The White Company

A Sequel to "Sir Nigel"

By Sir A. Conan Doyle

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Synopsis of preceding chapters at end of this installment.

CHAPTER VII.

If he might not return to Beaulieu within the year, and if his brother's dogs were to be set upon him if he showed face upon Minstead land, then indeed was Alleyne adrift upon earth. North, south, east and west—he might turn where he would, but all was equally chill and cheerless. The Abbot had rolled ten silver crowns in a lettuce-leaf and hid them away in the bottom of his scrip, but that would be a sorry support for twelve long months. In all the darkness there was but the one bright spot of the sturdy comrades whom he had left that evening; if ne could find them again all would be well. He pushed on, therefore, now walking and now running.

The forest began to shred out into scattered belts of trees, with gleam of cornfield and stretch of pasture-land between. Here and there by the wayside stood little knots of wattle-and-daub huts, with shock-haired laborers lounging by the doors and red-cheeked children sprawling in the roadway.

By these Alleyne knew that he was on the very fringe of the forest, and therefore no great way from Christchurch. Right glad later, was the traveller to see the high tower of Christchurch Priory gleaming in the mellow evening light, and gladder still when, rounding a corner, he came upon his comrades of the morning seated astraddle upon a fallen tree. They had a flat space before them, on which they alternately threw little square pieces of bone, and were so intent upon their occupation that they never raised eye as he approached them. He observed with astonishment, as he drew near, that the archer's bow was on John's back, the archer's sword by John's side, and the steel cap laid upon the tree-trunk between them.

"Mort de ma vie!" Aylward shouted, looking down at the dice. "Never had I such cursed luck. A murrain on the bones! I have not thrown a good main since I left Navarre. I am like to reach Christchurch in my shirt." Then suddenly glancing up, "Hola, by the splendor of heaven, here is our cher petit! Now, by my ten finger-bones! this is a rare sight to mine eyes" He sprang up and threw his arms round Alleyne's neck, while John, no less pleased, but more backward and Saxon in his habits, stood grinning and bobbing by the wayside, with his newly-won steel cap stuck wrong-side foremost upon his tangle of red hair.

"Hast come to stop?" cried the bowman, patting Alleyne all over in his delight. "Shall not get away from us again!"

"I wish no better," said he, with a pringling in the eyes at this hearty greeting.

"Well said, lad!" cried big John. "We three shall to the wars together, and the devil may fly away with the Abbot of Beaulieu! But your feet and hosen are all besmudged. Hast been in the water?"

"I have in good sooth," Alleyne answered, and then, as they journeyed on their way, he told them the many things that had befallen him

"But you," said Alleyne, "there have been changes with you also. Where are bow and sword and cap—and why so warlike, John?"

"It is a game which friend Aylward hath been a-teaching of me."

"And I found him an over-apt pupil," grumbled the bowman. "He hath stripped me. But, by my hilt! you must render them back to me, camarade, lest you bring discredit upon my mission, and I will pay you for them at armorer's prices."

"Take them back, man, and never heed the pay," said John. "I did but wish to learn the feel of them, since I am like to have such trinkets hung to my own girdle for some years to come."

"Ma foi, he was born a free companion!" cried Aylward. "He hath the very trick of speech and turn of thought. I take them back then, and indeed it gives me unease not to feel my yew-stave tapping against my leg.

It chanced on that very evening that Sir Nigel Loring, having supped before sunset, as was his custom, had taken his dogs for an evening breather. Two russet-clad varlets, with loud halloo and cracking whips, walked thigh-deep amid the swarm, guiding, controlling, and urging. Behind came Sir Nigel himself, with Lady Loring upon his arm, the pair walking slowly and sedately, as befitted both their age and their condition. They paused at the bridge.

Sir Nigel was a slight man of poor stature, with soft lisping voice and gentle ways. So short was he that his wife, who was no very tall woman, had the better of him by the breadth of three fingers. His sight having been injured in his early wars by a basketful of lime which had been emptied over him when he led the Earl of Derby's stormers up the breach at Bergerac, he had contracted something of a stoop, with a blinking, peering expression of face. His age was six-and-forty, but the constant practice of arms, together with a cleanly life, had preserved his activity and endurance unimpaired, so that from a distance he seemed to have the slight limbs and swift grace of a boy. His face, however, was tanned of a dull yellow tint, and the little pointed beard which he wore was streaked and shot with gray. His features were small, delicate, and regular, with clear-cut curving nose, and eyes which jutted forward from the lids. His dress was simple and yet spruce. A gold embroidered belt of knighthood encircled his loins, with his arms, five roses gules on a field argent, cunningly worked upon the clasp. So stood Sir Nigel Loring upon the bridge of Avon, and talked lightly with his lady.

And, certes, had the two visages alone been seen, and the stranger been asked which were the more likely to belong to the bold warrior whose name was loved by the roughest soldiery of Europe, he had assuredly selected the lady's. Her face was large and square, with fierce thick brows, and the eyes of one who was accustomed to rule. It was the age of martial women. The deeds of Black Agnes of Dunbar, of Lady Salisbury, and of the Countess of Montfort were still fresh in the public mind. With such examples before them, the wives of the English captains had become as warlike as their mates, and ordered the castle in their absence with the prudence and discipline of veteran seneschals. Right easy were the Montacutes of their Castle of Twynham, and little had they to dread from roving galley or French squadron while Lady Mary Loring had the ordering of it.

"I tell you, my lord," she was saying, "that it is not fit training for a demoiselle: hawks and hounds, rotes and citoles, singing a French rondel, or reading the Gestes de Doon de Mayence, as I found her yester-night, pretending sleep, the artful, with the corner of the scroll thrusting forth from under her pillow. Lent her by Father Christopher of the Priory, forsooth—that is ever her answer. How shall all this help her when she has castle of her own to keep, with a hundred mouths all agape for beef and drink?"

"True, my sweet bird, true," answered the knight. "The maid is like the young filly, which kicks heels and plunges for very lust of life. Give her time, dame, give her time"

"Well I know that my father would have given me, not time, but a good hazel-stick across my shoulders. I know not what the world is coming to, when young maids may flout their elders. I wonder that you do not correct her, my fair lord"

"Nay, my heart's comfort, I never raised hand to woman yet, and it would be a passing strange thing if I began upon my own flesh and blood. But I doubt not that you are right, and that Maude's wings need clipping, which I may leave in your hands when I am gone, for, in sooth, this peaceful life is not for me, and were it not for your gracious kindness and loving care I could not abide it a week. I hear that there is talk of warlike muster at Bordeaux once more, and by St. Paul! it would be a new thing if the lions of England and the red pile of Chandos were to be seen in the field, and the roses of Loring were not waving by their side."

"Now woe with me but I feared it!" cried she, with the color all struck from her face. "I have noted your absent mind, your kindling eye, your trysing and riveting of old harness. Consider, my sweet lord, that you have already won much honor, that we have seen but little of each other, that you bear upon your body the scars of over twenty wounds received in I know not how many bloody encounters."

"My lady, when our liege lord the king at three-score years, and my Lord Chandos, at three-score and ten, are blithe and ready to lay lance in rest for England's cause, it would ill become me to prate of service done. It would be bitter shame to me, and also to you, since my fame is yours, that I should now hold back if a man's work is to be done. Besides, bethink you how low is our purse, with bailiff and reeve ever croaking of empty farms and wasting lands. Were it not for this constableship which the Earl of Salisbury hath bestowed upon us we could scarce uphold the state which is fitting to our degree. Therefore, my sweeting, there is the more need that I should turn to where there is good pay to be earned and brave ransoms to be won."

"Ah, my dear lord," quoth she, with sad, weary eyes, "I thought that at last I had you to mine own self, even though your youth had been spent afar from my side. Yet my voice, as I know well, should speed you on to glory and renown, not hold you back when fame is to be won. Yet what can I say? for all men know that your valor needs the curb and not the spur!"

"Fret not thyself, my heart's dove, for it is like that there may be no war waged, and we must await the news. But here are three strangers, and one, as I take it, a soldier fresh from service. It is likely that he may give us word of what is stirring over the water."

Lady Loring, glancing up, saw in the fading light the three companions

"FLICKED THE BEAST TWICE ACROSS THE SNOUT."

walking abreast down the road, all gray with dust, and stained with travel, yet chattering merrily between themselves. Aylward looked keenly at Sir Nigel, and then, plunging his hand under his breastplate, he stepped up to him, with a rough, uncouth bow to the lady.

"Your pardon, fair sir," said he, "but I know you the moment I clap eyes on you, though in sooth I have seen you oftener in steel than in velvet. I have drawn string beside you at La Roched'Errien, Romorantin, Maupertius, Nogent, Auray, and other places. I bring you this letter from the valiant Gascon knight, Sir Claude Latour."

As they read it, Alleyne, who stood with Hordle John a few paces back from their comrade, saw the lady catch her breath, while the knight laughed softly to himself.

"You see, dear heart," said he, "that they will not leave the old dog in his kennel when the game is afoot. And what of this White Company, archer?"

"Ah, sir, you speak of dogs" cried Aylward; "but there are a pack of lusty hounds who are ready for any quarry, if they have but a good huntsman to halloo them on. Sir, we have been in the wars together, and I have seen many a brave following, but never such a set of woodland boys as this. They do but want you at their head, and who will bar the way?"

"Pardieu!" said Sir Nigel, "if they are like their messenger, they are indeed men of whom a leader may be proud. Your name, good archer?"

"Sam Aylward, sir, of the Hundred of Easebourne and the Rape of Chichester."

"And this giant behind you?"

"He is big John of Hordle, a forest man, who hath now taken service in the Company."

"A proper figure of a man-at-arms," said the little knight. "Why, Aylward, you are no chicken, yet I warrant him the stronger man. See to that great stone from the coping which hath fallen upon the bridge. Four of my lazy varlets strove this day to carry it hence. I will wager that you two could put them I would that you two could put them to shame by budging it, though I fear that I overtask you, for it is of a grievous weight."

He pointed, as he spoke, to a huge rough-hewn block which lay by the roadside, deep sunken from its own weight, in the reddish earth. The archer approached it, rolling back the sleeves of his jerkin, but with no very hopeful countenance, for indeed it was a mighty rock. John, however, put him aside with his left hand. "Let me try a pull at this, little plummet," he said, "bethinks me that I may be able to budge it from its bed. Then, perchance, you can assist me in the heaving." Stooping over the huge stone, he grasped it by two projecting edges and straightened his giant legs in an upward pull. As he bent his weight and strength to the effort, the stone for the minute stuck fast; then as the mighty muscles of his broad back creaked and the huge knots on his nearly bare shoulders drew into tense bunches with the strain of the tug, the stone gave way from its bed with a gurgling suck and came free in his hands. With a deep chested chuckle, as the archer stepped forward to help in the throwing, Hordle John straightened himself and hurled the rock well out into the stream.

"Good lack!" cried Sir Nigel, and "Good lack!" cried his lady, while John stood laughing and wiping the caked dirt from his fingers.

"I have felt his arms round my ribs," said the bowman, "and they crackle yet at the thought of it. This other comrade, fair Sir, is a right learned clerk, for all that he is so young, hight Alleyne, the son of Edric, brother to the Socman of Minstead."

"Young man," quoth Sir Nigel sternly, "if you are of the same way of thought as your brother, you may not pass portcullis of mine."

"Nay, fair Sir," cried Aylward hastily, "I will be pledge for it that they have no thought in common; for this very day his brother hath set his dogs upon him, and driven him from his lands."

"And are you, too, of the White Company?" asked Sir Nigel. "Hast had small experience of war, if I may judge by looks and bearing."

"I would fain to France with my friends here," Alleyne answered; "but I am a man of peace—a reader, exorcist, acolyte, and clerk."

"That need not hinder," quoth Sir Nigel. "It is well to have a learned clerk in every troop. By St. Paul! there are men so caitiff that they think more of a scrivener's pen than of their lady's smile, and do their devoir in hopes that they may fill a line in a chronicle or make a tag to a jongleur's romance. I remember well that, at the siege of Retters, there was a little, sleek, fat clerk of the name of Chaucer, who was so apt at rondel, sirvente, or tonson, that no man dare give back a foot from the walls, lest he find it all set down in his rhymes and sung by every underling and varlet in the camp. But, my soul's bird, you hear me prate as though all were decided, when I have not yet taken counsel either with you or with my lady mother. Let us to the chamber, while these strangers find such fare as pantry and celler may furnish."

The three comrades dropped behind and followed: Alyward much the lighter for having accomplished his mission, Alleyne full of wonderment at the humble bearing of so renowned a captain, and John loud with snorts and sneers, which spoke his disappointment and contempt.

"What ails the man?" asked Alyward in surprise.

"I have been cozened and bejaped," quoth he gruffly.

"By whom, Sir Samson the strong?"

"By thee, Sir Balaam the false prophet."

"By my hilt!" cried the archer, "though I be not Balaam, yet I hold converse with the very creature that spake to him. What is amiss, then, and how have I played you false?"

"Why, marry, did you not say, and Alleyne here will be my witness, that, if I would hie to the wars with you, you would place me under a leader who was second to none in all England for valor? Yet here you bring me to shred of a man, peaky and ill-nourished, with eyes like a moulting owl, who must needs, forsooth, take counsel with his mother ere he buckles sword to girdle."

"Is that where the shoe galls?" cried the bowman, and laughed aloud. "I will ask you what you think of him three months hence, if we be all alive; for sure I am that——"

Aylward's words were interrupted by an extraordinary hubbub which broke out that instant some little way down the street in the direction of the Priory. There was deep-mouthed shouting of men, frightened shrieks of women, howling and barking of curs, and over all a sullen thunderous rumble, indescribably menacing and terrible. Round the corner of the narrow street there came rushing a brace of whining dogs with tails glued under their legs, after them a white-faced burgher, with outstretched hands and wide-spread fingers, his hair all abristle and his eyes glinting back from one shoulder to the other, as though some great terror were at his very heels. "Fly, my lady, fly!" he screeched, and whizzed past them like bolt from bow; while close behind came lumbering a huge black bear, with red tongue lolling from his mouth, and a broken chain jangling behind him. To right and left the folk flew for arch and doorway. Hordle John caught up the Lady Loring as if she had been a feather, and sprang with her into an open porch; while Aylward, with a whirl of French oaths, plucked at his quiver and tried to unsling his bow. Alleyne, all unnerved at so strange and unwonted a sight, shrunk up against the wall with his eyes fixed upon the frenzied creature, which came bounding along with ungainly speed, looking the larger in the uncertain light. Its huge jaws agape, with blood and slaver trickling to the ground. Sir Nigel alone, unconscious to all appearance of the universal panic, walked with unfaltering step up the centre of the road, a silken handkerchief in one hand and his gold comfit-box in the other. It sent the blood cold through Alleyne's veins to see that as they came together—the man and the beast—the creature reared up, with eyes ablaze with fear and hate, and whirled its great paws above the knight to smite him to the earth. He, however, blinking with puckered eyes, reached up his kerchief, and flicked the beast twice across the snout with it. "Ah, saucy! saucy!" quoth he, with gentle chiding; on which the bear, uncertain and puzzled, dropped its fore legs to earth again, and waddling back, was soon swathed in ropes by the bearward and a crowd of peasants who had been in close pursuit. As they passed through the castle gate, John plucked at Aylward's sleeve, and the two fell behind.

"I must crave your pardon, comrade," said he bluntly. "I was a fool not to know that a little rooster may be the gamest. I believe that this man is indeed a leader whom we may follow."

CHAPTER VIII.

Black was the mouth of Twynham Castle, though a pair of torches, burning at the further end of the gateway, cast a red glare over the outer bailey, and sent a dim ruddy flicker through the rough-hewn arch, rising and falling with fitful brightness on the shields which bore the red roses of the veteran constable. As they passed over the drawbridge, Alleyne marked the gleam of arms in the embrasures to right and left, and they had scarce set foot upon the causeway ere a hoarse blare burst from a bugle, and with screech the hinge and clank of chain, the ponderous bridge swung up into the air, drawn by unseen hands. At the same instant the huge portcullis came rattling down from above, and shut off the last fading light of day. Sir Nigel and his lady walked on in deep talk, while a fat under-steward took charge of the three comrades, and led them to the buttery, where beef, bread, and drink were kept ever in readiness for the wayfarer. After a hearty meal and a dip in the trough to wash the dust from them, they strolled forth into the bailey, where the bowman peered about through the darkness as well and at keep, with the cat, ng eyes of one who has seen something of sieges, and is not lightly to be satisfied. To Alleyne and to John, however, it appeared to be as great and as stout a fortress as could be built by the hands of man.

"Is there an archer here hight Sam Aylward?" asked a gaunt man-at-arms, clanking up to them arcoss the courtyard.

"My name, friend!" quoth the bowman.

"Then sure I have no need to tell thee mine," said the other.

"By the rood! if it is not Black Simon of Norwich!" cried Aylward. "A mon coeur, camarade, a mon coeur! Ah, but I am blithe to see thee!" the two fell upon each other and hugged like bears.

"And where from, old blood and bones?" asked the bowman.

"I am in service here. Tell me, comrade, is it sooth that we shall have another fling at these Frenchmen? It is so rumored in the guard-rooms, and that Sir Nigel will take the field once more."

"It is like enough, mon gar, as things go."

Now may the Lord be praised!" cried the other. "This very night will I set apart a golden ouche to be offered on the shrine of my name-saint. I have pined for this, Aylward, as a young maid pines for her lover."

"Art so set on plunder, then? Is the purse so light that there is not enough for a rouse? I have a bag at my belt, camarade, and you have but to put your fist into it for what you want. It was ever share and share between us."

"Nay, friend, it is not the Frenchman's gold, but the Frenchman's blood that I would have. I should not rest quiet in the grave, coz, if I had not another turn at them. For with us in France it has ever been fair and honest war—a shut fist for the man, but a bended knee for the woman. But how was it at Winchelsea when their galleys came down upon it some few years back? I had an old mother there, lad, who had come down thither from the Midlands to be the nearer her son. They found her afterward by her own hearthstone thrust through by a Frenchman's bill. My second sister, my brother's wife, and her two children, they were but ash-heaps in the smoking ruins of their house. I will not say that we have not wrought great scath upon France, but women and children have been safe from us. And so, old friend, my heart is hot within me, and I long to hear the old battle-cry again, and, by God's truth, if Sir Nigel unfurls his pennon, here is one who will be right glad to feel the saddle-flaps under his knees."

"We have seen good work together, old war-dog," quoth Aylward; "and, by my hilt! we may hope to see more ere we die. But, comrade, it is in my mind that there is some small matter of dispute still open between us."

"'Fore God, it is sooth!" cried the other. "I had forgot it. The provost-marshal and his men tore us apart when last we met."

"On which, friend, we vowed that we should settle the point when next we came together. Host thy sword, I see, and the moon throws glimmer enough for such old night-birds as we. On guard, mon gar! I have not heard clink of steel this month or more."

"Out from the shadow, then," said the other, drawing his sword. "A vow is a vow, and not lightly to be broken."

"A vow to the saints," cried Alleyne, "is indeed not to be set aside; but this is a devil's vow, and, simple clerk as I am, I am yet the mouthpiece of the true Church when I say that it were mortal sin to fight on such a quarrel. What! shall two grown men carry malice for years, and fly like snarling curs at each other's throats?"

"No malice, my young clerk, no malice!" quoth Black Simon. "I have not a bitter drop in my heart for mine old comrade; but the quarrel, as he hath told you, is still open and unsettled. Fall on, Aylward!"

"Not whilst I can stand between you," cried Alleyne, springing before the bowman. "It is shame and sin to see two Christian Englishmen turn swords against each other like the frenzied bloodthirsty paynim."

"And, what is more," said Hordle John, suddenly appearing out of the buttery with the huge board upon which the pastry was rolled, "if either raise sword I shall flatten him like Shrove-tide pancake. By the black rood! I shall drive him into the earth like a nail into a door, rather than see you do scath to each other."

"'Fore God, this is a strange way of preaching peace," cried Black Simon. "You may find the scath yourself, my lusty friend, if you raise your great cudgel to me. I had as lief have the castle drawbridge drop upon my pate."

"Tell me, Aylward," said Alleyne earnestly, with hands outstretched to keep the pair asunder, "what is the cause of quarrel, that we may see whether honorable settlement may not be arrived at?"

The bowman looked down at his feet and then up at the moon. "Parbleu!" he cried, "the cause of quarrel? Why, mon petit, it was years ago in Limousin, and how can I bear in mind what was the cause of it? Simon there hath it at the end of his tongue."

"Not I, in troth," replied the other. "I have had other things to think of. There was some sort of bickering over dice, or wine, or was it a woman, coz?"

"Pasques Dieu! but you have nicked it," cried Aylward. "It was indeed about a woman; and the quarrel must go forward, for I am still of the same mind as before."

"What of the woman, then?" asked Simon. "May the murrain strike me if I can call to mind aught about her."

"It was La Blanche Rose, maid at the sign of the Trois Corbeaux at Limoges. Bless her pretty heart! Why, mon gar, I loved her."

"So did a many," quoth Simon. "I call her to mind now. On the very day that we fought over the little hussy, she went off with Evan ap Rice, a long-legged Welsh dagsman. They have a hostel of their own now, somewhere on the banks of Garonne, where the landlord drinks so much of the liquor that there is little left for the customers."

"So ends our quarrel, then," said Aylward, sheathing his sword. "A Welsh dagsman, i' faith! C' etait mauvais gout, camarade, and the more so when she had a jolly archer and a lusty man-at-arms to choose from."

The old soldiers and Hordle John strode off together in all good-fellowship. Alleyne had turned to follow them, when he felt a touch upon his shoulder, and found a young page by his side.

"The Lord Loring commands," said the boy, "that you will follow me to the great chamber, and await him there."

Up the broad steps Alleyne went, following his boyish guide, until at the folding oak doors the latter paused, and ushered him into the main hall of the castle.

On entering the room the clerk looked round; but, seeing no one, he continued to stand, his cap in his hand, examining with the greatest interest a chamber which was so different to any to which he was accustomed.

Most interesting of all to Alleyne was a small ebony table at his very side, on which, by the side of a chess-board and the scattered chessmen, there lay an open manuscript written in a right clerkly hand, and set forth with brave flourishes and devices along the margins. In vain Alleyne bethought him of where he was and of those laws of good breeding and decorum which should restrain him; those colored cantials and black even lines drew his hand down to them, as the loadstone draws the needle, until, almost before he knew it, he was standing with the romance of Garin de Montglane before his eyes, so absorbed in its contents as to be completely oblivious of where he was and why he had come there.

He was brought back to himself, however, by a sudden little ripple of quick feminine laughter. Aghast, he dropped the manuscript among the chessmen and stared in bewilderment round the room. It was as empty and as still as ever. Again he stretched his hand out to the romance, and again came that roguish burst of merriment. He looked up at the ceiling, back at the closed door, and round at the stiff folds of motionless tapestry. Of a sudden, however, he caught a quick shimmer from the corner of a high-backed bancal in front of him, and, shifting a pace of two to the side, saw a white, slender hand, which held a mirror of polished silver in such a way that the concealed observer could see without being seen. He stood irresolute, uncertain whether to advance or to take no notice; but, even as he hesitated, the mirror was whipped in, and a tall and stately young lady swept out from behind the oaken screen, with a dancing light of mischief in her eyes. Alleyne started with astonishment as he recognized the very maiden who had suffered from his brother's violence in the forest. She no longer wore her gay riding-dress, however, but was attired in a long sweeping robe of black velvet of Bruges, with delicate tracery of white lace at neck and at wrist, scarce to be seen against the ivory skin. Beautiful as she had seemed to him before, the lithe charm of her figure and the proud, free grace of her bearing were enhanced now by the rich simplicity of her attire.

"Ah, you start," said she, with the same sidelong look of mischief, "and I cannot marvel at it. Didst not look to see the distressed damozel again. Ah, that I were a minstrel, that I might put it into rhyme, with the whole romance—the luckless maid, the wicked soeman, and the virtuous clerk! So might our fame have gone down together for all time, and you be numbered with Sir Percival or Sir Galahad, or all the other rescuers of oppressed ladies."

"What I did," said Alleyne, "was too small a thing for thanks; and yet, if I may say it without offence, it was too grave and near a matter for mirth and raillery. I had counted on my brother's love, but God has willed that it should be otherwise. It is a joy to me to see you again, lady, and to know that you have reached home in safety, if this be indeed your home."

"Yes, in sooth, Castle Twynham is my home, and Sir Nigel Loring my father. I should have told you so this morning, but you said that you were coming hither, so I bethought me that I might hold it back as a surprise to you. Oh, dear, but it was brave to see you!" she cried, bursting out a-laughing once more, standing with her hand pressed to her side, and her half-closed eyes twinkling with amusement. "You drew back and came forward with your eyes upon my book there, like the mouse who sniffs the cheese and yet dreads the trap."

"I take shame," said Alleyne, "that I should have touched it."

"Nay, it warmed my very heart to see it. So glad was I that I laughed for very pleasure. My fine preacher can himself be tempted then, thought I; he is not made of another clay to the rest of us."

"God help me! I am the weakest of the weak," groaned Alleyne. "I pray that I may have more strength!"

"And to what end?" she asked sharply. "If you are, as I understand, to shut yourself forever in your cell within the four walls of an abbey, then of what use would it be were your prayer to be answered? Wilt do what I ask?" said she.

"What is it, lady?"

"'Tis but to bear me out in what I say to my father."

"In what?"

"In saying, if he ask, that it was south of the Christchurch road that I met you. I shall be shut up with the tire-women else, and have a week of spindle and bodkin, when I would fain be galloping Troubadour up Wilverley Walk, or loosing my little falcon Roland at the Vinney Ridge herons."

"I shall not answer him if he ask."

"Not answer! But he will have an answer. Nay, but you must not fail me, or it will go ill with me."

"But, lady," cried poor Alleyne, in great distress, "how can I say that it was to the south of the road when I know well that it was four miles to the north?"

"You will not say it?"

"Surely you will not, too, when you know that it is not so?"

"Oh, I weary of your preaching!" she cried, and swept away with a toss of her beautiful head, leaving Alleyne as cast down and ashamed as though he had himself proposed some infamous thing. She was back again in an instant, however, in another of her varying moods.

"Look at that, my friend!" said she. "If you had been shut up in abbey or in cell this day you could not have taught a wayward maiden to abide by the truth. Is it not so? What avail is the shepherd if he leaves his sheep?"

"A sorry shepherd!" said Alleyne humbly. "But here is your noble father."

"And you shall see how worthy a pupil I am. Father, I am much beholden to this young clerk, who was of service to me and helped me this very morning in Minstead Woods, four miles to the north of the Christchurch road, where I had no call to be, you having ordered it otherwise." All this she reeled off in a loud voice, and then glanced with sideling questioning eyes at Alleyne for his approval.

(To be Continued Next Week.)

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

The scenes of the story are laid in the 14th century. Hordle John, a lay-brother of the Cistercian Monastery, Abbey of Beaulieu, flees from the monastery after being found guilty of certain serious charges brought against him by a number of the monks. The same day, another of the lay-brethren of the monastery, Alleyne Edricson, takes his departure in accordance with a provision of his father's will, designating that he should, when he became twenty years old, go forth for one year to choose for himself his future calling. In sadness he wanders from the monastery to visit his brother, the Socman of Minstead, whose reputation is a most unsavory one. At nightfall Alleyne seeks shelter in a road-side inn where he meets Hordle John, and Samkin Aylward, an English archer just back from the French wars. Hordle John, getting into a controversy with Aylward, engages in a wrestling bout with the bowman, and is defeated. He decides to join the White Company. Alleyne finds his brother in Minstead woods, quarreling with a beautiful damsel, whom he rescues. He tells her of his intention to join his companions of the inn who are to fight under Sir Nigel in the White Company. On hearing this she laughingly leaves him without telling her name.

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