

From Alpine Hut to Berridale on Ski

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[This story might have ended differently. As it is, it provides another illustration of the need for adequate checks on the arrival of touring parties even in "safe" country.—Ed.]

OUR party originally consisted of four, Mr. and Mrs. Goodman ("Big Toni" and Edith), Mr. Biekart ("Little Tony") and the writer.

We had stayed a fortnight at the Alpine Hut and intended to go to White's River Hut, thence to the Chalet and so home.

However, although we went to White's, inclement weather held us up there for two days. The radio in the Hut couldn't transmit and we had the doubtful pleasure of only receiving messages between the various stations calling us asking whether we had

arrived at the Chalet. Finally, a search party set out from the Alpine Hut to find us. We heard this news over the air and, because of it and since the weather was still bad, we returned to the Alpine Hut.

We couldn't arrange transport straight away and so had to wait there for two days. That night snow started to fall and it also snowed the next night. The day after, really our seventh on our way home, we set out again from the Alpine Hut and I shall commence to describe the rest of our trip.

Gordon Dunn had joined the party, plus

a pair of faithful langlauf skis joined on to him by, at the beginning, about four pieces of string tied together and at the end about eight pieces of string. We thought that because of the recent fall of snow we would be able to ski to Brassy Gap and some optimists even thought that we would be able to ski further. Ploughing through the snow soon dampened our spirits. We were knee deep in it and the leader had to kick his skis like a ballet dancer to get the tips above the snow, so that every quarter of an hour or so we had to change the leader.

The only food we had with us was a sandwich or two each for lunch as we had expected to be picked up by Constance at the depot a little beyond Brassy Gap. (It transpired that Constance had not received our message.)

At Kidman's Hut half our food went and we pushed on to Brassy Gap. Here it started to snow heavily. On the way up we had a very clearly defined rocky track to follow and now there was no track to be seen! Soon, the inevitable happened, we were lost, with the ceaselessly falling snow slowly but surely wetting us. However, more by good luck than by good management we refound the track and the depot. Here the writer, who has a parlour trick of eating raw eggs in one swallow, used it on two or three from the box of fifteen dozen we found there.

The others, more refined, politely asked me to pack theirs in a hip bag of mine, to end up in a broken but still acceptable mass by night time.

Strange though it may seem to those of you who have skied regularly from Alpine to Harvey's Hut, we only reached there by nightfall and we had all had it. The realities of the situation were beginning to dawn upon us, namely:—

- (1) We would have to spend the night in the hut;
- (2) That we had little food;
- (3) That we had no idea where Constance was or where he would meet us;
- (4) That we had little knowledge of the track ahead of us; and
- (5) That there was every indication that it would snow for ever.

Little Tony could make a damper and the kind summer users of the hut always leave in them the requisites for damper making, so we did not starve. There was a double bed

in the hut and a three-quarter stretcher under it. Our dinner consisted of a couple of eggs, a cup of Milo and our last sandwich. That night Little Tony made a damper for the morrow. Fortunately, all of us had sleeping bags, so we did not suffer from cold, though it was a bit crowded for five in two beds.

Next day we got away to a very late start, partly because we had to dress and cook in a hut with no floor space. I am not sure as to our breakfast, but I think it was our last egg plus damper. We plugged along in the direction which we thought led to Snowy Plains through the same deep snow. Finally, we came to the Gungarlin. It was no use, we had to wade it. To those of you who have waded rivers of melting snow, I need say no more; to those of you who haven't, I can't say enough. I would like to meet someone who has suffered the Chinese torture of feet beating to compare the two. Big Toni had to make three trips, one with the packs, one returning and one with his wife. He said a yabbi bit him on the third trip, but we were too preoccupied with our own troubles to care. I had crossed rivers before and kept my socks on, which gave me some comfort. Having climbed the other bank, my comfort, however, was shattered by a cry for help from Little Tony, who was nobly trying to carry Edith's skis, stocks and boots as well as his own and was rapidly finding himself becoming divorced from his impedimenta. There was nothing for it, so I went into the river again to his rescue, but not without throwing every word I knew at him.

The situation was now not too good—(1) visibility was bad and looked as if it might become worse; (2) the valley had become a plain from which one could go in about five directions; (3) none of us knew the way from here, for we had come up by battle buggy and had expected to return that way; (4) we had come to the edge of our maps; (5) there was no sign of Constance; and (6) it was beginning to dawn on us that the snow might reach to Cooma.

One thing has left a lasting impression on the writer's mind and that is how animal-like and shelter-conscious one quickly becomes under such conditions. The only sensations one seemed to experience was a mute wondering "Where will I sleep to-night?" "I hope there will be something to

eat!" The second consideration is, of course, subsidiary to the first (subsequently reasoning it out) whereas one could last for quite a few days with only water to drink—and there was plenty of that—I wouldn't like to try to last out a couple of nights in the snow.

While we were mooching around wondering what to do next, we espied a hut on the hillside and animal-like made for its shelter. We were rather intrigued on drawing nearer to find it had a red roof, verandah and even gutters and a tank. Civilisation in the Steppes!

It is rather an eerie feeling being in somebody else's house (we have subsequently apologised to the owners, who very kindly accepted our apologies) not knowing what the owners' attitude would be. However, here was both a bed room and living room, with sink and tap beside the open hearth on which one cooked. If only it were possible to build week-end cabins like this on the snowfields! However, what was more important at the moment was that there was a little food, some soup cubes, two bonox bottles and what was perhaps more important a Lands Department Parish Map showing a road marked "to Nimmo" proceeding in a north-westerly direction off the corner of the map.

After having a cup of tea, the Goodmans rested, while the three of us went out on a recce, and to our great surprise found the hut which now replaces Snowy Plains Hut and the gates through which we had passed on the way up. We spent the best part of the afternoon doing this, but at least we knew where to start next morning. Prior to this we were thinking of squatting in the cabin until 'rescued,' which would have been very ignominious but preferable to wandering round becoming lost and being rescued, or perhaps not being rescued, from the depths of the snows.

Further, we made a find of more food in this hut, to wit:—some potatoes, butter and sago and hard bread a month old. Once more Little Tony made his damper and for dinner we had soup, chipped potatoes and damper.

Next morning we started a little earlier. We had a somewhat liquid breakfast of bonox, sago and damper and set out. Right at the outset, after passing through the gates, we had difficulty in locating the road,

but eventually did so and proceeded along under an arch of trees. The snow by this time was sticking very badly to our skis and it took us some time to reach the bridge over the Eucumbene River. Down here, the writer reached his nadir. What lay ahead? Eventually civilisation, that was obvious. Were we not on a made road? But we had whizzed over this road in Constance's battle buggy and motoring hours and skiing hours differ greatly in distance. It was now about one o'clock and at the most we would only go a few miles before sundown, and would that bring us to habitation or at least shelter?

These thoughts might sound morbid, but ascending the never-ending hill from the Eucumbene River on a liquid breakfast is not the right foundation for optimism. Near the top of the hill we had our lunch, consisting of the last of the dry bread and some jam, and all our food was gone. The others asked me how I felt and I said I felt like a man who was going to Randwick to put the last of his capital on the horses and if he failed, to file a bankruptcy petition.

However, my gloomy prognostications were soon to be swept away. Over the crown of the hill on the right of the road was a farm house. We went to it, dogs barked, on the snow were the marks of horses' hooves. No one answered our knockings, but it did not matter. Here was shelter, shelter to which we could always return.

From there we pushed on. No living being was in sight along the road except the group of five bi-peds plodding along in single file with boards under their feet leaving a curious trough-like wake. We came to a sign board reading, Adaminaby, Jindabyne, Snowy Plains. We pushed on, we saw more houses, we came across a snow plough and reached a village—Rocky Plains—we spoke to a lorry driver taking feed to his sheep, till finally this strange crocodile of skiers wended its way to a house with a 'phone. The owners of the house were the Patricks, who immediately asked us in for an "afternoon tea" of chops and scones. Then, nothing daunted, they asked us to stay for the night.

We will not forget that night, nor the hot bath, nor having a proper dinner sitting at a table. They gave us the last of their bread and we had a delightful evening's entertainment playing the piano, singing songs and talking in the midst of the family circle

with the white snow outside.

We were up bright and early next day, helped separate the milk and had a marvelous breakfast in the Patrick's kitchen with its open hearth, a fuel range shining like a new pin, while Mrs. Patrick made scones and more scones for her family of six and five guests. Finally, we took our departure, and Mr. Patrick lent us his jackeroo, Charlie Milne, to show us a short cut to the mail road to Berridale over his property. We had a delightful run over the paddocks to his boundary fence, when we said good-bye. Of the Patricks it can be truly said "I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in."

The trip to Berridale was for me a memorable one. We had no anxieties, there were no good downhill runs, but we were touring through pleasant and interesting countryside on skis, an experience completely novel to the writer. By this time the sun was shining, both literally and figuratively, the surface of the snow was good and our spirits were up. We had forgotten all our doubts, difficulties and hardships, everything became a pleasant adventure. We skied up to the "pub" at Berridale and nonchalantly put our skis on the verandah. It was our fourth day from the Alpine Hut and it could not be said that the holiday had gone according to plan, but what did that matter? We ordered rum and drank each other's health.



Journey's End