

The avalanche disaster of 1951

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THE AVALANCHE DISASTER OF 1951.

The terrible tragedy which overtook Switzerland in the early months of 1951 and caused such grievous loss of life and so much material damage, is brought back to our minds by an illustrated brochure published in three languages, by the competent authorities under the title "DIE LAWINEN-KATASTROPHE 1951".

The brochure, which might be called a documentary, is issued by the "Co-ordination Committee for the Administration of the Funds collected by the Swiss Red Cross". It contains a descriptive account of the disaster and of the relief measures taken, a financial report and a balance-sheet audited by the Federal Finance Control under whose supervision the distribution of the funds entrusted to the said Committee was carried out.

The descriptive section of the volume makes heart-rendering reading. In the Alpine valleys avalanches have always been a recurrent seasonal danger. The likely paths of the avalanches were generally known and, where possible, protective measures were taken. But the 1951 visitation ran contrary to all experience. Avalanches came down in places never before affected and many localities were overwhelmed in which the danger was not thought to exist. Houses built in the 15th and 16th centuries were destroyed and so were many homesteads that had been erected on sites specially selected with an eye to safety.

Exceptional conditions contributed to the disaster. The snowfall in that tragic winter had been phenomenal and beyond all expectation or experience. Huge masses of snow had accumulated on the heights and slopes. These, subjected to the vagaries of the weather and the law of gravity, swept down with irresistible force and in unpredictable directions. Farmsteads, chalets, hotels, entire villages, roads and railways were buried, and great damage to property and livestock was caused. Worst of all was the dreadful loss of human life: 96 bodies, victims of the white terror, were recovered.

Help, such as could be improvised, was quickly forthcoming. Volunteers from neighbouring districts were the first to come to the rescue. Regardless of their own risk — several lost their life — they toiled frantically in a desperate effort to locate victims and dig them out. Later the Army took over and carried out organised plans of rescue and clearance on a vast scale.

When the magnitude of the disaster was realised, an appeal for material help was launched. It met with a magnificent response, donations large and small from all over the world came pouring in. The contributions reached the impressive total of more than 14 million francs, 95% of which were raised in Switzerland, enough to cover the cost of compensating every sufferer, rebuilding the shattered homesteads and re-stocking the farms.

The little volume with its beautiful photographs brings home, not only the extent of the calamity, but also the assurance that human solidarity and practical sympathy have not altogether vanished from our modern world.

J.J.F.S.

AVALANCHE.

Relentlessly it snows from leaden skies,
An eerie stillness fills the lonely vale,
But through the darkness and the misty veil
Peer many anxious, terror-haunted eyes.

A sudden roar drowns desperate warning-cries;
The dreaded avalanche descends, a threshing flail,
With smothering death and ruin in its trail.
Beneath it, helpless, man a victim lies.

Inscrutable is Nature's dual role,
As in blind fury she exacts her toll,
Or scatters lavish gifts throughout the land.
Yet mankind still retains a noble choice:
When brethren suffer, not the least of joys
Is that of helping out a helping hand.

J.J.F.S.



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