

Two Escapes

N. M. Macindoe

(1) FROM DISCOMFORT.

SIX men were blizzard bound at White's River Hut for six days. Supplies were short. Tobacco had long since run out. Coffee was finished and tea was rationed to one cup per day. There was practically no sugar or jam and next day would finish the oatmeal.

True, they had tinned meat, cocoa and a little flour, but tinned meat and cocoa is a

nauseating mixture. And still the blizzard blew. On the fourth day they had made no attempt to run down the White's River, cross the Snowy and reach the hotel at Piper's Creek. But conditions were very bad that day. They gave it up and retreated. The outlook was not reassuring. At 8 o'clock that night they picked up the earphones and listened. A weather report from the Hotel stated that there was a record "low" there.

The leader thought for a few minutes, then said: "A record low is probably the centre of a cyclone. To-morrow may be calm as the centre of a cyclone is usually calm. Fog or no fog if the wind drops we shall make a dash for it to-morrow."

At 6 a.m. the next day the leader was up. Half an hour later the last ration of tea woke the party up and a few minutes later a pot of thick steaming porridge got them out of their bags. A dense fog had settled down, but there was not a breath of wind. Splendid! In finally packing out from a hut there are always a lot of delays, but by 9 a.m. they were skinned up and climbing into thicker fog on the Granite Peaks.

Long experience had taught the leader how necessary it is to check the compass bearing every hundred yards when ski-ing blind. They reached the top of the ridge and plugged along for three hours. By keeping slightly to the east of their course they were sure of striking the Snowy sooner or later. A deviation to the west would have meant finishing up in the Geehi gorges. The fog was so thick that they could hardly see beyond their ski tips and three times the leader fell over cornices ten to twenty feet high without seeing them. Fortunately, no one was hurt. [Another member of the party wrote of this stage—"Now the moving mists grew murky, and the eye discerned no contour save the ghostly crops of granite and the phantom forms of skiers in the blinding greyish whiteness that pervaded crag and valley. Yet with calm determination ever southward pressed our party, with the one called Norman leading."—Ed.]

They got a bit too far east and started to run down a valley which might have been the Guthega. Lower down the fog cleared. This valley was not the Guthega, nor was the next one, but the third was right. By this time visibility was half a mile or more. "See you at the bottom," cried the leader, and pointed his skis downhill. They almost flew that last mile and collected at that lovely crossing where the Blue Cow and the Guthega come in on opposite sides of the Snowy, to find the whole water system covered up with the most delicate ice and snow formations. A stick of chocolate, a photo, a short traverse up the left bank and there was Pounds Hut. Two hours later the Chalet welcomed them with a huge meal of sausage rolls, tea and a smoke. It must have been

the centre of a cyclone for next day the blizzard blew again and blew for a week.

(2) FROM DISASTER.

A party of six reached White's River Hut to find five others in possession. It was nobody's fault, just one of those misunderstandings which occur in the best families and without which lawyers would hardly make a living. But the position was impossible and one man "had" to get back next day. The leader agreed to take him to Alpine Hut. Next day the blizzard blew, but they knew the track "like the back of their hands." On Dickey Cooper saddle the wind struck them in the face and blinded them. Feeling their way between the gums below and the rocks above they struck the saddle between Gungartan and the Kerries. The leader was surprised, but said nothing. Now a compass bearing, a run across two shallow depressions, and another surprise. They ran into Tin Hut, buried under eight feet of snow with only the chimney showing.

At this moment all hell was let loose. The wind nearly lifted them bodily off the mountain. They could hardly breathe, they froze. The terrific swirl of snow blinded them, made them giddy, dulled their wits. Instinctively they swung off to the right. As they did so the leader thought, "That chimney is in the wrong position"—it did not register. A mile or so down the valley the trees broke the force of the wind and the air cleared. The trees and rocks looked vaguely unfamiliar. A doubt crossed the leader's mind—that chimney was in the wrong position. He looked at his watch. It was twelve noon. The old training at sea asserted itself: "Take a sight and check your compass." He pulled up and looked at the sun. A minute or so later a misty glow showed up directly behind them. They were travelling due south instead of due north, heading for disaster.

"Quick," he yelled, "back to the Tin Hut before our tracks blow away." Up that hill they raced again, the wind in their teeth. The tracks became fainter then disappeared. A hundred yards further on they halted. "Where do you think the Tin Hut is?" asked the leader. "About another half mile"—"there it is!" was the eager answer. For the second time they were nearly standing on the roof and that with visibility almost nil. Like a pair of wild dogs they got down on all fours and burrowed down five feet with

their hands, felt the shovel and opened the door.

As they boiled the billy with the hungry howl of the blizzard on the roof they knew why the Norwegians regarded hell as a place of perpetual wind and ice. Here was safety—outside was death. They should have stayed there overnight, but they had no food left, only one sleeping bag, and one "had" to get back. So they set off again. This time, quite blind, they checked the compass course every few yards. They fell on the ice on top, they fell over the cornices on the side, they fell over the saplings below. They were exhausted and aching in every joint. In three hours they had gone three miles downhill over a track which in good weather takes thirty minutes. It was getting dark. For the second

time something like fear shook them. "Maybe we'd better swing off down Dead Horse Creek. If we can't find Kidman's we'll have to spend the night out." A night out in that maelstrom could have only one end. Some stockman, mustering cattle in the spring, would find their bodies with the crows sitting above. A track, an old track made in "sugar" and frozen hard—then windswept. Another track, a new one this time—then a skier and the Hut a hundred yards away.

As the warm smell of baked bread, mingled with the aroma of a fire, wafted to their thawing nostrils the leader thought of the old English poem:

"Peace after warre, port after stormy seas,
Rest after toil, death after life doth greatly
please."