

CHAPTER 12

The Year of the Plague

Peace—Re-occupation of their Homes—Partial Famine—Contributions of Foreign Churches—Castrocaro, Governor of the Valleys—His Treacheries and Oppressions—Letter of Elector Palatine to the Duke—A voice raised for Toleration—Fate of Castrocaro—The Plague—Awful Ravages—10,000 Deaths—Only Two Pastors Survive—Ministers come from Switzerland, &c.—Worship conducted henceforward in French.

A whole century nearly passed away between the trampling out of the Protestant Church in Calabria, and the next great persecution which befel that venerable people whose tragic history we are recording. We can touch only the more prominent of the events which fill up the interval.

The war the La Trinita, so ingloriously for himself, had waged against the Waldenses, ended, as we have seen, in a treaty of peace, which was signed at Cavour on the 5th of June, 1561, between Philip of Savoy and the deputies of the Valleys. But though the cloud had rolled past, it had left numerous and affecting memorials of the desolation it had inflicted. The inhabitants descended from the mountains to exchange the weapons of war for the spade and the pruning-knife. With steps slow and feeble the aged and the infirm were let down into the vales, to sit once more at noon or at eve beneath the shadow of their vines and ancestral chestnut-trees. But, alas! how often did the tear of sorrow moisten the eye as it marked the desolation and ruin that deformed those scenes lately so fair and smiling! The fruit-bearing trees cut down; vineyard and corn-field marred; hamlets burned; villages, in some cases, a heap of ruins, all testified to the rage of the enemy who had invaded their land. Years must pass before these deep scars could be effaced, and the beauty of their Valleys restored. And there were yet tender griefs weighing upon them. How many were there who had lived under the same roof-tree with them, and joined night and morning in the same psalm, who would return no more!

Distress, bordering on famine, began to invade the Valleys. Seven months of incessant fighting had left them no time to cultivate the fields; and now the stock of last year's provisions was exhausted, and starvation stared them in the face. Before the treaty of peace was signed, the time of sowing was past, and when the autumn came there was scarcely anything to reap. Their destitution was further aggravated by the fugitives from Calabria, who began about this time to arrive in the Valleys. Escaping with nothing but their lives,

they presented themselves in hunger and nakedness. Their brethren opened their arms to receive them, and though their own necessities were great, they nevertheless shared with them the little they had.

The tale of the suffering now prevailing in the Valleys was known in other countries, and evoked the sympathy of their Protestant brethren. Calvin, with characteristic promptness and ardour, led in the movement for their relief. By his advice they sent deputies to represent their case to the Churches of Protestantism abroad, and collections were made for them in Geneva, France, Switzerland, and Germany. The subscriptions were headed by the Elector Palatine, after whom came the Duke of Wurtemberg, the Canton of Bern, the Church at Strasburg, and others.

By-and-by, seed-time and harvest were restored in the Valleys; smiling chalets began again to dot the sides of their mountains, and to rise by the banks of their torrents; and the miseries which La Trinita's campaign had entailed upon them were passing into oblivion, when their vexations were renewed by the appointment of a deputy-governor of their Valleys, Castrocaro, a Tuscan by birth.

This man had served against the Vaudois as a colonel of militia under La Trinita; he had been taken prisoner in an encounter with them, but honourably treated, and at length generously released. He returned the Waldenses evil for good. His appointment as Governor of the Valleys he owed mainly to his acquaintance with the Duchess Margaret, the protectress of the Vaudois, into whose favour he had ingratiated himself by professing a warm affection for the men of the Valleys; and his friendship with the Archbishop of Turin, to whom he had pledged himself to do his utmost to convert the Vaudois to Romanism. When at length Castrocaro arrived in the Valleys in the character of governor, he forgot his professions to the duchess, but faithfully set about fulfilling the promise he had made to the archbishop.

The new governor began by restricting the liberties guaranteed to their Churches in the treaty of peace; he next ordered the dismissal of certain pastors, and when their congregations refused to comply, he began to fine and imprison the recusants. He sent false and calumnious reports to the court of the duke, and introduced a troop of soldiers into the country, on the pretext that the Waldenses were breaking out into rebellion. He built the fortress of Miraboue, at the foot of the Col de la Croix, in the narrow gorge that leads from Bobbio to France, to close this gate of exit from their territory, and overawe the Valley of Lucerna. At last he threatened to renew the war unless the Waldenses should comply with his wishes.

What was to be done? They carried their complaints and remonstrances to Turin; but, alas! the ear of the duke and duchess had been poisoned by the malice and craft of the governor. Soon again the old alternative would be presented to them, the mass or death [Muston, chap. 16. Monastier, chap. 21].

In their extremity they sought the help of the Protestant princes of Germany. The cry from the Alps found a responsive echo from the German plains. The great Protestant chiefs of the Fatherland, especially Frederick, Elector Palatine, saw in these poor oppressed herdsmen and vine-dressers his brethren, and with zeal and warmth espoused their cause. He indited a letter to the duke, distinguished for its elevation of sentiment, as well as the catholicity of its views. It is a noble defence of the rights of conscience, and an eloquent pleading in behalf of toleration. "Let your highness," says the Elector, "know that there is a God in heaven, who not only contemplates the actions, but also tries the hearts and reigns of men, and from whom nothing is hid. Let your highness take care not voluntarily to make war upon God, and not to persecute Christ in his members. ...Persecution, moreover, will never advance the cause it pretends to defend. The ashes of the martyrs are the seed of the Christian Church. For the church resembles the palm-tree, whose stem only shoots up the taller the greater the weights that are hung upon it. Let your highness consider that the Christian religion was established by persuasion, and not by violence; and as it is certain that religion is nothing else than a firm and enlightened persuasion of God, and of his will, as revealed in his Word, and engraven in the hearts of believers by his Holy Spirit, it cannot, when once rooted, be torn away by tortures" [see the letter in full in Leger, part i., pp. 41-5]. So did the Elector Palatine warn the duke.

These are remarkable words when we think that they were written in the middle of the sixteenth century. We question whether our own age could express itself more justly on the subject of the rights of conscience, the spirituality of religion, and the impolicy, as well as criminality, of persecution. We sometimes apologise for the cruel deeds of Spain and France, on the ground of the intolerance and blindness of the age. But six years before the St. Bartholomew Massacre was enacted, this great voice had been raised in Christendom for toleration.

What effect this letter had upon the duke we do not certainly know, but from about this time Castrocaro moderated his violence, though he still continued at intervals to terrify the poor people he so basely oppressed by fulminating against them the most atrocious threats. On the death of Emanuel Philibert, in 1580, the villainy of the governor came to light. The young Duke Charles Emanuel ordered his arrest; but the execution of it was a matter of difficulty,

for Castrocaro had entrenched himself in the Castle of La Torre, and surrounded himself with a band of desperadoes, to which he had added, for his yet greater defence, a pack of ferocious bloodhounds of unusual size and strength [Muston, p. 98]. A captain of his guard betrayed him, and thus as he had maintained himself by treachery, so by treachery did his doom at last overtake him. He was carried to Turin, where he perished in prison [Monastier, p. 222].

Famine, persecution, war—all three, sometimes in succession and sometimes together—had afflicted this much-enduring people, but now they were to be visited by pestilence. For some years they had enjoyed an unusual peace; and this quiet was the more remarkable inasmuch as all around their mountains Europe was in combustion. Their brethren of the Reformed Church in France, in Spain, and in Italy were falling on the field, perishing by massacre, or dying at the stake, while they were guarded from harm. But now a new calamity carried gloom and mourning into their Valleys. On the morning of the 23rd of August, 1629, a cloud of unusual blackness gathered on the summit of the Cod Julien. It burst in a water-spout or deluge. The torrents rolled down the mountain on both sides, and the villages of Bobbio and Prali, situated the one in the southern and the other in the northern valley, were overflowed by the sudden inundation. Many of the houses were swept away, and the inhabitants had barely time to save their lives by flight. In September of the same year, there came an icy wind, accompanied by a dry cloud, which scathed their Valleys and destroyed the crop of the chestnut-tree. There followed a second deluge of rain, which completely ruined the vintage. These calamities were the more grievous inasmuch as they succeeded a year of partial famine. The Vaudois pastors assembled in solemn synod, to humble themselves and to lift up their voices in prayer to God. Little did they imagine that at that moment a still heavier calamity hung over them, and that this was the last time they were ever to meet one another on earth [Muston, p. 111].

In 1630, a French army, under Marshal Schomberg, suddenly occupied the Valleys. In that army were many volunteers, who had made their escape from a virulent contagious disease then raging in France. The weather was hot, and the seeds of the pestilence which the army had brought with it speedily developed themselves. The plague showed itself in the first week of May in the Valley of Perosa; it next broke out in the more northern Valley of San Martino; and soon it spread throughout all the Valleys. The pastors met together to supplicate the Almighty, and to concert practical measures for checking the ravages of this mysterious and terrible scourge. They purchased medicine and collected provisions for the poor [Monastier, p. 241]. They visited the sick, consoled the dying, and preached in the open air to crowds, solemnised and eager to listen.

In July and August the heat was excessive, and the malady raged yet more furiously. In the month of July four of the pastors were carried off by the plague; in August seven others died; and in the following month another, the twelfth, was mortally stricken. There remained now only three pastors, and it was remarked that they belonged to three several valleys—Lucerna, Martino, and Perosa. The three survivors met on the heights of Angrogna, to consult with the deputies of the various parishes regarding the means of providing for the celebration of worship. They wrote to Geneva and Dauphine requesting that pastors might be sent to supply the place of those whom the plague had struck down, that so the venerable Church of the Valleys, which had survived so many calamities, might not become extinct. They also recalled Antoine Leger from Constantinople [Muston, pp. 112-3. Antoine Leger was uncle of Leger the historian. He had been tutor for many years in the family of the Ambassador of Holland at Constantinople].

The plague subsided during the winter, but in spring (1631) it rose up again in renewed force. Of the three surviving pastors, one other died; leaving thus only two, Pierre Gilles of Lucerna, and Valerius Gross of Martino. With the heats of the summer the pestilence waxed in strength. Armies, going and coming in the Valleys, suffered equally with the inhabitants. Horsemen would be seen to drop from the saddle on the highway, seized with sudden illness. Soldiers and sutlers, struck in by-paths, lay there infecting the air with their corpses. In La Torre alone fifty families became extinct. The most moderate estimate of the numbers cut off by the plague is 10,000, or from a half to two-thirds of the entire population of the Valleys. The corn in many places remained uncut, the grapes rotted in many places remained uncut, the grapes rotted on the bough, and the fruit dropped from the tree. Strangers who had come to find health in the pure mountain air obtained from the soil nothing but a grave. Towns and villages, which had rung so recently from the sounds of industry, were now silent. Parents were without children, and children were without parents. Patriarchs, who had been wont with pride and joy to gather round them their numerous grandchildren, had seen them sicken and die, and were now alone. The venerable pastor Gilles lost his four elder sons. Though continually present in the homes of the stricken, and at the bedsides of the dying, he himself was spared to compile the monuments of his ancient Church, and narrate among other woes that which had just passed over his native land, and "part of which he had been."

Of the Vaudois pastors only two now remained; and ministers hastened from Geneva and other places to the Valleys, lest the old lamp should go out. The services of the Waldensian Churches had hitherto been performed in the Italian tongue, but the new pastors could speak only French. Worship was henceforward conducted in that language, but the Vaudois soon came to

understand it, their own ancient tongue being a dialect between the French and Italian. Another change introduced at this time was the assimilation of their ritual to that of Geneva. And further, the primitive and affectionate name of Barba was dropped, and the modern title substituted, Monsieur le Ministre [Monastier, chap. 18. Muston, pp. 242-3].