

The Approach to Hotham, Ancient and Modern

Malcom McColl

IT was 1931. The objective was Hotham—viewed somewhat as a fairly impregnable fastness hidden from the timid in the snowy wastes of the Alps—a place to be dreamed about as a Mecca for the skier who had already tasted the delights of the winter sport and was, for the rest of his life, an incurable addict.

The party consisted of a number of University students who had made the trip to St. Bernard in the comparative comfort of a motor truck. They were fairly inexperienced, having regard to the comparatively arduous trip of six miles to the Chalet at Hotham. However, the male members of the party had skied for several seasons and considered themselves sufficiently qualified to conduct a party to Hotham.

The probationary period of two or three days at St. Bernard over, and with a favourable barometer, it was decided to set off over the tops to Hotham. In those days it was usual to keep to the tops of the ridges the whole way as the road on the south side was not as well defined as it is nowadays, and skiers seemed to regard the long steep slopes down which the unlucky might slip to possible disaster with much greater respect than they do now.

It was a beautiful sunny morning when the party set off at about nine, anticipating with considerable satisfaction a nice leisurely trip, basking in the sun, admiring the superb views and enjoying a little ski-ing over the newly fallen snow of the past two days.

Then, about a third of the distance having been covered, with the wilful perversity which characterises weather in the Victorian Alps, conditions changed completely. Some malicious person must have pushed the needle of the barometer back an inch or so, for the weather, which had been perfect, disintegrated entirely. In ten minutes blue skies, sun and a gentle zephyr were replaced by thick fog, cold and a biting, tearing forty-mile-an-hour gale which quickly caused donning of all available woollen garments. The pace of the party slowed down considerably and numbed fingers soon caused much discomfort.

The duties of the escort increased considerably as the party tended to break up from a compact group all moving at the same pace to individuals strung out over some distance. The wind blowing strongly from the north-west slowed down the pace of the novices, unused as they were both to ski-ing in those conditions and to the carrying of packs.

The most trying sections were those where it was necessary to climb up the ends of the ridges from the saddles on to the top, particularly on the end of Blowhard. The visibility by this time was reduced to about ten feet, so that the newcomers to that area were completely unaware of the steep falls all around them. The snow was deep and soft and arranged in the form of a series of steep high steps up which it was necessary to clamber with the wind doing its utmost to blow one backward down the slope.

The party was eventually assembled on top of Blowhard and forced its way to the Blowhard Hut against the wind which was screaming across this exposed ridge.

The hut reached at one o'clock, it was decided to call a halt and light a fire to thaw out and have lunch. Practically all the party were suffering from numbed and frozen hands and feet. The hut was partly full of snow, and kept out some of the wind, but that was about all.

After about three-quarters of an hour it was apparent that a fire was out of the question—the wood just would not burn.

It was decided to abandon the fire and to push on as feet, hands and bodies generally were getting colder and more frozen every moment. Food had made a slight difference to the spirits of the party, but this improvement was soon dissipated as the cold wind and fog were again faced. By this time snow and particles of ice were blowing straight into the faces of the party to add to the general discomfort.

The trip across the top of Little Baldy can be appreciated by those who know how windswept this series of bumps and dips can be. The four hundred feet descent down the steep slope into Baldy Hollow was the usual slide and fall, clutching a fractious pair of skis in one's arms and endeavouring to stop them being torn away by the howling gale and blown into the foggy depths.

The Hollow was its windy self—all its fury was concentrated in these few yards, so that the party did not wait long before commencing the eight hundred feet climb up the pole line to the summit of Hotham. By this time the energy of the novices, and perhaps the escort, too, had diminished to almost zero, and this heart-breaking ascent was taken at a snail's pace. It was getting dark, which further tended to lower the spirits, so that it was a matter of a little gentle deception to coax the tired novices on from snow pole to snow pole. "How many more poles to the top?" "Only two or three"—knowing full well that there are at least twelve or more. The escorts moved up and down the line in the gathering dark giving a word of encouragement to people very evidently just about at the end of their physical resources, and just as inclined to stop and give up the struggle as to continue and face the freezing gale ahead.

Slowly, by dint of wheedling, coaxing and cajoling, the party climbed up the open

ridge near the edge of the cornice, then through the bumpy snow gum stretch, then across the ice-laden, gentle slope below the summit, and finally up the last hundred feet, which seem as long as the rest of the climb, to the summit itself. No cairn in those days—just a pole with an extra guy or two—but just as windswept and desolate as it is now in blizzard conditions.

No place to wait and recuperate—and freeze—but on—this time downhill gently—slight relaxation and less energy needed to drag the tired body along, but still the gentle coaxing is needed to shepherd the party past the first few poles on the down grade, then a few more—"only another ten—seven—five—etc.," and then, across the valley with a slight thinning of the fog clouds, the lights of the Chalet. Mecca at last!

More than twenty years pass. Years in which great strides have been made in the world—man has increased his rate of progress from one point to another from two hundred miles an hour to seven or eight hundred miles an hour—jet engines have been invented—vast strides have been made in the use of radio—the helicopter has been developed—television—a great war has been fought and great advances made in all fields as a result—huge bulldozers and snow ploughs have been used with great success all over the world—snowmobiles make trips of hundreds of miles over snow-covered Canada, and even three or four move across some of Australia's snow. In short, a vast development of all means of transport both on land, on snow and through the air.

The year is 1951, and it is again a party, in the main of University Ski Club members, who have as their objective Hotham, with its attendant delights both on the snow and off. To some of the party the objective is still the fairly impregnable fastness that it appeared to the party described above. To all of the party it was still the Mecca for the incurable dyed-in-the-wool addict, condemned for the rest of his life, whenever opportunity offered, to slide down steep and snowy slopes at a breath-catching speed.

By a strange coincidence two of the party were two of the escorts of twenty years back—slightly heavier on the hickory and with a few hairs less on the head—with vastly more experience on the snow, both in this country and overseas, but still going to Hotham as of yore—and, as of yore, once

again through force of circumstances and by virtue of the experience of years, cast in the role of escort.

This time the party had made the trip up from Harrierville to about four miles below St. Bernard in complete comfort in three private cars. As a result of some urgent pleading on trunk line telephones, a benevolent semi-public authority had made available two examples of progress in industry—to wit, two bulldozers—one, a great big snorting monster capable of pushing, to quote the words of its driver, "thirty feet of snow off the road. Why! I'll clear right through to Hotham in a few hours. I clear far more than that at the works right through the winter." To which the sceptics replied, "Good-oh! When you get through to Hotham we'll give you a beer!"

However, the snows of St. Bernard are of a different calibre from those at the works, and the total result of two hours or more work with this great big clanking monster was to push back the snow line for perhaps a quarter of a mile. The old hands who, through hard-won experience, should have known better, had been rather put into a trance by the confident assertions of the 'dozer operator. They still had a faint idea at the backs of their minds that twenty years of progress should really mean something, and that they should not lightly disregard it. However, by 1.30 p.m., ten miles still from Hotham, and with several comparative novices in the party, they cast their minds back through the years to their other experiences of the trip, and very rapidly cast progress aside and said, "Let's get to hell out of here!"

And then it was on again!

The same sunny, balmy conditions, the same pleasant progress, slow on the part of the tail-enders, it is true, with the party strung out much more than it should have been. Essentially the same conditions as twenty years ago with the same two escorts.

Trudging up the road, cutting down the pace to that of the slowest members not long on the snow, we passed the site of St. Bernard Hospice, now only a heap of melted glass fragments and an iron shed by the road. This time we disregarded the tops and kept to the road, now in most parts greatly widened and easier to follow.

The weather held till Blowhard, and then commenced to disintegrate—the sunlight giving place to grey skies and a cold wind

blowing with increasing velocity as night approached. The traverses across the steep slopes before the southern end of Blowhard caused some concern in the minds of the escorts for the safety of one female novice—it having been ascertained by this time that said novice was a stranger to such type of slope.

A prayer of thanks was offered when this was negotiated that it was not necessary to climb to the end of Blowhard, as was necessary twenty years back—also that it was not foggy. However, the sight of the traverse along the side of Blowhard quickly dashed the spirits again as the snow was hard and one track was about a foot above the other. Rather difficult conditions even for the old hand. How would it seem to the novice? Slow shuffle along here—novice some twenty feet behind—frightened to look behind in case novice had disappeared down 35° slope some 800 feet or more in height. Here the sun left and the wind took over. Slow movement along and difficult obstacle in the form of a hump, necessitating the lifting up of ski and putting down on other side—keeping wary eye on steep slope below.

Eventually Blowhard Hut reached—same old hut of twenty years back. Great progress here in that decade or so! Hut almost entirely full of snow blown in through window with missing sash—no wood—fireplace full of snow, door open and precisely one square foot of floor space where one could shelter from the wind—behind the door.

Novice showing signs of fatigue here, so it was decided to lighten her pack—large heavy objects discovered which were taken over by escorts and again out into cold. Five-fifteen by this time, and other comparative novice and escort were about quarter of a mile ahead and going steadily—or so it seemed.

Along the top of Little Baldy—up and down the bumps—wind becoming more and more bitter and progress of party becoming slower and slower.

Along to end of ridge and at the top of the climb down into the Hollow the remainder of the party was visible strung out along the climb up to Hotham on the other side of the Hollow—going slowly and with frequent stops.

On arrival at the bottom of the Hollow escort waits at stone cairn for novice who was coming along slowly. Darkness came much more quickly, however, and with dark-

ness came increased wind velocity and the temperature dropped considerably.

However, novice carrying ski trudges slowly along last few feet of Hollow to cairn looking all in and completely disinterested in anything appertaining to ski-ing. On enquiries being made as to her general well-being, which was rather obvious, she stated that she was "done." Escort was rather taken aback, but it was no time for prolonged deliberation and it was decided to dump novice's pack by the cairn until the morrow. A few minutes whilst some barley sugar and chocolate were consumed and then on again, dumping of pack having eased matters slightly. The steep pinches after the Hollow showed, however, that the ski were also redundant pieces of equipment so they were also dumped by a snow pole.

Finally, light looms up in the darkness and it turns out to be the torch of escort of comparative novice and compartive novice herself. Comparative novice also being in a bad

way, all in and suffering from severe cold. Her escort not feeling too good, either. No hesitation about dumping pack and ski immediately this time.

A little more nourishment and a few words of encouragement and the augmented party set out again.

Lightening of burden had improved matters considerably and two novices kept along close behind escort. Finally, very welcome sight in the rays of the headlamp, the Summit Cairn, not too soon as slight attack of cramp had warned escort that he, too, was feeling the strain.

A very short rest, removal of skins by those who had ski on and then the steady downhill trek. Escort decides after three-quarters of a mile or so of this steady progress that all is comparatively well and that party is in good hands hastens rapidly on to the shelter and warmth of the Lodge to advise all's well.

Truly, progress is a wonderful thing.