

The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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(Continued from Page 4.)

grew before my eyes and out of the grayness a vast head, set with horrible rolling eyes and with a profusion of shaggy hair. The apparition loomed before me, the bars of the window and with a quick movement seemed to push forward as though to enter. Involuntarily I started back into the darkness. The face glared at me, pressing upon the bars, the lip twisted over the red gums and yellow fangs, and the eyes dripping from its black hair. Its eyes measured me with a glance, and for half a minute of time we stood confronting each other, my tiny thread of light streaking the ghastly apparition with yellow. The next moment it had vanished, and my wits returning in a tide, I flung myself forward to the grating and looked out. The lantern shone upon the dark waters, and that was all. But this was more than enough for me, and I was aware that it was likely to be quite enough for our assailants.

Hurriedly I quitted the corridor and regained the upper air. By means of the ladder I reached the rest of the party and at once communicated my information.

CHAPTER XI

THE dawn was now abreast of the hilltops, and the trees of the park stood out like shadows in a great mist.

"They will begin here," observed Sheppard, "when they find there is no entrance below."

"I don't envy them the twelve feet of water to start with," said I.

"I don't envy them if they get here," remarked Montgomery quietly.

Williams said nothing. He looked from one to another curiously and then craned his neck over the castle wall and scrutinized the foreground. Now and then he grasped his shotgun almost mechanically, as if to feel certain that it was there. I agreed with Sheppard that if any attack was to be delivered it would be upon the breach made by time in the defenses. There was no way into the castle by the gratings above the moat, and it would take artillery at least to shake the huge portcullis. Yet it seemed incredible that any sane man should attempt to swim the fosse and scale the battlements. If I had been seen by that appalling face, as I conceived, the enemy would be aware that we were on the watch and ready for them. If so, I considered it more than likely that they would retire and make the best of the reconnaissance they had achieved.

"I don't like this," Sheppard said. "What the mischief are they up to? Let me go and see."

I considered. To say the truth, I did not like it myself, but would it be wise to divide our forces?

After a momentary reflection I decided to do so, and, enjoining upon Montgomery a strict vigilance, I crawled after Sheppard toward the upper battlements.

Once we had reached the ramparts we proceeded more quickly, but still with great caution, stopping at intervals to reconnoiter the ground below. But there was nothing to be seen or heard, and until we had passed the keep and had got upon the western wall we encountered no sign of the enemy. Here, however, Sheppard stopped short and pressed his hand on my shoulder.

"Down!" he said. Simultaneously with his words a whiz of cold air passed my nose, and a small crack of some firearm ensued upon it.

"That's by way of introduction," said Sheppard, "and now the fight begins." Keeping our heads below the parapet, we stumbled as fast as possible along the roof, and presently after rounded the corner to the northern wall. Here a sight met our eyes, even in that obscurity, which struck amazement and even terror to my heart. I have already spoken of the sycamore which stood outside my bedroom window and beyond the moat. It was a lofty tree, spreading very amply, and mounted to within a dozen feet of the parapet. This the ingenious wits of some one—and I had no hesitation in naming the author of the plan—had utilized to scale the walls. As I found afterward, a tough and serviceable rope had been employed to connect the peaks of the battlement with the tree, and over this, as we came into sight, the black figures of men were scrambling. I had little doubt on thinking over it subsequently that my presence in the basement revealed to the man in the moat had given the signal for the adventure, seeing that I was not likely to be in my chamber and able to detect them ere the enterprise had gone forward sufficiently.

Both of us sprang forward on the instant, but ere we could reach the spot the foremost of the men, landing, stood up and made at us with a cutlass. Taken aback by the shock, Sheppard, who was in front, gave way, and the weapon, swinging heavily, cut the air with a formidable whistle and struck the leads near my foot. I leaped at the fellow's throat, drawing my revolver, and, borne back by the impetus of my charge, he stumbled against the second man. But by this time some half dozen of the storming party had gained the ramparts and, without a pause bore down upon us. No shots were fired, and the struggle that ensued was decided in a silence almost complete, save for the noise of our hurrying feet, the sound of blows and the hard breathing of the combatants. I cannot but admit that if the dawn had been a little further advanced and it had been possible to distinguish between the various bodies raging in the medley things would have gone very badly with us. But as it was the darkness fought for us once more, as it had fought the previous evening. I brought the butt of my revolver full upon the head of one man, and he fell like a log. Sheppard's arms were twisted round another, and the two, swaying together, stood out for an instant against the sky and were then snatched up into the confusion of the melee. Blows rained upon us, and the warm gush of blood started from my arm. With a rush we were carried backward, and the struggle seemed all over. At that instant I bethought me of Montgomery and Williams, and, getting my finger on the trigger of my weapon, I fired. The shot flew aimlessly, but the noise rang loud upon the heights and passed from the courtyard in dwindling echoes. Then, throwing off the man who was struggling with me, I seized Sheppard's arm, and, dragging him from the kneeling posture into which he had been thrust, I rap across the leads toward the round tower of the keep. Sheppard raced with me, panting as he went, and after we pressed a thin stream of black creatures just visible against the heavens. Scrambling up the stairway, we jammed down the lid which gave access to the top of the tower and, turning, looked down upon the nether battlements.

After an ineffectual rally upon the stairs the assailants drew off and, huddling in a group some twenty paces away, whispered together. I heard the sounds of their voices stirring in argument, and now and then a syllable came to me, faintly familiar. Where had I heard it? Above the rest and lighted by the kindling sky towered a form which I took to be Sercombe's. For the space of three minutes or more this interval of rest continued, and then a louder voice cried something from the terrace. I recognized it now. The language was Greek, and those strange and horrible creatures, that seemed somehow to my excited brain compact of all deformities, were Greeks—sailors also, as I conjectured from the smartness of the trick which had led to our discomfiture. At this moment a low whistle came from the farther corner of the tower, and immediately two heads stole over the coping.

"It is I," said Montgomery. "What has happened?" We welcomed them with warmth and hastily unfolded the situation, but the words were scarce out of my

mouth when a noise of feet and a clanging of iron proclaimed a renewed attack upon the tower. Upon those heights, as I have explained, lay the wreckage and debris of centuries. Groping in this, Montgomery found a large stone and, leaning over the parapet, hurled it down upon the crowd. Almost as quick as thought we followed his example and had the satisfaction of seeing the parties withdraw to a safer distance. It was now plain to me that Sercombe had issued an order against the use of firearms. If the business could be managed without undue disturbance, he had decided that it was wiser. Indeed, the strange part of this remarkable encounter was that, saving the first shot and my own signal of distress, the conflict had been carried on in comparative silence.

I had also come to the conclusion that the fight was one to obtain possession of ourselves. It was to secure our bodies that the attack was directed. Sercombe knew well enough and Hood knew even better that to gain access to the precincts of the castle meant very little provided we were still at liberty and able to resist a forcible removal of the treasure. Bound and gagged or stunned or dead we should offer them no further trouble, and the treasure of the Vyvians would be theirs to deport at their convenience.

Sheppard clicked the trigger of his revolver. "The first man that essays this position shall find the time has come for real warfare," he observed quietly.

"Do not be in a hurry," I answered. "We have still the upper hand." He waited expectant. "You know the drum tower down which I climbed? I think it would not be a bad plan to venture that and take them in the rear."

"The devils are plotting mischief," said Sheppard uneasily. "I wonder if we could manage that ascent," I said. Montgomery moved forward. "I will," he said.

"No, no," said Sheppard. "I think I had better go," I hazarded. "You're wanted here," said Montgomery. "I know the way." And ere I could speak or interfere he sprang away and was on the ladder leading to the southern battlements.

"Come back! Come back!" I called under my breath. "Red, Ned! Don't spoil his chances," whispered Sheppard, and we watched his big body vanishing in silence.

"That boy is going to his death," he murmured. "I hope you'll trust him now."

"Oh, hang your sentiment!" I answered uneasily. "I think we'd better go back," he said after a pause, and we returned to Williams. The man stood like a rock, his eyes riveted eagerly upon the dark figures of our antagonists. "Shall I fire?" said he in his high Welsh voice.

"No," said I. "Hold yourself together and fire if I tell you. We shall have blood on our hands soon enough."

There followed another space of silence, broken only by the interjected voices below murmuring in conference. For my own part I was taken up with



The body rolled over the parapet.

supposition I had several times entertained. We were embarked upon a war, committed of our own act and will to a deadly strife, of which no one of us could see the end. And beneath me, stored in the vaults of the venerable fortress, lay the accursed treasure for which this blood must be spilled. Hastily I withdrew and mounted to the top of the keep. I could bear the fellowship no longer, and yet there arose now upon my mind, premeditated flight, a new perplexity. I dared not leave the body there, exposed to the sight of the world. Doubting in my thoughts and torn by shapeless fears, I stood irresolute, but at that moment my attention was caught by a movement in the bushes across the park. A head peeped out and scrutinized the scene with diligence. Then Sercombe's face emerged, red and bloated. He pushed through the covert and strode boldly toward the castle, followed presently by his companion, a rough, black fellow, with a galloway look. I watched them approach and half under the walls, facing the dead body underneath me. I suppose my outline appeared against the sky, for Sercombe looked up and fixed his eyes on me. But he said nothing, only addressed the Greek in an undertone. I leaned forward and regarded them intently. The rough fellow stepped to the brink of the moat and, stooping forward, pulled the floating bough toward him. It moved, carrying its hideous passenger. When next I looked the Greek had the body on his shoulders, and the two were retreating into the under-wood. At the end of the reach of turf Sercombe came to a stand, and once more looked up at me. But he still made no sign, and I could imagine that the color of his face had faded. It seemed somehow to me to be ominous of the new position in which we were involved. I descended into the castle. Outside Sheppard's door I paused. It stood open, and I looked in. The light streamed through the window and fell across his face. He lay dressed upon the bed, a red stain of blood upon his cheeks, and as I gazed his hands moved convulsively—a contortion twisted his sleeping face. I left him and, returning to my own room, threw myself upon the bed.

CHAPTER XII

IT was not long before we were visited by the first retribution for what might be accounted a crime and what was at least provoked by the own illegal acts. Indeed, the surprise fell sooner than I had anticipated, although it happened by the means I had always considered probable. That Williams, garrulous and sharp-eyed Welshman as he was, could be secured in silence was well impossible, for even if concealment had been for his personal benefit he would still have plied his tongue, and, though he were sworn to secrecy, the private transactions of this singular feud would have slowly dribbled through his communications and become current in the gossip of the country. This knowledge was mainly instrumental in deterring us from confiding in him. Burglars were the bugaboo we had brandished before him, and burglary, sure enough, was the word that ran late that morning. As I gathered, Williams, who was keeping company with some girl of Llanellan, woke early on his belated sleep and ran down to the village, full of the battle. His own appearance in it, as I afterward discovered, had been gorgeously conceived and magniloquently rendered. I believe, according to his version, it was he, and he alone, who gave the signal for the final rout, and certainly he was the author of that fall from the battlements. But this was just as well, for the man knew nothing of its fatal issue, and poor Sheppard did not grudge him the credit.

But I am trespassing upon my narrative too rashly. Williams returned late in the morning and, apparently to celebrate his own cleverness, made his communications to me. He had given warning to the schoolmaster at Llanellan, who had offered to hand on the notice to the authorities at Raymond. I could have cursed the man for his folly and his babbling tongue, but I was just enough to recall that his conduct was merely natural. In truth, if he thought at all, he must have considered us a pack of egregious asses for not taking better precautions and acquiring the aid of the Raymond police. I could do nothing, therefore, but acquiesce with as good a grace as I might and wish heartily that we had left him sleeping as soundly as Mrs. Main and the maid, who, it appeared, had never opened an eye throughout the night, although the former asserted that she had dreamed "there was a thunderstorm-like," adding the enclitic familiar to her conversation.

But the situation remained to be faced, and I guessed that we should be confronted with it very shortly. Consequently we must compose a plan of action, and, whatever we agreed upon, must run no risk of denial at other hands. In this connection it seemed that I must pay a necessary visit to Sercombe, a task which for some reason was not to my taste. Sheppard, who had quite recovered himself and had not yet referred in any way to the event of the early morning, cordially approved my suggestion.

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"It will be a wise course," he declared. "And, besides, I am anxious to inspect these foreigners nearer."

Where the Greeks were lodged we knew not, but it was evidently not at the Woodman, for on our arrival there the place was deserted except by the woman who had charge of Hood's kitchen. She could give us little information. She had not seen her master since she went to bed on the previous evening. But Captain Sercombe had been called at 9 o'clock and had gone out after eating a hasty breakfast. There was no one else staying in the house. Such was the information she imparted to us, influenced to her frankness, I had no doubt, by my position as the big landed proprietor of the place. Which way had Captain Sercombe gone? He had gone down the roadway in the direction of Raymond.

With this we had to content ourselves; but, determined at all hazards to catch Sercombe, Sheppard and I took the narrow lane that led down the valley in the hope of hitting upon him. At the bottom of the valley the stream makes an open pool of some considerable size upon a piece of flat land. Here it receives a few exiguous branches from the lower hills and rests, as it were, in those spreading shallows ere it narrows and spins for the Ray. The wood was sparse about the pool, but it was very private and retired from the roads, and it was quite by accident that we penetrated the wood so far. But here we perceived through the leafage the smoke of fires and heard the noises of human creatures, an uncommon feature in the silent Gwent. Pushing through the brushwood, we came next upon a veritable encampment in that friendly spot. And now we solved the riddle which had perplexed us earlier in the morning, for the first man my eyes fell upon was my old acquaintance of the squint. Here was not a camp of gypsies, but of cutthroat Greeks!

The discovery was no sooner made than it was confirmed by a voice sounding from my right and calling my name in familiar tones. "Ah, how d'ye do, Mr. Greatorex? Glad to see you. What pleasant chance has brought you into our little village?" The man stood before me as debonair and well groomed as ever, his puffy red face smiling cheerfully into mine and his bloodshot eyes twinkling with gayety. It seemed almost inconceivable that this fellow was but a few hours earlier upon the footing of a deadly foe and earnest to rob us even of our lives. And yet I confess that even at this juncture and after the grave events of the siege I experienced for him what always underlay my superficial feelings, a genuine liking. The impudence of the adventurer, his very gayety, the assumption he wore that whatever he did and however ruthlessly he pursued us he was still a welcome acquaintance—all these facts gave a charm to his person. His benignity was superb; it was that of an urbane philanthropist. He was ready to crack a joke with you, to recount his entertaining adventures in your ears or to offer you his choicest cigar. He was a man pre-eminently cast for so-

(Continued next week.)

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