EASTON GAZETTE.

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From the Religious Souvenir.

THE AVALANCHE, OR THE MARONS OF ST. BERNARD.

ALTHOUGH liberal in name and aspect, the constitution of Switzerland is not so favorable to liberty as is usually supposed. Privileges of orders, of corporations, of localities, and of families, interfere with the equal rights of the majority of the citizens.' The federal diet lords it over the cantons, the large towns infringe the natural rights of the country, and the most valuable privileges of the towns are monopolized by a few families or trades. In countries subsisting under the most despotic forms of government, liberty is always found unfettered in the wild, poor and thinly peopled districts, for,

'Men *remote* from power but seldom feel
Luke's iron crown or Damien's bed of steel.'

The democratic cantons of Switzerland are generally situated in the wildest and poorest part of these Alpine regions while the aristocratic members of the confederation, richer and more populous present most of the evils without the forms of regal government. Even in many of the new cantons of the Swiss confederacy, constructed on the principle of a perfectly popular representation, the defects of the system admitted of such practical abuses in the management of elections as to throw the whole power into the hands of a small number of patrician families.—But it was not in the nature of the brave and hardy inhabitants of the country, tamely to endure inquietable assumption of privilege and power; and frequent insurrections of various fortune disturbed the tranquility of the confederation.

Among those who distinguished themselves as the champions of popular rights and equal privileges, not the least remarkable was Albert Keller, a native of Basle. Defeated, however, and proscribed by an aristocracy irresponsible because numerous, and vindictive because insecure, Keller was driven from his sylvan possessions, and, with his wife and his children, sought a temporary asylum in the wild pass of St. Bernard, at no great distance from the *Hospice.** which, under that name, has gained so much reputation for the hospitality and disinterested benevolence of its inmates. There, in a hut rebuilt out of the ruins of one destroyed many years before by an *avalanche*, Keller earned a precarious subsistence by hunting, acting as a guide and occasionally performing the dangerous duties of a winter post-rider through the pass.

When otherwise unoccupied, Keller got unfrequently sallied forth, amidst storms and snow drifts, in search of bewildered travellers, surprised in spring and autumn by those sudden condensations of moisture so remarkable in Alpine regions. A little time sufficed to give to his hardy and agile frame the useful habits of his new position; and under the assumed name of Steinmitz, he soon became conspicuous for the courage, fortitude and sagacity which belong to the character of the Swiss hunters and shepherds, and which gave to them that heroic moral elevation, signified so gloriously in the bloody battles of Morgarten, Sempach and Murten. According to the place in which he found them, Keller conveyed those whom he rescued, either to his own hovel, or to the better shelter of the *Hospice* of St. Bernard. The monks were thus very soon apprized of his enterprize and skill, and were glad to avail themselves of his assistance in their charitable task. They had planted themselves aloft, amidst storms and perpetual winter, far from the comfort and abundance of the cloisters of the valleys, for the sole purpose of administering to the spiritual and temporal wants of those whose pleasure or whose business led them to encounter the dangers and fatigue of the pass of the great St. Bernard. A community of purpose and action, in so wild and unfrequented a region, naturally attached the good fathers to their new associate. Observent of his humanity and disinterestedness, and struck with his noble deportment and elegant manners, they could not fail to wonder at the cause of his sojourn on the wild acclivity of *Mont-Mort*; but they respected him too much to pry into his secrets, and loved him too well to doubt his virtue.

It was always, therefore, with that peculiar interest which is felt for misfortune and honor, especially when shrouded in mystery, that the good brothers of St. Augustine received the frequent visits of Keller. Sometimes, when the conversation diverged insensibly from literature and past-adventures, to the political condition of Switzerland, the eye of their mysterious guest would kindle, and his whole manner become so animated, as to lead them to a shrewd conjecture as to the causes of his solitude. But he betrayed himself but for a moment, and by an abrupt transition to less inciting topics, intimated his unwillingness to discuss subjects which evidently produced a too painful interest.

"What a singular fate must have been that of Steinmitz:" said one of the monks to his brethren, as at the close of a winter's day, they were engaged in scrutinizing the aspect of the confused clouds, which began to scatter in wild eddies from around the snow-peaks of *Le Dros sa* and *Velan*; "there seem about him strange inconsistencies. Sometimes he appears moody and perfectly regardless of life; at other times, full of rich discourse he seeks the shelter of our *Hospitium*, when he might easily have continued his journey to his own abode." "That arises, probably," said another, "from the conflicts in his bosom between disgust of life and the love he bears to his wife and children. As these are prest upon his attention variously by varying circumstances, his character seems to change; but it is always so with men of strong passions, under the constraint of powful events & contrasted incidents. But there is the man himself, in company with our faithful dog *Barre*. Something extraordinary has brought them togther-er? *Benedicite*, Steinmitz! Our dog! how came you together?" "Good evening, fathers! That noble fellow found me in the pass, entirely exhausted by the loose snow which has drifted into the path by which I was returning home, and but for his warm cloak and replenished wine flask, I should have seen the roof of the *Hospice* for the last time.—Barre seemed himself fatigued when we met, for as *I* afterwards discovered, he had scratched a hole into a snow bank to the depth of nearly twenty feet, where he found the mortal remains of the poor mineralogist who dined with you last week and whom, with incredible exertion, he had entirely uncovered.

When he heard my horn, he left the dead man, and came down the pass to my assistance; and by dint of dragging he has succeeded in making me once more a guest of St. Bernard." "*I* ought not," continued he, "to forget the kindness of that other *Maron** who was brought to our aid by the bells around Barre's neck. He is following us dragging along the mineral bag of the traveller, which he found on the way, and could not be induced to abandon, except for a few minutes at a time, when the larger snow banks rendered our passage very difficult, and called for his assistance." "You are most welcome, son," said the superior! "We expected your arrival, and our anxiety for your safety made us scan more curiously the signs of the weather. The blasts by which the snow was thrown on the pass escaped our observation, as they did not reach the summit; but it seems that our dogs knew it, for they nearly all set off in the afternoon, and most of them are yet out. It was these fantastic movements of the clouds which arrested our attention, and the storm they promise already hides the peaks of *Mont-Mort*† and *Barrasan* in the driving snow. If auguries fail not, this will be a most memorable night for St. Bernard. But come, let us minister to our fatigued friend's wants and pray that the signs of the heavens prognosticate no increase to the population of our *morgue*. It has had a fearful accession of numbers lately, and there is scarcely room among its inmates for another corpse."

Supper was soon ready, but the guest and the dogs partook of it with very different zest. Keller was moody and restless, ate little, and appeared to be attentive to every sound that came from without; whilst Barre and his fellow, after a voracious meal, ensconced themselves beneath the table near the blazing hearth, and were soon buried in sleep. 'You seem fatigued, Steinmitz,' said the superior,' even to the loss of appetite and spirits. Suffer brother Antoine to conduct you to bed?' Keller fixed on the benevolent father a look of sad decision. 'My bed,' said he, must be this night on the cold side of *Mont-Mort*.' 'To-night!' cried the good father; 'to-night, Steinmitz! It is impossible! Do you not hear how the wind howls over these hills?—The storm from the frozen peaks is dashing its wild snow-drifts over the passes. I would not suffer a dog to leave St. Bernard to-night. Even our brave Barre would shrink from such a tempest.' 'I must go, however,' replied Keller earnestly, and that speedily, too. My helpless and solitary family is in peril, and the very danger of the tempest is an incentive to reach those who know so little how to provide against it, and are perhaps even now in want of my assistance. These unexampled snow-drifts may, before morning, hide my poor little cottage from the sight, and what would Steinmitz be then, when the last of mortal ties to earth had been so fearfully sundered?' As he said this, he moved towards the door, and opening it looked out upon the waste. 'It is indeed a wild night, but—' a low distant crushing sound came on the blast, and interrupted his discourse. He stood rigid with attention until it passed away. 'That is what I most feared,' said he; that awful sound is the deathnote of the *avalanche*.‡ The mighty mass of snow is becoming too heavy for the rocks to detain it longer. I must fly to my family for to morrow may be to late. If alive the morning will bring us back to your hospitable abode, for longer my wife and children must not remain on that dreadful slope. The snow is beginning to break from its fastnesses. The signs are not to be mistaken. The chamois and the steinbochs have forsaken their hiding places, and the lammergerer‖ are congregating from every quarter of the heavens. They have an unerring instinct in these things. They have heard, before us the low sounds which the over-burdened mountain utters, as its soil slips, and its projecting rocks bend before the resistless weight of the snow. The vast accessions of the week have hastened the coming woe, and I have already periled my life to get thus far, and cannot now hesitate to proceed. The Great Being, who holds the hills in a balance, can, if it seems good to him, guide me now, as easily as on the brightest day, and *I am in the path of duty*.'

If *I* perish, I have only one favor to ask:—This packet must not be opened until my death is ascertained; it will instruct you whither to send my poor family. Do that I ask no more." Girding around him tightly his mountain dress, Keller was about to issue from the gate when the dog which had first found him in the evening seized him by the skirts. "Let go, Barre," said the superior. The dog obeyed, but getting in front blocked up the wicket, and with a low growl debarred his exit. "The very dog opposes your departure, Steinmitz.—Take his advice. He knows you must perish if you venture abroad to night. It is not long since he offered resistance to the departure of the poor fellow whom you found dead in the pass to-day." "There!" cried Keller, 'let me go, in the name of God!—that awful deep sound comes again on the wind, and warns me to fly.' His tone and look put an end to resistance; and even the dog retreating into the court yard, stood still with attention to the deep voice of the monhtain. As Keller passed him he wagged his tail, and looking up into the face of the superior, invited his signal of permission to accompany the traveller. It was given, and pressing close to the side of Keller, he waited for his customary flask and cloak.¶ They were fixed. 'You forget your staff, Steinmitz' said the monk, putting into his hands a long slender pole, armed at one end with a sharpened iron ferrule. 'You have need of all help to night; God bless you in your perilous path of duty. Barre, keep close to him.' The dog signified his acquiescence by taking, at a very short distance, the lead; and in this manner the travellers left the hospitable court yard of St. Bernard.

'I can scarcely believe Steinmetz right in his fears, said the superior. The avalanche descends only in the spring, when the snow is heavy with rain, and when its hold on the rugged soil is loosened by the water which trickles down the hills'. 'That is usually true,' rejoined an old monk, whose life had been spent among the passes, "but the immense, mass of snow which now lies above his residence and the boding signals of the hill, and the flight of the chamois and boquetin, and the gathering of the lammergeier, are things too significant of danger to have escaped the anxious and instructed notice of our neighbour. God grant we may see him and our poor Barre again; but I feel as if we had taken our last look of them."

While the benevolent fathers sat over the decaying embers, conversing of the traveller, and endeavouring to console themselves by the recollection of the many wonderful escapes of those whom winter caught in those wild regions, Keller, and his four-footed companion, following the irregular course of the pass, hastened towards that home in which lay all the earthly treasure of the exiled patriot—They were to him kindred, friends, riches honor, country. He had nothing on earth but what reposed in his air-hung cottage; and the attraction which drew him onward was the whole power and concentration of human motives and affections. The deep meditation of his heart rendered him little observant either of the direction of the road, or of its difficulties. The guide whom he followed had often visited his abode, and to his unerring instinct he implicity trusted.—Sometimes the bare and precipitous ice called for the use of his pointed pole, and his guide was then dependent on him for a share of its support. Sometimes up to the waist in the fleecy snow bank, Keller availed himself of the prodigious strength and agility of the dog for an escape otherwise impracticable. In the singularly varied windings of their obscure path, the wind in a favorable direction, would sometimes have forced the tall, broad figure of the mountaineer too hastily along, but for his pole, and the restraint imposed on the tail of his leathern coat by the teeth of Barre, while often blowing fiercely in opposition, nothing but the friendly drag of his fourfooted guide could have enabled Keller to advance. By slow and most laborious progress, they at length reached the end of the narrow pass, and issued out upon the broad platform of the glacier, which extending for a considerable distance, terminated at the base of the steep acclivity, on which hung the cottage of Keller.

At this place the fathers of St. Barnard had erected a *chalet*, or hut, in which they left, in perilous seasons, blankets and refreshments.

Keller saw, by the light which hung from the ceiling, that it was furnished for the storm; but though hungry and fatigued, he passed it rapidly, and reached the angle of the morgue of the chalet, beyond which he expected to have an unobstructed view of *Mont-Mort*. There was a light also in the *morgue*, and the quick eye of Keller observed, through the grated windows, that the glass case or cover of the black marble slab in its centre was not unoccupied. The bare possibility of having a near interest in these remains carried him to the table.—It contained the wife and child of the courier of St. Pierre, who had perished, as he had heard, by leaving home to meet the husband and father on his return from a distant service." The bonds of human sympathy are never drawn so closely as when the links in the chain of misfortune are of the metal of our own destiny. Time could not mark the briefness of the moment in which Keller's mind ran through the terrible parallel, and rushing out from the morgue he sought the open plain.

At this point he paused, to look for that light which in this wild country never failed to illuminate his window, and which had often led the bewildered traveller or benighted hunter to his shed. For the first time it was absent, and the low pitious moan of the dog assured him that *his* keener eye failed to discover it. "Oh, Barre, they are gone!" said the stunned father and husband "Buried in the leeward snow-drift, they are debarred escape from the avalanche.—To their rescue, or to death!" and with impetuous haste and unearthly energy, the tired hunter rushed across the bare surface of the icy plain. Barre kept before him for some time, but at length suddenly paused, and turning round, attempted to obstruct his progress.—Dashed impatiently aside, he instantly seized his skirt, and in the effort to detain him, threw him to the ground. The fall recalled Keller to his senses, and he soon perceived by his significant movement that his companion had discovered a new rift in the ice, which filled by the storm with light drifted snow, would, in a few onward steps, have absorbed him and his hopes and fears forever. Turning aside to a narrow part of the chasm, Barre, by a few extraordinary and struggling bounds, succeeded in reaching the solid bank beyond. With cautious and probing steps Steinmitz felt its verge, & extending his long pole deeply into its centre, sprang with the agility of the ibex to the other side. But it was a long leap, and the snow clinging to the pole, would have drawn him back from his faithless footing into its cold abyss. Barre expected this, and stood ready to seize him as he alighted, and with the temporary loss of his pole, Keller was again on his feet. To bring the end of the pole to his hand was but a short struggle for the dog, and again they resumed their journey.

On the afternoon of the day whose dreadful night we are now describing' George Steinmitz, the eldest son of the hunter, came down from the hill. He had nearly reached its summit by the bed of a stream, which seemed to have its 'source in the clouds' 'I wish' said he to his mother as he entered the cottage, "that our father were here." Old Seiper, our neighbour, is up there, looking at the snow bank and says that it will come down before to-morrow. I was just going to shoot at a fierce looking *lammergier*, when my gun was suddenly and roughly wrested from me by the strong old fellow. Although he appeared angry, he spoke to me almost in a whisper and told me that one shot would have brought down the snow bank. I was, as you may suppose, scarce-pleased at his roughness, and was beginning to talk loud about it, when he very coolly clapt his hand on my mouth, and told me not to shake the air so much. "Don't you see," said he, "that that old vulture wants you to shoot.—He keeps just out of reach of your gun. I cant help thinking he knows the effect of sound, for just before you came up, he was screaming in a way which old as *I* am, I never heard before. That fellow is old enough to have remembered the former avalanche, and may live to scream for many more, rather than you should shoot at him now." "Mother," continued George, "it is awful to see the snow at the top beginning to sag down on the snow beneath, and force itself up into huge wreaths. Rough as is the hill below, it cannot long resist the pressure.—Old Seiper begs you will not lose a moment in setting off to the monastery.—He has gone to remove *his* family.

In compliance with the advice of the experienced hunter, and in accordance with the conditional injunctions of Keller, so often repeated before his departure the little family, with heavy hearts and tearful eyes, took leave of the hut, which, though rude and inconvenient, had received them when all the world beside had rejected them. When Keller was rich, the cares of the world, the business of life, absorbed his attention, and too often shared in his affection; but there was nothing here to devide the heart which misfortune had only softened; and in the long winter nights, undisturbed by visitors, and unoccupied by business, he gave himself up to his family. Sage counsel, affectionate pleasantry, agreeable narrative, gave wings to time, and the wife, a true woman, forgot on the throne of her domestic felicity, even the cherished vanities and the showy pagentry of her former life. Dear to the sex as such things are, they vanish into darkness before the light of the heart, as do the stars before the brightness of the morning.

To collect the materials, and assemble the family for the journey, consumed so much time, that notwithstanding the louder warnings from the mountain, it was late in the day before they departed. The family consisted of George and a sister just on the verge of womanhood, an infant and the little fellow who is seen in the accompanying engraving. An Alpine mastiff, the brother of Barre, a gift from the benevolent monks of the *Hospice* completed the group. They had scarcely reached the broad tableland or ice-field, when the sudden and turbulent snow storm, already described, overtook them. The driving snow from the adjacent hills, mingled with that from the clouds, darkened the air, and entangled their footsteps; until at length bewildered, tired and despairing, they huddled together on the wild waste, to wait for that morning which was never to shine for them. George, his mother, and the dog placed their backs to the wind, and collected the children to the shelter of their bosoms. 'Now, my son' said the heroic mother, 'we have done all that in this dreadful situation our duty called for, and we must leave our fate to Him, in whose hands our breath is, and whose are all our ways.' It is impossible for us to proceed.

This plain is broken into rifts so full of snow as to be undistinguishable, and if we fall into them, our doom is certain. *The terrific roar of the glacier*, heard this morning, must have come from a new rent of no common size. *It* was prolonged until distance made it inaudible, and ran in a direction across our course. The storm took from us half an hour of day-light, otherwise we might have reached the CHALET before nightfall. We must now submit to the dispensation. By keeping close together, we shall retain warmth enough and if the snow-whirls do not cover us, nor the avalanche descend, we have little else to fear. The very severity of the night is a safe guard against the wolves, whose instinct of preservation will keep them in their rocky dens."

The extreme coldness of the air, added to fatigue, soon produced its usual effect, and a deep sleep fell on the desolate party. The dog seemed aware of their danger, and by varied effort, vainly endeavored to keep them awake. His solicitude arose almost to madness, when the snow began to cover the bodies, and with incredible patience and labor he kept down the drift, and scattered the snow. But as his strength failed him, and the driving flakes increased in number and size, his exertions became feeble and fruitless, and at length, abandoning himself to despair; he crept close to the little boy who had been his playfellow and feeder, and covering him with his shaggy coat,—seemed by his sympathizing whine to express at once his sorrow and its slender consolation. But the snow had no sympathies. The heap already collected by the backs of the group, became the centre of aggregation, and at length the family of Keller were concealed from view, and buried deeply in its cold white bosom.

At the moment when the event just described had been completed. Keller arrived at the spot, and was about to pass around the bank which obstructed his path, not without wondering at the cause of such an unusual collection of snow in so exposed a situation. Barre had hitherto led the way, but stopping at the mound, fell behind, and began to snuff the air, scratch the snow, whine most pitiously. "Come away Barre," cried Keller, "we have no time to look for dead men now. Something is wrong, for Carlo, my own dog, is abroad; *I hear his bells faintly in the distance!* Come away I say, or I will leave you!" Hurrying onward, regardless of the hoarse and solemn bark which informed him that Barre had discovered something, Keller's course was once more arrested by his associate, who, seizing his coat, and whining most pitiously, entreated him to go back. The patience of the man could hold out no longer, and he struck the dog with his foot so violently as to throw him to some distance. But Barre, nothing discouraged laid hold of his pole, and pulling backwards, strove to force Keller to return. "Let go, you beast," cried Keller, whose solicitude for his family seemed to absorb all other interests; & at the same moment he jerked the pole with maddened violence from the grasp of the poor dog As the iron shoulder of the ferrule encountered his teeth in its progress, the faithful fellow gave a short yelp never before heard from him; regardless of his injuries, again laid hold of the coat of the hunter, as if determined to detain him in spite of all opposition. "Well! I must either kill you or return, must *I*," said Keller, as he drew back the sharp point of his pole to dart into the dog. "No Barre, I will not kill you; I owe you my life; but it is a hard alternative to spare a moment now." As he said this Keller turned back to the snow-bank Barre watched him keenly as he thrust cautiously the pole into the cold bosom of the loose snow heap. *It* encountered something *soft and elastic*.—"Poor dog, ejaculated Keller, "you knew that the victim of the storm was not dead. I am sorry *I* struck you." In the attempt to withdraw the pole, Keller found to his surprize, great difficulty. It would not come away. Barre scratched, and whined, and barked, and pulled at the pole; and sometimes,—amidst the incessant jingle of his bells Keller's ear caught the sound of other bells, which seemed to him to issue from the bank. Believing now that one of the dogs of the Maronnier of St. Bernard was there, and unwilling to waste time in his rescued, the hunter was again about to leave the place, and and abanden his pole, when he found himself once more under arrest. With the impatient energy incident to so stimulating a position, Keller rushed back, and throwing his whole soul into the effort, grasped the buried pole, which with a sudden slip, burst from its hold, and brought out, attached to its nether end by his teeth, a huge black beast.

The unexpected yielding of the snow threw Keller on his back, and the strange quadruped on the top of him. A lick on his face, a bark from the stranger and his own dog Carlo lay down beside him with a moan which was not to be misinterpreted. In an instant the bank was again probed, and his pole told him the dreadful truth. To clear away the snow was the work of a few fearful moments, and to drag out the loved ones, one by one, served to delay for a few moments longer the burst of despair. It came at length, and who would dare to depict it? On the cold bosom of his wife lay the pledge of their love, encircled by arms stiffened in the embrace of the last agony of dying maternity.—Keller threw himself on that bosom never before cold to him. He had hastily examined the rest, and believed that the last link of the chain of affection had been broken away, and he had only now the consolation of dying beside the woman who had seen his light in prosperity, his bow of hope in adversity.

"A form of life and light,
Which seen, became a part of sight,
And rose, were'er he turned his eye,
The morning star of memory."

In the mean time the dogs, with wonted sagacity, had drawn asi le the little

*A convent for the shelter and accommodation of strangers.

*Alpine Dog. †Hill of Death.

‡Snow-slip.
§Rock-goat; ibex, boquetin or *capra alpina*.
‖Vulture of the Alps.
¶Usually fastened to the dogs for the use of travellers.

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