

CHAPTER 9

The Great Campaign of 1561

Mass or Extermination—Covenant in the Valleys—Their Solemn Oath—How the Waldenses Recant—Their Energetic Preparations—La Trinita Advances his Army—Twice attempts to Enter Angrogna, and is Repulsed—A Third Attempt—Attacks on Three Points—Repulsed on all Three—Ravages the Valley of Rora—Receives Reinforcements from France and Spain—Commences a Third Campaign—Six Men against an Army—Utter Discomfiture—Extinction of La Trinita's Host—Peace.

These frightful inflictions the Waldenses had submitted to, in the hope that the deputies whom they had sent to the duke would bring back with them an honourable peace. The impatience with which they waited their return may well be conceived. At last, after an absence of six weeks, the commissioners reappeared in the Valleys; but their dejected faces, even before they had uttered a word, told that they had not succeeded. They had been sent back with an order, enjoining on the Vaudois unconditional submission to the church of Rome on pain of extermination. To enforce that order to the uttermost a more numerous army was at that moment being raised. The mass or universal slaughter—such was the alternative now presented to them.

The spirit of the people woke up. Rather than thus disgrace their ancestors, imperil their own souls, and entail a heritage of slavery on their children, they would die a thousand times. Their depression was gone; they were as men who had awakened from heavy sleep; they had found their arms. Their first care was to recall their pastors, their next to raise up their fallen churches, and their third to resume public service in them. Daily their courage grew, and once more joy lighted up their faces.

There came letters of sympathy and promises of help from their fellow-Protestants of Geneva, Dauphine, and France. Over the two latter countries persecution at that hour impended, but their own dangers made them all the more ready to succour their brethren of the Valleys. "Thereupon," says an historian, "took place one of those grand and solemn scenes, which, at once heroic and religious, seem rather adapted for an epic poem than for grave history" [Muston, p. 78].

The Waldenses of Lucerna sent deputies across the mountains, then covered to a great depth with snow, to propose an alliance with the Protestants of

the Valley of Pragelas, who were at that time threatened by their sovereign, Francis I. The proposed alliance was joyfully accepted. Assembling on a plateau of snow facing the mountains of Sestrieres, and the chain of the Guinevert, the deputies swore to stand by each other, and render mutual support in the coming struggle [Monastier, p. 188. Muston, p. 78]. It was agreed that this oath of alliance should be sworn with a like solemnity in the Waldensian Valleys.

The deputies from Pragelas, crossing the Mount Julien, arrived at Bobbio on the 21st January, 1561. Their coming was singularly opportune. On the evening before, a ducal proclamation had been published in the Valleys, commanding the Vaudois, within twenty-four hours, to give attendance at mass, or abide the consequences—"fire, sword, the cord: the three arguments of Romanism," says Muston. This was the first news with which the Pragelese deputies were met on their arrival. With all the more enthusiasm they proceeded to renew their oath. Ascending a low hill behind Bobbio, the deputies from Pragelas, and those from Lucerna, standing erect in the midst of the assembled heads of families, who kneeled around, pronounced these words—

"In the name of the Vaudois Churches of the Alps, of Dauphine, and of Piedmont, which have ever been united, and of which we are the representatives, we here promise, our hands on our Bibles, and in the presence of God, that all our Valleys shall courageously sustain each other in matters of religion, without prejudice to the obedience due to their legitimate superiors.

"We promise to maintain the Bible, whole and without admixture, according to the usage of the true Apostolic Church, persevering in this holy religion, though it be at the peril of our life, in order that we may transmit it to our children, intact and pure, as we received it from our fathers.

"We promise aid and succour to our persecuted brothers, not regarding our individual interests, but the common cause; and not relying upon man, but upon God" [Muston, pp. 78-9].

The physical grandeurs of the spot were in meet accordance with the moral sublimity of the transaction. Immediately beneath was spread out the green bosom of the valley, with here and there the silver of the Pelice gleaming out amid vineyards and acacia-groves. Filling the horizon on all sides save one stood up an array of magnificent mountains, white with the snows of winter. Conspicuous among them were the grand peaks of the Col de Malure and the Col de la Croix. They looked the silent and majestic witnesses of the oath in which a heroic people bound themselves to die rather than permit the

defilement of their hearths, and the profanation of their altars, by the hordes of an idolatrous tyranny. It was in this grand fashion that the Waldenses opened one of the most brilliant campaigns ever waged by their arms.

The next morning, according to the duke's order, they must choose between the mass and the penalty annexed to refusal. A neighbouring church—one of those which had been taken from them—stood ready, with altar decked and tapers lighted, for the Vaudois to hear their first mass. Hardly had the day dawned when the expected penitents were at the church door. They would show the duke in what fashion they meant to read their recantation. They entered the building. A moment they stood surveying the strange transformation their church had undergone, and then they set to work. To extinguish the tapers, pull down the images, and sweep into the street rosary, and crucifix, and all the other paraphernalia of the Popish worship, was but the work of a few minutes. The minister, Humbert Artus, then ascended the pulpit, and reading out as his text Isaiah xlv. 20—"Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations: they have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a God that cannot save"—preached a sermon which struck the key-note of the campaign then opening.

The inhabitants of the hamlets and chalets in the mountains rushed down, like their own winter torrents, into Lucerna, and the army of the Vaudois reinforced, set out to purge the temple at Villaro. On their way they encountered the Piedmontese garrison. They attacked and drove them back; the monks, seigneurs, and magistrates, who had come to receive the abjuration of the heretics, accompanying the troops in their ignominious flight. The whole band of fugitives—soldiers, priests, and judges—shut themselves up in the town of Villaro, which was now besieged by the Vaudois. Thrice did the garrison from La Torre attempt to raise the siege, and thrice were they repulsed. At last, on the tenth day, the garrison surrendered, and had their lives spared, two Waldensian pastors accompanying them to La Torre, the soldiers expressing greater confidence in them than in any other escort.

The Count La Trinita, seeing his garrison driven out, struck his encampment at Cavour, and moved his army into the Valleys. He again essayed to sow dissension amongst the Vaudois by entangling them in negotiations for peace, but by this time they had learned too well the value of his promises to pay the least attention to them, or to intermit for an hour their preparations for defence. It was now the beginning of February, 1561.

The Vaudois laboured with the zeal of men who feel that their cause is a great and a righteous one, and are prepared to sacrifice all for it. They

erected barricades; they planted ambushes; they appointed signals, to telegraph the movements of the enemy from post to post. "Every house," says Muston, "became a manufactory of pikes, bullets, and other weapons." They selected the best marksmen their Valleys could furnish, and formed them into the "Flying Company," whose duty it was to hasten to the point where the danger pressed the most. To each body of fighting men they attached two pastors, to maintain the morale of their army. The pastors, morning and evening, led the public devotions; they prayed with the soldiers before going into battle; and when the fighting was over, and the Vaudois were chasing the enemy down their great mountains, and through their dark gorges, they exerted themselves to prevent the victory from being stained by any unnecessary effusion of blood.

La Trinita knew well that if he would subjugate the Valleys, and bring the campaign to a successful end, he must make himself master of the Pra del Tor. Into that vast natural citadel was now gathered the main body of the Waldensian people. What of their herds and provisions remained to them had been transported thither; there they had constructed mills and baking-ovens; there, too, sat their council, and thence directed the whole operations of the defence. A blow struck there would crush the Vaudois' heart, and convert what the Waldenses regarded as their impregnable castle into their tomb.

Deferring the chastisement of the other valleys meanwhile, La Trinita directed all his efforts against Angrogna. His first attempt to enter it with his army was made on the 4th February. The fighting lasted till night, and ended in his repulse. His second attempt, three days after, carried him some considerable way into Angrogna, burning and ravaging, but his partial success cost him dear, and the ground won had ultimately to be abandoned [Monastier, p. 190. Muston, p. 80].

The 14th of February saw the severest struggle. Employing all his strategy to make himself master of the much-coveted Pra, with all in it, he divided his army into three corps, and advanced against it from three points. One body of troops, marching along the gorges of the Angrogna, and traversing the narrow chasm that leads up to the Pra, attacked it on the south. Another body, climbing the heights from Pramol, and crossing the snowy flanks of La Vechera, tried to force an entrance on the east; while a third, ascending from San Martino, and crossing the lofty summits that wall in the Pra on the north, descended upon it from that quarter. The count's confident expectation was that if his men should be unable to force an entrance at one point, they were sure to do so at another.

No scout had given warning of what was approaching. While three armies were marching to attack them, the Waldenses, in their grand valley, with its rampart of ice-crowned peaks, were engaged in their morning devotions. Suddenly the cries of fugitives, and the shouts of assailants, issuing from the narrow chasm on the south, broke upon their ear, together with the smoke of burning hamlets. Of the three points of attack, this was the easiest to be defended. Six brave Waldensian youths strode down the valley, to stop the way against La Trinita's soldiers. They were six against an army.

The road by which the soldiers were advancing is long and gloomy, and overhung by great rocks, and so narrow that only two men can march abreast. On this side rises the mountain; on that, far down, thunders the torrent; a ledge in the steep face of the cliff, running here in the darkness, there in the sunshine, serves as a pathway. It leads to what is termed the gate of the Pra. That gateway is formed by an angle of the mountain, which obtrudes upon the narrow ledge on the one side, while a huge rock rises on the other, and still further narrows the point of ingress into the Pra del Tor. Access into the famous Pra, of which La Trinita was now striving to make himself master, there is not on this side, save through this narrow opening; seeing that on the right rises the mountain; on the left yawns the gulf, into which, if one steps aside but in the least, he tumbles headlong. To friend and foe alike the only entrance into the Pra del Tor on the south is by this gate of Nature's own erecting. It was here that the six Waldensian warriors took their stand [Monastier, p. 191]. Immovable as their own Alps, they not only checked the advance of the host, but drove it back in a panic-stricken mass, which made the precipices of the defile doubly fatal.

Others would have hastened to their aid, had not danger suddenly presented itself in another quarter. On the heights of La Vechera, crossing the snow, was descried an armed troop, making their entrance into the valley on the east. Before they had time to descend they were met by the Waldenses, who dispersed them and made them flee. Two of the attacking parties of the count have failed; will the third have better success?

As the Waldenses were pursuing the routed enemy on La Vechera, they saw yet another armed troop, which had crossed the mountains that separate the Val San Martino from the Pra del Tor on the north, descending upon them. Instantly the alarm was raised. A few men only could they dispatch to meet the invaders. These lay in ambush at the mouth of a defile through which the attacking party was making its way down into the Pra. Emerging from the defile, and looking down into the valley beneath them, they exclaimed, "Haste, haste! Angrogna is ours." The Vaudois, starting up and crying out, "It is you that are ours," rushed upon them sword in hand. Trusting to their superior numbers, the Piedmontese soldiers fought

desperately. But a few minutes sufficed for the men of the Valleys to hurry from the points where they were now victorious, to the assistance of their brethren. The invaders, seeing themselves attacked on all sides, turned and fled up the slopes they had just descended. Many were slain, nor would a man of them have re-crossed the mountains but for the pastor of the Flying Company, who, raising his voice to the utmost pitch, entreated the pursuers to spare the lives of those who were no longer able to resist. Among the slain was Charles Truchet, who so cruelly ravaged the commune of Rioclaret a few months before. A stone from a sling laid him prostrate on the ground, and his head was cut off with his own sword. Louis de Monteuil, another noted persecutor of the Vaudois, perished in the same action.

Furious at his repulse, the count La Trinita turned his arms against the almost defenceless Valley of Rora. He ravaged it, burning its little town, and chasing away its population of eighty families, who escaped over the snows of the mountains to Villaro, in the Valley of Lucerna. That valley he next entered with his soldiers, and though it was for the moment almost depopulated, the Popish general received so warm a welcome from those peasants who remained that, after being again and again beaten, he was fain to draw off his men-at-arms, and retreat to his old quarters at Cavour, there to chew the cud over his misfortunes, and hatch new stratagems and plan new attacks, which he fondly hoped would retrieve his disgraces.

La Trinita spent a month in reinforcing his army, greatly weakened by the losses it had sustained. The King of France sent him ten companies of foot, and some other choice soldiers [Leger, part ii., p. 36. Gilles, chap. 25.] There came a regiment from Spain; and numerous volunteers from Piedmont, comprising many of the nobility. From 4,000, the original number of his army, it was now raised to 7,000 [Ibid., part ii., p. 37]. He thought himself strong enough to begin a third campaign. He was confident that this time he would wipe out the disgrace which had befallen his arms, and sweep from the earth at once and for ever the great scandal of the Waldenses. He again directed all his efforts against Angrogna, the heart and bulwark of the Valleys.

It was Sunday, the 17th of March, 1561. The whole of the Vaudois assembled in the Pra del Tor had met on the morning of that day, soon after dawn, as was their wont, to unite in public devotion. The first rays of the rising sun were beginning to light up the white hills around them, and the last cadences of their morning psalm were dying away on the grassy slopes of the Pra, when a sudden alarm was raised. The enemy was approaching by three routes. On the ridges of the eastern summits appeared one body of armed men; another was defiling up the chasm, and in a few minutes would pour itself, through the gateway already described, into the Pra; while a

third was forcing itself over the rocks by a path intermediate between the two. Instantly the enemy was met on all the points of approach. A handful of Waldensians sufficed to thrust back along the narrow gorge the line of glittering cuirassed men, who were defiling through it. At the other two points, where bastions of rock and earth had been erected, the fighting was severe, and the dead lay thick, but the day at both places went against the invaders. Some of the ablest captains were among the slain. The number of the soldiers killed was so great that Count La Trinita is said to have sat down and wept when he beheld the heaps of the dead [Muston, p. 83]. It was matter of astonishment at the time that the Waldenses did not pursue the invaders, for had they done so, being so much better acquainted with the mountain-paths, not one of all that host would have been left alive to carry tidings of its discomfiture to the inhabitants of Piedmont. Their pastors restrained the victorious Vaudois, having laid it down as a maxim at the beginning of the campaign that they would use with moderation and clemency whatever victories the "God of battles" might be pleased to give them, and that they would spill no blood unless when absolutely necessary to prevent their own being shed. The number of slain Piedmontese was again out of all proportion to those who had fallen on the other side; so much so, that it was currently said in the cities of Piedmont that "God was fighting for the barbets" [Ibid. Monastier, p. 194].

More deeply humiliated and disgraced than ever, La Trinita led back the remains of his army to its old quarters. Well had it been for him if he had never set foot within the Waldensian territory, and not less so for many of those who followed him, including not a few of the nobles of Piedmont, whose bones were now bleaching on the mountains of the Vaudois. But the Popish general was slow to learn the lesson of these events. Even yet he harboured the design of returning to assail that fatal valley where he had lost so many laurels, and buried so many soldiers; but he covered his purpose with craft. Negotiations had been opened between the men of the Valleys and the Duke of Savoy, and as they were proceeding satisfactorily, the Vaudois were without suspicions of evil. This was the moment that La Trinita chose to attack them. He hastily assembled his troops, and on the night of the 16th April he marched them against the Pra del Tor, hoping to enter it unopposed, and give the Vaudois "as sheep to the slaughter."

The snows around the Pra were beginning to burn in the light of morning when the attention of the people, who had just ended their united worship, was attracted by unusual sounds which were heard to issue from the gorge that led into the valley. On the instant six brave mountaineers rushed to the gateway that opens from the gorge. The long file of La Trinita's soldiers was seen advancing two abreast, their helmets and cuirasses glittering in the light. The six Vaudois made their arrangements, and calmly waited till the

enemy was near. The first two Vaudois, holding loaded muskets, knelt down. The second two stood erect, ready to fire over the heads of the first two. The third two undertook the loading of the weapons as they were discharged. The invaders came on. As the first two of the enemy turned the rock they were shot down by the two foremost Vaudois. The next two of the attacking force fell in like manner by the shot of the Vaudois in the rear. The third rank of the enemy presented themselves only to be laid by the side of their comrades. In a few minutes a little heap of dead bodies blocked the pass, rendering impossible the advance of the accumulating file of the enemy in the chasm.

Meanwhile, other Vaudois climbed the mountains that overhang the gorge in which the Piedmontese arm was imprisoned. Tearing up the great stones with which the hill-side was strewn, the Vaudois sent them rolling down upon the host. Unable to advance from the wall of dead in front, and unable to flee from the ever-accumulating masses behind, the soldiers were crushed in dozens by the falling rocks. Panic set in: and panic in such a position was dreadful. Wedged together on the narrow ledge, with a murderous rain of rocks falling on them, their struggle to escape was frightful. They jostled one another, and trod each other under foot, while vast numbers fell over the precipice, and were dashed on the rocks or drowned in the torrent [Leger, part ii., p. 37. Muston, p. 85]. When those at the entrance of the valley, who were watching the result, saw the crystal of the Angrogna begin about midday to be changed into blood, "Ah!" said they, "the Pra del Tor has been taken; La Trinita has triumphed; there flows the blood of the Vaudois." And, indeed, the count on beginning his march that morning is said to have boasted that by noon the torrent of the Angrogna would be seen to change colour; and so in truth it did. Instead of a pellucid stream, rolling along on a white gravelly bed, which is its usual appearance at the mouth of the valley, it was now deeply dyed from recent slaughter. But when the few who had escaped the catastrophe returned to tell what had that day passed within the defiles of the Angrogna, it was seen that it was not the blood of the Vaudois, but the blood of their ruthless invaders, which dyed the waters of the Angrogna. The count withdrew on that same night with his army, to return no more to the Valleys.

Negotiations were again resumed, not this time through the Count La Trinita, but through Philip of Savoy, Count of Raconis, and were speedily brought to a satisfactory issue. The Duke of Savoy had but small merit in making peace with the men whom he found he could not conquer. The capitulation was signed on the 5th of June, 1561, and its first clause granted an indemnity for all offences. It is open to remark that this indemnity was given to those who had suffered, not to those who had committed the offences it condoned. The articles that followed permitted the Vaudois to

erect churches in their Valleys, with the exception of two or three of their towns, and to hold public worship—in short, to celebrate all the offices of their religion. All the "ancient franchises, immunities, and privileges, whether conceded by his Highness, or by his Highness's predecessors," were renewed, provided they were vouched by public documents [the Articles of Capitulation are given in full in Leger, part ii., pp. 38-40]. Such was the arrangement that closed this war of fifteen months. The Vaudois ascribed it in great part to the influence of the good Duchess Margaret. The Pope designated it a "pernicious example," which he feared would not want imitators in those times when the love of many to the Roman See was waxing cold. It stank in the nostrils of the prelates and monks of Piedmont, to whom the heretics had been a free booty. Nevertheless, Duke Emanuel Philibert faithfully maintained its stipulations, the duchess being by his side to counteract any pressure in the contrary direction. This peace, together with the summer that was now opening, began to slowly efface the deep scars persecution had left on the Valleys; and what further helped to console and reanimate this brave but afflicted people, were the sympathy and aid universally tendered them by Protestants abroad, in particular by Calvin and the Elector Palatine, the latter addressing a spirited letter to the duke on behalf of his persecuted subjects [Leger, part ii., p. 41].

Nothing was more admirable than the spirit of devotion which the Vaudois exhibited all through these terrible conflicts. Their Valleys resounded not less with the voice of prayer and praise, than with the din of arms. Their opponents came from carousing, from blaspheming, from murdering, to engage in battle; the Waldenses rose from their knees to unsheathe the sword, and wield it in a cause which they firmly believed to be that of Him to whom they had bent in supplication. When their little army went a-field their barbes always accompanied it, to inspire the soldiers by suitable exhortations before joining battle, and to moderate in the hour of victory a vengeance which, however excusable, would yet have tarnished the glory of the triumph. When the fighting men hastened to the bastion or to the defile, the pastors betook themselves to the mountain's slope, or to its summit, and there with uplifted hands supplicated help from the "Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." When the battle had ceased, and the enemy were in flight, and the victors had returned from chasing their invaders from their Valleys, the grey-haired pastor, the lion-hearted man of battle, the matron, the maiden, the stripling, and the little child, would assemble in Pra del Tor, and while the setting sun was kindling into glory the mountain-tops of their once more ransomed land, they would raise their voices together, and sing the old war-song of Judah, in strains so heroic that

the great rocks around them would send back the thunder of their praise in louder echoes than those of the battle whose triumphant issue they were celebrating.