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The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON.

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"You are more expert," said I.
 "I thought you took me," said he.
 "It's plain enough. Let us piece the
 document together, read it and start
 fair on the knowledge. That places us
 again on equal terms, only with this
 difference, that the best man wins.
 Whereas now a man may be Satan
 himself and fall till the crack of
 doom."

Sheppard threw an eager glance at
 me, and I read assent in it. Nor was I
 indisposed to agree to the proposal, odd
 and unexpected as it came and involv-
 ing us, as I foresaw, in all the out-
 rages of actual warfare. Yet upon so
 pregnant a proposition I dared not
 make up my mind on the instant, and
 I suppose the man saw this, for, turn-
 ing, he moved to the windows again
 and looked out upon the heavens, hum-
 ming to himself. Ere he had turned
 again and faced me with his question
 in his eyes I had made up my mind.

"I agree," I said.
 Sheppard whistled softly and, as if
 imitating the captain, leaned forth up-
 on the window. A light of satisfaction
 played in Sercombe's gray-green eyes
 for an instant. As for Montgomery, I do
 not suppose that he had any clear
 notion of what it was all about.

"Then," said Sercombe, "the sooner
 the better, and what time better than
 today?"
 "I agree to today," I replied.
 "Good! And now there remain only
 the place and time," said he.

"I have no wish to have my head
 broken," said I bluntly, "or to be mis-
 taken for a hare, and so I say the cas-
 tle. If you grant that, you may fix
 your own time."

"I was in hopes," he said, smiling,
 for he took no offense at my plainness
 of speech, "that we might have set-
 tled the matter over a little dinner.
 Hood, an excellent host, I find, is an-
 xious to show you what the Woodman
 can do when he spreads himself. And
 a full stomach, warmed with wine, is
 better for business, as my young friend
 here knows. But you shall have it your
 own way."

"By all means let it be a dinner,"
 said Sheppard, suddenly springing up
 from his seat. "Mr. Greator, I am
 sure, would be loath to rob you of your
 pleasure, Captain Sercombe, and in his
 name I make bold to offer you the hos-
 pitality of the castle."
 I started in amazement and opened
 my mouth to refuse, but was saved the
 trouble by the captain's answer. He was
 a good deal disconcerted.

"I fear," said he, "that the hospitali-
 ty would be reluctant on Mr. Greator's
 part."
 "Not at all," I said graciously. "A
 distinguished soldier like Captain Ser-
 combe is always welcome to my house."
 He hesitated, and then, coloring slight-
 ly, "I am not alone," said he.

Sheppard shot me a glance of tri-
 umph, as who would say, "I thought
 we should corner him."
 "No doubt," Mr. Greator would
 gladly entertain the other gentleman,"
 he suggested.

The captain looked at him, and a
 grin spread slowly over his features.

By his side stood Hood.
 "No," he said; "but, with Mr. Greator's
 permission, the other gentlemen
 shall entertain us," said he.
 "I fancy," he continued, smiling,
 "that Hood is not a stranger to the
 castle ways, and he makes a good wait-
 er."

The idea tickled me. "Let us have
 Hood by all means," I said. "I had
 an excellent character for him from
 Mr. Kesteven."

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black velvet, and his appearance was
 carefully under restraint. The situa-
 tion became a little disagreeable, and I
 thought the time had arrived to end it.
 "Captain Sercombe," I said, "as for-
 mally, 'I fancy our dinner, such as
 it is, is over, and if you will take no
 more wine perhaps we had better get
 to business.'"

"Certainly," said the captain,
 cheerfully and draining his glass. "I
 am at your service."

I looked at Hood. "It is time now,"
 said I, "that we were alone." And I
 waited to see the man move.

A quick exchange of glances took
 place between them, and then the in-
 keeper turned his back on us and busied
 himself with the plates upon the
 sideboard.

Sercombe colored angrily and was
 visibly disconcerted. "I beg your par-
 don, sir," said he, with a slight stam-
 mer, "but I have already had the honor
 of informing you that I am not alone in
 this matter."

"Really," said Sheppard gently, "I do
 not think we can invite our servants to
 discuss this matter with us."
 Sercombe bit his lip, and after a
 glance at Hood, who still kept his atti-
 tude, "I understand your feeling, gen-
 tlemen," he replied, "and, in fact, I
 sympathize with it. But—"

He hesitated, and I began to perceive
 for the first time how far he was in-
 volved with the other and to what ex-
 tent he was under his control. It was
 evident that he was chagrined by his
 position.

"Leave the room, Hood," said I, not
 that I had any certain intention that
 he should quit us, but rather out of
 curiosity as to what would ensue. The
 issue surprised me. Hood turned obedi-
 ently on his heel and made for the door.
 As it closed upon him Sercombe
 turned to us and broke out with em-
 phasis:

"You are right, gentlemen. I agree
 with you. These things are better
 managed between gentlemen. But—"
 His perplexities struggled in evidence
 upon his face, yet he had an uncon-
 quenchable glow of recovering himself, which
 I had had occasion already to admire.

"I was to admire him still more at
 this moment. 'You will perceive, Mr.
 Greator,' he said abruptly, 'but with
 a sudden suavity of voice, 'that, as
 you have just pronounced, we have
 concluded our friendly dinner, and it
 is to business that we turn. I take it,
 therefore, that we are no longer here
 in the capacity of hosts and guests.'"

"True," said I.
 "Then," he exclaimed triumphantly,
 "Hood, I take it, is no longer a serv-
 ant?"

"Captain Sercombe is right," said
 Sheppard promptly, turning to me.
 "and, by your leave, Ned, I will ring
 the dinner bell up."

"I accept your theory," I answered.
 "Let us have him up, certainly."

Sheppard rose and when the man
 returned ushered him with some cere-
 mony 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 comfort-
 able. 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 must now conduct
 a piece without the usual sherry."

If this elaborate irony disturbed Ser-
 combe, as it seemed to do, it had no
 effect upon Hood.

"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 up-
 on his knees.

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

There was a momentary silence, and
 then a consultation of a slight busi-
 ness 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 wine.

"That is a very proper demand, Cap-
 tain 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 and sleight of hand."

Let us understand one another
 better."

"The captain did not color, as he
 might well have colored under this im-
 plicit distrust. He had 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 con-
 sider. 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 can-
 not 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 in-
 tensely watching the scene. "But I
 think it is somewhat unnecessary, Mr.
 Greator," he said, again very awk-
 wardly, and he laughed shortly, and
 again his eyes flew to Hood, directing
 at it 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 dem-
 onstration. 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 fasten-
 ed upon the white thing under my
 hand. His mouth dropped, and a por-
 tion 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 hurled dertly 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 un-
 easily. "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, plac-
 ing his hand 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 stam-
 mered:

"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 explana-
 tion. Why may not Mr. Greator 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, and I saw him and
 picking up the dagger offered it to
 Hood. 'I am sorry for this misunder-
 standing, Mr. Hood,' he said sweetly.
 'If I had stopped to think I should
 have known that a man like yours
 would only carry a weapon for some
 good purpose. But I am 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 dinner."

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

"And now, Mr. Greator, may I 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, as-
 tounded 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 assum-
 ed a gay air, a 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, and had received from Sercombe
 upon the other, smoothed it with the
 back of a knife and, forthwith, read-
 ing the following composition, dear
 it slowly aloud to the company:

(To be continued.)

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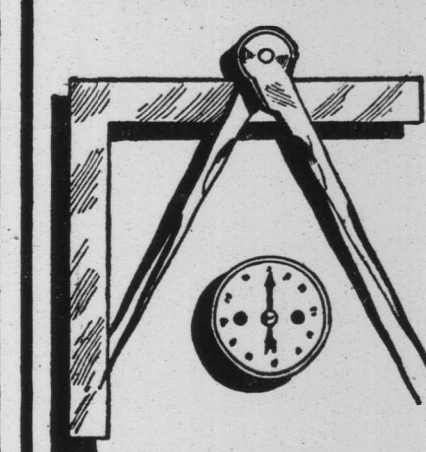
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