

The Club Hut

IMPRESSIONS OF A C.T.M.

By H. M. BETHUNE.

"It would be amusing," they said, "to have the ski-ing impressions of a complete Tasmanian mug." They smiled at me kindly, and handed me a pen. . . .

I had seen ski before, pulled out on a lawn on a lazy summer afternoon, but I'd had no personal truck with them before that vivid day when for the first time I made the blessed journey to Twilight Tarn.

It's all amazingly easy to remember, beginning like a Christmas carol and ending like a nightmare. There were loose snow flakes floating round the little brown ponies, and then the dark clad company when we reached the Fenton Huts. Here the snow lay deep, only the biggest rocks sticking out white iced, and I made the fascinating discovery that holes in the snow are filled with blue twilight—I told everybody, but they weren't much surprised.

The first of the four miles began for me in a mood of breathless anticipation. Grey lake, grey sky, dark trees, and the dark monotonously humping figure ahead lost interest as I learnt a new variety of falls. Then, triumphantly I realised that I had learned to ski. I was warmed with exercise, I even felt a foolish pride in the bite of my pack straps, the snow whirled faster, and I licked my lips, brother indeed of Scott and Oates and all their great quiet company. Unfortunately, I lost the art a little later when the kindly flakes turned to stinging ice, and I learnt for the first time the heart breaking hopelessness of being two irretreivable steps behind. It grew darker, lightning occasionally flung the sky into vicious relief, and a stitch sent a stab of liquid fire across my chest with every breath. I fell and fell. . . . I felt someone taking my pack, so I knew I must still be alive, though one last drop of red blood whined angrily against the inevitable loss of prestige. I had no wistful thoughts of home and mother; I was entirely occupied by the wooden monstrosities on my feet.

I regret to say my erstwhile friends were singing as they went.

And so to the long pull up Webster—"Don't wait for me", said someone, "I usually take it very slowly—you scoot up ahead". I barked hoarsely, and sank at his feet.

I had a preconceived idea of the hut which is still so strong that I think it must exist somewhere—a small place, made of rusty tin clutching itself together among tearing draughts, with a mud floor patched with puddles, candle stumps burning greasily, and for some incomprehensible reason, an occasional damp and gaping bag of clay—a homey spot. So in contrast the warm red glow of the hut at Twilight Tarn came like an unbelievable dream—I lurched into it, stubbing my toes against the air—huge fire, stove breathing hotly, the smell of soup, the utterly revolting taste of rum in cocoa, everybody smiling—lovely place. Very warm, very, very fed, a bunk in another room with a fire in it, ski tracks whizzing in front of my eyes when ever I shut them—gorgeous place . . . gorgeous people . . . a deep dark glory of sleep.

Later I grew to know the hut, and to love its stolid figure, and all its mixed and friendly household gods. A certain amount of it is simply cupboard love, lavished on the reassuringly labelled red-brown tins along one wall, and the nets that line the ceiling, and brim with cheeses and bread, butter, a precious onion or two and an awesome fragment of the vice-presidential sausage; but my affection for the hanging candlestick (for earth quakes) the tuxedo standing before the fire ("Funny, I always thought a tuxedo was a dinner jacket!" Well, now you know better, don't you?), the panel of Oriental embroidery, and the tin of cancer salve, burns with the bright flame of pure aestheticism.

I think I'll always remember the warm security of the hours between dinner and bed—the table on its side to shut out draughts, the luxurious ease of relaxed muscles and lazy talk. Then the feeblest jokes are excruciating, and it's then, on a warm night, that you may hear the Gurgle Under the Hearth—a darling little noise, specially arranged, we have been told, by the Almighty and the President. It's then too that you hear the early history of the Club—stories of hardships made glamorous by the present warmth of the fire. They talk wistfully, dreamily—"those few, those happy few, that band of brothers"—we listen, we envy, inwardly we emulate, lovingly we tell ourselves about our nearly-telemark.

Here we realise that we have written several hundred words without attempting the "ski-ing impressions" they demanded. We hurl a curse at them and hurry on.

The first day on the nursery slopes was a little distressing. Alienated from my companions by their witless chant of "Lean further forward and further out" (an injunction too contrary to the dictates of Mother Nature to be worthy of notice), I found life a monotonously collapsible business, enlivened only by the discovery that snow in bulk tastes of tin teaspoons. (N.B.: This may be a local condition, no correspondence on the subject can be entertained.) With some relief, then, we pass on to a first short tour.

It was on a day so clear and still that all the world seemed only a reflection thrown into a warm blue pool that we climbed up the shining Pass, and beyond the quiet Watcher, to drop gently down into the Enchanted Forest. The shadows of the big silvery gums were coloured like the furthest mountains, and along their boughs two small wakened 'possums ran, to blink at us from a safer distance.

The Pass was grey and bleak by the time we returned to it, and flurries of icy snow drove fitfully into our eyes. I stood on the top of Newdigate, confronted for the first time with the necessity of somehow getting down it. The thing dropped away perilously. I was absolutely sick with fear. However, since even the other novices seemed absurdly unconcerned about it, and it seemed a choice of being killed outright, or dying a lingering death from exposure, I made a despairing sort of cluck in my throat and pushed off.

It was a million sensations at once—I shut my eyes tight, and made no attempt to breathe—I was falling for miles in all directions, it was very dark, there were acres of snow all over me. I sat up in a luxurious cushioned cave of my own making, and they handed me my gloves and sticks, talking rather pointedly about amazing young idiots without enough sense even to traverse a slope, but I

was drunk—most gloriously and exultantly drunk, seeing ahead of me a lifetime of silver winters, filled with this breathless, godlike flight against the wind.

I spluttered out the rest of my snow, and kick-turned emotionally down the slope in the tracks of my exasperated escort.



THE S.C.T. MOUNT FIELD HUT.

—W. D. Counsell.