

CHAPTER 7

Persecutions and Martyrdoms

A Peace of Twenty-eight Years—Flourishing State—Bersour—A Martyr—Martyrdom of Pastor Gonin—Martyrdoms of a Student and a Monk—Trial and Burning of a Colporteur—A List of Horrible Deaths—The Valleys under the Sway of France—Restored to Savoy—Emmanuel Philibert—Persecution Renewed—Carignano—Persecution Approaches the Mountains—Deputation to the Duke—The Old Paths—Remonstrance to the Duke—to the Duchess—to the Council.

The Church of the Alps had peace for twenty-eight years. This was a time of great spiritual prosperity. Sanctuaries arose in all her Valleys; her pastors and teachers were found too few, and men of learning and zeal, some of them from foreign lands, pressed into her service. Individuals and families in the cities on the plain of Piedmont embraced her faith; and the crowds that attended her worship were continually growing. [George Morel states, in his *Memoirs*, that at this time there were more than 800,000 persons of the religion of the Vaudois. (Leger, *Hist. des Vaudois*, livr. ii., p. 27.) He includes, of course, in this estimate the Vaudois in the Valleys, on the plain of Piedmont, in Naples and Calabria, in the South of France, and in the countries of Germany.] In short, this venerable Church had a second youth. Her lamp, retrimmed, burned with a brightness that justified her time-honoured motto, "A light shining in darkness." The darkness was not now so deep as it had been; the hours of night were drawing to a close. Nor was the Vaudois community the only light that now shone in Christendom. It was one of a constellation of lights, whose brilliance was beginning to irradiate the skies of the Church with an effulgence which no former age had known.

The exemption from persecution, which the Waldenses enjoyed during this period, was not absolute, but comparative. The lukewarm are seldom molested; and the quickened zeal of the Vaudois brought with it a revival of the persecutor's malignity, though it did not find vent in violences so dreadful as the tempests that had lately smitten them. Only two years after the synod—that is, in 1534--wholesale destruction fell upon the Vaudois Churches of Provence; but the sad story of their extinction will more appropriately be told elsewhere. In the valleys of Piedmont events were from time to time occurring that showed that the inquisitor's vengeance had been scotched, not killed. While the Vaudois as a race were prosperous, their churches multiplying, and their faith extending its geographical area from

one year to another, individual Vaudois were being at times seized, and put to death, at the stake, on the rack, or by the cord.

Three years after, the persecution broke out anew, and raged for a short time. Charles III. of Savoy, a prince of mild manners, but under the rule of the priests, being solicited by the Archbishop of Turin and the inquisitor of the same city, gave his consent to "hunting down" the heretics of the Valleys. The commission was given to a nobleman of the name of Bersour, whose residence was at Pinerolo, near the entrance of the Valley of Perosa. Bersour, a man of savage disposition, collected a troop of 500 horse and foot, and attacked the Valley of Angrogna. He was repulsed, but the storm which had rolled away from the mountains fell upon the plains. Turning to the Vaudois who resided around his own residence, he seized a great number of persons, whom he threw into the prisons and convents of Pinerolo and the Inquisition of Turin. Many of them suffered in the flames. One of these martyrs, Catalan Girard, quaintly taught the spectators a parabolic lesson, standing at the pile. From amid the flames he asked for two stones, which were instantly brought him. The crowd looked on in silence, curious to know what he meant to do with them. Rubbing them against each other, he said, "You think to extinguish our poor Churches by your persecutions. You can no more do so, than I with my feeble hands can crush these stones" [Leger, livr. ii., p. 27].

Heavier tempests seemed about to descend, when suddenly the sky cleared above the confessors of the Alps. It was a change in the politics of Europe in this instance, as in many others, that stayed the arm of persecution. Francis I. of France demanded of Charles, Duke of Savoy, permission to march an army through his dominions. The object of the French king was the recovery of the Duchy of Milan, a long-contested prize between himself and Charles V. The Duke of Savoy refused the request of his brother monarch; but reflecting that the passes of the Alps were in the hands of the men whom he was persecuting, and that should he continue his oppressions, the Vaudois might open the gates of his kingdom to the enemy, he sent orders to Bersour to stop the persecution in the Valleys.

In 1536, the Waldensian Church had to mourn the loss of one of the more distinguished of her pastors. Martin Gonin, of Angrogna—a man of public spirit and rare gifts—who had gone to Geneva on ecclesiastical affairs, was returning through Dauphine, when he was apprehended on suspicion of being a spy. he cleared himself of that charge, but the gaoler searching his person, and discovering certain papers upon him, he was convicted of what the parliament of Grenoble accounted a much greater crime—heresy. Condemned to die, he was led forth at night, and drowned in the river Isere.

He would have suffered at the stake had not his persecutors feared the effect of his dying words upon the spectators [Monastier, p. 153].

There were others, also called to ascend the martyr-pile, whose names we must not pass over in silence. Two pastors returning from Geneva to their flocks in the Valleys, in company of three French Protestants, were seized at the Col de Tamiers, in Savoy, and carried to Chambery. There all five were tried, condemned, and burned. The fate of Nicolas Sartoire is yet more touching. He was a student of theology at Geneva, and held one of those bursaries which the Lords of Bern had allotted for the training of young men as pastors in the Churches of the Valleys. He set out to spend his holiday with his family in Piedmont. We know how Vaudois heart yearns for its native mountains; nor would the coming of the youth awaken less lively anticipations on the part of his friends. The paternal threshold, alas! he was never to cross; his native Valleys he was to tread no more. Travelling by the pass of St. Bernard, and the grand valley of Aosta, he had just passed the Italian frontier, when he was apprehended on the suspicion of heresy. It was the month of May, when all was life and beauty in the vales and mountains around him; he himself was in the spring-time of existence; it was hard to lay down life at such a moment; but the great captain from whose feet he had just come, had taught him that the first duty of a soldier of Christ is obedience. He confessed his Lord, nor could promises or threats—and both were tried—make him waver. He continued steadfast unto the end, and on the 4th of May, 1557, he was brought forth from his dungeon at Aosta, and burned alive [Leger, livr. ii., p. 29].

The martyr who died thus heroically at Aosta was a youth, the one we are now to contemplate was a man of fifty. Geofroi Varaile was a native of the town of Busco, in Piedmont. His father had been a captain in that army of murderers who, in 1488, ravaged the Valleys of Lucerna and Angrogna. The son in 1520 became a monk, and possessing the gift of a rare eloquence, he was sent on a preaching tour, in company with another cowed ecclesiastic, yet more famous, Bernardo Ochino of Sienna, the founder of the order of the Capuchins. The arguments of the men he was sent to convert staggered Varaile. He fled to Geneva, and in the city of the Reformers he was taught more fully the "way of life." Ordained as a pastor, he returned to the Valleys, where "like another Paul, says Leger, "he preached the faith he once destroyed." After a ministry of some months, he set out to pay a visit of a few days to his native town of Busco. He was apprehended by the monks who were lying in wait for him. He was condemned to death by the Inquisition of Turin. His execution took place in the castle-piazza of the same city, March 29th, 1558. He walked to the place where he was to die with a firm step and a serene countenance; he addressed the vast multitude around his pile in a way that drew tears from many eyes; after this, he

began to sing with a loud voice, and so continued till he sank amid the flames [Leger, livr. ii., p. 29].

Two years before this, the same piazza, the castle-yard at Turin, had witnessed a similar spectacle. Barthelemy Hector was a bookseller in Poitiers. A man of warm but well-tempered zeal, he travelled as far as the Valleys, diffusing that knowledge that maketh wise unto salvation. In the assemblage of white peaks that look down on the Pra del Tor is one named La Vechera, so called because the cows love the rich grass that clothes its sides in summer-time. Barthelemy Hector would take his seat on the slopes of the mountain, and gathering the herdsmen and agriculturists of the Pra round him, would induce them to buy his books, by reading passages to them. Portions of the Scriptures also would he recite to the grandames and maidens as they watched their goats, or plied the distaff. His steps were tracked by the inquisitor, even amid these wild solitudes. He was dragged to Turin, to answer for the crime of selling Genevese books. His defence before his judges discovered an admirable courage and wisdom.

"You have been caught in the act," said his judge, "of selling books that contain heresy. What say you?"

"If the Bible is heresy to you, it is truth to me," replied the prisoner.

"But you use the Bible to deter men from going to mass," urged the judge.

"If the Bible deters men from going to mass," responded Barthelemy, "it is a proof that God disapproves of it, and that mass is idolatry."

The judge, deeming it expedient to make short shrift with such a heretic, exclaimed, "Retract."

"I have spoken only truth," said the bookseller, "can I change truth as I would a garment?"

His judges kept him some months in prison, in the hope that his recantation would save them the necessity of burning him. This unwillingness to have resort to the last penalty was owing to no feeling of pity for the prisoner, but entirely to the conviction that these repeated executions were endangering the cause of their Church. "The smoke of these martyr-piles," as was said with reference to the death of Patrick Hamilton, "was infecting those on whom it blew." But the constancy of Barthelemy compelled his persecutors to disregard these prudential considerations. At last, despairing of his abjuration, they brought him forth and consigned him to the flames. His behaviour at the stake "drew rivers of tears," says Leger, "from the eyes of

many in the Popish crowd around his stake, while others vented reproaches and invectives against the cruelty of the monks and the inquisitors [Leger, Livr. ii., p. 28].

These are only a few of the many martyrs by whom, even during this period of comparative peace and prosperity, the Church of the Valleys was called to testify against Rome. Some of these martyrs perished by cruel, barbarous, and most horrible methods. To recite all these cases would be beyond our purpose, and to depict the revolting and infamous details would be to narrate what no reader could peruse. We shall quote only part of the brief summary of Muston. "There is no town in Piedmont," says he, "under a Vaudois pastor, where some of our brethren have not been put to death ... Hugo Chiamps of Finestrelle had his entrails torn from his living body, at Turin. Peter Geymarali of Bobbio, in like manner, had his entrails taken out at Lucerna, and a fierce cat thrust in their place to torture him further; Maria Romano was buried alive at Rocco-patia; Magdalen Foulano underwent the same fate at San Giovanni; Susan Michelini was bound hand and foot, and left to perish of cold and hunger at Saracena. Bartholomew Fache, gashed with sabres, had the wounds filled up with quicklime, and perished thus in agony at Fenile; Daniel Michelini had his tongue torn out at Bobbio for having praised God. James Baridari perished covered with sulphurous matches, which had been forced into his flesh under the nails, between the fingers, in the nostrils, in the lips, and over all his body, and then lighted. Daniel Revelli had his mouth filled with gunpowder, which, being lighted, blew his head to pieces. Maria Monnen, taken at Liouza, had the flesh cut from her cheek and chin bone, so that her jaw was left bare, and she was thus left to perish. Paul Garnier was slowly sliced to pieces at Rora. Thomas Margueti was mutilated in an indescribable manner at Miraboco, and Susan Jaquin cut in bits at La Torre. Sara Rostagnol was slit open from the legs to the bosom, and so left to perish on the road between Eyrat and Lucerna. Anne Charbonnier was impaled and carried thus on a pike, as a standard, from San Giovanni to La Torre. Daniel Rambaud, at Paesano, had his nails torn off, then his fingers chopped off, then his feet and his hands, then his arms and his legs, with each successive refusal on his part to abjure the Gospel" [Muston, *Israel of the Alps*, chap. 8.] Thus the roll of martyrs runs on, and with each new sufferer comes a new, a more excruciating and more horrible mode of torture and death.

We have already mentioned the demand which the King of France made upon the Duke of Savoy, Charles III., that he would permit him to march an army through his territories. The reply was a refusal; but Francis I. must needs have a road into Italy. Accordingly he seized upon Piedmont, and held possession of it, together with the Waldensian valleys, for twenty-three years. The Waldenses had found the sway of Francis I. more tolerant than

that of their own princes; for though Francis hated Lutheranism, the necessities of his policy often compelled him to court the Lutherans, and so it came to pass that while he was burning heretics in Paris he spared them in the Valleys. But the general peace of Chateau Cambresis, April 3rd, 1559, restored Piedmont, with the exception of Turin, to its former rulers of the House of Savoy [Leger, livr. ii., p. 29.] Charles III. had been succeeded in 1553 by Emmanuel Philibert. Philibert was a prince of superior talents and humane disposition, and the Vaudois cherished the hope that under him they would be permitted to live in peace, and to worship as their fathers had done. What strengthened these just expectations was the fact that Philibert had married a sister of the King of France, Henry II., who had been carefully instructed in the Protestant faith by her illustrious relations, Margaret, Queen of Navarre, and Renee of France, daughter of Louis XII. But, alas! the treaty that restored Emmanuel Philibert to the throne of his ancestors, contained a clause binding the contracting parties to extinguish heresy. This was to send him back to his subjects with a dagger in his hand.

Whatever the king might incline—and, strengthened by the counsels of his Protestant queen, he would doubtless, if he could, have dealt humanely by his faithful subjects, the Vaudois—his intentions were overborne by men of stronger wills and more determined resolves. The inquisitors of his kingdom, the nuncio of the Pope, and the ambassadors of Spain and France, united in urging upon him the purgation of his dominions, in terms of the agreement in the Treaty of Peace. The unhappy monarch, unable to resist these powerful solicitations, issued on the 15th February, 1560, an edict forbidding his subjects to hear the Protestant preachers in the Valley of Lucerna, or anywhere else, under pain of a fine of 100 dollars of gold for the first offence, and of the galleys for life for the second. This edict had reference mainly to the Protestants on the plain of Piedmont, who resorted in crowds to hear sermon in the Valleys. There followed, however, in a short time, a yet severer edict, commanding attendance at mass under pain of death. To carry out this cruel decree, a commission was given to a prince of the blood, Philip of Savoy, Count de Raconis, and with him was associated George Costa, Count de la Trinita, and Thomas Jacomel, the Inquisitor-General, a man as cruel in disposition as he was licentious in manners. To these was added a certain Councillor Corbis, but he was not of the stuff which the business required, and so, after witnessing a few initial scenes of barbarity and horror, he resigned his commission [Monastier, chap. 19, p. 172. Muston, chap. 10, p. 52].

The first burst of the tempest fell on Carignano. This town reposes sweetly on one of the spurs of the Apennines, about twenty miles to the south-west of Turin. It contained many Protestants, some of whom were of good position. The wealthiest were selected and dragged to the burning-pile, in

order to strike terror into the rest. The blow had not fallen in vain; the professors of the Protestant creed in Carignano were scattered; some fled to Turin, then under the domination of France, some to other places, and some, alas! frightened by the tempest in front, turned back and sought refuge in the darkness behind them. They had desired the "better country," but could not enter in at the cost of exile and death.

Having done its work in Carignano, this desolating tempest held its way across the plain of Piedmont, towards those great mountains which were the ancient fortress of the truth, marking its track through the villages and country communes in terror, in pillage, and blood. It moved like one of those thunder-clouds which the traveller on the Alps may often descry beneath him, traversing the same plain, and shooting its lightnings earthwards as it advances. Wherever it was known that there was a Vaudois congregation, thither did the cloud turn. And now we behold it at the foot of the Waldensian Alps—at the entrance of the Valleys, within whose mighty natural bulwarks crowds of fugitives from the towns and villages on the plain have already found asylum.

Rumours of the confiscations, arrests, cruel tortures, and horrible deaths which had befallen the Churches at the foot of their mountains, had preceded the appearance of the crusaders at the entrance of the Valleys. The same devastation which had befallen the flourishing Churches on the plain of Piedmont, seemed to impend over the Churches in the bosom of the Alps. At this juncture the pastors and leading laymen assembled to deliberate on the steps to be taken. Having fasted and humbled themselves before God, they sought by earnest prayer the direction of his Holy Spirit [Leger, livr. ii., p. 29.] They resolved to approach the throne of their prince, and by humble remonstrance and petition, set forth the state of their affairs and the justice of their cause. Their first claim was to be heard before being condemned—a right denied to no one accused, however criminal. They next solemnly disclaimed the main offence laid to their charge, that of departing from the true faith, and of adopting doctrines unknown to the Scriptures, and the early ages of the Church. Their faith was that which Christ Himself had taught; which the apostles, following their Great Master, had preached; which the Fathers had vindicated with their pens, and the martyrs with their blood, and which the first four Councils had ratified, and proclaimed to be the faith of the Christian world. From the "old paths," the Bible and all antiquity being witnesses, they had never turned aside; from father to son they had continued these 1,500 years to walk therein. Their mountains shielded no novelties; they had bowed the knee to no strange gods, and, if they were heretics, so too were the first four Councils; and so too were the apostles themselves. If they erred, it was in the company of the confessors and martyrs of the early ages. They were willing any moment to appeal their

cause to a General Council, provided that Council were willing to decide the question by the only infallible standard they knew, the Word of God. If on this evidence they should be convicted of even one heresy, most willingly would they surrender it. On this, the main point of their indictment, what more could they promise? Show us, they said, what the errors are which you ask us to renounce under the penalty of death, and you shall not need to ask a second time.

["First, we do protest before the Almighty and All-just God, before whose tribunal we must all one day appear, that we intend to live and die in the holy faith, piety, and religion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we do abhor all heresies that have been, and are, condemned by the Word of God. We do embrace the most holy doctrine of the prophets and apostles, as likewise of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds; we do subscribe to the four Councils, and to all the ancient Fathers, in all such things as are not repugnant to the analogy of faith." (Leger, livr. ii., pp. 30-1.)]

Their duty to God did not weaken their allegiance to their prince. To piety they added loyalty. The throne before which they now stood had not more faithful and devoted subjects than they. When had they plotted treason, or disputed lawful command of their sovereign? Nay, the more they feared God, the more they honoured the king. Their services, their substance, their life, were all at the disposal of their prince; they were willing to lay them all down in defence of his lawful prerogative; one thing only they could not surrender—their conscience.

As regarded their Romanist fellow-subjects of Piedmont, they had lived in good-neighbourhood with them. Whose person had they injured—whose property had they robbed—whom had they over-reached in their bargains? Had they not been kind, courteous, honest? If their hills had vied in fertility with the naturally richer plains at their feet, and if their mountain-homes had been filled with store of corn, and oil, and wine, not always found in Piedmontese dwellings, to what was this owing, save to their superior industry, frugality, and skill? Never had marauding expedition descended from their hills to carry off the goods of their neighbours, or to inflict retaliation for the many murders and robberies to which they had had to submit. Why, then, should their neighbours rise against them to exterminate them, as if they were a horde of evil-doers, in whose neighbourhood no man could live in peace; and why should their sovereign unsheathe the sword against those who had never been found disturbers of his kingdom, nor plotters against his government, but who, on the contrary, had ever striven to maintain the authority of his law, and the honour of his throne? "One thing is certain, most serene prince," they said, in conclusion, "that the Word of God will not perish, but will abide for ever. If, then, our religion is the

pure Word of God, as we are persuaded it is, and not a human invention, no human power will be able to abolish it." [See in Leger (livr. ii., pp. 30-1) the petition of the Vaudois presented "Au Serenissime et tres-Puissant Prince, Philibert Emmanuel, Due de Savoye, Prince de Piemont, notre tres-Clement Seigneur" (To the Serene and most Mighty Prince, Philibert Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy, Prince of Piedmont, our most Gracious Lord).]

Never was there a more solemn, or a more just, or a more respectful remonstrance presented to any throne. The wrong about to be done them was enormous, yet not an angry word, nor a single accusatory sentence, do the Vaudois permit themselves to utter. But to what avail this solemn protest, this triumphant vindication? The more complete and conclusive it is, the more manifest does it make the immense injustice and the flagrant criminality of the House of Savoy. The more the Vaudois put themselves in the right, the more they put the Church of Rome in the wrong; and they who have already doomed them to perish are but the more resolutely determined to carry out their purpose.

This document was accompanied by two others: one to the queen, and one to the Council. The one to the queen is differently conceived from that to the duke. They offer no apology for their faith: the queen herself was of it. They allude in a few touching terms to the sufferings they had already been subjected to, and to the yet greater that appeared to impend. This was enough, they knew, to awaken all her sympathies, and enlist her as their advocate with the king, after the example of Esther, and other noble women in former times, who valued their lofty station less for its dazzling honours, than for the opportunities it gave them of shielding the persecuted confessors of the truth. [See in Leger (livr. ii., p. 32), "A la tres-Vertueuse et tres-Excellente Dame, Madame Marguerite de France, Duchesse de Savoye et de Berry"—"the petition of her poor and humble subjects, the inhabitants of the Valleys of Lucerna and Angrogna, and Perosa and San Martino, and all those of the plain who call purely upon the name of the Lord Jesus."]

The remonstrance presented to the Council was couched in terms more plain and direct, yet still respectful. They bade the counsellors of the king beware what they did; they warned them that every drop of innocent blood they should spill they would one day have to account for; that if the blood of Abel, though only that of one man, cried with a voice so loud that God heard it in heaven, and came down to call its shedder to reckoning, how much mightier the cry that would arise from the blood of a whole nation, and how much more terrible the vengeance with which it would be visited! In fine, they reminded the Council that what they asked was not an unknown privilege in Piedmont, nor would they be the first or the only persons who had enjoyed the indulgence if it should be extended to them. Did not the

Jew and the Saracen live unmolested in their cities? Did they not permit the Israelite to build his synagogue, and the Moor to read his Koran, without annoyance or restraint? Was it a great thing that the faith of the Bible should be placed on the same level in this respect with that of the Crescent, and that the descendants of the men who for generations had been the subjects of the House of Savoy, and who had enriched the dominions with their virtues, and defended them with their blood, should be treated with the same humanity that was shown to the alien and the unbeliever?

These petitions the confessors of the Alps dispatched to the proper quarter, and having done so, they waited an answer with eyes lifted up to heaven. If that answer should be peace, with what gratitude to God and to their prince would they hail it! should it be otherwise, they were ready to accept that alternative too; they were prepared to die.