

[Written for The Flag of our Union]

The Land Passage

by Charles Castleton

I HAD disposed of my American cargo and taken in a load of fruits and wines at Messina, in Sicily, for the States. My owners had an agent, or consignee in Toulon, and thither I was to go and get a sum of money that he had in his hands belonging to our American company. A month before, while stopping a day at Gibraltar on my inward passage to the Mediterranean, I had despatched a letter to M. Paul Guettard, by a French steamer bound direct for Toulon, and in that note I informed him that I should call on him for the money on my return. As soon as my cargo was all on board, I sailed for Toulon, where I was admitted without quarantine; but I found that Mr. Guettard was not there. He had left a note for me, however, in which he informed that sickness prevented his meeting me as I had requested. He was at Brignolle, a town some twenty miles back in the country to the northward and eastward, and in his letter he informed that there was no one in Toulon with whom he could have well left the business, and that if I would come to Brignolle, he would let me have the money, though he should be obliged to give me a draft on a house in Marseilles for a part of it.

I knew that it was my duty to get the money, for our company needed it, though I did not fancy this land-passage at all. However, there was no help for it, so I made up my mind to go. If I was to have a draft to be cashed at Marseilles, then of course I should have to visit that city also, and as Marseilles was nearer to Brignolle than was Toulon, I thought it a waste of time and travel to rejoin my ship in the latter place, so I got a “clean bill of health” from the quarantine officer, or physician, and having given it to my mate, I directed him to take the ship around to Marseilles, and there wait for me.

This being done I went to the police office to get a passport to Marseilles by the way of Brignolle. There were a number of men in the office when I entered, but I took little notice of them save to remark in my own thoughts that two or three of them were rather hard looking customers.

When it came my turn I stepped up to the desk and had to give the officer a full account of my business—how long I meant to be on the road—what luggage I had, and so on. When I had answered all his questions, he filed me out a passport, for which I had to pay him two francs. When I turned around to come out, a gend’arme who stood close by the desk, said:

“If you are going to travel with much money, you had better keep your eyes open.”

I assured him that I was not in the habit of travelling with my eyes shut, and then I left the office. It was nearly noon when I reached the diligence office, and I found that no coach would leave for Brignolle until the noon of the next day. Now I wanted to be in Marseilles the next day, and I was determined not to wait there and waste my time. I hurried down to the landing and found that the ship was just heaving up her anchor, so I ordered a boat and went off. I went to my locker and took out a hundred dollars, and then having given my mate orders to proceed at once in getting underway, I went back to the town. With the money I had thus obtained, I bought me a powerful horse, having made up my mind that I would be master of my own conveyance, to the

end of my journey, and knowing that I could sell my horse there without sacrificing at most more than would have been the expense of diligence travel. I got me a noble animal for the hundred dollars—fair horses could have been bought for less than one half that sum—but such a horse would sell quickest at Marseilles, and what was of more consequence to me, serve m better on the road.

I went back to the office and had my passport altered—for the French are outrageously particular in these matters—so that I could make my passage on horseback instead of by diligence, and this done I got my dinner and set off. I found Brignolle situated among the mountains, a bustling, busy place, with some nine thousand inhabitants, and literally wooded with prune trees. It was five o'clock when I reached the place, and I found that M. Paul Guettard had gone to Castlelane, a town on the southern confines of the Lower Alps, and that he would not return before the next day. But his people knew me, as soon as I had stated my business, and I was directed to make myself at home in his house until his return.

On the next morning I arose early and took a turn through the town. At noon M. Guettard had not come. I was anxious and uneasy, for I was losing time that was much needed elsewhere. At three o'clock he made his appearance. He looked pale and thin, and was truly an invalid. He was glad to see me, and as soon as he had taken some simple refreshment, he sat down to attend to my business. It was after four o'clock then. He overhauled all his accounts and made duplicates of the substance of them. I urged him to hurry, for it was growing late. He told me I must remain with him over night, but I assured him that I should not sleep until I was on board my own ship. He hurried with the business, and at half-past six I had the money and draft in my possession. I had just one thousand dollars in gold, and a draft on a banking-house in Marseilles for four thousand more.

Various small affairs, such as supper, a repetition of the business from the agent, and such matters, kept me until seven o'clock, at which time the sun was about half an hour high. M. Guettard tried again to have me remain with him until morning, and to that end he assured me that I should catch a storm before I reached Marseilles. There was some heavy clouds rolling up above the mountains to the northward and eastward, but I took no serious note of that.

“I can ride to Marseilles in two hours, easily,” said I, “for after your directions I cannot surely miss the road.”

Just as I spoke a man passed in the street who eyed me sharply. I had seen his countenance before, I was sure, and I asked M. Guettard who it was, but he did not know. I remembered then; he was one of those whom I had seen at the police office, and so I informed the agent.

“Then let me assure you that you had better wait until morning,” said he, earnestly. “It is a wild, mountainous road you have to travel, and ten chances to one those fellows in the police office who heard all your business have dogged you here, and will follow you and rob you if you set out to-night.”

But I was not to be deterred from my purpose. I had assured my mate that I would join the ship that night, and I meant to do it. I had a pair of good double-barrelled pistols, and I knew that I

could fire four balls from them upon a very short notice. So I thanked my friend for his kindness, and while he still protested against my determination, I mounted my horse, laughed at his fears, and rode off.

It was now almost sunset, and the clouds that had been gathering over the mountains grew thicker and darker; but I put spurs to my horse and dashed off at a swift pace. I had a noble beast—proud, high-spirited, and full of life, but yet obedient and well-disposed. As soon as I had got fairly clear of the town, I began to wish that it were daylight, for I wanted to have a fair view of the scenery on the road. I was among the mountains, and from the circuitous route I had to take, I wondered if the way could not be longer than I had anticipated. However, I kept on at a swift pace, and left the road behind me rapidly.

I think I must have travelled ten miles, when it became so dark that I could with difficulty see the road, and to make the matter worse, a vivid stream of lightning at that moment burst over the mountains, and a clap of thunder followed, that seemed to make the very earth quake. My horse reared with fright and came near throwing me off, and, to add more difficulty to my lot, it had now become so dark that I could not even see the ground. I heard a dull, rushing sound behind me, too, which I knew was rain pattering on the leaves, and ere long the big drops began to fall about me thick and fast. Soon there came another stream of electric light, and another thunder-blot, and my horse plunged again, though not so furiously as before. It was now so dark, and the rain beat down in such torrents, that even my horse could not see the road, and I began to wish that I had listened to M. Paul Guettard. But it was too late now to think of him.

I remembered that Guettard had told me of a little inn about half way from Brignolle to Marseilles, and I thought I must be near it. In fact, I knew if I had understood him rightly, that I must be near it, for I had surely gone half the distance of my journey. But the prospect of finding the inn was not half so palpable to my mind as was the fact of its proximity. Another stream of lightning showed me that the road took a curve ahead of me around the base of a high cliff, and that upon the left there was a deep ravine which extended off to the mountains a mile distant. My horse plunged again at the electric shock, and I kept him crowded close to the right upon the cliff. He seemed to realize the proximity of the deep ravine, but I was sure he could not see any more than I could, for as soon as the lightning was gone, it was utterly dark—so black that the eyes had no power of penetration whatever. I closed my eyes and kept them closed for some moments, and when I opened them I experienced no other effect than the mere physical, muscular motion—not a single particle—not an idea of light was present, no more than might have been found in the very bowels of the earth.

At length the lightning came again, and I found that I had made the curve in the road—that the way was straight for some distance ahead, being between two mountains, and I felt sure that I saw a house! My heart leaped with hope, and I urged my horse forward. The animal seemed satisfied now from the revelation of the lightning, that he was on sure footing, and after trembling a few moments under the influence of the shock, he started on. It was dark as ever, and the rain fell still in torrents, but instinctively the horse picked out his way, seeming really to remember the direction from what he had seen by the aid of the lightning.

I had another source of disquiet besides the danger of the road. I was now thoroughly soaked to

the skin, and I feared that my papers might be destroyed. They were in a snug packet, and placed in a pocket within my vest. I kept my left arm over them when I could, and I hoped that they might not get damaged. The draft, however, which was by far the most particular, was folded within the rest, and I felt easier on that account.

At length it lightened again, and I saw the house plainly. The brilliant glare of the heavens lasted for some seconds, and I made out even the shape and location of the building. It was a quaint structure of two stories, with pointed gables and looking like a pile of small buildings thrown together by chance. No other buildings were in sight, and in fact, there was hardly a chance for another, for the road here was a sort of notch between the mountains, and the house in question occupied the only spot which could be spared from the road for some miles. The thick darkness was upon me again, but a quick, loud snort from my horse announced that he realized the proximity of better quarters. His snort was answered by a horse from the inn, and on that he increased his speed. Soon I saw the glimmer of a light, like a dim speck in gloom, and by the flash of another lightning-bolt, I rode into the yard of the inn and called out as loudly as I could yell. This brought a man with a lantern, and I rode at once under a thatched shed where I dismounted.

The fellow with the lantern made some remark about the storm, and about my own wet appearance, and then he called a boy from the stable, the door of which was under cover of the shed, to come and take my horse. We entered a long passage, and after passing through the kitchen and hall we came to the bar-room, in which a glorious fire was burning. My first request was, that some clothes might be furnished for me while mine could be dried. The host without hesitation bade me follow him, and having led me to a clothes-press which led out of his sleeping apartment, as I judged, he bade me pick out such as I wanted. I selected a pair of trowsers, a warm looking vest, and a loose wollen blouse; then he furnished me with a shirt, socks, and slippers, and after this he led me to an apartment where he informed me I would sleep. He left a candle and went out.

I removed my wet clothing as soon as possible, and having rubbed myself with a coarse towel which I had obtained, until my skin was all aglow, I donned the dry clothes. My host was a fat, burly fellow, and in his garments I found room enough and to spare, but I minded not the cut nor size of the habiliments, for their warmth made up for that. My papers I examined and found perfectly safe, the wet having only penetrated partly through the thick, hard paper in which they were enveloped. My gold, which was in an oil-cloth, belt-like vest, which I wore beneath my outer shirt, I secured again about me, having wiped the cloth dry. I examined my pistols, which were furnished with excellent percussion locks and which I had selected in view of standing the wet at sea, and found them yet safe and sure. Of course no water had got into the barrels, and I found that the caps were as dry as when first put on; so I placed them within the breast of the capacious blouse, and then taking my wet clothes on my arm, I went down to the bar-room. The host took the dripping garments and promised to have them dried by the kitchen fire, and then I sat down by the blazing fire of the bar-room, and for the first time, looked around upon my companions.

There were five men beside myself, and one of them, I instantly recognized as the man that had paused the house in Brignolle while I was conversing with M. Guettard, and whom I had before

seen in the police office at Toulon. The man did not seem to recognize me at all, though he must have seen me when I entered. But this was not the end of what I saw. Two of the others were men whom I had most surely seen before, and I was not long in convincing myself that they too were in the office in Toulon when I went in there after my passport. At length I caught the eye of the first mentioned man, and I determined to speak with him to see whether he would show any symptoms of nervousness, for I felt sure that if they had come from Toulon to rob me, they could not meet my eye without betraying some sign which I should know.

“Good evening, sir,” said I, bowing to him. I spoke French well.

He looked at me steadily for a moment, and as calmly as could be.

“Really, *mon ami*, you have the advantage,” he said, with a quiet smile.

“Then you don’t recognize me,” I resumed, somewhat puzzled.

“Your countenance does have a familiarity, truly,” he returned, with a kind of earnest, inquiring look, “but I cannot remember where we have met.”

“I think I saw you in Toulon,” I said, “and I knew not but that you might remember me.”

“Ah, we met in the opera—at the ball—or, perhaps in a café,” he continued, still seeming to try to recollect.

“In the cafe,” said I.

“Ah yes, that must have been it,” he added, so readily and confidently, that I began to doubt whether he recollected of seeing me at the office of police at all.

I had almost made up my mind that this meeting was purely accidental, for I had watched with the keenest eye their every sign and movement, but I could detect not a thing. If they had really dogged me to that mountain inn, and were now trying to bluff me, I had supposed they would overdo some point, or let drop some sign by which I could hook a suspicion, but I could detect not a thing. If they had really dogged me to that mountain inn, and were now trying to bluff me, I had supposed they would overdo some point, or let drop some sign by which I could hook a suspicion, but thus far I had seen no such thing. At length I called for a pipe, and I stopped down to light it, but in doing so I spilled out all the tobacco. The host saw my difficulty, and he pointed to me a small shelf directly opposite the fire place where there was a box of tobacco all prepared for smoking. I immediately went to this shelf, and upon it rested the bottom of quite a large mirror. While I was filing my pipe with the tobacco, I chanced to cast my eyes into the glass—it was purely accidental, and I saw the reflected images of the three men with whom I had been conversing. They were winking with each other, and one of them had his thumb pointed over his shoulder towards me. In an instant all their well-played game was lost, for I understood them as well as though I had seen each of their hearts revealed plainly before me. That look of theirs—that mutual look—was not to be misunderstood. In it I saw all they had been trying to hide, and I knew all that I could have asked. Now I knew they had followed me from Toulon to Brignolle,

and that there they had known my destination, and had come on ahead of me. Of course, from what they had heard me say in the police office, they had heard me say in the police office, they knew that I had a large sum of money with me, for I had told the officer there my whole business so as to be on the safe side of the police laws.

They may not have known in what shape I carried the money, but they must have known that it was available, and that, whether notes or drafts, the gold could be obtained in Marseilles, just upon presentation.

I filled my pipe and went back to the fireplace, and once more I entered into conversation with the three men. I now saw things that I did not see before. There were twinkles of the eye, movements of the feet, twistings of the body, and modulations of tone, too, that had before escaped me. But I saw it plainly, now; and not only so, but it was now so palpable that I wondered that I had not noticed it before.

At length I signified my intention of retiring. I had been thinking some upon the position in which I was placed, and my mind was made up upon the course of action I would pursue.

“Mine host,” I said, addressing the fat landlord, just as I arose from my seat, and while I was knocking the ashes from my pip, “you must call me early in the morning, for I would be on my way as soon as possible. Be sure, too, you fully awaken me, for I did not sleep an hour last night, and I shall sleep like a trooper, to-night.”

The host promised to awaken me, and also to have my dried clothes on hand for me to put on, and then I took my candle and left the bar-room. When I reached my bed-room I set the candle down, but I did not undress. I sat down on a chair to think. The rain was still falling without, and the lightning and thunder continued. But it was not cold in the room—only cool and comfortable.

Now I knew that those three men whom I had left in the bar-room, and whom I had first seen in the office at Toulon, had come thus far to rob me. I was just as sure of it as though I had seen the act attempted. And next how did they mean to do it? I supposed they had at first intended to waylay me and rob me upon the road; but the storm had disconcerted that plan, and now I thought they meant to rob me in the inn. And how would they do this without detection? Why—simply kill me in my bed without noise—then take my money and papers, and make off as quick as possible. Such rogues had probably a hundred places of refuge. I reflected thus for a while, and finally my course of action was resolved on. Instead of having slept only an hour on the previous night, as I told the host, I had slept in reality the whole night, from dark to sunrise, and I was prepared to watch now without difficulty.

In the first place, I found a closet in the room, and in this I found several articles of female wearing apparel. Some of these I rolled up, so as to make a long bundle of them, and then placed them beneath the quilt. Next I rolled up one of the sheets with a bunch on the end as large as my own head, and upon this ball I tied my handkerchief in the place and shape of a nightcap. This I placed upon the pillow, with the face apparently towards the wall, and fixed it up so that it appeared exactly like a man lying in the bed, and with the face turned so far down that a person would have had to reach over some distance to see the deception. I stood off at some distance

with the candle, and my work appeared well. I approached the bed, and even stood by the side of it, with the candle held fairly up, and yet the deception was perfect. Then I blew out my candle, and retired into the closet.

This closet was directly at the foot of the bed, and its door swung *from* the entrance to the room, so that while standing in it, with the door only partly open, I could see all that might transpire between the entrance and the bed. I stood there in the closet; some of the time partly sitting upon my heels, with my pistols both ready, and heard the clock strike ten, eleven, twelve, and one. After that I began to grow uneasy and fatigued; and I wondered if I might not have been mistaken after all. But my doubts were soon brought to a stand point. I distinctly heard soft, careful steps in the passage outside of my door, and in a moment more as the steps ceased, I heard a hurried whispering. I cocked both my pistols, and both the hammers to each. Soon the door of my chamber was tried, and it was pushed open an inch or so, as I could see by the long, narrow line of light which was defined perpendicularly upon the wall. This seemed to satisfy them that the door was not locked; and there was another season of whispering. Then the door was pushed open further, and I could see the head of a man intruded; but said head was quickly withdrawn, and I heard him say:

“It’s no use; I can’t see without the candle.”

I now closed my closet door so that there could be no danger of my being seen, and in a very few seconds afterwards the room door was opened again, and this time a candle, shaded by a man’s hand, was held into the room, and a man’s head followed it.

“All’s right!” I heard him say, as he withdrew again. There was one more season of whispering, and then a man stepped noiselessly into the room in his stocking feet. He held the candle, and he was immediately followed by two more, one of whom held a pillow in his hands, and the other a knife. I could read all that in a moment. One man was to stab the sleeper, another was to smother him with the pillow in case he should cry out, and the third was to hold the candle to light them on to their delectable work! The pistol I held in my right hand was ready. Both barrels were loaded with care, and I had never known them to fail me yet. I did not tremble—and if I felt excited it was not with fear, for I had four bullets for three men, and I knew I could fire them all with fatal accuracy before they could reach me.

He with the candle moved towards the head of the bed, and then the other two glided noiselessly up—the one with the knife standing nearest the foot so as to give him with the pillow a better chance to clasp his gag over the victim’s mouth.

“—sh!” whispered the man with the knife. “Stand by! Don’t let him make any noise!—*Now!*”

As he spoke he brought his knife down with all his might about where the mock-man’s heart appeared to be, and on that instant I fired. My nerves had grown steady, and as I had light enough to make me sure of my aim, I had fired at the head of him who struck the blow with the knife. I had just time to see him spring forward upon the bed, when I took deliberate aim at him with the pillow—at his head, for I was not five feet from him—and fired. He dropped as quickly as the other had done, and then with my remaining pistol in my right hand I sprang out and

confronted him with the candle.

“Set that candle upon the table!” I cried. (There was a small table at the head of the bed.) “Down with it. Put it out, and you die on the spot!”

The fellow was for a moment too much startled and astounded to know what to do; but at length he set the candle down, and then instinctively put his hand towards his bosom.

“Stop!” I shouted—or rather hissed, for I spoke with my teeth so tightly clenched that that they almost cracked; “move your hand towards a weapon, and you die on the instant!”

The fellow may have at first thought that I was threatening him with an empty pistol, but he saw that the one I held towards him had two barrels, and that another like it was in my left hand, and he settled down perfectly subdued. At that juncture the landlord came rushing in with a lighted lamp in his hand, and he was soon followed by his hostler and messenger.

“Bind that villain the first thing you do,” I said, as the new-comers began to gaze about.

The villain made a lunge for the door; but I had expected such a movement, and I simply placed my foot in his way, and the consequence was, that he quickly measured his length upon the floor. Then I sprang upon him, and this seemed to bring the others to their senses, for they came to my assistance, and in a few moments we had the fellow bound. Then we examined the other two, both of whom had fallen upon the bed, and we found them dead, for the balls had passed through their brains!

I explained the whole thing to the host, without haste or exaggeration. I commenced with my first meeting with the three men in Toulon, and followed on to the moment when he had just made his appearance at the door. He had been too long used to the ways of people in that mountainous section to be surprised at my story, and the only decided remark he made at that time was, that he was glad I’d “fixed ‘em.”

On the next morning, long before sunrise, the hostler and messenger were both sent off to Marseilles, and by six o’clock the officers were at the inn. They examined the live villain, and the two dead ones, and all three were pronounced to be convicts who had not been clear from the galleys a month. My desposition was taken, and upon a statement of my business I was allowed to depart. I reached Marseilles before ten o’clock, and found my ship only a mile from the mole. I went on board, and set sail for home. I have been in Toulon and Marseilles since, and have heard that the third villain was hung; but I have not since taken a *Land Passage* in France.

Flag of our Union, May 19, 1855