LETTER XXXIV.

MY DEAR:--

The Mer de Glâce is exactly opposite to La Flégère, where we were yesterday, and is reached by the ascent of what is called Montanvert, or Green Mountain. The path is much worse than the other, and in some places makes one's nerves twinge, especially that from which C. projected his avalanche. Just think of his wanting to stop me on the edge of a little shelf over that frightful chasm, and take away the guide from the head of my mule to help him get up avalanches!

I warn you, if ever you visit the Alps, that a travelling companion who has not the slightest idea what fear is will give you many a commotion. For instance, this Mer de Glâce is traversed every where by crevasses in the ice, which go to--nobody knows where, down into the under world--great, gaping, blue-green mouths of Hades; and C. must needs jump across them, and climb down into them, to the mingled delight and apprehension of the guide, who, after conscientiously shouting out a reproof, would say to me, in a lower tone, "Ah, he's the man to climb Mont Blanc; he would do well for that!"

The fact is, nothing would suit our guides better, this clear, bright weather, than to make up a party for the top of Mont Blanc. They look longingly and lovingly up to its clear, white fields; they show us the

stages and resting-places, and seem really to think that it is a waste of this beautiful weather not to be putting it to that most sublime purpose.

Why, then, do not we go up? you say. As to us ladies, it is a thing that has been done by only two women since the world stood, and those very different in their physique from any we are likely to raise in America, unless we mend our manners very much. These two were a peasant woman of Chamouni, called Marie de Mont Blanc, and Mademoiselle Henriette d'Angeville, a lady whose acquaintance I made in Geneva. Then, as to the gentlemen, it is a serious consideration, in the first place, that the affair costs about one hundred and fifty dollars apiece, takes two days of time, uses up a week's strength, all to get an experience of some very disagreeable sensations, which could not afflict a man in any other case. It is no wonder, then, that gentlemen look up to the mountain, lay their hands on their pockets, and say, No.

Our guide, by the way, is the son, or grandson, of the very first man that ascended Mont Blanc, and of course feels a sort of hereditary property and pride in it.

C. spoke about throwing our poles down the pools of water in the ice.

There is something rather curious about these pools. Our guide saw us measuring the depth of one of them, which was full of greenish-blue

water, colored only by the refraction of the light. He took our long alpenstock, and poising it, sent it down into the water, as a man might throw a javelin. It disappeared, but in a few seconds leaped up at us out of the water, as if thrown back again by an invisible hand.

A poet would say that a water spirit hurled it back; perhaps some old under-ground gnome, just going to dinner, had his windows smashed by it, and sent it back with a becoming spirit, as a gnome should.

It was a sultry day, and the sun was exercising his power over the whole ice field. I sat down by a great ice block, about fifty feet long, to interrogate it, and see what I could make of it, by a cool, confidential proximity and examination. The ice was porous and spongy, as I have seen it on the shores of the Connecticut, when beginning to thaw out under the influence of a spring sun. I could see the little drops of water percolating in a thousand tiny streams through it, and dropping down on every side. Putting my ear to it, I could hear a fine musical trill and trickle, and that still small click and stir, as of melting ice, which showed that it was surely and gradually giving way, and flowing back again.

Drop by drop the cold iceberg was changing into a stream, to flow down the sides of the valley, no longer an image of coldness and death, but bearing fertility and beauty on its tide. And as I looked abroad over all the rifted field of ice, I could see that the same change was gradually going on throughout. In every blue ravine you can hear the

clink of dropping water, and those great defiant blocks of ice, which seem frozen with uplifted warlike hands, are all softening in that beneficent light, and destined to pass away in that benignant change. So let us hope that those institutions of pride and cruelty, which are colder than the glacier, and equally vast and hopeless in their apparent magnitude, may yet, like that, be slowly and surely passing away. Like the silent warfare of the sun on the glacier, is that overshadowing presence of Jesus, whose power, so still, yet so resistless, is now being felt through all the moving earth.

Those defiant waves of death-cold ice might as well hope to conquer the calm, silent sun, as the old, frozen institutions of human selfishness to resist the influence which he is now breathing through the human heart, to liberate the captive, to free the slave, and to turn the ice of long winters into rivers of life for the new heaven and the new earth.

All this we know is coming, but we long to see it now, and breathe forth our desires with the Hebrew prophet, "O that thou wouldst rend the heavens, that thou wouldst come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence."

I had, while upon this field of ice, that strange feeling which often comes over one, at the sight of a thing unusually beautiful and sublime, of wanting, in some way, to appropriate and make it a part of myself. I looked up the gorge, and saw this frozen river, lying

cradled, as it were, in the arms of needle-peaked giants of amethystine rock, their tops laced with flying silvery clouds. The whole air seemed to be surcharged with tints, ranging between the palest rose and the deepest violet--tints never without blue, and never without red, but varying in the degrees of the two. It is this prismatic hue diffused over every object which gives one of the most noticeable characteristics of the Alpine landscape.

This sea of ice lies on an inclined plane, and all the blocks have a general downward curve.

I told you yesterday that the lower part of the glacier, as seen from La Flégère, appeared covered with dirt. I saw to-day the reason for this. Although it was a sultry day in July, yet around the glacier a continual high wind was blowing, whirling the dust and débris of the sides upon it. Some of the great masses of ice were so completely coated with sand as to appear at a distance like granite rocks. The effect of some of these immense brown masses was very peculiar. They seemed like an army of giants, bending forward, driven, as by an invisible power, down into the valley.

It reminds one of such expressions as these in Job:--

"Have the gates of death been open to thee, or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?" One should read that sublime poem in such scenes as these. I remained on the ice as long as I could

persuade the guides and party to remain.

Then we went back to the house, where, of course, we looked at some wood work, agates, and all the et cetera.

Then we turned our steps downward. We went along the side of the glacier, and I desired to climb over as near as possible, in order to see the source of the Arveiron, which is formed by the melting of this glacier. Its cradle is a ribbed and rocky cavern of blue ice, and like a creature born full of vigor and immortality, it begins life with an impetuous leap. The cold arms of the glaciers cannot retain it; it must go to the warm, flowery, velvet meadows below.

The guide was quite anxious about me; he seemed to consider a lady as something that must necessarily break in two, or come apart, like a German doll, if not managed with extremest care; and therefore to see one bounding through bushes, leaping, and springing, and climbing over rocks at such a rate, appeared to him the height of desperation.

The good, faithful soul wanted to keep me within orthodox limits, and felt conscientiously bound to follow me wherever I went, and to offer me his hand at every turn. I considered, on the whole, that I ought not to blame him, since guides hold themselves responsible for life and limb; and any accident to those under their charge is fatal to their professional honor.

Going down, I held some conversation with him on matters and things in general, and life in Chamouni in particular. He inquired with great interest about America; which, throughout Europe, I find the working classes regard as a kind of star in the west, portending something of good to themselves. He had a son, he said, settled in America, near St. Louis.

"And don't you want to go to America?" said I, after hearing him praise the good land.

"Ah, no," he said, with a smile.

"Why not?" said I; "it is a much easier country to live in."

He gave a look at the circle of mountains around, and said, "I love Chamouni." The good soul! I was much of his opinion. If I had been born within sight of glorious Mont Blanc, with its apocalyptic clouds, and store of visions, not all the fat pork and flat prairies of Indiana and Ohio could tempt me. No wonder the Swiss die for their native valleys! I would if I were they. I asked him about education. He said his children went to a school kept by Catholic sisters, who taught reading, writing, and Latin. The dialect of Chamouni is a patois, composed of French and Latin. He said that provision was very scarce in the winter. I asked how they made their living when there were no travellers to be guided up Mont Blanc. He had a trade at which he wrought in winter months, and his wife did tailoring.

I must not forget to say that the day before there had been some confidential passages between us, which began by his expressing, interrogatively, the opinion that "mademoiselle was a young lady, he supposed." When mademoiselle had assured him, on the contrary, that she was a venerable matron, mother of a thriving family, then followed a little comparison of notes as to numbers. Madame he ascertained to have six, and he had four, if my memory serves me, as it generally does not in matters of figures. So you see it is not merely among us New Englanders that the unsophisticated spirit of curiosity exists as to one's neighbors. Indeed, I take it to be a wholesome development of human nature in general. For my part, I could not think highly of any body who could be brought long into connection with another human being and feel no interest to inquire into his history and surroundings.

As we stopped, going down the descent, to rest the mules, I looked up above my head into the crags, and saw a flock of goats browsing. One goat, in particular, I remember, had gained the top of a kind of table rock, which stood apart from the rest, and which was carpeted with lichens and green moss. There he stood, looking as unconscious and contemplative as possible, the wicked fellow, with his long beard! He knew he looked picturesque, and that is what he stood there for. But, as they say in New England, he did it "as nat'ral as a pictur!"

By the by, the girls with strawberries, milk, and knitting work were

on hand on the way down, and met us just where a cool spring gushed out at the roots of a pine tree; and of course I bought some more milk and strawberries.

How dreadfully hot it was when we got down to the bottom! for there we had the long, shadeless ride home, with the burning lenses of the glaciers concentrated upon our defenceless heads. I was past admiring any thing, and glad enough for the shelter of a roof, and a place to lie down.

After dinner, although the Glacier de Boisson had been spoken of as the appointed work for the afternoon, yet we discovered, as the psalm book says, that

"The force of nature could no farther go"

What is Glacier de Boisson, or glacier any thing else, to a person used up entirely, with no sense or capability left for any thing but a general aching? No; the Glacier de Boisson was given up, and I am sorry for it now, because it is the commencement of the road up Mont Blanc; and, though I could not go to the top thereof, I should like to have gone as far as I could. In fact, I should have been glad to sleep one night at the Grands Mulets: however, that was impossible.

To look at the apparently smooth surface of the mountain side, one would never think that the ascent could be a work of such difficulty

and danger. Yet, look at the picture of crossing a crevasse, and compare the size of the figures with the dimensions of the blocks of ice. Madame d'Angeville told me that she was drawn across a crevasse like this, by ropes tied under her arms, by the guides. The depth of some of the crevasses may be conjectured from the fact stated by Agassiz, that the thickest parts of the glaciers are over one thousand feet in depth.

JOURNAL--(CONTINUED.)

Friday, July 8.--Chamouni to Martigny, by Tête Noir. Mules en avant. We set off in a calèche. After a two hours' ride we came to "those mules." On, to the pass of Tête Noir, by paths the most awful. As my mule trod within six inches of the verge, I looked down into an abyss, so deep that tallest pines looked like twigs; yet, on the opposite side of the pass, I looked up the steep precipice to an equal height, where giant trees seemed white fluttering fringe. A dizzy sight. We swept round an angle, entered a dark tunnel blasted out through the solid rock, emerged, and saw before us, on our right, the far-famed Tête Noir, a black ledge, on whose face, so high is the opposite cliff, the sun never shines. A few steps brought us to a hotel. William and I rolled down some avalanches, by way of getting an appetite, while dinner was preparing.

After dinner we commenced descending towards Martigny, alternately riding and walking. Here, while I was on foot, my mule took it into his head to run away. I was never more surprised in my life than to see that staid, solemn, meditative, melancholy beast suddenly perk up both his long ears, thus, and hop about over the steep paths like a goat. Not more surprised should I be to see some venerable D. D. of Princeton leading off a dance in the Jardin Mabille. We chased him here, and chased him there. We headed him, and he headed us. We said, "Now I have you," and he said, "No, you don't!" until the affair began to grow comically serious. "Il se moque de vous!" said the guide. But, at that moment, I sprang and caught him by the bridle, when, presto! down went his ears, shut went the eyes, and over the entire gay brute spread a visible veil of stolidity. And down he plodded, slunging, shambling, pivotting round zigzag corners, as before, in a style which any one that ever navigated such a craft down hill knows without further telling. After that, I was sure that the old fellow kept up a "terrible thinking," in spite of his stupid looks, and knew a vast deal more than he chose to tell.

At length we opened on the Rhone valley; and at seven we reached Hotel de la Tour, at Martigny. Here H. and S. managed to get up two flights of stone stairs, and sank speechless and motionless upon their beds. I must say they have exhibited spirit to-day, or, as Mr. C. used to say, "pluck." After settling with our guides,--fine fellows, whom we hated

to lose,--I ordered supper, and sought new guides for our route to the convent. Our only difficulty in reaching there, they say, is the snow. The guides were uncertain whether mules could get through so early in the season. Only to think! To-day, riding broilingly through hay-fields--to-morrow, stuck in snow drifts!