

# HAZARDS IN THE MOUNTAINS

## Care and Experience Can Reduce Them Further

(Written and illustrated for 'The Listener' by JOHN PASCOE)

THE pleasure of climbing mountains may be anything between quiet satisfaction and excitement, but it carries its responsibilities. My purpose is to outline the causes of tragedies in the Southern Alps and to strike a mean between the extremes of condemnation voiced by some of the alpine Jeremiahs, and of nonchalance affected by some people too young to know that a party is not well equipped unless it has clinkered boots and an ice-axe for each climber, and that the whole is best secured by rope correctly used.

By comparison with the accepted hazards of industry and of the roads, 18 mountain accidents, with their total death roll of 32, over 50 years, do not seem extraordinary for any sport. Their news-interest is often overstated by metropolitan papers, because of their sensation. Examine the attitudes of the readers. The public includes interested parties—friends and relations and acquaintances of the men who died in the mountains, whose anxiety is sharpened by the uncertainty and incoherence of the first reports that start by bush telephone and end in headlines. The public includes readers whose interest is heightened by the sense of vicarious adventure. It includes the very young

from alpine causes; drowning in mountain rivers, deaths by fall, and by exposure. Many of these are unrecorded. Musterers and hunters who worked in rough back country also had their tragedies. But the first serious accident to mountaineers, as such, was in February 1914, when S. L. King and his two guides were killed by an avalanche on the Linda glacier route to Mount Cook. That this was the first is a great tribute to the sense of the pioneers in the alpine field and to the sound principles established by New Zealand guides. It followed that the guided period remained one in which relatively few men and women climbed mountains. Thus the sanctions of experienced men were firmly established and the number they affected was small. The advent of guideless climbing broke even with the start of the depression of the 'thirties. This statement is not the over-simplification it may seem. It was true that before 1930 there was guideless work in the mountains. But it was after that year that there were many parties climbing where before mere handfuls had travelled.

### The New Freedom

Like all periods of change, this one had its debunkers. Look:

guideless climbing was hailed as the new freedom, but the obligations which are the price of freedom were but faintly recognised or not at all.



FIVE died in 1930—the Tasman Glacier from the Haast Ridge

mountaineers who goggle but do not relate the stories as those that may one day be theirs, if they ignore warnings. It includes the retired mountaineers who see in the tragedies a chance to tell the young not to do what they once did, or nearly did. But most important of all it includes the hundreds of sane and active climbers who are fearless without being reckless, who are sensitive enough to feel sorrow for the dead and the injured, who admit past errors of judgment without becoming intolerant of youth and inexperience, and who seek to face realities.

The early days of exploration, surveying, and prospecting included deaths

And look again:

technically they have made great strides: mentally they remain where they stood at the beginning of the decade . . . the bad young days of guideless climbing.

These overstatements are from the same article by a man who wore his prophet's mantle like a hair-shirt, and with a dour sort of joy.

The guideless parties of 1930-1940 had their troubles but in the main they accomplished much important work on virgin peaks and on technically difficult routes. They faced the same hazards as their predecessors, and, in the main, reduced them by the same combination of



DISASTER in 1914—the Linda route to Mount Cook

enterprise and skill. It would be churlish and a sign of age to condemn a period of climbing that banished the inferiority complex which had hindered development, and whose results were so rich in achievement, and in the patience that was the background of most successes. Remarkable also in this period was the progress of ski-ing, and the unpublished alpine travel of Government deer-killers whose chase of deer and chamois gave them a proficiency that is not recognised as widely as it deserves.

### South Island Only

It must be emphasised that this discussion affects only the Southern Alps, and excludes the North Island mountains, Egmont and Ruapehu, and lesser ranges whose accessibility to the inexperienced or the unequipped has caused a considerable roll of fatalities. The Southern Alps include in their dangers swift, tricky, glacier rivers. Over a period of years, Park, Morpeth, McStay, Townsend, and Barker were drowned in circumstances that could have been avoided by an efficient use of rope. A slope near Graham's Saddle accounted for Carroll in bad weather, in 1938, and in the previous year Dowling fell to his death on Mount Evans after taking part in its second ascent. Lerchenthal and Lees died in a "recce" of the low peak of Mount Cook. No comment can be made on this year's disaster in the Dobson Valley because the inquest has not been held. Guide Christie fell into a crevasse on the Fox Glacier when travelling solo in 1935. Five died from exposure on the Tasman glacier in 1930, and two on the Harman Pass in 1932. Dobbie died in the Hollyford in 1936, and Morton and Wallis on Mount Malte Brun in 1943. Divers, Stevenson, and Edwards in 1937, died in a crowded climb of Mount Trent. Avalanches killed Russell in 1933 on Avalanche Peak, Susman in 1942 in the

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