

## THE WALDENSIAN VALLEYS.

LEAVES FROM A TOURIST'S NOTE BOOK.

My last letter contained a sketch of the valley of Luserne. We shall now take a walk up the

## VALLEY OF ANGROGNA

and note some of the sights, making Torre Pellice again our starting point. At the east of the town, but still within its limits, the torrent of Angrogna comes rushing down from the north and joins the Pellice in the valley as it runs east to mingle its waters with those of the Po. We cross the strong stone bridge beneath which the torrent runs, and soon turn up a steep road along the left bank of the stream. A few perches bring us to the

## GIRLS' ORPHANAGE

founded in 1854 by Mr. Bracebridge and some friends, and of which the Vaudois are very proud. The grounds, buildings, and all its appointments are as perfect as they well can be. It is under the supervision of the Waldensian Board, Signora M. Sircoulon being directress. Between fifty and sixty children are supported, taught and fitted to earn a livelihood. I was present in June last at the laying of the foundation stone, on the grounds of the orphanage, of an institution for the training of nurses and Bible women, from which much is anticipated. It is built by funds supplied by Miss Oakes, a lady from Bath, England, who resides for the present at Torre Pellice.

A little further on, but higher up on the hill to the right, stands the old Church of Chabas, one of the oldest in the valleys. It is not used now for regular service, though occasionally visited. The view from the platform here is one of the finest possible, including both the valleys of Luserne and Angrogna, the heights of Rora and over the plain of Lombardy dotted with many towns, for here the mountains and the rich plains begin.

A steep climb of a few miles along the crest of the mountain brings us to the valley of St. Laurent where stands the

## CHURCH OF ANGROGNA,

and where Signor Bonnet lives and labours. Here let us rest a little in the shade and take in fully the beauties of the landscape. The valley is very narrow, being bounded on one side by the Vaudalín and the Ventocul which separates it from Luserne, and on the other by the Vachere and other heights which divide it from the valley of Perosa. The valley of St. Laurent stands high up above the torrent, and though the road certainly rough and steep, still vehicles can come thus far, but not much farther. Here in a charming spot, on the edge of the precipice above the river is the manse, one of the largest and most comfortable in all the valleys. Visitors from Scotland have described it as "the most charming, the most paradisaical in its situation and surroundings above, below and on either side," that they had ever seen at home or abroad. It stands on a projecting eminence 2,500 feet above the sea level, is adorned with a verandah on the ground floor, and is shut in by chestnuts, walnuts, acacias. It is certainly a lovely spot on a bright summer morning. I several times walked up from Torre Pellice to enjoy the view, and have a talk with the talented pastor of the valley, for so far he has charge of all the three churches. The Vaudois temple here stands at a little distance from the manse, on the opposite side of the road, and is interesting as being the first constructed in the Vaudois valleys. It was erected in 1555 and is therefore 328 years old, and holds between 400 and 500 persons. It received the name of the "Temple of Angrogna" from the old Vaudois historian, to distinguish it from the "Church of St. Laurent," which belongs to the Roman Catholics. Of course it has been greatly repaired and improved of recent years. M. Bonnet, who is still a comparatively young man told me he remembered the time when the worshippers in these temples had neither boards, flagstones nor bricks under their feet, but only the cold damp earth, rarely heated by a ray of sunlight. Above their head rose no arched ceiling; only rough boards, and often only the frame-work of the roof upon which lay cold slates of all forms and sizes, and yet he added, "here remained our fathers longer than we remain, praying and meditating on the Word of life which constituted their strength and joy."

While in Angrogna it may be permitted to look a little further back still, and none is better fitted to help us than pastor Bonnet. The Christians of the

Primitive Church met first in an upper room, and in the houses of disciples. The ancient Vaudois held their first meetings in the houses of the barbes—the old name for the pastors—and in such private houses as were adapted for the purpose; sometimes upon the field of battle, at other times in barns and stables. In summe, they preferred to meet in the open air, in solitudes, in the midst of forests, behind the crests of hills, wherever they would be most likely to escape the eye of the enemy. On a day appointed and at a signal agreed upon, the Vaudois grouped themselves around their spiritual teachers on the hill-side with the blue sky for their canopy, and listened with an eagerness we can scarcely now understand.

When the persecution refused to allow them the privilege of such peaceful reunions the old Vaudois were obliged to seek a refuge in the caverns of the mountains. There the pastor opened the Bible and announced its precious truths to his attentive audience seated around him. No sleeping in those days, significantly added the narrator. As a specimen of the cavern in which the Vaudois of Angrogna were in the habit of meeting on these occasions, we were taken to the side of the hill Vengier, and there introduced to a

## VAST CAVERN

concealed amidst a great mass of rocks among which we had difficulty in making our way. Here, in a spot impossible to find without the aid of a guide, is the entrance shaded by the foliage of a lime tree. We go down on all fours and creep in—ladies among the number. When we are able to resume the upright posture, we find a large space capable of holding from 150 to 200 persons, the whole lighted from above by the openings in the flanks of the rocks. This grotto bears the significant Piedmontese name of "Ghielsa d' la fana," that is "Church of the den." On the high rocks facing this "den," and on the opposite side of a mountain stream, sentinels kept watch, to give notice of the arrival of the enemy. At a certain signal profound silence followed in the "Ghielsa." But sometimes the Papists, guided by dogs or spies, found the entrance, and accumulating dry leaves, straw or bundles of sticks, set fire to them for the purpose of suffocating those within. The worst erection above ground was certainly preferable to this.

Near St. Laurent, under the chestnut trees of Chamforans, was held in 1532 the famous

## SYNOD OF ANGROGNA

which had such a powerful effect in reviving the piety of the Vaudois, and of putting an end to all dissimulation; for prior to the good news of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland having reached the valleys, the Vaudois had sunk into a state of deadness and conformity to many of the practices of the Romanists around them. The French reformer, William Farel, attended this synod, accompanied by Saunier as representative of the Swiss Reformed Church. They brought letters of sympathy and faithful rebuke from Ecolompadius, of Basle, which were read to the meeting. It was here that a translation of the Scriptures into French was first resolved upon, and carried out by Olivetan, a relative of John Calvin. This translation was printed and published in 1535 at Neuchatel, costing the Vaudois 1,500 crowns in gold. A copy of this edition is still to be seen in the college library at Torre Pellice.

The attendance at religious meetings became so numerous after this Synod, that no private house was large enough to contain the people, and the weather often preventing a meeting in the open air, it was decided to build a temple near the place where they were in the habit of assembling. Hence the origin of the Temple of Angrogna in 1555—the first in the Vaudois valleys. Many reverses, it is true, happened to these churches since then; but to these we cannot now refer further than to say that more than once they were profaned by the priests and monks saying mass in them, and more than once they were reduced to ruins. Even up to 1848 Romanist processions used to pass the doors, and on these occasions during service within, a bailiff would enter and order silence to be kept, because the curé and his followers were about to pass. In 1880 a stone wall was erected around the church grounds, which are now neatly laid out, and there is but little chance of these annoyances being repeated. The inscription on the temple are the words of Ephesians ii. 20, "and are built, etc." while that on the Roman Catholic Church is "Ave, Maria, gratia plena"—neatly printed texts adorn the interior of the one, while tawdry prints of the Virgin

with the infant child in her arms are found on the walls of the other.

From St. Laurent to

## FERRE

higher up the valley is a lovely walk shaded by chestnut and other trees, with small streams murmuring from the hills above at every turn. The old temple here, built on the top of a hill, was removed in 1875 after lasting for 320 years, and was replaced by a new one the year following—the work chiefly of the parishioners. Above the door here are printed the words of the prophet Isaiah chap. ii. 3: "Come ye and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord," etc. Mons. Bonnet preaches here on the Sabbath as well as at St. Laurent. But we have still a toilsome walk before us, as our chief object on this occasion is to see

## PRA DEL TOR

at the head of the valley, "the citadel built by God and impregnable by man," where 300 years ago, six brave Vaudois put to flight the hosts of Count La Trinité, where of old met the annual Synods of pastors and elders with their moderator at their head, and where tradition says was the Divinity College *à fresco*, where the youth were trained in theology by the more learned of the barbes, with the Bible (in M. SS.) for a text-book, around a flagstone table which is now to be seen in the hall of the new church.

Since 1881 there has been a Roman Catholic chapel here, but the Vaudois had no meeting-place except a small room used as a school-room in the winter months. And yet there were around some 247 Protestants, distributed amongst fifty-six families. At last the Waldensian Board, at the instance of the Rev. J. N. Worsfold, of Hadley, Yorkshire, purchased the "Rock of Pra del Tor," with the view of erecting a temple. This rock is situated in a magnificent position, sheltered from avalanches and overlooking the valley. The temple commenced in 1876 and finished in 1877 is a handsome edifice, bearing above the main entrance the words of Psalm xviii. 2, "The Lord is my rock, etc." At the opening services, at which the Rev. Mr. Worsfold assisted, above 3,000 people were present. Of course the meeting took place in an adjoining meadow, the roof of the nearest house being utilized as a platform for the speakers. On the second story of the church is a school-room and residence for the teacher, and a room for the pastor when he happens to be stormed. An English lady has supplied the funds for defraying the expenses of the church and school ever since.

After luncheon in the vestry we adjourned to the platform, facing the ravine, to take in fully the whole scene, one of the party repeating as we did so:—

"Thou small but favoured spot of holy ground!  
Where'er we gaze, above, around, below;  
What rainbow tints, what magic charms are found!  
Rock, river, forest, mountain, all abound;  
And bluest skies that harmonize the whole,  
Beneath, the distant torrents' rushing sound,  
Tells where the volumed cataract doth roll,  
Between those hanging rocks that shock, yet please the soul."

We now see from the position of Pra del Tor, why tradition fixed upon it as the site of the school of the Barbes, and the probability of its correctness. It is at once the most central and most secure spot in all the valleys. Whether these students sought concealment or opportunity for study here, they had both in perfection. Some one has said that all around is stamped with the seal of the Creator's greatness and eternity. Pra del Tor is like one vast monastery where everything combines to invite to meditation, study and devotion. Its solitudes, its groves, its walks, its beautiful and gigantic features, possess all the fascination by which contemplative minds are supposed to be affected.

*Præsentem conspicimus Deum  
Per inævis rupes, fera per juga,  
Clivosque præruptos, sonantes,  
Inter aquas, nemorumque noctem.*

But Pra del Tor was at the same time the sanctuary and the fortress of the valleys, and therefore the Vaudois naturally regard it with great veneration. We can readily imagine how even a few hardy mountaineers acquainted with every mountain path even in the dark night put to flight whole legions of men, who were strangers to the locality, and armed as soldiers were in the middle ages. This fortress is accessible only on one side, and here by a narrow path cut in the face of the cliffs overhanging the torrent. By hurling rocks from the heights above, the bravest men might be put into a panic, and make to recoil on those be-