

# The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

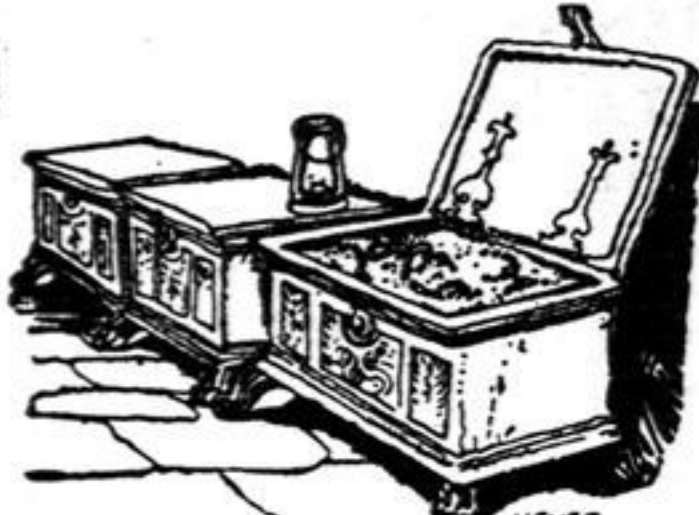
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(Concluded from last week.)

"It's the infernal wind," he exclaimed. The light flared in his face as he relit the lantern, and I noticed that it was wild and burning. With trembling fingers he handed me the lantern, and the light shone on a bit of steel I held under my thumb. I pressed, and with a jerk the oaken screen fell back. I put out a hand and encountered nothing.

"I'm going through," I said in a whisper. "Follow me. I'll leave the lantern here. Heaven knows what we shall find."

I let myself softly down below, and my feet struck the stone of the floor once more. Sheppard and Montgomery followed. We cast the light about us. We were in a dungeon closed with



The treasure was there before our greedy faces.

In absolutely blank walls. In the corner some rags and paper lay heaped. I pushed them aside, and they crumbled at the touch of my foot.

"It's not here," said Sheppard. "Throw the light this way. Ah, I thought so!"

Ere he had finished he was halfway up a flight of stone steps, and we followed pell-mell. A door of heavy oak barred the way at the top.

"We wanted oil after all," said Sheppard impatiently. Montgomery dug his weight against it, and with a crash it opened.

Montgomery, overbalanced with his effort, staggered and fell upon the threshold, but Sheppard, who was next to him, paid no attention and, turning, looked at me. The light made no way upon the great darkness.

"Do you know where we are?" whispered Sheppard. "This is below the keep. Shall we go in?"

"Certainly," I said, "get Montgomery up." He pulled the last to his feet, and slowly we shoved back the huge creaking door.

The chamber into which we were now come was small and square and, like that below, barred by solid masonry and unrelieved by window or grating. I found later by calculation that this must be in the very heart of the keep itself and so wholly departed from the rest of the castle that the noise of ordnance would scarce have penetrated its deep and dismal recesses. My eyes were drawn as by a magnet to the farther corner of the barren cell, in which I could perceive some formidable shadows wavering beneath the dull, uncertain light of my lantern.

Sheppard also had descried them and, plunging forward with a cry, flung himself upon his knees.

"They are here right enough," he called. And at his words Montgomery and I approached him. I held the light above his head, throwing the faint beams across his shoulder. There were three large oaken cases standing upon legs and simply carved upon the face. The dust lay deep on them, as upon the floor of that interior dungeon. Sheppard brushed the dust away and seized the lock. The hinge fell back to his touch, and slowly he lifted the massive lid.

The light shone still upon dark shadows, but, stooping a little lower, I thrust it into the mouth of the aperture, and our noses hung over the sides of the box together.

The treasure was there for certain. There it lay spread before our greedy faces, the gold and the silver and the precious stones that had been destined to save one king from death and another from exile. I let the pieces slip through my fingers—guineas, moldores, circlets of gold and silver, amulets and all the material gems of the market.

"How much is there?" asked Montgomery. Sheppard seemed to ponder, measuring rudely with his finger and computing the superficial area of the boxes.

"No one can say offhand," said he, "for there are the jewels, for one thing, among which are rubies. Now, rubies of that size—and he pounced upon one—are worth little short of a thousand pounds."

Montgomery gaped and whistled. "Let us make a rough shot and put the box at £50,000. Come, I'll take a bet that it's under the mark."

"Then there are the other two," said I. "True," said Sheppard. We all looked at one another.

"Come, boys," I said, rising; "let us get out of this. We know our way, and the treasure cannot take itself wings."

Reluctantly they obeyed, and we retraced our steps through the cupboard into the corridor and thence upward through the courtyard and into the living rooms. The dawn was brightening the eastern skies. I pulled out my watch.

"After 3," I said. "You'd better go to bed. There will be nothing happen now."

"Three o'clock!" echoed Sheppard indignantly. "Why, it is the very time for attacks and surprises. No; I'll see it out now."

"Very well," I assented. "We've got to arrange our defense, and as you are all determined not to go to bed we may as well hold a council of war."

"Agreed," said they, and we sat down to the job without further ado. We were agreed to consider 5 in the morn-

ing as the break of day for our purposes, and we were hardly exposed to an assault before 8 in the evening. The sky was still luminous at that hour. It was therefore plain that we must set a guard upon those intermediate and nocturnal hours. From 8 till 5 was a space of nine hours. That was to determine for us a watch of three. So far we settled the preliminaries of our defenses. But we had now to consider further. The drum towers commanded the slopes of the valley like two tall sentinels, and from the embrasure of the windows a watch might be kept upon the nether parts of the Gwent. But from one so stationed the back of the park and the crown of the hill behind were quite concealed. In this connection it appeared that the keep would best serve us, more particularly as the upper chambers were readily gained from the inhabited wing of the castle, whereas the towers reared their formidable heads in isolation and led only to the corridors of the basement and to the battlements above. It was in the keep, then, that our sentinel must hold his silent watch. The highest chamber in the keep rose immediately above the level of the battlements and was pierced by narrow slits in the masonry. This was a convenient station, or, better still, the roof of the tower, with which a flight of stairs connected the chamber.

We explored the keep thoroughly ere we had settled this point, and by that time it was 4 o'clock.

"Now, you had better go and lie down," said I to the others; "otherwise you will be nodding on your watches tonight. For my part, there is an hour yet to the time of safety, and I take first watch."

Sheppard expostulated with me for what he termed unnecessary precaution, but I held to my point, and presently they left me.

**CHAPTER X.**

WHEN I descended into the house I had hit upon one line of defense at least, and I at once proceeded to realize it. As I walked from the drawbridge along the moat to the back of the castle I wondered if it was practicable; but, remembering what old Kesteven had said of his predecessor's experiment some forty years before, I had great hopes that the sluices would still work.

The brook ran, as you will remember, behind the castle, at a little distance from it, and I found without difficulty the mouth of the conduit which had been formerly used to feed the fosse. I inserted my arm as far as possible, and the space seemed fairly clear, though the earth had crept in and lay along the bottom, grown with grass to the depth of some inches. Still I had no fear that the flow of water would not wash this sediment away, provided always I could get the sluices up. To find these sluices was my next thought. I moved along the turf in the direction in which it seemed that the culvert must run, scrutinizing very carefully every inch of the ground. About three feet from the stream was a noticeable elevation, a grass plot rising in a mound two feet high. Here was obviously what I wanted, and so, taking a spade, I dug with a will and soon had the turf removed and the floor of a stone erection laid bare. It was a good hour's work ere I had cleared the rubbish away sufficiently to free the sluices; then I laid hands on them and pulled vigorously, but fruitlessly. I must plainly have assistance, and accordingly, with enough content with my labors so far, I went back to the house. At breakfast I revealed my scheme, much to the delight of Sheppard, who roundly declared that he would give five years of his life for this adventure. Supported by two enthusiastic assistants, I returned to work, fetching with me a heavy iron bar for use as a lever.

"A little more beef, Montgomery," shouted Sheppard, and himself grew as red as a turkey cock with his efforts. Montgomery flung his heavy body upon the extremity of the bar, and with a crack something came up with a jerk. At the same time I heard

below a faint rumbling and rushing as of water.

"We've done it!" I shouted, and ere the words were out of my mouth Sheppard and the other were racing for the moat, whither they presently waded with wild hands.

The water was pouring from the conduit in a strong stream fully one foot in thickness. That was enough. It would take some hours to fill the moat, but it might take all day so long as we were secured by the fall of night. We left the sluices up and went back.

"The next thing," said I, "is to attack the drawbridge. The portcullis wants oil, but that will do later."

"We'll have the castle a mediaeval fortress in a twinkling," said Sheppard.

The heavy chains of the drawbridge were intact, but the machinery was in a very bad way, and without more ado we set to work upon it. I called my man Williams into requisition, and I think it took the four of us till 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening ere we pronounced ourselves satisfied. After that we had a rehearsal with both portcullis and drawbridge. By this time the moat was swimming with water, which lapped under the shoulders of the bridge. There must have been fully twelve feet of water in the fosse.

"This won't do. We'll have an inundation," said Montgomery, and he let the sluices down. When all was done we surveyed our handiwork and were content. It was now close upon 8 o'clock.

Dinner had been ready for more than half an hour, no way were informed by Mrs. Main, who must have regarded

us as lunatics. The clock in the hall struck 8 as we entered.

"Watch time," said I. "Who goes?" We looked at each other, laughing. "It's my turn," said Sheppard, with a grimace, but I stopped him.

"No; let Montgomery," I said meaningly. "Right you are," responded Montgomery cheerfully, and, taking his brace of pistols, he vanished along the corridor.

"How's this?" asked Sheppard. "I think the poor boy has earned his dinner."

"Bless you, he shall have his dinner," I answered. "Only the danger is going to be later, and I'd rather Montgomery were asleep in bed than asleep on the tower."

We had arranged that Williams should stay the night in the castle and, imbuing him with the fear of burglars, had armed him with a shotgun in case we should come to the worst. As Sheppard remarked, we could readily tangle the Welshman's brains if he became suspicious, and if his garrulity should bring us the sympathy and assistance of the law I think we could be stupid enough and vague enough to confound his kindly efforts. Mrs. Main was by this time bound to us by iron ties through Sheppard's contrivance, nor do I know to this day exactly how he managed it or in what directions he used his amiable and soothing fictions. The housemaid was Mrs. Main's hireling, and we need scarcely include her in our calculations.

We were now, as I conceived, adequately fortified against a surprise. From 8 o'clock until dawn upon the next morning we should be stretched upon the rack of suspense, but each of us was studiously resolved to accomplish his duty at all hazards. That an attack would be delivered I had few doubts, but my anxiety lay rather as to the watch in which it would be delivered. I had sent Montgomery to his post early, as it seemed wiser for more responsible heads than his to take the deeper and darker hours of the night. From 8 till 11 his time ran, and yet they might be upon us ere that. He was fed with some sandwiches and cheered with a little wine, while below Sheppard and I waited in a condition of tension.

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed Sheppard presently, after dinner. "I can't stand this. Let us go and join him."

"You would be much wiser," said I. "to get an hour's sleep."

Sheppard shrugged his shoulders. "It's my turn next, you say, and I'm not used to be awakened in my beauty sleep. It's bad for me. No; I'll go to bed when you relieve me. But I recommend your own advice to yourself."

"And I will take it," I answered. "See that Montgomery gets his supper and goes to bed like a sensible person. I'll be with you at 2 punctually."

I cannot say that I enjoyed a peaceful sleep. Although I was dog tired, partly from the exertion of the day's work and partly because I had had no rest the previous night, I still slumbered very fitfully. Finally I awoke in a fever and, throwing the hot blankets from me, stepped to the open window. My bedroom faced the north, and the cool air that heralded the dawn wandered over me, reducing the fume and fire of my nerves. Far away some roistering bird was calling, not in his spring notes, but raucous now with the somber beat of autumn. The curtain of the dawn was lifting. It was time for me to relieve Sheppard. My watch marked a quarter to 2. Having dressed, I went down to the great hall and, thrusting the western windows open, looked out. Trees, like great ghosts, invisible, whispered in the night together. The stars glistened down below, and I recollected suddenly that I was peering into the water of the fosse. The stillness hung so deep that I was possessed of a sudden with a hundred fears. Was Sheppard murdered? And were the castle and its treasure now in the hands of those abominable assassins? I listened for a cry, but there was none, only the gentle wash of the waters against those ancient foundations and the swishing of the leafage on the neighboring trees. The park lay, as one might have fancied, under the imminent hand of death.

I stole upstairs, clambering with a lantern to the keep. Upon the tower a silent figure turned and a low voice spoke.

"Is that you, Ned?" The sound almost startled me, occurring upon the stillness.

"Any news?" I asked. "Well, I have two things to communicate. Do you see that tree?"

"I peered into the darkness in the direction he had indicated. "I hear it," I observed doubtfully. "Well, I've seen it," he retorted. "Your eyes are better than mine, then," I answered.

"Maybe," said Sheppard cheerfully, "maybe not. But I don't profess to see through a wall. That tree is fifty paces away, and it is an oak, very large and umbrageous."

"I believe you are right," I answered. "I think I recollect it."

"I didn't," he went on. "But I reckon to see by match light as well as any."

I was puzzled. "Match light?" I queried. "No haven't been."

"Oh, dear, no!" he exclaimed. "My tower has been the central patch of blackness in this black night. Besides, who ever struck a match at night to see by? No; the match was to that same tree I speak of. I was silent. 'I presume it didn't strike it self,'" he continued.

"Lower your voice," I enjoined. Sheppard smiled, as I could perceive even in the darkness.

"Oh, I don't see why," he declared. "There's no one there to strike a match now, to the best of my belief."

"How is that?" "Did you hear no sound?" he asked. I shook my head, and he patted his shotgun.



I stole upstairs to the keep.

"I congratulate you on your soundness of health. I fired about an hour ago, and I fancy the shot did not altogether miss. There followed a still, small noise and after that again patting daylight. I think some one has indignation today in Sercombe's army."

Sheppard shouldered his gun and walked to the northern verge of the parapet. Stooping, he fumbled in the darkness, and the next moment his voice sounded from below my feet. "Follow me, Ned," he called. Gropping about with feet and hands, I came upon an open hole in the floor and, inserting my legs cautiously, happened upon the first step in a stone stairway. Diligently stepping down this through sheer blackness, I came out upon Sheppard's heels into what by comparison seemed daylight. The stars glistened in the canopy of heaven. I was out upon the battlements.

"We might have known there was some communication between the keep and the battlement," said Sheppard. "You see the advantage. I've been pacing this walk like a sentinel for the last two hours."

"Can you get right round?" "I'll show you," he returned and led the way along that lofty roadway. The battlements naturally stretched across the width of the castle, running from wall to wall. The parapet stood some 15 feet high and was broken with the machicolations of the design. There was ample space, therefore, for twenty men at arms to march abreast along the heights. Sheppard moved lightly, his head just swinging clear of the parapet and the black darkness contained between the shadows of the ramparts. The leaden roof was incumbered with rubbish. Presently Sheppard paused, and there rose quickly before me out of the superincumbent gloom the blacker mass of the drum towers. Feeling his way, Sheppard hit upon an iron ladder connecting with the heights above, and presently we stood upon the topmost pinnacle of the castle and peered from it into the night. The nocturnal mists and blackness of the valleys below were slowly shifting. The trees gradually grew black, showing against a vast and gray gloom. Yet there was no light visible in those seething changes of the elements. The night still hung about us.

The southern drum tower looked down upon deeper shadows, and I could not descry the wall below. I turned to my companion for an explanation and smiled at the confusion of my own brain when he answered: "That's the south, Ned. You know the battlements are in ruins there."

Of course they were, but I was not to be deterred from a complete circuit of the walls by that small fact, and I groped for the ladder.

"Be careful, Ned," said Sheppard. "Better not. Wait till it's light."

Now, I knew very well at the time that I spoke wisely and that I was merely taking a rash hazard for no better purpose than to display to myself my own determination—or obstinacy, if you will. But the feeling was strong upon me, and so, picking my steps down the ladder, I paid him no attention. Presently my foot, descending, shot through empty air, and coincidentally with that the iron bar to which I was clinging with my left hand ceased abruptly. For a moment I had a sickly sensation in my stomach, and I went quite cold. But, bracing myself together, I knelt upon the lowermost step and launched my body into space.

I have no intention, as I say, of defending my foolhardiness, nor do I take any credit for my ultimate escape from what was undoubtedly a deadly peril. My legs kicked aimlessly in the air and found no rest. I tightened my hold upon the iron of the ladder and strove to pull myself up. But my wrists had already weakened in that tedious and unavailing oscillation in space, and, to my horror, I realized that I could not get back.

"Sheppard!" I called faintly. "Ned! Ned!" came Sheppard's whisper from above, and I was vaguely aware of a tiny spark of light shining as it were in heaven. The glow lit up the remnants of the iron ladder, and below this I could see as I hung the imminent brows of the ruined wall and the gleaming light of water far away. Yet this illumination proved my salvation. The ruins were overgrown with masses of Irish ivy, as I have said, and in the course of centuries this strongly growing creeper had clambered over and beyond the proper limits of decay and clothed with great twisted branches the wall of the drum tower at one side of me. Gasping from my exertions, I reached a hand toward these leaves and, catching at a thick stem like a cable, clung to it desperately while dividing my weight between the two supports. My only anxiety was as to whether the ivy would hold. Its attachment to the stones of the wall must be precarious, and yet I had to trust it, and, poising an instant between the two, I dropped slowly upon the creeper. The friendly branches held, and I slipped carefully down until I stood upon the broken stones of the ruined wall. High above I saw Sheppard light another match and heard his voice calling to me, but I had no strength to reply. He flung the light from him, and, descending in an arc, it passed before my eyes and went out with a hiss below. I leaned over, and the grayness of the coming

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"It is twelve years since Psychine cured me of galloping consumption. The speaker was Mr. A. E. Mumford, six feet tall, and looking just what he is a husky healthy farmer. He works his own farm near Magnetawan, Ont.

"I caught my cold working as a fireman on the C.P.R.," he continued. "I had night sweats, chills and fever and frequently coughed up pieces of my lungs. I was sinking fast and the doctors said there was no hope for me. Two months treatment of Psychine put me right on my feet and I have had no return of lung trouble since."

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Dawn lay in the water thirty feet beneath me. A fragment of stone, detached by my movement, rumbled over the margin and fell with a great blub into the moat. There were twelve feet of water in the fosse. I shuddered and called back to Sheppard.

"I was afraid something had happened to you," said he. "Are you all right?"

I explained the position. "Wait there, and I'll join you from the other side. You old fool, Ned!"

I accepted the criticism meekly and retained my place upon the ivy covered ruins until I heard the sound of feet upon my right, and presently perceived Sheppard crawling over the stones toward me. He sat down near me, panting.

"You can get down from the other side pretty easily," he declared. "It's well to remember that."

"I don't quite see why you have done so," I answered, rather ungratefully. "You would be better asleep."

"Oh, nonsense!" he exclaimed; then, after a pause, "The dawn will be up directly, Ned."

Presently his head nodded upon his shoulder. I let him sleep. He must have been worn with his long vigil and the longer toil. I knew that he would not go to bed and he had better take what rest was possible in this illegitimate way. The stars faded and went out, yet the dawn seemed long in coming. I pulled out my watch and, striking a match, consulted it. It was half past 3. Sheppard's head lurched forward, and his breath grew stertorous. A thin fine line of light cut across the eastern horizon, and then suddenly a stick cracked below me. I started, alert, intent, the drums roaring in my ears. A soft sibilation, as of voices exchanged below the breath caught my eager senses. Surely I could discern the noise of footsteps falling quietly upon the grass. I strained my sight to pierce that gray-black cloud of gloom, but there was nothing visible, and, leaning softly forward, I touched Sheppard upon the shoulder. He was awake in an instant and ere I knew it whispering at me under his breath: "What is it? Are they come?"

"Listen!" I murmured. Sheppard turned to me, motioning with his hand. Reaching close, he put his lips to my ears.

"They're down by the moat, exploring," he said—"several, I think. Shall I fire?"

I grasped his hand in return. "No, no," I murmured back. "You stay here and keep quiet with your shotgun. I'm going down to find out."

With which I slipped noiselessly on hands and knees until I reached the back parts of the wall. From here it

was a descent of twenty feet or more into the courtyard, but the face of the ruin was irregular, and I found, by groping, projecting stones which offered me a foothold, so that presently I dropped to the flags of the yard without sound and stole into the house.

My first duty was to awaken Montgomery and the man Williams. Both of them I dispatched by means of a ladder to join Sheppard on the heights, and, that done, I took a lantern and descended into the corridor of dungeons. My light was but feeble, and my progress was necessarily slow along that path of inky blackness. At each of the turnings I paused and, proceeding to the bottom, peered out through the grating on the waters of the fosse. I had in this manner and exercising this precaution made the circuit of half the castle and was now upon the southern face and, as I concluded, in the proximity of Sheppard and the others. Here it was that I met my first alarm. As I gazed out of the grating on my tour of inspection and was almost now convinced that our fears had been unnecessary and that we had been deceived by the early movements of the dawn, suddenly there

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