

The Waldenses

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THE history of the Waldenses cannot fail to strike a chord of deepest sympathy in the hearts of all true Christians. Protected by their mountain fastnesses in the north of Italy, they have lived in the old faith - the faith of the Apostles - the faith which we ourselves hold; so that, as witnesses for the Truth, they form a link between the days of the Apostles and, the present time.

After serving centuries of unparalleled persecutions by the Church of Rome, they were prepared in a remarkable way, under Dr. Gilly, Canon of Durham, and General Beckwith, for their final emancipation in 1848. It is well that the hearts of a new generation in Scotland should be stirred by the recital of the cruel persecutions which this faithful people endured on behalf of the truth, and the wonderful deliverances which God wrought for them. During several centuries they passed through some thirty separate periods of persecution. Of the last of these Miss F. Markham, in her most interesting story of "The Church of the Valleys," which appeared in recent numbers of *The Protestant Woman*, writes as follows:-

"Over the horrors of the great massacre of April, 1655, we must draw a veil - the hand would fail to write them, the tongue to utter them horrors unnameable, inconceivable, such as have never been surpassed, nay, more; seldom equalled, even by savages, barbarians, and cannibals. Even Leger, the historian, whose pages throb with sickening details, cannot, dare not, attempt to chronicle all that might be told. Swift death, in however awful a form, was merciful compared with the horrible tortures to which, not men only, but women and young maidens, the aged, and helpless little infants were subjected. Surely the deeds of those days were planned in hell - and their judgment awaits the awful disclosures of the Great White Throne.

"As Leger writes his record he says : 'My hand trembles, so that I can scarce hold the pen, and my tears mingle in torrents with my ink, while I write the deeds of these children of darkness,'.

"And the martyrs of the valleys might have lived, might have escaped the appalling agonies of which we cannot bear to hear, had they been willing to

deny their Saviour, to be untrue to Whom was ,-"worse in their eyes than the uttermost anguish of mind and body.

"The awful story rang through Europe, but it was in England that it awoke the keenest sympathy. Cromwell ordained a fast, opened a fund for the survivors and sent letters to all the Protestant princes of Europe, and also to the King of France and the Duke of Saxony - letters penned by the poet Milton, who also wrote the immortal sonnet in which the woes of the Vaudois saints are for ever commemorated:-

"Avenge, O Lord! Thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold -
Even them who kept Thy Truth so pure of old.'

"It is little wonder that; after a blow so terrific, the stunned and agonised Waldenses should have seriously contemplated the abandonment of the valleys drenched with martyr blood. "But from this step Leger sought earnestly to withhold them. Rather, he counselled, should they 'rebuild their Zion, in the faith that the God of their fathers would not permit the Church of 'the Valleys to be overthrown.' History has proved that he was right.'

"But not yet were their sufferings over, not yet was Truth to triumph; for another half century was their story to be written in blood and tears before it should culminate in victory and peace. "A few sentences from the introduction to the piteous appeal of the Waldensians addressed to the Protestants of Europe at this time gives us more insight into the deep desolation of their hearts.

"Our tears are no longer water, they are of blood; they do not merely obscure our sight, they choke our very hearts. Our hands tremble and our heads ache by the many blows we have received.' "But what of Janavel, the hero of Rora? He did not perish amid the butcheries of the great massacre. God had further work for him to do. Nor did his wife and daughters die by the hands of the soldiers. Among the few spared, evidently for deep reasons on the part of the crafty marquis, they were carried away captives. A letter was addressed to the bereaved husband and father, exhorting him to renounce his heresy as the only means of saving these loved ones from the death of fire; while, for himself, he was assured that a price would be set on his head, and, when taken, no torments should be spared to punish him.

“The answer of the hero peasant for himself was couched in the following terms: - 'There are no torments so terrible, no death so barbarous, that I would not choose rather than deny my Saviour. Your threats cannot cause me to renounce my faith; they only fortify me in it.' They reveal the true character of the man, the deep secret of his heroism. But we can only wonder at the depth of devotion to his Lord, at the splendid reality of his faith, when we hear him add: -

“‘Should the Marquis di Pianezza cause my wife and daughters to pass through the fire, it can but consume their mortal bodies; their souls I commend, to God, trusting that He will have mercy on them and on mine, should it please Him that I fall into the Marquis' hands.'

“Truly, when a spirit like this had survived the appalling massacres, and could calmly face a future so terrible, the seeming conqueror must have felt he was, after all, defeated.

“So, in truth, he was. He might murder and torture in thousands, but he could 'not quench, by the utmost ingenuity of cruelty, the undying faith of these Waldensian saints. Death they could face, and that of the most appalling character, but denial of their Saviour was impossible to them, so fully were they trusting in Him.

“More than two hundred years ago the last remnant of this persecuted people was driven forth from their country; Rome rejoiced that the 'heretical' Church had been cast out root and branch. To-day we look on the map of Italy and see not only that that people are in the peaceful possession of their native valleys, but that they have studded the peninsula and its adjacent islands with churches, from which the light of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ is radiating into the darkness of Popish superstition and corruption! Then, the united armies of Savoy and France poured their thousands into the Waldensian Valleys to conquer a few mountaineers, and failed; now from these same valleys has gone forth a little band, with weapons 'not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.' They have pushed their outposts to the most southern point of Sicily, determined not to retreat till the whole kingdom has been won for Christ.”

“The Church of the Vaudois has two special claims on our interest and sympathy, due first to her past history, and secondly her present position. She

claims to be the oldest Evangelical Church in Europe.” This ancient Evangelical people, having been thus marvellously preserved, believe that God has kept them for a special work to lead the way in the evangelisation of Italy. In 1848 they girded themselves for this great enterprise, and now they have outside - their own valleys churches and evangelistic stations scattered over all Italy, with pastors, evangelists, colporteurs, Bible readers, etc.

“There are numerous day schools, evening schools for adults, and Sabbath schools, which “send their irrigating streams into many an Italian home, and even hovel, and reach many children whose parents could not even be approached by the evangelist.”

“It is to the honour of this 'interesting people that, with the exception perhaps, of the little Moravian Church, they supply more missionaries and evangelists in proportion to their aggregate numbers than any other. Christian community in the world. Is, it unreasonable in them that, when they provide and prepare, by a long and elaborate training, qualified labourers for the great world harvest, the richer and stronger churches in other lands-, should help in contributing for their adequate support in the mission field' It is the old story, repeated in new circumstances, of Carey saying to Fuller and other friends, I will go down into, the pit if you will hold the ropes.'

“It is necessary to emphasise the fact that the Waldensians *do not ask or expect help for the support of their own Church, but simply for the maintenance and extension of their mission outside the valleys*. They give the men, many of them descendants of those who freely shed their blood in defence of the truth, but, being a small and poor community, they are obliged to look to others to help them with the means. And surely if any Church has a right to do this, it is one which, like that of the Waldenses, has twice as many mission stations as it has churches at home. The Waldenses, however, are giving comparatively much themselves, and the contributions from the mission churches have largely increased during recent years, some of the churches being now self-supporting; but the needs of the work in the regions beyond are so great that Christians in other lands must come to their aid if they are to carry on the great work of Italian evangelisation, “for which they believe God brought them back to their native land, and did not suffer their name and their faith to be extinguished.”

Truly the claims upon the Christian people of Scotland do not grow less; but were they ten times as numerous as they are there would still be a very special call to help and encourage their Waldensian brethren, whose forefathers so nobly maintained the cause of truth through ages of popish darkness and persecution.