

Ski-mountaineering

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Ski-mountaineering

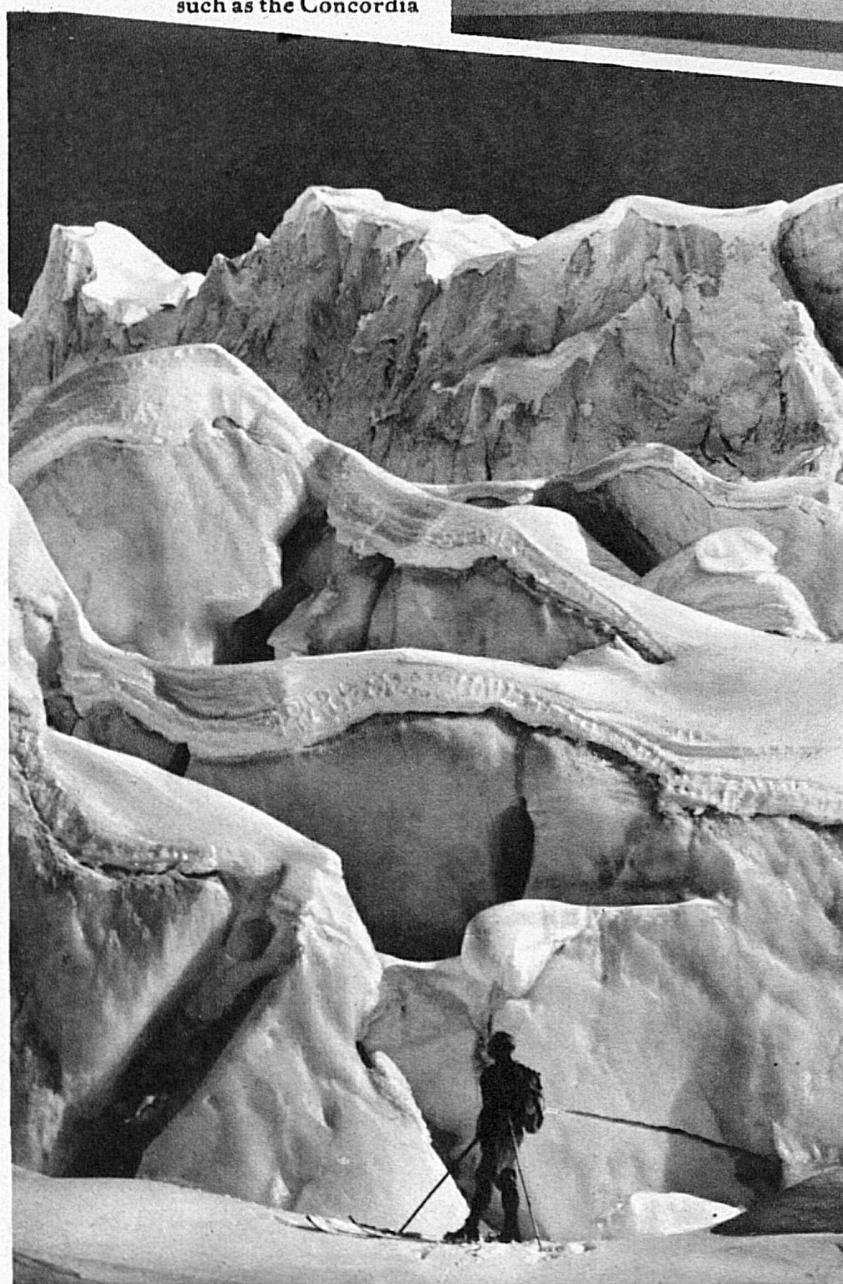
Many of the great Alpine peaks had been climbed in winter before ski-ing was introduced into Switzerland. The Matterhorn had been climbed by Signor Sella, the Jungfrau and Schreckhorn by Mr. Coolidge, and Mont Blanc by an English lady, Miss Straton.

These climbs, however, were regarded as tours de force. Few indeed were the mountaineers who persisted in making a regular practice of winter ascents.

The introduction of ski revolutionised the situation. During a fine spell in January or February huts such as the Concordia



View from the summit of the Piz Mundau into the Lugnez valley



are sometimes apt to be over-crowded, and during spring and Whitsuntide the club huts in the Oberland and Silvretta are at least as full as they ever are in July and August. Winter mountaineering on ski does not necessarily involve any hardships. Extreme cold is the exception rather than the rule. The temperature is often delightfully mild. I have sat on the summit of the Finsteraarhorn, more than 14,000 feet above the sea, stripped to the waist on a January afternoon, and I have spent six days on the Oberland glaciers without feeling a breath of wind and without suffering the least discomfort from cold.

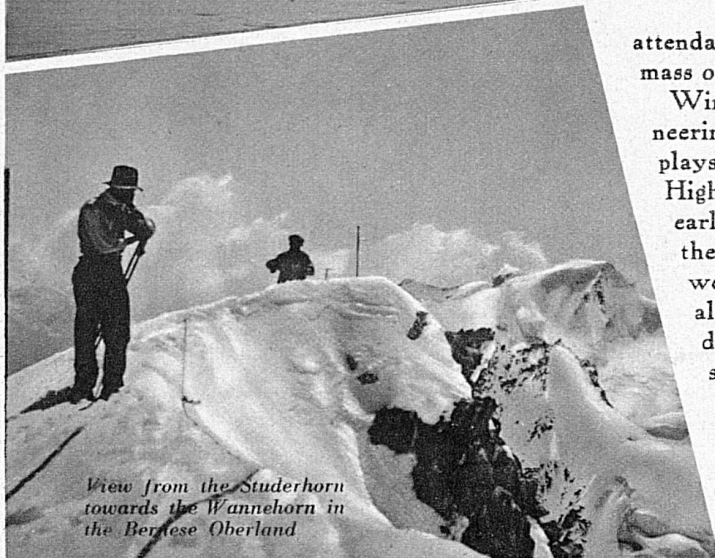
On the other hand, the weather often changes very abruptly in winter, and no skier should venture into the High Alps unless he has sufficient reserve of strength and stamina to withstand the exacting test of storm at those altitudes.

Winter mountaineering exercises an intense fascination on those who yield to its spell. Those windless hours on the summit of some great peak when winter reigns supreme from one end of the vast snowscape to the other have a quality which is all their own. Perhaps the most enduring impressions which the skier brings back from the High Alps in winter are those which are stored up not by day, but by night. No moon rivals the full moon of January seen from the roof of Switzerland. I remember a January evening at the height of 11,000 feet above the sea. Seventy miles away Mont Blanc rose above its

On the Pers glacier in the Bernina district



In the Forno district, Oberengadine



View from the Studerhorn towards the Wannehorn in the Bernese Oberland



Diavolezza Huts and the Piz Palu

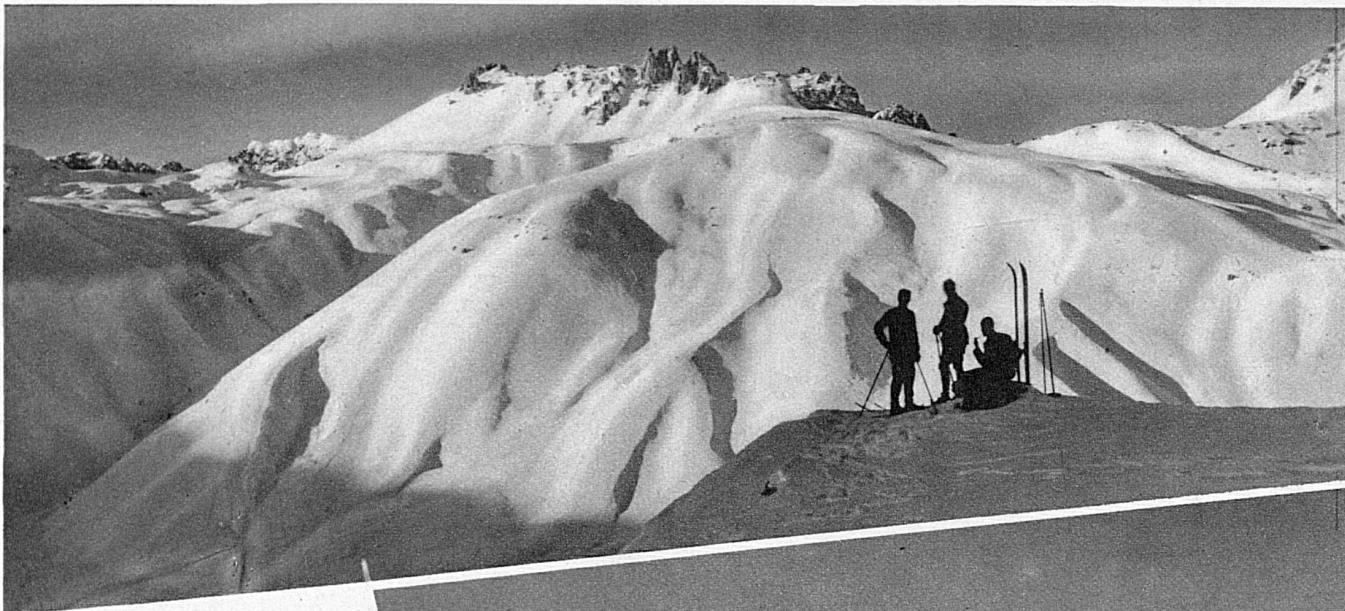
attendant Aiguilles. It was easy to identify not only the great mass of Mont Blanc, but even the lesser peaks on those ridges.

Winter, however, is not the best season for ski-mountaineering, for the high peaks are exposed to the wind which plays havoc with powder snow. Snow conditions in the High Alps are normally better in the late spring and the early summer, so far as the skier is concerned, than in the winter. Wind ruins light powder snow but is powerless to affect the crust which in spring is formed by alternate freezing and melting. The ski-runner times his descent for the moment when this hard crust begins to soften. There is no snow surface which is easier, safer and truer than hard spring crust which has been superficially softened to a depth of about half an inch or an inch. On this surface running and turning are both equally easy and equally safe, for such snow is absolutely true and never varies in depth or texture.

Spring-mountaineering does not depend for its attractions only on perfect snow conditions. Never are the mountains more beautiful. Contrast is the essence of beauty, and there is no contrast more lovely than that between the glare of the upper snowfield in May and the cool green of the valleys far below.

And few things are pleasanter than to begin the day linking one's christianias on the perfect snow of May glaciers and to wind up in the evening with a stroll down through the scented pines among fields gay with gentians and anemones.

The snow line, of course, is higher in spring than in winter, but none the less the skier normally can obtain 4000 feet more of descent in May than in January. In May one spends far shorter time on the ascent and the climb is usually done on foot



A Winter Evening in the Engadine

dragging the ski behind on a string, and it is about 50% quicker to walk up hard snow on foot than to climb up soft snow on ski.

In the Bernese Oberland the Jungfrau Railway saves the skier the labour of transporting his ski to the glacier world. The Jungfrau Railway carries him to a height of 11,400 feet above the sea to the starting point for some of the finest glacier tours in Europe. At Zermatt the Bétémps hut can be reached without trouble and without a long climb by using the Gornergrat Railway. Very fine ski tours can be carried out at Zermatt in August and in September. An enterprising club has been formed at Harrow which last year carried out a summer ski meet above Zermatt, climbing on ski Monte Rosa, Castor, Pollux and the Zermatt Breithorn. The current issue of the British Ski Year Book contains an account of an excellent ski-ing holiday in September, which began in the Oberland and included the glaciers of the Monte Rosa group.

I have, I hope, written enough to indicate that ski-ing is not solely a winter sport. In winter the best ski-ing is obtained among the lesser ranges: in spring and in summer one can move up into the glacier world. The reader who wishes for a technical treatise on ski-ing may perhaps care to glance at my book "Alpine Ski-ing at all Heights and Seasons" (Messrs. Methuen) and at the "Mountains of Youth" (Oxford University Press) in which I have tried to describe those days on ski in the High Alps which were the happiest that I have ever spent among the mountains.

Arnold Lunn.



View of the Piz Segnes in the Upper Rhine valley

