

# The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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(Concluded from last week.)



It was he, and he alone, who gave the signal.

cial popularity, and circumstances of his own wickedness had made him a scoundrel, and a very bad scoundrel at that.

And so it was that I responded quite affably to his greeting, oblivious of the past and almost forgetting the future. He stood by me, surveying the encampment, his bulky form overtopping mine by three inches at the least.

"It's a pity, Mr. Greator, that these animals have no spunk. Spunk goes a long way with me, I will admit, and that warms my heart to you. I doff my hat to Mr. Sheppard and by the way, to my young friend Montgomery also."

"What you lack in quality, I suppose, you calculate to make up in quantity," I said grimly.

"Precisely, Mr. Greator. You've hit it. That's the rub. If I had three of my mongrel Indians here I'd reckon to finish the job in a couple of days, but me has to use the material at hand."

"No doubt," said Sheppard, "but your plans must have been laid a long time."

The captain cast a curious glance at him. "Well, you seem to know," he said slowly. "But I tell you frankly that greed can carry too far and that a law too widely open will sometimes lose a bite; it takes too long to shut it. If I had managed this business"—But here, apparently recollecting himself, he broke off and turned away with a little frown. But presently he resumed, wearing his accustomed good humored expression. "There was never any good came of a Greek. I've known them upward of twenty years, and I never knew one that was fit for anything save to jab you in the back when you were not looking."

"I should say," remarked Sheppard mildly, "that you had a very suitable gang for your purpose."

Sercombe laughed. "Oh, I don't fancy the knife myself, though some people do."

Sheppard turned deathly pale, but he smiled politely and answered, "There is no knowing what scruples a man will develop."

This turn of the conversation suddenly woke me to a sense of my errand, and I quickly communicated my news to Sercombe.

"I thought we should come to this," he said cheerfully, "and I would have laid out this mission. I know you would drop that meaty mouthed righteousness of yours. What I disliked in you, Mr. Greator, from the outset, if I may say so without offense, was your blamed British pharisaism. You couldn't look at a job squarely. It's not your fault, but that of your training. I had the same defect once myself, but a campaign in the Ionian isles knocked the pretenses out of me. That's how I came to know these scoundrels so well. Well, I'm glad we meet evenly at last. You can see for yourself there's not a pennyworth to choose between us, save that you've had first blood, and with that he looked at Sheppard.

This time Sheppard held his color under control, but he looked away, and I perceived, in spite of his severe restraint, a twitching of the nostrils.

"Come, come," said I, "we must take what steps we may in self defense against cutthroats, captain."

"I'm with you there," said Sercombe cheerily, "and the steps I usually take consist of a barken. I shoot out of my coat tails as often as not. My plan is to fire when I see a squirt."

"I fear you rebuke me," I replied, with a bow, "but I swear that I would have fired if it had been any other place but London. I am so well known there."

Sercombe burst out laughing. "I once thought," he said, "that Mr. Sheppard was more my sort, but now I believe I pin my note on you!"

"You honor me," I returned, "but come to business."

The captain plucked his long red mustache meditatively. "I'm sorry I can't discuss this with you now, gentlemen," he said. "After all, it's your affair, though I admit I have a certain interest in it, but if I may come up and see you about 3 o'clock we can go into details. I fancy it's a concerted plan we want."

"That's so," I returned, feeling terribly mean and small to be conspiring so against the laws of my country with an admitted scoundrel.

"Very well; let us say 3," said the captain and stuck out his hand as though to dismiss us.

For myself, being in the frame of mind I have described, I contrived to overlook his arm, but Sheppard, all smiles, sprang forward and shook him heartily. "By the way," he said brightly, "and here is my friend Hood."

"Hood!" echoed Sercombe and looked at us queerly. "Oh, Mr. Hood is inventing a new maneuver. He is a better soldier than I am, is Mr. Hood, naturally." I suppose he saw that we exchanged glances. "My dear sirs," he said, "I only tell you what you might suppose for yourselves. Mr. Hood is trying his hand at generalship, but I don't reveal his plan of campaign. Perhaps you guess it." And he burst out laughing rather unpleasantly.

It was obvious to both of us that there was a bitterness in Sercombe's words. Fallen though he was from a respectable estate and sunk as he had become in a career of dissipation and unscrupulous adventure, he still retained a certain feeling of his own dignity. How far the difference between Hood and himself had gone I could not know, but if it went much further it seemed as though we might take some advantage out of it. But of the two it was Hood—Hood, with his lean black face—that I feared.

Sercombe kept his appointment with commendable punctuality, entering our council chamber, if I may so describe the smaller of the halls in which we usually sat, with the jauntness of his morning's encounter. Lunch was but newly over, and I felt myself descending in Montgomery's eyes when I offered the captain a glass of wine. He took it airily, even with a kind of rude grace, which sometimes characterized him, and nodded us a good health, plunging at once into the matter of his visit.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen. I can spare little time today. You will understand that I am very busy," this with a twinkling eye. "But we must needs oblige road to meet you."

"We are gravely indebted to you," said I ceremoniously. "But I must point out that this point touches you as much as, if not more than, it affects us."

"We have shed no blood," said the captain emphatically, settling back for argument.

"Tis not your fault, then," I retorted, "and, in any case, what blood was shed was spilled in self defense in repelling an illegal assault upon our persons and our property."

"You would find it difficult to prove that in a court of law," says he, casting his eye at me.

"I thought we were agreed to leave the law alone," said I.

"Unhappily," observed Sercombe, with a laugh, "the law won't leave us alone."

"Oh, come," said I impatiently, "we are confined to this. Captain Sercombe, are you prepared to help us? You yourself say time presses. If not, it may well be that we shall throw the onus upon the proper offenders and leave you to shift for yourselves."

"And what about the treasure, my friend?" asked the captain, with an ogle.

"I know nothing of any treasure," I remarked calmly, "nor does either of my friends here. Presumably an attack was made upon the castle for the purpose of burglary, and I can conceive that my silver only was aimed at. I think that will suffice to explain the cowardly attack of some ruffianly foreigners. I think the Raymond police will easily understand that."

Sercombe looked somewhat blank, but in a moment resumed his cheerfulness. "Quite so, and as such a course would benefit no one, we are to combine forces against a common enemy. Well, fire ahead."

At this moment an interruption came through the entrance of the maid with the announcement of some visitors at the door. We all stared at one another.

"Who are they?" I demanded.

But the girl, being raw and unscrupulous, had not inquired their names. They were, however, gentlemen, and there was a policeman with them. This was enough for us, and an uncomfortable silence fell on us. Sercombe raised his eyebrows and sucked in his lips sulkily.

"Have 'em in," said Sheppard. I looked dubious. We had arranged nothing and had no plan of action between us. "It is far wiser," urged Sheppard. "Don't give it too elaborate an appearance." And, turning, he gave the order to the maid.

I was still doubting and Sercombe was regarding Sheppard with a certain grave interest when the maid returned, ushering in a very ceremonious manner and a man whom I took to be a sergeant in plain clothes.

"Mr. Greator," said the old gentleman, with heavy courtesy.

I bowed. "That's my name," I replied. "I suppose you have come upon this business of last night?"

"Yes, sir," said he, signaling to the sergeant, who forthwith pulled out a notebook. "It looks a bad thing for the

Colonel Landell, and I am a justice of the peace."

I was evidently called upon to make some suitable rejoinder to his piece of oratory, and I bowed again and emphasized my satisfaction in receiving so distinguished and so famous a justice, who would soon dissipate the mists of suspicion and mystery with which this singular affair was involved.

This address set the old gentleman upon his legs, metaphorically speaking, and forthwith he plunged into the depths.

"This party, I understand, Mr. Greator," said he, "attacked you early this morning?"

"About 3 o'clock," I answered. He commented the reply to the sergeant, who scribbled in his book.

"Had you any reason to fear this assault was intended?"

I hesitated. "Well, to say the truth," I replied, "we were not wholly without some suspicions."

"You may take it upon myself to say, sir," suddenly broke in the captain, "that it was I that first put the suspicion into Mr. Greator's head."

He looked at me as if inviting my corroboration, and a twinkling glistened in the rascal's eye.

"That is true," said I gravely. "Captain Sercombe is entirely responsible for my suspicions."

The ambiguity of the phrase tickled us both, and a smile was very privately exchanged between us.

"May I ask, Captain Sercombe," said the old gentleman politely, recognizing this importation with a bow, "what reasons you had for supposing Ixora castle would be attacked in this extraordinary way, and whether you have any clue to the offenders?"

The captain lolled back in his chair and stroked his red mustache. "I used my eyes, colonel. I have lived a sharp

eye, sir. And when I see a fact I record it. That's a hint which is of use in your profession, as I make no doubt you know well enough," he said courteously. "This affair of the attack is a bad business; there's no denying that. But it might have been worse. No lives were lost, you see. And he glanced out of his ensanguined eyes at Sheppard.

"No; we must be thankful for that," observed the justice heartily. "But do I understand you that you had indeed actual evidence that the burglary was planned?"

"I did two to two, colonel, and make them four," says Sercombe, seeming to be very complacent. "And, staying by accident in the same neighborhood with my friend Greator, I put a point on his wits. That was all. I make no claim to extra smartness, but when I see a number of lazy looking gypsies about, there's no good promised, according to my notions."

"You are right; you are right," agreed the justice. But here the sergeant struck in for the first time, casting a glance from sharp, beady eyes on the captain.

"Where were these gypsies, sir?" We all looked at Sercombe, who showed not the least discomfiture, but bit the tip off a cigar.

"I trust I have your permission, Greator," said he. "The gypsies, sir, are encamped at the bottom of the valley; have been so, indeed, for a week."

I was astonished at the man's audacity. He had actually revealed the secret of his nest of cutthroats. The sergeant turned the pages of his notebook.

"The man Williams, examined this morning, states that one of the men, seen closely, looked like a foreigner—dark, stoutish; shouted in gibberish." He repeated the evidence monotonously.

Sercombe, puffing at his cigar, nodded. "That bears out my belief," he said. "Precisely—I thought so."

Colonel Landell turned to the sergeant. "This is important, Jones," he said. "You'd better attend to it at once. But one question more, Mr. Greator. Would you be able to identify any one of your assailants?"

"I fear not," I said. "You must remember that it was quite dark."

"Nor you, sir, I suppose?" he added, looking at Sheppard.

Sheppard shook his head doubtfully. "We were engaged in a pell-mell struggle. The utmost I saw was the outlines of the men, but I can recall that one looked very like my friend Captain Sercombe—that is to say, in the dark."

Sercombe laughed. "My dear fellow, I wish I had been there. I'm sorry I missed it. But I shall have better luck another time, if I stick to Sergeant Jones."

The officer smiled without emotion, and the colonel put his question formally to Montgomery, who promptly returned a negative. Landell moved toward the door, but suddenly the police officer touched him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear, then faced us again.

"It was lucky you had that moist filled and the drawbridge up, sir. What made you take those precautions?" he demanded.

confusion of any nefarious scoundrel with a big maw." These were the exact words, as I happen to remember, in which I introduced the subject, as Mr. Greator will no doubt recall, though he is not likely to have the terms on his tongue, like myself. But that, I reckon, is what started it. And with this Sercombe replaced his cigar between his teeth and went on smoking tranquilly.

The sergeant thanked him, frowning in some embarrassment; then he turned on his heel and, saluting to the company, vanished after his superior through the doorway.

Sercombe got up. "Well, we can break up now, gentlemen," he said. "Sorry to interrupt harmony, but I've got business to do."

"I am greatly obliged to you," I said, somewhat sheepily.

"You're very welcome," says the captain, with a wide smile.

"What about the gypsies?" I continued.

"Oh, I suppose the police will catch them," he remarked, his grin growing broader. "But, you see, none of you would be able to recognize them."

Sheppard burst into laughter, and I was fain to follow him, but Montgomery stared in amazement and with a certain latent dislike at the adventurer, pursuing him out into the courtyard with his steadfast eyes.

**S**ERCOMBE'S frankness proved of a piece with his conduct hitherto. I could not imagine the old soldier making a bad blunder, and the news that came to us later demonstrated the method in his candor. Sheppard encountered the sergeant near Llanellan and found that his expedition into the Gwent had had no success. There was no camp in the bottom.

Evidences of the recent presence of strangers there were in plenty, but not a sign remained to indicate into what hiding place they had withdrawn. To move a number of persons, with their effects, and the men foreigners, too, and thereby certain to attract the attention of the villagers, would seem impracticable without some public notice. But apparently no one had seen a trace of the fugitives. They had vanished as completely as though the encampment had been a mirage of our disordered brains.

It was clear, however, that there would be no assault upon the castle that night. Jones and his troopers hung about the village, and the farmer was too zealous to allow any disorder under his nose. Sercombe would not dare to risk a second attack. That much was for our comfort. He had put it to me ingeniously that the interference of the police would embarrass him, and I was heartily glad to hear it, for we needed some further resources for our defense. That was plain enough. We had been able to tempt the enemy on his first two attempts, and I began to doubt if we could hold out against a renewal of hostilities unless, indeed, we could our silent contact and called in the assistance of the law. We had decided to discard Williams from our society. He was too hazardous an ally, and we could not hope to circumvent the police a second time. As it was, I saw that some suspicious were breeding in the sergeant's mind. I suppose we took too lightly what was bruited about the country for a great sensation. The storming of the castle even in the distorted narrative which Williams had delivered to his friends sounded remarkable in so dull and uneventful a place as that countryside. Pieces of rumor concerning it crept into the London papers subsequently, and we were most unwillingly become the figures in a tragic and heroic adventure.

We resolved despite the promised respite to permit no one of the precautions, and Montgomery mounted guard at 8 o'clock on the keep tower. As Sheppard and I sat over our wine we were interrupted by Mrs. Main, who was greatly stirred by the visit of a justice, but in reality to breathe the air of our central excitement.

"I am to give Williams his supper tonight, as last night, sir," she asked. I told her "No," and her wits wandered to the events of the day without more ado.

"But presently she came back. "Then I'm not to prepare supper for Williams, sir?"

"Williams will not be sleeping here tonight," I replied. "He left at the usual hour—6 o'clock."

Her face wore a blank look, as of one struggling with perplexity, and, assuming that she had fears on her own account to combat, I went on, "You see, we shall be perfectly safe with the police looking after us."

"Oh, Lord, sir, 'tisn't that," she made answer, as though deprecating my reflection on her courage, "but Williams isn't gone, sir."

"But he is," said Sheppard. "I saw him myself two hours ago halfway to Llanellan."

Mrs. Main looked her incredulity. "If it wasn't his back I saw no more than two blessed minutes ago, I put it to you, whose was it, sir?"

I sat up, and we stared at each other. "Where was this?" I asked.

"I was leaving the kitchen for the pantry, sir, just preparatory with some dishes like, and the blinds being down against the window that faces the courtyard, I see Williams' shadow—leastways what I took to be Williams—pass across the blind, sir."

"It couldn't be Williams," said I after a pause. "Williams has never been in the castle since 2 o'clock, and, besides, the drawbridge is up."

"Did you see his face?" asked Sheppard.

"No, sir; it was on the blind like, but happening to have a question to put to him I just drops the dishes on the sideboard, and I run to the door, but when I'd got it open Williams was gone."

"It was not Williams," I repeated testily.

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"What I took to be Williams, sir," corrected Mrs. Main, with gentle obstinacy.

"Did you hear any sound of footsteps?"

"No, sir, but then I was making a noise with the dishes like, and Williams walks very gently."

"Oh, well," I murmured at length, "you must have been deceived, and if Williams was here he has gone since, and at any rate he won't want his supper."

When the housekeeper had retired I found Sheppard watching me. "What do you make of it, Ned?"

"I make nothing," I answered. "It's practically impossible for any one to get into the castle. We have had the bridge up nearly all day, but—you know my old adage, that it's better to be sure than sorry—we may as well have a look around."

Taking a candle we made a tour of the castle rooms and investigated all the corridors, peering into the dark corners. It was an arduous business, for I hardly realized the number of passages and crannies to be explored. Presently we both came to a stop on a simultaneous thought.

"This is really no use," I said, "it's quite impossible to exhaust all the possibilities of this house. And I still adhere to my previous notion that Mrs. Main was hardly in a sufficiently pacific state to judge between shadows."

"I'm with you there," said Sheppard cheerfully.

"Very well, then; bed," said I, and to bed we went, admirably tired with our excitement and our labors.

I must have been asleep for some hours when I awoke from dead unconsciousness with the presence of some one in the room oppressing me. Almost as I sat up I heard Montgomery's voice.

"Are you awake, Greator? There's some one about the house."

I sat still, striving to dissipate the confusion of my brain. Somewhere, far off, I remembered that I had heard this before. But with a strenuous effort of the will I threw off the dwindling hands of sleep and got out of bed. "We'll go and see," said I. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," said Montgomery as I lit a candle with fumbling fingers. "But my watch is over. I think it's about 12 or 1."

"Now, young man," I said, having pulled on some clothes, "what about this alarm of yours?"

"It was a noise—it woke me up," explained Montgomery. "Sheppard relieved me at 11, and I turned in, feeling very sleepy. I thought I slept like a log, but something got on my nerves, I suppose. At any rate, it woke me up."

"My dear lad, what was it?" I asked impatiently.

"It came from the back of the bed," he answered. "It was a sound of feet." "Something within the walls," I argued, "mice, beetles."

Montgomery shook his head. "Come and listen," he pleaded. I followed him. Certainly he was the least imaginative young man in the

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