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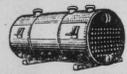
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The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON. Copyright, 1898, by Harper & Brothers.



The treasure was there before our greedy jaws.

Montgomery, overbalanced with his effort, staggered and fell upon the threshold, but Sheppard, who was next to him, paid no attention and, turning, looked at me. The light made no way upon the great darkness.

"Do you know where we are?" whispered Sheppard. "This is below the keep. Shall we go in?"

"Certainly," I said, "get Montgomery up." He pulled the lad to his feet, and slowly we shoved back the huge creaking door.

The chamber into which we were now come was small and square and, like that below, barred by solid masonry and unrelieved by window or grating. I found later by calculation that this must be in the very heart of the castle, where the towers reared their formidable heads in isolation and led only to the corridors of the basement and the battlements above. It was in the keep, then, that our sentinel must hold his silent watch. The highest chamber in the keep rose immediately above the level of the battlements and was pierced by narrow slits in the masonry. This was a convenient station, or, better still, the roof of the tower, with which a flight of stairs connected the chamber.

We explored the keep thoroughly ere we had settled this point, and by that time it was 4 o'clock.

"Now, you had better go and lie down," said I to the others; "otherwise you will be nodding on your watches tonight. For my part, there is an hour yet to the time of safety, and I take first watch."

Sheppard expostulated with me for what he termed unnecessary precaution, but I held to my point, and presently they left me.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN I descended into the house I had hit upon one line of defense at least, and I at once proceeded to realize it. As I walked I found without bridge along the moat to the back of the castle I wondered if it was practicable; but, remembering what old Kesteven had said of his predecessor's experiment some forty years before, I had great hopes that the sluices would still work. The brook ran, as you will remember, behind the castle, at a little distance from the wall. I found with difficulty the mouth of the conduit which had been formerly used to feed the fosse. I inserted my arm as far as possible, and I found the water very clear, though the earth had crept in and lay along the bottom, grown with grass to the depth of some inches. Still I had no fear that the flow of water would not wash this sediment away, provided always I could get the sluices up. To find these sluices was my next thought. I moved along the turf in the direction in which it seemed that the culvert must run, scrutinizing very carefully every inch of the ground. About three feet from the stream was a noticeable elevation, a grass plot rising in a mound two feet high. Here was obviously what I wanted, and so, taking a spade, I dug with a will and soon had the turf removed and the floor of a stone erection laid bare. It was a good hour's work ere I had cleared the rubbish away sufficiently to free the sluices; then I laid hands on them and pulled with a steady, but fruitless, effort. I must plainly have assistance, and accordingly, well enough content with my labors so far, I went back to the house. At breakfast I revealed my scheme, much to the delight of Sheppard, who roundly declared that he would give five years of his life for this adventure. Supported by two enthusiastic assistants, I returned to work, fetching with me a heavy iron bar for use as a lever.

"A little more beef, Montgomery," shouted Sheppard, and himself grew as red as a turkey cock with his efforts. Montgomery flung his heavy body upon the extremity of the bar, and with a crack something came up with a jerk. At the same time I heard below a faint rumbling and rushing as of water.

"We've done it!" I shouted, and ere the words were out of my mouth Sheppard and the other were racing for the moat, whether they presently waded or swam with hands.

The water was pouring from the conduit in a strong stream fully one foot in thickness. That was enough. It would take some hours to fill the moat, but it might take all day so long as we were secured by the fall of night. We left the sluices up and went back.

"The next thing," said I, "is to attack the drawbridge. The portcullis wants oil, but that will do later."

"We'll have the castle a medieval fortress in a twinkling," said Sheppard.

The heavy chains of the drawbridge were intact, but the machinery was in a very bad way, and without more ado we set to work upon it. I called my man Williams into requisition, and I think it took the four of us till 6 o'clock in the evening ere we pronounced ourselves satisfied. After that we had a rehearsal with both portcullis and drawbridge. By this time the moat was swimming with water, which lapped under the shoulders of the bridge. There must have been fully twelve feet of water in the fosse.

"This won't do. We'll have an inundation," said Montgomery, and he let the sluices down. When all was done we surveyed our handiwork and were content. It was now close upon 8 o'clock. Dinner had been ready for more than half an hour, so we were informed by Mrs. Main, who must have regarded us as lunatics. The clock in the hall struck 8 as we entered.

"Watch time," said I. "Who goes?"

We looked at each other, laughing. "My turn," said Sheppard, with a grimace, but I stopped him.

"No; let Montgomery," I said meaningly.

"Right you are," responded Montgomery cheerfully, and, taking his brace of pistols, he vanished along the corridor.

"How's this?" asked Sheppard. "I think the poor boy has earned his dinner."

"Bless you, he shall have his dinner," I answered. "Only the danger is going to be later, and I'd rather Montgomery and his step-in-lend be that asleep on the tower."

We had arranged that Williams should stay the night in the castle and, inducing him with the fear of burglars, had armed him with a shotgun in case we should come to the worst. As Sheppard remarked, we could readily tamper the Welshman's brains if he became suspicious, and if his garrulous assistance of the law I think we could be stupid enough and vague enough to confound his kindly efforts. Mrs. Main was by this time bound to us by iron ties through Sheppard's contrivance, nor do I know to this day exactly how he managed it, or in what directions he used his amiable and soothing actions. The household was Mrs. Main's hireling, and we need scarcely include her in our calculations.

We were now, as I conceived, adequately fortified against a surprise. From 8 o'clock until dawn upon the next morning, we should be stretched upon the rack of suspense, but each of us was sturdily resolved to accomplish his duty at all hazards. That an attack would be delivered, I had few doubts, but my anxiety lay rather as to the watch in which it would be delivered. I had sent Montgomery to his post early, as it seemed wiser for more responsible heads to take the watch during the deeper and darker hours of the night. From 8 till 11 his time ran, and yet they might be upon us ere that. He was fed with some sandwiches, and cheered with a little wine, while below Sheppard and I waited in a condition of tension.

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed Sheppard presently. "I can't get a good stand this. Let us go and join him."

"You would be much wiser," said I, "to get an hour's sleep."

Sheppard shrugged his shoulders. "My turn next, you see, and I'm not used to be awakened in my beauty sleep. It's bad for me. No; I'll go to bed when you relieve me. But I recommend your own advice to yourself."

"And I will take it," I answered. "See that Montgomery gets his supper and goes to bed like a sensible person. I'll be with you at 2 punctually."

I cannot say that I enjoyed a peaceful sleep. Although I was dog tired, partly from the exertion of the day's work and partly because I had had no rest the previous night, I still slumbered very fitfully. First I awoke to a fever and, throwing the hot blankets from me, stepped to the open window. My bedroom faced the north, and the cool airs that heralded the dawn were in my ears, reducing the fume and fire of my nerves. Far away some roistering bird was calling, not in his spring notes, but rancous now with the number of autumn. The curtain of the dawn was lifting. It was time for me to relieve Sheppard. My watch marked a quarter to 2. Having dressed, I went down to the great hall and, shutting the western windows open, looked out. Trees, like great ghosts, invisible, whispered in the night together. The stars glimmered down below, and I recollected suddenly that I was peering into the water of the fosse. The stillness hung so deep that I was possessed of a sudden with a hundred fears. Was Sheppard murdered? And were the castle and treasures now in the hands of those abominable assassins? I listened for a cry, but there was none, only the gentle wash of the waters against those ancient foundations or the swishing of the leafage on the neighboring trees. The party lay, as one might have fancied, under the imminent hand of death.

I stole upstairs, clambering with a silent figure turned and a low voice spoke.

"Is that you, Ned?"

The sound almost startled me, occurring upon the stillness.

"Well, I have two things to communicate. Do you see that tree?"

I peered into the darkness in the direction he had indicated.

"I hear it," I observed doubtfully.

"Well, I've seen it," he retorted.

"Your eyes are better than mine, then," I answered.

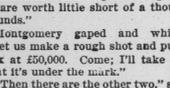
"Maybe," said Sheppard cheerfully, "maybe not. But I don't profess to see through a wall. That tree is fifty paces away, and it is an oak, very large and umbrageous."

"I didn't," he went on. "But I reckon to see by match light as well as any."

"I was puzzled. 'Match light?' I queried. 'You haven't been?'"

"Oh, dear, no!" he exclaimed. "My tower has been the central patch of blackness in this black night. Be-sides, who ever struck a match at night to see by? No; the match was in that same tree. I speak of. I was silent. 'I presume it didn't strike it,'" he continued.

"Lower your voice," I enjoined.



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Sheppard smiled, as I could perceive even in the darkness.

"Oh, I don't see why," he declared. "There's no one there to strike a match now, to the best of my belief."

"How is that?"

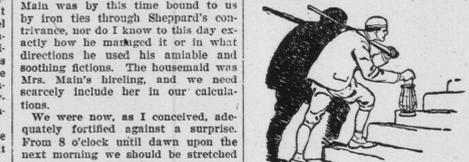
"Did you hear no sound?" he asked. I shook my head, and he patted his shotgun.

"I congratulate you on your soundness of health. I fired about an hour ago, and fancy the shot did not altogether miss. There followed a still, small noise and after that again pattering feet receding. I think some one has indignation today in Sercombe's army."

Sheppard shouldered his gun and walked to the northern verge of the parapet. Stopping, he fumbled in the darkness, and the next moment his voice sounded from below my feet.

"Follow me, Ned," he called. Groping about with feet and hands, I came upon an open hole in the floor and, inserting my legs cautiously, hopped upon the first step in a stone stairway. Diligently stepping down this through sheer blackness, I came out upon Sheppard's heels into what by comparison seemed daylight. The stars glistened in the canopy of heaven. I was out upon the battlements.

"We might have known there was some communication between the keep and the battlement," said Sheppard. "You see the advantage. I've been pacing this walk like a sentinel for the last two hours."



I stole upstairs to the keep.

"Can you get right round?"

"I'll not say I have not tried and led the way along that lofty roadway. The battlements naturally stretched across the width of the castle, running from wall to wall. The parapet stood some five feet high and was broken with the machicolations of the design. There was ample space, therefore, for twenty men at arms to march abreast along the heights. Sheppard moved lightly, his head just touching the top of the parapet and the black darkness contained between the shadows of the ramparts. The leaden roof was incumbered with rubbish, debris and broken pipes, and there rose quickly before me out of the superincumbent gloom the blacker mass of the drum towers. Feeling his way, Sheppard hit upon an iron ladder connecting with the heights above, and presently we stood upon the topmost pinnacle of the castle and peered from it into the night. The nocturnal mist and darkness of the valley below were slowly shifting. The trees gradually grew black, showing against a vast and gray gloom. Yet there was no light visible in those seething chambers of the elements. The night still hung about us.

The southern drum tower looked down upon deeper shadows, and I could not descry the wall below. I turned to my companion for an explanation and smiled at the confusion of my own brain when he answered:

"That's the south, Ned. You know the battlements are in ruins there. Of course they were, but I was not to be deterred from a complete circuit of the walls by that small fact, and I groped for the ladder."

"Better not. Wait till it's light."

"Now, I knew very well at the time that he spoke wisely and that I was merely taking a rash hazard for no better purpose than to display to myself my own determination—or obstinacy, if you will. But the feeling was strong upon me, and so, picking my steps down the ladder, I paid him no attention. Presently my foot, descending, shot through empty air, and coincidentally with that the iron bar to which I was clinging with my left hand ceased abruptly. For a moment I had a sickly sensation in my stomach, and I went quite cold. But, bracing myself together, I knelt upon the lovelorn step and launched my body into space.

I have no intention, as I say, of defending my foolhardiness, nor do I take any credit for my ultimate escape from what was undoubtedly a deadly peril. My legs kicked aimlessly in the air and found no rest. I tightened my hold upon the iron of the ladder and strove to pull myself up. But my wrists had already weakened in that tedious and unavailing oscillation in space, and, to my horror, I realized that I could not out-balance.

(To be continued.)

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