

The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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(Continued from Page 4.)

The twenty-four hours had passed uneventfully at the castle, but I found Montgomery on the watch and very eager. He had armed himself with a shotgun, which he dragged about with him very ostentatiously, and indeed I had some ado to prevent him sitting down to dinner with it. Sheppard had been informed of his presence, and the two promised to be capital friends. Sheppard always had a way direct to the heart of new acquaintances and, with his indomitable gaiety and his impulsive energy, was exceedingly attractive to Montgomery. I myself was treated with sincere respect, tempered by a little awe; but the boy showed immediate signs of a positive affection for Sheppard.

That evening we held a council of war. And, first, Montgomery must be



Montgomery on the watch.

Initiated into the mystery. The bare facts took away his breath and inspired him apparently more with a desire for bloodshed than for the treasure itself.

"I can tell you this, Mr. Sheppard, that if I shoot either of the scoundrels within shouting range I'll empty both barrels into them on the off chance. And of that I'll give 'em warning."

"Bravo!" said Sheppard, slapping him on the back and smiling his pleasant smile. "You're the man for my money, old cock!"

"And now," I resumed, "we are brought front to front with affairs. We have half the paper. How are we to get possession of the other?"

"It is plain enough," said Sheppard, "that one of those fellows, Sercombe or Hood, has it—Hood for choice, and a pretty scoundrel he must be, for all you say of him. You must introduce me to your friend Hood. I have a fancy for Hood."

As it fell out he had an earlier chance of the acquaintance than either of us anticipated. Shortly after breakfast on the following morning the maid brought me word that Captain Sercombe was in the library and begged to see me.

"Here is a pretty piece of impudence," said Sheppard, smiling. "Confound the man, but I like him! By all means let us have him up."

He looked at me. "Not at all," said I, "but since there is nothing to steal in the library save some hundreds of dusty volumes, let him wait upon our pleasure."

"And my toe," growled Montgomery, assuming a ferocious expression.

"No, no, my dear lad," said Sheppard, with his gentle and insinuating smile. "You are too forward, too precocious in your arguments. Let us bag the captain, whom I confess, I am dying to see well basted, but let it be by more diplomatic processes."

"Very well, come on," said I, rising, for, to say the truth, I was curious to know the man's business with me. We descended in file into the library. Sercombe, who was staring out of the window and curling his mustache with an air of abstraction, turned rapidly and, putting his heels together, gave me a military bow.

"Ah, here is my young friend of the claret!" he exclaimed lightly, nodding briefly to Montgomery, who fixed a stolid and somewhat glowering glance upon him. Then his eye fell on Sheppard, whom he observed with dispassionate curiosity.

"I was in hopes to have met you alone, Mr. Groatorex," with a little hesitation showing in his voice.

"These are my friends," said I, "from whom I have no secrets."

"Allow me to introduce myself," said Sheppard politely, stepping forward, "since Mr. Groatorex has overlooked the formality. Reginald Sheppard, Captain Sercombe—a gentleman, as I hope, but of no occupation and a vast deal of ambition, who is proud to make the acquaintance of so notorious a free companion as yourself."

Sercombe stared, somewhat discomposed by this deliverance, but, recovering himself, smiled genially. "The pride, sir, is on my side to encounter so pleasant a gentleman. Then he looked at me. "I take it, Mr. Groatorex, that I may state my business here."

"By all means," I answered curtly, "and the sooner the better."

"I have come to strike a bargain with you. I will confess that so far you have outmaneuvered us. I will go so far as to say that I thought I had you cornered yesterday. Yesterday morning I would not have put 2 crowns upon your appearance in the race. But you have sharp eyes, sir, and you are a sharper man than I had reckoned. But, upon the other hand, where do you stand? I ask you to consider that. And what price do you put on your chances? You have, I should guess, about as much chance to lay your hands on what you want as I have. Is that so?"

"I am not here to discuss my chances with you, but to listen to you, sir," said I. "What have you to say?"

He made a slight grimace, delivering it instinctively to Sheppard and went on: "Well, I suppose what you have to say will keep. What I have won't, if we are either of us to get any further. We stand upon equal terms now, Mr. Groatorex, as you will see,

but those terms are impracticable. You have only one half of a secret, and we have the other, and it will take a cleverer man than you to find our half, as I make no doubt you also have yours in pretty safe hiding. I don't reckon to hunt London for a piece of paper. But this brings me to my point. Let us show our hands. Let me see what you have in yours, and I give you the word of a gentleman you shall see all mine."

He paused, and interrogated me a moment silently.

"Since the captain gives his word as a gentleman," put in Sheppard's suave voice, "I think we stand on safe ground. For my part I am quite willing to give mine as a burglar."

Sercombe flashed a glance of annoyance at him.

"Will you be more explicit?" 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 involving us, as I foresaw, in all the outrages 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, turning, he moved to the windows again and looked out upon the lawn, humming 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.

"The captain stilled softly and, as if imitating the captain, leaned forth upon 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 mistaken for a hare, and so I say the castle. 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 settled the matter over a little dinner. Hood, an excellent host, I find, is anxious 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. Groatorex, 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 hospitality 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 hospitality would be reluctant on Mr. Groatorex's part."

"Not at all," said I graciously. "A distinguished soldier like Captain Sercombe is always welcome to my house."

He hesitated, and then, coloring slightly, "I am not alone," said he.

Sheppard shot me a glance of triumph, as who would say, "I thought we should corner him."

"No doubt Mr. Groatorex 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. Groatorex's permission, the other gentleman shall entertain us."

"I fancy," he continued, smiling, "that Hood is not a stranger to the castle ways, and he makes a good waiter."

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

"I will bring Hood," said the captain gravely and, taking up his hat, made to go.

The dinner was set for 7 o'clock, and I fancy that all eyes looked forward to it with considerable expectation. Sercombe arrived punctual to the hour, and a little later I entered the morning room to meet him. He sat in a chair, lounging very coolly, a light overcoat covering his evening dress, and by his side stood Hood, also in the orthodox costume and looking, as I could not help noticing, uncommonly spruce and servatic-like.

"I am here, Mr. Groatorex, to the moment," said Sercombe in his leisurely voice, "and I go ball that I have brought you an invaluable ally. With your permission, Hood will now retire to the kitchen."

The innkeeper insensibly straightened himself, standing to attention like a graven image, and I signed my assent.

"This is entirely your affair, Captain Sercombe," said I, "and you may do what you like with your own property." I turned to Hood. "You will find Mrs. Main in the servants' hall," I said.

With his gliding, serpentine tread, Hood made a motion of respect and vanished. Sercombe stared after him, meditating, and gnawed his mustache with a frown, which seemed to me to indicate a certain touch of perplexity. But he brightened at once and talked very freely and in his old manner till dinner was served. The interior significance of our dinner party would not have been visible to a stranger. For the main part, that preliminary skirmish was occupied by conversation the most distant from the subject we all had at heart. It was Sercombe himself who set the example of reserve, and we followed meekly enough. When I say reserve I am thinking only of one particular point, for heaven knows that his talk was sufficiently frank upon other topics. As I had occasion to take note of him subsequently, the man was by nature framed for a good talker, and, although he had every prejudice against him, and started, so to speak, with a great handicap, he soon wore down the feelings with which we embarked upon the entertainment. And it was not until we had broached a sort of good fellowship and the evening was far spent that anything happened to mar our growing harmony.

It fell out thus: Sercombe himself had just concluded an amusing narrative of his experiences among the brigands of Calabria, and Sheppard resumed the conversation with an adventure of his own. The evening had fallen dark and cloudy, and amid the starlike candles that illumined the room the dark figure of Hood moved noiselessly and constantly. I had heard this story of Sercombe's, which, indeed, was not very exciting, and my mind, swaying from its polite duty, rested unconsciously upon the new innkeeper. As I watched him I saw the two men exchange glances—an interrogating look upon Sercombe's part, a baffling and inscrutable look from Hood. There followed an instant's pause, and then the man approached the master with the pretext of a dish. Sercombe spoke low and across his shoulder, nervously exploring the contents of the dish with a spoon. Hood said nothing and, raising his eyes, softly fixed them upon me at the other end of the table. For a moment we regarded each other luminously, and then his glance fell politely away. Sercombe still whispered and I thought, with a growing anxiety. It was time for me to interfere.

"Captain Sercombe," I cried sharply, breaking upon the tail of Sheppard's yarn, "these communications are not included in the compact."

The captain started, and his face reddened deeper, but he was always a cool head.

"I must ask you to remember, Mr. Groatorex," said he suavely, "that I am your guest."

"That is true," said Sheppard, nodding his head.

Sercombe looked at me with some asperity.

"I think, sir," said he, "that in the circumstances you will see that I have overstepped the privileges of gentility."

"The word is hardly in the case. I think we are agreed that it is as thieves we meet," interjected Sheppard smoothly.

"You are right, Captain Sercombe," I answered, being in my turn in command of myself, "and I offer you my apology for the rudeness, but I am at least the master of my own servants, and Hood shall keep his distance and not hang about annoying my guests."

With which I ordered him forthwith to the window, a command which he hastened to obey almost by anticipation.

I must say that this unpleasant episode at once changed the atmosphere of the room. On the whole, I did not regret this, as I conceived that we had perhaps reached the proper term of our familiarity with Sercombe. It was strange to see the instant revolution in our mutual attitudes. Whether Sercombe himself had been as easy as he had previously seemed, or whether he had acted a part for our benefit, I cannot say, but it is certain that now he was charged with anxiety. Now and again his eyes, puffed and bloodshot, flickered uneasily on Hood, where the man stood in his corner, a memorial of black sobriety, and his demeanor was carefully under restraint. The situation became a little disagreeable, and I thought the time had arrived to end it.

"Captain Sercombe," I said, quite formally, "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, sir," 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 innkeeper turned his back on us and busied himself with the plates upon the sideboard.

Sercombe colored angrily and visibly disconcerted, "I beg your pardon, sir," said he, "with a slight reservation, 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 attitude, "I understand your feeling, gentlemen," 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 involved with the other and to what extent 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 obediently on his heel and made for the door. As it closed upon him Sercombe turned to us and broke out with embarrassment:

"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 uncommon gift of recovering himself, which I had had occasion already to admire, and I was to admire him still more at this moment. "You will perceive, Mr. Groatorex," he said abruptly, "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 servant."

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

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

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 to my right 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 brow. "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. Groatorex," 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 assure 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 buried deftly back against the window, and Sheppard sprang 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 gentlemen 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. Groatorex, 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—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. 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

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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 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 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. Groatorex, 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 do hereby, as 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, deciphering the following composition, read it slowly aloud to the company:

"I, Sir Ralph Vyvian, 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 1644, 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 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 accused act of traitors, the arch-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 use, having taken counsel with my steward and my friend Sir John Clunes, have concealed 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.

(Continued on Page 3.)

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