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ACCIDENTS IN THE ALPS.

Public opinion seems to be strongly impressed by the great number of climbing accidents which have occurred in the Alps during the past summer. There is in some quarters a tendency to consider mountaineering as a very dangerous pastime, but that is not so, as can be demonstrated with the help of the statistics carefully compiled by the Swiss Alpine Club, which does not merely record the yearly number of alpine accidents and deaths, but also examines their causes.

The 1951 alpine climbing season began later than usual because of the delayed melting of the huge masses of snow which had accumulated during the past winter; the situation remained unfavourable in the Alps until the second half of July, but sudden storms and cold spells prevailed until the end of August, so that the best period for mountain ascents was short and naturally the great bulk of the season's accidents were concentrated in a few weeks.

There are yet no accurate figures concerning the present year, but a rough estimate puts the number of accidents and deaths at respectively 21 and 28 in Switzerland, 12 and 16 in France, 55 and 61 in Italy, and 30 and 32 in Germany-Austria, altogether 118 accidents involving the death of 137 persons. The increase has been particularly striking in Italy and in Germany-Austria, while the death roll did not exceed the average in France and Switzerland. Swiss statistics are so far the most accurate, and extend over a longer period; they show that, since 1935, the number of alpine accidents has ranged from 60 to 75 a year, involving the death of 69 to 80 persons. The lowest figure — 48 accidents and 54 killed — was recorded in 1950 (the periods concerned extending from May 1 of the previous year, 1949, to the end of April, 1950), while the highest — 91 accidents and 118 killed — was registered in 1943. Between 1935 and 1950, inclusive, there were 958 alpine accidents which caused the death of more than 1,100 persons in the Swiss Alps.

Causes of Deaths.

The examination of the causes of these deaths is instructive. Physiological conditions (heart failure, apoplexy, &c.) accounted for 46 deaths, falling stones for 48, bad weather and exposure for 61, while 62 persons were killed through missing the right way, 71 through falls into crevasses, and 88 through falls when picking wild flowers; 147 deaths were due to avalanches of snow, 311 to falls on snow and ice, and 357 to falls when rock climbing. It has been ascertained that 410

deaths were due to imprudence, lack of training and of physical fitness, faulty equipment, and ignorance of alpine technique, geography, and topography. Moreover, it should be pointed out that 515 of these victims were making excursions without guides and that 77 of them were climbing alone.

At first sight these figures seem to be exceedingly high, and might lead to the conclusion that climbing is particularly dangerous. But the number of victims of the Alps should be compared with the number of persons who every year climb or make excursions in the mountains. The registers of the huts of the Swiss Alpine Club show that about 80,000 tourists are visiting them every year, while the other huts receive some 5,000 persons; the alpine resorts of Switzerland are receiving more than 450,000 guests every year, and it is safe to consider that 10 per cent., that is 45,000 of them, are making tours in the mountains; to these should be added a further 25,000 who are going from the towns to the hills without stopping at a hut or resort, giving a grand total of 155,000 persons who are every year, winter and summer, making tours and ascents in the Swiss alpine districts. The figure of 155,000 compared with a death roll of 118 — to take the highest figure recorded — represents less than one killed in a thousand, a low proportion indeed.

That is, nevertheless, too high, as it is clear that nearly 30 per cent. of these deaths might have been avoided. The alpine associations are every year organizing training and instruction courses for young climbers, with lectures on map reading, meteorology, and first aid, and by rope, ice axe, and skiing practice in the mountains.

(The Times.)

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