

CHAPTER 5

Failure of Cataneo's Expedition

The Valley of Angrogna—An Alternative—The Waldenses Prepare for Battle—Cataneo's Repulse—His Rage—He Renews the Attempt—Enters Angrogna with his Army—Advances to the Barrier—Enters the Chasm—The Waldenses on the point of being Cut to Pieces—The Mountain Mist—Deliverance—Utter Rout of the Papal Army—Pool of Saquet—Sufferings of the Waldenses—Extinction of the Invading Host—Deputation to their Prince—Vaudois Children—Peace.

The camp of Cataneo was pitched almost at the gates of La Torre, beneath the shadow of the Castelluzzo. The Papal legate is about to try to force his way into the Val di Angrogna. This valley opens hard by the spot where the legate had established his camp, and runs on for a dozen miles into the Alps, a magnificent succession of narrow gorges and open dells, walled throughout by majestic mountains, and terminating in a noble circular basin—the Pra del Tor—which is set round with snowy peaks, and forms the most venerated spot in all the Waldensian territory, inasmuch as it was the seat of their college, and the meeting-place of their Barbes.

In the Pra del Tor, or Meadow of the Tower, Cataneo expected to surprise the mass of the Waldensian people, now gathered into it as being the strongest refuge which their hills afforded. There, too, he expected to be joined by the corps which he had sent round by Lucerna to make the circuit of the Valleys, and after devastating Prali and San Martino, to climb the mountain barrier and join their companions in the Pra, little imagining that the soldiers he had dispatched on that errand of massacre were now enriching with their corpses the Valleys they had been sent to subdue. In that same spot where the Barbes had so often met in synod, and enacted rules for the government of their Church and the spread of their faith, the Papal legate would reunite his victorious host, and finish the campaign by proclaiming that now the Waldensian heresy, root and branch, was extinct.

The Waldenses—their humble supplication for peace having been contemptuously rejected, as we have already said—had three courses in their choice—to go to mass, to be butchered as sheep, or to fight for their lives. They chose the last, and made ready for battle. But first they must remove to a place of safety all who were unable to bear arms.

Packing up their kneading-troughs, their ovens, and other culinary utensils, laying their aged on their shoulders, and their sick in couches, and leading

their children by the hand, they began to climb the hills, in the direction of the Pra del Tor, at the head of the Val di Angrogna. Transporting their household stuff, they could be seen traversing the rugged paths, and making the mountains resound with psalms, which they sweetly sung as they journeyed up the ascent. Those who remained busied themselves in manufacturing pikes and other weapons of defence and attack, in repairing the barricades, in arranging themselves into fighting parties, and assigning to the various corps the posts they were to defend.

Cataneo now put his soldiers in motion. Advancing to near the town of La Torre, they made a sharp turn to the right, and entered the Val di Angrogna. Its opening offers no obstruction, being soft and even as any meadow in all England. By-and-by it begins to swell into the heights of Rocomaneot, where the Vaudois had resolved to make a stand. Their fighting men were posted along its ridge. Their army was of the simplest. The bow was almost their only weapon of attack. They wore bucklers of skin, covered with the bark of the chestnut-tree, the better to resist thrust of pike or cut of sword. In the hollow behind, protected by the rising ground on which their fathers, husbands, and brothers were posted, were a number of women and children, gathered there for shelter. The Piedmontese host pressed up the acclivity, discharging a shower of arrows as they advanced, and the Waldensian line on which these missiles fell, seemed to waver, and to be on the point of giving way. Those behind, espying the danger, fell on their knees and, extending their hands in supplication to the God of battles, cried aloud, "O God of our fathers, help us! O God, deliver us!" That cry was heard by the attacking host, and especially by one of its captains, Le Noir of Mondovi, or the Black Mondovi, a proud, bigoted, bloodthirsty man. He instantly shouted out that his soldiers would give the answer, accompanying his threat with horrible blasphemies. The Black Mondovi raised his visor as he spoke. At the instant an arrow from the bow of Pierre Revel, of Angrogna, entering between his eyes, transfixed his skull, and he fell on the earth a corpse. The fall of this daring leader disheartened the Papal army. The soldiers began to fall back. They were chased down the slopes by the Vaudois, who now descended upon them like one of their own mountain torrents. Having driven their invaders to the plain, cutting off not a few in their flight, they returned as the evening began to fall, to celebrate with songs, on the heights where they had won it, the victory with which it had pleased the God of their fathers to crown their arms.

Cataneo burned with rage and shame at being defeated by these herdsmen. In a few days, reassembling his host, he made a second attempt to enter the Angrogna. This promised to be successful. He passed the height of Rocomaneot, where he had encountered his first defeat, without meeting any resistance. He led his soldiers into the narrow defiles beyond. Here great

rocks overhang the path: mighty chestnut-trees fling their branches across the way, veiling it in gloom, and far down thunders the torrent that waters the valley. Still advancing, he found himself, without fighting, in possession of the ample and fruitful expanse into which, these defiles passed, the valley opens. He was now master so far of the Val di Angrogna, comprehending the numerous hamlets, with their finely cultivated fields and vineyards, on the left of the torrent. But he had seen none of its inhabitants. These, he knew, were with the men of Lucerna in the Pra del Tor. Between him and his prey rose the "Barricade," a steep unscaleable mountain, which runs like a wall across the valley, and forms a rampart to the famous "Meadow," which combines the solemnity of sanctuary with the strength of citadel.

Must the advance of the Papal legate and his army here end? It seemed as if it must. Cataneo was in a vast cul-de-sac. He could see the white peaks round the Pra, but between him and the Pra itself rose, in Cyclopean strength and height, the Barricade. He searched and, unhappily for himself, found an entrance. Some convulsion of nature has here rent the mountains, and through the long, narrow, and dark chasm thus formed lies the one only path that leads to the head of Angrogna. The leader of the Papal host boldly ordered his men to enter and traverse this frightful gorge, not knowing how few of them he should ever lead back. The only pathway through this chasm is a rocky ledge on the side of the mountains, so narrow that not more than two abreast can advance along it. If assailed either in front, or in rear, or from above, there is absolutely no retreat. Nor is there room for the party attacked to fight. The pathway is hung midway between the bottom of the gorge, along which rolls the stream, and the summit of the mountain. Here the naked cliff runs sheer up for at least one thousand feet; there it leans over the path in stupendous masses, which look as if about to fall. Here lateral fissures admit the golden beams of the sun, which relieve the darkness of the pass, and make it visible. There a half-acre or so of level space gives standing-room on the mountain's side to a clump of birches, with their tall silvery trunks, or a chalet, with its bit of bright close-shaven meadow. But these only partially relieve the terrors of the chasm, which runs on from one to two miles, when, with a burst of light, and a sudden flashing of white peaks on the eye, it opens into an amphitheatre of meadow of dimensions so goodly, that an entire nation might find room to encamp in it.

It was into this terrible defile that the soldiers of the Papal legate now marched. They kept advancing, as best they could, along the narrow ledge. They were now nearing the Pra. It seemed impossible for their prey to escape them. Assembled on this spot the Waldensian people had but one neck, and the Papal soldiers, so Cataneo believed, were to sever that neck at a blow. But God was watching over the Vaudois. He had said of the Papal

legate and his army, as of another tyrant of former days, "I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will cause thee to return by the way by which thou camest." But by what agency was the advance of that host to be stayed? Will some mighty angel smite Cataneo's army, as he did Sennacherib's? No angel blockaded the pass. Will thunder-bolts and hailstones be rained upon Cataneo's soldiers, as of old on Sisera's? The thunders slept; the hail fell not. Will earthquake and whirlwind discomfit them? No earthquake rocked the ground; no whirlwinds rent the mountains. The instrumentality now put in motion to shield the Vaudois from destruction was one of the lightest and frailest in all nature; yet no bars of adamant could have more effectually shut the pass, and brought the march of the host to an instant halt.

A white cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, unobserved by the Piedmontese, but keenly watched by the Vaudois, was seen to gather on the mountain's summit, about the time the army would be entering the defile. That cloud grew rapidly bigger and blacker. It began to descend. It came rolling down the mountain's side, wave on wave, like an ocean tumbling out of heaven—a sea of murky vapour. It fell right into the chasm in which was the Papal army, sealing it up, and filling it from top to bottom with a thick black fog. In a moment the host were in night; they were bewildered, stupefied, and could see neither before nor behind, could neither advance nor retreat. They halted in a state bordering on terror [Monastier, pp. 133-4].

The Waldenses interpreted this as an interposition of Providence in their behalf. It had given them the power of repelling the invader. Climbing the slopes of the Pra, and issuing from all their hiding-places in its environs, they spread themselves over the mountains, the paths of which were familiar to them, and while the host stood riveted beneath them, caught in the double toils of the defile and the mist, they tore up huge stones and rocks, and sent them thundering down into the ravine. The Papal soldiers were crushed where they stood. Nor was this all. Some of the Waldenses boldly entered the chasm, sword in hand, and attacked them in front. Consternation seized the Piedmontese host. panic impelled them to flee, but their effort to escape was more fatal than the sword of the Vaudois, or the rocks that, swift as arrow, came bounding down the mountain. They jostled one another; they threw each other down in the struggle; some were trodden to death; others were rolled over the precipice, and crushed on the rocks below, or drowned in the torrent, and so perished miserably [Monastier, p. 134].

The fate of one of these invaders has been preserved in story. He was a certain Captain Saquet, a man, it is said, of gigantic stature, from

Polonghera, in Piedmont. He began, like his Philistine prototype, to vent curses on the Waldensian dogs. The words were yet in his mouth when his foot slipped. Rolling over the precipice, and tumbling into the torrent of the Angrogna, he was carried away by the stream, and his body finally deposited in a deep eddy or whirlpool, called in the patois of the country a "tompie," from the noise made by its waters. It bears to this day the name of the Tompie do Saquet, or Gulf of Saquet.

[The Author was shown this pool when he visited the chasm. None of the Waldensian valleys is better illustrated by the sad, yet glorious, scenes of their martyrdom than this Valley of Angrogna. Every rock in it has its story. As you pass through it you are shown the spot where young children were dashed against the stones—the spot where men and women, stripped naked, were rolled up as balls, and precipitated down the mountain, and where, caught by the stump of tree, or projecting angle of rock, they hung transfixed, enduring for days the agony of a living death. You are shown the entrance of caves, into which some hundreds of the Vaudois having fled, their enemies, lighting a fire at the mouth of their hiding place, ruthlessly killed them all. Time would fail to tell even a tithe of what has been done and suffered in this famous pass.]

This war hung above the Valleys, like a cloud of tempest, for a whole year. It inflicted much suffering and loss upon the Waldenses; their homes were burned, their fields devastated, their goods carried off, and their persons slain; but the invaders suffered heavier losses than they inflicted. Of the 18,000 regular troops, to which we may add about an equal number of desperadoes, with which the campaign opened, few ever returned to their homes. They left their bones on the mountains they had come to subdue. They were cut off mostly in detail. They were led weary chases from valley to mountain and from mountain to valley. The rocks rolled upon them gave them at once death and burial. They were met in narrow defiles and cut to pieces. Flying parties of Waldenses would suddenly issue from the mist, or from some cave known only to themselves, attack and discomfit the foe, and then as suddenly retreat into the friendly vapour or the sheltering rock. Thus it came to pass that, in the words of Muston, "this army of invaders vanished from the Vaudois mountains as rain in the sands of the desert" [Muston, p. 11].

"God," says Leger, "turned the heart of their prince toward this poor people." He sent a prelate to their Valleys, to assure them of his good-will, and to intimate his wish to receive their deputies. They sent twelve of their more venerable men to Turin, who being admitted into the duke's presence, gave him such an account of their faith, that he candidly confessed that he had been misled in what he had done against them, and would not again suffer

such wrongs to be inflicted upon them. He several times said that he "had not so virtuous, so faithful, and so obedient subjects as the Vaudois" [Leger, livr. ii., p. 26].

He caused the deputies a little surprise by expressing a wish to see some of the Vaudois children. Twelve infants, with their mothers, were straightway sent for from the valley of Angrogna, and presented before the prince. He examined them narrowly. He found them well formed, and testified his admiration of their healthy faces, clear eyes and lively prattle. He had been told, he said, that "the Vaudois children were monsters, with only one eye placed in the middle of the forehead, four rows of black teeth, and other similar deformities" [Ibid.].

The prince, Charles II., a youth of only twenty years, but humane and wise, confirmed the privileges and immunities of the Vaudois, and dismissed them with his promise that they should be unmolested in the future.**[1]** The Churches of the Valleys now enjoyed a short respite from persecution.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Leger and Gilles say that it was Philip VII. who put an end to this war. Monastier says they "are mistaken, for this prince was then in France, and did not begin to reign till 1496." This peace was granted in 1489.