

CHAPTER 1

The Waldenses—Their Valleys

Submission of the Churches of Lombardy to Rome—The Old Faith maintained in the Mountains—The Waldensian Churches—Question of their Antiquity—Approach to their Mountains—Arrangement of their Valleys—Picture of blended Beauty and Grandeur.

It was the ninth century, and superstitious beliefs and idolatrous rites were overspreading the Church, when Claudius, Bishop of Turin, who was deeply imbued with the spirit of Augustine, set himself to arrest the growing corruption with all the fervour of a living faith, and the vigour of a courageous and powerful intellect. To the battle for the purity of doctrine he joined that for the independence of the Churches of Lombardy. Even in Claude's day they remained free, although many Churches more remote from Rome had already been subjugated by that all-conquering power. The Ambrosian Liturgy was still used in the cathedral of Milan, and the Augustinian doctrine continued to be preached from many of the pulpits of Lombardy and Piedmont. This independence of Rome, and this greater purity of faith and worship, these Churches mainly owed to the three Apostolic men whose names adorn their annals—Ambrose, Vigilantius, and Claude.

When Claude went to his grave, about the year 840, the battle, although not altogether dropped, was but languidly maintained. Attempts were renewed to induce the Bishops of Milan to accept the episcopal pall, the badge of spiritual vassalage, from the Pope; but it was not till the middle of the eleventh century (1059), under Nicholas II., that these attempts were successful. Petrus Damianus, Bishop of Ostia, and Anselm, Bishop of Lucca, were dispatched by the Pontiff to receive the submission of the Lombard Churches, the popular tumults amid which that submission was extorted sufficiently show that the spirit of Claude still lingered at the foot of the Alps. Nor did the clergy conceal the regret with which they surrendered their ancient liberties to a power before which the whole earth was then bowing down; for the Papal legate, Damianus, informs us that the clergy of Milan maintained in his presence that "The Ambrosian Church, according to the ancient institutions of the Fathers, was always free, without being subject to

the laws of Rome, and that the Pope of Rome had no jurisdiction over their Church as to the government or constitution of it" [Petrus Damianus, *Opuse.*, p. 5. Allix, *Churches of Piedmont.* p. 113. M'Crie, *Hist. of Reform. in Italy*, p. 2].

But if the plains were conquered, not so the mountains. A considerable body of Protesters stood out against this deed of submission. Of these some crossed the Alps, descended the Rhine, and raised the standard of opposition in the diocese of Cologne, where they were branded as Manicheans, and rewarded with the stake. Others retired into the valleys of the Piedmontese Alps, and there maintained their scriptural faith and their ancient independence. What has just been related respecting the dioceses of Milan and Turin settles the question of the apostolicity of the Churches of the Waldensian valleys. It is not necessary to show that missionaries were sent from Rome in the first age to plant Christianity in these valleys, nor is it necessary to show that these Churches have existed as distinct and separate communities from early days; enough that they formed a part, as unquestionably they did, of the great evangelical Church of the North of Italy. This is the proof at once of their apostolicity and their independence. It attests their descent from apostolic men, if doctrine be the life of Churches. When their co-religionists on the plains entered within the pale of the Roman jurisdiction, they retired within the mountains, and, spurning alike the tyrannical yoke and the corrupt tenets of the Church of the Seven Hills, they preserved in its purity and simplicity the faith their fathers had handed down to them. Rome manifestly was the schismatic, she it was that had abandoned what was once the common faith of Christendom, leaving by that step to all who remained on the old ground the indisputably valid title of the True Church.

Behind this rampart of mountains, which Providence, foreseeing the approach of evil days, would almost seem to have reared on purpose, did the remnant of the early apostolic Church of Italy kindle their lamp, and here did that lamp continue to burn all through the long night which descended on Christendom. There is a singular concurrence of evidence in favour of their high antiquity. Their traditions invariably point to an unbroken descent from the earliest times, as regards their religious belief. The *Nobla Leycon*, which dates from the year 1100 [recent German criticism refers the *Nobla Leycon* to a later date, but still one anterior to the Reformation], goes to prove that the Waldenses of Piedmont did not owe their rise to Peter Waldo of Lyons, who did not appear till the latter half of that century (1169). The

Nobla Leycon though a poem, is in reality a confession of faith, and could have been composed only after some considerable study of the system of Christianity, in contradistinction to the errors of Rome. How could a Church have arisen with such a document in her hands? Or how could these herdsmen and vine-dressers, shut up in their mountains, have detected the errors against which they bore testimony, and found their way to the truths of which they made open profession in times of darkness like these? If we grant that their religious beliefs were the heritage of former ages, handed down from an evangelical ancestry, all is plain; but if we maintain that they were the discovery of the men of those days, we assert what approaches almost to a miracle. Their greatest enemies, Claude Seyssel of Turin (1517), and Reynerius the Inquisitor (1250), have admitted their antiquity, and stigmatised them as "the most dangerous of all heretics, because the most ancient."

Rorengo, Prior of St. Roch, Turin (1640), was employed to investigate the origin and antiquity of the Waldenses, and of course had access to all the Waldensian documents in the ducal archives, and being their bitter enemy he may be presumed to have made his report not more favourable than he could help. Yet he states that "they were not a new sect in the ninth and tenth centuries, and that Claude of Turin must have detached them from the Church in the ninth century."

Within the limits of her own land did God provide a dwelling for this venerable Church. Let us bestow a glance upon the region. As one comes from the south, across the level plain of Piedmont, while yet nearly a hundred miles off, one sees the Alps rise before one, stretching like a great wall along the horizon. From the gates of the morning to those of the setting sun, the mountains run on in a line of towering magnificence. Pasturages and chestnut-forests clothe their base; eternal snows crown their summits. How varied are their forms! Some rise like castles of stupendous strength; others shoot up tall and tapering like needles; while others again run along in serrated lines, their summits torn and cleft by the storms of many thousand winters. At the hour of sunrise, what a glory kindles along the crest of that snowy rampart! At sunset the spectacle is again renewed, and a line of pyres is seen to burn in the evening sky.

Drawing nearer the hills, on a line about thirty miles west of Turin, there opens before one what seems a great mountain portal. This is the entrance to the Waldensian territory. A low hill drawn along in front serves as a

defence against all who may come with hostile intent, as but too frequently happened in times gone by, while a stupendous monolith—the Castelluzzo—shoots up to the clouds, and stands sentinel at the gate of this renowned region. As one approaches La Torre the Castelluzzo rises higher and higher, and irresistibly fixes the eye by the perfect beauty of its pillar-like form. [The new and elegant temple of the Waldenses now rises near the foot of the Castelluzzo.] But to this mountain a higher interest belongs than any that mere symmetry can give it. It is indissolubly linked with martyr-memories, and borrows a halo from the achievements of the past. How often, in days of old, was the confessor hurled sheer down its awful steep, and dashed on the rocks at its foot! And there, commingled in one ghastly heap, growing ever the bigger and ghastlier as another and yet another victim was added to it, lay the mangled bodies of pastor and peasant, of mother and child! It was the tragedies connected with this mountain mainly that called forth Milton's noble sonnet:

"Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold.
Who were Thy sheep, and in their ancient fold,
Slain by the bloody Piedmonteses, that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven."

The Waldensian valleys are seven in number; they were more in ancient times, but the limits of the Vandois territory have undergone repeated curtailment, and now only seven remain, lying between Pinerolo on the east and Monte Viso on the west—that pyramidal hill which forms so prominent an object from every part of the plain of Piedmont, towering as it does above the surrounding mountains, and, like a horn of silver, cutting the ebon of the firmament.

The first three valleys run out somewhat like the spokes of a wheel, the spot on which we stand—the gateway, namely—being the nave. The first is Luserna, or Valley of Light. It runs right out in a grand gorge of some twelve miles in length by about two in width. It wears a carpeting of meadows, which the waters of the Pelice keep ever fresh and bright. A profusion of vines, acacias, and mulberry-trees, fleck it with their shadows; and a wall of lofty mountains encloses it on either hand. The second is Rora, or Valley of Dews. It is a vast cup, some fifty miles in circumference, its sides luxuriantly

clothed with meadow and corn-field, with fruit and forest trees, and its rim formed of craggy and peaked mountains, many of them snow-clad. The third is Angrogna, or Valley of Groans. Of it we shall speak more particularly afterwards. Beyond the extremity of the first three valleys are the remaining four, forming, as it were, the rim of the wheel. These last are enclosed in their turn by a line of lofty mountains, which form a wall of defence around the entire territory. Each valley is a fortress having its own gate of ingress and egress, with its caves, and rocks, and mighty chestnut-trees, forming places of retreat and shelter, so that the highest engineering skill could not have better adapted each several valley to this very purpose. It is not less remarkable that, taking all these valleys together, each is so related to each, the one opening into the other, that they may be said to form one fortress of amazing and matchless strength—wholly impregnable, in fact. All the fortresses of Europe, though combined, would not form a citadel so enormously strong, and so dazzlingly magnificent, as the mountain dwelling of the Vandois. "The Eternal, our God," says Leger, "having destined this land to be the theatre of his marvels, and the bulwark of his ark, has, by natural means, most marvellously fortified it." The battle begun in one valley could be continued in another, and carried round the entire territory, till at last the invading foe, overpowered by the rocks rolled upon him from the mountains, or assailed by enemies which would start suddenly out of the mist or issue from some unsuspected cave, found retreat impossible, and, cut off in detail, left his bones to whiten the mountains he had come to subdue.

These valleys are lovely and fertile, as well as strong. They are watered by numerous torrents, which descend from the snows of the summits. The grassy carpet of their bottom; the mantling vine and the golden grain of their lower slopes; the chalets that dot their sides, sweetly embowered amid fruit-trees; and, higher up, the great chestnut-forests and the pasture-lands, where the herdsmen keep watch over their flocks all through the summer days and the starlit nights: the nodding crags, from which the torrent leaps into the light; the rivulet, singing with quiet gladness in the shady nook; the mists, moving grandly among the mountains, now veiling, now revealing, their majesty; and the far-off summits, tipped with silver, to be changed at eve into gleaming gold—make up a picture of blended beauty and grandeur, not equalled, perhaps, and certainly not surpassed, in any other region of the earth.

In the heart of their mountains is situated the most interesting, perhaps, of all their valleys. It was in this retreat, walled round by "hills whose heads touch heaven," that their barbes or pastors, from all their several parishes, were wont to meet in annual synod. It was here that their college stood, and it was here that their missionaries were trained, and, after ordination, were sent forth to sow the good seed, as opportunity offered, in other lands. Let us visit this valley. We ascend to it by the long, narrow, and winding Angrogna. Bright meadows enliven its entrance. The mountains on either hand are clothed with the vine, the mulberry, and the chestnut. Anon the valley contracts. It becomes rough with projecting rocks, and shady with great trees. A few paces farther, and it expands into a circular basin, feathery with birches, musical with falling waters, environed atop by naked crags, fringed with dark pines, while the white peak looks down out of heaven. A little in advance the valley seems shut in by a mountainous wall, drawn right across it; and beyond, towering sublimely upward, is seen an assemblage of snow-clad Alps, amid which is placed the valley we are in quest of, where burned of old the candle of the Waldenses. Some terrible convulsion has rent this mountain from top to bottom, opening a path through it to the valley beyond. We enter the dark chasm, and proceed along on a narrow ledge in the mountain's side, hung half-way between the torrent, which is heard thundering in the abyss below, and the summits which lean over us above. Journeying thus for about two miles, we find the pass beginning to widen, the light to break in, and now we arrive at the gate of the Pra.

There opens before us a noble circular valley, its grassy bottom watered by torrents, its sides dotted with dwellings and clothed with corn-fields and pasturages, with a ring of white peaks encircling it above. This was the inner sanctuary of the Waldensian temple. The rest of Italy had turned aside to idols, the Waldensian territory alone had been reserved for the worship of the true God. And was it not meet that on its native soil a remnant of the Apostolic Church of Italy should be maintained, that Rome and all Christendom might have before their eyes a perpetual monument of what they themselves had once been, and a living witness to testify how far they had departed from their first faith?¹