

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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AVALANCHE DANGERS

Tremendous avalanches recently buried long stretches of railway track in southwestern Colorado, isolated towns and mining camps, but did not, so far as reported, occasion any direct loss of life. Avalanche disasters are considerably less common in America than in Europe. Throughout the world, according to a French authority, M. Allix, they are responsible for about a hundred deaths a year on an average.

"Dust avalanches", consisting of dry, powdery snow, are the most dangerous kind. They start on the slightest provocation, and, as they are little retarded by friction, rush downward at a much greater speed than do the sliding masses of wet snow known as "ground avalanches". A gust of wind may set them in motion, or the impulse may be given by the mere fall of a branch, the tread of some animal's foot, or even a loud sound.

Dry snow, especially when it lies in hollows and in the lee of ridges, tends to become compacted or crusted so as to form large plate-like sections. Snow in this condition is known to ski-runners as "wind-slab", and it has been responsible for many fatalities in the Alpine regions where winter sports prevail.

"Nothing," writes F. S. Smythe, of the Alpine Ski Club, "seems more innocent than a slope composed of wind-slab. The surface is often firm and compact, giving the ski-runner a feeling of perfect security, but disillusion follows with terrible suddenness. With a booming, rending roar the whole stratum of snow, sometimes several feet thick, splits away, breaking up into a vast swarm of hard angular blocks. The alpinist is at once carried off his feet and borne down in this besom of destruction. Even if he is not suffocated, he is likely to be crushed to death beneath the great blocks."

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