

CHAPTER 17

Final Re-Establishment in the Valleys

Cross the Col Julien—Seize Bobbio—Oath of Sibaud—March to Villaro—Guerilla War—Retreat to La Balsiglia—Its Strength—Beauty and Grandeur of San Martino—Encampment on the Balsiglia—Surrounded—Repulse of the Enemy—Depart for the Winter—Return of French and Piedmontese Army in Spring—The Balsiglia Stormed—Enemy Driven Back—Final Assault with Cannon—Wonderful Deliverance of the Vaudois—Overtures of Peace.

The Vaudois had entered the land, but they had not yet got possession of it. They were a mere handful; they would have to face the large and well-appointed army of Piedmont, aided by the French. But their great leader to his courage added faith. The "cloud" which had guided them over the great mountains, with their snows and abysses, would cover their camp, and lead them forth to battle, and bring them in with victory. It was not surely that they might die in the land, that they had been able to make so marvellous a march back to it. Full of these courageous hopes, the "seven hundred" now addressed themselves to their great task.

They began to climb the Col Julien, which separates Prali from the fertile and central valley of the Waldenses, that of Lucerna. As they toiled up and were now near the summit of the pass, the Piedmontese soldiers, who had been stationed there, shouted out, "Come on, ye Barbets; we guard the pass, and there are 3,000 of us!" They did come on. To force the entrenchments and put to flight the garrison was the work of a moment. In the evacuated camp the Vaudois found a store of ammunition and provisions, which to them was a most seasonable booty. Descending rapidly the slopes and precipices of the great mountain, they surprised and took the town of Bobbio, which nestles at its foot. Driving out the Popish inhabitants to whom it had been made over, they took possession of their ancient dwellings, and paused a little while to rest after the march and conflict of the previous days. Here their second Sunday was passed, and public worship again celebrated, the congregation chanting their psalm to the clash of arms. On the day following, repairing to the "Rock of Sibaud," where their fathers had pledged their faith to God and to one another, they renewed on the same sacred spot their ancient oath, swearing with uplifted hands to abide steadfastly in the profession of the Gospel, to stand by one another, and never to lay down their arms till they had re-established themselves and their brethren in those Valleys which they believed had as really been given to them by the God of heaven as Palestine had been to the Jews.

Their next march was to Villaro, which is situated half-way between Bobbio at the head and La Torre at the entrance of the valley. This town they stormed and took, driving away the new inhabitants. But here their career of conquest was suddenly checked. The next day, a strong reinforcement of regular troops coming up, the Vaudois were under the necessity of abandoning Villaro, and falling back on Bobbio [Monastier, p. 356]. The patriot army now became parted into two bands, and for many weeks had to wage a sort of guerilla war on the mountains. France on the one side, and Piedmont on the other, poured in soldiers, in the hope of exterminating this handful of warriors. The privations and hardships which they endured were as great as the victories which they won in their daily skirmishes were marvellous. But though always conquering, their ranks were rapidly thinning. What though a hundred of the enemy were slain for one Waldensian who fell? The Piedmontese could recruit their numbers, the Vaudois could not add to theirs. They had now neither ammunition nor provisions, save what they took from their enemies; and, to add to their perplexities, winter was near, which would bury their mountains beneath its snows, and leave them without food or shelter. A council of war was held, and it was ultimately resolved to repair to the Valley of Martino, and entrench themselves on La Balsiglia.

This brings us to the last heroic stand of the returned exiles. But first let us sketch the natural strength and grandeur of the spot on which that stand was made. The Balsiglia is situated at the western extremity of San Martino, which in point of grandeur yields to few things in the Waldensian Alps. It is some five miles long by about two in width, having as its floor the richest meadow-land; and for walls, mountains superbly hung with terraces, overflowing with flower and fruitage, and protected above with splintered cliffs and dark peaks. It is closed at the western extremity by the naked face of a perpendicular mountain, down which the Germagnasca is seen to dash in a flood of silver. The meadows and woods that clothe the bosom of the valley are seamed by a broad line of white, formed by the torrent, the bed of which is strewn with so many rocks that it resembles a continuous river of foam.

Than the clothing of the mountains that form the bounding walls of this valley nothing could be finer. On the right, as one advances upwards, rises a succession of terraced vineyards, finely diversified with cornfields and knolls of rock, which are crowned with cottages or hamlets, looking out from amid their rich embowerings of chestnut and apple-tree. Above this fruit-bearing zone are the grassy uplands, the resort of herdsmen, which in their turn give place to the rocky ridges that, in wavy and serrated lines, run off to the higher summits, which recede into the clouds.

On the left the mountain-wall is more steep, but equally rich in its clothing. Swathing its foot is a carpeting of delicious sward. Trees, vast of girth, part, with their over-arching branches, the bright sunlight. Higher up are fields of maize and forests of chestnut; and higher still is seen the rock-loving birch, with its silvery stem and graceful tresses. Along the splintered rocks above runs a bristling line of firs, forming mighty chevaux-de-frise.

Towards the head of the valley, near the vast perpendicular cliff already mentioned, which shuts it in on the west, is seen a glorious assemblage of mountains. One mighty cone uplifts itself above and behind another, till the last and highest buries its top in the rolling masses of cloud, which are seen usually hanging like a canopy above this part of the valley. These noble aiguilles, four in number, rise feathery with firs, and remind one of the fretted pinnacles of some colossal cathedral. This is La Balsiglia. It was on the terraces of this mountain that Henri Arnaud, with his patriot-warriors, pitched his camp, amid the dark tempests of winter, and the yet darker tempests of a furious and armed bigotry. The Balsiglia shoots its gigantic pyramids heavenward, as if proudly conscious of having once been the resting-place of the Vaudois ark. It is no castle of man's erecting; it had for its builder the Almighty Architect himself.

It only remains, in order to complete this picture of a spot so famous in the wars of conscience and liberty, to say that behind the Balsiglia on the west rises the lofty Col du Pis. It is rarely that this mountain permits to the spectator a view of his full stature, for his dark sides run up and bury themselves in the clouds. Face to face with the Col du Pis, stands on the other side of the valley the yet loftier Mont Guinevert, with, most commonly, a veil of cloud around him, as if he too were unwilling to permit to the eye of visitor a sight of his stately proportions. Thus do these two Alps, like twin giants, guard this famous valley.

It was on the lower terrace of this pyramidal mountain, the Balsiglia, that Henri Arnaud—his army now, alas! reduced to 400--sat down. Viewed from the level of the valley, the peak seems to terminate in a point, but on ascending, the top expands into a level grassy plateau. Steep and smooth as escarped fortress, it is unscalable on every side save that on which a stream rushes past from the mountains. The skill of Arnaud enabled him to add to the natural strength of the Vaudois position the defences of art. They enclosed themselves within earthen walls and ditches; they erected covered ways; they dug out some four-score cellars in the rock, to hold provisions, and they built huts as temporary barracks. Three springs that gushed out of the rock supplied them with water. They constructed similar entrenchments on each of the three peaks that rose above them, so that if the first were taken they could ascend to the second, and so on to the fourth. On the

loftiest summit of the Balsiglia, which commanded the entire valley, they placed a sentinel, to watch the movements of the enemy.

Only three days elapsed till four battalions of the French army arrived, and enclosed the Balsiglia on every side. On the 29th of October, an assault was made on the Vaudois position, which was repulsed with great slaughter of the enemy, and the loss of not one man to the defenders. The snows of early winter had begun to fall, and the French general thought it best to postpone the task of capturing the Balsiglia till spring. Destroying all the corn which the Vaudois had collected and stored in the villages, he began his retreat from San Martino, and, taking laconic farewell of the Waldenses, he bade them have patience till Easter, when he would again pay them a visit [Monastier, pp. 304-5].

All through the winter of 1689-90, the Vaudois remained in their mountain fortress, resting after the marches, battles, and sieges of the previous months, and preparing for the promised return of the French. Where Henri Arnaud had pitched his camp, there had he also raised his altar, and if from that mountain-top was pealed forth the shout of battle, from it ascended also, morning and night, the prayer and the psalm. Besides daily devotions, Henri Arnaud preached two sermons weekly, one on Sunday and another on Thursday. At stated times he administered the Lord's Supper. Nor was the commissariat overlooked. Foraging parties brought in wine, chestnuts, apples, and other fruits, which the autumn, now far advanced, had fully ripened. A strong detachment made an incursion into the French valleys of Pragelas and Queyras, and returned with salt, butter, some hundred head of sheep, and a few oxen. The enemy, before departing, had destroyed their stock of grain, and as the fields were long since reaped, they despaired of being able to repair their loss. And yet bread to last them all the winter through had been provided, in a way so marvellous as to convince them that He who feeds the fowls of the air was caring for them. Ample magazines of grain lay all around their encampment, although unknown as yet to them. The snow that year began to fall earlier than usual, and it covered up the ripened corn, which the Popish inhabitants had not time to cut when the approach of the Vaudois compelled them to flee. From this unexpected store-house the garrison drew as they had need. Little did the Popish peasantry, when they sowed the seed in spring, dream that Vaudois hands would reap the harvest.

Corn had been provided for them, and, to Vaudois eyes, provided almost as miraculously as was the manna for the Israelites, but where were they to find the means of grinding it into meal? At almost the foot of the Balsiglia, on the stream of the Germagnasea, is a little mill. The owner, M. Tron-Poulat, three years before, when going forth into exile with his brethren,

threw the mill-stone into the river; "for," said he, "it may yet be needed." It was needed now, and search being made for it, it was discovered, drawn out of the stream, and the mill set a-working. There was another and more distant mill at the entrance of the valley, to which the garrison had recourse when the immediate precincts of the Balsiglia were occupied by the enemy and the nearer mill was not available. Both mills exist to this day; their roofs of brown slate may be seen by the visitor, peering up through the luxuriant foliage of the valley, the wheel motionless, it may be, and the torrent which turned it shooting idly past in a volley of spray.

With the return of spring, the army of France and Piedmont reappeared. The Balsiglia was now completely invested, the combined force amounting to 22,000 in all--10,000 French and 12,000 Piedmontese. The troops were commanded by the celebrated De Catinat, lieutenant-general of the armies of France. The "four hundred" Waldenses looked down from their "camp of rock" on the valley beneath them, and saw it glittering with steel by day and shining with camp-fires by night. Catinat never doubted that a single day's fighting would enable him to capture the place; and that the victory, which he looked upon as already won, might be duly celebrated, he ordered four hundred ropes to be sent along with the army, in order to hang at once the four hundred Waldenses; and he had commanded the inhabitants of Pinerolo to prepare feux-de-joie to grace his return from the campaign. The headquarters of the French were at Great Passet—so called in contradistinction to Little Passet, situated a mile lower in the valley. Great Passet counts some thirty roofs, and is placed on an immense ledge of rock that juts out from the foot of Mont Guinevert, some 800 feet above the stream, and right opposite the Balsiglia. On the flanks of this rocky ledge are still to be seen the ruts worn by the cannon and baggage-waggons of the French army. There can be no doubt that these marks are the memorials of the siege, for no other wheeled vehicles were ever seen in these mountains.*

*The Author was conducted over the ground, and had all the memorials of the siege pointed out to him by two most trustworthy and intelligent guides—M. Turin, then Pastor of Macel, whose ancestors had figured in the "Glorious Return;" and the late M. Tron, Syndic of the Commune. The ancestors of M. Tron had returned with Henri Arnaud, and recovered their lands in the Valley of San Martino, and here had the family of M. Tron lived ever since, and the precise spots where the more memorable events of the war had taken place had been handed down from father to son.

Having reconnoitred, Catinat ordered the assault (1st May, 1690). Only on that side of Balsiglia where a stream trickles down from the mountains, and which offers a gradual slope, instead of a wall of rock as everywhere else, could the attack be made with any chance of success. But this point Henri

Arnaud had taken care to fortify with strong palisades. Five hundred picked men, supported by seven thousand musketeers, advanced to storm the fortress [Monastier, pp. 369,370]. They rushed forward with ardour; they threw themselves upon the palisades; but they found it impossible to tear them down, formed as they were of great trunks, fastened by mighty boulders. Massed behind the defence were the Vaudois, the younger men loading the muskets, and the veterans taking steady aim, while the besiegers were falling in dozens at every volley. The assailants beginning to waver, the Waldensians made a fierce sally, sword in hand, and cut in pieces those whom the musket had spared. Of the five hundred picked soldiers only some score lived to rejoin the main body, which had been spectators from the valley of their total rout. Incredible as it may appear, we are nevertheless assured of it as a fact, that not a Vaudois was killed or wounded: not a bullet had touched one of them. The fireworks which Catinat had been so provident as to bid the men of Pinerolo get ready to celebrate his victory were not needed that night.

Despairing of reducing the fortress by other means, the French now brought up cannon, and it was not till the 14th of May that all was ready, and that the last and grand assault was made. Across the ravine in which the conflict we have just described took place, an immense knoll juts out, at an equal level with the lower entrenchments of the Waldenses. To this rock the cannons were hoisted up to play upon the fortress. [Cannon-balls are occasionally picked up in the neighbourhood of the Balsiglia. In 1857 the Author was shown one in the Presbytere of Pomaretto, which had been dug up a little before.] Never before had the sound of artillery shaken the rocks of San Martino. It was the morning of Whit-Sunday, and the Waldenses were preparing to celebrate the Lord's Supper, when the first boom from the enemy's battery broke upon their ear [Monastier, p. 371]. All day the cannonading continued, and its dreadful noises, re-echoed from rock to rock, and rolled upwards to the summits of the Col du Pis and the Mont Guinevert, were still further heightened by the thousands of musketeers who were stationed all around the Balsiglia. When night closed in the ramparts of the Waldenses were in ruins, and it was seen that it would not be possible longer to maintain the defence. What was to be done? The cannonading had ceased for the moment, but assuredly the dawn would see the attack renewed.

Never before had destruction appeared to impend so inevitably over the Vaudois. To remain where they were was certain death, yet whither could they flee? Behind them rose the unscalable precipices of the Col du Pis, and beneath them lay the valley swarming with foes. If they should wait till the morning broke it would be impossible to pass the enemy without being seen; and even now, although it was night, the numerous camp-fires that blazed beneath them made it almost as bright as day. But the hour of their

extremity was the time of God's opportunity. Often before it had been seen to be so, but perhaps never so strikingly as now. While they looked this way and that way, but could discover no escape from the net that enclosed them, the mist began to gather on the summits of the mountains around them. They knew the old mantle that was wont to be cast around their fathers in the hour of peril. It crept lower and yet lower on the great mountains. Now it touched the supreme peak of the Balsiglia.

Will it mock their hopes? Will it only touch, but not cover, their mountain camp? Again it is in motion; downward roll its white fleecy billows, and now it hangs in sheltering folds around the war-battered fortress and its handful of heroic defenders. They dared not as yet attempt escape, for still the watch-fires burned brightly in the valley. But it was only for a few minutes longer. The mist kept its downward course, and now all was dark. A Tartarean gloom filled the gorge of San Martino.

At this moment, as the garrison stood mute, pondering whereunto these things would grow, Captain Poulat, a native of these parts, broke silence. He bade them be of good courage, for he knew the paths, and would conduct them past the French and Piedmontese lines, by a track known only to himself. Crawling on their hands and knees, and passing close to the French sentinels, yet hidden from them by the mist, they descended frightful precipices, and made their escape. "He who has not seen such paths," says Arnaud in his *Rentree Glorieuse*, "cannot conceive the danger of them, and will be inclined to consider my account of the march a mere fiction. But it is strictly true; and I must add, the place is so frightful that even some of the Vaudois themselves were terror-struck when they saw by day-light the nature of the spot they had passed in the dark." When the day broke, every eye in the plain below was turned to the Balsiglia. That day the four hundred ropes which Catinat had brought with him were to be put in requisition, and the *feux-de-joie* so long prepared were to be lighted at Pinerolo. What was their amazement to find the Balsiglia abandoned! The Vaudois had escaped and were gone, and might be seen upon the distant mountains, climbing the snows far out of reach of their would-be captors. Well might they sing—

"Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers.

The snare is broken, and we are escaped." There followed several days, during which they wandered from hill to hill, or lay hid in woods, suffering great privations, and encountering numerous perils. At last they succeeded in reaching the *Pra del Tor*. To their amazement and joy, on arriving at this celebrated and hallowed spot, they found deputies from their prince, the Duke of Savoy, waiting them with an overture of peace. The Vaudois were as men that dreamed. An overture of peace! How was this? A coalition,

including Germany, Great Britain, Holland, and Spain, had been formed to check the ambition of France, and three days had been given to Victor Amadeus to say to which side he would join himself—the Leaguers or Louis XIV. He resolved to break with Louis and take part with the coalition. In this case, to whom could he so well commit the keys of the Alps as to his trusty Vaudois? Hence the overture that met them in the Pra del Tor. Ever ready to rally round the throne of their prince the moment the hand of persecution was withdrawn, the Vaudois closed with the peace offered them. Their towns and lands were restored; their churches were reopened for Protestant worship; their brethren still in prison at Turin were liberated, and the colonists of their countrymen in Germany had passports to return to their homes; and thus, after a dreary interval of three and a half years, the Valleys were again peopled with their ancient race, and resounded with their ancient songs. So closed that famous period of their history, which, in respect of the wonders, we might say the miracles, that attended it, we can compare only to the march of the chosen people through the wilderness to the Land of Promise.