

The Mennonites,

OR THE HEROES OF A FLAT COUNTRY.*

Some wise individual has said, "mountains make heroes." Like many wise sayings this is only half a truth. Switzerland and Scotland are synonymous for heroic devotion to truth and freedom. But with Goldsmith:

"To men of other minds my fancy flies,
Embosomed in the deep where Holland lies,
No thinks her patient sons before me stand,
Where the broad ocean leans against the land,
And sedulous to stop the coming tide,
Lifts the tall vampire's artificial pride"

I want you to forget for a while the 19th century, with its advantages of religious freedom, and go back in imagination to Europe in the 16th century. That century which is holy ground to all Protestant feet. Luther is of course the image that at once rises in your mind. But Luther was not the only Elijah of that century. While Luther was shaking Germany, and the world in fact, with his new relations of truth, in little Holland, that has so often been the battle ground of Europe, was born a new sect, the chief tenet of whose creed was that old biblical injunction, "If any man smite thee on the one cheek turn to him the other also." The earliest years of this sect are shrouded in a good deal of obscurity. The only fact that is at all clear is, they were among those who in 1520, separated from the Church of Rome for various reasons. In common with some others they held to the necessity of adult baptism, but went further than any other offshoot from Rome at that time in their idea of the separation of the church and state. Up to 1535 no very definite organization was arrived at, although one John Denck was the ostensible head of the movement. This want of organization has probably been the cause of their being so frequently confounded with the followers of Johan Von Leyden or John of Munster, who flourished about the same time, and was the leader of a dangerous and lawless band of fanatics.

They have also been called the reactionary movement, caused by the abominable extravagances into which the followers of Leyden fell, but this is manifestly incorrect. Some of the encyclopedias say that the movement first began in Zurich, Switzerland in 1525, and was led by Grebel. This, however, is denied by the Mennonites themselves, and also by a German writer, who of late has made an exhaustive study of the various sects that arose out of the general reformation of the 16th century. There seems little doubt that the movement began, has been stated, in Holland. It did not long lack a competent leader or a distinguishing name. In the town of Wimersum in Friesland, Holland, there lived a certain priest of the Church of Rome to whom the awakening spirit of the time had come. He daily grew more dissatisfied with the teaching of Rome. Like Luther he finally decided to leave the church and try and live out for himself the truths that had come to him. In 1536 the decisive step was taken and for a year "Menno

Simon" lead a quite and secluded life. In 1537 came the call from those of his towns people, who held a like belief with himself, to be their leader. Then was actually formed, what has since been known to the world as, the Mennonite Church. For twenty four years Menno Simon strove by precept and example to establish a true and pure form of Christian worship. It is surprising to notice how the various branches into which this church has since divided still hold in their purity the few simple doctrines and principles that Menno laid down as his basis of teaching. It was not until 1556 that, what are known as "Fundamental Teachings of Menno" were published. They are as follows:—

1. He denounced infant baptism.
2. Swearing, or the taking of an oath in any way.
3. War, Revenge, Divorce and the holding of Civic Offices.
4. He sought and enjoined a very high standard of Church Government.

"Menno does not seem to have been brilliantly eloquent like Luther, but rather to have been a faithful diligent soul who holding tenaciously a certain form of truth strove earnestly and untiringly to propagate it. His work was chiefly in the form of personal teaching (though he wrote a number of books) and was done in North Germany and North Holland. From the time he left the Church of Rome in 1536, until his death in 1561, both he and his followers suffered bitter persecution. Not from the Roman Catholics alone, but from Luther and his followers, who had not learned the gospel of toleration from the persecutions they had themselves endured.

EMIGRATION TO AMERICA

The history of the Mennonite Church has been persecution upon persecution. In the time from 1561 to 1683 things went from bad to worse, until in the latter year it became impossible for them to remain longer in Holland. A number emigrated to America and settled in William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania, some went to Switzerland, some to France, but the great body moved into Prussia where there were already a number of churches of their faith that had been established by Menno himself. Those who came to America seem to have had almost unbroken prosperity. They settled near Germantown and their descendants live there to-day and hold the faith of their fathers in its original simplicity. In 1770 a new church was built on the site of the first Mennonite Church. This church is still standing and in good preservation, the oak seats with which it is furnished being over one hundred and ten years old.

This branch of the Mennonite Church is frequently confounded with the Quakers. This is altogether a mistake. Their refusal to bear arms and their strictures as to dress are the doctrines that they hold in common with the Quakers. Unlike the Quakers, however, they have Bishops, Deacons and a regularly ordained ministry. They observe the usual sacraments. And here I might mention, that among many congregations the washing of the feet, which took place before the institution of the Lord's Supper, is faithfully observed each time the sacrament is administered.

THE COLONY IN PRUSSIA.

We will now return to the Colony in Prussia. The movements of this branch of the Mennonite Church possess the greatest interest for us, as it is from them that our own Mennonite colonies have come. From 1693 to 1786 the history is extremely meagre. Almost all that we can learn is that very shortly after they had removed to Prussia persecution again beset them. They saw their rights constantly diminishing until in the reign of Frederick William II. of Prussia, they had barely the right to exist. They were compelled to purchase immunity from military service at an exorbitant price. They were not allowed to hold land. They were heavily taxed and were at the same time deprived of all the rights and liberties of citizens. Things looked very dark indeed for them both spiritually and financially. When, lo! deliverance came from a quarter whence the world has not generally looked for help for the oppressed. Russia had then but recently acquired her southern territory along the Sea of Azof and the Black sea. Catherine II. sat on the Russian throne. Being a wise ruler she saw the advantage of having the vast plains settled with trained agriculturists. She did what we have heard of countries not 100 miles from here doing. She sent out an emigration agent to induce settlers to come and occupy these vacant lands. In this case the agent had a very high sounding name "Count Von Trappa." In 1783 this gentleman started on his mission and on his arrival in Germany made his headquarters at Dansig (the chief Mennonite settlements being in and about that city) and began to boom Russia as a field for emigration.

Here I would like to draw your attention to the fact, that the Government of Russia, more than 100 years ago, was far in advance of the Canadian Government of to-day in regard to the liberality of her emigration policy. Through the kindness of Mr. Siemens, of Greta, I have been able to get a very accurate translation of the original offer made by the Russian Government to the Mennonite people. The first person approached by the Count was Elder Peter Epps, one of the most prominent elders of his Church at that time, and to him and others the following offer was made:

1. They were allowed to settle in any Government or Province of Russia.
2. The Russian Government would furnish all money necessary for travelling expenses and also a certain additional sum to each family for incidental expenses.
3. They would be allowed entire religious liberty and to erect their own churches and religious schools. This clause, however, has a rider, "But heresy is everybody warned that no one will be allowed to proselytize upon any pretence whatever, except among the Mahommedans."
4. They would be exempt from taxes, and would not be required to perform any work on Government improvements and no soldiers would be quartered in their houses.
5. The exemption from taxation would be for those settling in communities in the country and in the smaller towns, for ten years. For those settling in large cities for five years.
6. They would be supplied with food for six months.
7. Manufactures of all kinds would be assisted by the State. With capital if necessary, and in any event to the extent of free sites for their factories. Special privileges being granted in the case of manufactures entirely new to the country.
8. They would receive money from the public treasury for the purchase of stock and farm implements. All mo

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