

CHAPTER 3

First Persecutions of the Waldenses

Their Unique Position in Christendom—Their Twofold Testimony—They Witness against Rome and for Protestantism—Hated by Rome—The Cottian Alps—Albigenses and Waldenses—The Waldensian Territory Proper—Papal Testimony to the Flourishing State of their Church in the Fourteenth Century—Early Bulls against them—Tragedy of Christmas, 1400--Constancy of the Waldenses—Crusade of Pope Innocent VIII.—His Bull of 1487--The Army Assembles—Two Frightful Tempests approach the Valleys.

The Waldenses stand apart and alone in the Christian world. Their place on the surface of Europe is unique; their position in history is not less unique; and the end appointed them to fulfil is one which has been assigned to them alone, no other people being permitted to share it with them.

The Waldenses bear a twofold testimony. Like the snow-clad peaks amid which their dwelling is placed, which look down upon the plains of Italy on the one side, and the provinces of France on the other, this people stand equally related to primitive ages and modern times, and give by no means equivocal testimony respecting both Rome and the Reformation. If they are old, then Rome is new; if they are pure, then Rome is corrupt; and if they have retained the faith of the apostles, it follows incontestably that Rome has departed from it. That the Waldensian faith and worship existed many centuries before Protestantism arose is undeniable; the proofs and monuments of this fact lie scattered over all the histories and all the lands of mediaeval Europe; but the antiquity of the Waldenses is the antiquity of Protestantism. The Church of the Reformation was in the loins of the Waldensian Church ages before the birth of Luther; her first cradle was placed amid those terrors and sublimites, those ice-clad peaks and great bulwarks of rock. In their dispersions over so many lands—over France, the Low Countries, Germany, Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, England, Calabria, Naples—the Waldenses sowed the seeds of that great spiritual revival which, beginning in the days of Wicliffe, and advancing in the times of Luther and Calvin, awaits its full consummation in the ages to come.

In the place which the Church of the Alps has held, and the office she has discharged, we see the reason of that peculiar and bitter hostility which Rome has ever borne this holy and venerable community. It was natural that Rome should wish to efface so conclusive a proof of her apostasy, and silence a witness whose testimony so emphatically corroborates the position of Protestantism. The great bulwark of the Reformed Church is the Word of God; but next to this is the pre-existence of a community spread throughout Western Christendom, with doctrines and worship substantially one with those of the Reformation.

The persecutions of this remarkable people form one of the most heroic pages of the Church's history. These persecutions, protracted through many centuries, were endured with a patience, a constancy, a bravery, honourable to the Gospel as well as to those simple people, whom the Gospel converted into heroes and martyrs. Their resplendent virtues illumined the darkness of their age; and we turn with no little relief from a Christendom sunk in barbarism and superstition to this remnant of an ancient people, who here in their mountain-engirdled territory practised the simplicity, the piety, and the heroism of a better age. It is the main object of this work to deal with those persecutions of the Waldenses which connect themselves with the Reformation and which were, in fact, part of that mighty effort made by Rome to extinguish Protestantism. But we must introduce ourselves to the great tragedy by a brief notice of the attacks which led up to it.

That part of the Alpine chain which extends between Turin on the east and Grenoble on the west is known as the Cottian Alps. This is the dwelling-place of the Waldenses, the land of ancient Protestantism. On the west the mountains slope towards the plains of France, and on the east they run down to those of Piedmont. That line of glittering summits, conspicuous among which is the lofty snow-clad peak of Monte Viso on the west, and the craggy escarpments of Genevre on the east, forms the boundary between the Albigenses and the Waldenses, the two bodies of these early witnesses. On the western slope were the dwellings of the former people, and on the eastern those of the latter. Not entirely so, however, for the Waldenses, crossing the summits, had taken possession of the more elevated portion of the western declivities, and scarcely was there a valley in which their villages and sanctuaries were not to be found. But in the lower valleys, and more particularly in the vast and fertile plains of Dauphine and Provence, spread out at the foot of the Alps, the inhabitants were mainly of cis-Alpine or Gallic extraction, and are known in history as the Albigenses. How

flourishing they were, how numerous and opulent their towns, how rich their corn-fields and vineyards, and how polished the manners and cultured the genius of the people, we have already said. Innocent III. exacted a terrible expiation of them for their attachment to a purer Christianity than that of Rome. He launched his bull; he sent forth his inquisitors; and soon the fertility and beauty of the region were swept away; city and sanctuary sank in ruins; and the plains so recently covered with smiling fields were converted into a desert. The work of destruction had been done with tolerable completeness on the west of the Alps; and after a short pause it was commenced on the east, it being resolved to pursue these confessors of a pure faith across the mountains, and attack them in those grand valleys which open into Italy, where they lay entrenched, as it were, amid dense chestnut forests and mighty pinnacles of rock.

We place ourselves at the foot of the eastern declivity, about thirty miles to the west of Turin. Behind us is the vast sweep of the plain of Piedmont. Above us in front tower the Alps, here forming a crescent of grand mountains, extending from the escarped summit that leans over Pinerolo on the right, to the pyramidal peak of Monte Viso, which cleaves the ebon like a horn of silver, and marks the farthest limit of the Waldensian territory on the left. In the bosom of that mountain crescent, shaded by its chestnut forests, and encircled by its glittering peaks, are hung the famous valleys of that people whose martyrdoms we are now to narrate.

In the centre of the picture, right before us, rises the pillar-like Castelluzzo; behind it is the towering mass of the Vandalin; and in front, as if to bar the way against the entrance of any hostile force into this sacred territory, is drawn the long, low hill of Bricherasio, feathery with woods, bristling with great rocks, and leaving open, between its rugged mass and the spurs of Monte Friolante on the west, only a narrow avenue, shaded by walnut and acacia trees, which leads up to the point where the valleys, spreading out fan-like, bury themselves in the mountains that open their stony arms to receive them. Historians have enumerated some thirty persecutions enacted on this little spot.

One of the earliest dates in the martyr-history of this people is 1332, or thereabouts, for the time is not distinctly marked. The reigning Pope was John XXII. Desirous of resuming the work of Innocent III., he ordered the inquisitors to repair to the Valleys of Lucerna and Perosa, and execute the laws of the Vatican against the heretics that peopled them. What success

attended the expedition is not known, and we instance it chiefly on this account, that the bull commanding it bears undesigned testimony to the then flourishing condition of the Waldensian Church, inasmuch as it complains that synods, which the Pope calls "chapters," were wont to assemble in the Valley of Angrogna, attended by 500 delegates. [Compare Antoine Monastier, *History of the Vaudois Church*, p. 121 (Lond., 1848), with Alexis Muston, *Israel of the Alps*, p. 8 (Lond., 1852).] This was before Wicliffe had begun his career in England.

After this date scarcely was there a Pope who did not bear unintentional testimony to their great numbers and wide diffusion. In 1352 we find Pope Clement VI. charging the Bishop of Embrun, with whom he associates a Franciscan friar and inquisitor, to essay the purification of those parts adjoining his diocese which were known to be infected with heresy. The territorial lords and city syndies were invited to aid him. While providing for the heretics of the Valleys, the Pope did not overlook those farther off. He urged the Dauphin, Charles of France, and Louis, King of Naples, to seek out and punish those of their subjects who had strayed from their faith. Clement referred doubtless to the Vaudois colonies, which are known to have existed in that age at Naples. The fact that the heresy of the Waldensian mountains extended to the plains at their feet, is attested by the letter of the Pope to Joanna, wife of the King of Naples, who owned lands in the Marquisate of Saluzzo, near the Valleys, urging her to purge her territory of the heretics that lived in it [Monastier, *Hist. Vaudois Church* p. 123].

The zeal of the Pope, however, was but indifferently seconded by that of the secular lords. The men they were enjoined to exterminate were the most industrious and peaceable of their subjects; and willing as they no doubt were to oblige the Pope, they were naturally averse to incur so great a loss as would be caused by the destruction of the flower of their populations. Besides, the princes of that age were often at war among themselves, and had not much leisure or inclination to make war on the Pope's behalf. Therefore the Papal thunder sometimes rolled harmlessly over the Valleys, and the mountain-home of these confessors was wonderfully shielded till very nearly the era of the Reformation. We find Gregory XI., in 1373, writing to Charles V. of France, to complain that his officers thwarted his inquisitors in Dauphine; that the Papal judges were not permitted to institute proceedings against the suspected without the consent of the civil judge; and that the disrespect to the spiritual tribunal was sometimes carried so far as to release condemned heretics from prison [Monastier, p. 123].

Notwithstanding this leniency—so culpable in the eyes of Rome—on the part of princes and magistrates, the inquisitors were able to make not a few victims. These acts of violence provoked reprisals at times on the part of the Waldenses. On one occasion (1375) the Popish city of Susa was attacked, the Dominican convent forced, and the inquisitor put to death. Other Dominicans were called to expiate their rigour against the Vaudois with the penalty of their lives. An obnoxious inquisitor of Turin is said to have been slain on the highway near Bricherasio [Ibid.].

There came evil days to the Popes themselves. First, they were chased to Avignon; next, the yet greater calamity of the "schism" befel them; but their own afflictions had not the effect of softening their hearts towards the confessors of the Alps. During the clouded era of their "captivity," and the tempestuous days of the schism, they pursued with the same inflexible rigour their policy of extermination. They were ever and anon fulminating their persecuting edicts, and their inquisitors were scouring the Valleys in pursuit of victims. An inquisitor of the name of Borelli had 150 Vaudois men, besides a great number of women, girls, and even young children, brought to Grenoble and burned alive [Monastier, p. 123].

The closing days of the year 1400 witnessed a terrible tragedy, the memory of which has not been obliterated by the many greater which have followed it. The scene of this catastrophe was the Valley of Pragelas, one of the higher reaches of Perosa, which opens near Pinerolo, and is watered by the Clusone. It was the Christmas of 1400, and the inhabitants dreaded no attack, believing themselves sufficiently protected by the snows which then lay deep on their mountains. They were destined to experience the bitter fact that the rigours of the season had not quenched the fire of their persecutor's malice. Borelli, at the head of an armed troop, broke suddenly into Pragelas, meditating the entire extinction of its population. The miserable inhabitants fled in haste to the mountains, carrying on their shoulders their old men, their sick, and their infants, knowing what fate awaited them should they leave them behind. In their flight a great many were overtaken and slain. Nightfall brought them deliverance from the pursuit, but no deliverance from horrors not less dreadful. The main body of the fugitives wandered in the direction of Macel, in the storm-swept and now ice-clad valley of San Martino, where they encamped on a summit which has ever since, in memory of the event, borne the name of the Alberge or Refuge. Without shelter, without food, the frozen snow around them, the winter's sky overhead, their sufferings were inexpressibly great. When

morning broke what a heartrending spectacle did day disclose! Some of the miserable group lost their hands and feet from frostbite; while others were stretched out on the snow, stiffened corpses. Fifty young children, some say eighty, were found dead with cold, some lying on the bare ice, others locked in the frozen arms of their mothers, who had perished on that dreadful night along with their babes.* In the Valley of Pragelas, to this day, sire recites to son the tale of that Christmas tragedy. [Histoire Generale des Eglises Evangeliques des Vallees de Piedmont, ou Vaudoises. Par Jean Leger. Part ii., pp. 6,7. Leyden, 1669. Monastier, pp. 123,124].

It was the year 1487. A great blow was meditated. The process of purging the Valleys languished. Pope Innocent VIII., who then filled the Papal chair, remembered how his renowned namesake, Innocent III., by an act of summary vengeance, had swept the Albigensian heresy from the south of France. Imitating the vigour of his predecessor, he would purge the Valleys as effectually and as speedily as Innocent III. had done the plains of Dauphine and Provence.

The first step of the Pope was to issue a bull, denouncing as heretical those whom he delivered over to slaughter. This bull, after the manner of all such documents, was expressed in terms as sanctimonious as its spirit was inexorably cruel. It brings no charge against these men, as lawless, idle, dishonest, or disorderly; their fault was that they did not worship as Innocent worshipped, and that they practised a "simulated sanctity," which had the effect of seducing the sheep of the true fold, therefore he orders "that malicious and abominable sect of malignants," if they "refuse to abjure, to be crushed like venomous snakes." [The bull is given in full in Leger, who also says that he had made a faithful copy of it, and lodged it with other documents in the University Library of Cambridge. (Hist. Gen. des Eglises Vaud., part ii., pp. 7-15.)]

To carry out his bull, Innocent VIII. appointed Albert Cataneo, Archdeacon of Cremona, his legate, entrusting to him the chief conduct of the enterprise. He fortified him, moreover, with Papal missives to all princes, dukes, and powers, within whose dominions any Vaudois were to be found. The Pope especially accredited him to Charles VIII. of France and Charles II. of Savoy, commanding them to support him with the whole power of their arms. The bull invited all Catholics to take up the cross against the heretics; and to stimulate them in this pious work it "absolved from all ecclesiastical pains and penalties, general and particular; it released all who joined the crusade

from any oaths they might have taken; it legitimatised their title to any property they might have illegally acquired; and promised remission of all their sins to such as should kill any heretic. It annulled all contracts made in favour of Vaudois, ordered their domestics to abandon them, forbade all persons to give them any aid whatever, and empowered all persons to take possession of their property."

These were powerful incentives—plenary pardon and unrestrained licence. They were hardly needed to awaken the zeal of the neighbouring populations, always too ready to show their devotion to Rome by spilling the blood and making a booty of the goods of the Waldenses. The King of France and the Duke of Savoy lent a willing ear to the summons from the Vatican. They made haste to unfurl their banners, and enlist soldiers in this holy cause, and soon a numerous army was on its march to sweep from the mountains where they had dwelt from immemorial time, these confessors of the Gospel faith pure and undefiled. In the train of this armed host came a motley crowd of volunteers, "vagabond adventurers," says Muston, "ambitious fanatics, reckless pillagers, merciless assassins, assembled from all parts of Italy"*--a horde of brigands in short, the worthy tools of the man whose bloody work they were assembled to do [Muston, *Israel of the Alps*, p. 10].

Before all these arrangements were finished it was the month of June of 1488. The Pope's bull was talked of in all countries: and the din of preparation rung far and near, for it was not only on the Waldensian mountains, but on the Waldensian race, wherever dispersed, in Germany, in Calabria, and in other countries, that this terrible blow was to fall [Leger, *Livr. ii.*, p. 7]. All kings were invited to gird on the sword, and come to the help of the Church in the execution of her purpose of effecting an extermination of her enemies that should never need to be repeated. Wherever a Vaudois foot trod, the soil was polluted, and had to be cleansed; wherever a Vaudois breathed, the air was tainted, and must be purified; wherever Vaudois psalm or prayer ascended, there was the infection of heresy, and around the spot a cordon must be drawn to protect the spiritual health of the district. The Pope's bull was thus universal in its application, and almost the only people left ignorant of the commotion it had excited, and the bustle of preparation it had called forth, were those poor men on whom this terrible tempest was about to burst.

The joint army numbered about 18,000 regular soldiers. This force was swelled by the thousands of ruffians, already mentioned, drawn together by the spiritual and temporal rewards to be earned in this work of combined piety and pillage [Leger, livr. ii., p. 26]. The Piedmontese division of this host directed their course towards the "Valleys" proper, on the Italian side of the Alps. The French division, marching from the north, advanced to attack the inhabitants of the Dauphinese Alps, where the Albigensian heresy, recovering somewhat its terrible excision by Innocent III., had begun again to take root. Two storms, from opposite points, or rather from all points, were approaching those mighty mountains, the sanctuary and citadel of the primitive faith. That lamp is about to be extinguished at last, which has burned here during so many ages, and survived so many tempests. The mailed hand of the Pope is uplifted, and we wait to see the blow fall.