

The Waldensian Church of Northern Italy

Taken out of the book, "Forgotten Heroes," 1905

A railway ride from the city of Turin to the small and secluded town of Pignerol, and then a coach ride along the high road to La Tour, brings the traveller to the centre of the Waldensian valleys. On the one hand is the Valley of Angrogna, with that of Perouse, and that of St. Martin—the latter close to the French frontier where Felix Neff laboured. On the other hand is the Valley of Lucerna or Pellice, above which rises the majestic height of Monte Viso. The scenery is grand—mountains covered with wood nearly to the summit, meadows bright with flowers, rich vineyards, cornfields intersected by mulberry trees, peaceful homes, and thriving settlements. The valleys are twenty-two miles in length and eighteen in breadth. Twenty thousand people dwell in them, prosperous and contented, none making them afraid. They have a handsome church in Turin itself, opened in December, 1853. Over the outer door are inscribed the words of Jeremiah—"Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." Over the inner—"God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." On the pulpit is the motto, "Lux lucet in tenebris." Yes! The day has broken, and the shadows have fled away! But a price had to be paid, and it is of this we must now hear.

It is probable that the sword of the persecutor would have ultimately overtaken them in their own homes, even supposing that they had never sought to obey the last command of the risen Christ to go forth and to preach the Gospel to every creature. But the danger was precipitated by the determined efforts which the Waldensians made to pierce the dense darkness of the Middle Ages and to send forth missionaries over the lands of Europe. At a very early period in their history their mountain territory was divided into parishes, each parish being placed under the guidance of a pastor, who was aided by a consistory of laymen. This synod met once a year, usually in the Valley Angrogna; it was composed equally of pastors and of laymen, sometimes as many as 150 of each would assemble. No higher office was known among them than that of moderator. The youth, owing to the cost and scarcity of written MSS., were taught to learn by heart the whole gospels and epistles. The Waldensian Church was from early times a missionary Church. Candidates for their ministry would be sent to foreign universities in order to learn the arts of dialectics and disputation. They had a law that all who took orders should work three years as missionaries. They would copy out for themselves MSS. of the Scriptures, and they would travel with these MSS. Throughout the countries of Europe, either in the guise of merchants or of troubadours. So it was that by the year 1200 there were communities of Waldensian believers in places as remote as the provinces of Russian Poland on the outskirts of European civilisation.

The earliest date of a persecuting edict having been launched against the Waldensians in their own valleys was 1198, when the Emperor Otho IV., in his visit to Rome to be crowned by the Pope, issued a decree empowering the Bishop of Turin to suppress and excommunicate them. The result is not known, but it was the beginning of five hundred years of sorrow, and thirty distinct outbreaks of Papal cruelty. In 1332 the Pope first sent an inquisitor into the valleys, by whose agency a pastor was carried off to prison at Marseilles. Twenty years later the attempt was repeated; and in 1378 the first monster of cruelty, the inquisitor Borelli, had 150 Waldensians besides women and children, burnt at Grenoble. This was followed by the tragedy at Christmas,

1400, when a whole community of Waldensians were suddenly surprised in the dead of night, and chased over the mountains thickly covered with snow. When morning dawned, the bodies of fifty children were found dead, many in the arms of their mothers, who had likewise perished of cold. To this day the memory of that Christmas night has never been forgotten.

Dreadful as these incidents were, they were only the droppings of the coming storm. Rome perceived that isolated and spasmodic efforts would be of no avail, and all through the century she endeavoured to stir up the secular powers to do the work of extermination. In the course of the Middle Ages the Waldensians had been martyred in all the countries whither they went; but in their native valleys the Kings of France and the Dukes of Savoy had seldom authorized persecution. But now the year 1487 had come, and Pope Innocent VIII., resolved on a grand effort. A crusade, as though against the Turks, should be proclaimed.

The Pope's bull was addressed to the King of France and to the Duke of Savoy. Indulgences were promised to all who were willing to assist in the complete extermination of those whom the Pope described as venomous serpents. Earthly rewards were also held out to the crusaders, for all who should slay the Waldensians were to have their lands and goods for their own spoil. Ruffians of the worst description flocked to the Papal armies from all parts of Italy and France. The invading host consisted of at least 18,000 men. It was divided into two portions—one was to invade the valleys from Dauphiné, the other from Piedmont. The command was given by the Pope to Cataneo, Archdeacon of Cremona. Before the invasion began, a swarm of monks and friars entered the Vaudois territory, but they found that it was not possible to gain a single convert. The pastors, after a conference decided to send a deputation to the Papal Legate. Two Waldensians, Campo and Desiderio, were dispatched for this purpose, and they thus addressed the Legate—"Do not condemn us without hearing us; we are Christians and faithful subjects; we 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. If God so wills it, all the forces you have assembled against us will nothing avail."

The Legate would not hear, and the signal for advance was given. Horrible deeds of cruelty marked the passage of both the invading armies. At first they met with some success, but in the end the whole crusade terminated in hopeless and disgraceful failure. Many remarkable incidents occurred. On one occasion the Waldensians met for prayer on the top of a lofty hill. As the Catholic army slowly approached, they lifted up their voices and cried—"O God of our fathers, hear us and deliver us." A French captain stood out from the enemy's line, and with shocking blasphemies told them that he would himself answer their prayers. Directly after this he fell dead, pierced by an arrow, whereupon the troop took to flight, the Waldensians pursuing them with heavy loss.

The Legate met with a total defeat in person. He had penetrated into the very heart of their mountain district, and was on the point of achieving his work of extermination, when a white cloud gathered upon the summits and rolled down into the valley, completely enveloping the Papal army and hiding the Waldensians from their view. A frightful panic ensued; they turned to fly, missiles of every kind were hurled upon them, the whole army became a mob of fugitives trampling each other down, and pushing each other over the precipices.

The war lasted a year, and of all that mighty host few ever returned to tell the tale. One division of 700 men was cut off to a man; the ensign of the band crawled away and hid himself among the rocks, till, famished with hunger, he crept forth and begged on his knees for mercy. The Waldensians let him go, and bade him tell the Papal Legate what had befallen the rest, for otherwise the Pope would not be able to solve the mystery.

So ended the tragedy of 1487. It was not the worst but the least of what we have to tell.

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