

The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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Into this cell the Greeks thrust me and, locking the door behind them, disappeared, leaving me to my own reflections. That these were not cheerful I need not assure you. Although I was but partially awakened to my misfortune, I had no difficulty in seeing whither it tended. Hood, as I now perceived, had discovered the secret gallery and had made his escape by that and not by the ally port. But why was he lingering about the entrance to the passage? And how came he in company with his allies? I had not contemplated this problem for five minutes ere the secret of my capture dawned on me and, I will confess, fairly turned my stomach. Through the gallery lay the one road to the treasure, and Hood and I were the only two people in the drama who knew that. My seizure meant, then, that the way was now clear for him and his enterprise. The treasure of the Vyvians was in his grasp.

In these desperate considerations I spun out the better part of an hour, at the end of which time the key creaked suddenly in the door, and Sercombe entered, bearing a heavy lamp. This he set down upon the rude bench table and turned to me, seating himself in a chair and disposing himself with comfort.

"I regret, Mr. Greator, said he suavely and pulling at his cigar, that his hat on the back of his head, 'I regret that I am somewhat late to my appointment with you. It was to have been 9 o'clock, I fancy.'"

Now I recalled what, to say the truth, I had completely forgotten in the adventure which I had experienced—that I had myself named such an hour to receive the capitulation of the captain. It maddened me to remember the fact and my triumphant diplomacy of the afternoon in the face of my dismal failure and this bland and sprawling creature. But I was not to take a rebuff with my ears down, and so I spoke up as calmly and as politely as himself.

"You are right," said I. "Nine o'clock it was. But, like you, I have been unavoidably delayed. So please don't apologize."

A smile lit up his face—and he was always best when he smiled—and his eyes twinkled.

"I begin to see, Mr. Greator," he said, "how it is that you have come so near winning this campaign."

"I have no doubt I shall win it yet," I returned.

"No doubt," he replied cordially. "But forgive me, Mr. Greator. I see you have no refreshments here, and I am sure you are in need of them. It was unparliamentary of Hood. So saying, he rose and went to the door, shouting some order to a man below, whom, I judged, I must consider my sentry. Presently, and before the captain resumed his seat, Hood himself entered, bearing in his hands a tray containing a bottle of whisky, a carafe of water and some glasses. He cast an eye of scrutiny on Sercombe, who lolled once more in his chair, but he said nothing and retired to the door. Sercombe gazed two glasses.

"I did," said I, "which I now beg to retract."

"It was not good enough," he went on, paying no attention to my sarcasms—"not nearly good enough. But what do you say if I make one to you now?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I am at your mercy," I said.

"I envy you your powers of ease," he said. "I am pretty good, but I admit you beat me. But come, I am making you a proposition. What do you say?"

"I have already said it."

"I see I will get no more change out of you," he said soberly. "But I know a man to trust when I see him. That has been my safeguard, Mr. Greator. And I know a man to distrust, though sometimes it is unavoidable." He broke off. "Your friends don't know where you went tonight?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"If the dungeon door is locked it is impossible that they can get into it. But if your friends had the key," he went on, growing very earnest, "what would happen? I imagine that they would open the door, find the bird down and perhaps the entrance to the secret passage disclosed."

This began to interest me. What was the rascal's purpose?

"Well," I put in.

He lowered his voice, which conveyed a certain effect of fear to my mind.

"In which case the treasure would remain in the possession of the castle."

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and, if so, I wished them both joy of their bargain together. I would trust neither scoundrel beyond the reach of my arms or the audit of my ears, and I was pretty sure that neither would trust the other. Their whole association rested upon a mutual compact of greed, and it was odds but the gold once under their hands, they would fall out in some mortal strife, according to the ancient proverb. If that should happen, perhaps, according to the ancient proverb, we, as representing honest men, as nearly as possible in the circumstances, might come by our own, or, speaking more properly, some one else's own.

For the present I had gained nothing, and lay, a disconsolate prisoner, in that airy cell, guarded by watches of the Greeks. So far as I could determine, we, the defenders of the castle and the treasure, were in a bad position, and there was nothing for it on my part but resignation with as civil a grace as might be. I had already taken account of the defenses of my prison and saw little prospect of escape, but I will confess that throughout the first day of my captivity I was somewhat under the influence of hope and hourly expected a conference with Sercombe. This, as you may imagine, drew my attention from the immediate scrutiny of my surroundings, but upon the morning of the second day, when Sercombe still failed to visit me, I cast about for other means of escape.

First of all, I examined the barn very carefully. It was a huge building and rose at the apex to a height of fifteen feet or more. The sides were of wood, but the top was composed of a skeleton of rafters, thickly coated with thatch. Two windows shone in the room, one at the back part and away from the door, the other inserted in one of the remaining walls. The door was, of course, kept locked, but by screwing my face against the side window and craning my neck I could see the figure of a man on guard, evidently at the foot of the ladder. There was little chance of breaking out this way. The second window gave on a low lying stable at the back, and beyond that were the great trees and cool depths of the forest. It was securely barred and fastened, and that, from all appearances, quite newly. The second exploration seemed to offer no more encouragement than the first, but I was not yet resigned to defeat, and, sitting down upon the floor, I fell to thinking, mechanically opening a small penknife which was in my pocket, and perking my nails.

I do not know if I were conscious of the act, but I remember that it took quite a long time, and when I had grown almost desperate in my counsels, that the advantage of this tiny weapon occurred to me. The wooden walls were not higher than six or seven feet, and above them, as I have explained, rose the superstructure of thatch to the pinnacle of the roof. I paused in my occupation and rose quickly. By standing on a chair I could easily reach the thatch between the rafters, and without a momentary hesitation I plunged my knife into the mass of reeds. Sharp as a razor, the small blade cut through the straw at a stroke, with a slight rasping noise. My blood flowed in a strong stream of excitement. Here surely was a road to the outer air.

But this was a venture to be essayed by night and after my fallers had retired for the evening; consequently I put aside the knife and waited very

impudently for the fall of dusk. It was not until 10 o'clock at night that I dared to make my experiment. By that time my supper had been cleared, and the Greeks had been gone for an hour. The barn was in solid darkness, which was all the better for my purpose.

And, getting upon my chair, I set to work at once among the straw of the thatch. If any one should come in from this point onward my adventure would be hopeless. I should stand confessed in my task and doubtless be doomed forthwith to a more secure and less comfortable prison. Therefore the need of haste was the greater, and with fingers and knife I sheared through and tore asunder the thatch with the utmost celerity. The job was none too easy, and I sweated at the work, with my head buried under the debris of the straw and my throat creaking with the dry and rotten stubble. Yet I had worked hard and fast enough to have opened a hole two feet through the thatch in a couple of hours. Through this the night lowered dark and somber upon me.

There was now no necessity for delay. Indeed, the necessity was all for instant action. I listened at the door and window for sounds of the sentry, but I could hear nothing. He might be asleep. At any rate, he lay upon the farther side of the barn, and I might hope to escape his notice by breaking over the stables into the wood. Hastening back, I got upon the chair and, pulling myself up by the rafters, gradually drew to the level of the hole. My head once outside, I breathed deeply of the purer air. Then, dragging up the rest of my body, I dropped gently to the ground beyond. It was a deeper fall than I had anticipated, and I came down with a certain clatter, but, resting a moment in the shadows, I heard nothing. No alarm was raised. So, creeping to the stable, I climbed softly upon the roof and clambered across the eaves in the direction of the forest.

Suddenly a small noise arrested me, but ere I could collect my senses to determine it a dark body crept round a corner of the roof and grappled with me. I seized it fiercely, resolved to do battle for my liberty with all the strength at my command, and together we rolled and struggled on the house-top. Then my opponent gave a shrill whistle, and the next thing I was conscious of was the grasp of a fresh pair of arms from behind. After that I gave it up, more especially as we had rolled to the edge of the roof, and a renewal of the struggle would send us over into the yard with broken limbs and bloody noses.

"If some one will take his foot out of my stomach," I said, "I will descend into the yard."

At that the tension upon me was relaxed, and I was pushed forward roughly to what appeared to be a trap-door in the roof, down which I climbed, thrust brusquely from above. Here I found myself in a small loft above the stalls of the stable. My captors followed, and one of them struck a match, when the light fell upon Hood's face. From that familiar and sinister countenance my eyes glanced about me to several figures in the half light. I saw at once what had been my undoing, for this loft was used as a dormitory for the Greeks, and the noise of my passage along the roof had evidently alarmed them. At a gesture from Hood two of these brutes seized my arms, and I was forced to descend the ladder to the ground. I protested against this treatment, saying that I had given my word not to attempt to escape, and I suppose some sign passed from Hood, for the men suffered me to proceed unmolested, keeping, however, upon either side of me. We entered the inn by the back way, and I expected nothing but to be thrust into some dismal cellar, there to rot and fester until such time as my jailers were pleased to deliver me. To my surprise, however, I was taken into an inner parlor of the inn, where I was left to myself, the Greeks turning the key in the door as they retired. No word had been uttered upon their side throughout the scene. They moved like automata at the beck of the luncheon. A lamp was burning on the table, which was covered with a green baize tablecloth, and the little window looked upon the road, where the sign of the Woodman, with his uplifted ax, was swinging gently.

Immediately afterward Sercombe entered, with Hood upon his heels.

"I regret, Mr. Greator," said the adventurer, "that you should have so small a notion of us as to try this game."

"It very nearly came off," I answered.

"I grant you it was very ingenious," Mr. Hood and I have just been making some investigations, and I congratulate you on your fertility of idea. But your cleverness is only partial. You have never throughout the whole affair been thorough, Mr. Greator; for which naturally you pay the penalty." He spoke very jauntily and plucked his mustache quite gayly, while it tickled me to see the blackguard there in this new role, who but forty-eight hours before had pledged me his word to carry out another arrangement. But if he could betray his friends I had certainly

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