

A Story of the Waldenses

Taken from the *Introduction* of "The Story of the Waldenses," 1832

DURING the dark ages which succeeded the invasion of Europe by the barbarous nations, when feudal anarchy distracted the civil governments, and a flood of superstition had deluged the Church, Christianity, banished from the seats of empire, and loathing the monkish abodes of indolence and vice, meekly retired into the sequestered valleys of Piedmont. Finding there a race of men unarrayed in hostile armour, uncontaminated by the doctrines and commandments of an apostate Church, unambitious in their temper, and simple in their manners, she preferred their society, and among them took up her abode."

This beautiful passage, from the elegant and eloquent historian of the Churches of the Waldenses, suggested the idea of the following story; in which an attempt is made to sketch the peace, industry, and homefelt happiness of a family in one of the villages of the valleys, and

then very simply to exhibit the nature of the persecution to which, from generation to generation, the people of God have been exposed in almost every Catholic state of Europe.

It is, however, well known to every reader of history, that many Catholics, in every age, have exceedingly disapproved of the measures followed by the priesthood, in regard to the Waldenses, Albigenses, and other Protestant Churches; and the singular note which is quoted at the end of this volume, shows how strong and how generous was the sympathy felt by many a noble, and by more than one royal Catholic, for the wrongs and sufferings of the early Christians of the valleys.

For the information of my readers, it may be necessary to state, that Piedmont, the place to which Christianity is said to have withdrawn, is a tract of country situated at the foot of the Alps, an immense range of mountains, which divides Italy from France, Switzerland, and other countries: it consists of a number of beautiful valleys, embosomed in mountains, which are again encircled by other mountains, and displays in its varied scenery, in most striking contrast, all the fertility and beauty of Eden, with lakes of ice and mountains covered with eternal snow. Many of the passes leading into Piedmont are strongly fortified, not by art, but by nature, which has so multiplied her bulwarks of rocks and rivers, forests and precipices, that "it appears," says Sir Thomas Moreland, "as if the all-wise Creator had, from the beginning, designed that place as a cabinet wherein to put some inestimable jewel, or in which to reserve many thousand souls who should not bow the knee to Baal."

But Christianity was not always secure amid the valleys of the Alps: she had sometimes to escape for her life, to leave the valleys behind her, to cross the mountains in ice and snow, and to seek shelter in Dauphiny, in Provence, and even in the recesses of the Pyrenees.— There, also, beautiful valleys are to be found, rich in every thing that is sweet to the taste, or pleasant to the eye, adorned with the flowers and fruit of the citron and the orange, the aloe and the pomegranate, animated by herds of deer, and cheered by the song of the vintage.

Behold, then, in these valleys, the retreats of a most interesting people, who, in times of misrule and oppression in the state, and of bigotry and superstition in the Church, preserved in simplicity and in purity, the "faith once delivered to the saints." Men that continued, from race to race, a separate people, like the Hebrew fathers of old, who went from one nation to another, and from one kingdom to another people, so the Christians of those early ages, "hunted as partridges on the mountains," and stigmatized as heretics by their enemies; when persecuted in "one city, fled unto another;" and when dislodged from the shelter of one lovely valley, retreated to the sequestered bosom of some other.

These interesting and persecuted people were called Waldenses. It is thought by some that the reason why they were so called, was from the Latin word *vallis*, from which the English word *valley*, and the ecclesiastical word *Valdenses*, are both derived; the latter simply signifies the inhabitants of valleys.

The Waldenses were exceedingly hated by the monks and clergy of the Church of Rome, who called them heretics. Their heresy consisted in the belief of the truth as set forth in the Bible, and in their contempt of many ceremonies and practices of the Roman Catholics. Among other things, the Waldenses affirmed, that the mass signified nothing; that the apostles knew nothing about it; that whatever was preached without Scripture proof was no better than fables; and they would neither kiss the altar, the priest's hands, nor the pope's feet. They placed no value in absolution, saying none could forgive sins but God only. They gave no credit to the legends of the saints, and despised alike their mock miracles and their relics. They dreaded all dedications and benedictions of candles, ashes, oil, fire, salt, water. They said that Christ never gave to his disciples either rockets or mitres; they dissuaded people from going on pilgrimage, and they denied the existence of purgatory, saying, "Where the tree falls, there it lies." They considered once praying in the words and spirit of the Lord's prayer better than the ringing of ten bells, or than the mass itself. They declared they saw no efficacy in the priestly vestments, altars, ornaments, palls, corporals, chalices, and patins. The worship of images, and their presence in the churches, they affirmed to be idolatrous. But the very head and front of their offending was this, they could say a great part of the BIBLE BY HEART!

But while such were the sentiments held and expressed by the people of the valleys, and which must have been extremely offensive to the Catholics, it is but justice to both parties to state, that the Catholic historians of that day bear ample testimony to the excellence of the morality of these persecuted heretics, except in some instances, where their accusations are so absurd and so extravagant as to carry with them their own contradiction.

"These heretics," writes an inquisitor of that age, "These heretics are known by their manners and conversation, for they are orderly and modest in their behaviour and deportment; they avoid all appearance of pride in their dress; they are chaste, temperate and sober; they seek not to amass riches; they abstain from anger; and even while at work, are either learning or teaching." A Catholic prelate says of them, "Their heresy excepted, they generally live a purer life than other Christians. In their morals and lives they are perfect, irreprehensible, without reproach among men."—"They are true in words," says another inquisitor, "unanimous in brotherly love; but their faith is incorrigible and vile, as I have shown in my treatise."

This faith, however, which the Dominican anathematized as incorrigible and vile, was notwithstanding his assertion both divine and holy, the faith that purifieth the heart, worketh by love, and overcometh the world; the faith of the martyrs and confessors of the primitive Church; the faith that supported the first martyr, who, in the exquisite agonies of an excruciating death, went as it were to sleep in peace and stillness, amid all the tumult of his persecutors, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

One circumstance more might be added to this sketch of the character of these depositaries of truth; these lights of the world in the days of darkness; I mean the zeal with which, as the missionaries of their age, they sought to instruct the uninformed, and the simplicity with which they communicated to others their knowledge of that Bible which was withheld from the Roman Catholic laity and of which many of the clergy knew nothing.

But as the following story is intended to convey this information to the juvenile reader, and to interest him in the truths of that Bible which the Waldenses, in some measure, preserved, and through God's blessing, have handed down to us, I shall not here anticipate what follows; but cast myself upon the generosity of my readers, praying that this little book may not pass through their hands without a blessing from Him who can alone make any means of instruction profitable; but who is sometimes pleased to magnify his own omnipotence by the very weakness and feebleness of the instrument which he employs.

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