

The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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CHAPTER XVII.

I PARTED from the vicar at the gates of the castle and hurried through the park in a lively state of anxiety. I had not yet conceived for myself what had happened in the interval of my absence. Sercombe, to be sure, had thrown out hints, but I knew better than to put any faith in him. Still it was certain that anything might have happened, and we might even now be in possession of the treasure. But what gave me my first blow was the sight of the drawbridge peacefully spanning the waters of the moat, and the spikes of the portcullis protruding just below the archway. These appearances seemed to point in one direction and to acquaint me that the game was up.

Inside I met Mrs. Main, who started in alarm and pursued me with her excited inquiries—so that it was very plain whence the news of my disappearance had reached the police. She informed me that Mr. Sheppard and Mr. Montgomery were both within and seated, in fact, at lunch, in the dining room, therefore, I sought them and broke in upon them. I will not say with what delight I was welcomed, embraced affectionately by Sheppard and sturdily shaken by Montgomery's great fist. They had been anxious, and yet not alarmed, by my absence. Sheppard's wits were always quick, and said he:

"I knew that it was not worth their while to slaughter you, Ned, but what other devilment they might be up to I could not guess. On the whole, we decided finally in favor of what actually occurred." And then, "So you were taken?" he asked. "But how?"

"Give me food and wine and I will give you my story," I replied, sitting down to the table.

Sheppard laid his hand on my shoulder. "No," said he; "not yet. There is something further first." And, looking at him, I perceived a great gravity on his features. He showed a worn and troubled face, now that the excitement of my return was over.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "Is the treasure?"

"That is it," he said. "I want that key. We tried the door in vain. We could not break it down. It is adamant. God knows it was not for want of trying."

"I fear the key is no use to us now," I said quickly.

He regarded me seriously and with a pale face.

"You must forget, Ned," he said gently, "what you left there."

Montgomery's face had fallen, and he sat echoing Sheppard's consternation. Suddenly a light dawned on me. It was Hood that had in mind.

"Hood's not there," I said. Sheppard stared at me.

"Not a bit of it," I went on. "He's plump and live as ever, and a worse rascal."

"But how—how?" exclaimed Montgomery. "I thought the poor devil was dead and rotten by now. We tried all we could."

"Oh, I see I must hasten on to my story without more ado," I said, and accordingly began at once upon my narrative. Chagrin grew upon their faces as I proceeded, and I was interrupted only by the expressions of astonishment and anger which the various episodes of my adventure evoked from both. When it was over, Sheppard rose.

"With your leave, Ned," said he, "I will go down to the keep forthwith." And he left the room, with Montgomery at his heels. I, too, followed, for I was eager to know the worst without unnecessary delay.

My surmises were quite correct. The dungeon rested as it had done when I saw it last and apparently had suffered no trespass. The chests stood in the corner as before, but they were bare of every piece of gold, amulet or jewel. The thieves had made a clean job of their depredation. We stared at one another in dismay and retreated dismayfully to the upper regions of the house.

"Well, there's an end," said Montgomery, with a sigh, and I fancy we were all of the same opinion in that early blast of despair.

The treasure was gone, and he must be a sharp fellow indeed who could discover its hiding place throughout the district of the Gwent or maybe within the borders of the kingdom. Sheppard was the first to show us the way out of our deadly snare.

"I am not going to see it stop here, Ned," he said, with determination, "and that's the truth. That treasure must be somewhere, and we've got to find it."

"I say 'ditto' to that," cried Montgomery stalwartly, heaving a sigh of resolution.

But say it is so, there must be something still about the Gwent, and we've got to run it down. I think, from what you say, you surprised them by your fitting with the vicar. It is evident that they wished to keep you a little longer, no doubt until they had disposed of the treasure under our noses.

"You are right, I believe," I replied. "Why did they want to keep me? Not because they had not the treasure, but to prevent an alarm. And yet the motive was not strong enough that they dared risk a misunderstanding with Morgan. Yes; you're hit it, Sheppard. But the Gwent is wide enough, heaven knows."

"Come, we have reached one point," said Sheppard. "Perhaps we can do more on reflection. Don't let us give it up. Is this treasure likely to be anywhere about the inn?"

"There is the barn," said I, "and the stable lofts, and there are the cellars." "Oh, Ned, there is everywhere!" groaned Sheppard. "We might watch, if they haven't got it away," suggested Montgomery, with some hesitation. It was not often that he intervened in our counsels, but his intervention was now to the point.

"Good!" said Sheppard, smacking him on the shoulder.

"Watch is the word. We've hitherto kept our watches in the battlements. We must now merely transfer them to where the treasure has gone."

"Where is that?" I asked.

"Let us say the Woodman," replied Sheppard, smiling.

"A very much more dangerous duty," I said slowly.

"Dangerous! We thrive on danger," said Sheppard gayly. "Anyhow, let us break up the conference and take an airing. There's nothing to keep us in the castle, and hence we are in no need of drawbridges. It is we who are the assailants."

"That reminds me," I put in. "I found the drawbridge down when I came in just now."

Sheppard winked. "My dear boy, if you'd had to answer all the awkward questions I have had to during the last three days you would have let down the drawbridge in despair."

"Jones?" I queried.

"Jones is the majesty of the law, and an infernally suspicious law it is." It was yet early in the afternoon, and there might be time to put a point upon our resolutions. This thought ran in our heads as, all three, we turned down the road that led to the Woodman.

Sercombe was sunning himself before the door of the inn, seated in a comfortable chair beneath the swinging sign. As we came abreast of him he looked up and greeted us.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said cheerfully. "I'm glad to see you back, Mr. Greastore. We heard that you had disappeared, and were beginning to be anxious about you."

The amazing impudence of the man took away my breath, but I managed to recover and say:

"Yes; I have been taking a little holiday; private business, you know, captain."

"Ah!" said he, shaking his head. "I wish I had the time. But I find holidays must look after themselves. I've too much on hand."

"I sympathize with you, Captain Sercombe," said Sheppard. "For myself, I never could abide business. But I think I understand to what you refer—a bad business, a very bad business."

Sercombe studied him attentively. "You seem to know a great deal, my dear sir," he replied.

"I know, and you know that I know, that you have the heaviest team to drive uphill that ever man undertook," said Sheppard, watching him.

"Maybe," said the captain after a pause. "Life's not all beer and skittles, gentlemen. Perhaps you're right. I don't say you're wrong. But the fact is that I—well, it's a pity we couldn't have fixed an arrangement together earlier."

He spoke so freely that I inferred he was not any longer in the fear of Hood, which meant for us that Hood was absent.

Was he absent, looking after the treasure? Upon consideration I decided that this was unlikely; otherwise, Sercombe would not be resting so comfortably in his chair. The two scoundrels dared not trust one another. In that case the odds were that the treasure lay in the Woodman, and here was Sercombe, and as likely as not a Greek or two, keeping guard upon it. This was all I wanted to know, and, having gained this information, I deemed it time to retire. You will think me rash in my conjectures, but you must conceive that in the game we were playing it was necessary to come to a conclusion quickly, and I had learned to come to a conclusion on the slightest evidence. Anyhow, I gave the signal for retreat, and back we went to the castle by a circuitous route, so as to avoid any suspicious on the part of the captain.

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pard agreed with me that the treasure lay in the inn and most probably in the cellars. The two thieves would secure it against one another. I admit that I entertained little hope of cutting out the treasure under the Woodman. The only way to get it was to go to the inn. On the other hand, it would be difficult to say what I really did anticipate or aim at in this nocturnal expedition. I think we all felt that we could not compose our minds to rest and an imperturbable indifference. We must be upon our legs and bustling about some business, even though it should prove the veriest moonshine, and I believe, too, that a notion was current among us that we might by some felicitous chance or by some heroic effort accomplish something under the cover of darkness. If we might not wrest from its abominable holders the gold and jewels of the treasure. At 10 o'clock we three were gathered within the shelter of the deep thicket before the Woodman. Montgomery had taken up his position there by light, but reported that there had been no movement in the inn.

Within our cogen of vantage we rested, peeping through the interstices of the foliage upon the Woodman. The windows gleamed with light, but beyond that there was no mark of life. Half an hour went by in this way, and then a sound of voices rose from the inn, and presently there emerged from the doorway two men, who stood in conversation for a few minutes before the house. It was too dark to make them out distinctly, but one I set down as Hood. After a time they separated, Hood, as I supposed him to be, returning into the inn and his companion walking down the road away from us. If we were to effect anything this man must be followed, and I whispered as much to the others, determining to take the duty on myself. Slipping through the copse, therefore, I struck downward through the fringe of wood that bordered the road. My progress was naturally slower than that of the man I was tracking, and soon I was surprised to lose the sound of his feet. But a moment's reflection convinced me that he had turned off the roadway and was proceeding, like myself, through the forest. This conviction became certainty a little later, when, pausing to resolve upon my direction, I heard the noise of breaking sticks ahead of me and a brushing among the foliage. Guided by these sounds, I shifted my path and went forward. I imagine now that the man must have heard me just as I had news of him in the wood and that he knew he was being followed. At the time I thought myself undiscovered, for I moved with slight noise. Yet what happened was this: I suddenly ceased more to get tidings of him. I paused and waited, but the valley (for we were now winding into the bottom) was stagnant with silence, save for the purling stream in the distance. Slowly and cautiously I pushed on and came out into a more open space, where I stood silent, waiting again. I must have remained there, still and attentive to all the tiny raptures of the nocturnal quietude, for more than half

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