

The Palmetto Herald.

VOLUME I.]
No. 23.]

PORT ROYAL, S. C., THURSDAY, JULY 28, 1864.

PRICE
Five Cents.

THE PALMETTO HERALD

IS PUBLISHED BY

S. W. MASON & CO.,

EVERY THURSDAY MORNING,
AT PORT ROYAL, S. C.

Office cor. Merchants' Row and Palmetto Avenue

Terms:

Single Copy.....Five Cents.
One Hundred Copies.....\$3 50
Per Annum to any Address.....\$2 00

Payment invariably in Advance.

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AN UNDERGROUND STORY.

From Milan we went to Parma, and having spent a week in the latter city, Wardwell and myself bought horses to carry us to St. Stefano, the man of whom we bought them pledging himself to buy them back at any time within a month, if we did not injure them, only deducting a moderate price for their use. St. Stefano is at the head waters of the Taro, and distant from Parma some five-and-forty miles. It is nestly away at the foot of the Appenines, and we had been invited hitherto by our friend Montallo, who owned an extensive vineyard there. We had first met Michael Montallo in Genoa, and as a warm intimacy sprang up between us, and as he promised us any amount of pleasure, we accepted his invitation to visit him. He had gone on a few days in advance to prepare for our coming.

We were fortunate in our horses, for we obtained two noble ones, and their keeper assured us that if we started betimes in the morning we should have no difficulty in reaching St. Stefano before night. We started early—only half an hour after the sun was up—and as the road followed the bank of the Taro nearly all the way, the ride was a delightful one. It was only three o'clock when we reached Compiano, which was only ten miles from Montallo's residence. After leaving this place we left the river, and found ourselves among the mountains, the road winding around among lofty spurs of the range. We had reached a point where the path had crossed a swift mountain torrent, and had just crossed the bridge, when a dozen horsemen appeared before us. There was no mistaking those habits; the tall, peaked hat, with its gaudy band; the short, embroidered jackets; the blue shirts, and the leathern belts with their load of weapons.

"Stand and deliver!" were the first words we heard; and after a few moments hesitation we concluded to obey. We begged of them to allow us to retain our portmanteaus and clothing, but they would allow us nothing. They were dark, savage-looking men, long inured to crime, and I could find nothing of that romance about them which I had so often heard of in connection with the Italian banditti; but, on the contrary, they were low, vulgar-looking fellows, with a hang-dog look, that forbade all thought of any such thing as a "lady-love" in connection with them. They took our portmanteaus, with all our clothing, our watches and money, and then bade us go on. I found myself lighter in burden to the amount of five hundred dollars in money, a watch worth a hundred more, and clothing worth perhaps another hundred. Wardwell had been wise enough to leave most of his money in Parma, so his loss was not so much. So when we reached Montallo's our pleasure was somewhat damped.

"Never mind," he said, when we had told our story, "I have clothing enough, and if you have escaped Delmarto and his band with your lives, you should consider yourselves fortunate."

"Then they are known?" said I.

"Known!" repeated my host, with a dubious shrug of the shoulders, "I should

think they were. Why, they have been the pest of these mountain regions for over eight years. Right here is the only handy pass over the mountains to Genoa, and these villains have grown fat in purse on the heavy robberies they have committed. They are the terror of all travelers, and the plague of all officers and soldiers."

"Then they cannot be soldiers."

"Why, bless you, no. More than two hundred soldiers have spent a fortnight at a time about their haunts without effect. To a stranger an account of the escapes they have made would be incredible. Sometimes they are here, and sometimes there; but the moment a party of soldiers heave in sight, they are nowhere!"

That evening Montallo entertained us with an account of Dalmarto's exploits, and I was glad he did, for thereby I was enabled to go to bed a happy man. The loss of my property seemed as nothing, for I could only feel thankful that I was alive. On the following morning we had an opportunity to look about, and never did I find myself in a more charming spot. Montallo's place was in a deep, wide valley or vale, with noble mountains upon slopes on both sides. From his place it was only about thirty miles over across to Genoa, and as he could carry all his wines over upon mules, his extensive vineyards were profitable. He kept a dozen men at work most of the time, besides the muleteers. He was a wealthier man than I had supposed.

Two days were spent in wandering about the premises and visiting his extensive wine vaults, and on the morning of the third day he proposed to visit the great cave of Castello.

"It is a great place," said our host, "and a place which no one has yet fully explored. It was accidentally found some years ago by a poor peasant, who had lost some goats, and was up there searching for them. But come, you shall see for yourselves."

At seven o'clock we mounted our mules and set out, and after travelling some six miles along a winding path among crags and cliffs, we began to ascend a mountain. It was a tedious ride up the rough, circuitous path, but we managed to take it pleasantly, and at length our host bade us stop. We were now upon a broad table rock, with a perpendicular descent of some hundred feet upon one hand, and upon the other the mountain still towered up above us. We hitched the mules to some dwarf place that grew out from a fissure in the rock, and then having taken our torches, we prepared to follow our leader. These torches were huge lamps, made to hang on wooden handles, something after the fashion of the torches carried by engine men.

Each of us took a torch, a loaf of bread, and a flask of wine, and then set out. For a distance of twenty rods or more, we climbed up a steep ascent, and here we came upon another table, only much smaller than the first. Upon this, standing close in to the side of the mountain, was a huge detached rock, and back of this we found the entrance to the cave. It was a rough, jagged aperture, some ten feet in diameter, with only a scene of darkness beyond. Montallo entered first, and we followed. For a distance of about twenty feet we passed through a tunnel not varying much in height from the entrance, and after this the way began to widen and expand, until we found ourselves in a vast chamber, the extremities of which were lost in utter gloom. The floor was quite smooth, but had a descent as we went on. Through this hall we travelled nearly four hundred feet, and then we came to a place where we had to crawl along upon our hands and knees; but this was only a few feet, and then we found ourselves in a hall not so large as the first, but vastly more grand, for the walls were hung all over

with stalactites, and as the light of our torches struck on the flashing pendants, the place had the appearance of one vast stelliferous dome.

After feasting our eyes upon this for a while, we passed on to another cave, still smaller than the others, and here we saw passages leading off in all directions. They were narrow and high, seeming like vast fissures where the rock had split asunder. Into one of these I entered alone, and as the way seemed straight, I kept on for some distance, the thought of finding any difficulty in getting back never once entering my head. I did not notice that though the way seemed straight as I was going, yet it had slightly radiating branches going back. At length the floor became rough, and while I held the torch above my head, and looked only upon the floor to see that my footing was sure, an intervening spur caught my light and threw it from my hand. For an instant the fallen flame quivered with its expiring throes—and then I was in utter darkness. I groped about until I found my torch, and then I turned to make my way back. My eyes were of no more use than was my lighted torch; but I fancied I had not gone far, and that a few moments groping would lead me to my companions.

But ere long I felt that something must be wrong, and then I remembered that I had my apparatus for lightning cigars with, and after a while I managed to re-light my torch. Strange that I had not thought of this before. However, the way was once more light, and I pushed on, and ere long I came out into a large apartment, and was upon the point of calling for my friends when I discovered that I was in a place where I had not been before. Again I called out with all my power, but only the startling echoes of my own voice replied. But my eye caught a passage that I was sure led back toward the spot where I had left my companions, and I started into it. I had not gone fifty feet before I came to a point where the passage branched off in three different ways, but I took the one which led straight on, and followed it until I was satisfied that I was on the wrong track. To go back I considered the safest way, so back I turned; but ere I had gone three rods found the way divided into two branches. I had not noticed this before. Without much hesitation I took the one that led to the right, for it seemed to me that that was the one by which I had come.

And on I went—on, on; and by-and-by I had the peculiar satisfaction of being convinced that I had made another mistake. I stopped and pondered; and at length I resolved that I would take some path and follow as long as I could. I was now in a small chamber, the walls and ceiling of which were only of dark rock, and which had three outlets. I chose the one that I had fancied would lead me aright, and pushed on. I had heard of people's being lost and dying amid the interminable labyrinths of these vast caverns, and it is not strange that thoughts like these made me a little uneasy, to say the least. But on I went, sometimes thinking I must be right, and at others that I was wrong. I passed through four more chambers, one of them as large as any I had entered, and finally I struck into a low, narrow passage, which had a gradual descent. After travelling this some distance I stopped. The way was very descending now, and often I had to step down from one crag to another, sometimes letting myself down by hands where the perpendicular descent was great. It seemed that I must be going down into the bowels of the mountain; but after a while I pushed on again.

And it was well that I did, for I had not gone twenty steps before I saw a faint glimmer of light ahead. I put my torch behind me, so as to be sure, and there was no mistake. This glimmer

was descending, being certainly twenty degrees below me. But down I went, and when I had reached the point where the light came in, I found it to be a low, narrow aperture, the wide passages I had been following taking an abrupt turn to the left, and leading away into utter darkness! I crawled out into this aperture, and found that I was upon a sort of shelf, about half way up the wall of a wide chamber, and into this chamber the light came from two directions—from a narrow fissure overhead, and from an entrance on the floor nearly opposite from where I was. I held my torch out into the cave, and could see that the bottom was not far from twelve feet from where I was perched upon the shelf. And I saw more, too. But wait.

Slowly and carefully I made my way to the edge of the shelf, and then having found secure clutching places for my hands I worked my way over and let my body down, and in a moment more I reached the bottom of the cave in safety. Of course my torch was extinguished, but I could see well enough without; and almost the first thing upon which my eyes fell was—my own portmanteau.

Of course I knew that I was in the robbers' cave. It was a wide cavern, with a rough, uneven floor, and upon every hand were piled up heaps of booty. There were many bales of dry goods, many casks, and in short every conceivable thing that travellers could carry across the mountains. Upon one side I saw a huge chest, which I tried to move, but could not. It was firmly locked, and I supposed it contained what of money and jewels the bandits had to store away. I opened my portmanteau and found my property untouched, only my gold was missing.

But I waited not long here. I took my portmanteau, and had resolved to take it off, when the thought occurred to me that if the villains should return and find any thing missing they might take alarm and make off with their most valuable booty, and furthermore, as my portmanteau was but little compared with the gold I had lost, I put it back where I had found it, and then taking my torch, made my way to the place where the light came upon the floor. I found here an aperture only about three feet high, and six feet in width, and having crawled through this I found myself in a deep ravine, and upon turning about I was surprised to find that I could not see the hole from whence I had come. But the mystery was soon explained. In coming out I had slid down a gentle descent, and an overhanging shelf of rock completely concealed the entrance. I should have said before, but may as well say here, that from the bottom of the cave the aperture through which I had gained access could not be seen, for the shelf extended some two or three feet out from the wall, and thus hid the place; so I doubt if the robbers ever discovered the secret.

This ravine in which I found myself after leaving the cavern long, narrow and deep, with almost perpendicular walls; but I could see that near me was the end of it, where the solid wall arose upon three sides, and I of course knew that the outlet must be the other way. So on I hastened, and at length came to the place of egress, which were very narrow, and hidden among a thick clump of trees. When I reached the confine of this stunted copse I found myself upon the western side of the mountain! So I must have made my way entirely through the giant rock.

It was an easy matter to find the path from here. With quick steps I started for the other side. I remembered a peculiar clump of trees that I had noticed in the morning on the top of the mountains, and as I could see this now I had a safe guide. The way was toilsome, and just as the sun was sinking to rest I

[CONTINUED ON FOURTH PAGE.]