

Gloria Mundi

By N. M. Macindoe

IT was Reg's idea.

We had laid a depot of food at White's River months before. Matt, Reg and I had done a preliminary canter up the range for a few days until the fog turned us back. Matt had to return to be on call for his unit. So Reg got the idea of a run up towards Kiandra, as far as the snow held, and then west towards Victoria to cross some country which even he had never seen.

We were to travel light and fast, no frills, the bare essentials: Food for five days, a sleeping bag, wind-jacket, spare socks and gloves, map and compass, spare tip and repair outfit, wax and matches. The snow was thin but good and the weather fine.

So we started. Reg is like a Diesel engine—sluggish on the cold mornings, but once warmed up he runs without attention till everyone else has given in. On the morning in question there was another factor. The girls got him and suggested a picnic at Pounds' Hut. It was a huge success. We ate the lunch the girls provided and then, seeing a wind had blown up and we were full of the flesh pots, decided to stay the night. The girls, I may say, went home.

As the dawn rose on Tait we crossed the Snowy and selected the East Ridge for the climb. In a long, easy traverse we crossed below the summit and ran down to Consett Stephen Pass. A winding trip amongst the granite peaks of the Rolling Grounds brought us to Sentinel Rock (Reg's nomenclature), the finest peak of all, and an exhilarating non-stop run down to the door of White's River Hut.

Noon at White's River. A quick lunch and we pushed on, over the saddle between Dicky Cooper and Gungartan, due north up a long easy valley full of perfect snow just west of the Kerries. This is some of the finest ski-ing country

on the Range. We should have kept straight on for Mawson's, but at the top of the valley struck off slightly west in the waning light and lost our way. The sun was sinking, and so were our hearts, at the thought of a night out, when we espied Cup and Saucer Hill. We took a bearing from it and soon found Mawson's amongst the trees. It is no wonder that the famous explorer chose this place to train his team before going south to the Magnetic Pole. The hut has been neglected and leaks, but the snow country would gladden an old skier's heart and the view—never shall I forget the dawn on Jagungal. The Bogong, the blacks called it. The mountain—for it is a real mountain—a white cone, not just a round rise from a plateau. There at our feet lay the big bend of the Valentine, huge plains which in summer are peat bogs, but in winter are the ballroom of the gods, flat as a billiard table, sheer white, covered with crystal that reflected all the colours of the spectrum, and from this plain in a splendid upward sweep rose the sharp peaks of Jagungal. Around the summit was a ring of cloud like a halo which rose slowly to heaven under the sun's caress.

I suppose not fifty people have ever seen from near at hand this the finest mountain in our native land. See it before you die—or die in the attempt. I'd like to be buried there. Maybe I will. And from the summit what a view! North and west you can see Table Top, Round Mountain and Black Jack; due south in a rolling panorama of green and white lie Gungartan, Dicky Cooper, Tait, the double breasts of Twynam and the crags of Townsend. Seventy miles away, like a lace cap on a brunette, lay the Bogong High Plains in Victoria.

We were loath to leave that view, but the northern slopes beckoned and the cold urged us on. Taking a wide detour to avoid losing height, we had a tricky wood-run and reached a fence. Now, a fence means a paddock, a paddock usually has a stockyard, and a stockyard often has a hut handy. We found it all right, and a jolly good hut, too, the Bogong, owned by McPhee Brothers, who ran cattle there in the summer.

We had tried Amundsen's scheme of two meals and a snack per day. The routine was bread and butter, meat and tea for two meals, and chocolate and biscuit for lunch. It was good rations for forced marches, but lacking in sugar, and Reg swears he lost twelve pounds on the trip. We ate the jam with great relish. That afternoon the snow almost petered out. I tripped, fell on a sharp rock and gashed my finger. We turned back from Farm Ridge, and had a good look at some ancient magazines by the lamp light.

We crossed the head of the Tooma River, skirted the Bogong swamp, west of Jagungal, and made for Smith's Lookout. This is a fine landmark, west of the range, easily seen, and useful for finding the Grey Mare. A hut supposed to be on Smith's Lookout could not be located.

We reached the Grey Mare soon after mid-day. It is a deserted goldmine. From the old shaft water was pouring and broken machinery lay about. The hut was the worst we had struck, leaking in three dimensions. So far the weather had been fine, but now a change set in and a blizzard was on the way. Not liking the idea of being snowed-up in that miserable hole, I wanted to push on. But I was aching all over and feeling deadly sick, and Reg, like a good Samaritan made me rest, fed me with part of his own food, and did all the work.

That night was the worst I've spent on the range. It was cold—so cold that at six feet from a roaring fire our billy of water froze. So cold, with the wind whistling through all the cracks, that we would wake up with cramp and then thaw out by almost sitting on the fire. In a warmer part of the range they registered a temperature of 8 deg. Fahr. that night.

Before dawn we were on the track; there was no track, and in an hour we

were in a sorry plight. We wanted to explore the upper reaches of the Geehi, on the Victorian side, and soon found ourselves in a deep gorge, with a roaring torrent at the bottom and ice-covered rocks hundreds of feet up on both sides. We took off some of our clothes and crossed. Reg, surefooted as a kangaroo, got across. I fell into a deep hole and got wet and my clothes froze hard. Then began the climb. It wouldn't be so bad in summer, but with a blizzard coming up, powder snow on the ice making footholds difficult, carrying packs, ski and stocks on our backs, the climb took us over three hours. You want an ice-pick and crampons for a climb like this. It was the only time Reg appeared to be exhausted, and I was nearly dead. We made it at last, and discovered it was the Ghost. That Ghost certainly gave us a nasty fright.

From the Ghost we espied Dicky Cooper, not five miles away, so ate our last crust and dashed for it. The blizzard almost blew us over the saddle. We staggered into White's, had a drop of grog and slept like a pair of drugged doormice.

There we lay in luxury for a day or so. Good food aplenty, the crackle of the fire within and the howling of the wind without. Two sleeping bags apiece, a good lamp, pencil, paper and books at night. Warmth and comfort instead of hunger and exhaustion. But when at last the blizzard eased and we hit the trail for home, I think we both felt we had left half our hearts behind.

Technical Points.

(a) Snowfields: In a bad season the best ski-ing fields on the range are between White's River and Jagungal. The slopes south of Jagungal are the very best.

(b) Routes: (1) Recommend Pounds' as a springboard for any Main Range tour.

(2) Tait East Ridge is the best ascent. [We like the valley.—Ed.]

(3) Kerries and west to Grey Mare Range is good ski-ing country.

(4) Ghost drops steeply into the Geehi and is to be avoided.

(5) Grey Mare Creek is a bad route past Valentine Falls; below that, where it joins the Geehi, the slopes are steep and timbered, a most difficult and dangerous route.

(c) Huts: Pounds'.—A good hut, plenty of blankets and wood. White's.—Excellent in every way, well insulated, good supply of wood, water and bedding. Mawson's.—A good hut, neglected, somewhat leaky. Bogong.—A very good hut, sheltered and well found. Grey Mare.—A bad hut, exposed position and leaks badly.