of the valley and climbed the Northcote Pass behind Townsend. During the night an inch or two of mist snow had fallen on the previous surface and it was most delightfully even, with its powdery top. If only we could have taken "time off" there, on the Northcote Pass, dumped our packs, and simply skied! Instead, we had lunch and a rest when we got to the top and sat looking down the valley, which eventually joins the Snowy; we could see, straight on down the Snowy our objective, Charlotte's Pass. That day was one of the most lovely days of the winter, with

a warm sun and tempering breeze and my first impression of the New South Wales side of the Alps was a good one.

When we finally rounded the corner of Mt. Clarke, we had another rest, looking up at Mt. Lee and Carruthers Peak. We had made very good time, but from there on our progress became slower—and considerably slower as we went up the back of the pass. The sun was setting, bringing out unbelievably lovely colours in the bark of the snowgums and throwing weird long shadows on the snow, while, further down the valley, Mt. Tate and Mt. David gleamed. At last we reached the top and saw straight below us the roofs of



H. Mallard.

Early morning, Pounds Creek Hut.



Hillside.

D. H. Wade.

the Chalet and the plain stretching out towards the Sugar Loaf and the blue Monaro, far away over Trap Yard Creek.

The run down the Pass was horrible. Deep snow had become breakable crust and there were many rocks and bushes showing the whole way down, the full winter snow having not yet fallen, as we learned later and to our cost. We arrived at the Chalet, after a final scramble across the creek, which was open, at about half past four.

We left for home again very early the next morning, hoping that, in spite of a forbidding sky, we would make the tree-line on the other side before any serious weather started. By the time we reached the top of the Pass it was snowing in quietly falling flakes. We went on, still hoping that the wind would not get up, but as we rounded

the shoulder of Mt. Clarke, thick snow, with wind behind it, blotted out the Northcote Pass. It was useless to continue, because, once we got across the divide, there was the great difficulty of finding the path down through the scrub. That night it snowed about two feet and continued hard all the following day and night, a good four feet in all; immediately it stopped the wind commenced to blow in earnest, so another day went by.

For our second attempt we left the Chalet in sunshine, but a knife-cold wind blew down the Snowy Valley, and all the time we ski-ed along it the mountains were becoming invisible in a mist of blown snow as the wind grew fiercer, till we could see the snow being blown to ice. We rounded the last corner of Clarke into the full blast and found ourselves on sheets of ice, on which it was impossible to make any headway against the wind which continually lifted one off one's feet. We turned back and at last ran down into the quietness of Charlotte's Pass Valley, with the powder snow threading off like a ribbon between our ski. We were in sunshine, with only the tearing white clouds to show the speed of the wind above.

The next day we had a final try, before our time limit forced us to go round by car. When we got to the top of the Pass the wind was still blowing and an ominous tinge in the sky over the Murray made us turn back and reluctantly down the plain towards the Hotel. As we ski-ed over the Perisher the sky was overcast over the Main Range, with swift travelling clouds, and presently some "three cornered" snow began to fall. Not till nearly a fortnight later was there a fine day.



The Cope Hut fireside, Victoria.

O. M. Sandell.