



## Up the River by L. CLEVELAND

ALF and George went in to have a beer and get rid of their small change before they caught the weekly freight lorry.

"I'm not going to carry this extra weight around from now on," said Alf, putting a few coins on the bar.

"Wouldn't mind a wheelbarrow full of it," the barman said, as he filled their glasses. "Where are you going, boys?"

"Up the river," said Alf. He folded up two pound notes and put them loosely in his shirt pocket. "Must remember to plant them in my waterproof bag before we get wet," he added.

"You fellows look as if you mean business," said the barman. He looked across at them.

Alf was all lean and determined. A mountaineer's cap on his head. George, stouter, slightly bald, with more to say. They both wore climbing boots that had been rather well greased and left little traces of oil on the floor where they walked.

"And what are you after? The deer?" "Mountains," said George. "Virgin peaks." He grinned as he said it, looking up at the last of his beer against the light, then swallowing it and smacking his lips.

"Mountains, mountains!" said the barman. "Ahhh! You can have that game for me. Climbing round in all that snow, storms all the time and all them rivers to cross. If it was shooting now I could see something in it, but tramping—"

"Climbing," said Alf sharply.

"Whatever you like to call it, then. It's just banging your backside against the clouds! Tell me now, What do you get out of it?"

"Often wondered myself," said George, still grinning.

"Aw, it's good to get out of town for a while," said Alf.

He smiled, too, and looked out the window where the nor'wester blew whiffs of dust down the shingle road.

The freight arrived in a noisy cloud of it. They pushed their packs and ice axes up and lay on top of the load.

"Good way to travel, this," said George. "See everything."

They relaxed, stretched out, their bodies bending and swaying with the shifts and shocks of the truck's passage. Their heads rolled back easily against

bales of straw. The last gorse hedges and farmhouses with pine trees faded behind their dust stream.

LOOKING back on where you had been was a nice way to get along, thought George, playing with the idea. It put things in their place. None of the risks and disappointments of anticipating what lay ahead round troublesome corners. As convenient in its way as the wake of a luxury liner, or the observation platform on a Hollywood train.

But this was the real thing, he reminded himself. They were to try themselves against real mountains. Already they had this bond of purpose between them, directing everything they did. It was like going up into the line—nothing much else to think about.

"Why, that's half the illusion of war," George thought.

Now the lorry was well into the valley. It groaned over a bluff and there was the river.

"She's up a bit," said Alf.

A mile of grey shingle streaked with shimmering, intersecting veins of light lay before them. One snakelike pattern had engorged itself to a size much greater than the others. The main-stream. George and Alf studied it until the truck dropped down into the valley flats again.

Without looking around they knew there was a homestead. Dogs were barking and a tractor clattered up the hillside. They helped unload a prefabricated chimney in concrete blocks for a new musterer's hut, and watched the mail being handed out. The homestead seemed to consist of scattered cottages and shacks. In one of them they dumped stores.

The cook in a neat apron pointed to the stove.

"Tea over there, boys. Scones here."

He and the driver began a three-cups-of-tea conversation about what was going to win the Cup that afternoon.

ON again. Boundary gates to be opened and shut. The road, rougher, narrower, almost a track, nearly lost in passages of old river bed, just a crooked furrow round stony hillsides. They shifted boulders out of the way and looked at creeks before the truck dropped into them. It had been raining the last few days. Fords were scoured and some of the road lay under water.

They stopped at the bones of an old iron shed propped up alone in a uni-

verse of sky and stones and faded rags of grass.

"Here you are," the driver said. He had another 20 miles to navigate to the last runholder and the end of the road.

Alf and George put their packs on and set off for the river a mile away. They could not yet see the homestead on the other side, but they knew it was there. Alf went first, quite quickly. George could not keep up. After twenty yards he and Alf stopped and laughed. They had suddenly remembered their heavy swags. For the next few days they would have to move at a calculated plod, their feet dragging, chests caved in, shoulders hunched forward against the strain of the load, eyes on the ground, picking the easiest path and never hurrying.

They went on over the empty riverbed.

"I never knew there was so much space in New Zealand," said George.

"Just like the desert," Alf replied.

They both kept glancing towards the head of the valley. For miles there was nothing to see but flats, until the long curves of bush covered spurs from the lower bastions of the main range reached down. They were like giant arms trying to strangle the throat of the river. The main divide peaks were out of sight round a bend, but on the crests of these lower flanks were snowy tops and the lolling tongues of glaciers on the black rock.

Wild clouds were overhead against infinite overtones of blue space. Their imaginations traced crazy adventures in the sprawling fantasy of white shapes.

"The Canterbury sky," said George. "That's the one no one looks at in town."

The wind puffed warm in their faces.

"Feel the monster's breath," said Alf with a smile.

They looked up the valley at the walls of the river's gorge showing like black prison bars through the storm. Great clenched fists of cloud lunged from behind this barrier.

"It's still raining hard up there," said Alf. "Wonder how bad the river is?"

"I hope Scotty can get a horse across from the homestead," replied George.

THEY reached the first side-stream.

There was thirty or forty yards of fast-running water, but it was not very broken.

"Shouldn't need the rope," said Alf.

He walked on to a shoal, turned at an angle to the stream and started

edging with the current towards the other bank. The water surged up round his knees, then over his thighs. Alf made little forward, jerking movements as his feet plunged over the stones on the bottom. All the time he probed downstream with his ice axe stretched out full length. Once in quiet water he splashed straight ashore. Water squelched from his trousers and boots.

George followed more easily. He was heavier and had more stability. Together they stamped on over the shingle again, trying to warm their legs after the shock of cold glacial water. They crossed several small streams, then reached the bank of another torrent about fifty yards wide.

George stepped in with care. He laughed when the water barely reached his ankles.

"I wish you could tell how deep these things are," he said, poking his axe into the swirling water. It was milky with suspended particles of glacial mud. His next step took him over his knees. Alf joined him. He stood close alongside and immediately downstream. They placed their ice axes together, parallel with their chests, so that they could link their arms through them. Then they edged forward like horses straining in harness. George, the heavier, broke the force of the current. Alf, comparatively sheltered below, kept forcing forward with little grunts and gasps, never getting ahead, and always holding in the exact line of the current against George's body.

The water tore at George's waist. His foot struck and faltered against a big boulder on the bottom.

"Steady, steady," he muttered between clenched teeth.

Alf, with staring eyes on a patch of water a foot square in front of them, shut out everything else. He fought with his entire strength to hold his mate upright against the flow of water. His feet strained and heaved against the bottom. For an anxious wavering second they struggled over the boulder until George got his balance again.

They paused together.

"Awright," muttered George. "Take her steady . . . slowly . . . slowly."

They kept creeping towards the bank, giving with the current all the time. A scramble up a little face of shingle and boulders and they were safe on the bank.

"Oh, good work! Good work! Oh, very good!" George exclaimed.

"Close go," said Alf.

They turned and looked sternly across the stream like men who have just broken a horse or won a fight.

Then they walked on through more shingle and matagouri bushes. Now they could see the homestead bright against the manuka and the drab olive green bush on the hill across the valley. There was no more river in sight.

"Wonder if that was the mainstream?" said George.

"Be all right if it was," said Alf.

"It's a wonder Scotty didn't see us and bring over a horse."

"Perhaps he's out mustering."

"Ah! I bet they've got the billy on over there now and some extra chops in the pan, anyway."

THEY walked on thinking of the cups of tea, the warm supper and the pleasures of back country hospitality.

But a murmuring which became a snuffling growl, then an evil rushing,

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