

The Western Slopes of Townsend

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ALL the season the weather had been changeable and unpredictable, and even in late September, the opportunities that offered were few.

Repeated disappointments wore out our optimism regarding the morrow, so when the perfect day came it caught us unprepared, and we did not get away from the Chalet until 9.30 a.m.

Fifteen minutes later we were on Charlotte's Pass. The familiar contour of the Main Range cut a clear line against a sky of cloudless blue, as our eyes followed round from Mt. Kosciusko to Northcote, to the steep face of Lee, the long slope of Carruthers, Twynam, and, to the north, Tate. Red dust, carried by westerlies from the dry inland plains, had dyed the snow rusty pink. In contrast to its usual dazzling white, the Range looked dirty and drab.

We could see the brown head of Townsend peering over the saddle between Northcote and Lee. It looked far away, but we hoped to get down the western side of the mountain and home again before night . . .

We bore south along the range before running down into Lake Albina. The descent was steep and open, not unlike the shoulder above Little Austria, and provided an unexpectedly good run.

From below, the Townsend wall which had appeared unscaleable, offered several alternatives, and we went up to the south of two main gullies. At last the unmistakable summit was revealed, jutting up, strong and imposing, from a high undulating plateau. On top the view to the west suddenly unfolded. No previous glimpse had destroyed the unexpectedness of that panorama, and though seen on many occasions, the effect of almost breath-taking surprise remained.

We looked out past the dark scrub, 3,000 feet below us, to the undulating hills and wide green flats to the Upper Murray Valley, and beyond to where the country smoothed out, until it was lost in a blue haze that merged with the sky. Dark green, olive green, and blue formed a backdrop to the snow-covered buttress spurs that plunged down to lose themselves in a maze of heavily timbered ridges and gullies. To the north the Townsend Spur enclosed a broad basin, on

the brink of which we stood. To the south, the great Hannel Spur swept downwards. Immediately in front the ground fell heavily away sharply, to rise again to a white knoll. We thought of skiing over the knoll to see what the hidden slope offered, but decided instead to go straight down the centre of the basin, the sides of which converged just above the tree line.

Down we went. At first we made the mistake of keeping to the drifts of white snow, until we found that the pink base was perfect spring snow. We wove long turns in and out of the islands of white snow, and the black rocks, the snow fast and easy. Everything was forgotten but the fun of racing down. Then suddenly we noticed the Geehi Flats, so close at our feet, that it seemed as though we could toss a pebble onto them. We halted, and looked back, and Townsend, against the sky, was high and far away. We decided to go on to the tree line. The snow was still deep, and the hillside, folding away below, lured us on to explore the secrets of its hidden gullies.

However though the sky was clear over the Murray, low cloud hid the sun and made us doubt the wisdom of remaining too late on the western side. Reluctantly we commenced to climb out.

We reached the top in an hour, and decided to return down the racecourse gully, into Lake Albina, and then climb up on to Mt. Lee. By the time we started the descent it was freezing fast, and the surface of the spring snow was covered with what looked like a layer of thin glass. As the skis broke this layer, thousands of fragments rushed down the slope in a tinkling cascade that caught up with the next turn and so on until the descent was made in an avalanche of ice particles and the noise was like the roar of hail on a tin roof. Despite the intimidating effect of this unusual clatter the skiing was not difficult.

Travelling was fast down the long gentle valley from the base of Lee to the Snowy River. We stopped to dip a drink out of the icy stream before starting the inevitable slog up the back of Charlotte's Pass with the prospect of a shaky run down the other side over battle-scarred ice and so home.