

CHAPTER XVI

A NEAR ACCIDENT

One year when Grandfather was conducting parties, the schedule called for a drive over the Simplon Pass. In the days of horse-drawn carriages, it took the forenoon to climb to the top of the pass. As the party of about twenty people in four carriages (one rode with the driver and two each on the two seats back of the driver) crossed a bridge over a little stream at the top of the pass, all noticed that the water was the color of chocolate. Obviously there was erosion, but the significance of this we did not understand.

Fifteen minutes later there was wild confusion at the inn where we had stopped. What was the matter? "Avalanche," whispered an old lady to Grandfather. "Where?" "River." Grandfather hastened back to the river and not a stone was left of the bridge we had just crossed. Furthermore, the road along the river side which we had used was gone for one hundred yards on each side of the bridge.

Should Grandfather tell his party? He consulted Dr. Naylor, who with another party of Chautauqua Tours had crossed the bridge just ahead of Grandfather's party. They decided that even if it made some uneasy about driving down, the party should see what havoc an avalanche can cause.

Grandfather has heard about people's hair standing on end from fright. This is the only time he ever saw the phenomenon - as the party stood silently and looked into the great hole where a few minutes before was the bridge and road we had used, the hair of some did literally stand up like bristles.

It seems that heavy snows had remained on the mountains longer than usual this spring, and when an exceptionally hot spell came, a large lake of water was formed on the mountain side. The erosion we had noticed was the water cutting a path through the bank. Finally the bank gave way and the whole lake plunged down, taking with it rocks and bridges to batter down the next bridge. Not a bridge over this stream escaped. The avalanche carried all before it until the rocks came to rest in the valley far below.

We could see a party on the other side who had to go back down the road they had already traveled and get into Switzerland through the Simplon Tunnel. We were over the bridge and could drive on, but if the avalanche had come fifteen minutes earlier, the bodies of all would have been so mangled and buried so deep in the landslide they probably never would have been recovered.