

CHAPTER 16

Return to the Valleys

Longings after their Valleys—Thoughts of Returning—Their Re-assembling—Cross Lake Lemman—Begin their March—The "Eight Hundred"—Cross Mont Cenis—Great Victory in the Valley of the Dora—First View of their Mountains—Worship on the Mountain-top—Enter their Valleys—Pass their First Sunday at Prali—Worship.

Now we open the bright page of the Vaudois history. We have seen nearly 3,000 Waldensian exiles enter the gates of Geneva, the feeble remnant of a population of from 14,000 to 16,000. One city could not contain them all, and arrangements were made for distributing the expatriated Vaudois among the Reformed cantons. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes had a little before thrown thousands of French Protestants upon the hospitality of the Swiss; and now the arrival of the Waldensian refugees brought with it yet heavier demands on the public and private charity of the cantons; but the response of Protestant Helvetia was equally cordial in the case of the last corners as in that of the first, and perhaps even more so, seeing their destitution was greater. Nor were the Vaudois ungrateful. "Next to God, whose tender mercies have preserved us from being entirely consumed," said they to their kind benefactors, "we are indebted to you alone for life and liberty."

Several of the German princes opened their States to these exiles; but the influence of their great enemy, Louis XIV., was then too powerful in these parts to permit of their residence being altogether an agreeable one. Constantly watched by his emissaries, and their patrons tampered with, they were moved about from place to place. The question of their permanent settlement in the future was beginning to be anxiously discussed. The project of carrying them across the sea in the ships of Holland, and planting them at the Cape, was even talked of. The idea of being separated for ever from their native land, dearer in exile than when they dwelt in it, gave them intolerable anguish. Was it not possible to reassemble their scattered colonies, and marching back to their Valleys, rekindle their ancient lamp in them? This was the question which, after three years of exile, the Vaudois began to put to themselves. As they wandered by the banks of the Rhine, or traversed the German plains, they feasted their imaginations on their far-off homes. The chestnuts shading their former abodes, the vine bending gracefully over their portal, and the meadow in front, which the crystal torrent kept perpetually bright, and whose murmur sweetly blended with the evening psalm, all rose before their eyes. They never knelt to pray but it was

with their faces turned toward their grand mountains, where slept their martyred fathers. Attempts had been made by the Duke of Savoy to people their territory by settling in it a mongrel race, partly Irish and partly Piedmontese; but the land knew not the strangers, and refused to yield its strength to them. The Vaudois had sent spies to examine its condition [Monastier, p. 336]; its fields lay untilled, its vines unpruned, nor had its ruins been raised up; it was almost as desolate as on the day when its sons had been driven out of it. It seemed to them that the land was waiting their return.

At length the yearning of their heart could no longer be repressed. The march back to their Valleys is one of the most wonderful exploits ever performed by any people. It is famous in history by the name of "La Rentree Glorieuse." The parallel event which will recur to the mind of the scholar is, of course, the retreat of "the ten thousand Greeks." The patriotism and bravery of both will be admitted, but a candid comparison will, we think, incline one to assign the palm of heroism to the return of "the eight hundred."

The day fixed on for beginning their expedition was the 10th of June, 1688. Quitting their various cantonments in Switzerland, and travelling by by-roads, they traversed the country by night, and assembled at Bex, a small town in the southern extremity of the territory of Bern. Their secret march was soon known to the senates of Zurich, Bern, and Geneva; and, foreseeing that the departure of the exiles would compromise them with the Popish powers, their Excellencies took measures to prevent it. A bark laden with arms for their use was seized on the Lake of Geneva. The inhabitants of the Vallais, in concert with the Savoyards, at the first alarm seized the Bridge of St. Maurice, the key of the Rhone Valley, and stopped the expedition. Thus were they, for the time, compelled to abandon their project.

To extinguish all hopes of their return to the Valleys, they were anew distributed over Germany. But scarcely had this second dispersion been effected, when war broke out; the French troops overran the Palatinate, and the Vaudois settled there, dreading, not without reason, the soldiers of Louis XIV., retired before them, and retook the road to Switzerland. The Protestant cantons, pitying these poor exiles, tossed from country to country by political storms, settled them once more in their former allotments. Meanwhile, the scenes were shifting rapidly around the expatriated Vaudois, and with eyes uplifted they awaited the issue. They saw their protector, William of Orange, mount the throne of England. They saw their powerful enemy Louis XIV. attacked at once by the emperor, and humiliated by the Dutch. They saw their own Prince Victor Amadeus withdraw his soldiers from

Savoy, seeing that he needed them to defend Piedmont. It seemed to them that an invisible Hand was opening their path back to their own land. Encouraged by these tokens, they began to arrange a second time for their departure.

The place of appointed rendezvous was a wood on the northern shore of Lake Lemman, near the town of Noyon. For days before they continued to converge, in scattered bands, and by stealthy marches, on the selected point. On the decisive evening, the 16th of August, 1689, a general muster took place under cover of the friendly wood of Prangins. Having by solemn prayer commended their enterprise to God, they embarked on the lake, and crossed by star-light. Their means of transport would have been deficient but for a circumstance which threatened at first to obstruct their expedition, but which, in the issue, greatly facilitated it. Curiosity had drawn numbers to this part of the lake, and the boats that brought hither the sight-seers furnished more amply the means of escape to the Vaudois.

At this crisis, as on so many previous ones, a distinguished man arose to lead them. Henri Arnaud, who was at the head of the 800 fighting men who now set out for their native possessions, had at first discharged the office of pastor, but the troubles of his nation compelling him to leave the Valleys, he had served in the armies of the Prince of Orange. Of decided piety, ardent patriotism, and of great decision and courage, he presented a beautiful instance of the union of the pastoral and the military character. It is hard to say whether his soldiers listened more reverentially to the exhortations he at times delivered to them from the pulpit, or to the orders he gave them on the field of battle.

Arriving on the southern shore of the lake, these 800 Vaudois bent their knees in prayer, and then began their march through a country covered with foes. Before them rose the great snow-clad mountains over which they were to fight their way. Arnaud arranged his little host into three companies—an advanced-guard, a centre, and a rear-guard. Seizing some of the chief men as hostages, they traversed the Valley of the Arve to Sallenches, and emerged from its dangerous passes just as the men of the latter place had completed their preparations for resisting them. Occasional skirmishes awaited them, but mostly their march was unopposed, for the terror of God had fallen upon the inhabitants of Savoy. Holding on their way they climbed the Haut Luce Alp, and next that of Bon Homme, the neighbouring Alp to Mont Blanc, sinking sometimes to their middle in snow. Steep precipices and treacherous glaciers subjected them to both toil and danger. [The Haut Luce Alp was so named by the author of the *Rentree*, from the village at its foot, but which without doubt, says Monastier (p. 349), "is either the Col Joli (7,240 feet high) or the Col de la Fenetre, or Portetta, as it was named to

Mr. Brockedon, who has visited these countries, and followed the same road as the Vaudois."] They were wet through with the rain, which at times fell in torrents. Their provisions were growing scanty, but their supply was recruited by the shepherds of the mountains, who brought them bread and cheese, while their huts served them at night. They renewed their hostages at every stage; sometimes they "caged"—to use their own phrase—a Capuchin monk, and at other times an influential landlord, but all were treated with uniform kindness.

Having crossed the Bon Homme, which divides the basin of the Arve from that of the Isere, they descended, on Wednesday, the fifth day of their march, into the valley of the latter stream. They had looked forward to this stage of their journey with great misgivings, for the numerous population of the Val Isere was known to be well armed, and decidedly hostile, and might be expected to oppose their march, but the enemy was "still as a stone" till the people had passed over. They next traversed Mont Iseran, and the yet more formidable Mont Cenis, and finally descended into the Valley of the Dora. It was here, on Saturday, the 24th of August, that they encountered for the first time a considerable body of regular troops.

As they traversed the valley they were met by a peasant, of whom they inquired whether they could have provisions by paying for them. "Come on this way," said the man, in a tone that had a slight touch of triumph in it, "you will find all that you want; they are preparing an excellent supper for you" [Monastier, p. 352]. They were led into the defile of Salabertrand, where the Col d'Albin closes in upon the stream of the Dora, and before they were aware they found themselves in presence of the French army, whose camp-fires—for night had fallen—illuminated far and wide the opposite slope. Retreat was impossible. The French were 2,500 strong, flanked by the garrison of Exiles, and supported by a miscellaneous crowd of armed followers.

Under favour of the darkness, they advanced to the bridge which crossed the Dora, on the opposite bank of which the French were encamped. To the challenge, "Who goes there?" the Vaudois answered "Friends." The instant reply shouted out was "Kill, kill!" followed by a tremendous fire, which was kept up for a quarter of an hour. It did no harm, however, for Arnaud had bidden his soldiers lie flat on their faces, and permit the deadly shower to pass over them. But now a division of the French appeared in their rear, thus placing them between two fires. Some one in the Vaudois army, seeing that all must be risked, shouted out, "Courage! the bridge is won!" At those words the Vaudois started to their feet, rushed across the bridge sword in hand, and clearing it, they threw themselves with the impetuosity of a whirlwind upon the enemy's entrenchments. Confounded by the suddenness

of the attack, the French could only use the butt-ends of their muskets to parry the blows. The fighting lasted two hours, and ended in the total rout of the French. Their leader, the Marquis de Larrey, after a fruitless attempt to rally his soldiers, fled wounded to Briançon exclaiming, "Is it possible that I have lost the battle and my honour?"

Soon thereafter the moon rose and showed the field of battle to the victors. On it, stretched out in death, lay 600 French soldiers, besides officers; and strewn promiscuously with the fallen, all over the field, were arms, military stores, and provisions. Thus had been suddenly opened an armoury of magazines to men who stood much in need both of weapons and of food. Having amply replenished themselves, they collected what they could not carry away into a heap, and set fire to it. The loud and multifarious noises formed by the explosions of the gunpowder, the sounding of the trumpets, and the shouting of the captains, who, throwing their caps in the air, exclaimed, "Thanks be to the Lord of hosts, who hath given us the victory," echoed like the thunder of heaven, and reverberating from hill to hill, formed a most extraordinary and exciting scene, such as was seldom witnessed amid these usually quiet mountains. This great victory cost the Waldenses only fifteen killed and twelve wounded.

Their fatigue was great, but they feared to halt on the battle-field, and so, rousing those who had already sunk into sleep, they commenced climbing the lofty Mont Sci. The day was breaking as they gained the summit. It was Sunday, and Henri Arnaud, halting till all should assemble, pointed out to them, just as they were becoming visible in the morning light, the mountain-tops of their own land. Welcome sight to their longing eyes! Bathed in the radiance of the rising sun, it seemed to them, as one snowy peak began to burn after another, that the mountains were kindling into joy at the return of their long-absent sons. This army of soldiers resolved itself into a congregation of worshippers, and the summit of Mont Sci became their church. Kneeling on the mountain-top, the battle-field below them, and the solemn and sacred peaks of the Col du Pis, the Col la Vechera, and the glorious pyramid of Monte Viso looking down upon them in reverent silence, they humbled themselves before the Eternal, confessing their sins, and giving thanks for their many deliverances. Seldom has worship more sincere or more rapt been offered than that which this day ascended from this congregation of warrior-worshippers gathered under the dome-like vault that rose over them.

Refreshed by the devotions of the Sunday, and exhilarated by the victory of the day before, the heroic band now rushed down to take possession of their inheritance, from which the single Valley of Clusone only parted them. It was three years and a half since they had crossed the Alps, a crowd of exiles,

worn to skeletons by sickness and confinement, and now they were returning, a marshalled host, victorious over the army of France, and ready to encounter that of Piedmont. They traversed the Clusone, a plain of about two miles in width, watered by the broad, clear, blue-tinted Garmagnasca, and bounded by hills, which offer to the eye a succession of terraces, clothed with the richest vines, mingled with the chestnut and the apple-tree. They entered the narrow defile of Pis, where a detachment of Piedmontese soldiers had been posted to guard the pass, but who took flight at the approach of the Vaudois, thus opening to them the gate of one of the grandest of their Valleys, San Martino. On the twelfth day after setting out from the shores of Lake Lemman they crossed the frontier, and stood once more within the limits of their inheritance. When they mustered at Balsiglia, the first Vaudois village which they entered, in the western extremity of San Martino, they found that fatigue, desertion, and battle had reduced their numbers from 800 to 700.

The first Sunday after their return was passed at the village of Prali. Of all their sanctuaries, the church of Prali alone remained standing; of the others only the ruins were to be seen. They resolved to commence this day their ancient and scriptural worship. Purging the church of its Popish ornaments, one half of the little army, laying down their arms at the door, entered the edifice, while the other half stood without, the church being too small to contain them all. Henri Arnaud, the soldier-pastor, mounting a table which was placed in the porch, preached to them. They began their worship by chanting the 74th Psalm—"O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? Why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?" &c. The preacher then took as his text the 129th Psalm—"Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth, may Israel now say." The wonderful history of his people behind him, so to speak, and the reconquest of their land before him, must have called up the glorious achievements of their fathers, provoking the generous emulation of their sons. The worship was closed by those 700 warriors chanting in magnificent chorus the psalm from which their leader had preached.

To many it seemed significant that here the returned exiles should spend their first Sunday, and resume their sanctuary services. They remembered how this same village of Prali had been the scene of a horrible outrage at the time of their exodus. The Pastor of Prali, M. Leidet, a singularly pious man, had been discovered by the soldiers as he was praying under a rock, and being dragged forth, he was first tortured and mutilated, receive my spirit." It was surely appropriate, after the silence of three years and a half, during which the rage of the persecutor had forbidden the preaching of the glorious

Gospel, that its re-opening should take place in the pulpit of the martyr
Leidet.