

LETTER XXXVI.

Dear:--

During breakfast, we were discussing whether we could get through the snow to Mont St. Bernard. Some thought we could, and some thought not. So it goes here: we are gasping and sweltering one hour, and plunging through snow banks the next.

After breakfast, we entered the char-à-banc, a crab-like, sideway carriage, and were soon on our way. Our path was cut from the breast of the mountain, in a stifling gorge, where walls of rock on both sides served as double reflectors to concentrate the heat of the sun on our hapless heads. To be sure, there was a fine foaming stream at the bottom of the pass, and ever so much fine scenery, if we could have seen it; but our chars opened but one way, and that against the perpendicular rock, close enough, almost, to blister our faces; and the sun beat in so on our backs that we were obliged to have the curtain down. Thus we were as uncognizant of the scenery we passed through as if we had been nailed up in a box. Nothing but the consideration that we were travelling for pleasure could for a moment have reconciled us to such inconveniences. As it was, I occasionally called out to C., in the back carriage, to be sure and take good care of the fur coat; which always brought shouts of laughter from the whole party. The idea of a fur coat seemed so supremely ridiculous to us, there was no making us believe we ever should or could want it.

That was the most unpleasant day's ride I had in the Alps. We stopped to take dinner in the little wretched village of Liddes. You have no idea what a disagreeable, unsavory concern one of these villages is. Houses, none of which look much better than the log barns in our Western States, set close together on either side of a street paved with round stones; coarse, sunburnt women, with their necks enlarged by the goitre; and dirty children, with tangled hair, and the same disgusting disease,--these were the principal features of the scene.

This goitre prevails so extensively in this region, that you seldom see a person with the neck in a healthy condition. The worst of the matter is, that in many cases of children it induces idiocy. Cases of this kind were so frequent, that, after a while, whenever I met a child, I began to search in its face for indications of the approach of this disease.

They are called cretins. In many cases the whole head appears swelled and deformed. As usual, every one you look at puts out the hand to beg. The tavern where we stopped to dine seemed more like a great barn, or cavern, than any thing else. We go groping along perfectly dark stone passages, stumbling up a stone staircase, and gaining light only when the door of a kind of reception room opens upon us--a long, rough-looking room, without any carpet, furnished with a table, and some chairs, and a rude sofa. We were shown to a bed room, carpetless, but tolerably clean, with a very high feather bed in

each corner, under a canopy of white curtains.

After dinner we went on towards St. Pierre, a miserable hamlet, where the mules were taken out of the chars, and we prepared to mount them.

It was between three and four o'clock. Our path lay up a desolate mountain gorge. After we had ascended some way the cold became intense. The mountain torrent, by the side of which we went up, leaped and tumbled under ribs of ice, and through banks of snow.

I noticed on either side of the defile that there were high posts put up on the rocks, and a cord stretched from one to the other. The object of these, my guide told me, was to show the path, when this whole ravine is filled up with deep snow.

I could not help thinking how horrible it must be to go up here in the winter.

Our path sometimes came so near to the torrent as to suggest uncomfortable ideas.

In one place it swept round the point of a rock which projected into the foaming flood, so that it was completely under water. I stopped a little before I came to this, and told the guide I wanted to get down. He was all accommodation, and lifted me from my saddle, and then stood to see what I would do next. When I made him understand that I meant

to walk round the point, he very earnestly insisted that I should get back to the saddle again, and was so positive that I had only to obey. It was well I did so, for the mule went round safely enough, and could afford to go up to his ankles in water better than I could.

As we neared the hospice I began to feel the effects of the rarefied air very sensibly. It made me dizzy and sick, bringing on a most acute headache--a sharp, knife-like pain. S. was still more affected.

I was glad enough when the old building came in view, though the road lay up an ascent of snow almost perpendicular.

At the foot of this ascent we paused. Our guides, who looked a little puzzled, held a few moments' conversation, in which the word "fonce" was particularly prominent, a word which I took to be equivalent to our English "slump;" and indeed the place was suggestive of the idea. The snow had so far melted and softened under the influence of the July sun, that something of this kind, in going up the ascent, seemed exceedingly probable. The man stood leaning on his alpenstock, looking at the thing to be demonstrated. There were two paths, both equally steep and snowy. At last he gathered up the bridle, and started up the most direct way. The mule did not like it at all, evidently, and expressed his disgust by occasionally stopping short and snuffing, meaning probably to intimate that he considered the whole thing a humbug, and that in his opinion we should all slump

through together, and go to--nobody knows where. At last, when we were almost up the ascent, he did slump, and went up to his breast in the snow; whereat the guide pulled me out of the saddle with one hand, and pulled him out of the hole with the other. In a minute he had me into the saddle again, and after a few moments more we were up the ascent and drawing near the hospice--a great, square, strong, stone building, standing alone among rocks and snowbanks.

As we drove up nearer I saw the little porch in front of it crowded with gentlemen smoking cigars, and gazing on our approach just as any set of loafers do from the porch of a fashionable hotel. This was quite a new idea of the matter to me. We had been flattering ourselves on performing an incredible adventure; and lo, and behold, all the world were there waiting for us.

We came up to the steps, and I was so crippled with fatigue and so dizzy and sick with the thin air, that I hardly knew what I was doing. We entered a low-browed, dark, arched, stone passage, smelling dismally of antiquity and dogs, when a brisk voice accosted me in the very choicest of French, and in terms of welcome as gay and courtly as if we were entering a salon.

Keys clashed, and we went up stone staircases, our entertainer talking volubly all the way. As for me, all the French I ever knew was buried under an avalanche. C. had to make answer for me, that madame was very unwell, which brought forth another stream of condolence as we came

into a supper room, lighted by a wood fire at one end. The long table was stretched out, on which they were placing supper. Here I had light enough to perceive that our entertainer was a young man of a lively, intelligent countenance, in the Augustine monks' dress, viz., a long, black camlet frock, with a kind of white band over it, which looks much like a pair of suspenders worn on the outside. He spoke French very purely, and had all that warm cordiality and graceful vivacity of manner which seems to be peculiar to the French. He appeared to pity us very much, and was full of offers of assistance; and when he heard that I had a bad headache, insisted on having some tea made for me, the only drink on the table being wine. The supper consisted of codfish, stewed apples, bread, filberts, and raisins. Immediately after we were shown up stone staircases, and along stone passages, to our rooms, of which the most inviting feature was two high, single beds covered with white spreads. The windows of the rooms were so narrow as to seem only like loopholes. There was a looking glass, table, chair, and some glazed prints.

A good old woman came to see if we wanted any thing. I thought, as I stretched myself in the bed, with feathers under me and feathers over me, what a heaven of rest this place must have seemed to poor travellers benighted and perishing in the snow. In the morning I looked out of my loophole on the tall, grim rocks, and a small lake frozen and covered with snow. "Is this lake always frozen?" said I to the old serving woman who had come to bring us hot water for washing.

"Sometimes," says she, "about the latter part of August, it is thawed."

I suppose it thaws the last of August, and freezes the first of September.

After dressing ourselves we crept down stairs in hopes of finding the fire which we left the night before in the sitting room. No such thing. The sun was shining, and it was what was called a warm day, that is to say, a day when a little thaw trickles down the south side of snow banks; so the fire was out, and the windows up, and our gay Augustine friend, coming in, congratulated us on our charming day.

The fireplace was piled up with wood and kindlings ready to be lighted in the evening; but being made to understand that it was a very sultry day, we could not, of course, suggest such an extravagance as igniting the tempting pile--an extravagance, because every stick of wood has to be brought on the backs of mules from the valleys below, at a very great expense of time and money.

The same is true of provisions of all sorts, and fodder for cattle.

Well, after breakfast I went to the front porch to view the prospect. And what did I see there? Banks of dirty, half-melted snow, bones, and scraps of offal, patches of bare earth, for a small space, say about fifty feet round, and then the whole region shut in by barren,

inaccessible rocks, which cut off all view in every direction.

Along by the frozen lake there is a kind of causeway path made for a promenade, where one might walk to observe the beauties of the season, and our cheery entertainer offered to show it to us; so we walked out with him. Under the rocks in one place he showed us a little plat, about as large as a closet door, which, he said, laughing, was their garden.

I asked him if any thing ever really grew there. He shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Sometimes."

We pursued this walk till we came to the end of the lake, and there he showed me a stone pillar.

"There," said he, "beyond that pillar is Italy."

"Well," said I, "I believe I shall take a trip into Italy." So, as he turned back to go to the house, W. and I continued on. We went some way into Italy, down the ravine, and I can assure you I was not particularly struck with the country.

I observed no indications of that superiority in the fine arts, or of that genial climate and soil, of which I had heard so much. W. and I agreed to give ourselves airs on this subject whenever the matter of Italy was introduced, and to declare that we had been there, and had



seen none of the things of which people write in books.

"What a perfectly dismal, comfortless place!" said I; but climbing up the rocks to rest me in a sunny place, I discovered that they were all enamelled with the most brilliant flowers.

In particular I remarked beds of velvet moss, which bore a pink blossom, in form somewhat like this. Then there was a kind of low, starry gentian, of a bright metallic blue; I tried to paint it afterwards, but neither ultramarine nor any color I could find would represent its brilliancy; it was a kind of living brightness. I examined the petals to see how this effect was produced, and it seemed to be by a kind of prismatic arrangement of the small round particles of which they were composed. The shape of the flower was somewhat like this.

I spread down my pocket handkerchief, and proceeded to see how many varieties I could gather, and in a very small circle W. and I collected eighteen. Could I have thought, when I looked from my window over this bleak region, that any thing so perfectly lovely as this little purple witch, for example, was to be found there? It was quite a significant fact. There is no condition of life, probably, so dreary that a lowly and patient seeker cannot find its flowers.

I began to think that I might be contented even there. But while I was

looking I was so sickened by headache, and disagreeable feelings arising from the air, that I often had to lie down on the sunny side of the bank. W., I found, was similarly troubled; he said he really thought in the morning he was going to have a fever. We went back to the house. There were services in the chapel; I could hear the organ pealing, and the singers responding.

Seven great dogs were sunning themselves on the porch, and as I knew it was a subject particularly interesting to you, I made minute inquiries respecting them. Like many other things, they have been much overstated, I think, by travellers. They are of a tawny-yellow color, short haired, broad chested, and strong limbed. As to size, I have seen much larger Newfoundland dogs in Boston. I made one of them open his mouth, and can assure you it was black as night; a fact which would seem to imply Newfoundland blood. In fact the breed originally from Spain is supposed to be a cross between the Pyrenean and the Newfoundland. The biggest of them was called Pluto. Here is his likeness, which W. sketched.

For my part, I was a little uneasy among them, as they went walloping and frisking around me, flouncing and rolling over each other on the stone floor, and making, every now and then, the most hideous noises that it ever came into a dog's head to conceive.

As I saw them biting each other in their clumsy frolics, I began to be afraid lest they should take it into their heads to treat me like one

of the family, and so stood ready to run.

The man who showed them wished to know if I should like to see some puppies; to which, in the ardor of natural history, I assented: so he opened the door of a little stone closet, and sure enough there lay madam in state, with four little blind, snubbed-nosed pledges. As the man picked up one of these, and held it up before me in all the helplessness of infancy, looking for all the world like a roly-poly pudding with a short tail to it, I could not help querying in my mind, are you going to be a St. Bernard dog?

One of the large dogs, seeing the door open, thought now was a good time to examine the premises, and so walked briskly into the kennel, but was received by the amiable mother with such a sniff of the nose as sent him howling back into the passage, apparently a much wiser and better dog than he had been before. Their principal use is to find paths in the deep snow when the fathers go out to look for travellers, as they always do in stormy weather. They are not longlived; neither man nor animal can stand the severe temperature and the thin air for a long time. Many of the dogs die from diseases of the lungs and rheumatism, besides those killed by accidents, such as the falling of avalanches, &c. A little while ago so many died that they were fearful of losing the breed altogether, and were obliged to recruit by sending down into the valleys for some they had given away. One of the monks told us that, when they went out after the dogs in the winter storms, all they could see of them was their tails moving along through the

snow. The monks themselves can stand the climate but a short time, and then they are obliged to go down and live in the valleys below, while others take their places.

They told us that there were over a hundred people in the hospice when we were there. They were mostly poor peasants and some beggars. One poor man came up to me, and uncovered his neck, which was a most disgusting sight, swollen with goitre. I shut my eyes, and turned another way, like a bad Christian, while our Augustine friend walked up to him, spoke in a soothing tone, and called him "my son." He seemed very loving and gentle to all the poor, dirty people by whom we were surrounded.

I went into the chapel to look at the pictures. There was St. Bernard standing in the midst of a desolate, snowy waste, with a little child on one arm and a great dog beside him.

This St. Bernard, it seems, was a man of noble family, who lived nine hundred and sixty-two years after Christ. Almost up to that time a temple to Jupiter continued standing on this spot. It is said that the founding of this institution finally rooted out the idolatrous worship.

On Monday we returned to Martigny, and obtained a voiture for Villeneuve. Drove through the beautiful Rhone valley, past the celebrated fall of the Pissevache, and about five o'clock reached the

Hotel Byron, on the shore of the lake.