

The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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Sheppard rose and when the man returned ushered him with some ceremony to the table. "A chair for Mr. Hood," he said. "Where will you sit, Mr. Hood—by the captain? That's right. Please make yourself comfortable. We have just enjoyed an excellent dinner very well served, Mr. Hood, but I fear you are too late. Montgomery, a glass of wine for Mr. Hood. Business is business, and I never conduct a piece without the usual sherry." If this elaborate irony disturbed Sercombe, as it seemed to do, it had no effect upon Hood.

"Thank you, sir. I will stand, sir. No wine, thank you, sir." Such was his brief reception of the courtesies.

He assumed a place at the back of the captain, commanding a view of the table. Sercombe spread his hands upon the table.

"Gentlemen, let us show our cards," he said.

There was a momentary silence, and then I was conscious of a slight bustle of excitement that stirred the room into sound. Sheppard looked at me, and Montgomery's gaze was riveted upon the captain. Sheppard coughed gently and sipped his wine.

"That is a very proper demand, Captain Sercombe," I said, "seeing that it is what we are here for, but I hardly yet see my way clear to table all my tricks. Let us understand one another better."

The captain did not color, as he might well have colored under this implicit distrust. As I have said, he was singular in the partial hold he kept upon his gentility. Instead he laughed, but somewhat awkwardly.

"I see," he answered, and looked down at his hands, appearing to consider. He lifted a big and somewhat clumsy hand and scratched his swollen cheek, smoothing a long wisp of red hair across his naked crown. "I cannot pretend to misunderstand you," he declared at last and shot a glance aside at Hood, who had fallen slightly away from the table and stood intently watching the scene. "But I think it is somewhat unnecessary, Mr. Greator, he said, again very awkwardly, and he laughed shortly, and again his eyes flew to Hood, directing at him, as it seemed to me in that light, a glance of warning, of appeal, even of fear.

"No doubt," said I in return, "but you must remember that I have already had experience of your possibilities. But come; we shall get no further unless we can strike a compromise. If you will produce your fragment of the document—"

"You assume that I have it," he broke in, with his discordant laugh. "You are taking a good deal for granted."

"I assume nothing," said I. "Do not let us bandy words."

Sercombe lifted the decanter which stood at his elbow and filled his glass with a hand that shook. He drained it at a draft and turned to Hood. The innkeeper glided to his chair, and something passed from hand to hand. Sercombe put the torn fragment upon the table before him. He looked at me, as if inviting me to a similar demonstration. We were to proceed by moves, then.

"I have no evidence that this is the document," I objected.

"Nor I, in your case," he retorted.

"Very well," I assented. "We will take it point by point, but I fear we shall find it a tedious job."

I drew the paper from my pocket and laid it before me. At the other end of the table I could see Sercombe's green eyes bulging in his head as they fastened upon the white thing under my hand. His mouth dropped, and a portion of the glow receded from his face. Montgomery stared. A tense feeling stiffened the attention of all. I felt my heart throb in the silence, and then suddenly there was a sharp exclamation from Sheppard, and the next moment I was conscious of a clatter and two figures struggling beside me. The affair lasted but a few seconds, and then Hood was hurried deftly back against the window, and Sheppard flung upon the floor with a crash a long Spanish dagger.

A hush fell on the room. Sercombe turned pale, and his eyes shifted uneasily. Had it been murder that was intended? If so, I could have sworn that Sercombe was no party to it.

"It appears that we can't do quite without the law," said Sheppard, placing his heel upon the weapon. Hood, breathing deeply, remained in the shadows of the window.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

Hood, black and lean, but immovable as to feature, stepped from his corner. "I beg your pardon, sir," he explained, "but I suppose the gentleman objects to my wearing it. It isn't a pretty weapon, sir, exactly, but I have found it useful, sir. I thought there would be no objection. Mr. Greator, sir, more especially as the gentleman here carries a revolver." He indicated Montgomery, who grew red and stammered.

"I beg your pardon. Awfully sorry. I—I—here it is," and extracting a Colt from under his waistcoat he threw it on the table in front of me.

Sheppard and I exchanged glances.

"Come, sir," said Sercombe's voice, rising in an imperative key, "but this remarkable scene requires an explanation.

tion. Why may not Mr. Hood wear what weapon he likes?"

"Was there anything?" I asked of Sheppard in a whisper.

He frowned in embarrassment. "To have waited for anything would have been too late," he answered in the same tone. "I had to forestall. I guessed, but I'll swear I guessed right. I can't prove it. I caught the gleam." Then he turned quickly from me and picking up the dagger offered it to Hood. "I am sorry for this misunderstanding," Mr. Hood, he said sweetly. "If I had stopped to think I should have known that a man like yourself would only carry a weapon for some good purpose. But it is a creature of impulse, full of mistakes, but of a warm heart below all, and I offer you the dagger back in token of my trust in you," with which he sat himself down in his seat and ostentatiously played with Montgomery's revolver for the rest of the interview.

"Come, come. That is well said and well ended," said the captain genially, and he was evidently very much relieved at the conclusion of this scene.

"And now, Mr. Greator, and to show that it is not both sides that are so unnecessarily suspicious, if you will be so good as to take this paper from me I will trust you to read out the whole document."

This proposal, coming on the top of what had happened between us, astounded us all, as you may suppose. But Sercombe was rarely at a loss for some amazing movement, and he knew well enough that he was perfectly safe with me, whereas he was also aware that I knew I was absolutely unsafe with him. Therefore he assumed a golden air of courtesy and lofty faith, as between gentlemen. But these reflections are not to the point, for there was I, with the two parts of the precious document in my hands and four pairs of bright eyes burning upon my face with their eager interrogation. You may conjecture my emotions and the way my pulse ran. I spread the paper I had received from Sercombe upon the other, smoothed it with the back of a knife and, forthwith, declared the following composition, read it slowly aloud to the company:

"I, Sir Ralph Vylian, being now in my thirtieth year and upon the eve of exile through the malicious treachery of friends, this 15th day of April, in the year of our Lord 1646, do hereby, as follows hereunder, give and proclaim to all or any of my descendants, lawfully begotten, or their heirs, the ensuing information. It being in the twentieth year of the reign of our beloved sovereign his gracious majesty and in the fifth of the lamentable and abominable strife with the disloyal houses, I was besieged in Ivor castle by one Colonel Morgan, attached to the army of the houses and more particularly to the notorious traitor Sir Thomas Fairfax. I held this castle for the king for three days and three nights, but upon the fourth day, this said 15th day of April, through the treacherous act of traitors, the enemy hath gained entrance by the towers and even now is pressing upon the garrison. And thus I set down these several facts here upon the instant of the final essay—to wit, that I, being the custodian of divers cases of treasure, gold pieces, jewels and the like, destined for his majesty's uses, having taken counsel with my steward and my friend Sir John Chumley, have concluded this great treasure in a privy place within the castle precincts and do hereby deposit this said writing also in a secret hiding place. And to whomsoever of my descendants or their lawful heirs this shall fall, in the event of my death or exile, I charge them to deliver the same unto his gracious majesty King Charles or unto his heirs, the sovereign kings of this realm, as a dutiful subject, being held in trust for that purpose."

"And here is how ye shall find the treasure: If ye will descend by the stairway in the guard room within the northern tower ye will find a gallery among the donjons of the basement. Keep upon this, feeling upon the walls, until ye shall touch the corner where the castle turns to the south."

Now I paused for a moment, for here the document which Sercombe had given me was ended. I cast a glance at the others as I laid it aside and took up the other portion. Sercombe's face was appalling in its marks of greed. The vulture shone from Hood's eyes. I resumed:

"Turning this corner, it is necessary to proceed upon the western side of the castle for the space of thirty footsteps, and at the close thereof to pause and survey the walls. If ye will then determine a height of five feet from the footway, there will be hewn upon a disclosed a small knob, the which revolving will give access to a large cupboard within the wall. Observe diligently upon the back of the cupboard and where the oaken lining adjoins the stone. Here will be a spring, the which pushing, a doorway shall open behind the cupboard, and ye shall find entrance to an interior vault. A flight of stairway leadeth—"

"At this point, as you will remember, the document grew illegible and nothing but the blur of faint characters was discernible. But we had all that was necessary in that explicit narra-

live of the dead Cavalier, and in proof of this up jumped the captain, his green eyes shining with emotion, and—"You will give me a copy of that, sir?" he asked sharply.

I nodded.

"You are welcome," I said. "If you will write I will dictate." And forthwith, pen and paper being fetched, we proceeded upon the odd task. When we had finished he gave a look at Hood, who joined him, and the two passed under the sheet together.

Then Sercombe rose and, putting the paper in his pocket, remarked: "You see I have trusted you, Mr. Greator. I take your word. And as you have

As I rose a man grappled with me, now the whole document of the late Mr. Kesteven in your possession I wish you joy of it."

"There is one word more," said I sternly. "The man who stole this piece of paper from its owner is morally guilty of his death."

"Fish!" he exclaimed lightly. "We can't make an auzet without breaking eggs, Mr. Greator. And now I must reluctantly wish you goodbye. I owe you an excellent dinner, and if fortune favors me I shall look forward to returning it. There is no need to part on bad terms."

He held out his hand, but ere I could accept or refuse it Sheppard sprang forward. "Allow me, captain," he said.

"Ah," smiled Sercombe, in no way abashed by my hesitation, "it is a pity you and I are not cast for companions, Mr. Sheppard."

"At least," said Sheppard, "as accomplices we can respect each other."

Sercombe broke out laughing, and with one glance at Hood, in which, as I thought, he appeared to offer a question, he marched out of the room. The innkeeper followed, and Sheppard went after them, full of geniality to the last and calling for Captain Sercombe's cloak. Out of the window I saw them pass under the dim light of the oil lamp before the doorway, and Sheppard was still ushering them across the courtyard to the gateway of the castle.



As I rose a man grappled with me.

Suddenly I heard my name called in a loud voice, and Montgomery started to his feet and threw open the window. This gave upon the courtyard from the northerly side of the castle. In an instant I recognized the cry of Sheppard, piercing shrilly through the noise and clatter of a struggle. Shouting to Montgomery to follow me, I dashed out of the room and down the staircase, almost falling upon the slippery cobble of the courtyard in my haste. As I rose a man grappled with me; but, being now strung to fighting pitch by my excited anticipations, I flung him heavily to the stones, where he lay inert, one I leaped over his body to the assistance of Sheppard.

CHAPTER IX.

YOU will remember, if I have been explicit enough, that the entrance to the castle lay across the drawbridge and by way of a great stone archway running through the width of the easterly wing. This passage, which was not more than ten feet across, was in effect a vault over the feet high and thirty feet long. It was here that the noise attracted me, and into this narrow channel I ran, breaking tumultuously upon the aggregated knot of men that seemed to struggle in the uncertain light. Stars illumined the sky very faintly, but in that passage the gloom was heavy, and I could perceive very little. As I was casting about, toosing among the swaying bodies, I saw immediately to my right the fair head of Sheppard rise, struck with the evening glow from without. Forthwith I dashed the body nearest me to the ground and with my fist dislodged another man in front of me. Then I heard Sercombe's voice raised in angry remonstrance. "I gathered nothing, neither words nor sense, from it, but, occupied merely with the physical lust of battle, drove right through the press of the melee to Sheppard. It seemed to me then that there were dozens of people crowded within those narrow walls, but I believe, as a matter of fact, that there were only some eight of us. Sheppard rose and fell and rose again.

"Ned! Ned!" he called, and at the sound, plunging upon human bodies, I lurched and went under. A stampede of feet seemed to rush over me. I felt battered and bruised; the wind was all out of my lungs; but, slowly edging on my stomach toward the wall, I drew out of the press. As I did so I heard a great dull noise, thud, thud, intervening upon the sounds of the struggle, and presently, my eyes being new accustomed to the darkness, I caught sight of Montgomery's tall form, his arms uplifted and wielding a heavy bar of iron.

"Bravo!" I cried and, struggling to my feet, pushed toward him.

"Turn, you fools! Curse you, turn!" said Sercombe's voice.

I was conscious then of white teeth and a grotesque screw neck that rose up before me, and even while I put up my hands to choke it I felt the warm sting of a knife in my shoulder blade. By some magical thought, dawning at the moment, I recalled Montgomery's revolver, which I carried in my breast pocket, and, producing it, fired at the lethal form before me. There was a sharp cry, the man appeared to re-

coil, and then Montgomery's fall descended in a pitiless shower of blows. Of Sheppard there was no sign.

Seeing that the affray was turning in our favor, I sprang to the side, and, opening a small doorway in the southerly drum tower, rushed up the stairs. It was fortunate that I had made so complete a study of the castle. I found the crank I wanted and turned the wheel, putting forward all the strength I had in my muscles. Slowly the mighty portcullis descended, shrieking as it fell, but this, as I had hoped, following upon the report of my revolver, and accompanied as it was with Montgomery's continuous and powerful blows, proved the turning point for our enemies. As the groaning gate descended there were cries uttered in a foreign tongue, and a rush ensued for the gateway. Leaving the machine to revolve by its own impetus, I flew down into the archway. Sercombe stood in the light expostulating. Montgomery's weapon stretched some one flat upon the stones as I entered, and the man crawled off. I fired another chamber of the revolver aimlessly, and the flash lit up the passage while the sound reverberated dully from the groined vault. The portcullis fell lower and Sercombe was driven across the drawbridge by his retreating allies.

"Dead or living, they shall have him," said some one in my ear, and I beheld Sheppard, his face smeared with blood, dragging a body in his arms. Together we thrust it forth, and it lay half-way across the threshold. The portcullis dropped inexorably and was now within a foot of the ground. The man lay under the range of its iron spikes. The wheels creaked above, and the distance shortened. Montgomery ran forward and shoved the body outward. But it still hung halfway. And then Sercombe came rapidly back and, stooping, by a swift movement drew the inanimate form from beneath the iron spikes of the drawbridge. He said no word, but merely glanced at us as we stood behind the grille.

As Sercombe's figure faded blackly into the night I turned and peered into the gloom of the archway where my companion stood.

Sheppard struck a match, and the tiny flame cast a precarious light upon the three of us. Two streaks of blood crossed Sheppard's forehead.

"First blood and first honors," he said.

Montgomery breathed like a blacksmith.

"It was a mean trick," he observed. An acute pain struck suddenly through my shoulder. "The foreigners use their knives aptly," I remarked.

"They do that," said Montgomery fiercely. "One devil has pierced my stomach through."

"Let us go back to the house," I said and, setting the example, turned. Sheppard's light went out, and as the flame vanished the blue-black darkness fell like a pall again. We walked back into the castle.

"What about this wound, Montgomery?" I asked anxiously.

The boy stood up straight, his well-cut face severe and immobile.

"It's no wound," he rejoined. "A pin prick."

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"Oh, well, let us see," I said carelessly.

He stripped off his shirt and coat, and a great red bulging spot met my eye below the breast. Sheppard put his fingers on it.

"That wants a bandage," he said, and, meeting my eye—"no, there's nothing much in it. A nasty place, but merely superficial."

"We'll have old Toms over tomorrow," I said.

"The doctor?" queried Sheppard.

"But what about?"

"Oh, I dare say we can compose some sort of lie. Besides, as a medical man, our confidences are sacred."

"That's true," said Sheppard, and a little silence fell between us. "Well, be resumed presently, 'can we sleep, do you think?'"

"I think we are likely to have a lively night," I answered. "And for me, I am in no mood for bed."

"Nor I," declared Montgomery.

"Very good," says Sheppard. "Then what about this treasure?"

"Precisely what I was thinking," I said.

"Let us see the papers," said he.

"Oh, I have them burning in my mind," I answered. "And if all are

ceeded on the way I noticed that now and then a narrow passage branched off to the right, and on each occasion, at the farther end, I caught the soft glow of the external lights of the night. From this I gathered that the chambers were passing (whatever was the use to which they had been put) were cut off by exiguous channels to the outer wall of the castle and breathed by gratings upon the moat. One of these passages we explored, and by peering through the grating, set with heavy iron bars, we were able to perceive that the floor of the sepulchral corridor was buried some feet below the level of the moat itself, for the gratings stood high above our heads and were only reached by climbing. I assumed that they stood just above the proper level of the water.

We were now, we judged, upon the western face of the castle—that is to say, upon the back parts which looked upon the park of trees and the brook behind, where the hill (or pitch, as it was called) rose in a thick to its utmost summit. We had twice turned at right angles and, pausing, consulted the document once again for the sake of certainty. We had now to proceed some thirty paces. Suddenly I stopped.

"The wall," said Sheppard, who had the paper by heart as well as myself, and forthwith set to fumbling upon the right hand.

"There is no doorway here," he observed in a low voice, "and yet this should be a chamber such as we have passed already."

"Five feet from the ground," I said in equally low tones; "that's what it says."

"Is it here?" he whispered.

Sheppard gave vent to an exclamation.

"Got it," he said sharply.

"Throw the light this way."

I moved the lantern forward, and sure enough there under Sheppard's hand stood out a round iron knob or handle in the huge masonry.

"Press," said I.

"No, turn," said he.

Nothing ensued upon his action. "Let Montgomery try," I suggested.

The boy stepped forward and wrenched at the knob.

"It's stiff with rust of centuries, but it's set in iron," said Sheppard. "We shall wait oil."

"Oil be hanged!" said Montgomery.

"I'll do this or die."

He swung, doubling on himself, and the veins jumped in his forehead.

"You will move your wound," I protested. Montgomery said nothing, but renewed his exertions, and with a creak the knob turned and a gap grew in the wall.

"Hurrah!" said Sheppard, his voice ricocheting down the musty corridors.

"Hush!" I enjoined. "Pull it open."

The two tore back the cupboard door, and my lantern flashed on an appalling space of blackness.

"There is nothing here," said Montgomery.

"We're not finished, you duffer," said Sheppard eagerly. "Feel along the back wall. Here, let me. Oh, the devil! I'm too short!"



Montgomery wrenched at the knob.

agreeable, we may take a lantern. They won't trouble us just yet."

But just at that moment came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Main showed in the open doorway, wearing a face of alarm.

"Mr. Montgomery's pistol went off by accident," said Sheppard promptly. Mrs. Main apologized and retired.

"I think we shall have to square the old lady or get rid of her," I observed.

"Leave that to me," says Sheppard cheerfully.

"Well, come along," said I, and, seizing the lantern, I stepped out into the courtyard and made for the entrance to the northerly drum tower.

Sheppard broke a jest or two at the entrance as we stumbled up the stairs, but once we were in the passage and had descended into the basement a deep silence enveloped us. The corridor rang with our feet, and the great slabs of stones were damp, to be felt even through our boots. As we pro-

(To be continued.)