

TO
HIS MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY
FREDERICK-WILLIAM KING OF PRUSSIA

Margrave of Brandenburg, Sovereign Duke of Silesia

ETC. ETC. ETC.

THE AUGUST PATRON AND MUNIFICENT BENEFACTOR

OF

THE ANCIENT WALDENSES OF PIEDMONT

AND OF THE MORE RECENTLY DECLARED PROTESTANTS OF THE TYROL

This Work

CONTAINING HISTORICAL AND TOPOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

OF THE

PROTESTANT VALLEYS OF PIEDMONT, DAUPHINY, AND THE BAN DE LA ROCHE

Illustrated

IS

WITH HIS MAJESTY'S GRACIOUS PERMISSION

AND WITH SENTIMENTS OF THE MOST PROFOUND RESPECT

Dedicated

BY THE AUTHOR.

The following account of a melancholy catastrophe, as related to the author, shows with what imminent danger the communication is kept open during the long winter in these dreary solitudes. On the 11th of March, 1832, eighteen men started from Pomaret with the intention of reaching Prali, their native place. They were strongly advised not to attempt so dangerous an enterprise, which, there was too much cause to apprehend, could not be accomplished without personal risk. These poor fellows, however, were too much concerned for the safety of their families at Prali to consult their own security, and, listening only to the voice of affection which called them home, resolved to confront the storm. It had continued to snow for several days previously, and, fearing that it might overwhelm their huts and families if they were not on the spot to avert the danger, the duty to return became sacred and imperative. They were well acquainted with the road, but, at this time, all traces of a road were obliterated, and they proceeded along the defile, guided by those landmarks with which their eyes were familiar. Various circumstances occurred in succession which had almost confirmed the worst predictions of their friends at Pomaret:

but having thus far escaped without injury, they gained courage as they approached home, where their presence was so much needed, and the pleasure so little expected. They had still, however, one or more perilous steps before them, which, if once overcome, would place them out of all danger. The spot most to be dreaded is called the bridge of marble, which, in fine weather, is only a few minutes' walk from Prali; but, apprehending no actual risk, they proceeded without hesitation. At this point the path winds along rugged precipices, the base of which is undermined by a deep and impetuous torrent. The snow lay deep to the very brink of the gorge, and required great precautions, lest, in proceeding, the newly-formed crust of snow should slip from the more hardened layer beneath, and carry them down with it into the torrent. To effect this, the weight of their bodies would have sufficed; and, once loosened at the base, the mass from above would precipitate itself with a force and velocity which no human effort could resist. Aware of this, some of them proposed to make the passage by ascending a little higher, and thereby diminish the risk; but the thirteen who were in advance overruled the proposal, and continued their progress without further halt or consultation. The snow was still falling thick, and so dense a mist covered the surrounding mountains, that the nearest objects became almost invisible. The rushing of the torrent, however, and the flashing of the spray at their feet, served as guides to their steps; and in this manner they wound slowly along the slippery brink. Habituated from infancy to these dangerous passes, their nerves were not shaken by ominous anticipations—more particularly as they could now almost descry the spot at which their fatigues and anxieties were to terminate;—and by preserving that profound silence so indispensable where avalanches are to be apprehended, they had nearly emerged from the defile. But, in an instant—in the midst of this apparent security—an ice-cold blast, the certain precursor of the avalanche, paralysed every heart! The leader of this devoted band, as the well-known signal struck his ear, exclaimed in a voice of despair, “Great God, we are lost!” The next moment all were thrown prostrate by the resistless current; and the avalanche, following with the rapidity of lightning, swept thirteen of the party into the bed of the torrent, and there, blocking up its course, buried them under the snowy deluge.*

* This avalanche is said to fall only once every four or five years, and to collect at a great distance up the mountains. So long as the soft and dusty snow remains attached to the fir-trees, avalanches may be generally apprehended in those defiles more particularly subject to this dreadful scourge. Though always to be dreaded so long as the snow remains soft, they are most so at the commencement of a thaw. When the snow happens to fall upon the frozen crust of the old layer, it forms lavanges with much greater facility than when it meets with a thawed surface. When the higher mountains are covered with recent or continued snow, as in the disaster here recorded, and when the wind, or some other occurrence, happens to detach some of the flakes, these very frequently fall along the slope of the rocks, and there, collecting for some time, become of

In the mean time, the five who had lingered some paces behind, and at the first moment of apprehension had thrown themselves upon their faces,* thereby offering less resistance to the descending mass, escaped the tremendous force by which their comrades in advance had been overwhelmed. Of the latter, one had a most remarkable escape. When the whole party were swept headlong, he was forced by the weight of snow into a small crevice, hollowed in the hard under-crust; and there, sheltered from the avalanche, it passed over him without injury, leaving him a solitary mourner over the tomb of his companions. After the survivors had partially recovered from the consternation of the moment, and were able to look around them, they perceived at some distance a human hand projecting through the snow; and, hastening towards the spot, had the happiness to rescue, but with difficulty, another victim from the frozen mass.

The survivors, now reduced to seven, out of the eighteen who had started together in the morning full of health and fortitude, stood for some time gazing with intense agony on the snow-deluge beneath them, waiting for some further indications of life—some voice or sign by which they might have hoped to rescue yet another of their unhappy comrades from the grave; but not a symptom of hope was left. The stillness of death settled over the spot; and, recalled at length to a sense of their own immediate danger, they consulted for a moment how they should act. The safest, and by far the shortest way, was to have proceeded forward to Prali; but so bewildered were their minds by the awful catastrophe which had just befallen their companions, that they had not resolution to advance and communicate the dreadful tidings, but returned panic-struck and oppressed on the road to Rodoret and Gardiole—villages through which they had already passed. Here, their diminished number and exhausted appearance soon told the melancholy tidings. The alarm spread, and every

an immense magnitude before they burst from their perch. These are what are called in the Alps of Savoy and Switzerland *cold lavanges*. Beside this, there are the spring and summer avalanches, an account of which the reader will find in our late work of SWITZERLAND ILLUSTRATED, French and German editions of which are now published.

* The approach of an avalanche is uniformly preceded by a dreadful hollow roaring, like that of thunder, and announced by a stream of frozen air, to which the violent concussion and sudden disrapture of the snowy mass have given the momentum of a leaden torrent. Thus surprised, the resistance of human strength is but as a straw opposed to the cataract, and the traveller is thrown prostrate in an instant. It has occasionally happened, however, that, by taking advantage of the first intimation, and flying to some protected point, he has escaped destruction.

The least noise, it is well known, is sufficient to detach an avalanche, and in dangerous passes it is advisable to observe strict silence. As a precaution, the bells carried round the necks of mules used formerly to be taken off, or stuffed with hay, on approaching any suspected part of the road, and a pistol fired into the air, in order to provoke, by concussion, the fall of the avalanche before the travellers exposed themselves to the danger. The same precautions are still to be recommended under similar circumstances, though rarely necessary in the limited district under notice. In the author's account of the passage of the French army across the Splügen, the reader will find some curious facts respecting avalanches.

limb that could be exerted in the cause of humanity rushed to the fatal spot. During three days, about sixty men were constantly employed in excavations in the snow to recover the bodies of the victims, most of which were found at a great depth under the surface. When the whole were extricated and conveyed to Prali, the scene of distress that followed was such as has been rarely witnessed or described, even in this land where death has been so often exhibited under the most appalling features. When the bodies were exposed to view, and each of the bereaved families came to claim "their dead," and saw before them the lifeless forms of those with whom they had so lately parted in health and joy—when they reflected that a too ardent attachment to home had led them to undervalue all personal danger—that the love of kindred had stifled the warnings of experience, and given cause for this untimely sacrifice, they were poignantly afflicted. The shock was as severe as it was sudden, and threw a sense of desolation over the whole valley; for every one had lost a relation, a friend, or acquaintance. In a small community like this, where the inhabitants are isolated, not only by local circumstances, but by their religious dissent from the world around them, the cords of natural affection are drawn closer; friendships are more cultivated; every gentler passion and emotion is cherished with a truth and intensity which are little practised in society of wider limits. Here, they live like one family of mutual cares and sympathies—every member of which is essential to the other's happiness, and from which, if but one drop away, the loss is felt and deplored by all. Each, like connecting beams in the same structure, is mutually dependent on each, soothing, supporting, and encouraging one another. Under these circumstances, the reader will easily picture in his own mind the distress into which Prali—never populous—was now plunged by this disastrous event. It had deprived them of what no circumstances could replace, and left a blank at the sacred altar, and at the cheerful hearth, which nothing could supply. But in the midst of this awful visitation their religion was their resource; they recalled those noble martyrs whom it had supported in the dungeon, on the scaffold, at the stake; and bore with hereditary strength and resignation this new trial of their faith. When the mournful preparations were completed, the victims who had thus perished together, together were committed to one grave—martyrs to their own virtuous affections, and leaving their epitaph in the heart of every survivor.