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MOUNTAIN PERIL.

By FRANK ILLINGWORTH.

(This interesting article is copied from "THE QUIVER" by courtesy of the Editor.)

Mountaineers on the Continent and in Britain are inspecting their alpine ropes, their rucksacs, ice-axes, skis, and steel-nailed boots in readiness for the winter climbing season.

The great precipices and snow-slopes of the Alps are clad in ice, and, glistening in the weak rays of the early winter sun, they exert a peculiar fascination on mountaineers, men and women.

What is this fascination? Why do men — and women — risk their lives in the High Mountains?

The answer is a simple one. It is this: The man who climbs mountains has in his blood the stuff that sent Captain Cook to discover Australia and Captain Robert Falcon Scott to his death in the Antarctic. Circumstances may prevent this "man with an urge" from fulfilling his urge to emulate Cook, Scott, Franklin, Parry, Livingstone and the rest, and to satisfy his immediate craving he travels to Switzerland and climbs a mountain. And once he has ventured into the high, dangerous, peaks, he is doomed to return again and again, and yet again, for the mountains exert a fascination on those who have tackled them which they find difficult to deny.

Many a time I have been afraid when climbing steep alpine ice slopes and rock precipices: I admit this quite candidly. Time and again I have returned to the "hut" exhausted, bruised, numb with cold. On each occasion I have muttered "Never again — I'm through with mountaineering." But each time I have returned to the high slopes to face just the same conditions.

I could not care less for the view to be seen from the crest of my chosen summit. It is the endeavour, the feeling of accomplishment behind every foot gained, and the employment of "rock craft" and "ice craft" (The *Art* of mountaineering) — these are the things that have driven me to climb mountains, winter and summer.

As long ago as July last it was estimated that some 250 climbers would die before the mountaineering season ended this October.

There were 34 fatal accidents on Mont Blanc alone, between June and the middle of August.

Struggling through knee-deep snow, rescue parties searched the steep, brilliantly white flanks of Mont Blanc for mountaineers, dead, injured, and missing (believed dead). Roped together they scanned the glaring white snow wastes of this great peak, the largest snow-fields in Europe, they climbed down into the blue-mauve depths of crevasses in glacial ice sometimes 2,500 feet deep, they scaled the perpendicular, black, snow-streaked precipices of the mountain's north face; and back in Chamonix the little heap of

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recovered rucksacs and the other personal possessions of dead mountaineers grew larger and larger.

Death and injury became so common in the Alps this last summer that only the more spectacular accidents were given more than a bare mention in the Press.

The number of deaths is hardly surprising, for on sunny days in August and early September as many as 100 holidaymakers were on the Matterhorn *at the same time*. And the Matterhorn is but one of more than 200 alpine peaks which are draped with ropes in August and September, and into the early days of October.

The reason for alpine accidents is legion. The three Britons who died in the Engerdine in August signed their own death warrant by walking across a steep snow-slope. Their footmarks cut the slope in half. The snow was "rotten," that is, old and liable to avalanche, and the lower half slipped away from the upper in a snow-slide which in a few seconds grew into a foaming avalanche.

There is immense pleasure to be had in a "snow climb", that is in climbing a mountain with less rock than snow surfaces, such as Pitz Palu. The beauty of shadow on snow, of vast glistening miles, the pink of dawn and dusk, and the sparkle of the moon on virgin snow — this is a beauty that not even the most hardened among us can forget. I remember my old guide, Rudolf Kaufmann, saying: "Up in the mountains one feels very near to one's God. I sometimes climb up into the snow-mountains just to think about my God."

To be sure he spoke the truth. But snow-mountains (such as the White Hell of Pitz Palu) are subject to sudden storms. They offer climbing conditions considerably colder than those found on rock. They are the home of avalanches. Their crests are made hazardous by the curling lips of snow-cornices formed by the upward screaming sweep of the wind; cornices are snow-overhangs which collapse when submitted to strain and which plunge the unwary climber perhaps four or five thousand feet to his death.

Yes, snow-mountains offer hazardous climbing, even if the slopes are slight.

Two Swiss climbers died this last "season" when the shadow cast across a snow-slope by a rock spur caused the snow in the shadow to contract, split away from the flanking snow in the hot sun, and release an avalanche that swept the two Swiss to their deaths. At least, this was the explanation given for the accident.

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Several inexperienced climbers — “tourists with alpine ropes” — died because they failed to take elementary precautions against the Fates which lurk in the High Alps.

And several *experts* died. One an Austrian with years of mountaineering experience, fell into a crevasse on the Aletsch Glacier (the longest in Europe, eleven miles) when snow “balled-up” between the three-inch spikes strapped to his heavy boots. Another expert, a Briton, fell 2,000 feet when the hand-hold to which he was clinging gave away.

In the old days, early between the wars, there were many unclimbed peaks. Not all of them were difficult by the mountaineer's standards, but because they had not been climbed they attracted the man with an urge to explore. They satisfied his immediate urge to emulate Scott, Franklin, Livingstone, without facing too great a risk.

But to-day there are few unclimbed peaks. Nearly every summit has been “crowned” by Man. To break new ground the mountaineer has left the comparatively easy “ridges” and taken to the “faces,” which means doubling and trebling the risks involved in attaining the summit by a new route.

Many “faces” climbed this last summer were almost bare of hand-holds and foot-holds. But this did not discourage the mountaineer. From the climbing of “impossible faces” has emerged a new cult in mountaineering — piton-climbing, that is, the employment of steel nails which the mountaineer hammers into the rocks where there are no hand-holds. British mountaineers do not favour piton-climbing. They allude to the employment of nails and hammers in the one contemptuous word “IRONMONGERY.” They prefer to use their skill to reach their chosen summits, and they attempt with no aid beyond that of their fingers and toes “faces” which prompt the Continental mountaineer to use pitons by the dozen.

Before the war the majority of accidents were among the ranks of amateurs, and tourists who ventured into the mountains alone.

To-day, at least as many *experts* as amateurs die in the High Mountains. The reason? The experts are always attempting more and yet more difficult “faces,” the North Face of the Eiger (for example), a “face” which was at one time draped with seven dangling bodies. The bodies were taken down (at immense risk to the rescue parties), and before the snow from the next blizzard had melted another party was slogging up this same “face.”

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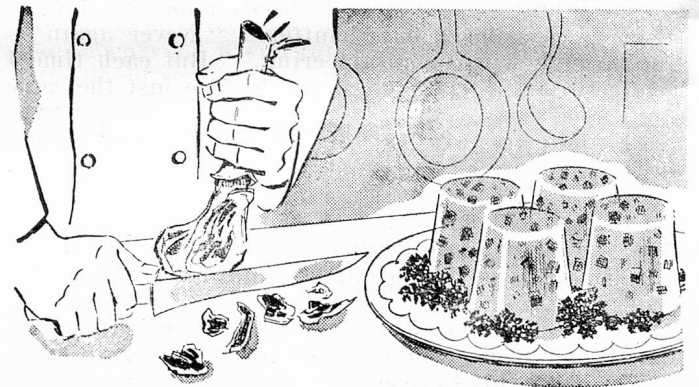
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The Alpine Clubs of Switzerland, France, Italy and Austria go out of their way to minimize the risks entailed in mountaineering.

They maintain rescue parties. They draw up rules for accredited guides. They maintain refuges at key points throughout the Alps, sometimes as many as four or five within a radius of a few miles. Late in July, when the assault on Mont Blanc was beginning to reach high proportions, the French sent a gang of workmen slogging up the everlasting snow-slopes to repair the Vallot Refuge, situated at an altitude of 14,311 feet. About the same time a Halifax bomber parachuted building materials onto the snow around the hut, in readiness for the builders' arrival. It was essential that the refuge be in good condition for the height of the mountaineering season, for if it collapsed in the blizzards that hit Mont Blanc every few days a dozen mountaineers might perish from exposure. Expense was not spared to see that the Vallot Hut was in good condition. But while the builders were putting repairs in hand four mountaineers fell into a crevasse, and their bodies will never be recovered.

Generally speaking guided parties are safe enough, because the guide recognizes “rotten” snow and avoids it, and he reads the meaning in the clouds and in a change of wind-direction — because he has “mountain craft.”

But there is an element of risk on even the simplest of slopes, for a change of wind can turn a “safe” climb into one of considerable hazard. Mountaineering conditions alter from minute to minute.



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Storms are a constant hazard, for they materialize in a few seconds from skies free of clouds. It might almost be that the God of the Mountains sees puny man trying to conquer his territory, and gathering his forces, flings them across the precipices and snow-slopes. At first a few puffs of cool wind; then a few snow flakes; a cloud with ragged grey edges, edges ragged with wind: then a storm of blinding snow as hard as grit and a wind against which it is difficult to stand, and with snow and wind cold that numbs the brain.

More than once I have seen this happen — seen a sunny day transformed into that of wind and blizzard within a period of a few minutes.

One such occasion was on the 13,700 foot Wetterhorn, in the Swiss Oberland. I was climbing with the Swiss guide, Rudolf Kaufmann, and my climbing-companion, John Nelson (then of Princesway, Preston). Over the wind we heard the roar of avalanches, set in motion by the wind itself; the coffee in our flasks froze; our faces were coated in frozen breath; our hands numb. We saw Rudolf cup his hands to his mouth and utter the "Alpine S O S" and heard his cry whipped away by the wind. But no help came. And had it not been for the "craft" of our guide we would never have reached the Glextein hut — and safety.

Too often British mountaineers ignore the warnings of guides: "Don't go 'up' to-day — the weather's uncertain."

This is just what happened a dozen times in the Alps this summer, and in several instances it saw the guides set off into the peaks to bring down the bodies of the climbers who ignored their warnings.

For example, the three Britons who ignored the warnings of guides who would stop their climbing Mt. Eveque, died at the base of a 900 foot precipice. Arola guides watched them through binoculars until they rounded a rock bluff. This was the last time the climbers were seen — alive. The following morning a rescue party found them — dead. They had slipped on rocks which a blizzard had coated with ice.

There is an increasing tendency among British mountaineers to climb without the aid of guides. There are two reasons for this. First, the independence in the Briton's soul is as marked as ever it was: he feels equal to meeting *any* situation, alone. Second, the limited amount of foreign currency which the holiday-maker can take abroad means that he cannot pay both

for a hotel and a guide. Thus he saves on the guide; and loses his life.

Mountaineering accidents are not restricted to the Alps. There were many accidents in the mountains of the Lake District last summer, in Wales and Scotland.

And now that the summer mountaineering season is over, men and women climbers are turning their attention to *winter* climbing. Winter conditions in our own mountains resemble those of summer in the Alps, inasmuch as the hills of England, Scotland and Wales are clad in snow and subject to severe blizzards.

And from now until next March conditions in the High Alps will be at their worst. Whereas in summer the rocks of the Alps are often hot from the touch of the sun, to-day they are bitter with ice — glazed surfaces to which it is difficult to cling. The wind that screams across rock and snow is "polar" in quality, the harbinger of frostbite and exhaustion. Few mountaineers have it in them to climb the High Alps in winter. But there are some who, wearing skis or "crampons" (iron spikes strapped to the boots) are prepared to face the worst of conditions to fulfil the urge that forces a man to venture into the mountains. Even now they are inspecting their alpine ropes, ice-axes, rucksacs and crampons in preparation for the assault on "winter summits." And those who took their holidays last summer? They are spending week-ends in Britain's mountains — or planning next year's assaults among the High Mountains where a man is "close to his Maker."

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