

# The Adventurers

By H. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

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(Concluded from last week.)

not be quite so smart as he seemed, and also that Mr. Hood was even smarter. What his object might have been in spreading an evil reputation for Sercombe I could not guess, but that he had an object, and a material one, I did not doubt for a moment.

Though I had introduced the idea to Sercombe's notice, and the introduction had had its effect, I had not yet given shape and substance to my plan of setting off the one scoundrel against the other. I foresaw that I could improve my own position very substantially by this system of balance, and I determined to go now forthright to Hood on the same errand. He had failed me in the morning, but perhaps he would have grown wiser in the course of the day's imprisonment. There is nothing like solitude and the opportunity of reflection to bring a man to prudence, and now, too, I had seen Sercombe and had a genuine offer to consider. I came to the conclusion that, after all, Hood would not prove obdurate and that the end of the warfare was almost in sight.

In some such mood as this I made the journey to the keep, flattering myself with the success of my diplomacy and contemplating an honorable settlement which would rid us of our troubles, banish these wretched intruders and leave us to the comfortable enjoyment of our share in the treasure of the Vyvians.

Dinner was over. The clock in the hall had chimed half past 8. I expected Sercombe at 9 o'clock and must hurry to secure the interview before that. I entered the dungeon carefully and locked the door behind me, as was my custom. Then, turning, I cast the light toward the boxes upon which Hood had sat.

He was not there. Hastily I flashed the lantern round the walls. There was no sign of Hood. The dungeon was empty.

## CHAPTER XV.

I stared at the blank stones, but they returned no sign from their unavailing grayness. The silence began to speak in that gloomy place. Recovering myself, I put down the lantern and considered. First I put the key in my pocket, a definite precaution which was to influence strangely the history of this narrative. It was not conceivable that any one could have opened the heavy door when it was locked, yet the prisoner was gone. "If he is gone," said I aloud in order to reassure myself, "he must needs have gone by some hole." That was incontrovertible. I decided, too, that the means of escape must lie within the dungeon. Once more I inspected the huge oaken door and shook my head. Was there any flaw in the wood? Perchance there was a secret spring in a panel. I went over the surface carefully, but found nothing.

"Very well," said I, "I will unroll this or be hanged for a felon," and I set to work upon the wall. Inch by inch I passed the masonry under my scrutiny, but made no discovery. "I will go over it again," I declared desperately and resumed my work from the beginning. I had not reached a point very far from the door on this second round of investigation when my glance slid off at a venture and almost mechanically rested upon the treasure chests. Something unfamiliar in their appearance vaguely persisted in my thoughts. I left off fumbling with the wall and stood gazing at them. They took my eyes with interest, and, crossing the room, I shed the light upon the cases, fingering the gold pieces under the broken lid. One, two, three—they stood exactly as—no, that was the point. They had been moved!

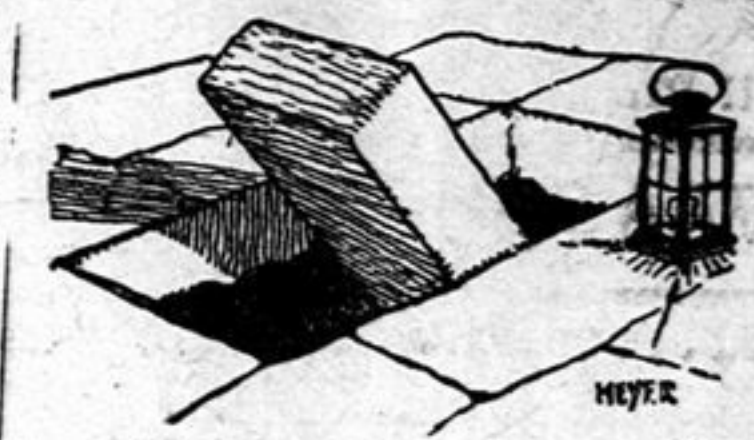
With a new zest I examined the floor, and, sure enough, one of these chests had been pulled out from the wall as far as its own width. I peeped over it, illuminating the space beyond. The slab of stone which the box had covered was like the other flags that made the floor of the dungeon. I leaned lower, and, sitting crossways on the chest, pushed the slab with my foot. It clanked dully to the more amazing to me, it seemed to shudder and tremble beneath me. Fully aroused to action, I flung myself over and alighted with both feet hard upon the flooring. In another moment I was tipped forward and felt myself falling precipitately upon my face. Catching at the chest with one hand, I saved myself, but in the effort the lantern fell from my hand and went out.

Slowly I groped in the darkness and struck a match, relighting the candle. Then I turned to the slab of stone. It lay open, displaced, one end protruding upward, and, as I saw, had twisted on some kind of axle. Below was disclosed a great mouth of darkness.

"Come," said I to myself, "I think I know where friend Hood is, and this begins to get interesting."

I felt in my pocket where my revolver lay safely, and, seizing the candle, plunged into the evil looking hole. A stairway of stone ran downward, but very steeply, and I had the utmost difficulty in preventing myself from pitching forward against the rough masonry of the opposite wall. The walls brushed me upon either side as I descended, so narrow was the tunnel. Down, down I went, until presently I reached a sort of landing, which broadened into a little irregular chamber. Here a ray of light caught my eye, and I followed it till it happened upon a small door in the wall. A huge key was in the lock, but the bolt was not turned, and by wrenching hard I forced the door open. I now looked down upon the waters of the moat, in which my tiny flame danced in the growing darkness.

After a little consideration I saw where I was. This must be a sally port, giving access to the fosse. Indeed, the water lapped the lowestmost step, upon which I stood. Was it by



The slab of stone lay open.

this way that Hood had escaped? It seemed certain, and, if so, there was nothing for it but to pocket my chagrin, go back and communicate my melancholy news to my friends. Retracing my steps, I shut the door and proceeded to retrace the stairway, but in the act of doing so I paused, for the lantern flashing on the obscure corners revealed to me a second flight of steps leading still downward from this level. Without hesitation and moved by some excitement I abandoned my first intention and plunged down this new well.

The second flight led downward even farther than the first, and must, I reckoned, have brought me under the foundations of the castle. At the bottom I was in a square, damp hole, and before me stretched a tunnel the height of a tall man and very black and misty. The thought of entering upon that mysterious and horrid gallery gave me a momentary pause, but, dissipating my forebodings, I marched forward and was soon buried in the bowels of the earth.

The tunnel was barely six feet in height, and I was obliged to walk with a slight stoop. To add to my discomfort the roof, which was rudely put together of huge stones, was very wet, and water trickled at intervals on my head. Moreover, I was being gradually coated with filth from the sticky nature of the clay through which the gallery was driven and which had, in the course of time, percolated between the stones. But I was now resolved to see the end of the adventure, and so I pushed on, undeterred by the inconveniences and almost oblivious of my fears.

A sense of suffocation accompanied me, but soon that feeling wore off, and I strode along at a sharper pace, lighting my way as well as I could with the lantern and stumbling at intervals over the debris of earth and stone which cumbered the footway. I must have gone some 300 yards in this fashion when I began to find the passage growing lighter. Some time afterward I discovered ahead, but shining as it seemed from a great distance, a point of brightness that grew as I advanced. This was undoubtedly the mouth of the tunnel, and, assured now of reaching some goal and no longer oppressed by the terror of that dismal alley, I increased my pace, moving forward to the light with a cheerful alacrity.

Thus I drew near to the jaws of that exit and came presently from the gallery itself into a wider space of cavern facing the heavens and rained upon by stars. About me the hollow, shadowed and hidden under the thick autumn foliage, was very gently luminous.

I had now to determine my position, and I will confess that I could not make the least guess of my whereabouts. A noise of water ran in my ears, coming from my right hand, and toward this I pushed my way. The trees were close, and the undergrowth of bracken and bushes rendered my advance very gradual, but by degrees I arrived at my point and found, what I had lately begun to suspect, that the sound rose from the little brook, which here descended the face of a steep slope in a pleasant gushing waterfall. A great gout of water, flung from the stones, dashed in my face quite merrily, and, heated with the confinement of the gallery and my long and troublesome passage, I stooped and bathed my face and hands in the running stream. I now began to see where I was. This was a point in the Gwent below the castle where the brook left the park and where the hill fell suddenly away into the valley, clothed with a dense forest and traversed by few save charcoal burners.

I reflected that this was a valuable add to the castle, and then upon that fell like a blow the second thought—that Hood might have chosen this mode of escape, in which case the gallery was a drawback to us rather than an advantage. And yet it appeared ridiculous to suppose that a fugitive would hunt about to follow the longer and more arduous route of flight. On the whole, I decided that Hood must have fled by the sally port and across the moat. Anyhow, he was gone, and it behooved us to renew our defenses and concert our plans afresh.

As I reached this conclusion in my reverie, with the sound of the waters pleasantly dulling my ears, I seemed to catch sight of a reflection flashing black among the tangled lights of the pool below me. The next moment I was hurried headlong, and when I was awake to my position ten seconds later the blood was drumming in my ears, my temples throbbing with pain, and two men were kneeling on my chest.

"Let him be, Charaxos! Loose his throat, you fool!" said a voice which had a familiar effect upon me. I staggered to a sitting position, the two men flung themselves upon me, and stared about me. "Very sorry, sir," said Hood. "Hope they didn't choke you too much, sir. 'Twas a near go."

I gasped, considering him. "I came to bring your supper, Hood," I stammered, and to this day I am glad to think I took the reverse with so much

coolness. For it was no mean feat, I can assure you, with the breath out of my body and my wits wandering and my head ringing from an ugly blow.

"Thank you, sir," said Hood, with his usual effrontery. "Thank you kindly, sir, I'm sure."

I could have sworn the man was more of a gentleman than a valet, and he was certainly more of a scoundrel than either. By having discharged this civility, he turned his back and paid me no further attention, merely issuing an order to his outcasts. The two dirty Greeks, one of whom was my squinting acquaintance, marched me along without more ado. And if I had considered the possibility of escape the fancy was dispelled by the presence of two more besides Hood himself, which I discovered when we began to move. I said nothing, keeping my eyes wide open and my brain as ready as might be, nor was any word spoken upon either side until we drew up to the Woodman, stopping before which Hood requested me to enter in his most conventionally hospitable manner.

I was much exercised in my mind as to the use these brigands could have for me, but as yet the situation was too novel to allow me consecutive thought. I was led into a large, barn-like building beyond the inn and reached by a flight of wooden steps outside. The room was large and airy and had evidently not been used for a granary these many years. Indeed, it bore the plain marks of recent habitation, and it came across me that maybe this had been the hiding place of the Greek sailors.

Into this cell the Greeks thrust me and, locking the door behind them, disappeared, leaving me to my own reflections. That these were not cheerful I need not assure you. Although I was but partially awakened to my misfortune, I had no difficulty in seeing whether it tended to my advantage, had discovered my escape by that and not by the sally port. But why was he lingering about the entrance to the passage? And how came he in company with his allies? I had not contemplated this problem for five minutes ere the secret of my capture dawned on me and, I will confess, fairly turned my stomach. Through the gallery lay the one road to the treasure, and Hood and I were the only two people in the drama who knew that. My seizure meant, then, that the way was now clear for him and his enterprise. The treasure of the Vyvians was at his mercy.

These desperate considerations I spun out the better part of an hour, at the end of which time the key creaked suddenly in the door, and Sercombe entered, bearing a heavy lamp. This he set down upon the rude bench table and turned to me, seating himself in a chair and disposing himself with comfort. "I regret, Mr. Greatorax," said he suavely and pulling at his cigar, with his hat on the back of his head, "I regret that I am somewhat late to my appointment with you. It was to have been 9 o'clock, I fancy."

Now I recalled what, to say the truth, I had completely forgotten in the adventure which I had experienced—that I had myself named such an hour to receive the capitulation of the fact and my triumphant diplomacy of the afternoon in his blind and sprightly failure and this blunder and sprightly creature. But I was not to take a rebuff with my ears down, and so I spoke up as calmly and as politely as myself.

"You are right," said I. "Nine o'clock it was. But, like you, I have been unavoidably delayed. So please don't apologize."

A smile lit up his face—and he was always best when he smiled—and his eyes twinkled.

"I begin to see, Mr. Greatorax," he said, "how it is that you have come so near winning this campaign."

"I have no doubt I shall win it yet," I returned.

"No doubt," he replied cordially. "But forgive me, Mr. Greatorax. I see you have no refreshments here, and I am sure you are in need of them. It was unpardonable of Hood." So saying, he rose and went to the door, shouting some order to a man below, whom, I judged, I must consider my sentry. Presently, and before the captain returned, he seated himself, Hood himself entered, bearing in his hands a tray containing a bottle of whiskey, a carafe of water and some glasses. He cast an eye of scrutiny on Sercombe, who lolled once more in his chair, but he said nothing and retired to the door. Sercombe filled two glasses.

"Allow me, Mr. Greatorax," he said and puffed for some minutes in silence. Indeed, it was I who first resumed the conversation.

"I presume, Captain Sercombe," I said, "that you have come to tell me that you do not accept my offer."

"Precisely," he owned, taking his cigar from his mouth. "That is exactly the position, Mr. Greatorax. I don't know how you guessed it, but there it is. I do not feel justified, in consideration of my relations with Mr. Hood, in accepting your proposals." "Then," I said bluffly, but keeping up the farce, "I see no reason for our continuing this interview, and, as I am somewhat tired, if you will excuse me—"

"I would not trespass upon you in the slightest," he interrupted. "But I had an idea that perhaps we might arrive at a compromise." I said nothing, for I had not the faintest notion of what he was driving at.

"If you happen to have locked the door of the dungeon?"

For answer and without giving the matter a thought I produced the key, which, as I have already narrated, I had put in my pocket.

Sercombe's eye lightened. He rose and went to the door, opening it and glancing into the darkness. Then he returned and drew his chair nearer to mine.

"You made me a proposition this afternoon," he said earnestly. "I did," said I, "which I now beg to retract."

"It was not good enough," he went on, paying no attention to my sarcasm—"not nearly good enough. But what do you say if I make one to you now?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I am at your mercy," I said.

"I envy you your powers of ease," he said. "I am pretty good, but I admit you beat me. But come, I am making you a proposition. What do you say?" "I have already said it."

"I see I will get no more change out of you," he said soberly. "But I know a man to trust when I see him. That has been my safeguard, Mr. Greatorax. And I know a man to distrust, though sometimes it is unavoidable"—He broke off. "Your friends don't know where you went tonight?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"If the dungeon door is locked it is impossible that they can get into it. But if your friends had the key," he went on, growing very earnest, "what would happen? I imagine that they would open the door, find the bird flown and perhaps the entrance to the secret passage disclosed."

"This began to interest me. What was the rascal's purpose?"

"Well?" I put in.

He lowered his voice, which conveyed a certain effect of fear to my mind.

"In which case the treasure would remain in the possession of the castle." "You speak like a book of Euclid," I returned, after a pause. "And now, captain, let me ask in my turn what proposition are you making to me?"

He considered for a moment. "There are three of you," he said. "But I confess I cannot reckon my friend Montgomery. Let us say two, then. I am willing to go halves with you. In which case, as you will see, there is a quarter for yourself."

"You would betray your associates," I said dryly.

"Pardon me," said the captain, "we are not here to pass criticisms on our morals. And, if it comes to that, what are we all? I see no pin prick between us. I do not invite your conclusions on my conduct. I have the honor to make you a proposal."

The rascal leaned back in his chair and watched me with a curious air of satisfaction. Indeed, his complacency was well grounded, and I could not but admit to myself that he was making me a handsome offer. His distrust or his fear of Hood was stronger than his greed, and it was to that we owed this unexpected intercession when fate had turned clean against us. Here was I, a prisoner and with no possibility of escape. The treasure lay at the mercy of these vagabonds, and even at this moment the pieces might be slipping through Hood's loving fingers. Assuredly I should be a fool, I thought, to refuse Sercombe's compromise. He must certainly have made the proposal in good faith, for all I was invited to do was to surrender the key, a key which could be of no possible use to him now that the subterranean entrance to the dungeon had been discovered. I withdrew it from my pocket. He nodded confidentially.

"That is all I ask," he said.

"And I?" I queried.

"You shall be at liberty at the earliest opportunity I can find," he returned. "Observe, Mr. Greatorax, that I am taking a great risk. I am depending upon your word."

"If I give it," I replied, "you may depend upon it. You will warn my companions?" I asked.

"I will see that they pay a visit to the prisoner," said he, "and I reckon they will wait little warning after that."

"You may take the key," said I after a pause. But at that moment a slight sound of soft feet upon the creaking stairway reached us. Sercombe whitened visibly and looked uneasily at the door.

"It is better that I should leave you now," he said hurriedly. "We can settle this tomorrow morning." And, showing clear signs of discomposure, he left the barn.

As for me, I sat with the key in my hand, considering. I thought I could put a name on the owner of those steps.

## CHAPTER XVI.

SERCOMBE was not so good as his word. So far from completing the bargain on the morrow, he never came near me, and I passed the day quite alone, save for the occasional visits of one of the Greeks bringing my food. I began to have a very intelligible view of the situation. Sercombe had been frightened off the position, but he contemplated by the fear of his companion, or if that were not so, though I was now quite prepared to credit it, he deemed it wiser to postpone the adventure still further, in which case I might still keep my hopes alive and nourish an ambition of final success. But the truth was that each day lost was so much gained toward the accomplishment of Hood's object, and even as I sat and gnawed my fingers and reflected in this doleful mood the treasure was fast leaving the castle, passing into the possession of alien and bloody hands.

There was yet another alternative, about which I could not make up my mind. Hood might have bought the allegiance of his traitorous associate, and, if so, I wished them both joy of their bargain together. I would trust neither scoundrel beyond the reach of my arms or the audit of my ears, and I was pretty sure that neither would trust the other. Their whole association rested upon a mutual compact of

(Continued on Page 4.)

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greed, and it was odds but, the gold once under their hands, they would fall out in some mortal strife, according to the ancient proverb. If that should happen, perhaps, according to the ancient proverb, we, as representing honest men as nearly as possible in the circumstances, might come by our own, or, speaking more properly, some one else's own.

For the present I had gained nothing, and lay, a disconsolate prisoner, in that airy cell, guarded by watches of the Greeks. So far as I could determine, we, the defenders of the castle and the treasure, were in a bad position, and there was nothing for it on my part but resignation with as civil a grace as might be. I had already taken account of the defenses of my prison and saw little prospect of escape, but I will confess that throughout the first day of my captivity I was somewhat under the influence of hope and hourly expected a conference with Sercombe.

This, as you may imagine, drew my attention from the immediate scrutiny of my surroundings, but upon the morning of the second day, when Sercombe still failed to visit me, I cast about for other means of escape.

First of all, I examined the barn very carefully. It was a huge building and rose at the apex to a height of fifteen feet or more. The sides were of wood, but the top was composed of a skeleton of rafters, thickly coated with thatch. Two windows shone in the room, one at the back part and away from the door, the other inserted in one of the remaining walls. The door was, of course, kept locked, but by screwing my face against the side window and craning my neck I could see the figure of a man on guard, evidently at the foot of the ladder. There was little chance of breaking out this way. The second window gave on a low lying stable at the back, and beyond that there were the great trees and cool depths of the forest. It was securely barred and fastened, and that, from all appearances, quite newly. The second exploration seemed to offer no more encouragement than the first, but I was not yet resigned to defeat, and, sitting down upon the floor, I fell to thinking, mechanically opening a small penknife which was in my pocket, and paring my nails.

I do not know if I were conscious of the act, but I remember that it was quite a long time, and when I had grown almost desperate in my counsels, that the advantage of this tiny weapon occurred to me. The wooden walls were not higher than six or seven feet, and above them, as I have explained, rose the superstructure of thatch to the pinnacle of the roof. I paused in my occupation and rose quickly. By standing on a chair I

could easily reach the thatch between the rafters, and without a momentary hesitation I plunged my knife into the mass of reeds. Sharp as a razor, the small blade cut through the straw at

(Continued on Page 4.)

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THE WATCHMAN-WARDER, APRIL 26th, 1906. DR. G. S. Toronto, specialist. DR. JEFF. 11 a.m. p.m. R. Telephone. DR. J. M. and Col. La. attention nose, throat, hours: 1 p.m. DR. F. B. Toronto U. Residence 1141 Broad-st. Phone 45. DR. J. W. Methodist to 11 a.m. p.m. PH. DR. G. H. corner of Special U. Phone 98. A. GILLIE. L. R. C. B. DR. B. W. Clerk, Agent, Conveyance. THE UNITED Village Prates of Private to buy WELDON Block. DR. BORR. money on the lowest basis is the principle without and debenture. We invest mortgage, bonds, etc. Barristers. DR. H. HOP. for the loan at 10 William-st. STEWART. Notaries, very low rates. York-st. T. Stewart