

THE AMERICAN BARON.



“PARDON, MEES.”

CHAPTER I.

THE AVALANCHE.

SOMEWHAT less than a hundred years ago a party of travelers might have been seen crossing over the Simplon Road, *en route* for Italy. They had been detained at Brieg by reports that the road was impassable; and, as it was the month of March, the prospect of snow and storms and avalanches was sufficient to make them hesitate. At length the road had been reopened, and they were informed that the journey might be made on sleds.

Unwilling to wait at Brieg, and equally unwilling to make a detour so as to take the railroad, the party decided to go on. They were informed that they could go on wheels as far as the line of snow, but that afterward their accommodations would not be so comfortable as they might desire. The road had been cleared for only a few feet; the snow was deep; the sleds were rude; and progress would be slow.

These statements, however, did not shake the resolution of the party; and the end of it was that they determined to go on, and cross the mountain if it were possible.

On leaving Brieg the road began to ascend with a very slight incline, winding around in an intricate sort of way, sometimes crossing deep gullies, at other times piercing the hillside in long dark tunnels; but amidst all these windings ever ascending, so that every step took them higher and higher above the little valley where Brieg lay. The party saw also that every step brought them steadily nearer to the line of snow; and at length they found the road covered with a thin white layer. Over this they rolled, and though the snow became deeper with every furlong of their progress, yet they encountered but little actual difficulty until they approached the first station where the horses were to be changed. Here they came to a deep drift. Through this a pathway had been cleared, so that there was no difficulty about going through; but the sight of this served to show them what might be expected further on, and to fill them all with grave doubts as to the practicability of a journey which was thus interrupted so early.

On reaching the station these doubts were confirmed. They were informed that the road had been cleared for sleds on the preceding day, but that on the previous night fresh snow had fallen, and in such quantities that the road would have to be cleared afresh. The worst of it was that there was every probability of new snow-storms, which would cover the road still deeper, and once more obliterate the track. This led to a fresh debate about the journey; but they were all unwilling to turn back. Only a few miles separated them from Domo d'Ossola, and they were assured that, if no fresh snow should fall, they would be able to start on the following morning. This last assurance once more confirmed their wavering resolution, and they concluded to wait at the station.

For the remainder of that day they waited at the little way-side inn, amusing themselves with looking out upon their surroundings. They were environed by a scene of universal white. Above them towered vast Alpine summits, where the wild wind blew, sweeping the snow-wreaths into the air. In front was a deep ra-