

ACCIDENTS IN 1939

IN consequence of the present international situation it has been impossible to collect adequate information for a proper review of such accidents as may have occurred during this season, which was marked by much bad weather in the earlier portion; nor can we attempt any analysis such as may be found for the years 1935-1938 in the September number of *Die Alpen*, which follows the lines of previous similar articles in that Journal for the years 1926, 1929, 1933 and 1935. It is with regret that we note how in the three accidents described below the victims were all men who, both in life and among the mountains, were in the early stages of their careers.

It is a temptation for those who are in the doldrums of their mountaineering life to adopt a paternal note towards the errors of inexperience, after the many years since they cast the first stone down the mountain side. No fellowship of men has greater need of the restoring influence of new enthusiasms from the coming men than the community of mountaineers, and many will remember with gratitude the encouragement which awaited their early endeavours from such men as Captain Farrar and Dr. Kugy. Let us, however, recall what is written of Farrar in this JOURNAL¹: 'The mountains meant much to Farrar; he treated them with respect, for, as he said, they never forgave a mistake.'

It is well to ponder these words, for they describe a man who was 'eminently safe, and excelled in his judgment of weather conditions.' There is no finer training ground for future mountaineers than the crags and open moorlands of the British Isles; but these cannot teach the lessons which can be learned only in the Alps: that where great variations of temperature occur every hold needs a higher testing, that changes of weather above the snowline increase in danger with increasing height, and that the onset of fatigue accentuated by severe cold must always remain an almost incalculable factor. It is not given to everybody to learn these lessons when following in the footsteps of some great guide; indeed, such a schooling may even tend through reliance on others to neglect of one's own critical faculties and to less self-reliance. For the many who, whether by preference or through necessity, must rely upon their own judgment, it is essential to safeguard a large measure of reserve which can come only the growth of experience. We look to the rising generation to bring new life into a community whose members are, in Dr. Kugy's words, the bearers of an incomparable tradition; and it is in no spirit of discouragement if we urge that the lesser groups in the Alps, under less exacting conditions, are the true ground for gaining the experience which will lead to the greater peaks where the best is yet to be.

¹ A.J. 41. 175.

The Accident on the Allalin Pass

ON Saturday, July 15 of this year, Messrs. M. T. Keith and W. H. C. Simmonds, both undergraduates of Lincoln College, Oxford, left the Fluh Alp hut about 5 A.M., intending to cross the Allalin Pass to the Britannia hut. They were carrying sleeping-bags and provisions for three days. Previously they had been with the O.U.M.C. meet in the Arolla district, climbing with various companions the Pigne d'Arolla, Aiguille de la Tsa, Dent des Bouquetins, Tête Blanche and Dent Blanche, descending via the Schönbühl to Zermatt on July 12. It was Keith's first visit to the Alps, his previous experience being fell-walking and ten days at Helyg last Easter with the O.U.M.C. Simmonds had had considerable experience on British hills, and this was his second season in the Alps.

The party went up to the Längenfluhjoch (3156 m.) where the ordinary route to the Rimpfischhorn turns E. along the edge of the Längenfluh Glacier. According to the *Guide des Alpes Valaisannes*, vol. 111b (1937), route 413a., a party bound for the Allalin Pass must here descend some 600 ft. N. and contour round at about 2960 m. to the Hubel Glacier. Keith and Simmonds, however, ascended to about the 3600 m. level, where they proposed to traverse N. across the intervening glaciers to the Allalin Pass. This appeared to be practicable on the Siegfried map, but in fact it proved impossible,² and the party therefore continued up the usual Rimpfischhorn route to the snow saddle (4009 m.) at the foot of the peak. They decided to ascend the Rimpfischhorn, with the purpose of descending the N. ridge³ to the Allalin Pass. They reached the summit at about noon.

During the morning the weather had been doubtful, with patches of sunshine and a S.W. wind blowing. Monte Rosa was in cloud, but the Mischabel group was clear. The wind had by now grown stronger, and the summit rocks held much snow and ice. The party therefore decided to descend a broad couloir running down W. from the gap immediately N. of the summit, in order to reach the snow terrace at the W. foot of the peak. By the time they reached this terrace mist had come down, and at times the wind whipped up the new snow into sharp blizzards. The snow here was in bad condition, knee-deep with a slight crust. The ordinary route to the Allalin Pass descends by this terrace about 1000 ft. from the snow saddle (4009 m.) and passes across the foot of the spur descending N.W. from Pt. 4119 at about the 3650 m. level. The party appears after crossing this spur to have contoured round too high, as they were involved in step-cutting for 3 hrs. in mist and strong wind.

² In the accounts given in the above-mentioned guidebook of the route taken by this party, it is noteworthy that in two instances the author calls attention to inaccuracy of contour detail in the Siegfried map.—EDITOR.

³ The guidebook gives 2½ hrs. as the time required for this descent. The ridge has many gendarmes, divided in the upper section by narrow and sometimes corniced snow arêtes. The final descent from Pt. 4119 m. to the pass (3564 m.) is a steep open slope of snow or ice.—EDITOR.

By the time they reached the Allalin Pass, about 8.30 P.M., the mist had cleared somewhat and they could see down to the level portion of the Allalin Glacier. They descended in an E.S.E. direction, but were soon forced N. by crevasses towards the Allalinhorn. Towards 9 P.M., by which time the party had been out for some 16 hrs., Simmonds who was leading on a doubled rope (both ends being round his waist) sighted a tongue of snow which ran down to the level ground, separated from it by an open crevasse 3-4 ft. broad. He trod down the snow firmly at the upper lip, which was square cut, and then jumped clear. After Simmonds had belayed the rope round his ice-axe, leaving a little slack for Keith's jump, Keith approached the edge. In treading down the snow, however, he appears to have gone too near the edge, with the result that the upper layer of snow gave way and he fell into the crevasse to a depth of some 10-12 ft., the shock on the rope burying Simmonds' axe a yard in the snow. This occurred about 9 P.M.

As Keith had retained his axe, Simmonds asked him to cut a step in the crevasse wall; Keith found himself unable to do this, perhaps owing to the constriction of the rope, but a little later he managed to fix his axe horizontally and sit on it. Simmonds then rescued his own axe and put on the belay securely. He then untied the two ends from his waist, put bowlines on them for foot-loops, intending to get Keith out by raising first one, then the other rope. However, he soon found that he could not safely hold Keith's weight with one hand while his other hand wound the belaying rope round the axe. He therefore set off for help, leaving Keith in the foot-loops but without his axe which had by now slipped from beneath him.

As soon as he set off for help, Simmonds discovered that the crevasse widened right out. He therefore returned to Keith and suggested that if the crevasse were U-shaped, Keith might work along and get out lower down. Accordingly he got up the foot-loops and was untwisting the belay in the hope of lowering Keith to the bottom of the crevasse, when suddenly the axe spun round like a peg-top and the rope ran through his numbed fingers. Keith fell some distance lower and was jammed between the crevasse walls, carrying the rope with him as he fell. Being now unable to assist further, Simmonds told Keith to get into his sleeping-bag if possible, and then set off for the Britannia hut, leaving his rucksack to mark the spot. It was then about 11 P.M.

Simmonds made his way safely down the crevassed Allalin Glacier and got off the ice about 1 A.M. (Sunday, July 16). He failed, however, to find the way from the glacier to the Britannia hut (rain was then falling) and did not arrive there until towards 4 A.M. The hut was tenanted by a solitary Englishman, who after tending Simmonds descended rapidly to Saas Fee to collect a rescue party. At 11.30 A.M. a party of six guides arrived from Saas Fee and went up with Simmonds in bad weather to the scene of the accident. One guide descended into the crevasse and found Keith dead, the body being 100 ft. down and

jammed in a vertical position beneath 3 ft. of new snow; apparently Keith had fallen lower in the crevasse, which proved to be unexpectedly deep. The rescue party returned to the Britannia hut, and Keith's body was brought down next day to Saas Fee for burial there.

In expressing our sincere sympathy for the parents of the victim of this accident, we desire to put on record our admiration of the repeated and tireless attempts made by Mr. Simmonds to rescue his companion. Certain general comments on the circumstances of this accident have been given in the introduction to this section of the JOURNAL. For the difficulties inherent in rescuing a man from a crevasse, even when a party of two are using a double rope, see *Alpine Notes* of this number, p. 335.

The Accident on the Aiguille de la Tsa

ON July 21, 1939, Mr. R. F. Alexander, of Emmanuel College, and Mr. R. H. Wheelock, of Magdalene College, both undergraduates of Cambridge University, left Arolla at 6.30 A.M., reaching the lowest rocks of the Aiguille de la Tsa, W. face, at 8.10 A.M. At the foot of the climb Alexander made bowline knots to attach each member of the party. In making their way upward, they kept too far to the left, though they had been advised the day before by the guide Adrien Lager of St. Niklaus to keep well to the right. At one point the rope became tangled, and Alexander untied in order to straighten it out. He then roped up again.

About a quarter of an hour later, approximately at 10 A.M., when the party had climbed some 800 ft. of rock, they moved up an easy section to the foot of a small overhanging step. Alexander was leading with some 40 ft. of rope out, the remainder of the 100 ft. rope being coiled round Wheelock's shoulders. While Alexander tackled the rock step, Wheelock was some 30 ft. below, and just to the right, without belay. At the moment when Alexander touched the overhang it gave way; he appeared to jump clear of the falling rocks. When the rope became taut Wheelock had some difficulty in holding on, but the tension soon slackened. As Wheelock turned round, he saw Alexander still falling, and on pulling in the rope discovered at the end of the rope nothing but an ordinary overhand knot 6 ins. from the end. The rope was badly frayed but otherwise undamaged.

Wheelock descended to find Alexander already dead, about 600 ft. below, not far above the screes. He reached Arolla at 11.30 A.M., and later a rescue party came up from Arolla to bring down the body.

The rope employed was of the Alpine Club model and had had only one week's use. It seems possible that, in tying on for the second time, Alexander may have made a faulty knot; the overhand knot mentioned above may have been designed to secure the knot from slipping.

Mr. Alexander had only taken up serious rock-climbing this year, but he had already proved himself to be a rock-climber of more than ordinary skill. It was his first season in the Alps—a period when lack

of experience may lead one to take the soundness of the rock for granted. We offer our sincere sympathy to the relatives of this promising young cragsman.

The Accident in the Jotunheim

ON Sunday, July 2, 1939, Mr. P. G. Mandahl, aged 23, and Mr. J. N. Mills left Turtagrø about 10 A.M. to walk over Fanaråken, a peak of about 6700 ft., intending to sleep at Krossbu, a journey of about 7 hrs. Neither of them knew the district, but the route chosen was a straightforward tourist path, marked with cairns, about which they had obtained information before setting out; they knew that there was a hut near the summit, occupied and provisioned, with a meteorological station attached, as indicated further by a signpost at the foot of the peak. They had a compass and a small-scale map, this being the best map obtainable, and were carrying kit for a full walking-tour. It was raining when they set out, and as they got higher the rain turned to sleet and snow; some firm old snow was encountered under a covering of powder snow, in which steps could be kicked where needed without difficulty. As the party got higher the snow became deeper, being in places even thigh-deep. Mandahl was a strong hill-walker, but had had little experience of snow walking, and even with properly nailed boots he found it difficult to maintain a steady progress.

At a point not far from the summit of the mountain, beside the upper of two windlasses, Mandahl got one foot stuck deep in the snow and could not extract it. There happened to be a shovel close by, with the handle exposed above the snow, and Mills dug out his companion's foot. When Mandahl went forward again, after a few yards he said that he could get no further. Mills then took Mandahl's rucksack as well as his own, but even with this relief Mandahl could scarcely get forward. Mills therefore left him with his rucksack and went on to look for the hut and obtain help. Mandahl was at this time perfectly conscious and in good spirits. On reaching the summit ridge, Mills encountered a very strong wind and driving snow, with deep concealed drifts. Under these bad conditions, with a minimum of visibility, Mills decided not to continue his search for the hut and returned to Mandahl, who greeted him cheerfully and said that he was quite recovered. They agreed to return to Turtagrø. Mills set out in advance, but discovered at once that Mandahl was not following and on going back he found him too exhausted to walk. Seeing that he had failed previously to find the hut, Mills decided to return himself to Turtagrø for help, leaving Mandahl well clothed and provided with chocolate. By running as much as possible, he reached Turtagrø in about 1½ hrs., arriving about 7.30 P.M. He collected a rescue party of four men, who set out within half an hour, and a wireless message was also sent to the meteorological station, giving the position where Mandahl had remained. The evening had turned fine, and as Mandahl's position was clearly known to the local inhabitants Mills did

not accompany the rescue party, fearing that he might keep them back. The rescue party had no difficulty in finding Mandahl, whom they reached at about 10 P.M., apparently at about the same time as a party of three arrived from the hut, which was, in fact, about 400 yds. from the scene of the mishap. They spent about 3 hrs. in a vain attempt to revive Mandahl. The body was brought down next day.

The cause of the disaster was exhaustion following upon fatigue and severe cold. Indeed, the officer in charge of the meteorological station said that so severe a storm had not been known there in summer for many years, and a party setting out from Turtagrø would have had no reasonable anticipation of such exceptional conditions. Although this was Mandahl's first day's walking in Norway, he had lately been walking on the Yorkshire hills, and was not altogether out of training.

It is well known how difficult it is, even for experienced mountaineers, to recognise the onset of exhaustion, especially in severe cold. Our sincere sympathy goes out to the parents of the deceased. We consider that under the exceptional conditions encountered, his companion acted with discretion in not pressing his search for the hut.