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AVALANCHE DISASTERS

Following the reports of extensive damage due to hurricanes in Switzerland (published in the last issue of the "Swiss Observer"), we have news of more bad weather, more storms, heavy snowfalls and avalanches. In the night from 12th to 13th March, trees were uprooted and obstructed many railway lines. In the Cantons of Lucerne and Aargau, the already badly depleted woods suffered further damage in winds reaching 135km. per hour. Police forces and soldiers were mobilised to help, apart from fire brigades. In many towns, roofs were lifted, chimney pots blown away and shop windows broken. Dustbins and wooden boxes ready to be collected were blown across roads as if they were matchboxes. The glass roof of the Zurich Stock Exchange was damaged so badly that the Exchange had to be closed. Electricity was cut in a number of places. The wood damaged in the two storms is estimated at over 2m. cubic metres, a catastrophe for the Swiss wood market.

A few days later, heavy snowfalls were reported from many parts of the country, and avalanches began to fall. On 20th March, the Entschlital avalanche roared into the valley and buried the Gotthard route for about 200 metres. The snow storms in the Canton of Uri were alarming, and several places were cut off, especially the Reuss Valley and its subsidiaries. There was so much snow, and so many avalanches went down that they talked about the "Black Monday in White Uri". In the Grisons, too, avalanches caused extensive damage and loss of life and livestock. Near Truns, a house was pulled away and its inmates buried. Dogs saved the woman, but her husband and two sons were killed. Five Italian workmen were killed in an avalanche on Oberalp; they were asleep in a hut. The Gotthard line was covered with rocks and trees brought down by the Plattental avalanche, and trains had to be redirected via Domodossola.

By 23rd March, the weather improved. Snow has returned to many parts. At Davos, there was 145cm. and at Andermatt 2 metres. The public has been asked to help the badly hit owners of woodland, especially by voluntary work. On going to press, the result of the appeal was not yet available.

Incidentally, bad weather foiled the attempt by four Czechoslovak mountaineers to climb the Matterhorn North Wall. One of them was killed.

[A.T.S.]

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