

CHAPTER 15

The Exile

New Troubles—Louis XIV. and his Confessor—Edict against the Vaudois—Their Defenceless Condition—Their Fight and Victory—They Surrender—The Whole Nation Thrown into Prison—Utter Desolation of the land—Horrors of the Imprisonment—Their Release—Journey across the Alps—Its Hardships—Arrival of the Exiles at Geneva—Their Hospitable Reception.

After the great Massacre of 1655, the Church of the Valleys had rest from persecution for thirty years. This period, however, can be styled one of rest only when contrasted with the frightful storms which had convulsed the era that immediately preceded it. The enemies of the Vaudois still found innumerable ways in which to annoy and harass them. Ceaseless intrigues were continually breeding new alarms, and the Vaudois had often to till their fields and prune their vines with their muskets slung across their shoulders. Many of their chief men were sent into exile. Captain Gianavello and Pastor Leger, whose services to their people were too great ever to be forgiven, had sentence of death passed on them. Leger "was to be strangled; then his body was to be hung by one foot on a gibbet for four-and-twenty hours; and, lastly, his head was to be cut off and publicly exposed at San Giovanni. His name was to be inserted in the list of noted outlaws; his houses were to be burned" [Leger, part ii., p. 275]. Gianavello retired to Geneva, where he continued to watch with unabated interest the fortunes of his people. Leger became pastor of a congregation at Leyden, where he crowned a life full of labour and suffering for the Gospel, by a work which has laid all Christendom under obligations to him; we refer to his History of the Churches of the Vaudois—a noble monument of his Church's martyr-heroism and his own Christian patriotism.

Hardly had Leger unrolled to the world's gaze the record of the last awful tempest which had smitten the Valleys, when the clouds returned, and were seen rolling up in dark, thunderous masses against this devoted land. Former storms had assailed them from the south, having collected in the Vatican; the tempest now approaching had its first rise on the north of the Alps. It was the year 1685; Louis XIV. was nearing the grave, and with the great Audit in view he inquired of his confessor by what good deed as a king he might atone for his many sins as a man. The answer was ready. He was told that he must extirpate Protestantism in France.

The Grand Monarch, as the age styled him, bowed obsequiously before the shaven crown of priest, while Europe was trembling before his armies. Louis XIV. did as he was commanded; he revoked the Edict of Nantes. This gigantic crime inflicted no less misery on the Protestants than it brought countless woes on the throne and nation of France. But it is the nation of the Vaudois, and the persecution which the counsel of Pere la Chaise brought upon them, with which we have here to do. Wishing for companionship in the sanguinary work of purging France from Protestantism, Louis XIV. sent an ambassador to the Duke of Savoy, with a request that he would deal with the Waldenses as he was now dealing with the Huguenots. The young and naturally humane Victor Amadeus was at the moment on more than usually friendly terms with his subjects of the Valleys. They had served bravely under his standard in his late war with the Genoese, and he had but recently written them a letter of thanks. How could he unsheathe his sword against the men whose devotion and valour had so largely contributed to his victory? Victor Amadeus deigned no reply to the French ambassador. The request was repeated; it received an evasive answer; it was urged a third time, accompanied by a hint from the potent Louis that if it was not convenient for the duke to purge his dominions, the King of France would do it for him with an army of 14,000 men, and would keep the Valleys for his pains. This was enough. A treaty was immediately concluded between the duke and the French King, in which the latter promised an armed force to enable the former to reduce the Vaudois to the Roman obedience, or to exterminate them [Monastier, p. 311]. On the 31st of January, 1686, the following edict was promulgated in the Valleys:

1. the Vaudois shall henceforth and for ever cease and discontinue all the exercises of their religion.
2. They are forbidden to have religious meetings, under pain of death, and penalty of confiscation of all their goods.
3. All their ancient privileges are abolished.
4. All the churches, prayer-houses, and other edifices consecrated to their worship shall be razed to the ground.
5. All the pastors and schoolmasters of the Valleys are required either to embrace Romanism or to quit the country within fifteen days, under pain of death and confiscation of goods.
6. All the children born, or to be born, of Protestant parents shall be compulsorily trained up as Roman Catholics. Every such child yet unborn shall, within a week after its birth, be brought to the cure of its parish, and

admitted of the Roman Catholic Church, under pain, on the part of the mother, of being publicly whipped with rods, and on the part of the father of labouring five years in the galleys.

7. The Vaudois pastors shall abjure the doctrine they have hitherto publicly preached; shall receive a salary, greater by one-third than that which they previously enjoyed; and one-half thereof shall go in reversion to their widows.

8. All Protestant foreigners settled in Piedmont are ordered either to become Roman Catholics, or to quit the country within fifteen days.

9. By a special act of his great and paternal clemency, the sovereign will permit persons to sell, in this interval, the property they may have acquired in Piedmont, provided the sale be made to Roman Catholic purchasers."

This monstrous edict seemed to sound the knell of the Vaudois as a Protestant people. Their oldest traditions did not contain a decree so cruel and unrighteous, nor one that menaced them with so complete and summary a destruction as that which now seemed to impend over them. What was to be done? Their first step was to send delegates to Turin, respectfully to remind the duke that the Vaudois had inhabited the Valleys from the earliest times; that they had led forth their herds upon their mountains before the House of Savoy had ascended the throne of Piedmont; that treaties and oaths, renewed from reign to reign, had solemnly secured them in the freedom of their worship and other liberties; and that the honour of princes and the stability of States lay in the faithful observance of such covenants; and they prayed him to consider what reproach the throne and kingdom of Piedmont would incur if he should become the executioner of those of whom he was the natural protector. The Protestant cantons of Switzerland joined their mediations to the intercession of the Waldenses. And when the almost incredible edict came to be known in Germany and Holland, these countries threw their shield over the Valleys, by interceding with the duke that he would not inflict so great a wrong as to cast out from a land which was theirs by irrevocable charters, a people whose only crime was that they worshipped as their fathers had worshipped, before they passed under the sceptre of the duke. All these powerful parties pleaded in vain. Ancient charters, solemn treaties, and oaths, made in the face of Europe, the long-tried loyalty and the many services of the Vaudois to the House of Savoy, could not stay the uplifted arm of the duke, or prevent the execution of the monstrously criminal decree. In a little while the armies of France and Savoy arrived before the Valleys.

At no previous period of their history, perhaps, had the Waldenses been so entirely devoid of human aid as now. Gianavello, whose stout heart and brave arm had stood them in such stead formerly, was in exile. Cromwell, whose potent voice had stayed the fury of the great massacre, was in his grave. An avowed Papist filled the throne of Great Britain. It was going ill at this hour with Protestantism everywhere. The Covenanters of Scotland were hiding on the moors, or dying in the Grass-market of Edinburgh. France, Piedmont, and Italy were closing in around the Valleys; every path guarded, all their succours cut off, an overwhelming force waited the signal to massacre them. So desperate did their situation appear to the Swiss envoys, that they counselled them to "transport elsewhere the torch of the Gospel, and not keep it here to be extinguished in blood."

The proposal to abandon their ancient inheritance, coming from such a quarter, startled the Waldenses. It produced, at first, a division of opinion in the Valleys, but ultimately they united in rejecting it. They remembered the exploits their fathers had done, and the wonders God had wrought in the mountain passes of Rora, in the defiles of Angrogna, and in the field of the Pra del Tor, and their faith reviving, they resolved, in a reliance on the same Almighty Arm which had been stretched out in their behalf in former days, to defend their hearths and altars. They repaired the old defences, and made ready for resistance. On the 17th of April, being Good Friday, they renewed their covenant, and on Easter Sunday their pastors dispensed to them the Communion. This was the last time the sons of the Valleys partook of the Lord's Supper before their great dispersion.

Victor Amadeus II. had pitched his camp on the plain of San Geronzo before the Vaudois Alps. His army consisted of five regiments of horse and foot. He was here joined by the French auxiliaries who had crossed the Alps, consisting of some dozen battalions, the united force amounting to between 15,000 and 20,000 men. The signal was to be given on Easter Monday, at break of day, by three cannon-shots, fired from the hill of Bricherasio. On the appointed morning, the Valleys of Lucerna and San Martino, forming the two extreme opposite points of the territory, were attacked, the first by the Piedmontese host, and the last by the French, under the command of General Catinat, a distinguished soldier. In San Martino the fighting lasted ten hours, and ended in a complete repulse of the French, who retired at night with a loss of more than 500 killed and wounded, while the Vaudois had lost only two [Monastier, p. 317. Muston, p. 199]. On the following day the French, burning with rage at their defeat, poured a more numerous army into San Martino, which swept along the valley, burning, plundering, and massacring, and having crossed the mountains descended into Pramol, continuing the same indiscriminate and exterminating vengeance. To the

rage of the sword were added other barbarities and outrages too shocking to be narrated [Muston, p. 200].

The issue by arms being deemed uncertain, despite the vast disparity of strength, treachery, on a great scale, was now had recourse to. Wherever, throughout the Valleys, the Vaudois were found strongly posted, and ready for battle, they were told that their brethren in the neighbouring communes had submitted, and that it was vain for them, isolated and alone as they now were, to continue their resistance. When they sent deputies to head-quarters to inquire—and passes were freely supplied to them for that purpose—they were assured that the submission had been universal, and that none save themselves were now in arms. They were assured, moreover, that should they follow the example of the rest of their nation, all their ancient liberties would be held intact [Muston, p. 202]. This base artifice was successfully practised at each of the Vaudois posts in succession, till at length the Valleys had all capitulated. We cannot blame the Waldenses, who were the victims of an act so dishonourable and vile as hardly to be credible; but the mistake, alas! was a fatal one, and had to be expiated afterwards by the endurance of woes a hundred times more dreadful than any they would have encountered in the rudest campaign. The instant consequence of the submission was a massacre which extended to all their Valleys, and which was similar in its horrors to the great butchery of 1655. In that massacre upwards of 3,000 perished. The remainder of the nation, amounting, according to Arnaud, to between 12,000 and 15,000 souls, were consigned to the various gaols and fortresses of Piedmont [Monastier, p. 320].

We now behold these famous Valleys, for the first time in their history, empty. The ancient lamp burns no longer. The school of the prophets in the Pra del Tor is razed. No smoke is seen rising from cottage, and no psalm is heard ascending from dwelling or sanctuary. No herdsman leads forth his kine on the mountains, and no troop of worshippers, obedient to the summons of the Sabbath-bell, climbs the mountain paths. The vine flings wide her arms, but no skilful hand is nigh to train her boughs and prune her luxuriance. The chestnut tree rains its fruits, but there is no troop of merry children to gather them, and they lie rotting on the ground. The terraces of the hills, that were wont to overflow with flowers and fruitage, and which presented to the eye a series of hanging gardens, now torn and breached, shoot in a mass of ruinous rubbish down the slope. Nothing is seen but dismantled forts, and the blacked ruins of churches and hamlets. A dreary silence overspreads the land, and the beasts of the field strangely multiply. A few herdsmen, hidden here and there in forests and holes of the rocks, are now the only inhabitants. monte Viso, from out the silent vault, looks down with astonishment at the absence of that ancient race over whom, from

immemorial time, he had been wont to dart his kindling glories at dawn, and let fall at eve in purple shadows the ample folds of his friendly mantle.

We know not if ever before an entire nation were in prison at once. Yet now it was so. All of the Waldensian race that remained from the sword of their executioners were immured in the dungeons of Piedmont! The pastor and his flock, the father and his family, the patriarch and the stripling had passed in, in one great procession, and exchanged their grand rock-walled Valleys, their tree-embowered homes, and their sunlit peaks, for the filth, the choking air, and the Tartarean walls of an Italian gaol. And how were they treated in prison? As the African slave was treated on the "middle passage." They had a sufficiency of neither food nor clothing. The bread dealt out to them was fetid. They had putrid water to drink. They were exposed to the sun by day and to the cold at night. They were compelled to sleep on the bare pavement, or on straw so full of vermin that the stone floor was preferable. Disease broke out in these horrible abodes, and the mortality was fearful. "When they entered these dungeons," says Henri Arnaud, "they counted 14,000 healthy mountaineers; but when, at the intercession of the Swiss deputies, their prisons were opened, 3,000 skeletons only crawled out." These few words portray a tragedy so awful that the imagination recoils from the contemplation of it.

However, at length the persecutor looses their chains, and opening their prison doors he sends forth these captives—the woe-worn remnant of a gallant people. But to what are they sent forth? To people again their ancient Valleys? To rekindle the fire on their ancestral hearths? To rebuild "the holy and beautiful house" in which their fathers had praised God? Ah, no! They are thrust out of prison only to be sent into exile—to Vaudois a living death.

The barbarity of 1655 was repeated. It was in December (1686) that the decree of liberation was issued in favour of these 3,000 men who had escaped the sword, and now survived the not less deadly epidemic of the prison. At that season, as every one knows, the snow and ice are piled to a fearful depth on the Alps; and daily tempests threaten with death the too adventurous traveller who would cross their summits. It was at this season that these poor captives, emaciated with sickness, weakened by hunger, and shivering from insufficient clothing, were commanded to rise up and cross the snowy hills. They began their journey on the afternoon of that very day on which the order arrived; for their enemies would permit no delay. One hundred and fifty of them died on their first march. At night they halted at the foot of the Mont Cenis. Next morning, when they surveyed the Alps they saw evident signs of a gathering tempest, and they besought the officer in charge to permit them, for the sake of their sick and aged, to remain where they were till the storm had spent its rage. With heart harder than the rocks

they were to traverse, the officer ordered them to resume their journey. That troop of emaciated beings began the ascent, and were soon struggling with the blinding drifts and fearful whirlwinds of the mountain. Eighty-six of their number, succumbing to the tempest, dropped by the way. Where they lay down, there they died. No relative or friend was permitted to remain behind to watch their last moments or tender them needed succour. That ever-thinning procession moved on and on over the white hills, leaving it to the falling snow to give burial to their stricken companions. When spring opened the passes of the Alps, alas! what ghastly memorials met the eye of the horror-stricken traveller. Strewed along the track were the now unshrouded corpses of these poor exiles, the dead child lying fast locked in the arms of the dead mother.

But why should we prolong this harrowing tale? The first company of these miserable exiles arrived at Geneva on Christmas Day, 1686, having spent about three weeks on the journey. They were followed by small parties, who crossed the Alps one after the other, being let out of prison at different times. It was not till the end of February, 1687, that the last band of these emigrants reached the hospitable gates of Geneva. But in what a plight! way-worn, sick, emaciated, and faint through hunger. Of some the tongue was swollen in their mouth, and they were unable to speak; of others the arms were bitten with the frost, so that they could not stretch them out to accept the charity offered to them; and some there were who dropped down and expired on the very threshold of the city, "finding," as one has said, "the end of their life at the beginning of their liberty." Most hospitable was the reception given them by the city of Calvin. A deputation of the principal citizens of Geneva, headed by the patriarch Gianavello, who still lived, went out to meet them on the frontier, and taking them to their homes, vied with each other which should show them the greatest kindness. Generous city! If he who shall give a cup of cold water to a disciple shall in nowise lose his reward, how much more shalt thou be requited for this thy kindness to the suffering and sorrowing exiles of the Saviour!