

CHAPTER 4

Cataneo's Expedition (1488) Against the Dauphinese and Piedmontese Confessors

The Confessors of the Dauphinese Alps—Attacked—Flee to Mont Pelvoux—Retreat into a Cave—Are Suffocated—French Crusaders Cross the Alps—Enter the Valley of Pragelas—Piedmontese Army Advances against La Torre—Deputation of Waldensian Patriarchs—The Valley of Lucerna—Villaro—Bobbio—Cataneo's Plan of Campaign—His Soldiers Cross the Col Julien—Grandeurs of the Pass—Valley of Prali—Defeat of Cataneo's Expedition.

We see at this moment two armies on the march to attack the Christians inhabiting the Cottian and Dauphinese Alps. The sword now unsheathed is to be returned to its scabbard only when there breathes no longer in these mountains a single confessor of the faith condemned in the bull of Innocent VIII. The plan of the campaign was to attack at the same time on two opposite points of the great mountain-chain; and advancing, the one army from the south-east, and the other from the north-west, to meet in the Valley of Angrogna, the centre of the territory, and there strike the final blow. Let us follow first the French division of this host, that which is advancing against the Alps of Dauphine.

This portion of the crusaders was led by a daring and cruel man, skilled in such adventures, the Lord of La Palu. He ascended the mountains with his fanatics, and entered the Vale of Loyse, a deep gorge overhung by towering mountains. The inhabitants, seeing an armed force twenty times their own number enter their valley, despaired of being able to resist them, and prepared for flight. They placed their old people and children in rustic carts, together with their domestic utensils, and such store of victuals as the urgency of the occasion permitted them to collect, and driving their herds before them, they began to climb the rugged slopes of Mount Pelvoux, which rises some six thousand feet over the level of the valley. They sang canticles as they climbed the steeps, which served at once to smooth their rugged path, and to dispel their terrors. Not a few were overtaken and slaughtered, and theirs was perhaps the happier lot.

About half-way up there is an immense cavern, called Aigue-Froid, from the cold springs that gush out from its rocky walls. In front of the cavern is a platform of rock, where the spectator sees beneath him only fearful precipices, which must be clambered over before one can reach the entrance to the grotto. The roof of the cave forms a magnificent arch, which gradually

subsides and contracts into a narrow passage, or threat, and then widens once more, and forms a roomy hall of irregular form. Into this grotto, as into an impregnable castle, did the Vaudois enter. Their women, infants, and old men, they placed in the inner hall; their cattle and sheep they distributed along the lateral cavities of the grotto. The able-bodied men posted themselves at the entrance. Having barricaded with huge stones both the doorway of the cave and the path that led to it, they deemed themselves secure. They had provisions to last, Cataneo says in his Memoirs, "two years;" and it would cost them little effort to hurl headlong down the precipices any one who should attempt to scale them in order to reach the entrance of the cavern.

But a device of their pursuer rendered all these precautions and defences vain. La Palu ascended the mountain on the other side, and approaching the cave from above, let down his soldiers by ropes from the precipice overhanging the entrance to the grotto. The platform in front was thus secured by his soldiers. The Vaudois might have cut the ropes, and dispatched their foes as they were being lowered one by one, but the boldness of the manoeuvre would seem to have paralysed them. They retreated into the cavern to find in it their grave. La Palu saw the danger of permitting his men to follow them into the depths of their hiding-place. He adopted the easier and safer method of piling up at its entrance all the wood he could collect and setting fire to it. A huge volume of black smoke began to roll into the cave, leaving to the unhappy inmates the miserable alternative of rushing out and falling by the sword that waited for them, or of remaining in the interior to be stifled by the murky vapour [Monstier, p. 128]. Some rushed out, and were massacred; but the greater part remained till death slowly approached them by suffocation. "When the cavern was afterwards examined," says Muston, "there were found in it 400 infants, suffocated in their cradles, or in the the arms of their dead mothers. Altogether there perished in this cavern more than 3,000 Vaudois, including the entire population of Val Loyse. Cataneo distributed the property of these unfortunates among the vagabonds who accompanied him, and never again did the Vaudois Church raise its head in these blood-stained valleys" [Muston, p. 20].

The terrible stroke that fell on the Vale of Loyse was the shielding of the neighbouring valleys of Argentiere and Fraissiniere. Their inhabitants had been destined to destruction also, but the fate of their co-religionists taught them that their only chance of safety lay in resistance. Accordingly, barricading the passes of their valleys, they showed such a front to the foe when he advanced, that he deemed it prudent to turn away and leave them in peace. This devastating tempest now swept along to discharge its violence on other valleys. "One would have thought," to use the words of Muston,

"that the plague had passed along the track over which its march lay: it was on the inquisitors."

A detachment of the French army struck across the Alps in a south-east direction, holding their course toward the Waldensian Valleys, there to unite with the main body of the crusaders under Cataneo. They slaughtered, pillaged, and burned as they went onward, and at last arrived with dripping swords in the Valley of Pragelas.

The Valley of Pragelas, where we now see these assassins, sweeps along, from almost the summit of the Alps, to the south, watered by the rivers Clusone and Dora, and opens on the great plain of Piedmont, having Pinerolo on the one side and Susa on the other. It was then and long after under the dominion of France. "Prior to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes," says Muston, "the Vaudois of these valleys [that is, Pragelas, and the lateral vales branching out from it] possessed eleven parishes, eighteen churches, and sixty-four centres of religious assembling, where worship was celebrated morning and evening, in as many hamlets. It was in Laus, in Pragelas, that was held the famous synod where, 200 years before the Protestant Reformation, 140 Protestant pastors assembled, each accompanied by two or three lay deputies; and it was from the Val di Pragelas that the Gospel of God made its way into France prior to the fifteenth century" [Muston, part ii., p. 234].

This was the valley of Pragelas which had been the scene of the terrible tragedy of Christmas, 1400. Again terror, mourning, and death were carried into it. The peaceful inhabitants, who were expecting no such invasion, were busy reaping their harvests, when the horde of assassins burst upon them. In the first panic they abandoned their dwellings and fled. Many were overtaken and slain; hamlets and whole villages were given to the flames; nor could the caves in which multitudes sought refuge afford any protection. The horrible barbarity of the Val Loyse was repeated in the Valley of Pragelas. Combustible materials were piled up and fires kindled at the mouths of these hiding-places; and when extinguished, all was silent within. Folded together in one motionless heap lay mother and babe, patriarch and stripling; while the fatal smoke, which had cast them into that deep sleep, was eddying along the roof, and slowly making its exit into the clear sunlit summer sky. But the course of this destruction was stayed. After the first surprise the inhabitants took heart, and turning upon their murderers drove them from their valley, exacting a heavy penalty in the pursuit for the ravages they had committed in it.

We now turn to the Piedmontese portion of this army. It was led by the Papal legate, Cataneo, in person. It was destined to operate against those

valleys in Piedmont which were the most ancient seat of these religionists, and were deemed the stronghold of the Vaudois heresy. Cataneo repaired to Pinerolo, which adjoins the frontier of the doomed territory. Thence he dispatched a band of preaching monks to convert the men of the Valleys. These missionaries returned without having, so far as appears made a single convert. The legate now put his soldiers in motion. Traversing the glorious plain, the Clusone gleaming out through rich corn-fields and vineyards on their left, and the mighty rampart of the hills, with their chestnut forests, their pasturages and snows, rising grandly on their right, and turning round the shoulder of the copse-clad Bricherasio, this army, with another army of pillagers and cut-throats in its rear, advanced up the long avenue that leads to La Torre, the capital of the Valleys, and sat down before it. They had come against a simple, unarmed people, who knew how to tend their vines, and lead their herds to pasture, but were ignorant of the art of war. It seemed as if the last hour of the Waldensian race had struck.

Seeing this mighty host before their Valleys, the Waldenses sent off two of their patriarchs to request an interview with Cataneo, and turn, if possible, his heart to peace. Jolin Campo and John Desiderio were dispatched on this embassy. "Do not condemn us without hearing us," said they, "for we are Christians and faithful subjects; and our Barbes are prepared to prove, in public or in private, that our doctrines are conformable to the Word of God ... Our hope in God is greater than our desire to please men; beware how you draw down upon yourselves His anger by persecuting us; for remember that, if God so wills it, all the forces you have assembled against us will nothing avail."

These were weighty words, and they were meekly spoken, but as to changing Cataneo's purpose, or softening the hearts of the ruffian-host which he led, they might as well have been addressed to the rocks which rose around the speakers. Nevertheless, they fell not to the ground.

Cataneo, believing that the Vaudois herdsmen would not stand an hour before his men-at-arms, and desirous of striking a finishing blow, divided his army into a number of attacking parties, which were to begin the battle on various points at the same time. The folly of extending his line so as to embrace the whole territory led to Cataneo's destruction; but his strategy was rewarded with a few small successes at first.

One troop was stationed at the entrance of the Val Lucerna; we shall follow its march till it disappears on the mountains which it hopes to conquer, and then we shall return and narrate the more decisive operations of the campaign under Cataneo in the Val Angrogna.

The first step of the invaders was to occupy the town of La Torre, situated on the angle formed by the junction of the Val Lucerna and the Val Angrogna, the silver Pelice at its feet and the shadow of the Castelluzzo covering it. The soldiers were probably spared the necessity or denied the pleasure of slaughter, the inhabitants having fled to the mountains. The valley beyond La Torre is too open to admit of being defended, and the troop advanced along it unopposed. Than this theatre of war nothing in ordinary times is more peaceful, nothing more grand. A carpet of rich meadows clothes it from side to side; fruitful trees fleck it with their shadows; the Pelice waters it; and on either hand is a wall of mountains, whose sides display successive zones of festooned vines, golden grain, dark chestnut forests, and rich pasturages. Over these are hung stupendous battlements of rock; and above all, towering high in air, are the everlasting peaks in their robes of ice and snow. But the sublimities of nature were nothing to men whose thoughts were only of blood.

Pursuing their march up the valley, the soldiers next came to Villaro. It is situated about midway between the entrance and head of Lucerna, on a ledge of turn in the side of the great mountains, raised some 200 feet above the Pelice, which flows past at about a quarter of a mile's distance. The troop had little difficulty in taking possession. Most of the inhabitants, warned of the approach of danger, had fled to the Alps. What Cataneo's troops inflicted on those who had been unable to make their escape, no history records. The half of Lucerna, with the towns of La Torre and Villaro and their hamlets, was in the occupation of Cataneo's soldiers; their march so far had been a victorious one, though certainly not a glorious one, such victories as they had gained being only over unarmed peasants and bed-ridden women.

Resuming their march the troop came next to Bobbio. The name of Bobbio is not unknown in classic story. It nestles at the base of gigantic cliffs, where the lofty summit of the Col la Croix points the way to France, and overhangs a path which apostolic feet may have trodden. The Pelice is seen forcing its way through the dark gorges of the mountains in a thundering torrent, and meandering in a flood of silver along the valley.

At this point the grandeur of the Val Lucerna attains its height. Let us pause to survey the scene that must here have met the eyes of Cataneo's soldiers, and which, one would suppose, might have turned them from their cruel purpose. Immediately behind Bobbio shoots up the "Barion," symmetrical as Egyptian obelisk, but far taller and more massive. Its summit rises 3,000 feet above the roof of the little town. Compared with this majestic monolith the proudest monument of Europe's proudest capital is a mere toy. Yet even the Barion is but one item in this assemblage of glories. Overtopping it

behind, and sweeping round the extremity of the valley, is a glorious amphitheatre of crags and precipices, enclosed by a background of great mountains, some rounded like domes, others sharp as needles; and rising out of this sea of hills, are the grander and loftier forms of the Alp des Rousses and the Col de Malaure, which guard the gloomy pass that winds its way through splintered rocks and under overhanging precipices, till it opens into the valleys of the French Protestants, and lands the traveller on the plains of Dauphine. In this unrivalled amphitheatre sits Bobbio, in summer buried in blossoms and fruit, and in winter wrapped in the shadows of its great mountains, and the mists of their tempests. What a contrast between the still repose and grand sublimity of nature and the dreadful errand on which the men now pressing forward to the little town are bent! To them nature speaks in vain! they are engrossed with but one thought.

The capture of Bobbio—an easy task—put the soldiers in possession of the entire Valley of Lucerna; its inhabitants had been chased to the Alps, or their blood mingled with the waters of their own Pelice. Other and remoter expeditions were now projected. Their plan was to traverse the Col Julien, sweep down on the Valley of Prali, which lies on the north of it, chastise its inhabitants, pass on to the Valleys of San Martino and Perosa, and pursuing the circuit of the Valleys, and clearing the ground as they went onward of its inveterate heresy, at least of its heretics, join the main body of crusaders, who, they expected, would by this time have finished their work in the Valley of Angrogna, and all together celebrate their victory. They would then be able to say that they had gone the round of the Waldensian territory, and had at last effected the long-meditated work, so often attempted, but hitherto in vain, of the utter extirpation of its heresy. But the war was destined to have a very different termination.

The expedition across the Col Julien was immediately commenced. A corps of 700 men was detached from the army in Lucerna for this service [Monastier, p. 129]. The ascent of the mountain opens immediately on the north side of Bobbio. We see the soldiers toiling upwards on the track, which is a mere foot-path formed by the herdsmen. At every short distance they pass the thick-planted chalets and hamlets sweetly embowered amid mantling vines, or the branches of the apple and cherry tree, or the goodlier chestnut; but the inhabitants have fled. They have now reached a great height on the mountainside. Beneath is Bobbio, a speck of brown. There is the Valley of Lucerna, a ribbon of green, with a thread of silver woven into it, and lying along amid masses of mighty rocks. There, across Lucerna, are the great mountains that enclose the Valley of Rora, standing up in the silent sky; on the right are the spiky crags that bristle along the Pass of Miraboue, that leads to France, and yonder in the east is a glimpse of the far-extending Plains of Piedmont.

But the summit is yet a long way off, and the soldiers of the Papal legate, bearing their weapons, to be employed, not in venturesome battle, but in cowardly massacre, toil up the ascent. As they gain on the mountain, they look down on pinnacles which half an hour before had looked down on them. Other heights, tall as the former, still rise above them; they climb to these airy spires, which in their turn sink beneath their feet. This process they repeat again and again, and at last they come out upon the downs that clothe the shoulders of the mountain. Now it is that the scene around them becomes one of stupendous and inexpressible grandeur. Away to the east, now fully under the eye, is the plain of Piedmont, green as meadow, and level as ocean. At their feet yawn gorges and abysses, while spiky pinnacles peer up from below as if to buttress the mountain. The horizon is filled with Alpine peaks, conspicuous among which, on the east, is the Col la Vechera, whose snow-clad summit draws the eye to the more than classic valley over which it towers, where the Barbes in ancient days were wont to assemble in synod, and whence their missionaries went forth, at the peril of life, to distribute the Scriptures and sow the seed of the Kingdom. It was not unmarked, doubtless, by this corps, forming, as they meant it should do, the terminating point of their expedition in the Val di Angrogna. On the west, the crowning glory of the scene was Monte Viso, standing up in bold relief in the ebon vault, in a robe of silver. But in vain had Nature spread out her magnificence before men who had neither eyes to see nor hearts to feel her glory.

Climbing on their hands and knees the steep grassy slope in which the pass terminates, they looked down from the summit on the Valley of Prali, at that moment a scene of peace. Its great snow-clad hills, conspicuous among which is the Col d'Abries, kept guard around it. Down their sides rolled foaming torrents, which, uniting in the valley, flowed along in a full and rapid river. Over the bosom of the plain were scattered numerous hamlets. Suddenly on the mountains above had gathered this flock of vultures that with greedy eyes were looking down upon their prey. Impatient to begin their work, the 700 assassins rushed down on the plain.

The troop had reckoned that, no tidings of their approach having reached this secluded valley, they would fall upon its unarmed peasants as falls the avalanche, and crush them. But it was not to be so. Instead of fleeing, panic-struck, as the invaders expected, the men of Prali hastily assembled, and stood to their defence. Battle was joined at the hamlet of Pommiers. The weapons of the Vaudois were rude, but their trust in God, and their indignation at the cowardly and bloody assault, gave them strength and courage. The Piedmontese soldiers, wearied with the rugged, slippery tracks they had traversed, fell beneath the blows of their opponents. Every man of

them was cut down with the exception of one ensign.* Of all the 700, he alone survived. During the carnage, he made his escape, and ascending the banks of a mountain torrent, he crept into a cavity which the summer heats had formed in a mass of snow. There he remained hid for some days; at last, cold and hunger drove him forth to cast himself upon the mercy of the men of Prali. They were generous enough to pardon this solitary survivor of the host that had come to massacre them. They sent him back across the Col Julien, to tell those from whom he had come that the Vaudois had courage to fight for their hearths and altars, and that of the army of 700 which they had sent to slay them, he only had escaped to carry tidings of the fate which had befallen his companions.