LETTER XXXIII.

MY DEAR:--

Well, I waked up this morning, and the first thought was, "Here I am in the valley of Chamouni, right under the shadow of Mont Blanc, that I have studied about in childhood and found on the atlas." I sprang up, and ran to the window, to see if it was really there where I left it last night. Yes, true enough, there it was! right over our heads, as it were, blocking up our very existence; filling our minds with its presence; that colossal pyramid of dazzling snow! Its lower parts concealed by the roofs, only the three rounded domes of the summit cut their forms with icy distinctness on the intense blue of the sky!

On the evening before I had taken my last look at about nine o'clock, and had mentally resolved to go out before daybreak and repeat Coleridge's celebrated hymn; but I advise any one who has any such liturgic designs to execute them over night, for after a day of climbing one acquires an aptitude for sleep that interferes with early rising. When I left last evening its countenance was "filled with rosy light," and they tell us, that hours before it is daylight in the valley this mountain top breaks into brightness, like that pillar of fire which enlightened the darkness of the Israelites.

I rejoice every hour that I am among these scenes in my familiarity with the language of the Bible. In it alone can I find vocabulary and

images to express what this world of wonders excites. Mechanically I repeat to myself, "The everlasting mountains were scattered; the perpetual hills did bow; his ways are everlasting." But as straws, chips, and seaweed play in a thousand fantastic figures on the face of the ocean, sometimes even concealing the solemn depths beneath, so the prose of daily existence mixes itself up with the solemn poetry of life, here as elsewhere.

You must have a breakfast, and then you cannot rush out and up Mont Blanc ad libitum; you must go up in the regular appointed way, with mule and guides. This matter of guides is perfectly systematized here; for, the mountains being the great overpowering fact of life, it follows that all that enterprise and talent which in other places develop themselves in various forms, here take the single channel of climbing mountains. In America, if a man is a genius he strikes out a new way of cleaning cotton; but in Chamouni, if he is a genius he finds a new way of going up Mont Blanc.

As a sailor knows every timber, rope, and spar of his ship, and seems to identify his existence with her, so these guides their mountains. The mountains are their calendar, their book, their newspaper, their cabinet, herbarium, barometer, their education, and their livelihood.

In fine, behold us about eight o'clock, C., S., W., little G., and self, in all the bustle of fitting out in the front of our hotel. Two guides, Balmat and Alexandre, lead two mules, long-eared, slow-footed,

considerate brutes, who have borne a thousand ladies over a thousand pokerish places, and are ready to bear a thousand more. Equipped with low-backed saddles, they stand, their noses down, their eyes contemplatively closed, their whole appearance impressing one with an air of practical talent and reliableness. Your mule is evidently safe and stupid as any conservative of any country; you may be sure that no erratic fires, no new influx of ideas will ever lead him to desert the good old paths, and tumble you down precipices. The harness they wear is so exceedingly ancient, and has such a dilapidated appearance, as if held together only by the merest accident, that I could not but express a little alarm on mounting.

"Those girths--won't they break?"

"O, no, no, mademoiselle!" said the guides. In fact, they seem so delighted with their arrangements, that I swallow my doubts in silence. A third mule being added for the joint use of the gentlemen, and all being equipped with iron-pointed poles, off we start in high spirits.

A glorious day; air clear as crystal, sky with as fixed a blue as if it could not think a cloud; guides congratulate us, "Qu'il fait très beau!" We pass the lanes of the village, our heads almost on a level with the flat stone-laden roofs; our mules, with their long rolling pace, like the waves of the sea, give to their riders a facetious wag of the body that is quite striking. Now the village is

passed, and see, a road banded with green ribands of turf. S.'s mule and guide pass on, and head the party. G. rides another mule. C. and W. leap along trying their alpenstocks; stopping once in a while to admire the glaciers, as their brilliant forms appear through the pines.

Here a discussion commences as to where we are going. We had agreed among ourselves that we would visit the Mer de Glâce. We fully meant to go there, and had so told the guide on starting; but it appears he had other views for us. There is a regular way of seeing things, orthodox and appointed; and to get sight of any thing in the wrong way would be as bad as to get well without a scientific physician, or any other irregular piece of proceeding.

It appeared from the representations of the guide that to visit Mer de Glâce before we had seen La Flégère, would no more answer than for Jacob to marry Rachel before he had married Leah. Determined not to yield, as we were, we somehow found ourselves vanquished by our guide's arguments, and soberly going off his way instead of ours, doing exactly what we had resolved not to do. However, the point being yielded we proceeded merrily.

As we had some way, however, to trot along the valley before we came to the ascending place, I improved the opportunity to cultivate a little the acquaintance of my guide. He was a tall, spare man, with black eyes, black hair, and features expressive of shrewdness, energy,

and determination. Either from paralysis, or some other cause, he was subject to a spasmodic twitching of the features, producing very much the effect that heat lightning does in the summer sky--it seemed to flash over his face and be gone in a wink; at first this looked to me very odd, but so much do our ideas depend on association, that after I had known him for some time, I really thought that I liked him better with, than I should without it. It seemed to give originality to the expression of his face; he was such a good, fatherly man, and took such excellent care of me and the mule, and showed so much intelligence and dignity in his conversation, that I could do no less than like him, heat lightning and all.

This valley of Chamouni, through which we are winding now, is every where as flat as a parlor floor. These valleys in the Alps seem to have this peculiarity--they are not hollows, bending downward in the middle, and imperceptibly sloping upward into the mountains, but they lie perfectly flat. The mountains rise up around them like walls almost perpendicularly.

"Voilà!" says my guide, pointing to the left, to a great, bare ravine, "down there came an avalanche, and knocked down those houses and killed several people."

"Ah!" said I; "but don't avalanches generally come in the same places every year?"

"Generally, they do."

"Why do people build houses in the way of them?" said I.

"Ah! this was an unusual avalanche, this one here."

"Do the avalanches ever bring rocks with them?"

"No, not often; nothing but snow."

"There!" says my guide, pointing to an object about as big as a good-sized fly, on the side of a distant mountain, "there's the auberge, on La Flégère, where we are going."

"Up there?" say I, looking up apprehensively, and querying in my mind how my estimable friend the mule is ever to get up there with me on his back.

"O yes," says my guide, cheerily, "and the road is up through that ravine."

The ravine is a charming specimen of a road to be sure, but no matter--on we go.

"There," says a guide, "those black rocks in the middle of that glacier on Mont Blanc are the Grands Mulets, where travellers sleep

going up Mont Blanc."

We wind now among the pine tree still we come almost under the Mer de Glâce. A most fairy-like cascade falls down from under its pillars of ice over the dark rocks,--a cloud of feathery foam,--and then streams into the valley below.

"Voilà, L'Arveiron!" says the guide.

"O, is that the Arveiron?" say I; "happy to make the acquaintance."

But now we cross the Arve into a grove of pines, and direct our way to the ascent. We begin to thread a zigzag path on the sides of the mountain.

As mules are most determined followers of precedent, every one keeps his nose close by the heels of his predecessor. The delicate point, therefore, of the whole operation is keeping the first mule straight. The first mule in our party, who rejoiced in the name of Rousse, was selected to head the caravan, perhaps because he had more native originality than most mules, and was therefore better fitted to lead than to follow. A troublesome beast was he, from a habit of abstract meditation which was always liable to come on him in most inconvenient localities. Every now and then, simply in accordance with his own sovereign will and pleasure, and without consulting those behind him, he would stop short and descend into himself in gloomy revery, not

that he seemed to have any thing in particular on his mind,--at least nothing of the sort escaped his lips,--but the idea would seem to strike him all of a sudden that he was an ill-used beast, and that he'd be hanged if he went another step. Now, as his stopping stopped all the rest, wheresoever they might happen to be, it often occurred that we were detained in most critical localities, just on the very verge of some tremendous precipice, or up a rocky stairway. In vain did the foremost driver admonish him by thumping his nose with a sharp stick, and tugging and pulling upon the bridle. Rousse was gifted with one of those long, India rubber necks that can stretch out indefinitely, so that the utmost pulling and jerking only took his head along a little farther, but left his heels planted exactly here they were before, somewhat after this fashion. His eyes, meanwhile, devoutly closed, with an air of meekness overspreading his visage, he might have stood as an emblem of conscientious obstinacy.

The fact is, that in ascending these mountains there is just enough danger to make one's nerves a little unsteady; not by any means as much as on board a rail car at home; still it comes to you in a more demonstrable form. Here you are, for instance, on a precipice two thousand feet deep; pine trees, which, when you passed them at the foot you saw were a hundred feet high, have dwindled to the size of pins. No barrier of any kind protects the dizzy edge, and your mule is particularly conscientious to stand on the very verge, no matter how wide the path may be. Now, under such circumstances, though your guide assures you that an accident or a person killed is a thing unknown,

you cannot help seeing that if the saddle should turn, or the girths break, or a bit of the crumbling edge cave away--all which things appear quite possible--all would be over with you. Yet I suppose we are no more really dependent upon God's providence in such circumstances, than in many cases where we think ourselves most secure. Still the thrill of this sensation is not without its pleasure, especially with such an image of almighty power and glory constantly before one's eyes as Mont Blanc. Our own littleness and helplessness, in view of these vast objects which surround us, give a strong and pathetic force to the words, "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath thee are the everlasting arms."

I like best these snow-pure glaciers seen through these black pines; there is something mysterious about them when you thus catch glimpses, and see not the earthly base on which they rest. I recollect the same fact in seeing the Cataract of Niagara through trees, where merely the dizzying fall of water was visible, with its foam, and spray, and rainbows; it produced an idea of something supernatural.

I forgot to say that at the foot of the mountain a party of girls started to ascend with us, carrying along bottles of milk and small saucers full of mountain strawberries. About half way up the ascent we halted by a spring of water which gushed from the side of the mountain, and there we found the advantage of these arrangements. The milk is very nice, almost as rich as cream. I think they told me it was goat's milk. The strawberries are very small indeed, like our

field strawberries, but not as good. One devours them with great relish, simply because the keen air of the mountain disposes one to eat something, and there is nothing better to be had. They were hearty, rosy-looking girls, cheerful and obliging, wore the flat, Swiss hat, and carried their knitting work along with them, and knit whenever they could.

When you asked them the price of their wares they always said, "Au plaisir" i. e., whatever you please; but when we came to offer them money, we found "au plaisir" meant so much at any rate, and as much more as they could get.

There were some children who straggled up with the party, who offered us flowers and crystals "au plaisir" to about the same intent and purpose. This cortége of people, wanting to sell you something, accompanies you every where in the Alps. The guides generally look upon it with complacency, and in a quiet way favor it. I suppose that the fact was, these were neighbors and acquaintances, and the mutual understanding was, that they should help each other.

It was about twelve o'clock, when we gained a bare board shanty as near the top of La Flégère as it is possible to go on mules.

It is rather a discouraging reflection that one should travel three or four hours to get to such a desolate place as these mountain tops generally are; nothing but grass, rocks, and snow; a shanty, with a

show case full of minerals, articles of carved wood, and engravings of the place for sale. In these show cases the Alps are brought to market as thoroughly as human ingenuity can do the thing. The chamois figures largely; there are pouches made of chamois skin, walking sticks and alpenstocks tipped with chamois horn; sometimes an entire skin, horns and all, hanging disconsolately downward. Then all manner of crystals, such as are found in the rocks, are served up--agate pins, rings, seals, bracelets, cups, and snuffboxes--all which are duly urged on your attention; so, instead of falling into a rapture at the sight of Mont Blanc, the regular routine for a Yankee is to begin a bargain for a walking stick or a snuffbox.

There is another curious fact, and that is, that every prospect loses by being made definite. As long as we only see a thing by glimpses, and imagine that there is a deal more that we do not see, the mind is kept in a constant excitement and play; but come to a point where you can fairly and squarely take in the whole, and there your mind falls listless. It is the greatest proof to me of the infinite nature of our minds, that we almost instantly undervalue what we have thoroughly attained. This sensation afflicted me, for I had been reining in my enthusiasm for two days, as rather premature, and keeping myself in reserve for this ultimate display. But now I stood there, no longer seeing by glimpses, no longer catching rapturous intimations as I turned angles of rock, or glanced through windows of pine--here it was, all spread out before me like a map, not a cloud, not a shadow to soften the outline--there was Mont Blanc, a great alabaster pyramid,

with a glacier running down each side of it; there was the Arve, and there was the Arveiron, names most magical in song, but now literal geographic realities.

But in full possession of the whole my mind gave out like a rocket that will not go off at the critical moment. I remember, once after finishing a very circumstantial treatise on the nature of heaven, being oppressed with a similar sensation of satiety,--that which hath not entered the heart of man to conceive must not be mapped out,--hence the wisdom of the dim, indefinite imagery of the Scriptures; they give you no hard outline, no definite limit; occasionally they part as do the clouds around these mountains, giving you flashes and gleams of something supernatural and splendid, but never fully unveiling.

But La Flegerc is doubtless the best point for getting a statistically accurate idea of how the Alps lie, of any easily accessible to ladies. This print you may regard more as a chart than as a picture.

Our guide pointed out every feature with praiseworthy accuracy. Midmost is Mont Blanc; on the right the Glacier de Boisson. Two or three little black peaks' in it are the sleeping-place for travellers ascending--the zigzag line shows their path. On the left of the mountain lies Mer de Glâce, with the Arveiron falling from it. The Arve crosses the valley below us; the fall is not indicated in this view. The undulations, which, on near view, are fifty feet high, seem

mere ripples. Its purity is much soiled by the dust and debris which are constantly blown upon it, making it look in some places more like mud than ice. Its soiled masses contrast with the dazzling whiteness of the upper regions, just as human virtue exposed to the wind and dust of earth, with the spotless purity of Jesus.

1. Mont Blanc. 2. Deme de Goute. 3. Aiguille de Goute. 4. Grand Plateau. 5. Les Grands Mulets. 6. Glacier de Tacconnaz. 7. Glacier de Boisson. 8. Mer de Glâce. 9. Montauvert.]

These mulets, which at this distance appear like black points, are needle cliffs rising in a desert of snow, thus--

Coming down I mentally compared Mont Blanc and Niagara, as one should compare two grand pictures in different styles of the same master. Both are of that class of things which mark eras in a mind's history, and open a new door which no man can shut. Of the two, I think Niagara is the most impressive, perhaps because those aerial elements of foam and spray give that vague and dreamy indefiniteness of outline which seems essential in the sublime. For this reason, while Niagara is equally impressive in the distance, it does not lose on the nearest approach--it is always mysterious, and, therefore, stimulating. Those varying spray wreaths, rising like Ossian's ghosts from its abyss; those shimmering rainbows, through whose veil you look; those dizzying falls of water that seem like clouds poured from the hollow of God's hand; and that mystic undertone of sound that seems to pervade the

whole being as the voice of the Almighty,--all these bewilder and enchant the discriminative and prosaic part of us, and bring us into that cloudy region of ecstasy where the soul comes nearest to Him whom no eye hath seen, or can see. I have sometimes asked myself if, in the countless ages of the future, the heirs of God shall ever be endowed by him with a creative power, by which they shall bring into being things like these? In this infancy of his existence, man creates pictures, statues, cathedrals; but when he is made "ruler over many things," will his Father intrust to him the building and adorning of worlds? the ruling of the glorious, dazzling forces of nature?

At the foot of the mountain we found again our company of strawberry girls, with knitting work and goat's milk, lying in wait for us. They knew we should be thirsty and hungry, and wisely turned the circumstance to account. Some of our party would not buy of them, because they said they were sharpers, trying to get all they could out of people; but if every body who tries to do this is to be called a sharper, what is to become of respectable society, I wonder?

On the strength of this reflection, I bought some more goat's milk and strawberries, and verily found them excellent; for, as Shakspeare says, "How many things by season seasoned are."

We returned to our hotel, and after dining and taking a long nap, I began to feel fresh once more, for the air here acts like an elixir, so that one is able to do twice as much as any where else. S. was too

much overcome to go with us, but the rest of us started with our guides once more at five o'clock. This time we were to visit the Cascade des Pèlérins, which comes next on the orthodox list of places to be seen.

It was a lovely afternoon; the sun had got over the Mont Blanc side of the world, and threw the broad, cool shadow of the mountains quite across the valley. What a curious kind of thing shadow is,--that invisible veil, falling so evenly and so lightly over all things, bringing with it such thoughts of calmness, of coolness, and of rest. I wonder the old Greeks did not build temples to Shadow, and call her the sister of Thought and Peace. The Hebrew writers speak of the "overshadowing of the Almighty;" they call his protection "the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." Even as the shadow of Mont Blanc falls like a Sabbath across this valley, so falls the sense of his presence across our weary life-road!

As we rode along under the sides of the mountain every thing seemed so beautiful, so thoughtful, and so calm! All the goats and cows were in motion along the mountain paths, each one tinkling his little bell and filling the rocks with gentle melodies. You can trace the lines of these cattle paths, running like threads all along the sides of the mountains. We went in the same road that we had gone in the morning. How different it seemed, in the soberness of this afternoon light, from its aspect under the clear, crisp, sharp light of morning!

We pass again through the pine woods in the valley, and cross the Arve; then up the mountain side to where a tiny cascade throws up its feathery spray in a brilliant jet d'eau. Every body knows, even in our sober New England, that mountain brooks are a frisky, indiscreet set, rattling, chattering, and capering in defiance of all law and order, tumbling over precipices, and picking themselves up at the bottom, no whit wiser or more disposed to be tranquil than they were at the top; in fact, seeming to grow more mad and frolicsome with every leap. Well, that is just the way brooks do here in the Alps, and the people, taking advantage of it, have built a little shanty, where they show up the capers of this child of the mountain, as if he tumbled for their special profit. Here, of course, in the shanty are the agates, and the carved work, and so forth, and so on, and you must buy something for a souvenir.

I sat down on the rocks to take, not a sketch,--for who can sketch a mountain torrent?--but to note down on paper a kind of diagram, from which afterwards I might reconstruct an image of this feathery, frisky son of Kuhleborn.

And while I was doing this, little G. seemed to be possessed by the spirit of the brook to caper down into the ravine, with a series of leaps far safer for a waterfall than a boy. I was thankful when I saw him safely at the bottom.

After sketching a little while, I rambled off to a point where I

looked over towards Mont Blanc, and got a most beautiful view of the Glacier de Boisson. Imagine the sky flushed with a rosy light, a background of purple mountains, with darts of sunlight streaming among them, touching point and cliff with gold. Against this background rises the outline of the glacier like a mountain of the clearest white crystals, tinged with blue; and against their snowy whiteness in the foreground tall forms of pines. I rejoiced in the picture with exceeding joy as long as the guide would let me; but in all these places you have to cut short your raptures at the proper season, or else what becomes of your supper?

I went back to the cottage. A rosy-cheeked girl had held our mules, and set a chair for us to get off, and now brings them up with "Au plaisir, messieurs" to the bearers of our purse. Half a dozen children had been waiting with the rose des Alps, which they wanted to sell us "au plaisir" but which we did not buy.

These continual demands on the purse look very alarming, only the coin you pay in is of such infinitesimal value that it takes about a pocket full to make a cent. Such a currency is always a sign of poverty.

We had a charming ride down the mountain side, in the glow of the twilight. We passed through a whole flock of goats which the children were driving home. One dear little sturdy Savoyard looked so like a certain little Charley at home that I felt quite a going forth of soul to him. As we rode on, I thought I would willingly live and die in

such a place; but I shall see a hundred such before we leave the Alps.

JOURNAL--(CONTINUED.)

Thursday, July 7. Weather still celestial, as yesterday. But lo, these frail tabernacles betray their earthliness. H. remarked at breakfast that all the "tired" of yesterday was piled up into to-day. And S. actually pleaded inability, and determined to remain at the hotel.

However, the Mer de Glâce must be seen; so, at seven William, Georgy, H., and I, set off. When about half way or more up the mountain we crossed the track of the avalanches, a strip or trail, which looks from beneath like a mower's swath through a field of tall grass. It is a clean path, about fifty rods wide, without trees, with few rocks, smooth and steep, and with a bottom of ice covered with gravel.

"Hurrah, William," said I, "let's have an avalanche!"

"Agreed," said he; "there's a big rock."

"Monsieur le Guide, Monsieur le Guide!" I shouted, "stop a moment. H., stop; we want you to see our avalanche."

"No," cried H., "I will not. Here you ask me to stop, right on the edge of this precipice, to see you roll down a stone!"

So, on she ambled. Meanwhile William and I were already on foot, and our mules were led on by the guide's daughter, a pretty little lass of ten or twelve, who accompanied us in the capacity of mule driver.

We found several stones of inferior size, and sent them plunging down. At last, however, we found one that weighed some two tons, which happened to lie so that, by loosening the earth before and under it with our alpenstocks, we were able to dislodge it. Slowly, reluctantly, as if conscious of the awful race it was about to take, the huge mass trembled, slid, poised, and, with a crunch and a groan, went over. At the first plunge it acquired a heavy revolving motion, and was soon whirling and dashing down, bounding into the air with prodigious leaps, and cutting a white and flashing path into the icy way. Then first I began to realize the awful height at which we stood above the plain. Tracts, which looked as though we could almost step across them, were reached by this terrible stone, moving with frightful velocity; and bound after bound, plunge after plunge it made, and we held our breath to see each tract lengthen out, as if seconds grew into minutes, inches into rods; and still the mass moved on, and the microscopic way lengthened out, till at last a curve hid its further progress from our view.

What other cliffs we might have toppled over the muse refuses to tell;

for our faithful guide returned to say that it was not quite safe; that there were always shepherds and flocks in the valley, and that they might be injured. So we remounted, and soon overtook H. at a fountain, sketching a pine tree of special physiognomy.

"Ah," said I, "H., how foolish you were! You don't know what a sight you have lost."

"Yes," said she, "all C. thinks mountains are made for is to roll stones down."

"And all H. thinks trees made for," said I, "is to have ugly pictures made of them."

"Ay," she replied, "you wanted me to stand on the very verge of the precipice, and see two foolish boys roll down stones, and perhaps make an avalanche of themselves! Now, you know, C., I could not spare you; first, because I have not learned French enough yet; and next, because I don't know how to make change."

"Add to that," said I, "the damages to the bergers and flocks."

"Yes," she added; "no doubt when we get back to the inn we shall have a bill sent in, 'H. B. S. to A. B., Dr., to one shepherd and six cows, --fr.'"

And so we chatted along until we reached the auberge, and,
after resting a few moments, descended into the frozen sea.

Here a scene opened upon us never to be forgotten. From the distant gorge of the everlasting Alpine ranges issued forth an ocean tide, in wild and dashing commotion, just as we have seen the waves upon the broad Atlantic, but all motionless as chaos when smitten by the mace of Death; and yet, not motionless! This denser medium, this motionless mass, is never at rest. This flood moves as it seems to move; these waves are actually uplifting out of the abyss as they seem to lift; the only difference is in the time of motion, the rate of change.

These prodigious blocks of granite, thirty or forty feet long and twenty feet thick, which float on this grim sea of ice, do float, and are drifting, drifting down to the valley below, where, in a few days, they must arrive.

We walked these valleys, ascended these hills, leaped across chasms, threw stones down the crevasses, plunged our alpenstocks into the deep baths of green water, and philosophized and poetized till we were tired. Then we returned to the auberge, and rode down the zigzag to our hotel.