THE CALL OF THE MOUNTAINS

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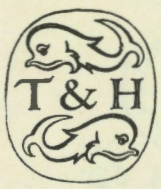
COLIN WYATT

WITH
75 PHOTOGRAVURE PLATES



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To my Father
JAMES WILLIAM WYATT

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PLATES

PREAMBLE

MOST OF my life has been spent among mountains—walking over the flower-covered alps of Central Europe and Canada, riding through the passes that pierce the limestone peaks of Albania or ski-ing across the frozen rivers and lakes of Lapland, among the golden birches. Snow is my greatest delight—its glorious soft shadows, its infinite variety of texture and the stories that the beasts and birds write on it with their tracks. Above all, I love ski-ing among the solitudes of the glaciers—in that remote world of glittering peaks and luminous shadows on hanging faces of ice where knife-sharp snow arêtes seem to cut into the dome of heaven itself.

For me the mountains are not merely a challenge to technical skill, human endurance and strength of will, not just varying arrangements of different geological structures, but definite and complex entities each with a distinctive character and endowed with an almost infinite variety of moods. The character of a mountain does not just consist of the quality and arrangement of its rocks and glaciers, but of the flowers that grow on its upper pastures, the animals in the forests that clothe its flanks, and the character and culture of the peasants who dwell in the valleys around its base.

Once I had had my initial fill of the pleasures of conquering rock and ice, the sensuous joys of warm stone under my hands in summer and the velvet hiss of glacier snows beneath my ski in winter, I began to want to know more about the more living aspect of the mountains, about their history and the sort of people and animals who live among them.

My father was lucky enough to have known the Alps of Switzerland and Austria in the "golden age" of climbing, before the tourist industry had been thought of, but I soon found the majority of the central European mountains too much of a beaten highway, too much "developed". Seeking to understand them I had gone back into the classics of alpine literature, to the writings of Whymper and Mummery; after reading the stories of their adventures and explorations I found myself irked by the modern roads, railways, hotels and

huts of Switzerland and Austria, although thoroughly appreciating them from the practical point of view when it came to making a purely technical climbing trip. I love the characters and traditions of the present-day peasants of the Alps, but I wanted something more primitive—to try to capture for myself something of the spirit of adventure that my father had experienced seventy years ago; so, whenever opportunity offered, I began to go to out-of-the-way countries and to mountains where very few people had been before.

Some, such as the Jotunheim Mountains in Norway, were still in much the same stage, alpinistically speaking, as were the Swiss Alps in the 1880's, while others were almost completely wild and untouched. Although many of them did not present much in the way of actual physical climbing, they offered true mountaineering in the sense of exploring and getting to know strange mountain peoples and places which twentieth-century civilization had not reached, and it is mostly of these that I write. But the comparison of the mountain ranges of distant lands with the Alps is interesting, and affords a familiar standard by which to measure; so I have included some photographs of the Alps in winter and told of the joys of ski-mountaineering, which is to me the most completely satisfying form of alpinism.

For the rest, I have set out to give an impression of the less-known mountains and their inhabitants, of the Lapps, the peasants of Albania, the Berbers of the High Atlas of Morocco, and of the wilds of New Zealand and Australia.

CHAPTER I

THE SNOWS OF AFRICA

THERE IS great pleasure in achieving the seemingly impossible, and I had long been intrigued with the idea of going ski-ing in Africa. I felt certain that there was good snow in the High Atlas, the great range of mountains—already famed in antiquity—separating the fertile North Moroccan plain from the sands of the Sahara; so a couple of Swiss friends and myself assembled within the red ramparts of Marrakech in March 1949 with a view to finding out.

A burning, almost tropical sun illumined the great square of Djemâa el Fna; around us seethed the throng—hook-nosed Arabs in their long white and brown djellabahs, a great silver dagger on the hip, and mysterious veiled women whose brown eyes gazed aslant at us through their yashmaks. From time to time a camel caravan passed, come from the sands of the South across the cols of the Atlas, the animals navigating the crowd like ships through a choppy sea. A swarthy Arab loaded the last case on our lorry and piled the ski, rucksacks and ice-axes on top. A long blast on the horn and we were off . . . behind us the throb of the snake-charmer's tom-toms slowly died away and five minutes later we left the city under the great arch of the South Gate. Beyond the many-coloured plain rose the gleaming white chain of the High Atlas, filling the whole horizon.

The road led across pink fields of wild gladioli splashed with the gold of Adonis anemones and the white of daisies; every now and again we passed a village whose flat-topped houses of red pisé hid behind walls of blue-green cactus. Soon we were at 4,000 feet among the olive groves and barley fields of Asni; its red houses, dominated by the great fortress of the Caïd, terraced the west flank of a wild valley whose slopes, blue with lavender, framed the snows of the majestic Toubkal, 13,744 feet, the highest mountain in North Africa.

The village headman led us to his house and regaled us with mint-tea and a mutton stew; this we ate with our fingers, sitting cross-legged on mats. Having noisily indicated our satisfaction and repletion in the local manner, we started bargaining for pack-mules so that we should be ready to set off at dawn on the morrow.

Most of the villagers assembled to see us off. The headman offered us a farewell round of mint-tea, and then the caravan wound its way through the narrow alleys of the village on to the sunny slopes above, where the track led through innumerable clumps of giant asphodels whose white stars stood out sharply against the deep blue of the valley shadows. For four hours we ascended the valley of the Ait Mizane. Now and then the valley widened into a bright green chequer-board of young barley fields, divided by walls of white stones; a few scrawny cows pastured by the side of the torrent, tended by Berber women clad in rich orange robes. Occasionally, perched on a spur, the grim walls of a castellated Kasbah guarded the track like a mediaeval fortress, and flat-roofed red villages clung to the steep hillsides. Suddenly our muleteers began a strange, oriental song—sometimes one voice, sometimes in chorus—a weird refrain repeated again and again in variations of a minor key. Apart from that, not a sound could be heard beyond the roar of the torrent and the dull blows of a stick on the rump of a recalcitrant mule.

At noon we arrived at Imelil, the last village, nestling in still-leafless walnut groves, where the village grocer gave us mint-tea. Rested and refreshed we came to the Plain of Arround, right at the foot of the Toubkal, a flat sea of purple moraine and huge boulders that forms one of the few remnants of the ancient glaciers. We were now at 6,600 feet, and the track climbed steeply in zigzags up a slope dotted with thuriferous junipers, the characteristic high alpine tree of the Atlas, large and aromatic and very like the Arolla pine of the Alps.

Soon the first patch of snow appeared, and a moment later we found the track blocked by a huge drift. The leading mule refused to set foot on it, and we had to form in line and stamp out a firm trail and then cajole it carefully across with two Berbers supporting it below. A mile or so beyond, the whole valley was white—we had reached the snow-line at 9,500 feet. Here we dumped our cases and the muleteers took their beasts back to Asni, leaving us with four specially selected porters, real hardy mountaineers, whom we had engaged at Imelil. We left one man to guard the depot, while the other three began a shuttle service to a small hut, built by the French Alpine Club, now only about an hour away.

What a pleasure to set ski on African snow for the first time! The skins slid along over a perfect spring snow across wonderful ski slopes towards a white pass on the sky-line. On our left rose the cliffs of the vast north face of the Toubkal, cut by a sinister couloir 3,000 feet high from which emerged the débris of a gigantic avalanche, while to our right the jagged peaks of the Ouanoukrim Range stood out against the blue sky.

Next day we rolled out of our sleeping-bags at dawn; while the porters started digging for water in the creek, ten feet down under the snow, Edmond and I set off on ski up the narrow valley. Seven hundred feet higher it widened; we turned right, crossing the fresh track of a jackal, and climbed up a snow-filled defile which debouched into an enormous amphitheatre, a real skier's paradise rejoicing in the name of the Amrharhas n'Iglioua. At 12,680 feet, on a little col at its head, we deposited our ski and roped up for the final climb to the top of the Afella n'Ouanoukrim. At the start all went well, but we soon arrived at the foot of a shady couloir where the rocks were badly iced and every hold had to be cleaned with the ice-axe. Then came some steep step-cutting in solidly frozen snow, and after 700 feet of trying work we at last came into the sun again on a narrow ridge. From one step to the next the snow became soft and the heat almost insupportable—it was past 11 a.m. But we were not the only living beings up here: the fresh tracks of a mouflon, the wild bighorn sheep of the Atlas—coming from goodness knows where—led us up the snow and rock ridge to the summit, 13,342 feet. Opposite rose the imposing mass of the Toubkal, just overtopping us, while beyond the southern slopes of the Atlas, like a red sea at the foot of white cliffs, spread a labyrinth of arid valleys

and rocky escarpments that lost themselves in the shimmer of distant sands. One solitary mountain stood out like a pearl against a background of copper, the Siroua, 10,900 feet, the only snow peak of the Anti-Atlas. To the north, the jagged rock ridge of the Ouanoukrim Range sloped down towards the blue-violet haze of the Moroccan plain.

The snow was soft in the couloir when we descended and we had to take great care, for below was just an abyss. On the rocks it went faster and we were soon back at our ski; a short rest, a bite of chocolate, and we launched ourselves down the slope. The snow was superb, and soon the christies interlaced from top to bottom of the amphitheatre, the tracks uniting in the valley in a long schuss that took us almost back to the hut door. After a good meal we took a sun-bath in front of the hut, lulled by the chirping of the choughs; a lump of snow fell from the top of a rock with a dull thud—were we really in Africa?

The next day marked the culminating point of the expedition, for at 7 a.m. we left the hut for the Toubkal, taking the route up the sharply rising valley immediately opposite. The steep slopes were frozen so solid that neither sealskins nor steel edges would bite, and we had to put on crampons and carry ski for 300 feet to the more gradual valley above. Then a very pleasant climb brought us out into a basin immediately under the west face, whence we had the choice of two alternatives, either to ski up to the base of the South Ridge, or to the opposite Northwest Ridge. The latter looked more promising and would be more sheltered, for a strong wind had got up. At last we reached the rocks of the ridge and planted our ski deep in the snow in the lee of a rock; from there on it was just a long scramble over rock and ice to the little summit plateau at 13,744 feet. The view was quite indescribable; it seemed as if the whole of the High Atlas and all Morocco was spread out around us—Edmond even swore he could see the Canary Islands off the Atlantic Coast!

We were now above the wind, and hated to tear ourselves away; but if we were to delay much longer the snow would become too soft for good ski-ing, and so at 11 a.m. we turned back down the ridge. The snow was just right; we spun down in long christies to the basin, and it was only a moment before we found ourselves on top of the steep slopes opposite the hut. Here the snow was terrifically fast and we arrived only half an hour after leaving the summit;

Brahim and Aomar had spotted us from afar and had a vast platter of couscous, a sort of crushed barley "rice" and mutton, awaiting us.

For the next two days we had more wonderful ski-ing and climbing, but we awoke on the fourth day to hear the wind moaning round the hut. It was the Sirocco, laden with the sand of the Sahara, the Atlas equivalent of the Foehn, and the weather looked bad. However, it was going to be a day of rest anyhow; for on the morrow we proposed to cross the Toubkal Range, the plan being to traverse two rock peaks and descend into a little-known valley beyond, whence we should attack another big snow peak in the Tifnout massif, while our porters with our tents and provisions took a roundabout lower route.

When the alarm went off next day at six o'clock, the gale was blowing outside with undiminished vigour. There was no sign of our porters, due to come up from Imelil to meet us, and anxiously we made coffee. It was nearly 9 a.m. by the time they arrived, frozen and gloomy, having waded through the snow in bare legs and sandals, in the teeth of the gale. We hastened to give them bread and hot coffee, while Robert cajoled and exhorted them; soon their wonted good humour returned and they shook themselves and laughed . . . "Safi! Safi!"—"Okay! Let's go!"

We set off simultaneously, the two porters on foot by the track and we on ski with heavy packs and the sleeping-bags, just in case we did not meet them that night as arranged, for we had started far later than we intended. We skied down the valley for a thousand feet to where it was filled by the huge avalanche débris, and then began a steep climb up the couloir towards the Tizi n'Immouzer, a pass 3,000 feet above. The couloir was barred by three great terraces of rock and blue ice, and in places we had to carry our ski up narrow chimneys and traverse along iced ledges. To make matters worse it began to hail, and pellets the size of peas bounced off the snow all round us. At last we arrived at a little basin at the foot of the last cliffs of the Toubkal, where we were out of the wind; with frozen fingers we fumbled in our rucksacks for a snack, while around us danced the bullets of hail.

The last slope was so steep and icy that our sealskins gripped no longer—cursing under our breath we put on crampons and carried our ski. Finally, after climbing for three and three-quarter hours, we reached the col. The view was incredibly wild, but we had no time to look at it for the wind was almost

tearing the ski from our hands. We carried on along the ridge to a huge black "aiguille" of rock, the Afekhoï or North-east peak of the Toubkal. Here we had to pass the ski from hand to hand up the clefts in the rock, but in twenty minutes we were on top. About a kilometre away, separated from us by two arêtes which met half-way at a col some 700 feet below, we could see the second rock peak we had to traverse, the Adrar n'Tichki. Buffeted by the wind, we plunged into a steep couloir full of powder snow; after 200 feet we were able to put on ski again and traverse across the last uncomfortable slopes, suspended above the abyss. Suddenly the sun took pity on us and appeared through the clouds, offering a wonderful view of the Afekhoï and the Toubkal as we skied up through the gullies and ridges of the wide col towards the last arête.

When we came to the final rocks we found our way barred; a direct route up was impossible, so we crossed to the left, ski on our shoulders, and up a long and steep snow couloir towards a little white col which should mark the end of our troubles. But when we finally reached it, 100 feet of vertical rock-slabs blocked any further advance—we could see the wide snow saddle on the other side of the peak, which was our goal, but it was separated from us by some 200 yards of giddily steep snow plastered across the rocks, above a vertical drop of unknown depth. We were holding a brief council of war, when suddenly Robert announced: "Well, I'm off!" He had put on his ski and was already some five yards out on the slope. Holding our breath we followed him with our eyes as, testing each step, he advanced slowly, leaving a good solid track behind him. Encouraged, we followed his example, and after twenty rather agonizing minutes we were all reunited on the little saddle, from which a fine ski run led down into the valley where we were to meet the porters. But almost at the same moment great clouds swirled up from the cauldron of the Plain of Arround and enveloped us, and for an uncomfortable half-hour we huddled together in a thick mist.

It was already after 6 p.m., with the twilight creeping up the valleys, when the mist cleared and we took off on a fast and very icy descent down to the pass, the Tizi n'Tarharhat. Had our porters already passed? Yes! There were their tracks and we only had to follow them. But soon they bore left on to the southern slopes of the Aksoual where there was less snow, so we kept to the

middle and skied down towards the entrance of a defile through which flowed the hidden creek. A narrow ribbon of snow between two rock walls gave us an exciting slalom which rapidly lost us altitude; soon the waters of the creek emerged and we came out at last on to the wet grass of the high pastures at the snow-line. It was almost dark and Robert began to shout: "O-o-oh! Mohammed!" . . . the echo came back to us mournfully from beyond the torrent. We followed its bank for another mile . . . "O-o-oh! Mohammed!" . . . A moment later an answering shout came, and a silhouette in a white djellabah appeared on the top of a huge rock. Our valiant porters ran out to meet us, seized our ski and packs, and conducted us to their shelter where tea was simmering on the fire. We quickly pitched our tents in the little flat "yard", surrounded by a wall of stones, between the big rock and the "azib", a stone hovel with a flat earthen roof, which is the Berber equivalent of a Swiss "alp", and after supper we slept like logs on the soft bed of old manure.

We awoke to find it snowing hard. All day long the great flakes fell from the grey mists; huddled in the azib, wearing everything we possessed, our mood swung from optimism to pessimism according to the rhythm of the snow-flakes. Every two hours someone had to go out to brush the snow off the tents and fetch water; luckily our far-seeing porters had collected a great pile of spiny bushes the evening before, and boiling a billy over their crackling twigs cheered us up and helped to pass the time. At nightfall there were fifteen inches of new snow—"and that's Africa!" said Robert in a gloomy voice. Not only that, it was April 12!

Next morning the landscape was covered with nearly two feet of new snow. Conditions would obviously be dangerous on account of avalanches for a couple of days, and so we reluctantly had to abandon all hope of climbing our last big peak, for our provisions were running out. For the same reason we could not go back to Asni by crossing the Tizi n'Likemt as we had planned, as not only is it very steep on the far side but the going would be impossible for the porters. So we decided to try to get out of the mountains through the valleys of the Kassaria and the Ourika.

The clouds began to rise as we started off up the slope behind the azib, carrying our ski and plunging up to our knees in the new snow to beat out a track for the heavily laden ski-less porters. After a 1,000-foot climb we

crossed a saddle on the last spur of the Aksoual Range, and down the far side we had our last ski run; the snow was very wet and soggy near the end, where it petered out on green, grassy pastures near the valley floor. We followed an irrigation channel to the Azibs Taouount, where two Berbers greeted us, the advance guard of the spring herdsmen; they told us that the first village was only about five hours' march away. So we cheerfully started off along a nice, dry mule-track, blissfully unaware that what is a five-hour journey to a nimble-footed Berber takes a good ten for a heavily laden European to cover!

The valley was very lovely; to our right rose the virgin snows of the Iférouane, while the sides of our track were covered with little alpine flowers of every description. Now and then a crystal-clear stream would come babbling across the path, the velvet patches of greensward along its banks spangled with the tiny golden trumpets of hoop daffodils. At noon we halted beside the main river and stripped for a swim, quite forgetting that only four hours earlier our fingers had frozen while packing the tents. But the welcome sunshine was only an interlude, for soon a mist came down and with it a drizzle; then the track plunged into a horrific gorge where we had to ford and re-ford the torrent, often thigh-deep, and sometimes even climb the walls and pass our ski and packs from hand to hand along narrow ledges high above the rapids out of sight in the depths. Nightfall caught us still in its labyrinthine toils, and we had to camp on a strip of grass by the torrent's edge at the bottom of a 3,000-foot ravine.

At dawn we set forth again and at last came out at the village, where we basked in welcome sunshine on the headman's roof, refreshing ourselves with mint-tea while he ordered mules to be saddled to take us down to the plain and so eventually back to Marrakech.

1 Moroccan High Atlas

Mt. Toubkal from Imelil

On the Afella n'Ouanoukrit

3 Moroccan High Atlas

Mt. Toubkal from the Afella n'Ouanoukrim

Tizi n'Ouagan

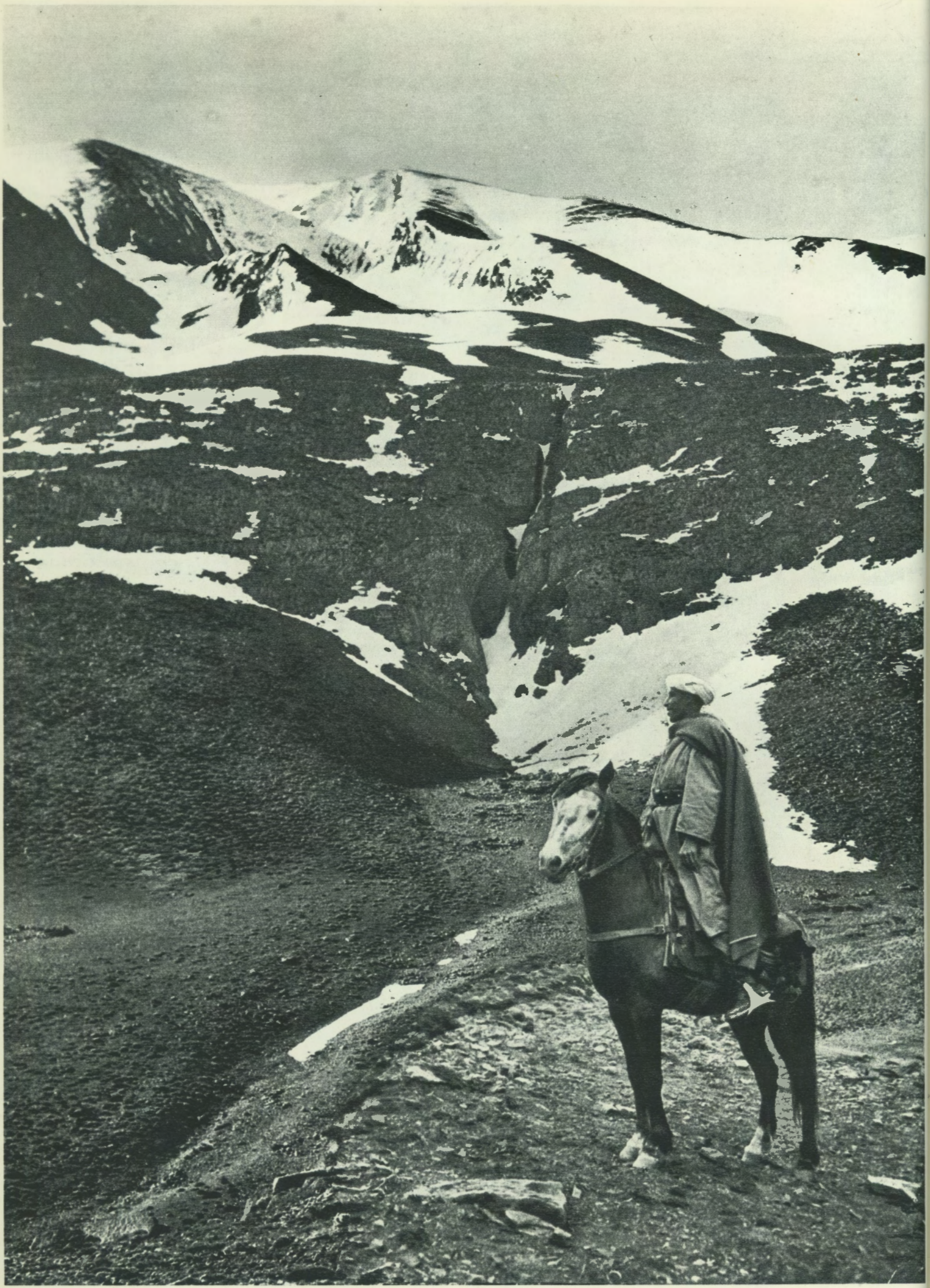
5 Moroccan High Atlas

Adrar n'Tichki—storm clouds mount from Plaine d'Arround

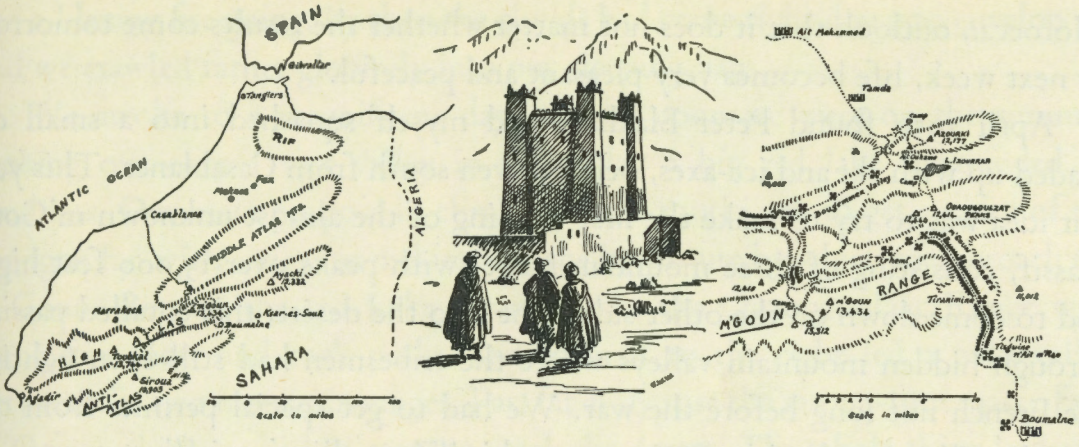
Mt. Afekhoi

7 Moroccan High Atlas

Mt. Aksoual



Mt. Azourki



CHAPTER II

CROSSING THE HIGH ATLAS

MOROCCO has a fascination that is hard to explain. It is not merely the beauty and indescribable coloration of the countryside, nor the charm of its people; probably it is due to the fact that, once the main towns and the plain are left behind, life goes on in just the same way as it has done almost undisturbed for 2,000 years. The philosophy of life of the Berber mountaineers is especially soothing; for they firmly believe that everything is as Allah wills, and that he knows far better than you what is for the best. If he has called you to a certain station in life and the community, it is up to you to do your best in it both for your own good and for that of your neighbours. It can be summed up in one phrase: "insh'Allah!"—"God willing!"; and once you absorb it, life becomes incredibly easy and simple. You cease to worry about results, for they are in God's hands; you merely do your best at the task in hand, thus achieving as much as, or more than the usual, with no mental wear and tear. We Europeans have mostly forgotten the words of Christ: "Take no heed for the morrow; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." This by no means indicates slovenliness or absence of planning; you merely cease to obscure the efficiency of today's efforts by worrying about tomorrow's results. This is precisely what the Berber puts into practice, and once we have accustomed ourselves to the

Moroccan outlook that it does not matter whether the results come tomorrow or next week, life becomes very pleasant and peaceful.

April 1950 found Peter Blaxland and myself squashed into a small car loaded up with ski and ice-axes, being driven south from Casablanca. This year our idea was to try to make the first crossing of the almost unknown m'Goun massif, consisting of three mountain ranges with peaks over 13,000 feet high, and to come down on the other side right into the desert; this entailed passing through hidden mountain valleys where the tribesmen had still been fighting the French not long before the war. We had to get special permits from the French military authorities to penetrate this "Zone d'insécurité".

We drove up into the foothills along a military track through wild country; clumps of cactus-like Euphorbias and huge pink and white rock-roses dotted the roadside, the air was scented with rosemary and Cistus. In due course we came to the last French outpost of Ait Mehammed, where fierce tribal levies in flowing blue gowns, after inspecting our papers, raised the barrier and led us to the Captain, who greeted us warmly and gave us a lot of useful information. He told us that porters were to meet us at Tamda, a deserted Foreign Legion fort ten miles farther on.

The weather had turned bad, and lowering black clouds hung over the top of the snow-covered Azourki, 12,177 feet, our first objective. The car deposited us at Tamda, and presently our porters appeared with a pack-mule and a bunch of interested tribesmen. Many willing hands soon had everything loaded, and we set off down a track of rich red earth into the gorge below the fort; we forded the creek, and began to climb towards the Azourki across barren red and purple slopes dotted with spiny plants and a few tall, gaunt and weirdly contorted thuriferous juniper trees that filled the air with their aromatic scent.

We had no sooner reached the first snow-drift than it began to rain; it turned very cold as we plodded on in mud and snow towards a pass ahead. Our muleteer grinned cheerfully and called: "Kerrib! Kerrib!"—"It's close now!" But as "kerrib", to a Berber, may mean anything up to a two-hour march, we did not respond. However, we did at last breast the final rise, and at 9,000 feet came into a lovely little valley of green turf dotted with tiny dwarf crocuses, at the very foot of the steep snow slope of the Azourki that soared up into the clouds. Our muleteer took the ice-axe and grubbed up some roots, and soon we

had a blazing fire going; by then the clouds had come right down to envelop us, and we crawled rather gloomily into our sleeping-bags.

We awoke to a magnificent day, and by noon we were on the summit, looking out over a vast valley in which lay a big red lake surrounded by mudflats. Our main purpose in climbing the Azourki was to get an idea of the topography, with a view to picking out the best route by which to approach the m'Goun. Beyond the red Lake Izourrar rose the Ouaougoulzat Range with some fine snow and rock peaks, and from it to the right led a wild valley between the two mountain ranges. Far, far away rose the 13,000-foot mass of the m'Goun, which we had to cross to reach the desert. The whole thing looked a much bigger job than we had bargained for; but since we could see the red squares of several fortress villages spaced along the valley—looking like toys so far below—we reckoned we could get all the food we needed as we went along. We had a fast, exciting ski run back to our camp, where after a meal and a rest we puttered about the green turf, while overhead a flock of red-billed choughs went swirling and chirping along the cliffs.

Next day we bore south over the Tizi n'Tirhist, west of the Azourki, and down a stony track through a grove of magnificent giant junipers into the valley we had seen from above. Green terraces of barley appeared, and then the square watch-towers of a village. The valley was lined with a network of irrigation channels, and a few women in dark-blue robes were working in the fields. Under a big rock a few old men were squatting; as we approached they stood up and raised one hand in greeting. "Labäss!" they cried. "Fin rhadi?"—"Where are you going?" We explained our plans, and they raised their hands and looked at the snows above: "insh'Allah!"—"if God wills!"

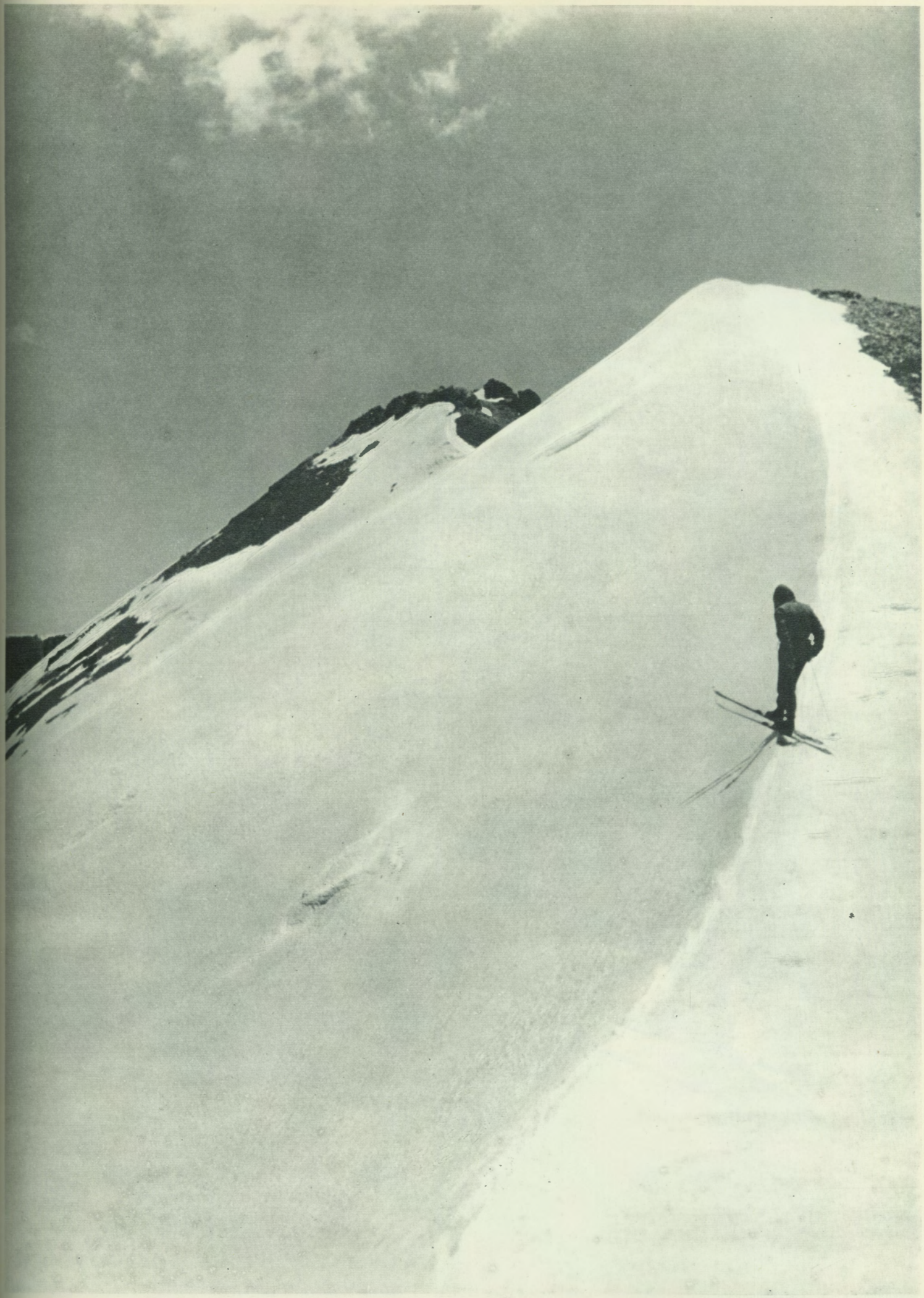
We walked on until we reached the highest hamlet of the valley, where all the villagers came out to meet us and ask countless questions. They were very friendly; but, since time means nothing to a Berber, it was a long while before they realized we still had far to go to reach our camp site beyond Lake Izourrar, and that we were very hungry. But at last a man led us through the high gates in the walls and along a narrow alley of red mud houses to a dark doorway. Entering by way of the stable, we felt our way up a dark stairway to the first storey—where a woman was bending over a large fire on the earthen floor—and on into the room above. Our host spread mats for us by the window embrasure,

and we politely took off our boots and squatted down. His small son came in and presented a squawking chicken to our gaze; then the child dashed out, only to return three minutes later with a broad grin, proudly displaying a blood-stained knife! A little later the man's wife came up, a handsome woman with fine features, dressed in a dark-blue gown held at the shoulders with big silver brooches. She wore a sort of pendant tiara of silver ornaments across her forehead, two necklaces of massive amber beads and heavy silver anklets and bracelets. Although Moslems, Berber women do not wear the veil, and generally take a much more active part in social life than do their Arab counterparts.

She carried a big covered earthenware bowl in which was the chicken, wonderfully steamed, a wooden platter of flat, round barley loaves and a bowl of fresh butter. When she had set them down we all squatted in a circle and tucked in with our fingers. The poor chicken had been about to lay an egg, and our host insisted on digging out this delicacy from its interior and presenting it to me as the guest of honour!

We hated to tear ourselves away, but it was getting late. As it was, we did not reach the far shores of the red lake until dusk, so that we had to pitch our tent by torchlight. It was a freezing night, and we were quite glad to set off at grey dawn though the valley still lay deep in shadow. For four hours we climbed on ski, first up a narrow ribbon of snow in a gully just opposite our camp, and then over wide snowy slopes to a ridge that led to the first peak of the Ouaougoulzat Range. On the far side of the ridge lay a vast snow basin of wonderful ski slopes, leading up to two fine rock peaks that promised excellent climbing.

The last 500 feet were too steep for ski, so we stuck them in the snow and continued on foot towards the summit, only to find that the highest peak was still a mile or so away along a very precipitous and airy arête. We had a short rest on the hot rocks, and then climbed down to a notch beyond our peak. The long ridge was most exciting—great cornices, most insecure, overhung red cliffs that fell a sheer 1,500 feet to the south, while very steep granite slabs, thinly covered with treacherous snow, fell away into an abyss to the north. In places every foothold had to be tested, and at times we passed like tight-rope walkers along the very crest of the ridge. But at last we arrived—the first people ever to set foot on that peak—and, to celebrate, we built a small cairn. The great



Irhil m'Goun ; summit ridge

Ouaougoulzat Rang

11 Moroccan High Atlas

Ouaougoulzat Range

Irhil m'Goun

m'Goun range was much nearer now and we could pick out the main summit and the way to approach it, though it still looked an awfully long way off. The lower, eastern end of the range was almost opposite to us, and through the deep cleft of a river gorge we could see the red shimmer of the desert far, far away. We made our way back to our ski and then skimmed down for over 3,000 feet on spring snow, descending in a few minutes what had taken us hours to climb.

All next day we trudged down the Ait Bougemmez valley along a hot, stony track, wishing we had light shoes instead of our heavy climbing boots. Every now and then we passed by the walls of fortress villages, and sometimes the four-square castle of some Sheikh would jut out from the mountainside high above us. At about 4 o'clock we came to a very big village, and a messenger came out to say that the Sheikh would like us to take tea with him. We were led down through tunnels in the walls and through huge wooden doors to an inner courtyard where he, his son, and his grand vizier stood awaiting us. He was a wonderful old man with a nose like an eagle's beak, white-bearded but as straight as a die, and a good six feet tall. His robes and turban were of spotless white, and a huge chased-silver dagger hung at his hip from a crimson cord. He led us through cool, whitewashed corridors to a room spread with rich rugs; the walls were painted in geometrical designs of many colours and hung with bright brass and copper utensils. He kicked off his slippers and watched us with amused tolerance as we struggled with the laces of our boots; then an old man brought in a three-foot-high brass brazier and a huge tea-kettle, while another came round with a brass bowl and a carved ewer of water for us to wash our hands. Although we were anxious to get as far as possible before dark we had to be tactful, and so an hour and a half came to be passed in polite conversation before we continued on our way.

That night we slept in comfort in yet another village, and at dawn we set off up a side valley, which led us to high alpine pastures where the puddles were glazed with ice. A dignified horseman on a high-pommeled, brightly embroidered saddle was watching a peasant ploughing the first furrow of spring, and there was a tang in the air that reminded me of Switzerland. Ahead, the triple peak of the m'Goun appeared, framed by a terrific gorge, and it was a great thrill to see our final goal so close. To avoid the gorge, which was

impassable, we found we would have to cross an 11,500-foot-high pass to one side of it. When we reached the head of the valley two shepherds warned us that there was so much snow above, we should never get over; we looked at Moha, our muleteer, who shrugged and said: "Let us try—we shall cross—insh'Allah!" So, on we went, up and up along a track among box bushes, beside a creek where the overhanging grasses were sheathed in ice. Though we could see the pass high above us, the mule soon began to flounder in great patches of snow, so that one of us had to stamp out a track while the other and Moha propped him up. Once or twice I thought he would never make it, but wheezing and panting he at last arrived at the top.

It was a wonderful moment, for there in front lay the whole vast range of the m'Goun, the last barrier between us and the desert, with a wide, grey, Tibetan-like plain in between. Down to this we now scrambled and across to the foot of the mountains; and here, by a spring on a tiny island of green turf in an ocean of grey stones, we made our highest camp at 10,500 feet. Moha borrowed the ice-axe and grubbed up some spiny bushes whose roots made excellent firewood, and we cooked the communal dinner while he devotedly groomed his beloved and gallant mule.

That was the coldest night I have ever spent. Even wearing all our spare clothing we shivered, and in the morning the whole inside of the tent was white with frost crystals, and our water-bottle was frozen solid. How Moha survived in just a djellabah, a burnous and some saddle-cloths, curled inside a small stone wall he had built—goodness knows. When I took him a bowl of porridge and some coffee, cooked on our Meta cooker in the chill grey dawn, he admitted he had not slept a wink.

At 6 a.m. the sun came up, and within half an hour we set off. A ribbon of snow between rock walls came to within a few yards of our camp, and this we followed on ski until we reached the broad base of a spur. From now on it was relatively easy going, though the snow was frozen so hard that the steep traverses necessary higher up were very slippery. Sealskins would not grip at all on the last steep and very narrow 300 feet of ridge, so we took off our ski and carried them.

It was a hard day, that. The first peak of the m'Goun Range that we reached was 12,580 feet high, and here we stopped for a meal. The view was fantastic,

for beyond a range of foothills the whole southern horizon was a haze of red desert, thousands of feet below. Dimly in the distance we could just make out the green of the oasis of Skoura. To reach the main summit, 13,434 feet, we had to ski along the narrow backbone of the range, an airy arête not very much lower, and across two intervening peaks. About half-way along we passed above a big snow basin to our left which seemed perfect for ski-ing and looked as if it would lead us almost back to our camp; we noted it for future reference, and climbed up to the penultimate peak. Here the ridge became very narrow and rocky, and to our disappointment we had to leave our ski and proceed on foot.

The main summit offered us a wonderful view right down the valley by which we had approached the range, and far beyond it towards the wooded ranges of the Middle Atlas. The contrast between the green pastures of the valley and the arid red desert to the south was most remarkable—we felt we were on a frontier between two different worlds. It had taken us nearly eight hours to reach the top, so we only rested for a bare half-hour before returning. The big snow basin gave us a wonderful ski run, but over the most extraordinary snow I have ever seen, for the strong sun had cut into it diagonally so that it was a series of long laminations about six inches high and an inch or so apart. However, lower down we struck good spring snow, and a series of pleasant traverses led us across into the head of a steep gully down which we slalomed in very tight turns to within fifty yards of our camp.

It was good to get back there and stretch out by the fire on the soft green turf. Propped up against my pack, full of hot tea, I was drowsily going over the events of the day, when suddenly Moha touched my arm and whispered: "Shouf!"—"Look!" There on the sky-line of the gully, barely fifty yards away, stood six magnificent buck mouflon, with huge curling horns and great beards. They came right to the edge to look at these humans who had usurped their waterhole. On elbows and heels I began to edge towards my camera, but at the first tiny movement they wheeled and vanished.

After another freezing night we started off on the last lap down through the m'Goun gorges to the desert. For miles we stumbled along stony ravines, and in the late afternoon met the first camel, looking most out of place against the snowy mountains. That night a friendly shepherd, who had never seen a

European before, bedded us down in the hay of his manger. Next afternoon we came to the gorges; the track became a ledge high in the cliffs, then ended abruptly in a deep cleft that seemed to fall vertically to the river-bed far below. A fantastic staircase-path had been built in tight zigzags down it, and I was amazed at the way our mule got down with the ski on his back. But the track led to the water's edge and disappeared; so, rolling up our trousers to our thighs, we waded into the torrent and for three miles splashed down an awe-inspiring gorge in a twilight gloom—for, as it was only some fifteen feet wide, the sky was often shut out by the towering cliffs that rose sheer on both sides for over a thousand feet.

At dusk we reached a point where the gorge widened, and came upon a hamlet tucked into a bend in the great red cliffs, surrounded by thickets of pink oleanders. A man was kneeling on a mat, saying his prayers; as soon as he had finished he leapt to his feet and conducted us to a house where his three wives and assorted children and dogs greeted us. He produced a welcome meal, and we all squatted down round the fire in the centre of the floor. The fire-light glinted on the silver bangles of his wives as they whispered and giggled opposite us, while from outside came the murmur of the river, echoing from the cliffs; in the darkness of the far corner a small black goat was bleating. Warm and replete, we stretched out on mats and soon everyone slept.

The next day was our last. At the first big village of the desert the Sheikh entertained us to lunch in his castle, where we ate mutton grilled on long skewers while his musicians sang in the room next door. Then, in flowing white robes with crossed bandoliers and a very modern rifle, he mounted his white Arab steed, gorgeously caparisoned in gold, scarlet and green, and escorted us to the edge of his territory. After a long march over the desert we arrived by moonlight at the Foreign Legion post of Boumalne.

CHAPTER III

ACROSS LAPLAND TO THE NORTH CAPE

FOR YEARS I had cherished the idea of ski-ing across Arctic Lapland to the North Cape, that northernmost point of Europe which juts out into the Arctic Ocean. Lapland is not a political entity, but just the name given to the territory inhabited by the Lapps, which spreads across the extreme north of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia; it is an area of wild mountains and glaciers and barren frozen plains, broken by forests that harbour the wolves who periodically descend upon the reindeer herds of the Lapps.

The "Land of the Midnight Sun" in summer, this region never sees the sun at all for nearly three months in mid-winter; so I had to pick the in-between season at the end of March, when the days would be long but the land still firmly snow-bound. Apart from the adventure of the thing, I was interested to get to know the Lapps as the people who had probably invented ski-ing, not as a sport but as an absolute necessity for getting about in winter. Their prowess on ski is amazing; many can travel non-stop for two days and nights at an average speed of 6 miles an hour, while in a ski race in 1884 a Lapp covered 137 miles in 21 hours. They are friendly, sympathetic people, as is shown in their belief that on the Day of Judgment the first witness called by the Almighty to testify to their character will be their dog.

There are only some 33,000 of them in an area almost twice the size of England and Wales, whither they probably migrated originally from somewhere in Central Asia. They have preserved their nomadic way of life ever since, wandering to and fro across the wild hinterland in the train of their huge herds of reindeer which they have been domesticating for over a thousand years.

The reindeer means everything to the Lapps, money, food, clothing, utensils and transport. Their main livelihood comes from the sale of reindeer meat and skins, and its meat, supplemented by willow-grouse, trout, and berries, is their main food. Their shoes, thigh-high leggings, gloves and long fur "kolte" or smock are all made from reindeer hide and fur, while the sheaths of their knives, spoons, cups, needles and so on are carved from the bones, antlers and skulls. The reindeer is the only beast of burden that can run on soft snow, usually pulling a "pulk", a boatlike sled with broad keel and rounded hull ending in a high prow to which the single trace is attached. This vehicle is made in two sizes, small for the single passenger or broad for baggage, and is entirely made of birch wood, beautifully trimmed and pegged together with wooden pegs. The deer are very difficult to manage for the uninitiated, for apart from being extremely temperamental and very mistrustful of the smell of non-Lappish folk, they are driven by a single rein attached to the right side of a simple halter. A sharp jerk on the rein sets them off at a gallop, while to stop them it is swung over the back and pulled in hard to the left. A flick with it on the left flank makes them turn left and vice versa; owing to the single rein and single trace their progress is always very serpentine and the rein has perpetually to be swung to and fro over their backs to keep them on a straight course.

The language of the Lapps is related to no known tongue except that spoken by the Samoyeds in arctic Siberia, and they are certainly very mongoloid in appearance—short stocky people with little bandy legs, turned-up noses, high cheek-bones and narrow chins; the average height of the men is only about five feet.

The first Lapps we met were in the ramshackle bus that took us from Kiruna, the great iron-mining town in the extreme north of Sweden, for as far as the snow-ploughs had cleared a track towards the mountains. Each tribe wears its distinctive costume, and these, resplendent in their blue "kufta"—a

long smock secured at the waist with a belt, the seams all picked out in scarlet and yellow trimmings—and blue peaked caps with a gigantic scarlet pom-pom on top the size of a football, were Jukkasjärvi Lapps.

The road ended in a snowdrift near a few huts, and here we got a horse and sleigh that took us westwards for some fifty miles across a chain of frozen lakes between low, undulating hills covered in birch scrub. A biting wind from the north-west drove stinging clouds of snow over us, and the drifting new snow made the going very heavy for the horse, almost covering the narrow, beaten track; we began to wonder whether we should be able to reach the last village, Nikkaluokta, before dark. On and on we sped in the twilight over the never-ending frozen lake, and it was not until 9 o'clock that night that we were able to warm up at the welcome fire of a Lapp hut in the village in question.

At dawn next day we set off on ski with 50-lb. packs up a slowly rising valley; the weather had cleared, and the sun shone brightly on the brown and silver trunks of the birches. All day we plodded on up the twenty-mile-long valley until we at last came to the tree-limit and finally to a hut built by the Svenska-Turistförening near the foot of Kebnekaise; this is the highest mountain in Sweden, and a Swede told us with a superior air that it was quite impossible to climb on ski.

The first thing was to make a reconnaissance, so next morning we climbed for three hours up a mountain fronting Kebnekaise, from whose long, snowy top we could pick out a good route of attack. From the farther end of the summit ridge a short ski run took us to a saddle at the head of the huge Storglaciär, right at the foot of the imposing ice-plastered face of Kebnekaise's northern summit. A wonderfully smooth and wide slope led down past a few crevasses to the névé, and after a dozen or so continuous turns we put our feet together and flew down in a terrific schuss that took us way down the glacier towards a little piece of exposed moraine; here we stopped for lunch, before tackling the more tricky running down the snout to the narrow side-valley that would eventually bring us out near the hut.

At 7 o'clock on a magnificent morning we started for Kebnekaise. After over an hour of traversing we reached the head of the valley, and then turned north up a gully at the foot of the towering crags of Tuolpagorni, a minor peak on the same range. The heat in this narrow, sheltered defile was terrific and we

were soon obliged to strip to the waist—the last thing we had ever expected in the Arctic. At the top we came into a big basin under the ice-covered cliffs of the long eastern escarpment of Kebnekaise, over whose eastern rim spread the furrowed blue ice of Björlings Glacier. We now saw that we would have to traverse a minor peak before we came to the long final slope to the summit, since the direct route was blocked by ice and heavy cornices; there was only a very thin coating of powder-snow on an icy crust that made traverses very tiring work, and it was easier to strap our ski to our packs and walk straight up on crampons. The domed top was covered in ice-nodules, while long feathers of ice festooned the edge of the cliffs. We were now high above the basin and could see right down the Ladtjodal to Nikkaluokta and on beyond to where the foothills gradually merged into the undulating white plain that vanished into the horizon. South and west lay range upon range of high mountains and shining glaciers.

We reached the summit at two-thirty; the South Top, just over 7,000 feet high, was clear, but the slightly lower North Top was hidden by clouds that were swirling up from the glaciers to the north-west, and the best part of the view was obscured. We had intended to climb along the narrow snow arête to the other peak, but it would have been unwise.

Having successfully disproved our friend's contention that the summit could not be reached on ski, we had a glorious run down to the saddle before the minor peak. The snow was absolutely perfect, and we raced down in consecutive christies with a cloud of "spray" behind us; then, after a short plod up on to Rullevare, we slalomed down the rather icy slopes beyond. The sky was clearing, and the sun gleamed on the glaciers of Sarek and Akka far away to the south, while to the west the mountains of the Norwegian frontier stood out in sharp silhouette.

We awoke next day under a brilliant blue sky, with no wind and the temperature at −8°C. Loaded up with three days' provisions and sleeping-bags we set out up a side-valley to the north, on the first lap of our 300-mile hike to the North Cape. We traversed up opposite the snout of Storglaciären as far as the frozen Lake Tarfala at the foot of Tarfalatjaako, the mountain we had to cross. The Kebnepakte Glacier flows into this lake, and a high cliff of blue ice bordered its western shore. To the right towered Kaskasatjaako, its whole

rock face and jagged triple summit encased in gleaming ice against the deep blue sky, looking like some glazed Himalayan giant.

Tarfalatjaako turned out to have one of those convex peaks whose summit one never seems to reach, and we did not enjoy the last three-quarters of an hour of our five-and-a-half-hour climb. The surface of the snow was covered in hard nodules of ice and frozen into waves; we had to go carefully to avoid tearing our sealskins. The run off the far side was a horrible, slippery, scraping performance, but we soon reached a small glacier which gave us easy ski-ing down into a valley. From there we traversed up westwards across its northern slope and crossed a wide shelf from whose further side we dropped steeply, in the teeth of an icy wind, into the Vistas Valley. The slope was in the shade and the wind cut through us; the snow had been blown into high, icy waves that made ski-ing very tricky and tiring, and we were thankful when we encountered the sun once more in the shelter of the birches below. Here ptarmigan were plentiful, and the dotted lines of their little feathered footprints interlaced the long shadows under the trees. Some ravens were croaking high among the cliffs, and once or twice we came across a few tufts of black and orange fur that were all they had left of a lemming. Later, among the trees we came upon the traces of a mass slaughter, with blood staining the trampled snow amid a mass of raven tracks. The unfortunate little rodents, it seemed, led a precarious existence in this valley!

For an hour we made our way up the slippery surface of the frozen river in the centre of the valley, in the teeth of an even colder evening wind that was blowing the snow in long, stinging streamers. The valley was the wildest we had yet seen, with high, forbidding rock precipices on either hand, only broken by the steep slopes of snow down which we had come, and others opposite that we were due to climb next day. We were looking for a deserted Lapp "kaata", a bee-hive hut of birch-poles and peat-sods used by the wandering reindeer herdsmen in summer. Tucked away in the birches under the cliffs, its sloping sides heavily plastered with snow, this hut blended so well into the general colour scheme that it took us some time to locate. Having at length found it, we stuck our ski into the snow and crawled through the sloping door into the cold and gloomy interior, where our first acts were to light a candle and chop some kindling. Birch-bark strips make superb fire-lighters, and after much blowing we had a roaring blaze going in the circular stone hearth and an

appetising mess of baked beans sizzling in the pan. There was very little room to move around the fire, which took up all the centre of the hut, and it was only possible to stand upright close beside it. The floor was covered with a deep layer of birch twigs, over which we later spread some reindeer pelts found in a corner. Bobby split some kindling for the breakfast fire while I set our compass courses for the morrow, our nightly precautionary ritual. We then banked up the fire to keep us warm as long as possible, and crawled into our sleeping-bags which we had wrapped up in two blankets each.

That was literally an arctic night, for the kaata was by no means airtight. Getting out of a cosy bag at 5 a.m. to light the fire was a most cheerless matter; on top of that we found that our boots were frozen stiff as boards, and we had to wrap our feet in blankets until breakfast was cooked and the leather thawed out. The "hard fried eggs" we had brought with us, wrapped in grease-proof paper, were frozen solid, and even when the outsides were re-fried in the pan until almost too hot to eat, the insides were still stone-cold.

But the day was perfect, and after an hour's climbing, when we at last came into the sunshine again, we were nice and warm. There was deep powder snow under the trees, muffling our steps, while small coveys of ptarmigan clucked in alarm and whirred off through the branches as we climbed; we crossed their tracks and passed deep, round holes in the snow where they had been sleeping. After a couple of hours we came to a high, lonely valley deep in the mountains; the wind could not penetrate here and the direct heat of the sun and its reflection from the snow were most exhausting. The air felt cooked, and we were glad to rest on the shores of a frozen lake and eat a handful of raisins before tackling the last steep 1,800 feet of climb on to Ruamaspakte.

We took off our skins and skied down on to the Mormantjaako glacier; it was hot, and as the snow was deep and sticky, we had to punt a lot. For several miles we descended the valley until our way was blocked by a series of frozen waterfalls; so we had to scramble out of the defile and along the steep slopes above until we could come down again to the wide lower valley that led to the big lake we were making for. Hardly had we started the run down than we came to the fresh tracks of a pair of hunting wolves that must have passed barely an hour before; the big pads and sharp claw-marks showed up crystal clear on a patch of smooth wind-crust.

I shall never forget the exquisite colouring of that evening, with the sun low down on the pass behind us. A warm glow spread over the valley, making the sallow and myrtle twigs stand out in swathes of glowing orange-red, merging into the more subtle tawny purple of the birches. The snow shone with yellow glints, while the dazzling whiteness of the ice-glazed mountain face behind was reflected here and there in the clear lilac shadows. Our arms worked in steady rhythm as we slid down the river, every twist and bend in its course making a fresh pattern in the kaleidoscope of colour.

We could just make out the kaata for which we were aiming, a small black speck a mile away across the frozen lake. Not even the beauty of the evening could make us oblivious to our tired muscles; we had been going for eleven hours and our pack-straps were cutting into our collar-bones. We were happy as we prised open the snowed-up door; but this mood did not last long, for the winter gales had done their work only too well and the interior was full of drifted snow. To add insult to injury, this had buried the small pile of cut faggots which were covered with ice and useless for starting a fire. It was impossible to clear all the snow out, but there was space enough at the back to spread the reindeer skins and make our beds.

We slept little, and began to stir already at 4 o'clock. The day's work began with a long, gradual ascent through the birches. Mountain tits were chirping wheezily as they breakfasted off the old birch catkins; an ermine had been running through the wood, and all the snow-hares in creation seemed to live here, their tracks criss-crossing in wild confusion. The long, slow ascent finally brought us into a narrow pass between high cliffs, filled by a frozen lake; and as we emerged at the other end we looked down over rolling slopes to the huge white expanse of the Torneträsk, a lake some thirty-five miles long, down to which we skied in powder snow over five miles of easy slopes.

The high mountain section of our trip was now over, and for the next ten days we would be crossing the flat, undulating tundra. At Abisko we flagged an empty south-bound ore-train of the Lapland Railway, and climbed aboard the wee calaboose tacked on to the last truck, where we, the guard, and two Lapps sat around the huge iron stove in the middle of the floor as the train rumbled southwards to Kiruna. At Kiruna we took a bus that carried us north again, now well provided with stores of bacon, eggs, tinned meat and fruit,

bread, butter and honey. All that day we rattled through a desolate, snowy countryside, only occasionally stopping at villages, where everyone including the bus driver conversed only in Lappish. At dusk we arrived at Karesuando, the last permanent Lapp village in Sweden, whose northern half lies across the river in Finland. There were plenty of Lapps about, all clad in very fine and heavy fur "kolter"; I was most interested in their ski, which were of the same archaic type one normally only sees in museums, a good 260 cm. long, turned up at each end, the whole upper surface being ornamented with carved designs. The binding was just a single thong through a hole in the centre, into which the hooked toe of their fur boots was inserted. They used only a single pole, with finely carved reindeer-horn handle.

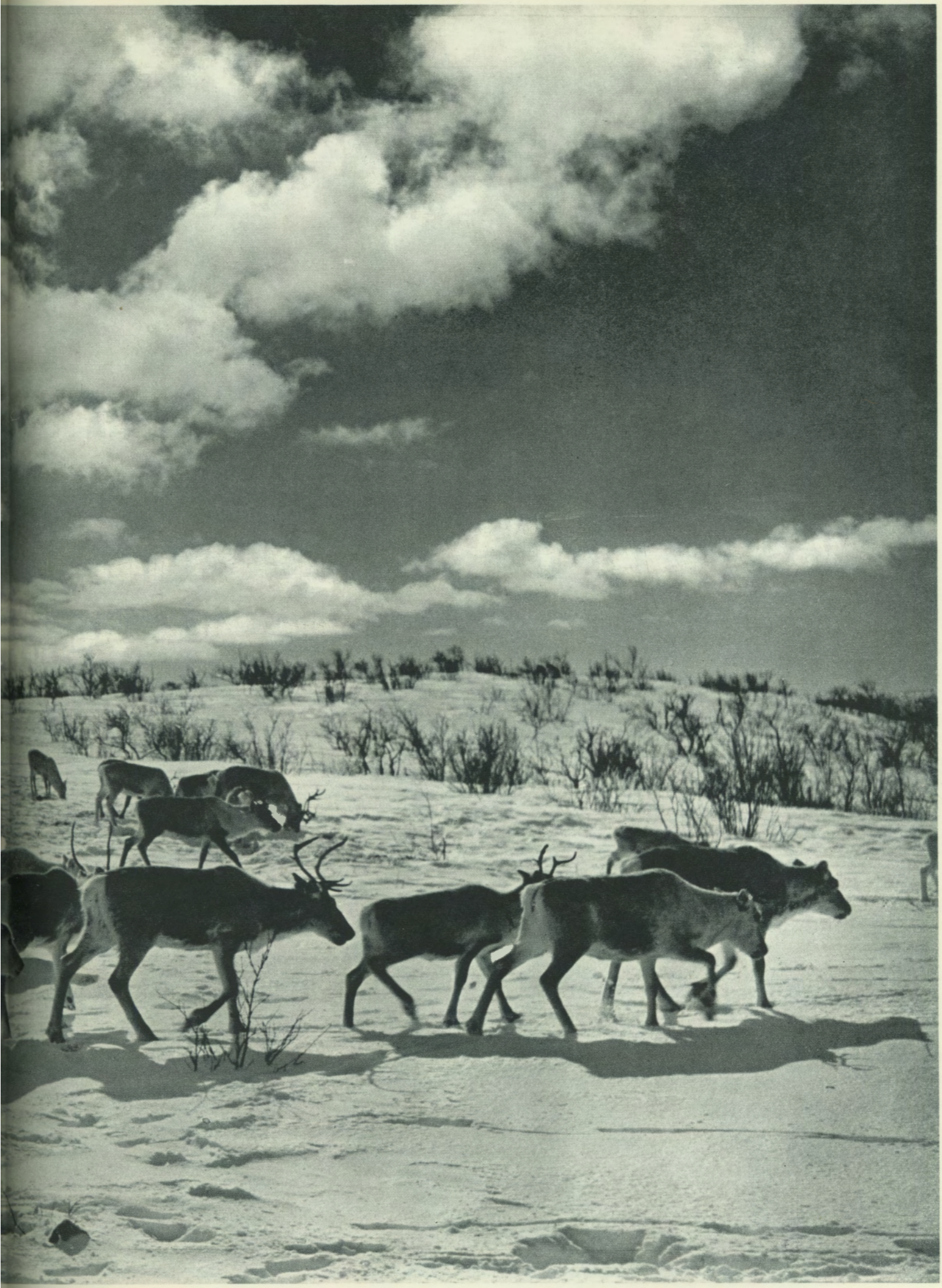
Where to sleep was the next problem; but we soon found help, in the shape of a man who led us through the village to the edge of the river and pointed out a house on the opposite bank. We skied down on to its frozen surface and punted across into Finland; parking our ski against the house, we knocked and entered.

Fru Vuopio welcomed us with open arms, beaming all over. She was the plumpest old lady I have ever seen, five feet high and just about as broad, clad simply in a plain dress of bright red flannel and a pair of fur boots. She ushered us into a huge room bedecked in the Finnish colours and furnished with a table, two chairs, a settee, and a bed which, though of orthodox width, was only two feet long: of this more anon. She then led us through into the next room where about a dozen Lapps were squatting on the floor around the stove, including a young mother rocking her baby in her arms in a minute, boat-like birch-wood cradle. They were very shy, and all shut up like clams as we entered. We then intimated to Ma Vuopio in Swedish, of which she spoke but little, that we would like to buy some furs if she had any to spare. This she certainly had, and very shortly we were both the proud possessors of a complete set of Lapp clothing, in beautiful soft reindeer-calf fur, embroidered in red, yellow and green, and ready for the wilds of the Finnish tundra.

After dinner—a huge stew of reindeer meat, potatoes, wholemeal bread and preserved cloudberries—we began to think about bed, but could not for our lives see where to sleep except on the floor, for the settee was too narrow and the "bed" only two feet long. As we were trying to puzzle out this

Ptarmigan tracks, Vistasdal

Akka from Kebnekaise



Reindeer

Lake Tarfala and Kaskasapakte

Sunset

Evening. Siusiavvre

problem, a small Lapp girl entered. She seized the end of the bed, and pulled it out like a concertina to full length; next she grabbed the settee and pulled that out somehow to double its width; then she opened a panel in the wall to reveal a basin and jug, and finally vanished through a trapdoor in the floor, whence she presently emerged with blankets and bolsters. In a moment our room was transformed into a most comfortable double bedroom, and after waxing our ski and washing we retired to an unexpectedly soft rest.

Next morning we were called at six. Ma Vuopio had provided us with a Lapp "vappus" or guide, and a reindeer sleigh to transport our tent, provisions, and a supply of chopped faggots to serve as fuel in the treeless wastes. Much to our disappointment our reindeer had only one antler, the other having been lost in a fight; so our Father Christmas outfit looked rather lop-sided on the march and nothing like as imposing as we had hoped. Bidding a fond farewell to Ma Vuopio, and the last of "civilization" we were to see for two weeks, we set off on ski behind our caravan, which departed in a northerly direction at full trot. At first we were hard put to keep up with it, but luckily the initial enthusiasm of the deer soon slackened and before long we were ski-ing along peacefully through a pretty, rolling landscape of birches and scattered pine-trees.

In the late afternoon we sighted a huge herd of reindeer moving slowly across a distant hill-top, their antlers looking like a forest of low trees; a few moments later we came to a nomad Lapp encampment on the shores of Lake Syväjärvi. There were two "tents" exactly like Red Indian tepees, made of skins stretched around a cone of poles, with a hide door like a kite opening on thong hinges. A few tethered deer were browsing nearby, their heads deep in the holes they had dug into the snow to get at the reindeer moss underneath; sleighs, ski and various bundles were piled all around, and some meat was hung up in a tree safely out of reach of any marauding wolverines. Inside the first tent a circle of Lapps squatted round the central fire, over which bubbled a pot of stew.

These Lapps had seen few foreigners and were very shy at first, but their curiosity soon got the better of them. A girl brought us a bucket of water and we busied ourselves with preparing a meal, while periodically small children would come up to stare at us, only to fly for their lives when we looked round.

These Lapps wore very different head-dresses from those farther south: a sort of blue cloth bag with four long trailing points behind, an eight-inch red headband embroidered with white and yellow, and a bundle of square bits of red and yellow cloth on a string hanging down like ear-rings on either side. Although they looked fairly poor, they owned the herd of deer—some 3,000 strong—which we had seen, and were considered fairly well-off by local standards.

Night came, and we decided to turn in. As we were spreading our bags and blankets a large and powerful-looking Lapp appeared at the door and stood motionless, staring at us like a figure of doom. After about five minutes of this we began to feel a bit disconcerted; he watched our every movement but neither moved nor uttered. Suddenly, just as we were crawling into our bags, he addressed us in Norwegian; the ice was broken, and we soon got talking amicably. Apparently he had been sent in by the others, as the only one who could converse with us, to ask if we had all we wanted and generally do the duties of host. From him we got details of the next stage of our journey—it seemed we had some sixty kilometres to cover, across the most desolate and barren part of the country, going first eastwards to where a little pass led through the low hills and then north across the high tundra on the Finnish-Norwegian frontier to the little encampment of Galanito, after which we would follow the Kautokeino River for some seventeen kilometres to the village of the same name.

After breaking camp at dawn, we crossed the lake, passed through the birches to the foot of the hills and began the climb up to the pass. There we saw the last of the trees, as we struck out into a limitless expanse of dead white. By the edge of a frozen lake we passed a derelict kaata, half covered with drifted snow, and then for miles and miles we saw nothing to relieve the monotony until a faint line of hills appeared far away to the south-west. At ten o'clock our vappus reined in the deer and informed us we were now on the frontier: the wind blew little whirlwinds of snow over our tracks and the placid deer gazed at its feet, occasionally munching a mouthful of snow to quench its thirst. There was no point in resting, nor anything to look at except the vast expanse of snow and sky; so we carried on for another two hours and then camped for lunch. With his heel the vappus dug a big hole in the snow into which he piled some faggots, and soon we had a roaring fire at which we roasted some rashers of bacon while he warmed up a large leg-of-reindeer from which he pared huge

slabs with his knife. The deer rooted down through the snow to the moss below, and browsed peacefully before curling up for a rest.

An hour later we set off once more. Presently we came down into the birches again and began to cross low ridges and valleys for some miles until we came to a huge lake. The wind had now turned to the north and was blowing strongly right in our teeth; gusts of wind almost blew us backwards and clouds of driven snow stung our faces. It was hard work ski-ing against the wind on the icy surface, broken by long ribs of drifted snow, but we plodded on—seemingly for ever. We could not even chat, for the wind blew the words back into our mouths. Our deer soon left us far behind; with heads down we followed the tracks until we came to the end of the lake and regained the shelter of the birches. Suddenly we found a pair of ski propped against a tree, and then the trail dipped and descended steeply to the wide Kautokeino River. On its farther bank lay a cluster of Lapp huts and before them, chewing their moss, were our deer. The inhabitants welcomed us warmly and were full of questions about the outside world: Was London a very big village and how many houses did it have? Had the snow begun to melt yet in England? Was it true that apple-trees grew there; and was it true that Europe was always fighting?

Our vappus wanted to go home from here, so we paid him off and engaged another, a cheerful little man called Lauri Utsi who was always laughing. We skied off in his wake next day down a broad river whose frozen surface was beaten flat by the hooves of many deer, since it was the main traffic artery to the coast. The going was very hot, but after some fifteen miles we climbed the north bank and began once again to cross interminable tundra, occasionally passing a caravan of Lapps with their deer. After two days we reached a big river whose course we followed; the ice was beginning to break up and in places we had to watch out. We were obviously losing altitude, for presently we left the birches behind and came to a pine forest. The river widened to a hundred yards, and we began to meet many Lapps coming and going along its broad surface. In the late afternoon we came to the big Lapp village of Karasjokk, and here we rested for a day and a half, for we had covered 150 miles in four and a half days.

It was Easter Sunday, and the Lapps were in all their finery. The wooden fences and tall silver birches, the wide river with its troika-like sleighs bearing men and women in their bright costumes on its frozen surface, and the colourful

groups standing on the banks, all reminded me of a scene in Russian opera. Lapps were coming in from all sides to the little wooden church; the women, wearing bright scarlet poke-bonnets and blue, red-hemmed gowns approached sedately two by two through the trees, between the huts with huge skins pegged out on their walls; their hook-toed fur boots, bound with scarlet at the ankle, made not a sound on the snow. The men wore dark-blue smocks bound with broad scarlet bands at every seam, and fur caps with four enormous pointed horns of blue cloth stuffed out hard with hay, making a jagged frieze against the smooth hills above the river. A few chiefs were clad entirely in white furs.

Easter over, we bade a fond farewell to little Lauri, and engaged another vappus to take us on the last section to the coast. From Karasjokk we climbed up again above the pine woods and across a barren landscape bounded to the north by a low range of mountains. Towards evening we came to the shores of Lake Igjajavrre, dotted with stunted birches from which the setting sun threw long, fantastic shadows. Far away to the west, over the distant mountains, banks of storm clouds were forming, and the prospects for the morrow did not look very bright. The temperature dropped to −15°C.—the coldest yet—and as we turned in, a fine Aurora Borealis sent its long, sinuous curtains of gold flashing across the heavens.

Sure enough, we awoke to hear the wind whistling; for two days we headed into a gale of stinging snow until at last we dropped down off the high inland plateau through a wild rocky valley to the Porsangerfjord. A little jetty stuck out into the pack-ice, by a clear lane of water, and a few Lapps were hanging about the cluster of huts waiting for the bi-weekly small steamer connecting this lonely spot with the island on which lies the North Cape. As dark fell we all huddled together round a stove in a tiny hut. Desultory conversation sounded above the shuffling of feet and clicking of knives, while a haze of pungent smoke eddied about the solitary oil lamp. The bright scarlet bonnets of the women glowed in the shadows as they sat in silence by their fur-clad menfolk. All at once a Lapp started a mournful, monotonous song in a low minor key, which was gradually taken up by the whole room in a slowly swelling volume of sound; Europe and the twentieth century were swept away and only the primeval North remained.

Next day, at two o'clock in the morning, the ship landed us on the island in

what was already broad daylight. We climbed up a gully in the forbidding black cliffs above the little harbour on to a high plateau, the most bleak and desolate landscape I have ever seen, an endless waste of snow blown into waves like the sea stretching away into low, leaden clouds. This we crossed for several miles and then skied down into Skarsvaag, the most northerly village in Europe. On the farther side of the fjord a huge black promontory jutted out into the Arctic Ocean: the North Cape. A storm caught us as we approached it, and for an hour we had to shelter under a rock; then we climbed up on to the narrow plateau on top. Compasses not being always reliable in these far northern latitudes, we had, when the storm clouds came right down over us, to steer by ear, going ahead until we could hear the warning roar of breakers far below to one side and then altering course until we heard them again on the other. But at last we saw a small black shape in the murk—a signpost with a big N and an arrow pointing to the North Pole. All around us sullen black cliffs were falling to the dark sea hundreds of feet below, where the waves crashed thunderously against the rocks.

Our trip of 505 kilometres was over; we were on the northernmost tip of Europe.

CHAPTER IV

"SONS OF THE EAGLE": AN ALBANIAN INTERLUDE

THE EARLY morning mists of autumn were slowly rising as I walked down to the shores of the Lake of Scutari, and the low line of the mountains on the opposite shore loomed faintly through them. In the reeds pelican sailed majestically along; nearer the shore, in the shallows, a few egrets were fishing for their breakfast. From behind came the faint tinkle of bells as the first donkeys arrived in the bazaars for market. I turned back and followed them, elbowing my way through the throng that filled the narrow cobbled alleys, jostled by pack-ponies and tall mountain peasants in short black tufted jackets and long white bell-bottomed trousers whose seams were bound in broad black braid. Their bright coloured sashes were stuffed with knives and pearl-handled pistols, while their womenfolk were adorned with massive barbaric jewellery, their intricately embroidered blouses separated from the full, swaying skirts by eight-inch-wide metal-studded belts. High above the cluster of low, red-tiled roofs rose the slender white minaret of a mosque—it is barely forty years since Albania was part of the great Ottoman Empire and the country is ninety per cent Moslem.

I bought rolls of fresh bread, a kilo of white goat-cheese, fine and delicate in flavour, some lemons, and a large and sticky parcel of "Lokhoum" or Turkish

Delight, sold by the yard and cut up into convenient lengths for packing. This sweetmeat, full of nuts and sugar, is one of the most sustaining things to take into the mountains—and I was getting ready to go through the northern Albanian Alps, a wild area of tall limestone peaks and deep valleys. My purchases complete, I collected my bedding-roll and tent and clambered aboard a lorry that was to take me to road-head away in the foothills some thirty-five miles to the north-east.

My fellow passengers were mostly mountain peasants, all armed to the teeth; as we bumped and jolted across the stony plain, they broke into weird oriental tunes, their voices rising and falling in queer cadences that harmonized well with the hot red earth and stunted thorn-bushes which stretched as far as the eye could see, shimmering in the heat haze. Soon the "road" began to rise and we lurched and rolled over piles of loose boulders and bare ribs of rock among dried-up watercourses. Presently a few stunted oaks appeared, and just as the first pines began to dot the rocky hillside the engine boiled. The peasants gathered in a group to gossip, leaning on their rifles from which they would not be parted for a second; to stretch my legs I walked across a field towards some wooden crosses at the edge of a small oak copse. It was a cemetery of the Miridits, one of the few Christian tribes of Albania; just a few mounds headed by simple but graceful carved wooden crosses. On the top, and at each end of the cross-piece, stood a small carved bird; for the Miridits believe that birds are the protectors of the spirit and will swoop down and drive away anyone who may try to violate a grave.

Shouts called me back to the lorry, and an hour later we arrived at a village below high, rocky crags to which pointed beeches precariously clung. Peasants and pack-trains were constantly passing on their way to or from the two high passes above; the men wore the little round white skull-caps of Albania and were always fully armed, since the vendetta is rampant and the mountains are full of wild boars, not to mention the occasional bear or wolf. The Albanian mountaineer is the soul of honour according to his stern code, and the traveller is sacrosanct; even blood-enemies will suspend their feud as long as either is harbouring a stranger. Wherever I went I was greeted by a grave "Toonyat yetta!" or "Long life!", and offered food and milk and lodging; to have proffered payment would have been a deadly insult. All I

could do was to hand out cigarettes and, if permitted, give a few coins to the children.

Having eaten, I found a man going my way who helped to carry my roll over the Thoria Pass; together we zigzagged up the stony track through the beech forest until the trees suddenly thinned and we came out on the pass before a stupendous panorama of wild mountain scenery. The pass led through a gap in the mountains and down the top of a spur; to our right a precipitous slope, thinly clad with tall pines, overhung a deep wooded ravine 3,000 feet below. All around towered huge rock peaks, and away up to our left the main valley ended in a long white scree slope in the heart of a cirque of pink cliffs. The air was scented with resin and the perfume of alpine flowers that carpeted the clearings. The way led between high rocks and lightning-riven pines. With a loud, leathery flapping a golden eagle soared off a rock barely nine feet above my head, and twenty yards on we surprised a dozen more in the branches of a dead tree on the cliff-edge; they flapped away one by one and slowly circled up into the heavens. The trees seemed to exude eagles as we descended, and at one moment I counted over thirty in the air at once, from huge winged forms close above us to tiny specks far up in the sky, swinging in great arcs against the background of towering pink mountains. Not for nothing do the Albanians call themselves "Sons of the Eagle".

Once down in the valley, we followed the stony bed of the river to the village of Thethë, a few tiny white houses, windowless except for square embrasures in the masonry, each with its own little patch of tobacco. Here the valley was comparatively broad and dotted with fields of maize; the track now led up the river bank and brought us to a flat green meadow upon which stood a Franciscan monastery with its chapel and little cemetery—a last outpost of Christianity, for the valleys beyond the next pass were inhabited by Moslems. The monks gladly gave me leave to pitch my tent in their meadow, and while I struggled with guy-ropes my companion went off to a neighbouring cottage, returning presently with a couple of freshly roasted corn-cobs and a few interested peasants. These squatted around me in a circle as I cooked our evening meal, watching my every movement. A few tall walnut-trees sheltered this pleasant spot; below us the unseen river burbled, and beyond it high terraced cliffs rose towards the darkening sky, a few scraggy beeches clinging

to their ledges. Opposite, the last rays of the sun lit up the glittering pink crags of Zhaborah Peak 5,000 feet above us, flashing from the snow in the gullies.

After dinner the Abbot bade us drink coffee with him. He and one of the Brothers told me in excellent German that for four hundred years the valley had made its own laws, owing to its isolation in the midst of these wild mountains, and was still exempt from all taxes. In winter it is utterly cut off from the outside world by over twelve feet of snow, which not only blocks the passes but makes them perilous of approach owing to the danger of avalanches. The peasants hardly ever move out of their houses, since they want to conserve all the heat possible indoors; also the snow is too deep to wade through, though at intervals they have to take fresh hay from the barns across to the sheds that house the sheep and goats.

We were up at dawn next day and struck our tent in the deep gloom of the valley as the first rays of the sun lit up the high peaks. The peasants were already on the move; an old woman passed slowly by us behind her few sheep, a long distaff under her arm bearing a tangle of thick white wool, the bobbin twirling from the other hand as she spun the yarn. It was cold, for the valley lay at 4,000 feet, and we strode briskly up the shingle by the riverside before striking steeply up into the glorious beech forests. Every now and then the winding track passed through clearings that afforded wonderful views across the valley to the rock precipices at its head. In one of these a horseman with two pack-mules caught up with us, and as we now had a mule of our own we made a regular cavalcade. Presently we left the beeches and entered the pine-belt; there was little shade and we stripped to the waist as we toiled up the steep and narrow trail, now across grassy inclines, now between big rocks that reflected the heat of the sun. The air was full of the humming of insects among the masses of rock-plants in every nook and cranny.

As we arrived in the pass—a narrow rift in the serrated sky-line—a family came over from the other side; father, mother, two children and a heavily laden pack-horse. One of the children was strapped to the bedding on the horse, while the baby was slung across its mother's back in a painted wooden cradle. Father made a brave figure with his bell-bottomed black trousers and tasselled coat, his red sash slung with bandoliers and his rifle across his shoulder.

The valley on the far side was much wilder; steep and narrow between high ranges of rock peaks. A white river-bed shone in its depths, winding through clustering fir trees, and far below I spied some figures moving ant-like along the thread of track. Our way cut across to the left under some cliffs, on a very steep slope of purple shale that fell sheer away into nothingness 200 feet down; in one place the trail was so narrow, with the cliff on the left and the abyss on the right, that the horse with its pack-saddle could hardly pass. With ears pricked and head down it picked its way down foot by foot; but finally it jibbed and had to be led with great care for some 20 feet. Round the next corner, luckily at a wider point, we met a local chieftain mounted on a pure white pony, magnificently saddled and caparisoned, with rifle and bandoliers across his back and two finely inlaid pistol butts projecting from the bright sash below his gold-braided lilac waistcoat. He was escorted by two men on foot, both heavily armed, and a pack-train of three horses.

It was a joy to get off the precipice on to a grassy slope spangled with yellow flowers, and then down into the shade of the beech forest. Here at a spring we rested and fed, the horse happily munching a large bundle of beech branches which we broke off a nearby tree. We made not a sound as we descended over the soft brown bed of leaf-mould, but presently the silence was softly disturbed by a weird little melody that piped and bubbled away inconsequentially in the distance; slowly it grew louder, until in a clearing we came upon a small boy squatting on a rock playing a double-tubed shepherd's pipe. He stopped as we approached but started again as soon as we had passed, the odd little dancing trill pursuing us until we were once again deep in the forest.

Down on the valley floor we crossed a broad river-wash of white stones from a gash in the steep slope above, stones so white that they hurt the eye. The track led through spruces to where a river was splashing and before long we were walking along its edge, a swift flowing stream of crystal-clear water in whose many pools lurked plenty of huge trout. Herdsmen were now calling from the hillsides, and in a few more miles the valley widened into big green clearings where cattle grazed. Soon the river split into three; two of the channels we forded, while a narrow log bridged the last to where the white houses of Selimaj village crowded between the water and the vertical mountainside behind.

My companion led the way to the second house and up the steps to a wooden platform outside the first floor, where an old woman welcomed us and gave each a bowl of milk to drink while she fetched a thick black-and-red rug which she spread on the "balcony". After dinner it rapidly turned very cold, and we were glad to go to the room offered us, where we spread our bedding on the rugs on the plank floor. There were no windows, only two-foot-square holes in the wall, and underneath we could hear animals moving; through the night their welcome warmth came up through the cracks in the floor.

All next day we followed the limpid river, sometimes in the beech woods beside it, sometimes on steep narrow trails high on rocky slopes above. We passed a few villages where, as usual, each house had its own tiny plot of tobacco plants; enough for the needs of the owner, with a little over to take to market. We were down in richer vegetation now, and sometimes the path was overhung by "Thannas", broad-leaved trees which bear masses of fruit like long oval cherries, with a delicious taste somewhere between a cherry and a raspberry. Caravans of peasants and pack-trains were passing in both directions, and towards evening we came to a wide fertile plain deep in the heart of the mountains. Large villages lay scattered among the maize-fields and oak-groves, and at intervals beside the broad river that divided the plain in two. My muleteer took us to a walled farmhouse on the outskirts of Kolgecay village, where we were admitted through a wooden gateway to an inner courtyard. The house, surmounted by a big watch-tower, took up one corner, and barns and pens lined the stone walls. A wrinkled old man took us to a verandah on the first floor, sat us down on rugs, and brought us delicious Turkish coffee and corn-cobs. We were given a cucumber each, followed by stuffed paprikas, a huge grilled trout, and cheese and a melon; while we menfolk sat cross-legged around a low table and dipped our fingers into the communal bowl, the women waited upon us and periodically proffered a basin and ewer for us to rinse our hands. From a corner of the roof hung a huge hide drum: wild boars come down from the hills every night to raid the maize-plantations, and throughout the night, relays of volunteers go the rounds beating this drum to scare them off.

When at last bedtime came, we spread our sleeping bags on the verandah floor. The drum was unhooked and carried off by two men armed with rifles

and accompanied by fierce dogs. My companion started to sing wailing, nasal Turkish melodies as we lay down to sleep, but broke off as the drum began to sound in the distance. I slept fitfully that night, and whenever I woke I heard the monotonous THUD! Thud-thud-thud! THUD! Thud-thud-thud! of drumming, and the staccato barking of the dogs.

Next day we left the plain, and for three more days marched on through the mountains, climbing in and out of precipitous valleys. Once we had to cross a large river, the Drini; there was no bridge, just a ferry made of simple twin-log floats with a platform built across the middle. As we waited for it to come across, a small boy appeared, stripped, put his clothes in a bundle on his head and swam over supported by two gourds tied under his arm-pits. Next to arrive was a man carrying an entire sheepskin with the legs and neck-hole sewn up; this he inflated and used as a life-buoy while swimming across. We unloaded our pack-horse, piled saddle and baggage on the ferry, and drove the animal into the river; as we were paddled across he swam, drifting with the current to land a couple of hundred yards downstream.

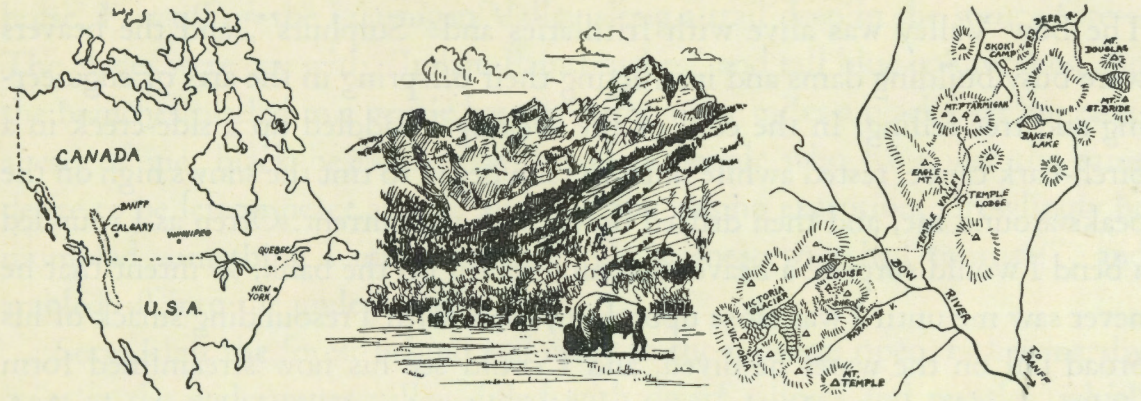
Before long the weather broke and thunder-storms soaked us to the skin, but at night we always found some hospitable household that sheltered and warmed us. At long last we emerged from the mountains into a valley of lovely green fields dotted with blackberry bushes and oak copses; eventually a big village at the end of a newly built road hove into sight. As we sipped coffee at the inn the host ran up to say that a timber-lorry was just about to leave for the plain; grabbing our gear we hopped aboard and settled ourselves among peasants and their rifles. With a crashing of gears we lurched off down the red road, and three hours later the white minarets of Scutari once more appeared on the horizon.

Mt. e Zhorahit

i Pejës Range from Thethë

i Vash Shtefnit Range from Qaf e Valbonës Pass

Qaf e Valbonës Pass



CHAPTER V

RIDING THROUGH THE CANADIAN ROCKIES

MUCH AS I love ski-ing and the silent, remote world of the mountains in winter, I never cease to thrill at the fresh scent of spring in the air when one comes down off the glaciers in April; to see the first green shoots, bursting with the promise of new life, and the tight pink buds of the fruit-trees. It is a thrill that is always as fresh and new as the first time I experienced it; that gives, simultaneously with the exquisite ecstasy of living the present moment to its fullest, the timeless vision of the ever-recurring array of seasons stretching back and forward into infinity.

As the spring advances, the skier is driven up to the highest slopes or to the perpetual glaciers, while the valleys are given over to the blue stars of gentians in the fresh green meadows and the lilac clusters of Hepaticas on their cool brown bed beneath the fir-trees. The tinkle of cow-bells echoes up towards the tops and the first shrill whistles of the awakening marmots split the air along the glacial moraines. Boisterous streams dance bubbling down the slopes as the snow, transformed, descends to give life to the land. The sunlit hours lengthen, drawing out the flowers—they advance, driving back the snow, until the purple of the Pascal anemones carpet the highest levels.

The summer had just arrived as I came to Banff in the Canadian Rockies.

The Bow Valley was alive with fritillaries and "Sulphurs", and the beavers were busy building dams and instructing their offspring in the arts of engineering and tree-felling. In the cool of the evening I paddled up a side-creek in a birch-bark canoe, rested awhile until the sun began to tint the snows high on the peaks around me, and then drifted down with the current. Often as I rounded a bend I would surprise a beaver preening its fur on the bank, so intent that he never saw me until I was close upon him; then, with a resounding smack of his broad tail on the water he dived, and I could see his now streamlined form gliding swiftly past under the canoe, outlined in silver air-bubbles. As the dusk grew, a bull moose came down to drink, his heavy head ill-supported on his stilted legs. Slowly he advanced, huge antlers outlined against the sky as he swung them, sniffing the air; then spreading his hooves he lowered his head to the water to drink.

But Banff was too low for me and I moved on to Lake Louise, whose clear waters reflect the gleaming glaciers and snowy arête of Mt. Victoria. That night it snowed, although it was the middle of July, and next day the peaks were all a dazzling white above the deep green of the forest. Slowly I climbed up towards Mt. Fairview: as the sun rose higher the snow swiftly disappeared, and on the highest slopes each leaf cradled a drop of dew. Were it not for the scarlet and crimson spikes of "Indian Paintbrush" growing through the grass I might have been in the Alps, for there were bilberries everywhere and big patches of dark green spangled with the white stars of the mountain avens, (*Dryas octopetala*). The top was a barren jumble of loose rock; all around me rose high peaks hung with glaciers, and the lake was so far below that I looked down on it as from an aeroplane. A few coneys, with little round ears and blunt noses, were popping shyly in and out of the stones, and small fritillaries could be seen fluttering gaily along the crest of the ridge, occasionally pausing to sun their wings on a hot rock. Otherwise there was not a sign of life and the silence was absolute. Instinctively I listened for a sound of cow-bells or the distant ringing of a village church-bell; this, I thought, is how the Alps must have been in the Stone Age, before man had peopled them.

Once you leave the thin ribbon of the Canadian Pacific Railroad behind you are in country that has not changed for thousands of years, disturbed only by the animals and the passage of an occasional band of hunting Indians. Taking a

horse, I set off up the Ptarmigan Valley along a trail deep in the spruce forest. The glades were gay with "Indian Paintbrushes" and tall blue columbines, and the branches rustled in a gentle breeze. After a few miles a black bear appeared ahead of me; black bears are very harmless people who have just the same desire to be left in peace as you, and this one was no exception. Growlingly he mumbled something I interpreted as: "Curse these wretched tourists!", and ambled off into the undergrowth.

Soon I left the forest behind and came to the muskeg: open, rather marshy areas in the wide upper valley, filled with dwarf sallows and myrtles, which finally gave way to alpine meadows of short crisp turf spangled with orange hawkweeds and clumps of sulphur anemones. Here the trail was well-beaten and hard; I know of few more glorious experiences than riding across these wild, high passes with towering rock peaks and gleaming glaciers on every hand. Ski-ing is after all a purely selfish sport, in that you have nothing more to consider than a pair of boards that are (theoretically at any rate!) just part of you; but in riding, especially in the wilds, the care and well-being of your steed are almost more important than your own. And because of this, a sort of understanding is developed whereby the horse becomes the medium for a closer appreciation and understanding of Nature in all her moods: you and your horse and the blades of grass you crush underfoot all become equally vital parts of one whole, each no less important than the other.

I found a grassy basin in which shone a small blue lake, and by it stood a rocky mound with a flat top, an ideal camp-site; beyond it the broad green slopes rose gently to the wide pass, and to left and right long slopes of purple scree led to the foot of rocky mountains whose gullies were lined with snow-drifts. Small, brilliant orange "Clouded Yellows" were darting about everywhere, probing the flower-heads, and the gentle humming of insects was broken, now and again, by the shrill whistles of a marmot. From the tent door I looked down the wide vale up which I had ridden, and across the Bow Valley, hidden below the distant tree-line, to the ice-capped peak of Mt. Temple.

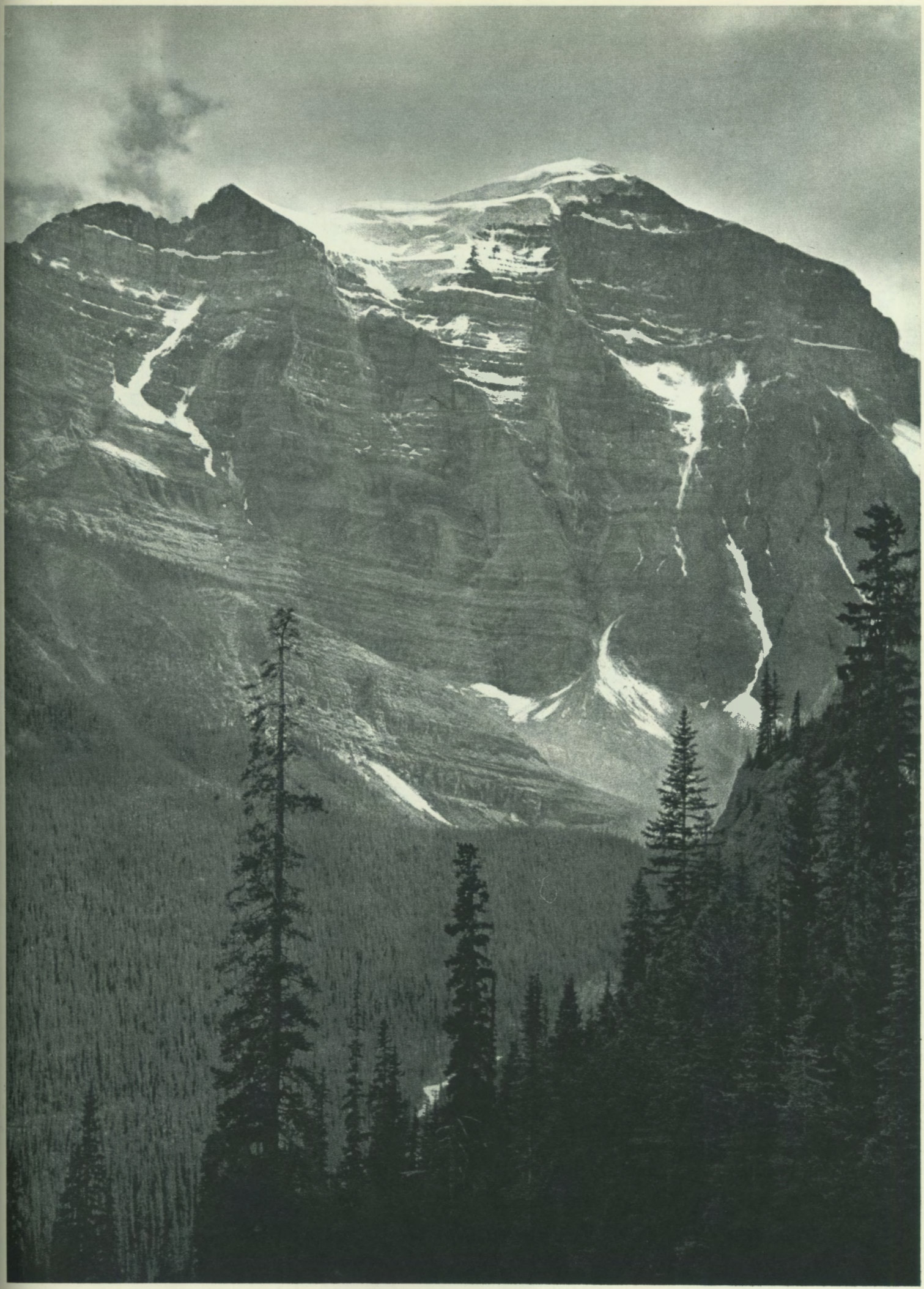
It was a wonderful evening. The scent of the alpine flowers came out as the shadows lengthened, and the air grew pleasantly cool. The distant glaciers of Mt. Victoria and Mt. Temple were slowly turning pink in the rays of the

setting sun. From somewhere high up in the screes behind, a few stones rattled down, dislodged by a "Rocky Mountain goat". The resin-scented smoke of the camp-fire drifted gently up into the still air. At last the deep purple shadows enveloped me; the distant snows turned a glowing crimson that died out into a steely grey, and one by one the stars began to appear. A cool little breeze sprang up, and I crawled into my sleeping-bag.

Next day I rode on over the Ptarmigan Pass, down to the Skoki Valley and over a low saddle to the Red Deer Valley, whence I followed a steep side-valley up to the dirty, boulder-studded snout of the Douglas Glacier. Far across on the other side shone the long Drummond Glacier, looking as if there was still good ski-ing on it; and I thought regretfully of my ski as I plodded up and up over the ice and the granular snows above. From the hot summit-rocks I looked down into another wide valley, down which ran a creek that broadened out into two small lakes among some low timber. Three small black dots were wading across one of these—a family of moose on the move.

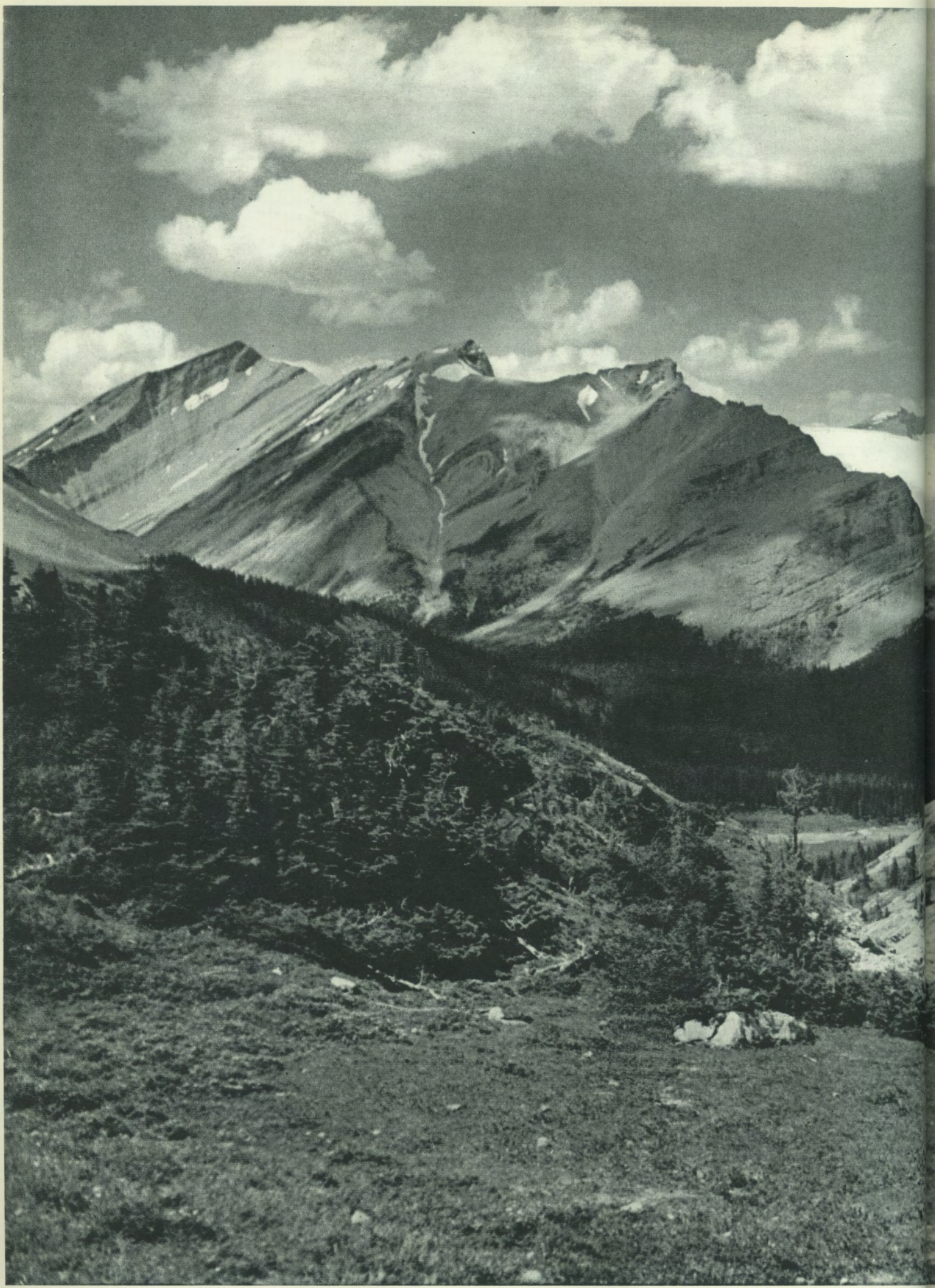
Back at the camp I kindled a fire which shone brightly in the dusk, and soon an appetising smell of cooking permeated the still air. Evidently I was not the only one to appreciate it, for sundry cracklings in the trees and an occasional "Woof!" showed that at least one bear had caught it. Next morning at dawn the first thing I saw was a bear ambling round the clearing with a slightly frustrated look in his eyes, and he kept hanging around all through breakfast. Evidently he had passed the word around that I was moving and that there might be scraps, for as I left a mother bear and her cub appeared at the edge of the timber.

After climbing a few more small peaks I finally worked my way round back into the Bow Valley, and so to civilization. Even the slight bustle of Banff I found a bit irksome after the peace of the Rockies, and I was sorry to board the train that was to take me on to the Pacific Coast and to New Zealand.



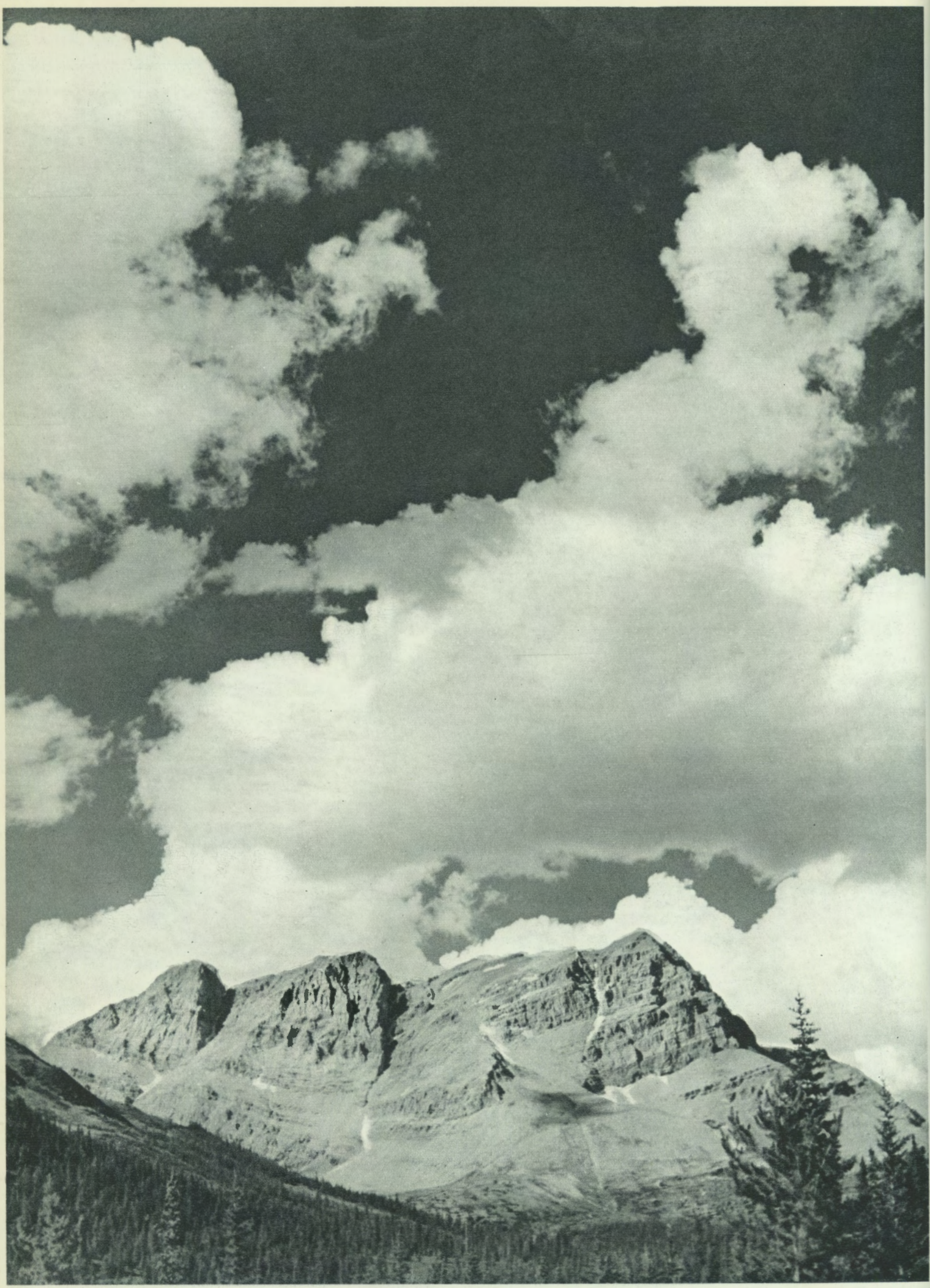
Sheol Valley and Mt. Temple

Saskatchewan River

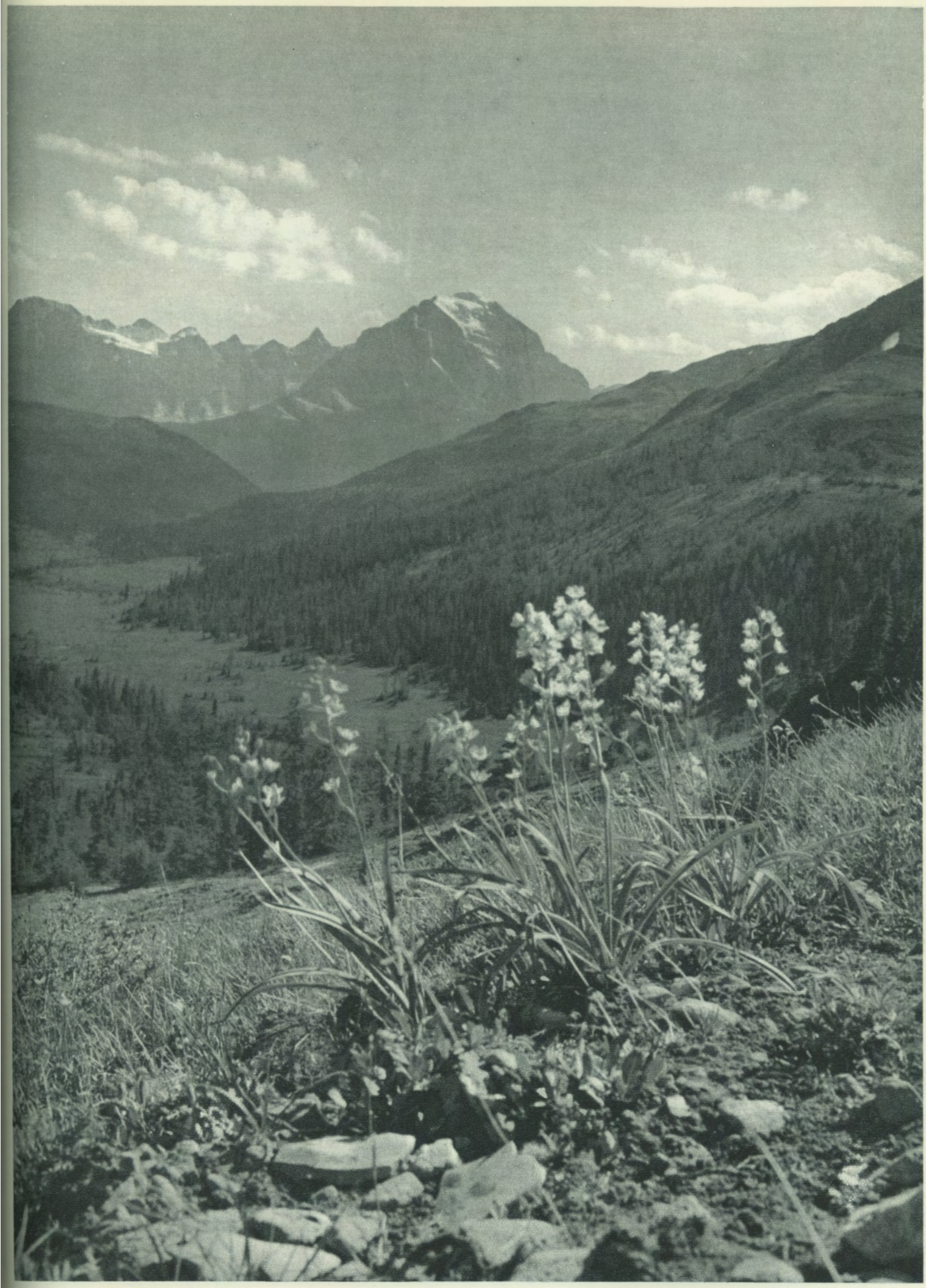


27 Canadian Rockies

Drummond Glacier and Red Deer Valley



Mt. Ptarmigan



Temple Valley and Mt. Temple

Mistaya River

CHAPTER VI

SKI-ING ACROSS VOLCANOES IN MAORI-LAND

SNOW CAN occur in the most unexpected places; there are glaciers on the Equator in Africa and high above the steamy jungles of New Guinea—one can even ski in Hawaii, not so very far from the surf of Waikiki. But where one would least expect to find snow, and good skiable snow at that, is on an active volcano.

Chance had taken me down to New Zealand, and from the shores of Lake Taupo, on my way to the steaming mud-pools and roaring geysers of Wairakei, I had seen the snowy cones of the three volcanoes Tongariro, Ngauruhoë and Ruapehu soaring up into the clouds; whereupon I immediately decided to explore them. Ngauruhoë had erupted only a few years before, while the hot green sulphur-smelling crater-lake of Ruapehu, into which fall the blue ice-cliffs of a glacier, blew up during the Second World War, precipitating itself tens of thousands of feet into the sky and covering the glaciers that flank its 9,000-foot slopes with hot rocks and mud.

According to Maori legends, Tongariro was once a gigantic cone some 15,000 feet high; in a titanic eruption long before the white man first landed it is said to have blown its whole top off and become the jumble of craters and ridges, some extinct and some active—the highest point only some

6,500 feet above sea-level—which are all that remain of it now. To the Maoris the mountains have long been personalities; Tongariro and Ruapehu were, they believe, once man and wife, while the fourth great volcano of the North Island, —Mt. Egmont or Taranaki, now far away on the west coast—lived close by them. In the course of time Taranaki began to fall in love with Ruapehu, though at first the clandestine affair went unnoticed. Then one evening Tongariro discovered the intrigue, and erupted in a fury of rage; so great was his frenzy that he blew himself to pieces. Taranaki fled in terror and stumbled blindly through the land in his haste to escape, going first south-west until he struck the coast and then turning north, leaving in his wake a deep and devious track in which the Wanganui River now flows. But the mountains have power of movement only while the sun is down. Taranaki, in his anxiety, lost all sense of time; as he turned north at the edge of the sea the dawn surprised him and he became firmly rooted to the spot where he now stands. Inland lies Tongariro, a sprawling body, while Ruapehu mounts guard over their child Ngauruhoë. To this day the mountains are all sacred to the Maori, and so strong is the law of "tapu" that none will set foot upon their slopes unless prepared and authorized by his village "tohunga", or priest. And small wonder, for they are indeed uncanny places.

The early dawn found everything shrouded in mist. But once the car had dumped my companions and me in the Antarctic beech forest near Ketetahi, the rising sun chased the mists away, until the gleaming ramparts of Tongariro shone out behind the tall cabbage-trees that lined the track. As we climbed the steep path the ski strapped across our rucksacks caught in the thick bush, while thorny "lawyer-vine" clutched at our clothing. Higher up in a clearing we dumped our packs and stretched our tired shoulders, laughing at the contrast between our ski and ice-axes and the exotic palm-like foliage of the cabbage-trees, pointing their feathery tufts of spear-shaped leaves at the sky.

After another long rise we suddenly emerged from the forest on to steep tussock slopes; to the right of the three-mile snowy scarp above us rose the cone of Ngauruhoë, seven miles away. High ahead of us the flank of the mountain was scarred by a deep rift from which huge clouds of steam were issuing, and towards this we made our way over the tussocks.

No wonder that to the Maoris the mountains are living things. When we

got there we felt the ground under us vibrating; at our feet a sullen red volcanic gash extended for four hundred yards up the slope like a deep wound on the flank of some gigantic beast. Deep within it a series of vents were emitting dense clouds of steam at a pressure of 120 lb. per sq. inch, roaring up into the air for 150 feet with a noise as of all the locomotives in creation letting off steam simultaneously. Its walls were covered with smoking sulphur vents, and a hot sulphur spring bubbled up at the lower end and left a trail of steam winding down into the tussock.

Immediately above this inferno rose the ice-coated outer wall of Tongariro's crater, so hard that we soon had to put on crampons to get up it. At half-past eleven we came to the top amid long plumes of ice, and looked down over the thirty-foot rim on to a vast level expanse of snow that stretched away to the further wall. Beyond this showed the topmost point of the mountain, a tooth on the rim of the South Crater, and beyond that again rose the gleaming cone of Ngauruhoë.

For a while we followed the rim; on the crest of a spur below us was the ulcerous-looking red crater of Te Mari, the edge of a large steaming sulphur pool just visible. We subsequently dropped down into the West Crater and almost literally skated across it on ski; then we climbed up on to its northern rim, where we basked in the sun over lunch and looked down into the main Central Crater whose sulphur lake seeped through the snow and ice of the half-mile-wide interior. Snowy craters rose all around us in a weird lunar landscape, and hot, sulphur-tainted breezes wafted by us. Everything appeared most insecure.

It seemed our best plan to ski down into the Central Crater and climb up to the Red Crater diagonally opposite. I dropped over the edge on to the beautiful slope of smooth snow that fell 600 feet to the flat crater floor, expecting a lovely ski run in long, linked turns. The next thing I knew, the wind was whistling in my ears and I had arrived at the foot; it was all solid ice-crust and I had unwittingly taken it straight, broadside on! The others had perforce to follow in a tooth-jarring scrape of steel edges. We thereupon punted across to the far side and up to a 500-foot peak that had intrigued us during lunch, for the top was all bare red scoria that steamed up gently into the calm blue sky. The last fifty feet of it were solid glazed ice, so that we not

only had to don crampons but also cut steps; and step-cutting up an ice slope that had steam coming out of the top made me wonder whether I was dreaming!

Arrived on top, we found ourselves standing on warm scoria steaming with sulphur fumes, at the edge of a horrible desolate abyss that fell sheer away for some hundreds of feet, emitting dense clouds of fumes that made breathing decidedly unpleasant. Towering above the far lip, the beautiful symmetrical cone of Ngauruhoë seemed almost on top of us, separated by a deep hidden valley through which an ominous tongue of cloud was slowly rising. Hastily we returned to our ski and hurried on up the long, undulating rim of the South Crater towards the summit. Before we had covered half a mile a biting cold wind struck us, and a second later the clouds enveloped us in a damp fog; we struggled on in the teeth of the wind along icy knife-edges and across steep slopes of ice until we emerged unexpectedly into sun and warmth again on a flat saddle just beneath the summit. A lovely snow slope fell away into the clouds, but when the time came we took it very gently, for we could not see what lay below and had not the least desire to do a skid-christie into the Nether Regions before our appointed time. As luck would have it, it continued unbroken within the clouds, and we had fine ski-ing—though in poor visibility—for a good 1,500 feet down to the crater floor, and then on through a huge gap in the wall down another 1,500 feet over an old lava-flow to the Mangatepopo valley. Ski-ing over a large, frozen avalanche is no fun, and scrambling over snow-covered moraine is worse, but ski-ing down a lava-flow has both beaten to a frazzle. Lava is just as broken and lumpy as moraine but knife-sharp, and this flow was a mile wide and three miles long. However, we found a succession of lovely "glades" of spring snow between the ridges, which rapidly brought us down to the tussock again to a spot where two springs bubbled up, one plain water, the other soda water; whereupon we sat down for a breather and took the opportunity of diluting the contents of our hip-flasks according to taste.

A two-mile plod on foot brought us to the tiny tin hut; here we spent the night, before attacking Ngauruhoë. Over tea which was ink-black (caused by the water of the hut stream which came from the soda spring), we decided to leave ski behind in view of the steepness of its icy slopes. We awoke to a

drizzling Scotch mist, but decided none-the-less to make the attempt; with our clothes getting wetter and wetter and our hands and faces clammier and chillier, we plodded up for ages over snow and lava. When at last we reached the foot of the final steep 2,000-foot snow slope we stopped to hold a council of war, for we were right in the clouds and it was raining hard. Grudgingly we decided to climb another 100 feet and see what happened: after 50 feet a glow appeared in the mist, and a few moments later we emerged from the waves of gloom on to the shore of a sea of billowing cloud that extended as far as the eye could see. Right above us towered the glittering cone of Ngauruhoë, a vast tower of dazzling whiteness stretching upwards seemingly into infinity.

Rejoicing in the hot sun, we slowly zigzagged up the interminable thirty-five degrees slope; after a while we began to meet with small plumes of ice, and the surface became so hard we had to put on crampons; laboriously we climbed another 500 feet towards some ice-turrets on the sky-line. Suddenly, without warning, we found ourselves on the crater's edge, looking down on the most astounding sight I have ever seen.

We stood on the sharp rim of a vast bowl half a mile wide and 500 feet deep, with sheer ice-covered walls except where hot steaming rock had melted through in large red patches; immediately below gaped the 50-foot mouth of a circular funnel from whose Stygian depths billowed a sullen column of steam and sulphur smoke. The cliffs were shrouded in long plumes of ice and resembled a gigantic wedding-cake. We followed round the rim to the north, carefully avoiding openings in the snow from which steam was trickling, and picking our way over bare patches of hot and steaming earth that scorched our boots. At a break in the rim we went down an easy snow slope that led into the crater itself, followed a rib of rock that sloped towards the actual blow-hole to form a cliff above it, and then, finding a gap in this, walked through to come out right on the edge of the funnel. It was an awe-inspiring sight; never had the term "terra firma" seemed more inappropriate. As we watched the 200-foot column of smoke slowly uncoiling, a sullen rumble echoed up from out of the abyss—we stood not upon the order of our going, but fled back up on to our rib, fearful of what might come. Since luckily nothing did happen, we cut steps up a steep ice-couloir back on to the rim and scrambled over yard-long ice-plumes and feathers on to the highest point of the mountain. Away

over the clouds shone Ruapehu, the mother-mountain, a gigantic white castle towering out of the billowing sea.

We went very carefully for the first 300 feet of the steep descent, but beyond that the snow had become so soft in the afternoon sun that we just sat and, using our ice-axes as rudders, took the longest toboggan slide I have ever had—1,500 feet down to the edge of the lava—leaving three highly unaesthetic grooves in the virgin purity of Ngauruhoë's snow.

Ruapehu was our next objective after we had returned to base over the miles of tussock plain. For an hour and a half we climbed up through the forest and over scoria slopes to the Salt Hut of the Ruapehu Ski Club, and then continued on ski for 2,000 feet to the snout of the Whakapapa Glacier, the largest of the several glaciers that flow from the great crater. It was one of those long even climbs on a slight convex curve where the end is always just over the top, only the top never seems to come any nearer. It took us a good two and a half hours to make it; then we skied across a wide pass in the crater wall and down an easy slope to the edge of the blue ice-cliffs that dropped 100 feet into the crater lake, a sheet of hot water surrounded by ice, ever changing in colour as the hot currents rose and eddied from the unplumbed depths—now a pale yellow-green, now the lightest of Cambridge blues, reflecting up in wonderful shades into the lilac shadows of the surrounding ice-cliffs. The air stank of sulphur.

After climbing the peak of Pare-te-tai-tonga on crampons we returned to our ski and skirted around the lake, traversing along the inside of the crater wall under bare plaques of rock seamed with sulphur-reeking cracks until we came to a col at the foot of Tahurangi, the main peak of the mountain. Here we left our ski and continued on foot over slopes thickly sown with spikes and nodules of glare-ice resembling a giant nutmeg-grater. The summit was completely covered with fantastic plumes of solid ice like frozen ostrich-feather boas several feet long. All around us, thousands of feet below, the drab tussock plains stretched away into the blue distance, the monotony only broken to the north where the graceful cone of Ngauruhoë stood out against the pale waters of Lake Taupo.

After lunch we skied across the summit plateau of Ruapehu to Te-heu-heu Peak, overlooking the desolate scoria plains, scarred and pitted by old lava

flows and craters, that lay between it and Ngauruhoë, ten miles away. Then we dropped over the edge into a steep gully of wonderful spring snow, which gave us excellent ski-ing down to the slopes by the Salt Hut and on to the door of the Chateau Tongariro, 4,300 feet below.

I had now skied over the three high active volcanoes of the North Island and there only remained the extinct Taranaki, or Mt. Egmont, which raises its lovely Fujiyama-like cone 8,300 feet from the shores of the Tasman Sea. Egmont is completely surrounded by a large forest of wonderful trees, giant "rimu" and "rata" and the smaller "konini" or fuchsia-tree with its delicate flowers; everywhere in the rank gullies grew huge tree-ferns, unrolling their young shoots like velvet-covered bishop's crooks. The bush was full of little birds with quite new and enchanting songs—wonderful bell-like chimes and fascinating little inconsequential tunes that wandered about at random in minor keys, always breaking away unexpectedly a semi-tone higher or lower. When several were singing together it reminded me at times of some wood-wind and percussion motif by Stravinsky; again and again I seemed to hear snatches of "l'Oiseau de Feu"—here were the same dancing, flitting, intangible melodies. They came at all angles from within a weird world of gnarled and twisted tree-trunks, some red, some silver, and some swathed in tufted moss, bound together across, around and above by lianas and creepers—the whole bathed in a diffuse green light that had no end and no beginning, so that all sense of reality was lost.

After we had climbed a long way up a narrow bush-track the trees gave way to subalpine scrub, and this in turn to the drab, lumpy tussock grass at the edge of the snow-line. Here, in the fresh new snow that had fallen overnight, we found the tracks of a kiwi: this reddish-brown, wingless bird is not uncommon in the depths of the forest—my companion told me he had once even found one frozen stiff inside the crater at over 8,000 feet.

Slowly we mounted the steep slope of the cone. From the sea whose glassy expanse filled the horizon to our left a warm wind was blowing in; as it struck the cold mountain the moisture with which it was laden condensed into knobs and spikes of clear ice on every roughness. A glaze of ice formed all up the left side of my clothing, and when we reached the top my rucksack straps bore plumes three inches long. We had to leave our ski on the high plateau of

Fantham's Park and continue to the main summit on crampons, so large and many were the spikes of ice.

Up and up the never-ending 1,500-foot cone we went, slipping and stumbling, bruising our feet and ankles; the crater rim was covered with huge coral-like clumps of ice and high ridges with giant "plumes" of an almost transparent blue. We reached the summit in the early evening; walls and turrets of fantastically feathered and knobbed ice stood all around like weird reefs and towers of blanched coral 50–100 feet high; 3,000 feet below lay a huge sea of billowing clouds through which peeped the summits of the Pouakai Range, while far away in the distance, beyond the hair-line of surf breaking on the beaches, the sinking sun gleamed golden over the Tasman Sea. Inland we looked down on a chequer-board of green dairy-farms, and far away beyond them to where the snows of Ruapehu shone faintly nearly a hundred miles away on the horizon.

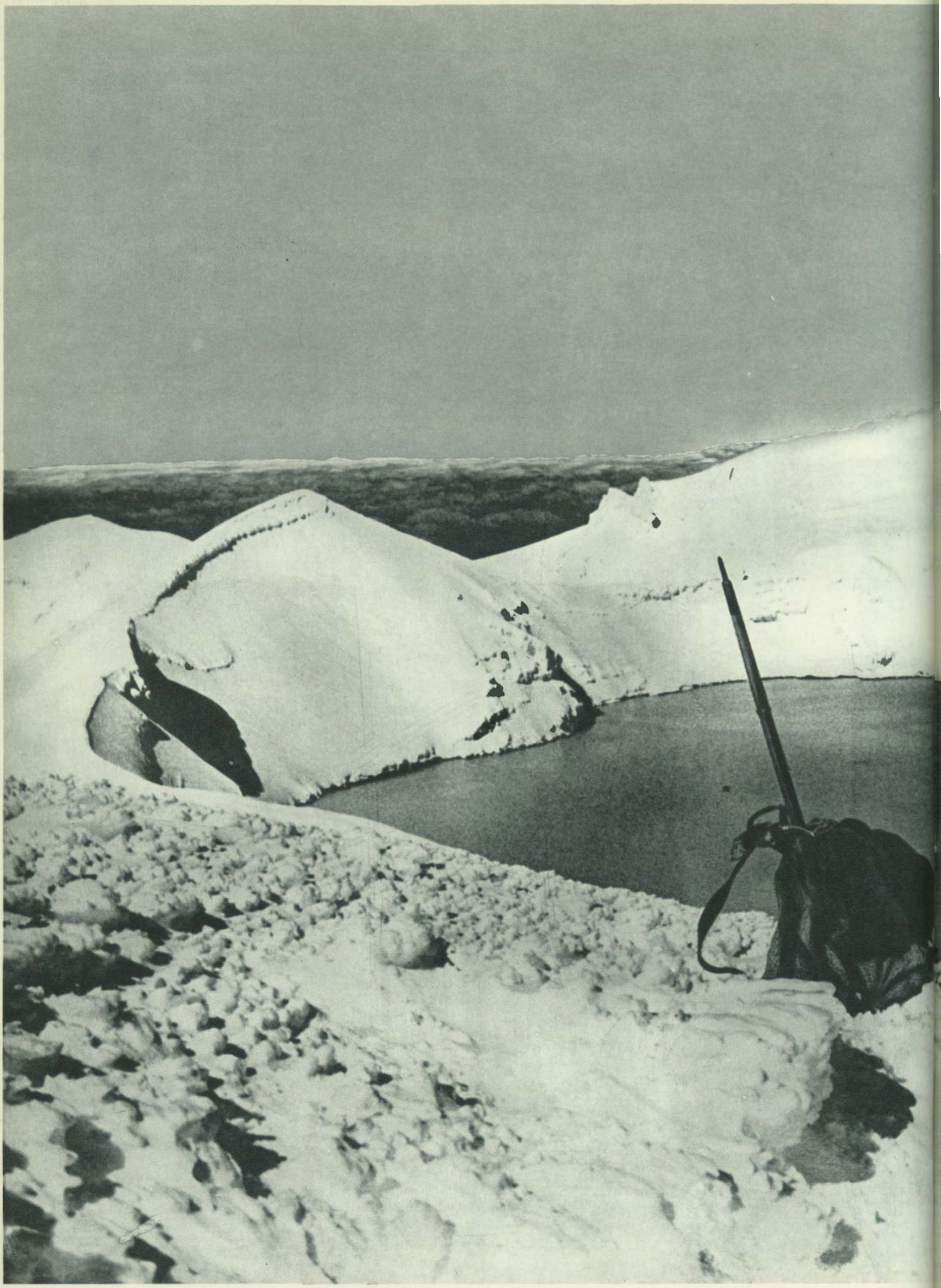
31 New Zealand, North Island

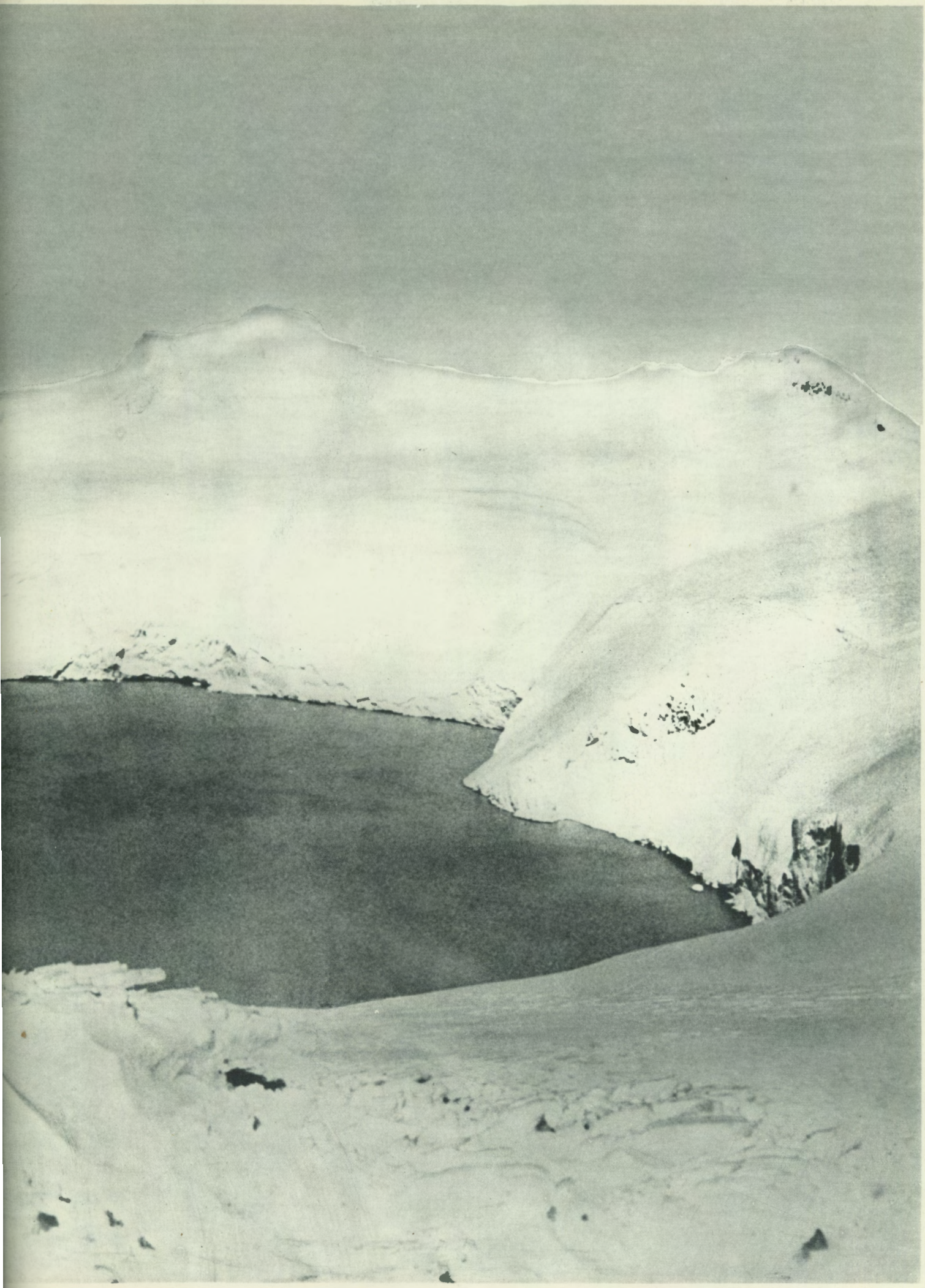
Cabbage Trees

Mt. Ngauruhoë

33 New Zealand, North Island

Central Crater, Mt. Tongariro





Crater lake, Mt. Ruapehu

35 New Zealand, North Island

Mt. Ngauruhoë from Red Crater, Mt. Tongariro

Sunset over the Tasman Sea, Mt. Egmont

Inside the crater of Mt. Ngauruhoë

CHAPTER VII

FROM ICE TO JUNGLE: THE NEW ZEALAND ALPS

AS FAR AS the mountains are concerned, the North and South Islands of New Zealand are two different worlds. The volcanoes of the North are weird and uncanny and unlike anything else I have experienced, while the Southern Alps might at first glance be in Switzerland. It is only on closer acquaintance with them that their own especial character becomes apparent—when you sit down to rest on the moraine of a huge glacier and a green and red parrot comes to look at you, or when you stand on the crest of the Main Divide and look down on the jungle bordering the surf 10,000 feet below yet only fifteen miles away. The Maoris have woven legends around the volcanoes of the North Island, but in the South they only founded a few scattered settlements on the coastal fringe and never touched the remote world of the glaciers. In the North the mountains all bear Maori names; in the South they are named after early British and Austrian explorers; only Mt. Cook, the tallest of them all, is also called Aorangi—"the Cloud Piercer".

To reach the foot of Mt. Cook is a very long trek. I left the east coast railway at Timaru and rolled all day in a bus across the bleak, yellow Canterbury Plains. In the late afternoon the road topped a rise and the whole array of the Southern Alps burst into view, mirrored in the waters of Lake Pukaki. An

hour or so later we reached road's end at the Hermitage Hotel; the scenery was magnificent, the vast ice precipices of Mt. Sefton rising ahead a sheer 7,000 feet from the boulder-strewn valley, while away up past the barren terminal moraine of the Hooker Glacier towered the twin 12,000-foot peaks of Mt. Cook. There was a lot of snow on the ground, for it was already nearly August—the New Zealand mid-winter—and it was very cold.

Our first goal was the Ball Hut, several miles up the Tasman Glacier; after climbing a few of the main peaks, we then hoped to make the first ski-crossing of the Main Divide and go down the Franz-Josef Glacier to the west coast, return to the east up the Fox Glacier, and if possible make a first ascent or two into the bargain.

As we wound our way up the moraine we passed several chamois tracks left by descendants of the two pairs presented to New Zealand by the Emperor Franz-Josef of Austria. Since those long-distant days the animals have increased out of all bounds; indeed they have become an unmitigated curse, for they exterminate all the native flora and turn firm, flower-covered hillsides into slipping, destructive screes. The gullies used to be white with the lovely "Mt. Cook Lilies", a giant white buttercup (*Ranunculus Lyalli*), but nowadays these have become very rare.

It was odd to see sea-gulls flying around a glacier, several pairs of whom nested regularly on the moraines below the Ball Hut; but the climax came when a large olive-green and scarlet parrot swept low over my head screaming "Kee-ah! Kee-ah!" at the top of its voice. The "Kea Parrot" is the real glacier bird of New Zealand, taking the place of the chough of the Alps, and rows of them came to sit on the moraine in front of the hut to observe us. They are most amusing to watch, being quite fearless and incurably inquisitive; they will sell their souls for anything red, and their favourite pastime is to push stones off the edge of the moraine and with screams of delight watch them tumble down the slope. One dare not leave one's ski unguarded, for they will rip the straps and bindings to pieces out of sheer joy of destruction, while any clothing left about will soon be torn to shreds.

On my first day in the Ball Hut, I woke up at dawn to pandemonium; yells and screeches rent the air, and all the devils in hell seemed to be using the tin roof of the hut as a slippery slide. I hastily pulled on some clothes and dashed

out, to find a whole row of keas sitting on the ridge-pole pushing each other off, screaming with joy and rage respectively as the victim slithered down the grooves in the corrugated iron, clawing frantically as he went. Finally he ended up with a bump in the gutter, gave one final outraged screech, and flew up to the top again to get his own back. It was as funny as a circus and put me in a wonderful humour, which the cloudless day coupled with the aroma of Mick's bacon and eggs made even better.

The world was very cold and blue as we carried our ski down the moraine and out on to the Tasman Glacier, where we put them on and trudged slowly off in the dry powder snow. The twin peaks of the Minarets shone brightly in the first rays of the sun, and the big V of moraine at their foot, where the Rudolf Glacier flows into the Tasman, seemed an unconscionable distance away. The Tasman is twenty-three miles long, larger than any glacier in Europe; it was a long, monotonous trek up that endless river of ice, but the wonderful panorama of peaks that slowly unfolded on our left kept it from becoming tedious. At first the great precipices of Mt. Cook towered 9,000 feet above us, and then the tangled maze of the Hochstetter ice-fall came into view, cascading down for 2,000 feet between rock-cliffs in a chaotic jumble of great towers and pinnacles of ice at every angle, separated by fathomless blue crevasses. At the beginning of the century a party of climbers were caught by an ice-avalanche high on the Linda Face of Mt. Cook, and swept into a huge crevasse on the névé of the Hochstetter Glacier. Fourteen years later some of their remains were thrown up on to the surface of the Tasman, broken into fragments after their passage through this terrific ice-fall.

We plodded slowly on up and down ridges and hollows, and sometimes over small streams welling up from some seepage. We passed under the ice precipices of Mt. Haidinger and the blue hanging glaciers of Glacier Peak. Presently we turned a corner and the huge snowfields at the head of the Tasman came into view, culminating in the wonderful ski slopes of the Hochstetter Dome. We were now well and truly in the sun and it had become very hot; as we started up the long slope leading to the névé the heat became terrific and our ski began to ball—we cursed our heavy packs and the unending even grade. On and on we toiled until we were almost opposite the Minarets; then we edged over to the right and climbed up the 400-foot-high moraine to the Malte Brun Hut.

Only the eaves were showing and we had to dig for half an hour—this on top of our five-hour climb. When at last we got inside we found that pressure of snow had broken a window and the living room was two feet deep in drifted snow. We got the Primus going and boiled a billy of tea, shovelled out the snow, repaired the window and then, stripped to the waist, basked outside in the late afternoon sunshine, letting our eyes feast on the maze of the Minarets' glaciers opposite.

The next two days were spent ski-ing up the Hochstetter Dome, the peak at the head of the Tasman, and climbing Mt. Hamilton; then the weather broke and for two days the storm raged around the hut, shrieking and buffeting, the wind driving fine snow in under the tin roof. The hut "library" of Wild West thrillers was soon exhausted, and we were thankful when the third day dawned clear and perfect, with a nice covering of new snow all around. The weather looked settled, so Mick and I set off jubilantly at 5 a.m. for Mt. Elie de Beaumont. We had big ideas, for we knew that the western peak of the Elie massif, Wilszek Peak, 10,022 feet, had never been climbed although much sought after, and we nursed an inward hope that, given wind-still conditions, we might be able to make the first ascent.

By the light of a lantern we carried our ski down the moraine to the glacier, the wall of the Minarets looming dark against the dawning sky. As we skied up the centre of the huge glacier the first touch of crimson dyed the ice-cap of Mt. Cook—then one by one other giants sprang to life in a blood-red glow and slowly the wave of colour spread lower down the ice, gradually brightening into a blaze of golden glory which in turn paled to an exquisite primrose, finally dissolving into the dazzling whiteness of a perfect day.

Slowly we zigzagged up to the first ice-fall, keeping well clear of the blue hanging glacier of Mt. Walter that menaced us from above its 400-foot cliff. We wound our way past huge crevasses until our progress was blocked by one that spread right across the face; a little exploration fortunately revealed one good snow-bridge about four feet wide which led us across and on to beautiful ski slopes rising to the broad terraces below the second ice-fall. Above us gleamed a great broken cliff of pale blue ice and we thanked our stars that the storm had delayed us, for from the Dome we had seen this slope clear; now it was laid waste for a width of fifty yards by a huge ice avalanche that stretched

right across it in a jumble of big blue blocks, its end disappearing into a wide crevasse. With great difficulty we picked our way across it on ski, slipping and sliding over and between the blocks underneath the overhanging smooth blue wall from which the mass had broken away—in places the ice was scoured out like butter scooped with a spoon. On the far side of this obstacle our route was blocked again at the top of a steep snow slope by an enormous almost vertical sérac of green ice. This being the only approach, we were reluctantly obliged to abandon our ski and stack them in the snow to await our return. Donning crampons, we had to cut steps for some thirty feet up the sérac, a labour which took us some time, for the ice was very hard; once we were on top, however, the going was easier through the remainder of the ice-fall. Finally we emerged on to a long, easy snow slope that led up over a small bergschrund to the summit.

It was absolutely windstill, so we gratefully relaxed on the broad top to bask in the sun and rest after our five-and-a-quarter-hour climb. It was a glorious viewpoint. Away to the south stretched the serrated peaks along the Main Divide, culminating in the white knife-edge of Tasman and the great 12,000-foot mass of Mt. Cook; far below wound the ribbon of the Tasman Glacier above whose further moraine rose the red-rock peaks of the Malte Brun Range. But, alas, on the other side lay a great sea of cloud that hid the west coast and the ocean, only a few sharp peaks appearing out of it like islands. However, this only helped to focus our attention on the knife-sharp arête leading to Wilszek Peak, that jutted out high above it like the prow of a giant ship. It was extremely exposed, but given the good snow conditions and total lack of wind it looked a reasonably straightforward proposition apart from one short, steep break with a narrow ridge of rock beyond it.

We climbed down some 300 feet to the beginning of the arête; the first 300 yards or so were merely a piece of tight-rope walking over two fifty-foot humps, the new snow giving excellent foothold. The steep break that we had been studying was about twenty-five feet high and quite easy to cut steps up, but the section of rock proved to be badly iced, very narrow and rather rotten; although it was only about ten feet long it was by far the most difficult part of the climb. It fell sheer away to the south for some 2,000 feet, and had some very steep overhanging snow to the north, which by that hour had become wet, slippery and untrustworthy. However, we negotiated this without mishap and

came to a long knife-edge, very sheer for thousands of feet on both sides, along which we straddled, the snow being dry and powdery to the south but wet and dangerous to the north. After this came a steep drop in the arête, down which we had to cut steps; a little later we found the way blocked by a substantial cornice, to avoid which we were forced to leave the ridge and cut down and across the extremely steep face below. Although still very airy, the going then became easier, and at noon we set foot on Wilszek for the first time. We were right out on top of a peak high above the clouds—3,000 feet below—seldom have I felt so isolated and above the world.

The return journey was uneventful apart from that ten feet of rock, a chunk of which broke away under me and shot out into the abyss. We had a final rest just below Elie's summit and then made our way down to our ski. On the far side of the big ice avalanche the ski-ing was wonderful; so strong was the sun that we stripped to the waist and played around for a while. Then we ran all the way home in semi-nudity over vast undulating slopes of snow where the ski seemed to swing and turn of their own accord, varied by long schusses the last of which took us non-stop for well over a mile to a point right opposite the hut.

That night the weather broke again, and for two days we could do nothing but study maps. On the third night conditions were still bad when the alarm went off at 3.30 a.m., and we crawled back into our blankets after re-setting it for 5.30. It was daylight when the alarm next woke us up; the weather looked more promising, but the heavy clouds on the Divide did not look good enough to warrant an attempt at the crossing. We began a leisurely breakfast—suddenly we realized that the clouds had gone and it was rapidly becoming a beautiful day. It was now too late to start over the Divide, so after a moment's consultation we set out for Mt. Annan via the small glacier that led to its foot from the head of the Darwin Glacier, by which route it had never before been climbed. It was gruellingly hot as we skied up the glacier, but within two hours we were in the welcome cool shadow cast by the ice-walls of Mt. Darwin. Our glacier, though steep, was easier than expected although we realized at one point, where we came out on to a 600-foot slope of thirty-five degrees, above an overhang and scoured by the débris of an old avalanche, that this was a place where great caution would have to be exercised earlier in the season.

The climb was steep and narrow; black cliffs rose on either hand and we had to pick our way through plenty of small crevasses. As we mounted, the glacier opened out and became flatter, and at noon we reached a saddle between Mts. Annan and Häckel above a sheer drop on to the sunlit Murchison glacier. We skied on up to the left over wind-slab and ice, until a steep ice-slope forced us to abandon ski and start off on a long bit of step-cutting up to the 150 feet of rock leading to the summit. The sun was just about to come over the edge of the slope and, in places where the beams were shining parallel to the surface and barely a foot above it, it was as if a fountain of diamonds gushed up at each stroke of the axe.

There was not a breath of wind on top. Before us spread the whole upper basin of the Tasman with the Tasman saddle, the pass leading over to the Murchison, almost at our feet; for the first time I fully appreciated the immense size of this glacier, as I stood overlooking the huge glittering snowfields from which it flows for twenty-three miles. Opposite rose the sharp snow peak of Aylmer, and beyond it the double hump of the Hochstetter Dome; dominating the whole scene rose the beautiful massif of Elie de Beaumont with wonderful shadows in its icy walls, gleaming with a soft lustre like a pearl on the lip of its parent shell.

It is always a sad moment when time obliges one to leave a peak. One takes a last, long look out over the peaceful world around one, trying desperately to engrave it for ever on the memory; for the first few minutes of the descent all one's movements are automatic, the eyes, unseeing, turned inwards, still grasping frantically at the hard-won beauty left behind.

In silence we followed our own steps down again, looking across to Cook and Tasman shining in the distance. From the saddle we had a most exciting steep ski-run over perfect light powder snow, in and out of the crevasses and gullies of the glacier. It ended in a schuss a good two miles long that took us right down the Darwin and round the corner on to the Tasman, almost to the moraine in front of the hut. Back in the hut we boiled a billy and sipped our tea with a glow of satisfaction, for not only had we had superb ski-ing, a nice climb and wonderful views, but we had made an ascent by a new route, being the fifth party to climb Annan.

Now began the blackest period of the trip. The storm returned again

overnight; for five days on end we were weather-bound, rising monotonously every morning at 3.30 a.m. in case the blizzard had stopped, and always returning to bed as we heard the howling of the wind. On the sixth night things looked better, and the morning disclosed a brilliant starlit sky. We hastily breakfasted by candle-light, and set off in the twilight for the Minarets. We skied straight across the Tasman, two minute specks on the mile-wide river of ice, trudging steadily on in the dull grey light before dawn, while at the edges of the dark ramparts 5,000 feet above us the stars slowly faded as the light grew from the east. Ahead, tier upon tier of ice terraces towered up to the jagged sky-line: suddenly the unearthly silence was broken as a block of ice broke away and bounded down with soft thuds to vanish into the mouth of a crevasse—a moment later a dull, muffled crack echoed over the slopes.

The maze magically opened out as we climbed; the scale was so much vaster than we had imagined and the mountain so much farther away, that what to us had seemed an intricate ice-fall turned out to consist of beautiful stretches of powder snow between gigantic crevasses, whose bridges were so huge that it was hard to believe that one was on anything but a solid slope between two chasms. After two hours the sun appeared and we soon began to discard our warm clothing, for the storm had left nearly two feet of new snow behind it and the going was heavy; the climb was uneventful—except for one nasty moment when the whole world fell away from under my left ski and I found myself balanced on the lip of a black crevasse. After four and a half hours we arrived on the saddle between the two Minarets. Here a belt of icy wind was blowing around the summits; but luckily the top of the highest Minaret was about ten feet above it, so we were able to sit down in comfort and marvel at the astounding view.

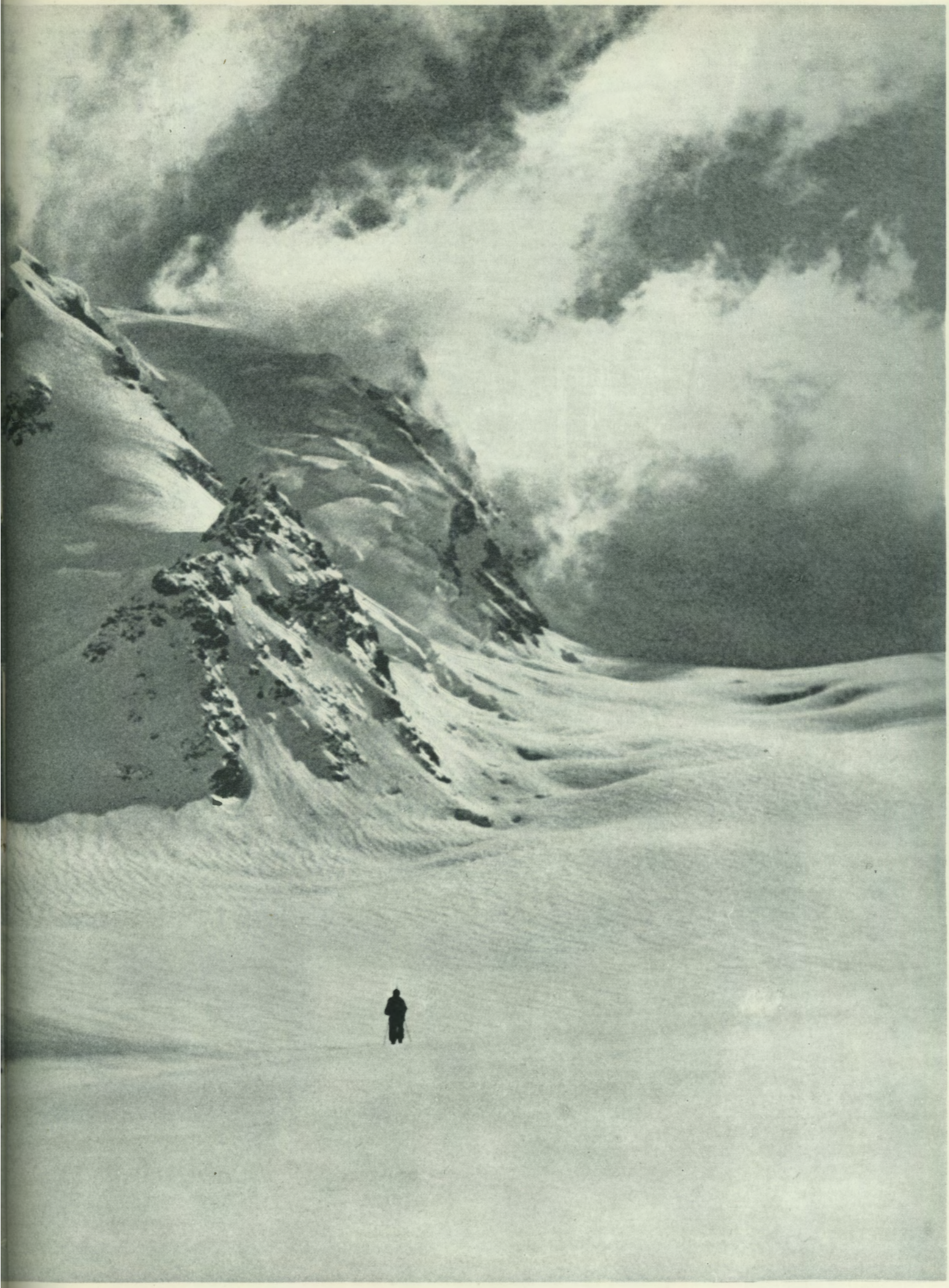
We were on the edge of a 2,000-foot precipice, below which spread the huge gleaming névés of the Franz-Josef and Spencer Glaciers; beyond again stretched range upon range of hills ever decreasing in size, and gradually turning from white to green as they merged into the coastal belt of bush where glinted the waters of Lake Mapourika; fifteen miles away and 10,000 feet below we could see the surf edging the shores of the Tasman Sea. Crowning the Divide to the north rose the mass of Elie de Beaumont and the saw-tooth ridge of Wilszek Peak.

After lunching on the plateau below Mt. de la Bèche, south of the Minarets

Mt. Annan from Darwin Glacier

Mt. Wilszek

41 New Zealand, South Island



Tasman Glacier

The Minarets

43. New Zealand, South Island

Mt. Cook from Mt. Annan

round whose rocks the wind-belt was roaring, we skied across it and round behind, coming eventually to the top of a very steep couloir overlooking the Rudolf Glacier. This was so icy that we had to remove our ski, strap them to our packs, and cut down it on crampons; progress was precarious, for the slope was so steep that the ends of the ski kept catching in it. After 400 feet of step-cutting we got into snow again; in order to cross the small crevasse at the foot of the slope with the least trouble we slid down on our backsides, using our ice-axes as rudders, and shot over it to land with a bump on the far side. From there we skied around to Graham's Saddle on the Divide; then we swooped down in long, gentle schusses for miles towards the west coast, skimming softly across the huge névé of the Franz-Josef Glacier towards the point where the head of its main ice-fall flowed like a frozen Niagara into a mile-wide gorge between mountain walls.

We followed the fringe of a great rock ledge a thousand feet above the ice-fall until we found a long steep gully that would bring us out on to the glacier below it. After 300 feet the snow became so wet and so slippery on its ice base that ski-ing was too dangerous, since one slip might have shot us down over the rocks into the yawning crevasses below. We put on crampons, which balled at every step; slowly we goose-stepped down, kicking off the balled snow from the spikes as we went, until we came to where the Aylmer Glacier merges into the Franz-Josef in a tumultuous labyrinth of hundred-foot ice towers and gaping crevasses. We picked our way cautiously through these, now creeping over a snow-bridge between two towers, now balancing along an icy ridge with a chasm on either side, until we reached a long "arterial road" of comparatively unbroken snow near the middle of the glacier. Here we were able to ski once more—fast open running, except for one 500-foot stretch of very tricky broken ice-fall where turns had to be executed with split-second precision. Deep bush now rose above the ice on either hand, and suddenly a screaming kea, flaunting his vermilion plumage overhead, welcomed us to the west coast.

The Franz-Josef is one of the most amazing glaciers in the world, descending as it does through a deep gorge with mountains rising to 6,000 feet on either side, from the region of perpetual ice at 8,000 feet to dense sub-tropical rain-forest barely 700 feet above sea-level and but a few miles from the coast. It is the fastest-moving glacier known, travelling at a speed of over six feet a

day, which explains how it can maintain itself at such low altitudes; the effect of this speed was unpleasantly noticeable to us, for séracs were perpetually crashing down, and eerie creaks and groans were always sounding.

Presently the snow gave out; we had to take off our ski for good and don crampons for the last three miles of bare, blue ice. Never have I seen such a wilderness: huge fifty-foot ice pinnacles, towering blocks the size of houses, and gaping abysses hundreds of feet deep. Twice our way was blocked by a sheer wall of ice, which meant laboriously retracing our steps or cutting up some glazed face to see if a route through could be found on the other side. After an hour of hard work we came to the snout of the glacier, a semicircular cliff of moraine-covered ice from which flowed a pale yellow river that disappeared into a wall of deep green jungle.

At once we came into another world; giant tree-ferns met overhead, and the sinister moss-covered trunks were woven fast together by long creepers and lianas. Invisible "Bell-birds" and "Tuis" chimed and fluted, and the air was redolent with nectar. Our long sojourn high up in the world of ice had made our senses unusually keen, and every scent and sound seemed magnified; although we could see no flowers we could smell them, and our ears picked up the clear bell-notes in minor keys that echoed from the depths of the forest.

For miles we strode through a dark green tunnel, occasionally catching a glimpse of the glacier's snout behind us where some forest giant had fallen and torn a gap in the wall of bush; in places the ribbed trunks and high vaulting fronds of the tree ferns resembled the columns and arches of a cathedral nave. Then suddenly the light grew stronger and we came out on to a road; a few moments later the guests of the Waiho Hotel were startled by the appearance of two dirty and unshaven men who dumped their packs on the verandah and rushed for beer. We had covered eighteen miles, including 4,500 feet of climb and just on 10,000 feet of descent in eleven and a half hours, and we felt we had well and truly earned a drink.

We took a day off and refreshed ourselves on the sandy beaches and in the pleasant green of the jungle, before taking the bus down the west coast road to Weheka; thence we followed the Cook river up a very lovely bush track to the snout of the Fox Glacier. On the glacier the going was hard since our crampons kept slipping on the moraine detritus with which it was littered. After a while

we crossed to the lateral moraine to the left and scrambled over a jumble of boulders for a seemingly interminable period, coming at last to a place where we could put on ski and make more rapid progress. Avoiding the ice-fall, we scrambled up a thousand-foot slope of wet snow, among bushes and low scrub, to reach the snow-covered ledge where stands the Chancellor Hut; some keas were having great fun on a neighbouring slope, pushing snow-balls down it with their beaks and hopping after them with shrieks of joy.

Then came another of those rapid changes in the weather, and once more we were storm-bound for two whole days; on the morning of the third day, however, we were able to get away in the bright moonlight and reached the névé of the Fox Glacier as dawn broke. The top basin of the Fox is an absolute skier's paradise—a huge area surrounded by lovely slopes and minor snow peaks, dominated by the 11,000-foot mass of Mt. Tasman whose rocky buttresses now towered against the dawn sky. We had planned to climb Tasman, the finest ice climb in New Zealand; but sinister nor'wester clouds were rapidly forming, and we realized that we would have to abandon all thoughts of a climb and go for our lives if we wished to get back over the Divide and down to the Tasman before the storms returned.

As we approached the Pioneer Pass we heard the gale roaring in the rocks ahead like surf in a storm, and whirlwinds of driven snow were sweeping round in the pass. We battled our way into the narrow gap, the driving snow particles almost blinding us; the snow was frozen hard and glazed, and our sealskins would scarcely grip. On the top the wind was frightful; our fingers froze while putting on crampons and strapping our ski to our packs, and we had to hold them firm lest they be torn from our hands.

A huge cornice overhung the bergschrund on the far side, and we had a few nasty moments as we cut down through it and then along the edge of the 'schrund; but once across we were able to slide down a slope of soft snow until we were out of the wind. The great ribbon of the Tasman lay directly below us, 5,000 feet down, and the prospect ahead was awe-inspiring—huge hanging glaciers under which lay a narrow band of wind-slab at thirty degrees that hung into space over the precipices of the Haast Glacier. We skied across to the edge of this horrible strip which looked as if it might avalanche at any moment; while I was still studying it Mick suddenly shot across to the rock wall at the

far side. I felt very doubtful if it would stand the strain of two sets of tracks and endeavoured to run in his, but I soon got up too much speed; since a fall would almost surely have brought the whole slope down I unwillingly cut a second set. I did start a small slab-slide half-way over, but safely reached the rocks with a sigh of relief. We were now at the top of a thirty-eight-degree couloir with a ledge a couple of hundred feet down and then a blank drop into space—rather like the in-run of a monster ski-jump tilted down an extra ten degrees and with no landing ground below it. We took off our ski, sank up to our knees in wind-slab, and gingerly made our way straight down, breaking off slabs like tea-trays which went spinning away into space. After a rock traverse to the right we at last came out on to the safe, skiable slopes of a broad outcrop of terra firma between the Haast and Freshfield Glaciers. Down this we rushed in consecutive christies for 3,000 feet, schussed out to the moraine, slithered down it in a small avalanche and punted out on to the centre of the Tasman to look back. The first part of our descent appeared quite impossible from below, so much so that I could barely make out our route, but the lower part told a very different story and I counted sixty-six linked turns before our final schuss.

Keeping well in to the right under the Hochstetter Ice-fall we had good skiing all the way down to the vicinity of the Ball Hut, although in places the snow had almost gone and great ridges of wet, blue ice showed up like the ribs of a skeleton. We took off our ski and scrambled across the enormous pyramids and ridges of moraine to the hut; a chamois hunter had spotted us from afar and welcomed us with a billy of tea—we fingered our beards and grinned happily at each other over the steaming cups, for we had successfully realized almost all our hopes and made mountaineering history.

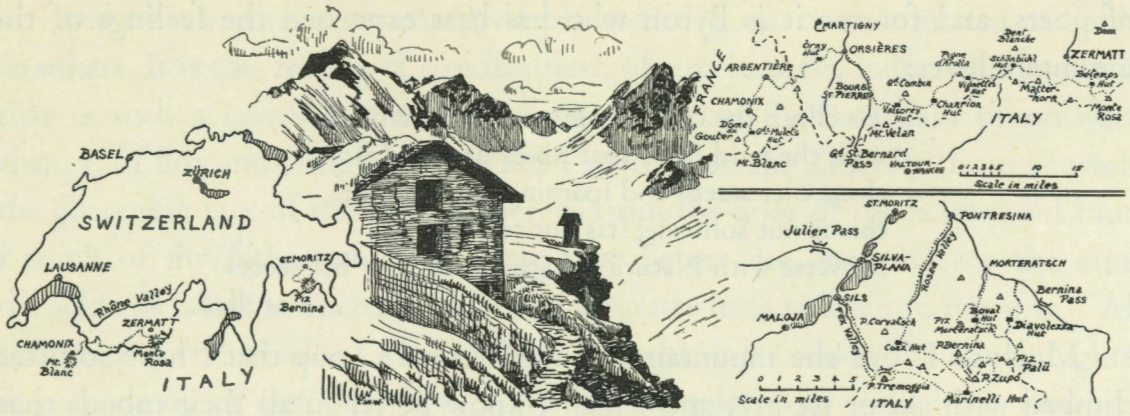
45 New Zealand, South Island

On Mt. Annan

Franz-Josef Glacier

47 New Zealand, South Island

Mt. Elie de Beaumont from the Minarets



CHAPTER VIII

THE ALPS: MOUNTAINS OF HISTORY

MOUNTAINEERING history has been made in many parts of the world—we have only to recall the climbs of Mummery in the Caucasus, the explorations of Haast and von Lendenfeld in New Zealand, Slingsby's pioneer work in the mountains of Norway—but nowhere can be found so much history, so much romance, nowhere were enacted such epics of human rivalry and of man's determination to conquer nature's hitherto impregnable fastnesses, as in that short strip of the Alps from Zermatt to Chamonix.

Elsewhere in the world the mountains have remained remote, deserted wildernesses far from the haunts of man, but for many centuries the valleys of the Alps have been tilled and the flocks of the peasants driven to pasture on the highest slopes. Not only has the history of mountaineering been written there, but the history of civilizations: the crossing of the Alps by Hannibal with his armies and elephants, the passage of the Romans to and fro over the passes to their northern domains, and the battles of the Swiss against the Dukes of Burgundy which culminated in the Swiss Republic and the most ideal and amicable systems of society and government the world has yet seen.

Unlike other mountains of the world, the Alps have become part of the European cultural and artistic tradition. They have long been the inspiration

of poets, and for me it is Byron who has best expressed the feelings of the mountain lover:

> To climb the trackless mountain all unseen,
> with the wild flock that never needs a fold,
> alone o'er steeps and foaming falls to lean,
> this is not solitude; 'tis but to hold
> converse with Nature's charms, and view her stores
> unrolled.

Much as I love the mountains of the Bernina Group that I have so often climbed with ski or ice-axe, and which I know better in all their moods than any other part of the Alps, there is something in the classic alpine country of the early British mountaineers that evokes deep feelings that I am quite unable to describe. When one first glimpses the Matterhorn around the corner of the village street in Zermatt one instantly thinks of Whymper and his long rivalry with Carrel for the honour of being the first to surmount its dark buttresses; from there one's thoughts go to Tyndall, to the gallant Swiss guides who were as much pioneers and idealists as their "*Herrschaften*" and in whom the love of the mountains—their mountains—was innate. When they first climbed an untrodden peak they not only vanquished the rock, but also the long tradition of superstition; a tradition of mountain demons, dragons, of terrors evoked by the uncanny roar of the avalanche in the dead of night heard dimly through the pine logs of the chalet—all the subconsciously remembered old pagan beliefs in the gods of the mountains, of Thor and his thunderbolts, handed down from father to son for countless generations.

Together with the early British climbers, the Swiss guides created a new tradition, a new saga of courage and determination, of selfless companionship. In his desire to prove himself the master of Nature, man for the first time steeled himself to penetrate to the remotest of the Alpine strongholds in all weathers and at all hours; in so doing he established a communion with them and realized his essential one-ness with them. High up at dawn in some airy bivouac, a tiny speck on their vast unmoving flanks, he glimpsed the timelessness of Life—face to face with the agelessness of the Alps his own petty life and tiny temporal problems faded into their true perspective. He drank deep of the source of all being and returned, refreshed and strengthened, to his daily round in the valley below.

And what one has experienced, deeply and fully, can be transmitted ineffably to others. It is this feeling of steadfastness, of timelessness, indueing every rock, that is such a comfort and so staunch a support in these days of outward change, of flux and uncertainty. When I set foot on the Zinal Rothorn or study the glistening face of the Dent d'Hérens from the door of the Schönbühl Hut, I think of my father who was there long before me, experiencing the same thoughts as I, and at once the void that separates us is reduced to nothing. "All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts . . ." (*Dhammapada*). And thought is timeless. This is not escapism; it is not a question of seeking solace from the present by vainly recalling the past, but of gaining strength from unity in the realization that past and present are one, that all we or any man have ever known is 'Now'.

It was May when I first came to Zermatt, as a ski-mountaineer. Down in the Rhône Valley spring was in full tide, and as we approached the village the fields alongside the track were blue with gentians. There were few people about, since the summer visitors had not yet arrived, and I had the village almost to myself. I paid a visit to the cemetery, where lies interred so much romance; then I walked up the street and round the corner to get my first glimpse of the Matterhorn, probing the sky like a seeking finger, brooding, dark, and seeming to pulsate with life. The river was wide open and running strongly, and on a big overhanging boulder by the bridge was a crimson mat of saxifrages (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*) in full flower. Beyond, under the pines, the hepaticas were out, their delicate lilac flowers illuminating the shadows.

I had arranged to meet my Swiss friends, Andrea and Robert, at the Bétemps Hut the second day after I left England. From the Engadine they were cutting through Italy to Breuil and climbing up from there. The train deposited me and my heavy pack at Rotenboden, and shouldering my ski I started down the steep track towards the Gorner Glacier. Far across the ice the huge bulk of Monte Rosa filled the sky, the hut an almost invisible speck at its foot. The air was cold and the great mass of white snow and black rock flanked by glaciers seared with blue crevasses looked vaguely aloof and repelling; it was sharply realistic and quite unlike the distant vision from the warm valleys of the Italian side that caused Tennyson to exclaim:

How faintly flushed, how phantom fair,
was Monte Rosa hanging there,
a thousand shadowy-pencill'd valleys
and snowy dells in a golden air.

But life was stirring even on these northern slopes, for the crimson and gold of the saxifrages (*oppositifolia* and *Aretia vitaliana*) covered the grassy slopes between the patches of snow above the moraine. Everywhere the marmots were whistling, sitting up like tiny totem-poles, then suddenly popping down their holes like a Jack-in-the-box as I approached. Full of the joy of spring, they were revelling in the newly revealed grass, their tails—all the winter store of fat absorbed—flapping about behind them like dirty dish-cloths.

Down at the edge of the ice I put on my ski and started slowly off across the great expanse of wet, snow-covered ice towards the distant hut. I hunched my rucksack up on my hips and filled my lungs with the crisp air; London and the gloom of England were already remote. There was no-one else on the glacier and I thought of the words of Byron:

I live not in myself, but I become
portion of that around me; and to me
high mountains are a feeling, but the hum
of human cities torture: I can see
nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
a link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee
and with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.

The further shore of the sea of ice drew slowly nearer; soon I was climbing up alongside the moraine at the foot of Monte Rosa, towards the eaves of the hut projecting high above me. Robert and Andrea arrived an hour later; we greeted each other joyfully, but our pleasure was slightly marred by the heavy clouds which were forming, casting doubts on the weather to come.

We awoke to a grey dawn and with some misgivings set off for Monte Rosa. At first we were too occupied with zigzagging up the steep slopes above the hut to notice much of what was happening; but by the time we came on to easier going on the snow-covered ice above, the day had completely closed in and the top of the Dufourspitze was hidden in the clouds. With no view, and all colour

Dent d'Hérens

Dent d'Hérens from Stock Glaci

Mt. Velan

Approaching storm : Grands Mulets, Mont Blanc

Refuge Vallot and Mont Blanc

Piz Bernina from Piz Palü

taken from the landscape, the climb became a tedious plod in and out between huge crevasses and under dimly looming ice-cliffs.

It is a great disappointment, while climbing a mountain, when there is no view to be had from any of the points of vantage. Instead of being an exhilarating experience, it turns into a long grind, which comes to its logical end only when you can get no higher. On this day, even our ski-run down was no pleasure, for in the uncertain light we had to exercise great care, roped together, the leading man almost literally feeling his way. It had begun to snow hard, and our eyes were stinging by the time we reached the hut door. For the next two days we sat cursing in the hut; the third was not much better but the glass was rising, and as Robert only had two weeks' holiday we decided to start off on the first lap of the "Haute Route" to Chamonix, climbing the Théodule Pass, circumnavigating the Matterhorn, and sleeping at the Schönbühl Hut.

Everything was cold and grey, wet and dispiriting as we punted off down the glacier, but by the time we had climbed to the Théodule we had warmed up and the sun was trying to break through. Ahead of us the peak of the Matterhorn was floating darkly in the sky above an encircling ring of clouds, brooding over the land. Silently we schussed down over the miles of smoothly sloping glacier towards the Schwarzsee, and traversed round beneath the high rib of rock on which perches the Hörnli Hut. At these close quarters the vastness of the Matterhorn was almost oppressive; it seemed to squat there like some gigantic monster with its dark head high above the clouds in another, remoter world. Once round the Hörnli Ridge, we began the long traverse across the steep slopes above the Zmutt Valley, close under the menacing ice-wall of the Matterhorn Glacier. We rested on a rock to chew some raisins; above us towered the forbidding North Face, still guarding in its grim walls the secret sepulchre of one of the four unfortunates who crashed 4,000 feet to their death nearly ninety years ago. A block of ice suddenly broke away with a crack and smashed down on to the slope ahead in a splintering of glittering fragments; singly, a hundred yards apart, we skimmed across the final half-mile of slopes to the Zmutt Glacier and then, putting on skins, began the gentle climb towards the hut, high on its buttress of rock.

We had the hut to ourselves: a little persuasive blarneying of the *Hüttenwart* led to his disappearing through a trap-door in the floor, to re-emerge

clutching a bottle of red wine. We busied ourselves around the stove and presently the four of us, replete, were comfortably sprawled out along the benches exchanging climbing gossip.

Under a brilliant blue sky we slithered down the grassy gully to our ski, parked by the moraine the night before. The world had suddenly become friendly again; even the airy crest of the Zmutt arête soaring into the snow-plastered slabs of the Matterhorn seemed to beckon to us. The Dent d'Hêrens was clad in a dazzling mantle of white, falling in blue-lined icy flounces to the soft-furrowed glacier below. On perfect powder snow we wound our way along its crests and gullies towards the clear-cut col on the sky-line; we passed beneath the terraces of the Stockje, where, in the days before the hut was built, so many famous expeditions had bivouacked—and climbed up above it on to the Stock Glacier. With our backs to the shark's fin of the Dent Blanche we sweated up over the now sticky snow to the Col de Valpelline and then, fanned by a welcome breeze of speed, swept down on to the Tza de Tzan Glacier, that little island of Italian ice framed by Swiss cliffs. The air was so hot down here that we could scarcely breathe; laying our ski on the snow we propped ourselves up against our packs and rested before tackling the short, steep climb to the Col de Mont Brulé. We still had a long way to go to the Cabane des Vignettes: down into a valley, up a long climb to the Col de l'Evèque, and then down a broken glacier and across the mile wide névé of the Glacier du Mont Collon. As we came out into the defile at the top of the last climb we could see the hut far away in the distance, perched in the face of a precipice—I just had time to take a compass bearing and try to memorise its situation before the clouds enveloped us. It was late, nearly five o'clock. Cautiously we skied down, feeling our way along some old ski-tracks, but once on the névé these disappeared and we had to steer entirely by compass.

Slowly we plodded along the flat; then suddenly the edge of an ice-fall loomed out of the mist to our right. We checked this on the map, took a fresh bearing and set off again, checking with the compass every few hundred yards. At last we came to the foot of a slope and a few rocks appeared; we knew we were somewhere very near the hut. The slope was so steep that we had to climb in zigzags—visibility was about ten yards. Presently we had to admit we were lost, and then the inevitable argument developed. We were following a rather

stony ridge; Andrea swore this was the spur immediately below the hut—I was convinced it was another spur marked on the map farther to the left. For a while we climbed on until the aneroid showed we were as high as the hut and still the spur went on up into the mist. We were tired and it was getting dusk. Robert volunteered to climb on a bit and see what happened, if we would wait for him; but he returned after twenty minutes to say he had met glacier ice, which was obviously wrong. I still stuck to my opinion that the hut lay away to the right, and finally Andrea agreed to wait while I went to see. I hurried off into the gloom on a compass bearing; soon the slope fell steeply away to the right and I felt happier. Then rocks appeared ahead, beyond which according to the map the hut should lie, for the altitude and the direction were correct. The slope to the right was now giddily steep and I carefully side-stepped up on to the rocky ledge and skied along it for fifty yards until suddenly a dark shape loomed ahead—the hut. Thankfully I dumped my heavy pack and hurried back over my tracks to find Andrea and Robert gloomily conferring as to how best to dig into the snow for the night. Seldom have three people been more thankful to reach the shelter of a hut. We were cold and tired, and the first thing after taking off our boots and putting on the *"Hüttenschuhe"* was to cook up a really good, solid soup.

The Pigne d'Arolla is a pleasant and easy ski climb, with a nicely rounded snow summit from which one looks down almost sheer on to the pine-trees and green meadows of Arolla, the hotel and chalets looking like doll's houses so far below. Almost all the main peaks of the Alps can be seen, swinging in a circle from the Oberland to the Dent Blanche, past Monte Rosa framed between the Matterhorn and the Dent d'Hérens, past the Gran Paradiso faintly floating like a cloud above the plains of Italy, to the dome of Mt. Blanc overtopping the Grand Combin.

In silence we basked on the summit, united in the desire to put off the inevitable departure as long as possible. Then we put on our ski and dived off the top in a long schuss which took us far across the saddle that separated us from the Mt. Blanc de Seilon. That run was one of the best I have ever made, over miles of long easy slopes in perfect spring snow down the Glacier de Breney. Half-way down we had an exciting slalom on the steep and narrow slope beside the main ice-fall; and then more long schusses followed by a short

traverse round above the left-hand moraine, and a final swoop down on to the Cabane de Chanrion.

Around the hut the snow had all gone, and the grassy slopes were filled with the silky lilac heads of golden-centred Pascal anemones. It was still early afternoon and we wandered about among the flowers, in spring and yet in winter. But there was little feeling of spring next day as we stumbled down the hard-frozen grass in the darkness before dawn, carrying our ski into the foot of the gorge far below, and the first part of the long climb under the Grand Combin was over icy, granular snow on which the edges scarcely gripped. For hours we toiled up the endless-seeming Glacier du Mont Durand, getting hotter and hotter once the sun had risen; this was friendlier country than around Zermatt, and in proof of it we crossed the track of a doe-chamois, on her way to the softer pastures of the southern Italian slopes. Later, as we neared the Col de Sonadon, we were hailed by another party of three skiers, coming from Chamonix.

We were grateful to them, for the long lip of the Plateau du Couloir, above the precipitous slopes leading down to the Cabane de Valsorey, was overhung by cornices through which they had had laboriously to hew a way. Strapping on crampons, Andrea climbed down through the gap and turned to receive the bundled ski which we lowered to him on the rope; then, ski across our packs, we roped up and carefully made our way footstep by footstep across the dizzily steep slopes below the Grand Combin until we reached a more gentle spur where we could safely put on ski again. We wished we had more time in hand, for the Mont Velan, rising to the south, looked a magnificent ski mountain. As it was, we merely paused at the hut and then skied on down into the valley until we came to the snow-line.

I shall never forget that walk down into the St. Bernard Valley. As we came lower the slopes all around were blue with thousands of starry gentians, and splashed with the gold of potentillas. Occasionally the gentians gave way to lilac waves of alpine violas, nodding their heads in the gentle breeze, and by the stream grew masses of pink primulas (*Primula farinosa*). The first herds were already at the upper pastures, and a small boy was singing away happily from the top of a big rock high above the path, amidst the tinkling bells of his flock of goats.

From Bourg St. Pierre we caught a bus down to Orsières for the night, and another next day up to Lac Champex; from there we carried our ski for ages along narrow paths high on the mountainsides, and then up a steep and shut-in valley until we came to the snow again in the upper part of the Combe d'Orny. There followed a hot climb on ski up to the Cabane d'Orny. Next day we continued up the glacier to the Plateau du Trient—the country was now very different, for we were already among the forerunners of the Chamonix Aiguilles and the rocks all around rose in slim red spires towards the blue sky. Once through the narrow, rocky pass called the Fenêtre de Saleinaz, we had a short run down followed by a very steep and hot scramble up to the Col du Chardonnet, the frontier between Switzerland and France. At once we were among classic peaks—to our right rose the airy red shafts of the Aiguille du Chardonnet and facing us down the valley rose the perpendicular ice-clad scarp of the Aiguille Verte and Les Droites. Then followed a superb ski-run, over perfect spring snow in hot sunshine down long, easy slopes to the ice-fall, where we found a lovely gully to one side that brought us out on to the wide expanse of the Glacier d'Argentières.

As we dropped lower and lower the snow became very soggy, and finally ran out at the top of a steep slope covered in freshly budding sallow bushes. Through the wet patches of lank grass soldanellas were peeping, shyly bending their heads, while farther down, the blue trumpets of bell gentians dotted the ridges. The air was redolent of pine as we struck the summer path and followed it down to the valley floor across to the village of Argentières; here, with the tumbling ice cascades of Mt. Blanc already in sight we sat on a sunny terrace drinking welcome beer until the little train hove in sight that was to take us down to Chamonix.

Next day the cable-car swung us high above the tree-tops and deposited us above the snow-line near the Pierre Pointue, the starting point of so many of the early attempts on Mont Blanc. As we skied along peacefully over steep slopes and then across the great snowfield at the head of the Bossons Glacier my mind went back to the first climbers, ignorant of ski, sweating and stumbling, plunging up to their knees in the snow, burdened with ladders and long poles, striding on with grim determination towards that island of refuge—the Grands Mulets rocks. For us, supported on our ski, carefully making our way through it on the rope, the tricky passage through "la Jonction", fantastic

labyrinth of huge séracs and yawning crevasses where the Taconnaz and Bossons glaciers meet, was awe-inspiring enough. For them, on foot with only ladders and poles for safeguards, it must have been truly terrifying; and indeed more than one of those early adventurers was swallowed up by this grim maze of broken and tortured ice. And then, once safely through it, they had to prepare for a chilly night camped in the crevices of the Grands Mulets rocks, from where, huddled round small fires every stick of which they had had to carry with them, they would look down enviously at the winking lights of Chamonix far below and think of those who were peering up anxiously, hoping to see the tiny pinpoints of fire high in the glaciers that would denote the first dangers overcome. We, on the other hand, could relax on the terrace of the hut, watching the gathering storm-clouds over the Dôme du Gouter, and then sleep soundly under warm blankets.

The storm broke after dinner and rain drummed on the roof as we went to bed; but when I looked out after the alarm went off at 1.30 a.m., the night was clear and starlit. We ate an enormous breakfast, for we had nearly 6,000 feet to climb to the highest summit in Europe. The mountains were merely starless areas of the night as we slowly started on foot over the hard-frozen slopes; the world for us had shrunk to a tiny pool of golden light cast by the lantern, beyond which the blackness shut us in like a wall. Eerily from the outer darkness echoed creaks and muffled groans as the glaciers moved uneasily in their rocky beds. Presently we came to the point where the night's rain had fallen as snow, and now, on ski, the going was easier. Slowly the stars faded; black silhouettes appeared one by one high above us—giants waking into life. A glow spread from the east, outlining the Aiguille Verte, and the icy wastes about us took on an opalescent shimmer.

The sky paled through silver to gold, and then the first shaft of sun struck the snowy col at the foot of the Aiguille du Midi. A rosy glow enveloped the Aiguille Verte, the sky behind it the palest emerald. A warm flush ran through the rocks as the day slowly dawned, and one by one the peaks were kindled into life. Only the valley below still slept, a deep blue vale cradling a sea of grey mist.

We crossed the Petit Plateau, circumnavigated the blue blocks of ice-avalanches fallen from the Dôme du Gouter, and climbed slowly on towards the Grand Plateau. There was a lot of new snow up here and the going in

places was heavy. Alas, some ominous streamers of cloud were by now approaching from the south, and when at last we reached the Bionassay Ridge we found a turbulent sea of cloud lapping the edge, covering all the Italian valleys. After a chilly snack in the Refuge Vallot we moored our ski securely and put on crampons for the last 1,500 feet to the summit. The going was good over the Bosses du Dromadaire, on hard-blown snow, but a wind was rising and the sea of cloud already beginning to drift through the notches in the ridge. Slowly and steadily we trudged along the crest of dizzy slopes disappearing into the clouds, with wave after wave of mist sweeping over us. One last steep slope, and we were on the summit ridge. The clouds cleared for a moment to give us a glimpse along the top and down to the Mont Maudit, before we were enveloped for good. We sat in the lee of the little cornice to rest, and thought of the good people of Chamonix about to start their breakfast.

When we had returned to the Refuge the weather still showed no sign of improving, so we put on our ski and ran down to the saddle. As we got there everything suddenly closed in, a strong wind sprang up and it started to snow. Visibility was nil. To go on towards the yawning bergschrunds awaiting us was to court disaster; the only alternative was to strike back along our tracks to the hut. After much arguing we decided to give it half an hour and see; so, with our hands in our pockets and backs to the wind we huddled together in the blizzard. Then, as if by magic, it cleared ahead of us, opening the view down to Chamonix; and although a great wave of cloud in suspended animation menaced us from the rear, we reckoned we had time to get below the Grand Plateau before the weather could close up again. The new snow was already blown into slabs and ski-ing on the rope was not easy, but once down on the Grand Plateau we discarded it and had comparatively good running back to the Grands Mulets. The summit was now completely hidden in cloud but the lower slopes were open; under a hot sun we ran the remainder of the descent down to the cable-car station, and by one o'clock we were lunching under the cherry blossom of the Chamonix Valley.

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In comparison with the immense Zermatt and Chamonix glaciers those of the Bernina Group seem small. Also, while technically no less difficult and just

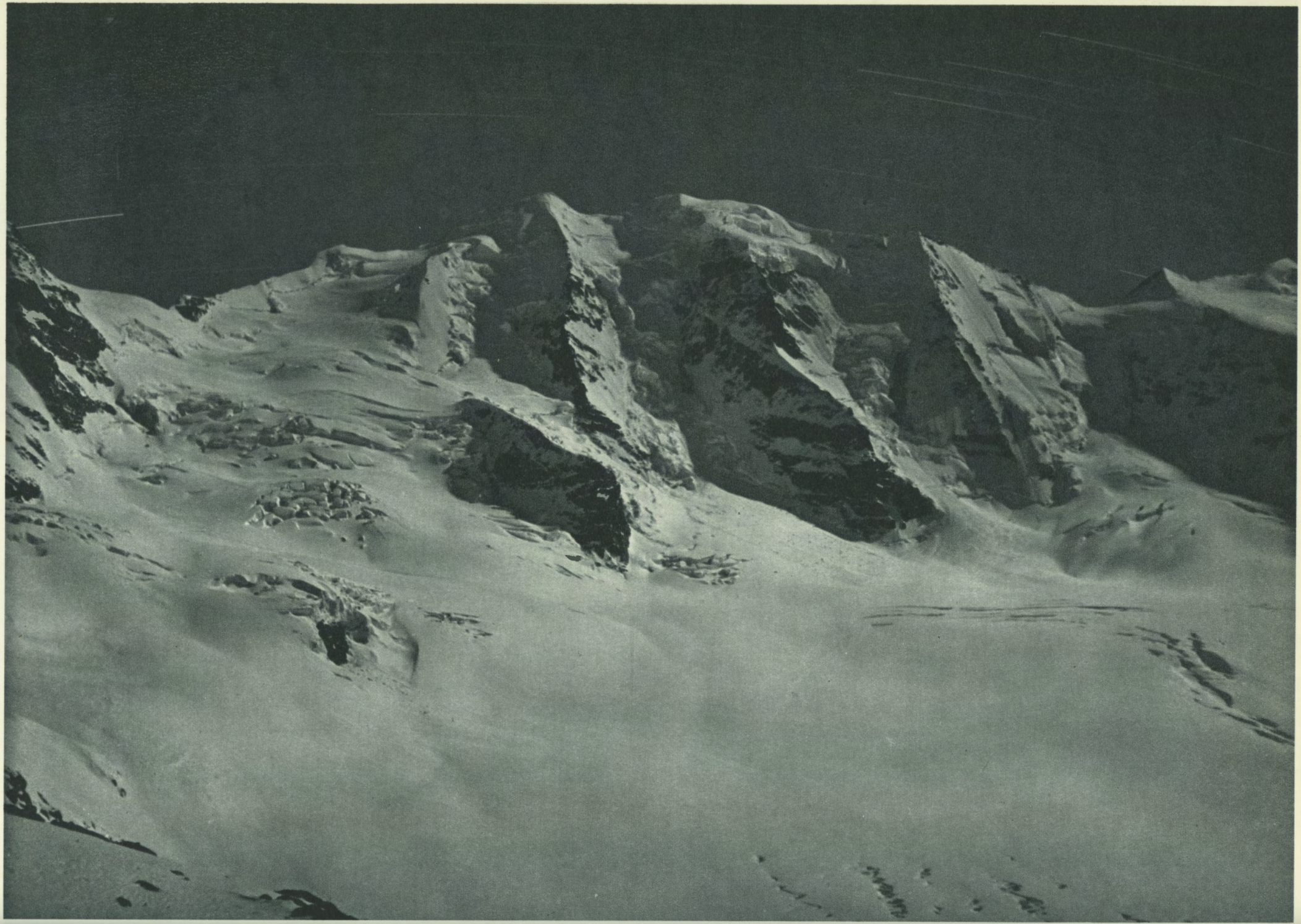
as treacherous for the unwary, they seem more friendly, more intimate. The climbs are shorter and the mountaineer has more time in which to relax and absorb the beauties of the world around him. For the ski-mountaineer they are ideal, for there are few climbs upon which ski cannot be taken to within 1,000 feet of the summit.

Piz Palü is one of the loveliest, the three soaring buttresses of its snowy triple peak rising in icy tiers above the snowfield of the Pers Glacier. Often had I sat on the terrace of the Diavolezza Hut and studied its delicate crest, sharply outlined against the Italian sky, and mentally picked my way through the crevasses of the Cambrena Ice-fall that guard the approach; but afterwards I had always dived over the edge and skied past its foot and down the Morteratsch Glacier for five wonderful miles. One hot February day I reversed the process and sweated up the steep pitch of Isla Pers from the Boval Hut, to which I had returned after climbing the Piz Morteratsch, and on up to the Diavolezza. For the first time I sat in the hut window and watched the deep shadows flow up the valley and slowly engulf the flanks of Palü, till the last warm glow of the peaks faded and cooled. For a while all was shrouded in darkness—then the moon rose, and in her silver light Palü shone out fairer than ever, the moonbeams dancing from the polished walls of the ice terraces and bathing all the snowy slopes in soft and luminous light.

It was still dark as my companion and I skied down on to the Pers Glacier, and we were still in cold shadows as we came to the Cambrena Ice-fall. A fathomless black crevasse spanned the whole face; we skied along its narrow lip until we found a bridge across it, close in under the Piz Cambrena. Beyond the ice-fall, the climb was easy for several hundred feet until once again a crevasse with a high, overhanging lip blocked our way. We made a bridge of our ski and then, thrusting an ice-axe into the hard-frozen snow of the further wall to serve as a step, hacked our way through the cornice above to the final snow slope, leaving our ski behind. Kicking steps up the last sunny climb to the first top was like walking up the tilted ridge-pole of a roof, but this was nothing to the narrow arête leading from the saddle beyond to the summit of Piz Palü. This was really a knife-edge, a slope of snow vanishing over cliffs on the Italian side and abysmal ice precipices falling for 2,000 feet on the Swiss, along which we balanced wondering whether anyone at the hut was watching our tiny figures on the sky-line.

Piz Bernina, Biancograt

Piz Palü from Piz Morteratsch



50 Swiss Alps

Piz Palü by moonlight

The Labyrinth, Piz Bernina

Bellavista and Piz Bernina from Morteratsch

Scerscen Glacier

63 Swiss Alps

Near the top of Piz Morteratsch

At the top we sat and basked in the sun until it was time to make our way back to our ski. Once we had them on again we indulged in glorious running, first on the rope through the Cambrena Ice-fall and then in long, sweeping schusses over perfect powder snow down the glacier to Isla Pers, where we joined the ordinary "bob-run" of beaten snow of the Diavolezza skiers. We whizzed down the last long miles of the Morteratsch Glacier to the Bernina Railway—thanks to our ski, we had descended the 7,000 feet from the summit of Palü in only two hours; on foot it would have taken at least five.

A few weeks later we were jogging up the Roseg Valley in a sleigh, muffled up to the ears in rugs. High above the cliffs under the Piz Rosatsch an eagle was circling in the warm upper air; in the pine forest close by the track a few shaggy-coated chamois were browsing at the long streamers of lichen hanging from the branches, and grubbing for plants under the snow round the tree-trunks, so engrossed in their search for sustenance that they paid us scant attention. At the Roseg Restaurant we paid off our driver and started the long trek up towards the Coaz Hut. As soon as we were through the jumble of old terminal moraines at the junction of the Tschierva Glacier we came to smooth climbing up the Roseg Glacier, and when at last we arrived opposite the hut we looked out a nice warm rock, perched high and dry on the big lateral moraine, and sat down for a well-earned rest. As we munched our sandwiches two chamois approached us across the glacier—at this point over half a mile wide; they came to within fifty yards of us, then with a slithering of stones scrambled up the exposed moraine towards a few sparse patches of grass blown bare by the winds on the ridges above.

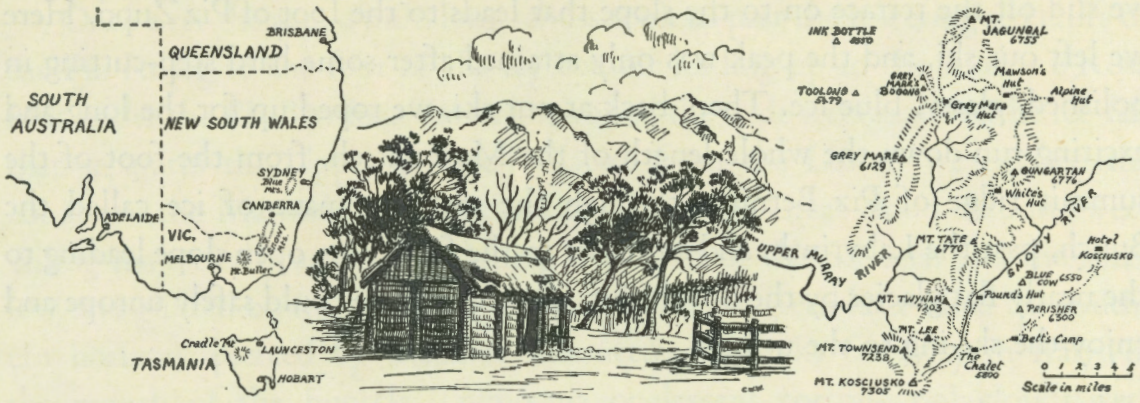
The long glacier slopes below the Sella Peaks and the Piz Glüschaint looked most inviting as we climbed, and we began to look forward to the run down into Italy that awaited us at the top. As we slowly mounted the Sella Glacier two skiers came into view ahead, unroped and falling with terrifying frequency. Mentally we prepared ourselves for rescue operations, but the angel who looks after fools and drunks was evidently on the job, and they presently staggered up to us with a cheerful "buon'giorno!"—a couple of smugglers burdened with heavy and shapeless packs of rice to exchange for cigarettes and Nescafé. Everything was lovely on the other side, they said, and the Marinelli Hut was nearly empty.

Once over the top, a mile-long schuss took us past the towering red cliffs of the Piz Roseg to the foot of the icy couloir leading up to the Marco e Rosa Hut under the Piz Bernina. Traversing round the wide terrace above the ice-fall that separates the Upper Scerscen Glacier from the Lower, we reached the col above the Marinelli spur in the late afternoon. Great cloud shadows were sailing majestically across the shining snowfield of the Scerscen and the sun's low rays glinted on its hardening surface. A delicate green haze filled the southern horizon, pierced by the dim silhouettes of peaks far away in Italy; in the mouth of the Fuorcla Tremoggia opalescent cotton-wool clouds were slowly forming and re-forming.

The lower part of the steep run down to the hut was in shadow and already icy. The hut itself was still sunlit, perched like a swallow's nest on the ledge of a cliff above a thousand-foot precipice, looking out high over the tongue of the Scerscen Glacier towards the jagged outline of Monte Disgrazia. Maria, the sister of the hut-keeper, welcomed us warmly; she at once produced a flagon of red Valtellina wine and some huge steaks. Overjoyed at the two tins of Nescafé I had brought her, she insisted next morning, as we left the hut at 6 a.m., on giving us a stirrup cup each of *grappa*—a very potent local liqueur—with the result that the rhythm of our climb was broken every hundred feet or so by a resounding hiccup. In fact we did not get over the grappa until we were high in the ice-fall below the névé of the Palü Glacier.

Piz Palü is not very impressive from the Italian side—just three white peaks above a line of low cliffs. But once one arrives on the Fuorcla Bellavista the sunny slopes of Italy are transformed into the terrifying ice precipices of Switzerland, and the peaceful ski excursion immediately becomes high-alpine mountaineering where every step must be watched. The pass is very narrow, and to get round to the Bellavista Terrace—a wide snow-shelf above great ice-cliffs—one has to traverse a dizzy slope that gets steeper and steeper until it falls in a sheer 2,000 feet of ice to the Pers Glacier. Half-way across our ski would scarcely grip; so, firmly mooring ourselves we put on crampons, tied our ski across our rucksacks, and carefully made our way diagonally up across the remaining hundred yards to the lip of the terrace. The Morteratsch Glacier looked incredibly far below; a long, sinuous, furrowed white tongue winding its way into the dark valley. Once round the corner under Bellavista's last peak

we slid off the terrace on to the slope that leads to the foot of Piz Zupó. Here we left our ski, and the peak was only attained after some hard step-cutting in polished, glassy, blue ice. Then, back at our ski, we roped up for the long and exciting run down the whole length of the Morteratsch, from the foot of the summit ridge of Piz Bernina, through the intricate maze of ice called the Buuch, past the Labyrinth, and so at last to the final long, open slope leading to the nearly flat glacier by the Boval Hut, upon which we could safely unrope and enjoy the ski-ing to the utmost.



CHAPTER IX

THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS OF AUSTRALIA

ONE OF THE earliest things I remember from my geography lessons as a small boy was that intriguing name in the bottom right-hand corner of the map of Australia—"The Blue Mountains". I had visions of a range of blue peaks rather like the mountains of the moon, inhabited exclusively by kangaroos, and I believed the rest of the Australian continent to be flat. It was not until I went out there that I discovered that the Blue Mountains are just a 4,000-foot plateau cut by huge red-cliffed canyons; they owe their name and reputation mainly to the fact that they were the first great barrier the early settlers had to overcome before they found the rich plains of the west.

The real mountains of Australia are the Snowy Mountains, a range varying from about 6,000 to 7,000 feet that stretches for over a hundred miles in southern New South Wales, extending southwards into Victoria. The first recorded expedition to this region was led by the Polish explorer Count Strzelecki, who hoisted the Polish flag in the name of Freedom on the highest peak in 1835, and named it after the Polish patriot Kosciuszko. The haunt of wombats and wallabies, of kangaroos, dingoes and duck-bills, they remained for long a wild area visited only by the occasional hunter or prospector. Then, as the great cattle stations came into being in the west, the squatters realized that

Snowgums

The Main Range

Watson's Crags, Main Range

Winter day

here at their doorstep was a wonderful summer range for their cattle, which could be left there to thrive on rich grass and abundant water while the plains lay in the grip of drought. It was the Wild West over again, and twice a year—in the spring and autumn round-ups—thousands of cattle were driven up into the Range in November and brought down again in May. The herdsmen built huts along the top to accommodate themselves, and it is these huts which have now become the "alpine huts" of the winter skiers.

To most people the idea of ski-ing in Australia is just as crazy as the thought of ski-ing in Africa. They do not realize that the area under snow in the south-east corner of Australia is very nearly equal to that of the Swiss Alps in winter. And the Norwegians find it a bitter pill to swallow when they discover that Australia can boast the oldest ski-club (as against a general sports club) in the world—the Kiandra Pioneer Ski Club, founded in 1861, sixteen years before the Christiania Skiklub in Norway. In fact, probably the first downhill ski race in history was held in Australia. Kiandra was the scene of one of the early gold-rushes, and thousands of miners came from all over the world to try their luck, among them a great many Chinese. The American miners had brought with them from California the tradition of Snowshoe Thompson, who single-handed inaugurated and carried out a "ski" mail service in the Sierras in 1857, with the result that the men soon took to making primitive ski of old fence-boards and playing around on winter Sundays on Township Hill, a 500-foot slope near the village. Before long an annual downhill race was organized, with a mass start from the top—the sight of the miners racing down the slope, tripping each other up with their single staves, the Chinese yelling and with pigtails flying, must have been truly terrifying. Kiandra is now just a small village, very different from the thriving gold-rush township it was, but the ski-ing tradition still holds and the locals still make "Kiandra ski". The finest tour in the Australian Alps, the Antipodean "Haute Route", is from Kosciusko to Kiandra, a distance of some thirty-five miles along the crest of the Main Range.

Compared to the Alps of Europe, the Australian winter landscape is extraordinarily colourful. Here are no sombre black swathes of fir-trees, monotonous in their uniformity, but groves of snow-gums whose graceful, sinuous trunks are slashed with pastel shades of olive, yellow, pink, lilac, blue

and gold. The sun glitters through their feathery leaves, netting the snow with delicate shadows, and against the deep blue sky their twigs glow a rich red; from a distance, as the wind ruffles the foliage, it changes from grey-green to sienna and then to orange and back again. From the western wall of the Range the eye roams for miles over the blue and gold plains far below, lapping the foot of white cliffs.

Although to the west the Range falls steeply and suddenly, the approach from the east, whence mounts the only road, is long and gradual. A bus takes one to the Hotel Kosciusko at 4,000 feet (it was burnt to the ground in 1951), from which point—until a snow-tractor pulling a "covered waggon" on runners was inaugurated shortly before the war—one had to ski for eleven miles up to the Chalet, with one's bags following by dog-team. It is a long pull, across three wide passes with hardly any downhill running. Often there is a strong head-wind, and the mountains on either hand bear chilly-sounding names—"The Perisher", "The Paralyser", "The Blue Cow". Sometimes, as one slowly climbs through the snow-gums to the Perisher Pass, a pair of slate-grey cockatoos will rise from a tree and swing away with wheezing cries in tumbling, erratic flight through the branches, sure harbingers of bad weather. The only sight less pleasant than these "Gang-gangs", as they are called, is a flight of the huge black cockatoos with their long, yellow-barred tails, coming over with grating squawks like a formation of bombers. A gang-gang may herald only a day or two, but the "Black Cockies" at least a week of bad weather. Nobody knows why they come up to the tops only when storms are imminent but so it is; at other times one seldom sees them. Once, after a four-day blizzard, I found a crimson-crested cock gang-gang frozen stiff in the snow at the hut door.

The Chalet lies in a snowy basin at the foot of Charlotte's Pass, beyond which long, easy ski slopes climb 1,300 feet to the Main Range. In summer the motor road is open the whole way to the top of Mt. Kosciusko, though often blocked by snowdrifts even at Christmas, but in winter there may be thirty or forty feet of snow on the Pass, overhanging in great cornices, gathered by the blizzards which so often sweep the Range in the early part of winter.

I would rather be exposed to a blizzard in almost any other part of the world than in Australia. A bank of cloud rises and envelops everything in dense mist; then the relatively warm, wet winds scream in, driving the snow before

them and condensing in plumes of ice against the rocks, and all sense of direction is lost. On the long, rolling eastern slopes of the Range every ridge and valley looks alike, and once the summit landmarks are obscured there is no bearing on which the eye can fix. No skier ever ventures out on the Range without a compass and a pair of goggles; no party so much as goes from the hotel to the chalet or vice-versa without reporting at each end, and more than once search-parties have had to go out for people eventually found completely lost within half a mile of safety. When Mawson trained his dog-teams and party for a South Pole expedition he chose the Australian Alps for his camp. Recently two-way radio communication has been installed in most of the huts with a central control post at the chalet, so that parties can report their movements even when right out on the Range.

But in August and September the weather is usually fine, and then the skier can roam at will over the vast expanses of the Main Range. Early one morning, I left the chalet with a ski-ing companion while everyone still slept; with rolled-up sleeves we were soon steadily climbing the even gradient towards Mt. Lee, and in just over two hours we stood on the crest of the Range. Behind us the long white slopes vanished into a blue haze, but ahead steep, rocky spurs enfolding basins and narrow valleys of snow fell abruptly towards the western plains, disappearing into a dense forest of "tall timber" that stretched away to the first green clearings near the source of the Murray River, whence a thin pencil of smoke was rising vertically. Around us the rocks sprouted plumes and feathers of clear ice, and we had to pick our way carefully over the ice-sown surface of the snow along the crest. Below the immediate top the ice gave way to smooth spring snow, and we swooped down in consecutive turns for 2,000 feet. We followed the side of the narrow valley foot as far as the edge of the tall timber, where the underbrush of wattle scrub blocked our descent; then, on a dry rock by the side of the now-open creek we sat and took a sun bath, oiling ourselves against the overpowering rays.

Then we put on our skins and began the long, hot climb back up the valley to the Range, sweating with the sun on our backs. On frozen Lake Albina we turned south and found a cooler gully that brought us out under the summit rocks of Mt. Townsend (7,238 feet, and the second highest mountain in Australia)—tall monoliths of granite like the blocks of Stonehenge. From

here we looked out across the plains nearly 6,000 feet below, which vanished into the heat haze some thirty miles away. Presently we set off for Mt. Kosciusko, a mile away to the south and overtopping us by 67 feet, swinging in a swift slalom down a 500-foot slope and then ski-ing across a wide basin to the summit ridge. Far to the north rose Jagungal, a white lion couchant, and nearly a hundred miles to the south-west the white mass of the Victorian Alps shimmered above the haze. The air was rapidly cooling and we were glad of our wind-jackets as we began the long run back down into the head of the Snowy Valley; shadows lengthened, the temperature fell, and it was freezing as we ran down the darkening Charlotte's Pass back to the Chalet door.

Our day over the Range and down the Western Faces had whetted our appetites, so a few days later, staggering under heavy packs holding a week's provisions, a party of us set off to follow the Range to Jagungal, two-thirds of the way to Kiandra; from there we intended to explore south along the parallel range of the Grey Mare. The first half-day was easy, just over the Pass and down the valley of the Snowy River to Pound's Hut. I felt rather like the White Knight, my neck hung with compass and aneroid, goggles over my cap, a large bowie knife hanging at my belt and a billy-can clanking on the back of my rucksack under the bulging roll of sleeping-bag. The hut was in good shape but there was no firewood; so my first chore was to find the axe, sharpen it as best I could and then go off into the nearby bush in search of dead timber while somebody else dug down and got a supply of water from the creek. I found some lovely dead branches, but as soon as I tried to chop them they sank into the snow; so the only thing to do was to go back for my ski. Then, leaning well forward and towing a log in each hand, I schussed back to the hut where I could chop them up at my leisure on the doorstep.

Man is essentially a domestic animal, and his natural instinct is to try to make himself as comfortable as possible even when he knows he has to move on again almost immediately. By common unspoken accord each one of us had selected a certain task about the hut and very soon the "beds" were made, the food and tin utensils neatly laid out, spare clothing and sealskins hung up out of the way, and a billy of tea boiling on the roaring stove; a leak was discovered in the tin chimney-pipe and painstakingly repaired, while another vain attempt was made to sharpen the axe. Soon there was a gentle haze of smoke under the

Snowgums at Charlotte's Pass

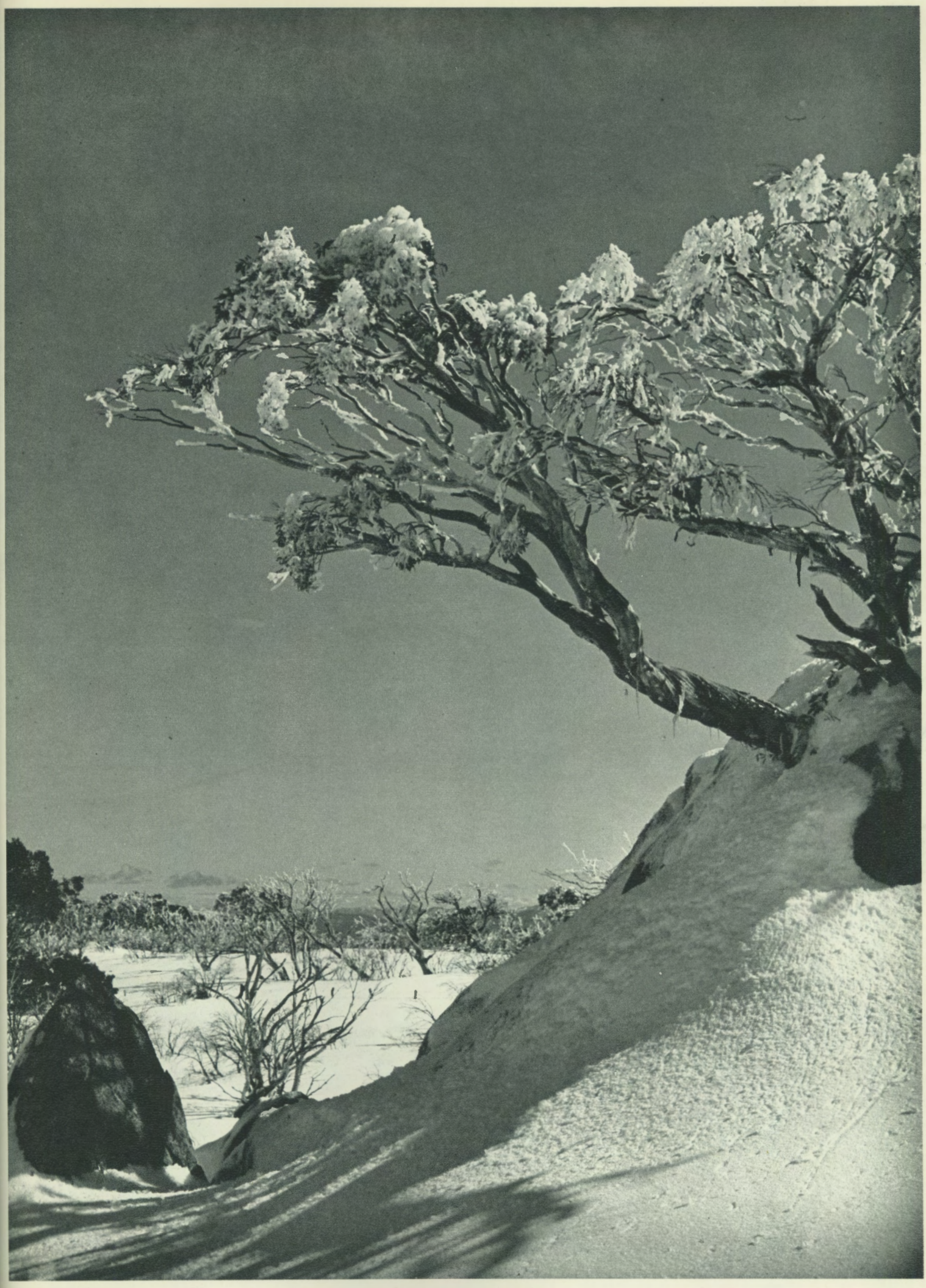
So — Australia

Mt. Twynam, west spur

Mt. Twynam, west spur

Snowgum twigs

Cornice on Mt. Tat



Above Dead Horse Gap, Snowy Mts.

Mt. Jagungal

Dawn on Mt. Buller

Snowgums on Mt. Buller

rafters, and when we blew out the candles and crawled into our sleeping-bags the whole room was illumined by the glow of the red-hot stove. The warmth must have woken up some hibernating mouse, for there were odd rustlings and scratchings behind my head during the night, and in the morning I found some tell-tale traces round the corner of my pillow.

Next day we forded the half-open Snowy River, balancing on ski over polished domes of granite between ice-lappetted pools of swift black water. We climbed over hard-frozen snow up the long slopes of Tate; from its summit the peak of Kosciusko already looked a long way behind us. The Grey Mare's long-humped ridge was almost opposite, across the darkly wooded valley that rose towards the foot of Jagungal. Above the run down to Consett Stephen Pass part of the corniced ridge of Tate had broken away in an avalanche, a rare thing in Australia where the humidity binds the snow far firmer than in Europe, and big blocks lay strewn across our path. Then we climbed again and followed the backbone of the Range for another two miles until we dropped off it down powder-snow slopes towards the little hidden valley of White's River and its comfortable hut. The day was still young, so two of us climbed the opposite peak and had a fast and exciting slalom back through the glades in the snow-gums while the others prepared the hut. White's is one of the summer cattlemen's headquarters, and the tops of the corral posts were just showing above the snow. Inside, pinned up beside the big fireplace, a yellowed placard announced the joys of a long-past Bushman's Carnival in the nearest township.

The next two days were over very flat country, almost like Lapland except for the bright and friendly patches of snow-gums through which we constantly passed. We spent the first night at Mawson's Hut, and then traversed a section of lower country, fording open streams and sometimes slaloming trickily through thickets of black-wattle scrub, cutting across below the foot of Jagungal which we hoped to climb later on. In the late afternoon we came to a valley where the grass was already showing, on whose further slopes stood the Grey Mare Hut; we were glad to see it, for not only is it a difficult place to find, being well hidden in the mountains, but we hoped food would be awaiting us there. The hut is only two days' ride from the Upper Murray Valley to the west, and one of our party had arranged for a sealed tin to be brought in on

horseback in the autumn, just before the first snowfalls. Sure enough, there it was safe and sound—and the fruit-cake it contained was very welcome.

The Grey Mare was the name of a gold-mine in the hill behind the hut—it has long been worked out and abandoned but the hut has survived, though it is seldom used, for not many cattle-men come this way. We found half of it had fallen in, but the other half was still habitable—given a little attention. The fireplace and chimney were a solid block of ice, and snow had seeped up through the floor-boards that in places were almost two inches apart. There were two axes of ancient lineage, and with these we set to work to clear the fireplace while one of us climbed on to the roof to clear the snow out of the chimney. The nearest timber was high on the hillside above, so I went up with two pairs of ski and made a rough sledge on to which I loaded all the branches I could get, and then tobogganed dangerously back to the hut using the longest as a brake-cum-rudder.

The others had got the chimney and fireplace cleared, and we soon had a fire going; even so, draughts blew in from so many angles that we had to keep on our full clothing. The bunks were too dilapidated for use, but in the dankly shuttered back room we found two ancient, and as far as we could ascertain uninhabited, mattresses; these we spread over the floor to cover the maximum number of cracks. Building up the fire as high as was safe, and with a pile of firewood within easy reach, we got into our sleeping-bags and curled up round it.

It was a chilly night, and whoever was coldest would periodically wake up and stoke the fire. When at last morning came we were glad to swallow a big brew of porridge and start the long climb up behind, and then along the three-mile back of the Grey Mare Range. The exercise soon warmed us up, and by the time we reached the top the sun was so hot that one of us curled up and put in an hour's sleep while the rest explored the far side. Here we were right out above the plains, and some ten miles away to the south we seemed to be looking almost straight across on to the white western faces of Kosciusko and Carruthers. It was very wild country, and the snow was criss-crossed with fox tracks; in two places near the tree-line we met the spoor of a dingo. Spring was in the air, and a little bird like a cock-bullfinch, but soft-billed, came and sat in a dead snow-gum to watch us at lunch, his scarlet breast a gay splash of

colour against the grey branches. On the way back we did some traversing in order to ski down the nice slopes of the round top called the Grey Mare's Bogong, "Bogong" being the aboriginal name for a high place; in the snow were the tracks of a wedge-tailed eagle, each print the length of a human hand.

So far we had not had much downhill ski-ing. The trip had been more in the nature of a Scandinavian ski-hike, but the landscape was new and fascinating and we had found the pleasure that comes from the harmonious rhythm of cross-country ski-ing. And when the downhill sections unexpectedly came, we enjoyed them all the more.

But when next day we got up on to Jagungal we had a pleasant surprise, for beautiful steep slopes fell away for 1,700 feet on its south flank. The climb had been very hot, up and down over several rounded ridges and across little plains, and then finally up a long steady pull to the summit. As the snow was wet and granular, I had slobbered up my ski with corn-snow Tento, which climbed and ran like a charm—in Australia a good knowledge of wax-craft is almost as important as in Scandinavia. There was a magnificent view from the twin rocky peaks, right back along the whole glittering length of the Range to Kosciusko, and ahead over snowy ridges and valleys down to the depression where lay Kiandra. We had a superb run down the south face on to the high plateau at the foot of Jagungal, and then langlaufed peacefully back again to the Grey Mare.

Maybe we were getting tougher, but that night did not seem so cold as the preceding one. The weather broke next day, and we set off on the return trip in a sleeting rain under low grey clouds. It was clammy and wet and unpleasant, but as we rose on to the Range the sleet improved to light snow, and by mid-afternoon the sun came out again for the last run down to White's Hut. It was only a temporary break, for the morning was bad again—clear in the valley but low cloud along the Range. By the time we got to the top, visibility was down to a few yards, and soon we were in doubt as to our direction. I swore we should keep more to the left, being too lazy to get my compass out; but Dudley insisted on producing his and on checking with the map, to find on the contrary that we should bear more right. This is a very tricky part of the Range, where it breaks up into two or three nearly parallel ridges, and accurate

navigation is essential to save time and trouble. For a good hour we went on in the white blankness, checking our bearing every few hundred yards, and at last we dropped down a bit and struck a half-buried fence that we knew must be just before Consett Stephen Pass. Sure enough we came out on the Pass a few moments later, just below the clouds, and had a good visibility for the nice run down towards the fitful patches of sun that beckoned to us from the Snowy Valley. The Snowy was wide open and we had to search up and down the bank for quite a while until we found some safe enough stepping-stones; once across, it was an easy climb up to Pound's Hut, and next day on up the valley and over Charlotte's Pass back to the chalet.

After a few more days exploring the long, steep ski-runs down the western face of the Main Range, two of us set off for the Victorian mountains; since there are no communications across the Range, this meant ski-ing down back to the Hotel and then going by bus and train to Goulburn, almost back to Sydney, where we changed on to the Melbourne Express that took us overnight across the border far to the west of the Main Range and deposited us at a township. Here we caught a bus and rolled through very wild, forested country towards the snow-line at the foot of Mt. Buller. The countryside was much more "European" in appearance than the eastern approaches to Kosciusko —deep valleys of small farms and cultivation, with densely forested flanks under high mountains. From the foot of Mt. Buller the road climbed steeply through a forest of mighty eucalypts, whose great trunks shone against the green darkness like the towers of lighthouses. High above us gleamed the snow. In due course mud and slushy snow held up the bus, and we had to get out and walk; after a while we were able to use our ski and on these we covered the remainder of the way to the small log hotel, situated on a big knob of open glades on the longest spur coming off the backbone of the mountain. There was much more life here than at Kosciusko—a flock of currawongs were calling in the high branches, occasionally swooping low with golden eyes scanning us over wicked black beaks. They looked like streamlined crows with white patches on their tails, calling "curra-wong! curra-wong!"

All along the glades at the edge of the thickets were wombat tracks, fat pudgy footprints often ending in a deep groove where their hairy bellies had sunk in the softer snow. Occasionally we saw one of these beasts at dusk

or early dawn, looking like a cross between a wolverine and a small black pig. They are friendly and peaceful animals, feeding on roots and grasses, and very shy.

In the early light of the following dawn we started up the glades over fresh powder snow; as we rose along the ridge the sun came over the top of Mt. Stirling far across the valley, illuminating the new snow on the gum branches. Higher up we began to traverse across the flank of the mountain along an old summer track. The soft new snow lay on a hard base; in one place a foraging wombat had slipped when walking along the top of the steep bank and had slid broadside-on to the bottom, leaving a parallel series of claw marks ending in a large hole from which neat round prints padded away into the black-wattle scrub.

The early morning sun threw long, graceful shadows from the bushes through which we climbed, and far away in the distance the mists of night were still lingering in the hollows of the valleys. On the crest of the ridge wisps of mist were blowing up into the blue sky and melting away as they struck the warmer air, while the snow and hoar-frost had condensed in fairy-like feathers over all the snow-gums. Buller is a beautiful ski-mountain, a high cone at the end of a long, elevated ridge, with lovely steep runs down its flanks in all directions. From the corniced summit we looked sheer down into the valley up which we had come, and over a wild landscape of forested mountains and valleys towards the other snowy ranges of Victoria far away in the distance. The ridge we had climbed continued a long way in the other direction, falling to a pass and then rising steeply to Mt. Stirling, whose wide snowy slopes beckoned to us. We contented ourselves that day with a terrific schuss off the summit, starting with a *Geländesprung* over the cornice, and then we followed fast and exciting glades down into a valley just below the hotel. That night we sat round the blazing log fire with the Austrian owner and his wife, drinking *Glühwein* and singing Swiss and Austrian songs to the strains of an accordion; the *Stimmung* could not have been better, and it was hard to imagine one was at the other end of the earth.

The sun was already high as we arrived on the top of the ridge next day. The running along the serrated backbone was more open than we had expected, and we had glorious fast ski-ing through steep glades to a saddle at the foot of

Tabletop. There was heavenly powder snow here; a dingo had passed early that morning chasing a rabbit, and the imprints on the soft crystals told the story almost as vividly as if we had witnessed the event. The little climb to Tabletop was rather icy, and we had some tricky bush-whacking through black-wattle scrub down the other side; but then a series of long, gentle schusses followed along an undulating "arterial road" that ran for a good mile along the ridge. The dingo, likewise downward bound, had unerringly picked the best line, and we soon found ourselves following his tracks at speed round blind corners with complete confidence. It was pleasant and peaceful ski-ing, and the few little rises gave one time to look out over the great valleys that lay on either hand. The last few hundred feet down to Woollybutt Saddle were fast and exciting, for the "road" had dwindled to a steep and narrow track with lots of sharp corners. It was too narrow to stem, except here and there, and we whizzed round corners with "Lifted-skid-prod-oh God!" christies, our sticks whacking the great trunks as they flashed past.

The saddle itself was a wide, open glade surrounded by huge woollybutts—massive gum-trees with very thick, hairy bark around the base of their boles. It was much patronised by the local wombats, and their tracks criss-crossed all over it. We put on skins and climbed up on to Stirling through long glades in the tall timber, on perfect spring snow. It was very hot on top, and we sat for ages over our lunch, studying the massif of Mt. Buller that was spread out before us like a relief map, picking out the site of the hotel and the main runs and trying to spot possible new variations. The run back was a joy, schuss after schuss down the top ridge and then glorious wood-running through the woollybutt forest, between huge black boles that towered up into the dark roof of branches; it was almost a twilight down there, the colour scheme a sombre black and white.

The climb back along the Tabletop ridge came as an anti-climax; all the same it was pleasant wandering through the snow-gums, looking between their red twigs and soft, grey-green leaves to the blue haze of the valley in the distance. In the branches there were a few of those little bullfinch-like birds with crimson breasts and glossy black and white backs; in one place we crossed the tracks of a lyre-bird, and as we neared the hotel we heard one calling from the tree-fern thickets in the valley far below—that is the great joy of Australian

ski-ing, the wildness, the remoteness, the strange birds and beasts comparatively unafraid of man.

A few weeks later I went down to Tasmania, to do some pure rock-climbing in the tall granite crags of Cradle Mountain, one of the few places in Australia where the gums take second place: the prevailing trees are the Antarctic beech, as in New Zealand, and the King Billy pine, an attractive aromatic conifer like a small Arolla pine but with rather cypress-like foliage. Here, too, I found gentians, but they were pure white and I missed the cheerful vivid blue of the Alpine variety. This is the country of the "Marsupial Wolf", or "Tasmanian Tiger", one of the only two carnivores endemic to Australia; although now very rare, he still exists in the remote mountain forests, and his tracks can be found every now and again across the snow. I had no desire to encounter the "Tasmanian Devil", whose appearance and character are rather worse than those of the wolverine of the Arctic, but I was very sorry not to catch a glimpse of the marsupial wolf. For, apart from these, I had met with all the endemic animals: kangaroos in the forest glades of the foothills of the Snowy Range, wallabies along the approaches to Kosciusko, as well as their extraordinary tracks in the snow—wide-spaced hindlegs with a long groove from the tail in between, spaced six to eight feet apart—and the duck-billed platypus swimming like a bit of dead wood in the headwaters of the Murray, under the western face of Kosciusko.

At last the time came to leave Australia and return to Europe. Much as I love the Australian bush—its perfume, its brittle, dancing light, the ever-new, ever-changing kaleidoscope of colour on the gum-trunks—I always feel that it is hostile, that I and all men are intruders and that it will seize the first opportunity to swallow up our works and expel us. In Switzerland, on the contrary, I feel the harmonious relationship between man and nature that has been built up painstakingly over countless millennia, the people themselves in some curious way imprinting a reflection of their own character upon the mountains their ancestors had tamed. No one has yet tamed the Australian bush, and it will be many, many centuries before this comes to pass. And yet it is precisely this, I think, that forms its fascination; it appeals more than it repels, offering a challenge to the instinct to explore, to assert our superiority over Nature, that is innate in all of us. It is the same urge that drove the early mountaineers to

conquer the Alps, and which in more remote times impelled Columbus to search for America and Drake to make his voyages round the New World.

Despite the rapid advance of mechanical civilization which many deplore, the intimate places of the Alps will always remain for those able to seek and find them. Furthermore, the present-day mountaineer, making use of air travel to span the world in a fraction of time, can experience afresh in mountains far afield and among peoples little known, the same quiet ecstasy as did our fathers among the mountains and peoples of Europe. No words, no dogmas, no propaganda can ever spoil the intrinsic character of the mountain peasant, who lives so close to Nature that he has imbibed her universal spirit and tolerance with his mother's milk. The mountain dwellers in all parts of the world, whatever their colour or creed, share a common, direct approach to life and its problems. The hardness of their struggle for existence has imbued them with an honesty and a hospitality to the stranger and traveller within their domain that is a shining beacon in these days of international and inter-racial hatred and distrust. More often than not they welcome you as a friend; never do they fail to offer you food and shelter and give you safe conduct through their territory. Their code is often stern, but it is fair.

I shall always be faithful to my first love, the Alps, but I appreciate them all the more for having known the far places of the Earth, and for having striven with still untamed nature as did my forbears. "What can he know of England, who only England knows?" wrote Browning; and these lines can, as far as I am concerned, be paraphrased to embrace the Alps, with their changing mantles of summer flowers and winter snows, or the mountains of his own homeland for any other mountaineer.