

# MOUNTAIN DEATH-TRAP

## Gruesome Reminder of Avalanche Menace on Popular Mt. Cook Climb

**B**Y a trick of the twisting ice, the remains of Sydney King have been discovered on the Tasman Glacier twelve years later than glacier parties first encountered traces of one of the bodies of his two guides, Darby Thompson and Jock Richmond, who died with him on Mount Cook in February of 1914, after climbing to the summit.

Last month, to quote the Press Association message from Timaru, the 1914 tragedy was recalled by the discovery of a human trunk, a piece of bone with a sock adhering, some clothing, and part of a pack.

Head and limbs had been severed from the trunk by the action of the ice, which had kept the flesh in perfect condition while squeezing it to a thickness of three inches.

The clothing (of tweed), underclothing, some windproof material, and part of an evidently light pack, indicated that this had been King, and not one of the guides, who would probably be dressed in heavier cloth and would certainly have heavier packs.

From the very summit of Mount Cook begins the stream of ice which flows steeply down the Linda Valley, through the narrow walls of the Hochstetter Icefall, and down the wide valley of the Tasman to end in broken heaps of stone-covered black ice nearly ten miles from its source.

Now, about 18 miles long, the Tasman glacier would scarcely have a claim to being the greatest glacier in any temperate region in the world were it not for the impetus given its sluggish stream by the tremendous outflow of the Hochstetter.

### A Land of Ice

From Elie de Beaumont and the Hochstetter Dome at its head, the glacier rides smoothly down for about 12 miles, gathering tribute on the way from The Minarets, Rudolf Glacier, Glacier Peak, Douglas Peak, Haidinger, on the west, and from the smaller feeders off the Malte Brun Range on the east. Where it meets the Rudolf at de la Beche corner, scene of other tragedies, the estimated depth is from two to three thousand feet — more than three times the height of Tinakori Hill in Wellington, or Mt. Albert in Auckland, deeper than Mt. Cargill in Dunedin is high; and as deep as the height of the highest of the Port Hills near Christchurch.

But from that point its main stream dwindles, and depth-sounding devices have recorded a depth of a mere 800 to 1000 feet. The drive is taken up by the ice from the giants of the Southern Alps, as Cook calls the tune with ice rolling off its ice-cap above the Linda.

Dampier, third highest peak in New Zealand, joins in first. Next come Teichelmann and The Silberhorn, each overhanging the death-trap below, with ice rising in wave after wave to their thin crests. From them fell the ice which caught the climbers in 1914. Below Silberhorn the Linda broadens into a great plateau, from two to three miles long, and a mile across.

From the north the plateau is fed by the icefalls of Mt. Tasman, New Zealand's second mountain, from Lendenfeld, and Dixon. In the south, half of

Cook's great eastern face turns its ice into the stream.

### Into Unknown Depths

Here there are crevasses into which it would be easily possible to drop the largest building in your city, almost without hearing the end of its reverberations as it bounced from wall to wall on its way to unknown blue depths.

This great volume of ice is forced by its own weight and the unceasing pressure from above



*Mt. Cook and Mt. Dampier from The Silberhorn: The Linda Glacier, subject of this article, starts at the sharp ice-cap of Cook, is swept by avalanches off Dampier, and below the camera turns left under Teichelmann and The Silberhorn to run the gauntlet of falling ice again*

through the narrow neck between Glacier Dome and the Anzacs, outcrops of the range whence it comes. It starts to fall through a gap three-quarters of a mile wide, drops almost sheer for three thousand feet, and from its wide outlet at the foot broadens into a river that pushes the Tasman quite six miles further down the valley.

It moves up to 15 feet a day. In hot summer its heavings and creakings can be heard quite clearly, when the surface spires and towers and cupolas are not toppling to drown all other sound with the thunder of avalanches. It will be no surprise to experts if other remains are found. With glacier movements roughly known, the bodies of the Cook party could be expected about now. By some prank, Thompson was released early, but the body was no more intact when it came to the surface than King's has been found to be. Richmond was found at the scene of the tragedy at the time.

### No Smooth Passage

Legends about corpses retained as if in a permanent coffin of ice, untouched by the action of the glacier, and delivered years later whole and still beautiful with youth, have always been debunked by reality. Particularly in the case of the ice coming

off the steep eastern faces of the Southern Alps, racked in its swift passage over uneven beds, there is little chance of anything remaining whole. Even unresistant cloth is torn and shredded. People who have seen the fantastic jumble of towers and blocks in the icefalls of the Mt. Cook region must wonder that anything comes out in any recognisable form. They will not wonder if it is found that parts of the bodies are spread over a considerable area. Last month's discovery was nothing new. Since first finding human remains close to Ball Hut, tourist centre, guides have been known to look out for more signposts of the road the two bodies have been taken. Especially during the last two seasons has the glacier given up its secrets. Small remnants have been seen beside tracks through the moraine heaps on the way to the clear ice of the central stream. They have been tactfully avoided, and the guides have kept silent about their observations.

### Popular, But Dangerous

Although the most dangerous, the Linda Glacier route for Mt. Cook has for years been the most popular and most often used. Contrary to popular conceptions, Mt. Cook is often climbed. It has the great attraction of being the highest, and is the least technically difficult of the five or six "big ones" in the same district. By the Linda route it is climbed to 10,000 feet before anything like reasonable mountaineering difficulties are encountered. Served by the hut erected on Glacier Dome to remember King and his guides, the Linda climb has become as close to a tourist route as any major climb can become in the storm threatened mountains of the South Island. Year after year parties have gone up the Linda and come down, so far safely. But the law of averages and the law of gravity are due soon to co-operate, and then there may be some more bodies in the ice. Operating not to the known rules of heat and cold, snowfall and sunshine and frost, the sheer weight of the ice overhanging the deep and narrow confines of the Linda keeps it pressing out and down to make avalanches which in bulk and length are almost outside the comprehension of any who have not actually seen them. Falling without warning, they can sweep the whole length of the glacier, leaving no room for hope if any party is anywhere along the route. The danger area is not to be passed in a minute or two. In the best going, two or three hours are busily filled before a climber can feel himself out of reach of the menace from above. Time and again mountaineers have clambered over fresh strewn blocks, and found at night on their return that the steps of the morning have been swept again.

The mountains cannot always be so kind.

Experienced climbers say that use of the Linda route indicates not only a lack of sense in the climber, but also a lack of appreciation for the greater technical possibilities for good climbing offering from the Hooker Valley, on the other side of the mountain, where the Gardiner Hut now makes safe refuge for parties.

### Remarkably Free of Tragedy

So far New Zealand's biggest mountains have been kept remarkably free of tragedy. First-class, home-trained guides have perfected their craft to establish a safety factor which has been stretched only on two or three occasions in the long history. In later years most of the amateurs now storming the biggest peaks have visited the mountains with a wholesome respect for their armament; a fortunate frame of mind, since the traditions of New Zealand's best and greatest high-climbing guides is fading against the brighter background of commercialism and glacier-party "tourisme".

But the mountains will outlast the modern frills and fashions as well as the best of technique, and the greatest of good fortune.

The Linda will claim tribute again.