

Over the Edge: A Kosciusko Trip

By T. W. Mitchell.

It all happened suddenly. One of those Touring *versus* Racing arguments was in progress and the more senior members of the party were criticising the juniors because they did not explore more and race less. Stung to the quick, one of the juniors exclaimed, "Well, with all your exploration, you never had the nerve to go over the western edge of the Main Range." Day looked at me and I looked at Day. Next morning we left the Chalet at 8.30 a.m.

It was a glorious day, with very few patches of ice to mar a straight schuss to the Foreman Hut crossing. We had intended to ascend the Main Range by way of the Teece Cup course on Mount Northcote, but, after proceeding some little way, we changed our minds and set out for Club Lake. Arriving there, we stopped to survey the line of cornices running from Mount Lee towards Northcote. Two big avalanches had already fallen (N.S.W. Editor, please note) and the ruin was spread out in gigantic lumps on the floor of the valley. There was but one point where the final cornice could be scaled, and the thought crossed both our minds that we might be the cause of a third downfall. However, the day was cold, so we decided to chance it. After a preliminary scramble over the avalanche lumps, we began to climb. Up and up we went. There was an invigorating snap in the air and everywhere the snow reflected the sun in myriad points of light. Peak after peak came into view, while, away on the Pass itself, a number of black dots told us of a party starting out for the Blue Lake.

The slope grew steeper and steeper, and the thought of avalanches more and more acute. A good distance apart, we moved a foot at a time. At last the top of the cornice appeared within reach. One of my skins showed signs of coming loose, but it did not seem worth while stopping to fasten it. By now, I could see the Murray valley across the top, and, shouting the good news down to Day, I put out a hand to pull myself over. After that things happened quickly, very quickly. I went past Day, giving an excellent display of crazy flying, and remember vaguely wondering when the rest of Mount Lee (and Day) would land on top of me. I had just remembered that there was only one shovel at the Chalet, when I came to rest abruptly and suddenly, with the last few links of my spinal vertebrae in close contact with an extremely hard avalanche lump. As the cloud of snow subsided I could see Day's figure, clean-cut against the blue at the top of a seemingly towering white wall. Although my ears were mostly full of snow, I was able to make out Day calling something about coming up and seeing him sometime; I had barely time to ponder on this, when Day was suddenly changed into a very close resemblance to an autogiro revolving rapidly in a cloud. He bounced lightly on the top of an avalanche track and finally made a perfect landing in a wind-scoop beside a rock. What he said then was far from encouraging.

At the second attempt we took our ski off and made the ascent safely, on foot. On the top we had an orange and took off our skins. To the left and right were the openings to two small valleys. We decided to take the left hand one. This slopes down to Lake Albina and yielded excellent running. The ice was smooth and had begun to soften. After some invigorating schusses with a couple of full-blooded turns thrown in, we ran out on to the surface of Lake Albina. We put up a placating prayer to Zoë, and set out into *terra incognita*. The start was not pleasant. The lake discharges into the Northcote Canyon by means of a narrow waterfall. This was smoothly iced and liberally sprinkled with rocks. Some tricky ski-ing on steel edges followed. Passing the waterfall, the Canyon opens out into a surprisingly wide valley which gives little indication of the narrowness lower down. This gave us quite fair, if easy, downhill running.

At the first of the trees (a stunted, twisted snow-gum) the steepness begins and the walls of the Canyon close in, the running becomes a series of short slams, with sudden twists and changes of grade. Not knowing what might be hidden, we proceeded carefully. Down and down we went, and soon we got the feeling, unusual for Kosciusko, of mountains towering above us. On one side rose the massif of the Main Range itself, on the other the Townsend spur. The running also got cramped between small cliffs and the waters of the Geehi starting on their long trip to South Australia. Trees also became more numerous, especially a species of wattle. Finally, about the 2500 foot mark we took off our ski. We seemed to be at the bottom of a well and the strip of sky a very long way above. Through the slit of the Canyon we could see the black and white pattern of tree and snow in the wild tangle of the Valentine ranges. It all seemed a different world from the wide, rolling expanses of the upper snowfields. Tributary streams cascaded down on either side to join the main one, and the roar of the numerous waterfalls, being thus magnified in the confined space, was like "the voice of many waters."

We set off on foot, at first scrambling over snow-capped rocks in the middle of the stream, and later, when the scrub got thicker, on the tops of the trees. Finally we came to a halt almost at Watson's Crag, where the undergrowth was too thick for a passage even on foot.

After lunch and a rest we retraced our steps up the Canyon. Passing the huge spur which runs off Carruthers' Peak, we decided to turn left up a narrow gorge which disappeared heavenwards. With faces practically on our ski-points, we carried on up the gorge, getting narrower and more narrow, until it was almost a tunnel. Suddenly, after running through a cut in the rocks it opened out into a sunken valley, which ran away to the right until it ended under Mount Lee. Here we stopped for a well-earned rest, to discuss our next move. The view through the mouth of the crevice we had climbed gave far more an Arlberg aspect than a Kosciusko one; in fact, we named it "Little Austria." The steepness of the country both before and behind us created a complete European or New Zealand impression. From a downhill runner's point of view, the descent from Mount Lee to the bottom of the Canyon, via "Little Austria," would be far superior to the route from Lake Albina and yield better and more tricky running than anything from the top of the Main Range to the Snowy.

In order to get a better survey of the country, we decided not to continue up the valley towards Mount Lee, but to ascend by means of the ridge towards Carruthers' Peak. Here our troubles began, for, after a steady climb of some twenty minutes, over steep but wide and icy fields, we came to the knife-edge of the ridge itself. Behind us it was steep enough, but, both in front and to one side, there was nothing but precipitous drops over icy cliffs heavily studded with rocks. To make matters worse, the whole of the ridge was solid ice, and for over three-quarters of an hour progress was made by jamming ski-sticks into the ice, getting a hold and then shifting our ski upwards, one at a time. Then the ice would be gripped with the ski and the sticks shifted. In these eternally long moments many a heartfelt prayer did we offer to the inventor of steel edges! After a couple of disappointments by false summits, we at last relaxed on the top of Carruthers' Peak. As a reward for our labours, we allowed ourselves a generous period to watch the shadows thicken in the mysterious deep valleys of the border country.

Carruthers' Peak itself looked too icy, so we ran, over somewhat jarring snow, back to Mount Lee. A geländesprung over the cornice started the fun, and then followed the most perfect end to any ski day, a run downhill on powder snow. With the powder smoking up behind us we descended in a series of rhythmical tail wags to the valley to run out over the easy grades to the Snowy and home.