

THE ENDS OF THE ALPS

By E. K. Mitchell

THE Little Dargal is the last mountain at the north-western end of the Alps. Two steep ridges go up on either side to two small peaks, drop a few feet and then meet in the sharp rock summit. The face of it drops so steeply to the Khancoban Forest Reserve as to be almost funnel shaped. One Sunday in the early spring of 1936 we decided to walk towards its summit from Towong Hill. One of its ridges goes off from Bradney's Gap; we drove up the New Road a short distance and then commenced to walk, reaching the top in $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours, the last few hundred feet on snow. From the summit one obtains probably the most comprehensive view of the Alps, across the Murray Valley and over the foothills to the sweep of the Main Range, then the Grey Mare Spur, and, getting closer, the Scammell Spur. The revelation, too, of such vast snowfields behind the Little Dargal was quite surprising. There was a snow-filled plateau running right back to the Big Dargal, and away to the east, like a lion crouched, was Jagungal.

We decided to spend some days at Pretty Plain for spring ski-ing. We finally got away on about October 8. By then the first spring rains had come and there was no snow in Pretty Plain, but it still lay along the south side of a ridge running very nearly east off the Broadway Top, between Pretty Plain and the Dargals. We had some very pleasant ski-ing there on our first day out. From the Broadway Top we saw right across to the Ink Bottle and to the Dargals, still with a lot of snow on their steep slopes. We had very little idea of what the

intermediate country would be like, but set out one morning, carrying our ski. It took us till noon to reach the big Dargal, up hill and down dale. Climbing the south side of the Ink Bottle we prayed we wouldn't be too exhausted to enjoy ski-ing down it on the way home. The south slopes of the Dargal Plateau seemed to offer some excellent running, open and through woods and very steep. By the time we climbed the Dargal it was too late to go right on to the hatchet-shaped Trig. Station, so we lunched, looking along at the big bluff which drops down toward Pugilistic Point, wishing we had time to ski to the bottom of it; then we fought our way down through the almost impenetrable scrub and once more up the Ink Bottle.

The outlook from the Ink Bottle is most spectacular. The mountain drops away like the side of a house and we saw over the tree-tops to the gleaming Main Range; away to our right we could see, mistily, Bogong and the Bogong High Plains. The run down was magnificent. There were just sufficient snow gums to make the run interesting, and yet not to detract from the feeling that an extra large geländesprung would take one thousands of feet through space to the wooded hills above the Murray Valley. It was such fun that we climbed all the way up to run it again. The next day we spent ski-ing on the south slope of Finlay's Lookout or Toolong. As late in the year as October 12 the ski-ing was excellent. Finlay's Lookout had been proved a good ski hill when my husband took Mr. Lamble, Miss Olive Lamble and Roy Dunstan there from Pretty Plain Hut earlier in the winter of 1936. This was the first ski ascent known of this mountain, though, of course, the miners in the Toolong Diggings skied in the wild, and we know from Mr. W. Scamell, who lives at the foot of Bradney's Gap, that he and a companion skied from the Round Mountain right into Greg Greg Station as long ago as the time of the Boer War.

At the other end of the Alps, the southernmost end, is Dead Horse Gap and the Leather Barrel, leading down to Tom Groggin—a country absolutely unknown in winter. At the end of July, 1937, my husband, George Day and myself set out for Dead Horse Gap. We started along the road to the summit of Kosciusko and turned off towards the Ram's Head at the Snowy Crossing. From there it is quite a distance across the plain which, in summer, is the bog in which the Snowy River starts. There was a strong, cold wind blowing and a few clouds on Townsend, and the Lee cirque, and in the valley between Tate and Twynam. The Ram's Head Range is rather like the Stilwell Range, broken up into a lot of rugged bluffs, and for a long time, while we climbed up it we got practically no view. Finally we came out on the Ram's Head itself and were suddenly on the edge of the Alps.

With the Main Range dropping steeply below our feet, we could see for miles. We saw the Pilot, well covered with snow, and then Davies Plain, also snow-capped, the Indi Valley and the line of the Buckwong Creek. To the right was the South Ram's Head and a long ridge off it which cut across the valley running down from where we stood; to the left, the ridge running to the Dead Horse Gap and snowy hills stretching on and on.

We took off skins and ran towards the left ridge. The snow was fairly mixed and rough and icy. After this rather tricky running we had a schuss out on to the ridge proper and then into better snow, the start of the trees, with the snow getting better and better. The way was through deep glades among tall, yellow-marked snow gums and miraculous leaf snow into which the ski vanished but whistled round, when one swung a turn, with a gleaming, froth all around. Then through thicker and thicker snow gums and some manuka scrub—"tunnels of green gloom"—ducking low beneath the branches. Down, till we came out on the sun-filled valley of the headwaters of the Thredbo or Crackenback River that runs on to the east between the thickly timbered hills.

We put on skins in the valley for the 200 foot climb up to the hut on Dead Horse Gap. We could look right up the gorge between the ridge of the South Ram's Head and the ridge we came down and could see the place where we had

started to drop. We were very nearly at the snow-line. We found the hut right on the gap with, to the east, the Crackenback Valley and then to the west, a valley that leads eventually to the Leather Barrel. At last we came out on the Ram's Head again, along it and down on to the flat plain, keeping a good pace all the way to get back to the Chalet before dark. All the way along the road we kept up a two-step, punted hard and made good time. As we went over the Pass the colours of the Range were just fading out.

Mr. Mitchell adds a note: The total descent from Ram's Head to Dead Horse Gap is about 1,100 feet. The Gap would be the best access to the road our local Council is trying to get up the Murray Valley into Kosciusko and connecting with a road down the Thredbo into Monaro. If I die in the attempt we'll get our road to Tom Groggin!