

A Summit Trip in a Fog

(By An Alpino.)

Five stupid souls ventured forth one July morning for the sake of saying they had stood on Australia's highest peak, and the Hotel was all the quieter for their departure. The Summit has its fascinations, even for those who have been there, and, as three of the party had not been before, keenness wasn't the least attribute. You know, fellows have been to the Summit and told such heroic tales about the super-task that when one went on a beautiful, cloudless day,—well, it was easy to be a hero, after all.

A Kosciusko holiday is really funny. A big price is paid for the privilege of sleeping at the Hotel at night, and the daily amusement is to tramp miles and miles and miles over the snow, here, there and everywhere, with crashes galore, and what crashes, too!

Tramping was in the air, so these particular five—no very particular really, just any old five—decided to tramp to the Summit and back—the fog, although really an obstruction, is nevertheless a reason for the telling of this episode.

The inference is certainly not for you to run away with the idea that going to the Summit, even in a fog—really a little bit of a fog—is to be mentioned in the same breath, let alone compared with, say, Scott's trip to the South Pole, Amundsen's to the two Poles, Dr. Teece's to the Tin Hut, nor even Hubert Wilkins' flight over a Pole; Byrd's to and from both; nor yet certain doctors' to Jagungal. No, sir! Nothing like that. By the way, is there a Pole at the Tin Hut? I know there's one at the Summit, so it appears to me that all great snow trips have a Pole for their objective. It's best to have a Pole there—something has to be tied to something to prove you've been and you can't tie anything to the snow. He was a knowing chap who put the Pole at the Summit. The arguments he saved—and the doubts! Of course, the uninitiated may not be aware of the fact that something has to be tied to the Pole at the Summit to prove contact. When record-breakers go on the run to the Summit and back they are generally furnished with the proof by Host Pete, who grabs it in a hurry—maybe somebody's false teeth, skinned knee or sprained ankle—anything, so long as it is proof.

This particular trip that I've started to tell you about was to be quite a big party. Everyone was enthusiastic (a very necessary commodity), and preparations (ditto, ditto),

were, and were not, going on at the pace they might have done, particularly after a well known snow-runner (a ski-runner—not a carpet-runner or even a carpet-skier, although Kosciusko knows them all), came in the night before with a lurid picture of fierce stretches of rugged mountains, bare of fleecy whiteness, over which one had to take off thy skis and walk. With this spectre before them, the brains of the party dropped out and the five (well, perhaps they were below particular average), were left to prove their mental capacity—or want of it.

"Tom" now appears in the picture. It might be said here that all stories of trips from Kosciusko to various known and unknown parts commence with Tom. Tom wakes everybody, including the explorers, at the usual 5 o'clock a.m. (almost morning), and for that kindness some say "Good old Tom!" and others are not quite so complimentary. After a lot of hoarse whispers—"Have you got this?" "Have you got that?" and a lot of waste time and a lot of breakfast—strange to say, breakfast was nearly forgotten—the mentioning, not the eating—great he-men eggs (he-men, not emu) and honest beef chops—just as you wish—the party gets away. The leader—well, a sort of a leader—sees them safely off, as it is done in the army. Sweet Aurora began to show her beauty as the road was tackled and her wondrous pink on the snowy hills was gorgeous. All the boys were entranced, but the coquettish thing left us by the time Dainer's Gap was reached.

Something does or something doesn't usually happen on the "slog"—I think all the best writers say "slog"—up the road to Dainer's. Either the watches stop half-way up and start again at the top, or some lose their wind and others have been known to lose their breakfast. The only thing that happened to this party was that they were successful in shaking off the dawn, an effort controlled mainly by want of speed. Not to be daunted by the report of the bad state of the road from Dainer's Gap to the creek, our heroes—may as well call them "heroes" first as last—took the other side of the valley down to the creek—a strategic move, worthy of note. As a matter of fact, it was a beautiful run and tons better than the road is at most times. A halt was called at the creek and each offered the other an orange, and each offer was refused with profuse thanks. So each shared his orange with the chap next to him, and everyone quenched a thirst. Rucksacks were changed, but it was really difficult to find the heaviest, because each firmly stated he had the lightest.

After the least amount of unnecessary delay the party once more moved forward. The only really bright thing about the place was the spirits of the boys, for old Sol

hadn't shown up at all. It was snowing slightly and a bit foggy. When, however, the clouds had been climbed above, things would be different. They really didn't climb above the clouds that day, but that didn't matter much—they had hoped they would.

Being a fairly flat country for the next mile or so, that sort of a leader was noticed towards the van—if not really in the van. A mistake, but still sometimes leaders insist. Then, consternation!! Bare patches were seen in the track (you know it's really a road, but track sounds better), bare patches were seen in the track and the whole party crossed the creek to the southern slope of the valley. The southern slope is on the northern side of the valley and the northern slope is on the southern side; so if you want a southern slope you go north and if you want a northern slope you go south. The south's in the north and the north's in the south—strange, but true, and well known to Kosciusko men.

After battling with the corrugation on the southern slope for over a mile, a silent decision was unanimously carried to return to the road. Now they were back on the main highway there was nothing left to do but to push on. Well, dear reader, at the rate this yarn is travelling the main body of the story—that is the fog—will never be reached, so we'll hurry things somewhat, boys and story. The boys raced up Piper's Gap in spite of the icy surface, absolutely flew across the Perisher Plain up to the top of the Perisher Gap, gasping, and with great gusto ran down to Betts Camp with such terrific pace that only hunger and thirst—two very wary gentlemen—prevented their passing it unnoticed. The food at Betts Camp is always good—an acknowledged fact by those who have been there—and always the same. You can rely on having no bread, because they've run out and no chops for the same reason. These boys varied the diet by bringing some run-outs along with them. Alf, the handy man,—you've simply got to have a handy man in a real adventure story—soon had a hearty breakfast going on the fire, in the kettle and out of the tin. The boys ate heartily. No story would be complete without the hero or heroes having a real hearty meal—on what, is a detail. A weary bend to unclip the ski bindings, sighs of relief as they dropped the rucksacks on the floor and more sighs as they fell upon stretchers. You will agree with me that heartiness in a meal is more important than meat or tea. I can assure you that, though spirits were high, energy was low. Anyhow, everyone doesn't prefer tea—soda or milk-flavored is oft' times more palatable when intense cold has to be considered.

"To go or not to go" was answered in the affirmative,

and when they poked their noses out of the hut the real theme of the story was much in evidence—the fog was with them. In leaving Betts Camp for Charlotte's Pass, you either go over the hill or round the hill. Round the hill for these boys, and it proved the wiser course, for on the other side of the hill were rocks—great burly chaps that needed some manoeuvring through, and the fog wouldn't have helped much. It wasn't a real thick fog—not one of those fogs that you can't see your hand in front of you, but just what you'd call "pretty" foggy. The rucksacks had been left behind at Betts Camp—only the very necessary things being brought along—maps and momentum, compass and chewing gum, oranges and such like, and, of course, themselves. The trail (sounds like Zane Grey) took them along the valley for about a mile before they started to climb over an upheaval called Sugar Loaf. It was only natural that something had to happen with a name like that about and sure enough it did. The fog changed its form and became a can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-you one. As a matter of fact, the leader (don't laugh) became very anxious, for he felt he was no world's champion at steering fellows across snow in a thick fog. He called a consultation, but in vain, for the others, who had just the faintest idea where the Summit was, pressed on. To keep with them he had to press on also, for had he not done so, either he would have been lost or they would have been lost. It was snowing a little now, and the snow became very attached, particularly to the bottom of the skis. As a matter of fact, the run down the other side of Sugar Loaf was as good a walking match as you could wish to see.

A long traverse brought the party to Charlotte's Pass, nothing happening except, perhaps, the loss of some vim. Charlotte's Pass is a wind-blown, corrugated, icy, uninviting, forsaken place on a day like this, and the devouring of an orange didn't improve it much. While the orange quarters were disappearing, words of discouragement were spoken, but the rank and file having set out for the Summit were set on the Summit, and the fog, having thinned a little, was no deterrent.

The next effort—and "effort" is the correct term—was along that abominable ridge on which one slips and slides for about a mile. The fog cleared a little while they were trudging along here, and old Sol peeped out, giving them a glimpse of the immense mountain slopes of snow across the Snowy Valley. They looked terrifying and yet magnificent and wondrously beautiful. Soon they disappeared, the upward march continuing, through semi-fog, and the Snowy crossing was reached by five weary men. The fog

was now thick, with an early promise of becoming "soupy" (it's to be hoped that reads all right, but aren't all real fogs spoken of as being "soupy?"). Let it pass. Writing yarns isn't all it's cracked up to be. First you've got to please the grammarians, then the literary critics have a "go" at you, then the historian, and sundry others, and in this instance the Snow-alls. This one, anyhow, finishes at the Hotel, so we continue in second gear out of the Snowy Valley. The plug up to Dead Horse was exciting enough and Seaman Hut was found by accident and found pretty dirty and half well—say quarter full of snow. More oranges, more talk, but, as Canute was dead, nobody tried to stop them, so the best that could be arranged was one of the party would stay at Seaman Hut and have some hot tea ready for the return—if any.

The other four started out for the Summit in the thick fog, which they jealously kept with them all the way. Along Etheridge it was just ice, what could be felt of it, for little could be seen of it. The leader had never seen (or felt) it in such a fearfully icy condition the whole once he'd been before. After an endless—anyway, say about an hour—of this murderous climbing, the mound running down to Cootapatamba Saddle was reached. The fog cleared a little—someone must have prayed—so they ran and fell and ran and fell and ran and reached the Saddle.

Then a black out!! Which really was the Summit? Straight on from whence they came, of course, and of course one always knows the way from which one came in a fog. It's hard to tell you how the top was gained, but they had to keep so close together not to lose sight of each other, that each was walking on the other's skis. Slog, slug, then rest. Slog, slug, then turn, kick-turn or scramble round—all the same—slog, slug, then curses, deep and venomous when one slipped down—the surface was awful. What wonderful joy is the trip to the Summit—mostly when it's over. We whip our weary bodies to achieve—nothing—well, perhaps not quite nothing; we find a little of our real selves and maybe that's worth a lot.

At last they found the Pole they were looking for. Had a good look round and saw nothing—in fact, only for the Pole they could have been any old where. The Summit had been climbed but seen not. The climb-up was tough, but the getting-down was—well—that's what it rymes with. You've heard the expression "Up in the clouds?" Yes, and that's where they were—literally—and how to get to earth was the question. A little run and a stop. A little run and stop. A little run that would stop only with a flop. Some of them took to sitting on their skis and when they were getting out of sight, fall over. It's no mean

slope—the Slam's a baby to it, and the ski-runners were not Mürren men, so a fall or two worried them not. One was taking a short cut to the Snowy Valley on the back of his skis and just stopped in time.

By the effective—though not altogether graceful—method of "run" and "fall," Cootapatamba Saddle was a second time honored with their presence. Up over the mound and Etheridge was again before them. It was just fearful trying to ski; so icy was it that stemming was useless. They nearly lost one another scrambling about, so to keep together it was decided to take off ski and walk for a while. Nothing could be seen and they might have been going back again, for all the landmarks available. The snow got a little bit softer, and the hope was that they were near Seaman Hut. A thinning of the fog, and, sure enough, there it was. Tired out, they drank a cup of tea, which was ready waiting for them. While drinking they complained about the state of the hut; tried to ring up Alf, at Betts Camp to let him know when they'd be back, and found the telephone in a perfect state of disorder. There was no joy to be had there, and "push on" was the order.

The fog was determined to give them something to think about this time, and you could cut it with a knife. Getting a line on the Snowy was the move and the ski tracks were diligently sought. The tracks could not be picked up, but the alpen stock holes were, fortunately, visible. By slowly snow-ploughing down the track of the stock marks the mile to the Snowy River crossing was accomplished. Had there been a fall of snow, the Snowy would have been crossed somewhat later. From thence on the fog lifted quickly, and it was not long before Charlotte's Pass was seen in the distance. Betts Camp was reached just about dusk—pretty quick going that last bit—but, you see, the fog was finished and the story cannot but soon come to an end.

Some pretty fair eating was staged, and the steward at Betts Camp kept the tin opener going with the throttle wide open. The next move was the Hotel. It was hard to move though—feet frozen stiff, clammy clothes, wet gloves, weary bodies—oh! but a beautiful moon! After a few "What's it to be's" and "Come on's," they all found themselves out on the snow again, grappling with heel straps. "So long, Alf," and away they went.

Have you ever had a trip on the snow in the moonlight? Well, it's a treat divine. Prove it for yourself at the first opportunity. A little over two hours later the Hotel hove in sight, around the last bend of the road, and with it ended the trip and the story. Not so good.