

"GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH"

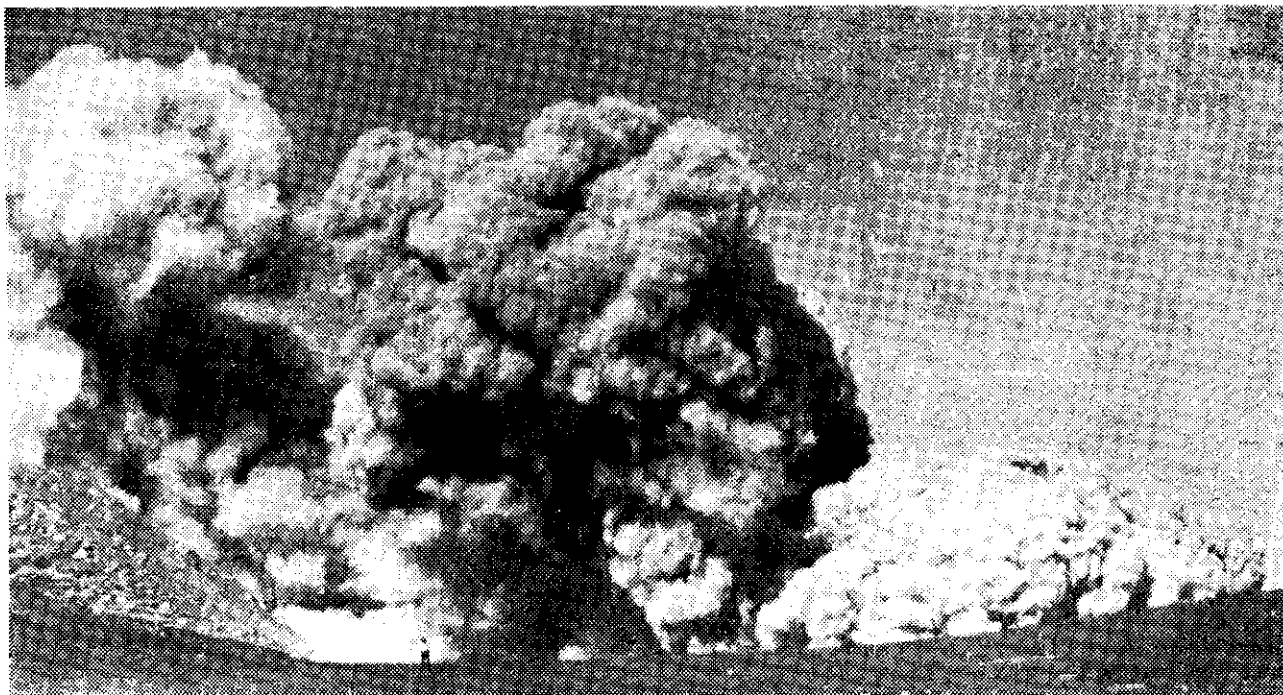
A Visit To Ruapehu

Written for "The Listener"
by JAMES HARRIS

AS the train neared National Park I stared from the dark carriage trying to see the volcano, but the night was so black that nothing could be made out beyond the range of some light which spilled out from the carriage in front. Then I just managed to distinguish a dark cloud above where I thought the mountain should be, and as I watched a streak of greenish lightning pierced the northern end of the cloud.

In the morning, when I came out of doors and looked through the beech-trees, the top of the mountain was shining white among little pale-grey clouds, and from over the rim a pinkish-grey smoke rolled upwards in the shape of a cauliflower. Then clouds formed over the snow and the volcanic action was hidden.

THE "Cauliflowers," which from the plain seem to go up silently most of the time, and once or twice a day with a considerable bang, are fascinating to watch and have no doubt caused many near-by settlers to burn the toast, miss their dinners, and let the sheep into the wrong paddock. First of all the ash-cloud shows above the edge of the crater looking like a pink or brown brain, and slowly grows up like a cauliflower on a broad stalk, the outside parts curling down while the centre rises, much as a growing leafless cauliflower might be expected to look in accelerated motion. It all seems very slow, and yet in less than a minute the turmoil of ash may be as high again as the mountain, and the mountain stands a good 6,000 feet above



On the crest of the glacier. There is about a two-inch layer of wet ash over the snow and ice

the surrounding plain. Sometimes the things mushroom up at quite regular intervals, and drift down-wind towards Taihape or somewhere in a regular even row.

For people in the National Park area the westerly winds which blow the ash over towards Hawke's Bay are much to be preferred, as with these blowing they can proudly admire their lively mountain without having their rain come down dirty, their creeks made to taste like photographic fixing-solution and their ski-slopes made unusable. When the wind is westerly the only ash which comes down locally falls and blows about on the Onetapu Desert, and no one minds about that, even if the end of the plume is making the washing dirty away in the direction of Hastings. In general, people living near the volcano seem to worry about it much less than do those who live further away.

"ARE you going to the top? Good-on-ye!" said someone. "It's all right so long as she doesn't blow up and get

you, that's the only trouble." And when a fine day came I got a lift up the mountain track to the Salt Hut in what is probably the most valuable motor truck in the Dominion, a vehicle full of amplifiers and recording gear belonging to the Geophysical Survey. In it we climbed a road which soon left the beech trees of the bush for tussock, scrub-covered bog, and then the rocky desert of Scoria Flat. I had been at Scoria Flat alone, after breakfast alone, on VJ Day's morning-after, and had been rewarded for my trouble by seeing Ruapehu fire her big gun, sending out an echoing report as of a 12-incher, followed by the growth of a most tremendous "cauliflower" which was soon too big to photograph even from that distance.

The first snow was here on the Flat, small roadside drifts almost black with volcanic ash. Then the snow on the road became continuous, and soon we arrived. The climbing party adjusted loads between their four packs and the two geophysicists began running out cable, intending to plant a special microphone, a geophone, up on the mountain and connect it to the recording gear in the truck to take a sort of electro-cardiograph of the volcano's pulse.

The scenery round the Salt Hut was quite extraordinary. Ash falling on this side of the mountain on the previous day had so darkened the snow that I kept on trying to take off the dark glasses which I had not got on. The effect was of a very bad plaster movie-set of a mountain.

Through this unreal landscape we set off on our climb. Up above, small short-stalked "cauliflowers" grew out of the crater and moved down-wind to the northeast almost with regularity, and behind us the truck's klaxon flooded the mountain with efficient morse as one geophysicist made remarks to another half-a-mile off.

THERE is one thing that every raw beginner knows about snow mountains, and that is that one must never never roll a snowball down, because it will grow and grow — the famous snowball

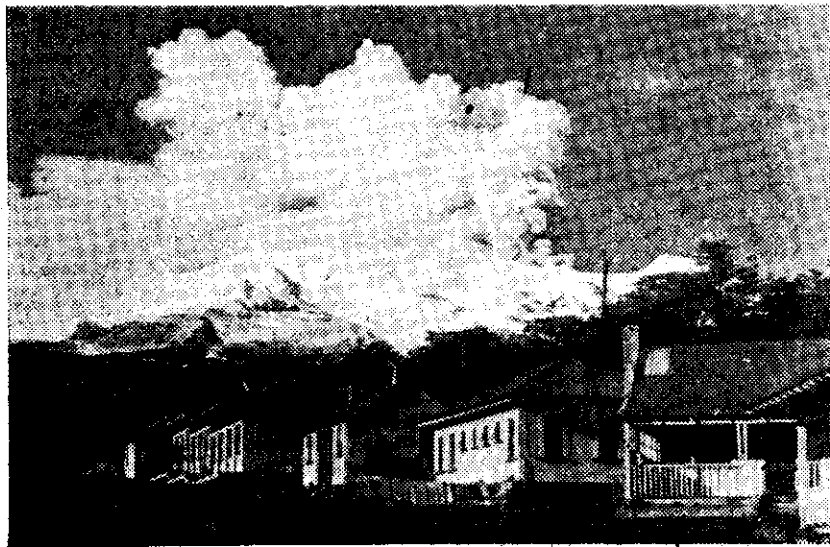
effect — and when it gets big enough cause an avalanche. Such literary knowledge must needs be applied, and so when the guide was not looking a hard snowball the size of a penny bread-roll went smartly down the slope in a place where an avalanche would do no harm. Rapidly it grew and grew to the size of a fourpenny coffee-bun, flopped over on its side and stopped. So much for literary knowledge.

FOR three hours the guide led us upwards through a scene which was largely colourless, but when colour did appear, as in an amphitheatre of red rocks, the effect against the grey snow and black stones was striking. Down below the pools of the bogland glistened in the sun. Northwards the inactive cone of Ngauruhoe was all soiled by our mountain, while far over to the east across an unmoving sea of cloud, the cone of Egmont stood up white and superior in his place of legendary exile. Up and ahead our mountain continued to pump out dirt.

We went on and on through the darkened snow, and as we went higher breath became shorter. I found myself treading in other's footsteps, playing Page to the guide's Good King Wenceslas. Also I found that the only tune I knew to hum which set a reasonable pace was that thing of mixed moods, Gounod's "Funeral March of a Marionette." The volcano threw up a big one.

We came to the glacier and the last long climb. It was a strange sight, the big smooth slope being striped right across by dark bands of ash on the snow, each a couple of yards wide. In the summer, crevasses open up, but now snow had smoothed out the whole area, and there was just a broad smooth slope going up and over the crater. As we trudged up through the patterned carpet of wet ash and snow the mountain did not seem so active, and only small and gentle clouds of ash were pushing up into view above the crest. "The calm

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Ruapehu from behind the Chateau Tongariro. Paretaitonga is the peak at the extreme right, and the saddle to the left of it is the crest of the glacier