

**The Adventurers**  
By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON  
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(Continued from Page 4.)

UPON the third day after the events of the preceding chapter Mrs. Main announced a visitor, handing me at the same time a card on which was printed with an abundance of flourishes and ornament "Mr. Morris Barnett." He made a ceremonious entry and politely discharged a few courtesies ere he got to business.

"I have come over, Mr. Greatorix," said he suavely, "to see if you are at all disposed to do a client of mine a great favor."

I did not see any very strong reason why I should favor a client of Mr. Morris Barnett, but I murmured that I was always glad to be of service to my fellow creatures.

"The fact is, sir," he resumed, laying his hat and stick upon a chair and drawing a packet of papers from his pocket, "my firm has a client who is related to the ancient Vyrian family, the original owners of this castle, as you are no doubt aware, and he has been informed that you have come into possession of this very beautiful estate in accordance with the will, if I mistake not, of the late Mr. Kesteven."

He looked at me inquiringly, and I told him that his information was quite correct.

"I gather, Mr. Greatorix," he continued affably, "that you have been until comparatively recently a stranger to these parts and that, in short, you have no particular ties in the county?"

"That is true," said I.  
"My client, sir, has naturally—you will understand the motive—a desire to purchase the property, if you are disposed to meet him and we can arrange terms. And that, shortly, is the object of my visit."

Now, you will easily conceive that, falling in the present circumstances, this set my blood humming. Here was yet another, and within a few days of the demise of the old proprietor, who must needs be clamoring for a sale of the castle. The fact stirred my curiosity—may, to speak truly, inflamed me with something very like excitement.

"And what, then, is your proposal, Mr. Barnett?" I asked calmly enough.

"I was sharp enough to notice a gleam of satisfaction pass over his face, but he displayed none of his triumph in his very businesslike tone.

"Ah, well, Mr. Greatorix," said he, lolling back in his chair, "you see these old places are more matters of sentiment than profitable investment."

"True," said I shortly, "and men are usually willing to pay a high price for sentiment."

"Ah, no, Mr. Greatorix," said he promptly, shaking his head, and here there was a real touch of gutturals, "you mistake. My client is not a rich man, but he hankers after the place of his fathers. It would mean much to him."

"It means a good deal to me," said I.  
"How much?" said Barnett suddenly.  
"Supposing I said £20,000?"

He held up his hands. "My dear sir, my dear sir," he repeated and stared at me as if my audacity had plucked away his wits.

"Why not?" I asked.  
Mr. Barnett was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Do you know what landed property is selling at, Mr. Greatorix?" he asked confidentially. "It is practically a drug in the market, sir, just now."

"Then," said I, "will you kindly explain, Mr. Barnett, how it comes that I have had two offers within a week of my inheritance?"

"Ah," he said meditatively, rubbing his chin.  
"It looks as if this particular property was not a drug in the market, doesn't it?" I asked.

"To be sure," he remarked vaguely, and then, recovering himself, resumed his gentle smile. "But let us come back to business, Mr. Greatorix. Shall we say £5,000?"

He cooed at me enticingly. His assumption that we had wandered into the regions of fancy and romance tickled me, and I broke forth laughing.

"Ah, well," said he, grimacing sympathetically, "we might make it £7,500 with immediate possession."

"Mr. Barnett," said I gravely, "your client seems to have been born too late by a hundred years."

"The inkeeper entered and received his orders."

"Now, sir, take a seat. I think you'll find that apology for a sofa at least comfortable," continued my host, and he flung himself, breathing hard, into an armchair and fanned his face with his handkerchief.

"How is the new inheritance?" he asked presently.  
"There was no shadow of offense in his voice, and I should have been surly indeed to have taken for a liberty what was clearly a friendly interest in my affairs. I said I hoped that he would pay me a visit and see for himself."

"Thank you very much," said he, with a delicate bow of acknowledgment. "I shall be delighted. I had a sight of the old place yesterday as I passed the gates."

"Hood entered with a tray of refreshments, and Sercombe drew himself up to the table and began upon his untimely meal.

"I don't know what digestion is, Mr. Greatorix," he explained, "I believe it is a term in use among doctors to terrify nervous patients. I eat when I like, not when society wants me. And, filling his mouth, he asked me if I had resolved to live in the castle."

"At present, yes," I answered, "though certainly it would appear to be in despite of fortune, for it is not the fault of some people that I am not sent packing off to London."

He stared at me in the act of drinking, and I felt Hood's eyes also upon me. The next second the inkeeper resumed his work, placing a fork softly by the captain's plate.

"How do you mean?" asked Sercombe.  
"As I had started the tale, I went on with it, rehearsing briefly the visit of Barnett."

"Oh, I thought some one had been disputing your title," he said, "that is all. I hope you fooled him?"

I related my victory with some satisfaction, and Sercombe chuckled.  
"Well, you're going to keep your castle?" he resumed. "Patriotic man! Though I should judge £20,000 to be a good market price for the property."

"It is not worth half as much," said I.  
"Then why not, in the name of goodness, take your profit?" demanded the captain, opening his eyes in astonishment.

"I'm in no hurry," said I, smiling.  
"Humph!" ejaculated the captain, picking his teeth thoughtfully. "Well, you may be right, though I don't see your reasons. A landed estate is merely a nuisance, so far as my experience goes. It's all payment and no returns. It takes a wealthy man to keep an estate. If I had your place, Mr. Greatorix, I should be disposed to let it, at any rate, and enjoy the proceeds while I might. You'd find no difficulty in doing that, I should think."

"I dare say not," was my reply.  
"Why," continued the captain, as if smiling at his own thought, "I would take it off your hands for a month or so for the fishing alone—that is, if you were reasonable."

For some reason or other this semijocular offer irritated me, possibly because of previous experiences.  
"Between you, you are bound to have me out," I said, rather dryly. "But I assure you I will not budge."

I was not looking at him as I spoke, but out of the tail of my eye it seemed to me that I caught a quick exchange of glances between the captain and the inkeeper, and to my imagination—for such it may have been—the face of the man Hood wore an unmistakable frown. But as I turned sharply he was merely refilling the captain's glass and using a deft napkin upon the soda water bottle.

Sercombe burst out laughing in his comfortable fashion.  
"My dear sir," said he, "it is long since I was in a position to pose as a country gentleman, and for my own part I sincerely hope you will occupy the castle as long as I occupy the inn. After that I fear I shall have no further interest in the matter."

I felt distinctly snubbed by the rejoinder, for all that it was delivered in so hearty a manner. But I got out of the inn creditably enough and with a neat stroke in return, all very good humored. All the same, upon my homeward journey I was troubled by that

mutual signal which I had seemed to discover between these two incongruous people. As for Sercombe's offer, it was plainly intended for a jest, and I thought no more of it. Yet I was still exercised in my mind, vaguely uneasy and distrustful. And in this mood I settled down to consider my situation that evening and to review the events which I have here narrated.

The puzzle was to determine a cause for all the remarkable transactions. Some one wanted to acquire the castle, and went about it very persistently. Why? And some one had made raids upon the house to secure something of which I was in possession. What?

Suddenly, and as if revealed by a flash of illumination, the reason was lit up and stood bare and bright before me. It was hidden treasure!

CHAPTER VI.  
NOW that I had put my tongue to the word I was confident of my discovery. All the facts pointed one way, and I was dumfounded at my previous obtuseness. For what but a hidden store of treasure would explain these incessant attempts upon the house itself or the incessant efforts to take it out of my hands? And what again but treasure could supply so natural a key to old Kesteven's death and his mysterious secret? It seemed to me, too, that upon this hypothesis several facts hitherto inexplicable might be referred to reason. The eccentricity of my host in choosing me for his heir became not so much an eccentricity as a studious piece of policy. He was, in the general verdict, devoid of living relatives, and had so long fallen out of the world as to be practically friendless. He had made up his mind to my honesty, possibly to my capability, and was resolved to trust me. If this were so, as I saw it now, the making of the will had been an inevitable act in the game he intended to play.

I could not imagine that he had foreseen his sudden death, yet with his

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imaginable rubbish of a young man's fancy. Upon my entrance he rose, his silly face beaming red, and grasped my hand with an awkward sentence of welcome.  
"It's good of you to come so soon," said he.  
"I've come to take you back," said I. He stared at me. "Oh, all right!" he said, as if this mission of mine had been a matter of course. "Come and have a drink."

It was but 11 in the morning, though the breakfast things still cluttered his table, and so I refused his hospitality, a refusal which did not prevent his pouring himself out a glass of beer. "Montgomery," said I, "leave that alone and keep your head clear. I want you."  
The boy bounded to his feet sheepishly enough to what he doubtless considered my rebuke, but with a show of eagerness which pleased me.  
"Get your horse?" I asked.  
He nodded, all attention now, and I continued:  
"Then fling your legs up and be off, and ask your servant to send on your bags. I'm going to keep you for a week."

"Bully!" he said and clamored out of the room in a cheery fashion.  
I had already made up my mind not to be too explicit with Montgomery. He was too recent an acquaintance, despite my conviction of his fidelity, to intrust with a precious secret. Indeed, the first occasion of our encounter would not have commended him to many particular people. What I told him, therefore, as we rode back embraced but the general atmosphere of intrigue in which I was involved. The word that stuck in his mind was "burglary," and it greatly excited him.  
"Shall we have the police over?" he asked anxiously.  
But, strangely enough, although the thought had occurred to me more than once, it was almost in old Kesteven's words that I replied:  
"There are none nearer than Raymond." To that I added, "Besides, I think we two are in no need of assistance against a ruffian or two."

The next two days passed very peacefully. As I am fond of laying my plans ahead, I wrote to Sheppard at his chambers asking him if he were still in town and if he felt disposed to pay me a visit, referring briefly to the strange turn which my fortunes had taken. I saw nothing of the captain, at least at the castle, and for some reason or other I felt no desire to revisit him just now. He had evidently forgotten my invitation, nor did I remind him of it when we met casually upon the road the day after Montgomery's arrival. He gave me a civil greeting, cocking his eye at my companion in his good humored, cynical way, and when we had passed, on looking back I saw him standing at the crossroads, nod in hand, gazing intently after us. Seeing me do so, he waved his hand and moved off upon his journey. Montgomery was as docile as a spaniel, submitting readily, I suppose, to the superior will, and I had no complaint to make of him save that he wearied me a good deal. He himself, however, had a complaint, for he was grievously disappointed that there had been no bloodshed. We saw not a show of a burglar, and I fancy he thought me in his private mind something of an impositor, whose possibly was the very reason which made him strike up an acquaintance with Sercombe. I certainly had no right to protest, for the captain was a pleasant fellow and so far as I knew harmless, and moreover, life at the castle.

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