GENEVA

The Cradle of Calvinism

I

If the work of Calvin in Geneva and the influence he exercised from it are to be rightly appreciated, some preliminary knowledge of its previous history and geographical situation is necessary. He did not transform it but only completed the transformation which had been in progress for more than a century. Switzerland may be regarded as one of the nurseries of assertive democracy. The people would not brook an autocratic overlord much less a tyranny; Austria learnt to respect the prowess of their patriotism. The Genevese had a long struggle before they successfully asserted in opposition to the ruling counts their determination to have some effective share in their own government. Though nominally under the German suzerainty, the real rule was shared by the Counts of Geneva and the bishop of the place, between whom there were continual feuds. Frederic Barbarossa in 1153 handed over the entire government to the bishop, whereupon the incensed nobles made things still hotter for that dignitary, and at last the people, roasted between the two, sought the protection of the Duke of Savoy, who soon possessed himself of the rights of the old counts. The people were granted many privileges, the most important of all being the right to share in the government through a popularly elected council headed by four syndics or magistrates (1387). Three authorities now shared in the direction of affairs, the ruling prince, the bishop, and the council. The bishop, while he had to swear to observe the rights of the town, held a position which went far to make him dictator. The House of Savoy and the people were in constant antagonism, and according as the bishop threw his influence on the side of the Duke or of the community, he determined which should have the predominance. The Church committed the mistake, fatal to its own interests as it proved, of throwing itself into the arms of the ducal house, and, thus separating the interests of public

liberty and the catholic faith, induced the formation of an anti-ecclesiastical party of patriots. That laid the train of the Reformation and shortsighted policy precipitated the explosion. In 1444, Amédie VIII, in turn Duke of Savoy, hermit, and Pope, possessed himself of the bishopric, and from that time it remained in the ducal family.

In the appointments made by the reigning prince, no regard was had to moral or religious fitness, and many of the bishops were little better than rakes. One was installed at the age of seven, another at the age of ten. The subordinate clergy took their cue from the bishop with the result (according to Kampschulte, a Roman Catholic historian) that their degenera tion was frightful. Geneva, indeed, suffered from the extreme abuse of the Roman system. The clergy battened on it; besides the secular priests, the town possessed three great monasteries, a convent, and a chapter of 32 canons. In all there were several hundred tonsures in a population of less than 12,000. Their character was such that the people generally were ready and eager to embrace the cause of the Reformation. Political happenings stimulated their sympathies. Duke Charles III, " the most hateful, arrogant, cruel, and perfidious of despots ", ill-content with a division of power, sought to establish himself in absolute command of the city, but the inhabitants frustrated the attempt with the assistance of allies, first Freiburg and then Berne. The forces of these two cities united to invade Savoy and extracted from the Duke a treaty safeguarding Geneva from his designs. It was during this conflict that the Reformation entered Geneva. French colporteurs, carrying Bibles and controversial writings, were given welcome. Soon the fury of discussion raged everywhere, in the streets, in the shops, in the inns. Nothing else was spoken of; even women joined in the fray, a onesided one, however, as it mostly was, for nearly all alike derided the mummeries of the monks. The first Protestant sermon was preached in 1522 by a monk, Labet d'Avignon, who had been converted through a public discussion with Zwingli, as monks by the score were afterwards converted in a similar way by Calvin. But the chief instrument in the propagation of Reform was Farel who appeared upon the scene in 1531.

II

Farel has been well called the stormy petrel of the Reformation. Of noble descent, he early came under the influence of the enlightened Briçonnet, Bishop of Meaux, who formed one of the famous circle gathered there and was already exhibiting his powers as a preacher. When that was broken up by the menace of persecution, he found his way latterly to Strasburg where he was given a hearty welcome by the eminent scholar Bucer, who afterwards so strongly influenced the views of Calvin. Farel's success in gaining proselytes led to his being used in various places to further the cause of Reform. He had much to do with giving its Protestant bias to the province of Würtemburg, the Duke of which was imbued with Reformation principles. His zeal unfortunately was equalled by his violence; to such lengths did he permit himself to go that Oecolampadius of Basel, with whom he lodged for a time, had to reprimand him sharply more than once. "The more prone you are to passion," he wrote, "the more you should compose yourself to mildness, and temper the lion's courage with the meekness of the dove. Men may be led, but will not be driven by force." He was apt, it seems, to pour a torrent of the bitterest invective upon the priests. "I am not ignorant what they deserve," writes Oecolampadius, "and in what colours they ought to be exposed; but give me leave as a friend and as a brother to a brother to say, you do not seem in every respect to remember your duty; you are sent to preach and not to rail."[1] We are told that he had a squat figure of poor appearance, with a complexion burnt by the sun, a long beard badly combed, an eye of fire, a large mouth with a thundering voice.[2] He needed all its thunder, for in various places the monks, failing by other means to silence him, tried to drown it with ringing of bells, against which he "strained his voice till he was hoarse, being resolved to vanquish."[3] He did not make his attack merely with words; on a procession day, he wrested from the hands of a priest the image of St. Antony and pitched

[1] Bayle's *Dict.*, Art. "Farel."

[2] Gallica mirata est Calvinum Ecclesia nuper,
Quo nemo docuit doctius.
Est quoque te nuper mirata, Farelle, tonantem
Quo nemo tonuit fortius.
(Icones of Beza.)

[3] Bayle, ib.

it over a bridge into the river. Wherever he went, he acted like a ferment. His visit to Neuchatel, for example, resulted in the establishment of the Reformed religion. Doumergue draws a vivid picture of the man at work.[1] "He goes across the lake, across the mountains, on foot, in the cold, attacked, attacking, always ready to deliver battle, in the cemetery, in the market place, in the street, now uplifted by popular enthusiasm which casts him into the pulpit of the church, now rebuffed, beaten, bruised, almost murdered. At Olon the women assail him and play havoc with his beard; at Saint Beuve, the curé rouses the people and Farel returns to Neuchatel, exhausted, defeated, spitting blood, almost unrecognisable. At Grandson, the women tear his face. At another town his head strikes the ground and he is covered with blood. On he goes, ever tireless, always upright, always confident of new victories, scouring Switzerland, uplifting it, shaking it, helping it with his strong arms, with his burning faith, bringing out from the mountains and towns a new people. What do I wish, he would cry, but that it blazes?" We must take it on trust that he was one of the most eloquent men of the age, as not a discourse of his survives, though two books remain. It is unlikely that he ever took the trouble to write down an address, seeing that, being a man of facile speech, he was accustomed to improvise.

His first visit to Geneva brought him into violent collision with the vicar and other ecclesiastics, and so threatening was their attitude that he had to beat a hasty retreat. But an impression had been made; the Bible began to be read more than formerly, and genuine evangelical centres began to be formed in 1532. During this year Pope Clement VII issued a bull granting general indulgences for a consideration. The vicar advertised it by fixing placards on the pillars of the churches. A few days afterwards, on the morning of June 9, 1532, other placards were found to have been substituted, promising to each one pardon of all sins on the sole condition of repentance and a living faith in the promises of Jesus Christ. Protestantism had taken firm root, and now it grew apace. Another missionary of Reform, Antony Froment, took up his residence in the city. He advertised that he wished to give lessons in reading and writing French to any who had not been taught, and guaranteed that, if in ten months they could not do that, he would demand

[1] Doumergue's *Calvin*, II, 163.

no fees. He thus gained opportunities of inculcating evangelical truth of which he took advantage with considerable success. Then he held conventicles more or less secret and largely attended. The clergy, finding themselves helpless to reply to the attacks made upon them and their Church, ignorant as they were of Scripture and overwhelmed by the cataract of popular denunciation, had recourse to a policy of "frightfulness". They fired the fanaticism of that part of the populace which sided with them. Farel was set upon by a crowd of armed priests and rescued with difficulty by the syndics. Froment in his turn was all but pitched into the Rhone. Later when Farel, Froment and Viret were all in Geneva, the soup of which they were expected to partake at their lodging one day was poisoned. Fortunately Farel ate none of it and Froment happened to dine out. Viret who alone partook did not succumb, but his constitution was so injured that his health never recovered. Those in sympathy with Reform, Eidguenots as they were called (later, Huguenots), retorted by making burlesque processions, derisive masquerades ridiculing the old cult, and mutilating images, to the great scandal of good Catholics. Both Councils and populace were sharply divided.

This state of affairs lasted for three years, when the Reform party, strengthened by the support of Berne, got the upper hand. Farel was summoned back to assist in establishing the new faith and a debate took place between him and a Dominican monk called Fürbitz in the presence of the Council, resulting in the discomfiture of the Roman champion. On the 1st of March 1534, the Reformer preached the first Protestant sermon delivered by authority from a pulpit in Geneva in the convent of Rive. On the 15th of August 1535, the Council declared the mass abolished; the altars and confessionals were overthrown, the images broken, relics scattered, and the monasteries and convent were suppressed. After the inmates were gone, a subterranean passage was discovered leading from the convent to the neighbouring monastery. Some of the priests abjured, but the great majority withdrew to the territory of Savoy. On December 4, 1535, the Council of 200 considered the adoption of a motto to celebrate the new régime. The Vulgate translation of Job xvii:12, Post tenebras spero lucem, was selected, and ordered to be imprinted on all coins with the word "spero" deleted, possibly because of the necessity of abbreviation. On

the other side were the words, Deus noster pugnet pro nobis. Later, the motto was changed to Post tenebras lux, when Geneva lived in the full light of the truth. On the 20th of May 1536, the people of Geneva, convened in General Assembly, with hands uplifted and without a dissentient voice, declared that the Roman Catholic religion was abolished and that they were henceforth resolved to live " according to the holy reformation of the Church ". The principles of Reform thus became the law of the State and obligatory upon all within it.

The Bernese had given indispensable and effective aid in securing Geneva against the designs of the Duke of Savoy, and as the price of their assistance they claimed to receive and exercise the rights of both bishop and duke. Their subject territories surrounded Geneva on almost every side and they hoped to consolidate their power by incorporating it, realising that Geneva constituted the key to the valley of the Leman. Geneva, however, refused to concede their demands, being fortified in its opposition by the assurance that France would readily intervene at its invitation. The Bernese recognised the hopelessness of forcibly prosecuting their claim and consented to a treaty (Aug. 7, 1536), according to which Geneva was to be open to all Bernese and might not conclude any alliance or treaty without consent of Berne. The signature of this may be said to open the modern period of Geneva's history.

The Reformation so carried out was, however, little more than an outward one, embraced principally from political motives. Bonnivard, recently set free from Chillon, in a sermon asked the citizens how they expected to reform the Church who were themselves so unreformed. " You say that the monks and priests are unchaste, gamblers, drunkards, but you are the same. You find all your comfort in forbidden pleasure. You have hated the priests who were too much like yourselves, but you will hate the preachers because they are not like you. Not two years will pass before you will wish they were priests and will pay them their wages with a heavy cudgelling. Love of freedom has degenerated into love of licentiousness." Bonnivard did not libel them; unbridled immorality was rife in every quarter of the city. The demoralisation extended in all directions. The hospitals and schools which had been established were in a decrepit condition or had ceased to operate at all. Farel did his best to revive and reorganise them, but he did

not possess the powers and qualities which would fit him for that work. Geneva might well have lapsed into a pest spot of Europe, had not Providence sent a saviour in the person of Calvin. Never was its finger more apparent. Farel had been absent at a synod held elsewhere. The Council wrote on July 10 asking him to return, speaking of French and Italian incomers whose arrival necessitated his presence at home, and bidding him hasten to prevent disorder. Reluctantly he obeyed and was just in time to anticipate and prevent the departure of Calvin. The arrival of Calvin in Geneva had been "a matter of chance"; he had been on his road from Paris to Strasburg, but had been prevented from going directly to his destination by the existing state of war which resulted in the road being barred by troops. He had to make a great détour which brought him round by Geneva. Farel had not known that Calvin was there and had no thought of seeing him then, as he himself said later. Calvin on his part had no special wish to see Farel; he was a mere bird of passage, diverted from his intended route and resting here impatiently for a day or two. But Providence brought Farel on the scene before he could resume his journey, and so arresting the man of destiny, sovereignly determined the course of history.

III

Geneva was by no means a large town, judged by modern standards, certainly not worthy of the designation of a city. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, its population numbered no more than 12,000. By 1543 it had increased to 13,000. From this time such numbers of Protestant refugees began to pour in from all quarters where persecution raged, that in the two years from 1549-1550 there were received into it no less than 5,017 strangers of all nationalities. By 1550 the population had increased to 20,000, that is, at the average rate of 1,000 a year. Over against the gains there must be put a certain amount of loss, as no Catholic was allowed to remain within the city, and if anyone turned Catholic, he lost his citizenship and had to leave. This stringent law was relaxed only in the seventeenth century, when permission to reside within the walls for a limited time was given to Catholics for exceptional reasons (e.g. for purposes of study, when the University was thrown open to all after the withdrawal of the Confession).

But in addition to the loss thus occasioned, there was a serious wastage due to the ravages of plague, whose visits were invited by the exceedingly insanitary condition of the place. Geneva was attacked by it with greater or less virulence forty to fifty times between 1454 and 1550, i.e. once in two years on an average. In 1545 there were 2,000 victims, while the epidemic which began in 1568 lasted for five gruesome years, not abating as time wore on, but becoming aggravated in 1571. In 1615 it carried off 1,650 people in seven months, and then after an attack lasting from 1636-1640, it unaccountably disappeared.[1]

Comparatively small though it was, Geneva focused an extraordinary amount of attention upon itself, proof of the notable part it played in the history of the times. No place was ever more widely or bitterly hated. Pope and Emperor, King and Prince, eyed it with a malevolence which frequently burst into flame and threatened it with extinction as a self-governing community. It was called " the birthplace of insurrections " by the French Roman Catholics, and their King was advised to destroy it as a nest of spreading mischief. Pope Pius IV urged Catherine de Medicis to overthrow it,—" whence all the evil proceeded," said he. It is amazing how Geneva was saved from this international conspiracy against her. The devout mind will, of course, see the finger of Providence in it all, and will have good grounds for its conviction in this case. After the reconciliation of the Emperor of Germany (and Spain) and the King of France in June 1559, they arranged a joint expedition under the command of the merciless veteran, the Duke of Alba, to accomplish the destruction of " this seat of heresy ". The Pope stimulated their efforts by preaching a crusade against it. It was at this time that Calvin wrote to the church in Paris, then " in perplexity and anguish for the dangers impending over it ": " We do not know how soon the blow may light upon ourselves. One thing is certain, we are menaced more than all the others." In another letter he speaks of the French King's implacable hatred being due to his opinion that " the doctrine, which has been disseminated over all parts of his kingdom, emanated from here ", and so his ardour was inflamed for razing and destroying the city. In anticipation of attack, the fortifications of Geneva were reconstructed to meet

[1] Calderwood records a visitation of Edinburgh by the plague in 1569, when it claimed 2,550 victims (*Hist. of Kirk of Scotland*, II, p. 477).

the demands of the new modes of warfare due to the introduction of cannon. The whole population gave themselves to the work, Calvin, though in a deplorable state of health, encouraging them both by his words and example. But with all possible defensive preparations, he saw hope only "in the marvellous protection of God". That came in unforeseeable fashion. When the king of France was engaged in his favourite recreation of tilting at a tournament, the spear of one of his great nobles pierced his eye with fatal consequences, and the projected expedition was thereupon abandoned.

But danger arose from another quarter. Pius IV, after failing to persuade Catherine de Medicis to take offensive action, counselled the Duke of Savoy to undertake the pious business of crushing Geneva, but they could not agree to whom the city should afterwards belong, and nothing was then done. When thieves fall out, honest men keep their own. Subsequently the Duke sought to persuade the five Catholic Cantons to join him in subjugating the hated place. He hoped to take advantage of the Swiss intestine divisions, but he was deceived in his calculations, not allowing for the power that a common national danger has to extirpate domestic quarrels and quench the flame of party enmities. The Protestant Cantons, headed by Berne, promptly replied by preparing to act together. The ducal forces were twice cut to pieces by the Protestants of the Alpine portion of his territory, whom he had treated with Hun-like cruelty, burning down their houses and compelling their wives and children to find refuge in lurking places of the woods, as Calvin tells us. The Turkish fleet, too, timeously threatened Nice, where the Duke had narrowly escaped capture by them the summer before, his escort being mostly taken or slain, while he himself fled "in great trepidation and with the greatest disgrace", according to Calvin. Add to that, he was so desperately poor and overwhelmed with debt that he could get no one to lend him anything. Once more Geneva was saved, and Calvin had some reason to say, "thus God scatters the counsels of the ungodly like clouds". "We trust," he adds, "that God will continue to be the guardian of an innocent city which he has hitherto protected."

IV

Reference has been made to the number of refugees who flocked to Geneva. It was not the only place that provided such asylum, the other Protestant towns of Switzerland willingly opening their gates to them. Zurich gave hospitality to 225 who had fled from Locarno. But it was to Geneva that they came in their crowds, drawn in large degree by the magnetism of Calvin, who made prodigious efforts on their behalf. The largest proportion of these were French, to whom Calvin, himself a Frenchman, gave a specially warm welcome. We hear of 4000 Waldenses being supported there by collections. Italy contributed a very considerable number of refugees, not less than 300 families finding a new home in Geneva. They came from nearly every part of that kingdom, mostly from Piedmont, Lucca and Naples, specially from the province of Calabria, but also from the Papal provinces, Bologna, Piacenza, etc. Venice, Florence, Genoa, Ferrara and Sicily were all represented, Rome almost alone having no name on its rival's registers. These immigrants were mostly of the highest classes; it was the élite of the Italian people, as it was of the Polish, that the Reformation captured.[1] Nobles of the highest rank, cultured ladies, rich merchants, bishops, abbots, famous preachers like Peter Martyr, relations of Pope Paul IV himself, such as Galiazzo Carracioli, Marquis of Vico,[2] received hospitable entertainment in Geneva. As Gaberel says, " they left all that was desirable and delightful, a splendid climate, luxurious palaces, the society of the most cultured people in the world, a life full of art and worldly enjoyment, limitless means, thousands of servants and dependents, a princely independence, the influence they enjoyed in the councils of famous cities, and exchanged all that—for what? A very modest existence in the little Geneva of these days, of whose dark streets and tiny houses we to-day can scarcely form a conception. There in the narrow corners of the Pelisserie or the Rue de Temple, these families crowded together who had hitherto moved in artistically adorned galleries, wide salons of stately castles and charmingly situated

[1] So elsewhere. Cf. Letter of March 12, 1562: " Among the Armoricans, that is in Brittany, the nobility have almost to a man embraced the gospel. Also in Picardy, but the populace cannot be brought over."

[2] Who said, " Where I cannot serve God, there I cannot have my home ".

villas." The family of the Calandrini sacrificed three palaces and eleven princely possessions.

The incoming of all these imposed a serious strain on the resources of the town. The response to the appeals of the authorities was splendid, but nevertheless there were ebullitions of discontent among the citizens, who came to view with a certain jealousy the favour Calvin showed to the strangers, and looked apprehensively at the growing number of foreigners, who threatened to become almost sufficient to swamp the native population. Room could not be found for all conveniently within the walls, and we find Beza writing to Bullinger in 1554 that the Genevese had assigned a portion of land outside for founding a new settlement in which 400 French exiles, then expected, might take up residence. The order and spirit maintained amongst this heterogeneous crowd is worthy of all praise. Michelet with justice rhapsodises on the spectacle thus: "It is the most wonderful sight seen in history which this Geneva presents to the onlooker. Comprising in itself the élite of three nations, who were welded into one whole through the spirit of one man, it endures amidst the most powerful and bitter foes without any external supports, purely through its moral strength. It has no territory, no army, no treasure. A city of the spirit it stands there, built on Christian stoicism on the rock-foundation of Predestination."

V

The covetous eyes which various powers cast on Geneva were sharpened by the recognition of its commanding situation. It was one of the strategical points of Europe, being the key to the valley of the Leman. It stood on one of the great Roman roads which led from Italy to Germany, and was close to the borders of these two kingdoms, forming with France and Switzerland itself a kind of angulus terrae. The Genevese themselves were very conscious of their advantageous position, and the Council laid emphasis on it when seeking to induce Calvin to return after his exile—"we are like the gate of France and of Italy," they said. But he was fully alive to the exceptional advantages of the situation; the recognition of them, indeed, had much to do with forming his decision to resume his labours there. They account too in some degree for the range of his influence and the rapidity of its spread.

One of the results of the situation of Geneva was that it conferred on the city very substantial commercial advantages. It became a kind of goods depot and mart of exchange for the surrounding countries. That was the age of great fairs where merchants gathered to dispose of their commodities. All kinds of articles were exposed for sale and trafficked in. Booksellers resorted to them to replenish their stocks; Calvin frequently refers in his letters to his own books being exposed for sale on their stalls, or to friends securing there for him volumes he desired. Geneva was one of the principal centres of those indispensable institutions, four being held in it annually, each lasting fifteen days, and concentrating the commerce of Europe in its market place. So famous were these fairs that, before the Reformation, Geneva was known as " la villefoire "—the Fair-city. Sellers and buyers from Spain in the west to Tuscany in the east and Flanders in the north jostled and bargained there. The houses in the central parts of the town were supplied with broad colonnades to give shelter to the goods assembled. Booths blocked the main streets, stocked with everything for peace or war.

It may be conceived how these fairs not only filled the capacious pockets of the shrewd citizens but filled their receptive minds with the emancipating ideas that were becoming current coin through the most advanced countries of Europe. They could not come into free, unrestricted intercourse with burgesses of the free cities in Northern Germany or the self-assertive commoners of Flanders or representatives of the little republics of Italy without becoming indoctrinated with their political notions. The democratic political system adopted by Geneva in the middle of the fourteenth century (which in developed forms lasted for 483 years), was doubtless the fruit of seed-thoughts sown at these fairs. But they had their less wholesome consequences. Geneva acquired an affluence which was morally its undoing. The leading citizens vied with each other in the splendour of the dress they wore, specially on State occasions. The banquets were prolonged orgies and deep carousals. Laws had to be passed to restrain the extravagances of the luxurious spirit that pervaded the rich classes and communicated its love of pleasure to all ranks. The gross and varied immoralities of self-indulgent living followed as a matter of course, whose tolerated shamelessness may be gauged from the enactment of

the Council that the crowd of prostitutes should elect one of their number to bear rule over her unfortunate sisters. The greed of amusement, of spectacles, of boisterous gaiety, of sensual pleasure, induced largely by these fairs, formed one of the most serious obstacles to the successful establishment of Reformed principles in the control of social life. That was a legacy of their prime, for the fairs began to decay before the Reformation had more than touched the city. Louis XI in 1463, jealous of their popularity and success, astutely instituted as many fairs at Lyons, and made their dates coincide with those of Geneva. The effect was immediate; Geneva's prosperity was attacked at its roots. To their appeals and protests, Louis XI, Duke Philibert, and Duke Charles III successively (in 1467, 1498 and 1512) offered to ensure the restoration of the fairs to their former flourishing state on condition that the city submitted to the authority of the House of Savoy. The Genevese proved that they were not yet degenerate by stoutly refusing to agree, preferring poverty with freedom to riches with ignoble servitude.

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