

A TRAVERSE OF MOUNT COOK

By MRS. J. THOMSON

On the afternoon of the 29th January, 1916, I left the Hermitage for the Hooker Hut with an Australian friend intent on seeing what he could of mountain scenery without climbing. Miss Marsden, too, was one of the party, bound for the Copland Pass on the following day. Her guide, Dick Young, and mine, Conrad Kain, did not leave with us, but came on later. We got into difficulties in trying to cross a flooded creek, where I lost a fine new ice-axe. Fortunately I found another at the Hut, but it was clumsy and heavy.

At the Hooker Hut our midnight slumbers were disturbed by the belated arrival of a well-known alpine climber and his guide, Frank Milne, fresh from adventures in flooded streams in the darkness. After the clattering of their cooking utensils was over, about 2 a.m., we tried again to sleep.

The following morning was cloudless and beautiful, and our mountains glistened in the sunshine.

My mountain calls, its floors are shod
By rainbows shining up to God,
But ah! the rugged ways and bleak,
That give upon that icy peak!

My Australian friend walked with us for a few miles, until the going became rather rough on the Hooker ice, and then he left us, with kind wishes for our success.

Mr. Turner and Frank Milne had preceded us to the Mount Cook bivouac by an hour, and had a welcome meal ready for us on our arrival, hot and tired, about noon. After a rest Conrad set off to prospect a route and tread steps in the snow for the next day's climb, while I passed the

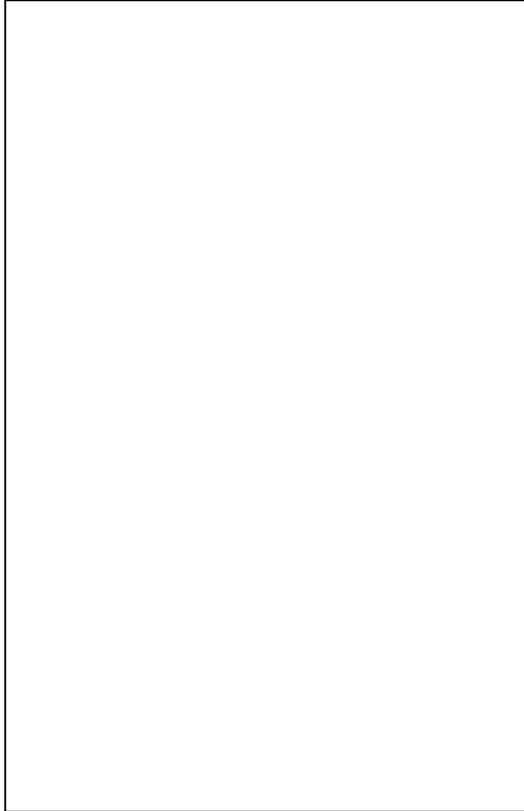
time in watching the lace-like avalanches which were falling every few moments from David's Dome and in sleeping in the sunshine.

We left camp the next morning at 3.40 in fine calm weather, crossing, the Empress Glacier just below some imposing seracs. An avalanche had fallen from them during the night, covering for some distance Conrad's footsteps of the previous day. Easy snow slopes then led us on to the rocky ridge which runs up to the lowest of the three peaks of Mount Cook. These rocks were fairly steep, but good and firm.

For an hour or more we kept to the ridge, and then, after crossing some dangerous ice-faces thinly coated with snow, and passing over a bergschrund, we found ourselves in a huge amphitheatre, the upper ridge of which formed part of the summit ridge of the mountain. There was no special difficulty there: crevasses were numerous, but not wide, with beautiful, blue ice cliffs here and there.

The rising sun shone on the low peak above us, with the result that a shower of stones fell around us. Fortunately there was a large block of ice near at hand, behind which we took refuge until the danger was past.

The latter part of the climb required care, owing to an ice-traverse with its hard step-cutting, followed with a stretch of smooth slabs of rock. At 11 a.m. we sat down to rest, close to the lowest peak. The view from there, looking along the arete to the summit, was magnificent, but to me was rather appalling. It looked too much like walking on a knife-edge to be altogether pleasant. Conrad seemed to be troubled only about the weather. A gentle easterly breeze was blowing towards us, bringing a few wisps of cloud that enveloped us from time to time. When one cloud, slightly darker than the others, came floating by, he remarked: "Do you see that cloud? Well, that means the end of it, we shall not get to the top!" I took no



Conrad Kain on the summit of Mount Cook.

notice of his gloomy prophecy, and plodded along behind him on that sensational ridge, treading in the footsteps he had kicked or cut, and wondering what new and unforeseen difficulties lay between us and our goal.

The snow was in good condition, and nothing insurmountable presented itself. On the centre peak we rested for twenty minutes and took some photographs. A weather-worn pile of rocks projected through the snow of the ridge between the centre peak and the summit. It was almost impossible to walk on either side, owing to precipices; therefore Conrad climbed over first and held the rope while I followed on hands and knees.

At last we were on the final slope leading to the summit, a snow mound which we reached in 3 hours 40 minutes after leaving the low peak. Hot and tired we were, and glad to sit on the

snow and rest. All threatenings of bad weather had disappeared. Clouds lay low over the West Coast country, the sea being visible beyond them. The sea on the Canterbury side was hidden by clouds also. Glaciers and rivers appeared like lines drawn on a map, and all the high peaks looked low and flat, owing to the perspective.

After remaining on the top for three-quarters of an hour, and refreshing ourselves with some watery tea and tinned pineapple, we decided to descend by the Linda Glacier route instead of returning by the way we had come, thus making a traverse of the mountain via the three peaks. It was an arduous venture for one man to undertake, as there was so much downward step-cutting to be done, and he was at the same time carrying a fairly heavy swag on his back.

At 3.45 p.m. we started off down the ice-slope that caps the mountain and found it difficult and dangerous through being covered with a layer of crystallised snow, liable to slip off if disturbed. This actually happened when we were one hundred and fifty feet above the summit rocks, when a patch several yards wide, on which Conrad was standing while cutting a step, suddenly broke away and moved downwards. I was carefully watching my own steps just above when I heard an exclamation, and looking down, I saw Conrad jumping lightly from the moving mass to the stationary part adjoining, at the same time driving in his ice-axe to steady himself.

“I was expecting that to happen,” he said, “and now I shall have to cut steps in the ice the whole way down to the rocks.” It was a weary business, requiring the greatest care, the slope being so steep. “Be careful,” he said to me, “if you slip here I cannot save you.”

It was a relief to get down to the rocks off that deadly ice-slope. “Now we shall make better progress,” he said, but he looked rather apprehensively downwards to where the gaping crevasses of the Linda Glacier split the ice-

stream from one side to the other, and which must be crossed before dark. Half way down the ridge a tiny stream of snow-water was trickling from a rock, and from this we filled our water-bottles.

At length, after crossing a bergschrund, we were on the Linda and made greater speed by glissading down several successive avalanche furrows. The crevasses lower down were troublesome, some extending almost across the entire width of the Glacier. "Can you jump this one?" said Conrad, as we stood on the edge of a fine blue chasm, "it will save a quarter of an hour's walk if you can." I agreed to try. He jumped over first, after having fastened the rope to the handle of his ice-axe which was firmly driven into the snow. I followed, assisted by a pull from the handle of his axe.

At last we were faced with such a maze of crevasses that he remarked "We are blocked!" For a few tragic moments I felt hopeless, but confidence soon returned. After further explorations a way out was found by a narrow iceledge, and then lower down, by passing close under the seracs of the Silberhorn icefall, we came to the easy slopes of the Plateau, down some of which we glissaded. The Rev. Green estimated the length of this snow field at six miles, with a width of two miles.

It was 9.40 p.m. before we arrived at the Haast Bivouac, wet through after the long snow tramp and very glad to rest after eighteen hours' hard going. The night was warm and calm, and the next morning so bright and sunny that we stayed to dry our wet boots and puttees before going down to the Ball Hut in the afternoon.

Our friend, Mr. J. Smith, who was in-charge of the men who were building the Haast Hut, came to meet us as we approached the camp at the foot of the ridge, and regaled us with mugs of hot tea in his cookhouse while he listened to the tale of our adventures. The soft

beds of the Ball Hut were a comfortable change from the hard rocks of the high camps, and we could appreciate them after two unrestful nights. On the following morning we rode back to the Hermitage, and the memorable climb was an event of the past.



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