

CHAPTER 18

Condition of the Waldenses From 1690

**Annoyances—Burdens—Foreign Contributions—French Revolution—
Spiritual Revivals—Felix Neff—Dr. Gilly—General Beckwith—
Oppressed Condition previous to 1840—Edict of Carlo Alberto—
Freedom of Conscience—The Vaudois Church, the Door by which
Religious Liberty Entered Italy—Their Lamp Kindled at Rome.**

With this second planting of the Vaudois in their Valleys, the period of their great persecutions may be said to have come to an end. Their security was not complete, nor their measure of liberty entire. They were still subject to petty oppressions; enemies were never wanting to whisper things to their prejudice; little parties of Jesuits would from time to time appear in their Valleys, the forerunners, as they commonly found them, of some new and hostile edict; they lived in continual apprehension of having the few privileges which had been conceded to them swept away; and on one occasion they were actually threatened with a second expatriation. They knew, moreover, that Rome, the real author of all their calamities and woes, still meditated their extermination, and that she had entered a formal protest against their rehabilitation, and given the duke distinctly to understand that to be the friend of the Vaudois was to be the enemy of the Pope. [Monastier, p. 389. The Pope, Innocent XII., declared (19th August, 1694) the edict of the duke re-establishing the Vaudois null and void, and enjoined his inquisitors to pay no attention to it in their pursuit of the heretics.] Nevertheless their condition was tolerable compared with the frightful tempests which had darkened their sky in previous eras.

The Waldenses had everything to begin anew. Their numbers were thinned; they were bowed down by poverty; but they had vast recuperative power; and their brethren in England and Germany hastened to aid them in reorganising their Church, and bringing once more into play that whole civil and ecclesiastical economy which the "exile" had so rudely broken in pieces. William III. of England incorporated a Vaudois regiment at his own expense, which he placed at the service of the duke, and to this regiment it was mainly owing that the duke was not utterly overwhelmed in his wars with his former ally, Louis XIV. At one point of the campaign, when hard pressed, Victor Amadeus had to sue for the protection of the Vaudois, on almost the very spot where the deputies of Gianavello had sued to him for peace, but had sued in vain.

In 1692 there were twelve churches in the Valleys; but the people were unable to maintain a pastor to each. They were ground down by military imposts. Moreover, a peremptory demand was made upon them for payment of the arrears of taxes which had accrued in respect of their lands during the three years they had been absent, and when to them there was neither seed-time nor harvest. Anything more extortionate could not be imagined. In their extremity, Mary of England, the consort of William III., granted them a "Royal Subsidy," to provide pastors and schoolmasters, and this grant was increased with the increased number of parishes, till it reached the annual sum of 550 pounds. A collection which was made in Great Britain at a subsequent period (1770) permitted an augmentation of the salaries of the pastors. This latter fund bore the name of the "National Subsidy," to distinguish it from the former, the "Royal Subsidy." The States-General of Holland followed in the wake of the English sovereign, and made collections for salaries to schoolmasters, gratuities to superannuated pastors, and for the founding of a Latin school. Nor must we omit to state that the Protestant cantons of Switzerland appropriated bursaries to students from the Valleys at their academies—one at Basle, five at Lausanne, and two at Geneva [Muston, pp. 220-1. Monastier, pp. 388-9].

The policy of the Court of Turin towards the Waldenses changed with the shiftings in the great current of European politics. At one unfavourable moment, when the influence of the Vatican was in the ascendant, Henri Arnaud, who had so gloriously led back the Israel of the Alps, to their ancient inheritance, was banished from the Valleys, along with others, his companions in patriotism and virtue, as now in exile. England, through William, sought to draw the hero to her own shore, but Arnaud retired to Schoenberg, where he spent his last years in the humble and affectionate discharge of the duties of a pastor among his expatriated countrymen, whose steps he guided to the heavenly abodes, as he had done those of their brethren to their earthly land. He died in 1721, at the age of four-score years.

The century passed without any very noticeable event. The spiritual condition of the Vaudois languished. The year 1789 brought with it astounding changes. The French Revolution rung out the knell of the old times, and introduced, amidst those earthquake-shocks that convulsed nations, and laid thrones and altars prostrate, a new political age. The Vaudois once again passed under the dominion of France. There followed an enlargement of their civil rights, and an amelioration of their social condition; but, unhappily, with the friendship of France came the poison of its literature, and Voltairianism threatened to inflict more deadly injury on the Church of the Alps than all the persecutions of the previous centuries. At the Restoration the Waldenses were given back to their former sovereign,

and with their return to the House of Savoy they returned to their ancient restrictions, though the hand of bloody persecution could no more be stretched out.

The time was now drawing near when this venerable people was to obtain a final emancipation. That great deliverance rose on them, as day rises on the earth, by slow stages. The visit paid them by the apostolic Felix Neff, in 1808, was the first dawning of their new day. With him a breath from heaven, it was felt, had passed over the dry bones. The next stage in their resurrection was the visit of Dr. William Stephen Gilly, in 1828. He cherished, he tells us, the conviction that "this is the spot from which it is likely that the great Sower will again cast his seed, when it shall please him to permit the pure Church of Christ to resume her seat in those Italian States from which Pontifical intrigues have dislodged her" [Waldensian Researches, by William Stephen Gilly, M.A., Prebendary of Durham; p. 158; Lond., 1831]. The result of Dr. Gilly's visit was the erection of a college at La Torre, for the instruction of youth and the training of ministers, and an hospital for the sick; besides awakening great interest on their behalf in England. [So deep was the previous ignorance respecting this people, that Sharon Turner, speaking of the Waldenses in his History of England, placed them on the shores of Lake Lemane, confounding the Valleys of the Vaudois with the Canton de Vaud.]

After Dr. Gilly there stood up another to befriend the Waldenses, and prepare them for their coming day of deliverance. The career of General Beckwith is invested with a romance not unlike that which belongs to the life of Ignatius Loyola. Beckwith was a young soldier, and as brave, and chivalrous, and ambitious of glory as Loyola. He had passed unhurt through battle and siege. He fought at Waterloo till the enemy was in full retreat, and the sun was going down. But a flying soldier discharged his musket at a venture, and the leg of the young officer was hopelessly shattered by the bullet. Beckwith, like Loyola, passed months upon a bed of pain, during which he drew forth from his portmanteau his neglected Bible, and began to read and study it. He had lain down, like Loyola, a knight of the sword, and like him he rose up a knight of the Cross, but in a truer sense.

One day in 1827 he paid a visit to Apsley House, and while he waited for the duke, he took up a volume which was lying on the table. It was Dr. Gilly's narrative of his visit to the Waldenses. Beckwith felt himself drawn irresistibly to a people with whose wonderful history this book made him acquainted for the first time. From that hour his life was consecrated to them. He lived among them as a father—as a king. He devoted his fortune to them. He built schools, and churches, and parsonages. He provided improved school-books, and suggested better modes of teaching. He strove

above all things to quicken their spiritual life. He taught them how to respond to the exigencies of modern times. He specially inculcated upon them that the field was wider than their Valleys; and that they would one day be called to arise and to walk through Italy, in the length of it and in the breadth of it. He was their advocate at the court of Turin; and when he had obtained for them the possession of a burying-ground outside their Valleys, he exclaimed, "Now they have got infetment of Piedmont, as the patriarchs did of Canaan, and soon all the land will be theirs." [The Author may be permitted to bear his personal testimony to the labours of General Beckwith for the Waldenses, and through them for the evangelisation of Italy. On occasion of his first visit to the Valleys in 1851, he passed a week mostly in the society of the general, and had details from his own lips of the methods he was pursuing for the elevation of the Church of the Vaudois. All through the Valleys he was revered as a father. His common appellation among them was "The Benefactor of the Vaudois."]

But despite the efforts of Gilly and Beckwith, and the growing spirit of toleration, the Waldenses continued to groan under a load of political and social disabilities. They were still a proscribed race.

The once goodly limits of their Valleys had, in later times, been greatly contracted, and like the iron cell in the story, their territory was almost yearly tightening its circle round them. They could not own, or even farm, a foot-breadth of land, or practise any industry, beyond their own boundary. They could not bury their dead save in the Valleys; and when it chanced that any of their people died at Turin or elsewhere, their corpses had to be carried all the way to their own graveyards. They were not permitted to erect a tombstone above their dead, or even to enclose their burial-grounds with a wall. They were shut out from all the learned and liberal professions—they could not be bankers, physicians, or lawyers. No avocation was left them but that of tending their herds and pruning their vines. When any of them emigrated to Turin, or other Piedmontese town, they were not permitted to be anything but domestic servants. There was no printing-press in their Valleys—they were forbidden to have one; and the few books they possessed, mostly Bibles, catechisms, and hymn-books, were printed abroad, chiefly in Great Britain; and when they arrived at La Torre, the Moderator had to sign before the Reviser-in-Chief an engagement that not one of these books should be sold, or even lent, to a Roman Catholic [General Beckwith: his Life and Labours, &c. By J.P. Meille, Pastor of the Waldensian Church at Turin. P. 26. Lond., 1873].

They were forbidden to evangelise or make converts. But though fettered on the one side they were not equally protected on the other, for the priests had full liberty to enter their Valleys, and proselytise; and if a boy of twelve

or a girl of ten professed willingness to enter the Roman Church, they were to be taken from their parents, that they might with the more freedom carry out their intention. They could not marry save among their own people. They could not erect a sanctuary save on the soil of their own territory. They could take no degree at any of the colleges of Piedmont. In short, the duties, rights, and privileges that constitute life they were denied. They were reduced as nearly as was practicable to simple existence, with this one great exception—which was granted them not as a right, but as a favour—namely, the liberty of Protestant worship within their territorial limits.

The Revolution of 1848, with trumpet-peal, sounded the overthrow of all these restrictions. They fell in one day. The final end of Providence in preserving that people during long centuries of fearful persecutions now began to be seen. The Waldensian Church became the door by which freedom of conscience entered Italy. When the hour came for framing a new constitution for Piedmont, it was found desirable to give standing-room in that constitution to the Waldenses, and this necessitated the introduction into the edict of the great principle of freedom of worship as a right. The Waldenses had contended for that principle for ages—they had maintained and vindicated it by their sufferings and martyrdoms; and therefore they were necessitated to demand, and the Piedmontese Government to grant, this great principle. It was the only one of the many new constitutions framed for Italy at that same time in which freedom of conscience was enacted. Now would it have found a place in the Piedmontese constitution, but for the circumstance that here were the Waldenses, and that their great distinctive principle demanded legal recognition, otherwise they would remain outside the constitution. The Vaudois alone had fought the battle, but all their countrymen shared with them the fruits of the great victory. When the news of the Statuto of Carlo Alberto reached La Torre there were greetings on the streets, psalms in the churches, and blazing bonfires at night on the crest of the snowy Alps.

At the door of her Valleys, with lamp in hand, its oil unspent and its light unextinguished, is seen, at the era of 1848, the Church of the Alps, prepared to obey the summons of her heavenly King, who has passed by in earthquake and whirlwind, casting down the thrones that of old oppressed her, and opening the doors of her ancient prison. She is now to go forth and be "The Light of all Italy" ["Totius Italiae lumen"], as Dr. Gilly, thirty years before, had foretold she would at no distant day become. Happily not all Italy as yet, but only Piedmont, was opened to her. She addressed herself with zeal to the work of erecting churches and forming congregations in Turin and other towns of Piedmont. Long a stranger to evangelistic work, the Vaudois Church had time and opportunity thus given her to acquire the mental courage and practical habits needed in the novel circumstances in

which she was now placed. She prepared evangelists, collected funds, organised colleges and congregations, and in various other ways perfected her machinery in anticipation of the wider field that Providence was about to open to her.

It is now the year 1859, and the drama which had stood still since 1849 begins once more to advance. In that year France declared war against the Austrian occupation of the Italian peninsula. The tempest of battle passes from the banks of the Po to those of the Adige, along the plain of Lombardy, rapid, terrible, and decisive as the thunder-cloud of the Alps, and the Tedeschi retreat before the victorious arms of the French. The blood of the three great battles of the campaign was scarcely dry before Austrian Lombardy, Modena, Parma, Tuscany, and part of the Pontifical States had annexed themselves to Piedmont, and their inhabitants had become fellow-citizens of the Waldenses. With scarcely a pause there followed the brilliant campaign of Garibaldi in Sicily and Naples, and these rich and ample territories were also added to the now magnificent kingdom of Victor Emmanuel. The whole of Italy, from the Alps to Etna, the "States of the Church" excepted, now became the field of the Waldensian Church. Nor was this field the end of the drama. Another ten years pass away: France again sends forth her armies to battle, believing that she can command victory as aforetime. The result of the brief but terrible campaign of 1870, in which the French Empire disappeared and the German uprose, was the opening of the gates of Rome. And let us mark—for in the little incident we hear the voice of ten centuries—in the first rank of the soldiers whose cannon had burst upon the old gates, there enters a Vaudois colporteur with a bundle of Bibles. The Waldenses now kindle their lamp at Rome, and the purpose of the ages stands revealed!

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