

Chapter 4: Inhumane Persecutions of the Waldenses

We have already given an account of the popish crusade against the Waldenses of the south of France , and the horrible cruelties and massacres inflicted on them by the bloody Montfort and the Pope's legate, at the commencement of the thirteenth century. (Book v., chap. 7, 8.) Nothing more than a very brief sketch can now be added of the barbarities of a similar kind, which at various intervals were endured by this pious and interesting people during the five centuries which followed from the commencement of the crusade of pope Innocent.

In spite of all the efforts of the popes and their bigoted adherents to extirpate from the earth these pious people, they continued to increase in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in various countries of Europe, but especially in the valleys of Piedmont, where, shut in by the lofty and snow-capped mountains around them, they were in some degree sheltered from their popish persecutors.

About the year 1400, a violent outrage was committed upon the Waldenses who inhabited the valley of Pragela , in Piedmont , by the Catholic party resident in that neighborhood. The attack, which seems to have been of the most furious kind, was made toward the end of the month of December, when the mountains are covered with snow, and thereby rendered so difficult of access, that the peaceable inhabitants of the valleys were wholly unapprised that any such attempt was meditated; and the persecutors were in actual possession of their caves, ere the former seem to have been apprised of any hostile designs against them. In this pitiable plight they had recourse to the only alternative which remained for saving their lives-they fled to one of the highest mountains of the Alps, with their wives and children, the unhappy mothers carrying the cradle in one hand, and in the other leading such of their offspring as were able to walk. Their inhuman invaders, whose feet were swift to shed blood, pursued them in their flight, until night came on, and slew great numbers of them, before they could reach the mountains. Those that escaped, were, however, reserved to experience a fate not more enviable. Overtaken by the shades of night, they wandered up and down the mountains, covered with snow, destitute of the means of shelter from the inclemencies of the weather, or of supporting themselves under it by any of the comforts which Providence has destined for that purpose: benumbed with cold, they fell an easy prey to the severity of the climate, and when the night had passed away, there were found in their cradles, or lying upon the snow, fourscore of their infants, deprived of life, many of the mothers also lying dead by their sides, and others just upon the point of expiring.

24.-Nearly a century later, in consequence of the ferocious bull of pope Innocent VIII., already cited (page 425), a most barbarous persecution was carried on against the Waldenses in the valleys of Loyse and Frassiniera . Albert de Capitaneis , archdeacon of Cremona , was appointed legate of the Pope to carry his bull into execution, and was no sooner vested with his commission, than calling to his aid the lieutenant of the province of Dauphiny , and a body of troops, they marched at once to the villages inhabited by the heretics. The inhabitants, apprised of their approach, fled into the caves at the tops of the mountains, carrying with them their children, and whatever valuables they had, as well as what was thought necessary for their support and nourishment. The lieutenant finding the

inhabitants all fled, and that not an individual appeared with whom he could converse, at length discovered their retreats, and causing quantities of wood to be placed at their entrances, ordered it to be set on fire. The consequence was, that four hundred children were suffocated in their cradles, or in the arms of their dead mothers, while multitudes, to avoid dying by suffocation, or being burnt to death, cast themselves headlong from their caverns upon the rocks below, where they were dashed in pieces; or if any escaped death by the fall, they were immediately slaughtered by the brutal soldiery. "It is held as unquestionably true," says Perrin, "amongst the Waldenses dwelling in the adjacent valleys, that more than three thousand persons, men and women, belonging to the valley of Loyse, perished on this occasion. And, indeed, they were wholly exterminated, for that valley was afterwards peopled with new inhabitants, not one family of the Waldenses having subsequently resided in it; which proves beyond dispute, that all the inhabitants, and of both sexes, died at that time." [Perrin's History of the Waldenses, book ii., chap. 3.]

25.-In the year 1545, a large tract of country at the south of France, inhabited chiefly by the Waldenses, was overrun and most cruelly desolated by the popish barbarians, under the command of a violent bigot, named baron Oppede. A copious account of this persecution is given by a candid Romish contemporary historian, Thuanus, in the history of his own times. As a specimen of the cruelties perpetrated upon the heretics at this time, we can only extract the description of the taking of a single town, Cabrieres. "They had surrendered to the papists, upon a promise of having their lives spared; but when the garrison was admitted they were all seized, they who lay hid in the dungeon of the castle, or thought themselves secured by the sacredness of the church; and being dragged out from thence into a hollow meadow were put to death, without regard to age or the assurances given: the number of the slain, within and without the town, amounted to eight hundred: the women, by the command of Oppede, were thrust into a barn filled with straw, and fire being set to it, when they endeavored to leap out of the window, they were pushed back by poles and pikes, and were thus miserably suffocated and consumed in the flames."

26.-About the year 1560, during the suspension of the council of Treat, a most violent and bloody persecution was carried on against the Waldenses of Calabria at the south of Italy, by direction of that brutal tyrant, pope Pius IV. Two monks were sent from Rome, armed with power to reduce the Calabrian heretics to obedience to the Holy See. Upon their arrival, at once to bring matters to the test, they caused a bell to be immediately tolled for mass, commanding the people to attend. Instead of complying, however, the Waldenses forsook their houses, and as many as were able fled to the woods with their wives and children. Two companies were instantly ordered out to pursue them, who hunted them like wild beasts, crying, "Amazzi! Amazzi!" that is, "murder them! murder them!" and numbers were put to death.

Seventy of the heretics were seized and conducted in chains to Montalto. They were put to the torture by the orders of the inquisitor Pauza, to induce them not only to renounce their faith but also to accuse themselves and their brethren of having committed odious crimes in their religious assemblies. To wring a confession of this from him, Stefano was tortured until his bowels gushed out. Another prisoner, named Verminel, having, in the extremity of pain, promised to go to mass, the inquisitor flattered himself that, by increasing the violence of the torture, he could extort a confession of the charge which he

was so anxious to fasten on the Protestants. The manner in which persons of the tender sex were treated by this brutal inquisitor, is too disgusting to be related here. Suffice it to say, that he put sixty females to the torture, the greater part of whom died in prison in consequence of their wounds remaining undressed. On his return to Naples, he delivered a great number of Protestants to the secular arm at St. Agata, where he inspired the inhabitants with the utmost terror; for if any individual came forward to intercede for the prisoners, he was immediately put to the torture as a favorer of heresy.*

Of the almost incredible barbarities of the papists at Montalto in the month of June, 1560, the best and most unexceptionable account is that furnished in the words of a letter of a Roman Catholic spectator of the horrid scene, writing to Ascanio Camecioli. This letter was published in Italy with other narrations of the bloody transactions. It commences as follows:-"Most illustrious sir-Having written you from time to time what has been done here in the affair of heresy, I have now to inform you of the dreadful justice which began to be executed on these Lutherans early this morning, being the 11th of June. And, to tell you the truth, I can compare it to nothing but the slaughter of so many sheep. They were all shut up in one house as in a sheepfold. The executioner went, and, bringing out one of them, covered his face with a napkin, or benda, as we call it, led him out to a field near the house, and, causing him to kneel down, cut his throat with a knife. Then, taking off the bloody napkin, he went and brought out another, whom he put to death after the same manner. In this way, the whole number, amounting to eighty-eight men, were butchered. I leave you to figure to yourself the lamentable spectacle, for I can scarcely refrain from tears while I write; nor was there any person who, after witnessing the execution of one, could stand to look on a second. The meekness and patience with which they went to martyrdom and death are incredible. Some of them at their death professed themselves of the same faith with us, but the greater part died in their cursed obstinacy. All the old men met their death with cheerfulness, but the young exhibited symptoms of fear. I still shudder while I think of the executioner with the bloody knife in his teeth, the dripping napkin in his hand, and his aims besmeared with gore, going to the house and taking out one victim after another, just as the butcher does the sheep which he means to kill."

Lest the reader should be inclined to doubt the truth of such horrid atrocities, the following summary account of them, by a Neapchitan historian of that age, may be added. After giving some account of the Calabrian heretics, he says-"Some had their throats cut, others were sawn through the middle, and others thrown from the top of a high cliff: all were cruelly but deservedly put to death. It was strange to hear of their obstinacy; for while the father saw his son put to death, and the son his father, they not only exhibited no symptoms of grief, but said joyfully that they would be angels of God: so much had the devil, to whom they had given themselves up as a prey, deceived them." [Tommaso Costo, *Seconda Parte del Compendio dell' Istoria di Naploli*, p. 257. See that valuable work, which has recently been honored by a notice in the Pope's bull against the Christian Alliance, *M'Crie's Reformation in Italy*, chap. v. *The Reformation in Spain*, by the same writer, is equally valuable.]

27.-About the middle of the following century, the barbarity and wholesale slaughter of the poor oppressed Waldenses, in the valleys of Piedmont, by their popish persecutors, was such as to excite a general feeling of indignation and remonstrance in all the protestant states of Europe. The bigoted and cruel soldiery, attended by the still more

bigoted monks, had been let loose upon the inoffensive inhabitants of the valleys. Thousands of families had been compelled to abandon their homes in the very depths of winter, and to wander over mountains covered with ice and snow, destitute and starving, to seek a refuge from their relentless persecutors; and multitudes of them perished on the way, overwhelmed by tempests of drifted snow. Children had been torn from their agonized parents to be brought up as Roman Catholics, and carried off where those parents, even if they should linger out a miserable existence themselves, might never more expect to behold these objects of their tenderness and affection. Many were hurled from precipitous rocks, and dashed to pieces by the fall. Sir Samuel Morland, who was appointed ambassador by Oliver Cromwell to bear the remonstrances of protestant England against these popish cruelties, published, on his return, a minute account of the sufferings of the Waldenses, in which he relates that in one instance "a mother was hurled down a mighty rock, with a little infant in her arms; and three days after was found dead, with the little child alive, but fast clasped between the arms of the dead mother, which were cold and stiff insomuch that those who found them had much ado to get the young child out." [Sir Samuel Morland's history of the Valleys of Piedmont, p. 363. Folio, London, 1658.]

The great poet Milton was, at this time, Latin secretary to Oliver Cromwell, and wrote the eloquent expostulations on the persecutions of the Waldenses, addressed to the duke of Savoy, with which Morland was entrusted, and the letters to the various protestant sovereigns of Europe on the same subject. [For a full translation of these able and interesting documents from the pen of Milton, see Jones' History of the Church, Cone's edition, vol. ii., pp. 326-366. This valuable work is very full on the subject of the Waldenses. It was originally written as a "History of the Waldenses," and afterward enlarged, and republished under the title of a "History of the Church."] The immortal author of the Paradise Lost also invoked his poetic muse to excite sympathy for these "slaughtered saints," in the following sonnet, in which there is an allusion to the touching incident of the mother and her babe, just cited from Sir Samuel Morland.

[top](#)

ON THE LATE MASSACRE IN PIEDMONT

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold;

Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old, When all our fathers worshipp'd stocks and stones Forget not: in thy book record their groans Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold Slain by the bloody Piedmontese that roll'd Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans The vales redoubled to the hills, and they To heaven. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow O'er all th' Italian fields, where still doth sway The tripled tyrant; that from these may grow A hundred fold, who having learned thy way Early may fly the Babylonian wo .

28.-The interposition of the powerful Protector of England was not to be resisted. The persecutions of the Waldenses were abated, and the protestant Christians of Piedmont enjoyed for a few years a season of comparative repose, till the persecutions arising from the revocation of the edict of Nantes in France, when the popish duke of Savoy, imitating king Louis of France, commenced another most cruel and bloody persecution of the Waldenses, hardly exceeded in severity by any of the preceding. To relate the particulars

of it would be only to repeat the horrors of massacres, burning, outrage, and rapine, by which the feelings of the reader must already have been sufficiently harrowed. This cruel persecution was brought to a close through the friendly interposition of the Swiss Cantons, in September, 1686. Multitudes of the Waldenses had long been confined in loathsome prisons in Piedmont. The Swiss Cantons sent deputies to demand their release, and the privilege of quitting the dominions of their popish persecutor. In the month of October, the duke of Savoy's proclamation was issued for their release and banishment. It was now the approach of winter, the ground was covered with snow and ice; the victims of cruelty were almost universally emaciated through poverty and disease, and very unfit for the projected journey. The proclamation was made at the castle of Mondovi, for example: and at five o'clock the same evening they were to begin a march of four or five leagues! Before the morning more than a hundred and fifty of them sunk under the burden of their maladies and fatigues, and died. The same thing happened to the prisoners at Fossan . A company of them halted one night at the foot of Mount Cenis ; when they were about to march the next morning, they pointed the officer who conducted them to a terrible tempest upon the top of the mountain, beseeching him to allow them to stay till it had passed away. The inhuman papist, deaf to the voice of pity, insisted on their marching; the consequence of which was, that eighty-six of their number died, and were buried in that horrible tempest of snow. Some merchants that afterwards crossed the mountains, saw the bodies of these miserable people extended on the snow, the mothers clasping their children in their arms. Such are the tender mercies of Rome.