

CHAPTER 14

Exploits of Gianavello—Massacre and Pillage of Rora

Ascent of La Combe—Beauty and Grandeur of Valley of Rora—Gianavello—His Character—Marquis de Pianeza—His First Assault—Brave Repulse—Treachery of the Marquis—No Faith with Heretics—Gianavello's Band—Repulse of Second and Third Attacks—Death of a Persecutor—An Army raised to invade Rora—Massacre and Pillage—Letter of Pianeza—Gianavello's Heroic Reply—Gianavello renews the War--500 against 15,000—Success of the Waldenses—Horror at the Massacre—Interposition of England—Letter of Cromwell—Treaty of Peace.

The next tragic episode in the history of the Waldenses takes us to the Valley of Rora. The invasion and outrages of which this valley became the scene were contemporaneous with the horrors of the great massacre. In what we are now to relate, feats of heroism are blended with deeds of suffering, and we are called to admire the valour of the patriot, as well as the patience of the martyr.

The Valley of Rora lies on the left as one enters La Torre; it is separated from Lucerna by a barrier of mountains. Rora has two entrances: one by a side ravine, which branches off about two miles before reaching La Torre, and the other by crossing the Valley of Lucerna and climbing the mountains. This last is worthy of being briefly described. We start, let us suppose, from the town of La Torre; we skirt the Castelluzzo on the right, which high in air hangs its precipices, with their many tragic memories, above us. From this point we turn to the left, descend into the valley, traverse its bright meadows, here shaded by the vine which stretches its arms in classic freedom from tree to tree. We cross the torrent of the Pelice by a small bridge, and hold on our way till we reach the foot of the mountains of La Combe, that wall in the Valley of Rora. We begin to climb by a winding path. Pasturage and vineyard give place to chestnut forest; the chestnut in its turn yields to the pine; and, as we mount still higher, we find ourselves amid the naked ledges of the mountain, with their gushing rills, margined by moss or other Alpine herbage.

An ascent of two hours brings us to the summit of the pass. We have here a pedestal, some 4,000 feet in height, in the midst of a stupendous amphitheatre of Alps, from which to view their glories. How profoundly deep the valley from which we have just climbed up! A thread of silver is now the Pelice; a patch of green a few inches square is now the meadow; the

chestnut-tree is a mere dot, hardly visible; and yonder are La Torre and the white Villaro, so tiny that they look as if they could be packed into a child's toy-box.

But while all else has diminished, the mountains seem to have enlarged their bulk and increased their stature. High above us towers the summit of the Castelluzzo; still higher rise the rolling masses of the Vandalin, the lower slopes of which form a vast and magnificent hanging garden, utterly dwarfing those which were among the wonders of Babylon. And in the far distance the eye rests on a tumultuous sea of mountains, here rising in needles, there running off in long serrated ridges, and there standing up in massive peaks of naked granite, wearing the shining garments which winter weaves for the giants of the Alps.

We now descend into the Valley of Rora. It lies at our feet, a cup of verdure, some sixty miles in circumference, its sides and bottom variously clothed with corn-field and meadow, with vineyard and orchard, with the walnut, the cherry, and all fruit-bearing trees, from amid which numerous brown chalets peep out. The great mountains sweep round the valley like a wall, and among them, pre-eminent in glory as in stature, stands the monarch of the Cottian Alps—Monte Viso.

As among the Jews of old, so among the Waldenses, God raised up, from time to time, mighty men of valour to deliver his people. One of the most remarkable of these men was Gianavello, commonly known as Captain Joshua Gianavello, a native of this same Valley of Rora. He appears, from the accounts that have come down to us, to have possessed all the qualities of a great military leader. He was a man of daring courage, of resolute purpose, and of venturous enterprise. He had the faculty, so essential in a commander, of skilful combination. He was fertile in resource, and self-possessed in emergencies; he was quick to resolve, and prompt to execute. His devotion and energy were the means, under God, of mitigating somewhat the horrors of the Massacre of 1655, and his heroism ultimately rolled back the tide of that great calamity, and made it recoil upon its authors. It was the morning of the 24th of April, 1655, the day which saw the butchery commenced that we have described above. On that same day 500 soldiers were dispatched by the Marquis de Pianeza to the Valley of Rora, to massacre its unoffending and unsuspecting inhabitants. Ascending from the Valley of the Pelice, they had gained the summit of the pass, and were already descending on the town of Rora, stealthily and swiftly, as a herd of wolves might descend upon a sheep-fold, or as, says Leger, "a brood of vultures might descend upon a flock of harmless doves." Happily Gianavello, who had known for weeks before that a storm was gathering, though he knew not when or where it would burst, was on the outlook. He

saw the troop, and guessed their errand. There was not a moment to be lost; a little longer, and not a man would be left alive in Rora to carry tidings of its fate to the next commune. But was Gianavello single-handed to attack an army of 500 men? He stole up-hill, under cover of the rocks and trees, and on his way he prevailed on six peasants, brave men like himself, to join him in repelling the invaders. The heroic little band marched on till they were near the troop, then hiding amid the bushes, they lay in ambush by the side of the path. The soldiers came on, little suspecting the trap into which they were marching. Gianavello and his men fired, and with so unerring an aim that seven of the troop fell dead. Then, reloading their pieces, and dexterously changing their ground, they fired again with a like effect. The attack was unexpected; the foe was invisible; the frightened imaginations of Pianeza's soldiers multiplied tenfold the number of their assailants. They began to retreat. But Gianavello and his men, bounding from cover to cover like so many chamois, hung upon their rear, and did deadly execution with their bullets. The invaders left 54 of their number dead behind them; and thus did these seven peasants chase from their Valley of Rora the 500 assassins who had come to murder its peaceful inhabitants [Leger, part ii., chap. 11, p. 186].

That same afternoon the people of Rora, who were ignorant of the fearful murders which were at that very moment proceeding in the valleys of their brethren, repaired to the Marquis de Pianeza to complain of the attack. The marquis affected ignorance of the whole affair. "Those who invaded your valley," said he, "were a set of banditti. You did right to repel them. Go back to your families and fear nothing; I pledge my word and honour that no evil shall happen to you."

These deceitful words did not impose upon Gianavello. He had a wholesome recollection of the maxim enacted by the Council of Constance, and so often put in practice in the Valleys, "No faith is to be kept with heretics." Pianeza, he knew, was the agent of the "Council of Extirpation." Hardly had the next morning broken when the hero-peasant was abroad, scanning with eagle-eye the mountain paths that led into his valley. It was not long till his suspicions were more than justified. Six hundred men-at-arms, chosen with special reference to this difficult enterprise, were seen ascending the mountain Cassuleto, to do what their comrades of the previous day had failed to accomplish. Gianavello had now mustered a little host of eighteen, of whom twelve were armed with muskets and swords, and six with only the sling. These he divided into three parties, each consisting of four musketeers and two slingers, and he posted them in a defile, through which he saw the invaders must pass. No sooner had the van of the enemy entered the gorge than a shower of bullets and stones from invisible hands saluted them. Every bullet and stone did its work. The first discharge brought down an officer and

twelve men. That volley was succeeded by others equally fatal. The cry was raised, "All is lost, save yourselves!" The flight was precipitate, for every bush and rock seemed to vomit forth deadly missiles. Thus a second ignominious retreat rid the Valley of Rora of these murderers.

The inhabitants carried their complaints a second time to Pianeza. "Concealing," as Leger says, "the ferocity of the tiger under the skin of the fox," he assured the deputies that the attack had been the result of a misunderstanding; that certain accusations had been lodged against them, the falsity of which had since been discovered, and now they might return to their homes, for they had nothing to fear. No sooner were they gone than Pianeza began vigorously to prepare for a third attack [Leger, part ii., pp. 186-7].

He organised a battalion of from 800 to 900 men. Next morning, this host made a rapid march on Rora, seized all the avenues leading into the valley, and chasing the inhabitants to the caves in Monte Friolante, set fire to their dwellings, having first plundered them. Captain Joshua Gianavello, at the head of his little troop, saw the enemy enter, but their numbers were so overwhelming that he waited a more favourable moment for attacking them. The soldiers were retiring, laden with their booty, and driving before them the cattle of the peasants. Gianavello knelt down before his hero-band, and giving thanks to God, who had twice by his hand saved his people, he prayed that the hearts and arms of his followers might be strengthened, to work yet another deliverance. He then attacked the foe. The spoilers turned and then fled up-hill, in the hope of escaping into the Valley of the Pelice, throwing away their booty in their flight. When they had gained the pass, and begun their descent, their flight became yet more disastrous; great stones, torn up and rolled after them, were mingled with the bullets, and did deadly execution upon them, while the precipices over which they fell in their haste consummated their destruction. The few who survived fled to Villaro [Leger, part ii., p. 187. Muston, pp. 146-7].

The Marquis de Pianeza, instead of seeing in these events the finger of God, was only the more inflamed with rage, and the more resolutely bent on the extirpation of every heretic from the Valley of Rora. He assembled all the royal troops then under his command, or which could be spared from the massacre in which they were occupied in the other valleys, in order to surround the little territory. This was now the fourth attack on the commune of Rora, but the invaders were destined once more to recoil before the shock of its heroic defenders. Some 8,000 men had been got under arms, and were ready to march against Rora, but the impatience of a certain Captain Mario, who had signalled himself in the massacre at Bobbio, and wished to appropriate the entire glory of the enterprise, would not permit him to await

the movement of the main body. He marched two hours in advance, with three companies of regular troops, few of whom ever returned. Their ferocious leader, borne along by the rush of his panic-stricken soldiers, was precipitated over the edge of the rock into the stream, and badly bruised. He was drawn out and carried to Lucerna, where he died two days afterwards, in great torment of body, and yet greater torment of mind. Of the three companies which he led in this fatal expedition, one was composed of Irish, who had been banished by Cromwell, and who met in this distant land the death they had inflicted on others in their own, leaving their corpses to fatten those valleys which were to have been theirs had they succeeded in purging them of heresy and heretics [Leger, part ii., p. 188. Muston, pp. 148-9].

This series of strange events was now drawing to an end. The fury of Pianezza knew no bounds. This war of his, though waged only with herdsmen, had brought him nothing but disgrace, and the loss of his bravest soldiers. Victor Amadeus once observed that "the skin of every Vaudois cost him fifteen of his best Piedmontese soldiers." Pianezza had lost some hundreds of his best soldiers, and yet not one of the little troop of Gianavello, dead or alive, had he been able to get into his hands. Nevertheless, he resolved to continue the struggle, but with a much greater army. He assembled 10,000, and attacked Rora on three sides at once. While Gianavello was bravely combating with the first troop of 3,000, on the summit of the pass that gives entrance from the Valley of the Pelice, a second of 6,000 had entered by the ravine at the foot of the valley; and a third of 1,000 had crossed the mountains that divide Bagnolo from Rora. But, alas! who shall describe the horrors that followed the entrance of these assassins? Blood, burning, and rapine in an instant overwhelmed the little community. No distinction was made of age or sex. None had pity for their tender years; none had reverence for their grey hairs. Happy they who were slain at once, and thus escaped horrible indignities and tortures. The few spared from the sword were carried away as captives, and among these were the wife and the three daughters of Gianavello [Leger, part ii., p. 189. Monastier, p. 277].

There was now nothing more in the Valley of Rora for which the patriot-hero could do battle. The light of his hearth was quenched, his village was a heap of smoking ruins, his fathers and brethren had fallen by the sword; but rising superior to these accumulated calamities, he marched his little troop over the mountains, to await on the frontier of his country whatever opportunities Providence might yet open to him of wielding his sword in defence of the ancient liberties and the glorious faith of his people.

It was at this time that Pianezza, intending to deal the finishing blow that should crush the hero of Rora, wrote to Gianavello as follows:--"I exhort you

for the last time to renounce your heresy. This is the only hope of your obtaining the pardon of your prince, and of saving the life of your wife and daughters, now my prisoners, and whom, if you continue obstinate, I will burn alive. As for yourself, my soldiers shall no longer pursue you, but I will set such a price upon your head, as that, were you Beelzebub himself, you shall infallibly be taken; and be assured that, if you fall alive into my hands, there are no torments with which I will not punish your rebellion." To these ferocious threats Gianavello magnanimously and promptly replied: "There are no torments so terrible, no death so barbarous, that I would not choose rather than deny my Saviour. Your threats cannot cause me to renounce my faith; they but fortify me in it. Should the Marquis de Pianeza cause my wife and daughters to pass through the fire, it can but consume their mortal bodies; their souls I commend to God, trusting that he will have mercy on them, and on mine, should it please him that I fall into the marquis's hands" [Leger, part ii., p. 189]. We do not know whether Pianeza was capable of seeing that this was the most mortifying defeat he had yet sustained at the hands of the peasant-hero of Rora; and that he might as well war against the Alps themselves as against a cause that could infuse a spirit like this into its champions. Gianavello's reply, observes Leger, "certified him as a chosen instrument in the hands of God for the recovery of his country seemingly lost."

Gianavello had saved from the wreck of his family his infant son, and his first care was to seek a place of safety for him. Laying him on his shoulders, he passed the frozen Alps which separate the Valley of Lucerna from France, and entrusted the child to the care of a relative resident at Queyras, in the Valleys of the French Protestants. With the child he carried thither the tidings of the awful massacre of his people. Indignation was roused. Not a few were willing to join his standard, brave spirits like himself; and, with his little band greatly recruited, he repassed the Alps in a few weeks, to begin his second and more successful campaign. On his arrival in the Valleys he was joined by Giaheri, under whom a troop had been assembling to avenge the massacre of their brethren.

In Giaheri, Captain Gianavello had found a companion worthy of himself, and worthy of the cause for which he was now in arms. Of this heroic man Leger has recorded that, "though he possessed the courage of a lion, he was as humble as a lamb, always giving to God the glory of his victories; well versed in Scripture, and understanding controversy, and of great natural talent." The massacre had reduced the Vaudois race to all but utter extermination, and 50 men were all that the two leaders could collect around their standard. The army opposed to them, and at this time in their Valleys, was from 15,000 to 20,000 strong, consisting of trained and picked soldiers. Nothing but an impulse from the God of battles could have moved these two

men, with such a handful, to take the field against such odds. To the eye of a common hero all would have seemed lost; but the courage of these two Christian warriors was based on faith. They believed that God would not permit his cause to perish, or the lamp of the Valleys to be extinguished; and, few though they were, they knew that God was able by their humble instrumentality to save their country and Church. In this faith they unsheathed the sword; and so valiantly did they wield it, that soon that sword became the terror of the Piedmontese armies. The ancient promise was fulfilled, "The people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits."

We cannot go into details. Prodiges of valour were performed by this little host. "I had always considered the Vaudois to be men," said Descombies, who had joined them, "but I found them lions." Nothing could withstand the fury of their attack. Post after post and village after village were wrested from the Piedmontese troops. Soon the enemy was driven from the upper valleys. The war now passed down into the plain of Piedmont, and there it was waged with the same heroism and the same success. The besieged and took several towns, they fought not a few pitched battles; and in those actions they were nearly always victorious, though opposed by more than ten times their number. Their success could hardly be credited had it not been recorded by historians whose veracity is above suspicion, and the accuracy of whose statements was attested by eye-witnesses. Not unfrequently did it happen at the close of a day's fighting that 1,400 Piedmontese dead covered the field of battle, while not more than six or seven of the Waldenses had fallen. Such success might well be termed miraculous; and not only did it appear so to the Vaudois themselves, but even to their foes, who could not refrain from expressing their conviction "that surely God was on the side of the Barbets."

While the Vaudois were thus heroically maintaining their cause by arms, and rolling back the chastisement of war on those from whom its miseries had come, tidings of their wrongs were travelling to all the Protestant States of Europe. Wherever these tidings came a feeling of horror was evoked, and the cruelty of the Government of Savoy was universally and loudly execrated. All confessed that such a tale of woe they had never before heard. But the Protestant States did not content themselves with simply condemning these deeds; they judged it to be their clear duty to move in behalf of this poor and greatly oppressed people; and foremost among those who did themselves lasting honour by interposing in behalf of a people "drawn unto death and ready to perish," was, as has already been said, England, then under the protectorate of Cromwell. In the previous chapter mention was made of the Latin letter, the composition of Milton, which the Protector addressed to the Duke of Savoy. In addition, Cromwell wrote to Louis XIV. of

France, soliciting his mediation with the duke in behalf of the Vaudois. The letter is interesting as containing the truly catholic and noble sentiments of England, to which the pen of her great poet gave fitting expression:--

"Most Serene and Potent King, ... After a most barbarous slaughter of persons of both sexes, and of all ages, a treaty of peace was concluded, or rather secret acts of hostility were committed the more securely under the name of a pacification. The conditions of the treaty were determined in your town of Pinerolo: hard conditions enough, but such as these poor people would gladly have agreed to, after the horrible outrages to which they had been exposed, provided that they had been faithfully observed. But they were not observed; the meaning of the treaty is evaded and violated, by putting a false interpretation upon some of the articles, and by straining others. Many of the complainants have been deprived of their patrimonies, and many have been forbidden the exercise of their religion. New payments have been exacted, and a new fort has been built to keep them in check, from whence a disorderly soldiery makes frequent sallies, and plunders or murders all it meets. In addition to these things, fresh levies of troops are clandestinely preparing to march against them; and those among them who profess the Roman Catholic religion have been advised to retire in time; so that everything threatens the speedy destruction of such as escaped the former massacre. I do therefore beseech and conjure your Majesty not to suffer such enormities, and not to permit (I will not say any prince, for surely such barbarity never could enter into the heart of a prince, much less of one of the duke's tender age, or into the mind of his mother) those accursed murderers to indulge in such savage ferocity, who, while they profess to be the servants and followers of Christ, who came into the world to save sinners, do blaspheme his name, and transgress his mild precepts, by the slaughter of innocent men. Oh, that your Majesty, who has the power, and who ought to be inclined to use it, may deliver so many supplicants from the hands of murderers, who are already drunk with blood, and thirst for it again, and who take pleasure in throwing the odium of their cruelty upon princes! I implore your Majesty not to suffer the borders of your kingdom to be polluted by such monstrous wickedness. Remember that this very race of people threw itself upon the protection of your grandfather, King Henry IV., who was most friendly disposed towards the Protestants, when the Duke of Lesdiguières passed victoriously through their country; as affording the most commodious passage into Italy at the time he pursued the Duke of Savoy in his retreat across the Alps. The act or instrument of that submission is still extant among the public records of your kingdom, in which it is provided that the Vaudois shall not be transferred to any other government, but upon the same condition that they were received under the protection of your invincible grandfather. As supplicants of his grandson,

they now implore the fulfilment of this compact. "Given at our Court at Westminster, this 26th of May, 1658."

The French King undertook the mediation, as requested by the Protestant princes, but hurried it to a conclusion before the ambassadors from the Protestant States had arrived. The delegates from the Protestant cantons of Switzerland were present, but they were permitted to act the part of onlookers simply. The Grand Monarch took the whole affair upon himself, and on the 18th of August, 1655, a treaty of peace was concluded of a very disadvantageous kind. The Waldenses were stripped of their ancient possessions on the right bank of the Pelice, lying toward the plain of Piedmont. Within the new boundary they were guaranteed liberty of worship; an amnesty was granted for all offences committed during the war; captives were to be restored when claimed; and they were to be exempt from all imposts for five years, on the ground that they were so impoverished as not to be able to pay anything.

When the treaty was published it was found to contain two clauses that astonished the Protestant world. In the preamble the Vaudois were styled rebels, whom it had pleased their prince graciously to receive back into favour; and in the body of the deed was an article, which no one recollected to have heard mentioned during the negotiations, empowering the French to construct a fort above La Torre. This looked like a preparation for renewing the war.

By this treaty the Protestant States were outwitted; their ambassadors were duped; and the poor Vaudois were left as much as ever in the power of the Duke of Savoy and of the Council for the Propagation of the Faith and the Extirpation of Heretics.