

The White Company

A Sequel to "Sir Nigel"

By Sir A. Conan Doyle

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CHAPTER XIII.

The prince's reception-room was fitted up with all the state and luxury which the fame and power of its owner demanded. A high dais at the further end was roofed in by a broad canopy of scarlet velvet spanned with silver fleurs-de-lis.

In the center of the dais were two very high chairs. On that to the right sat a tall and well-formed man with red hair, a livid face, and a cold blue eye. He lounged back in a careless position, and yawned repeatedly. On the other throne there was perched bolt upright, a little round, pippin-faced person, whose eyes and bobbed to everyone who smiled he glanced to meet. Between, and a little in front of them, on a humble charrat stool, sat a slim dark young man, whose quiet attire and modest manner would scarce proclaim him to be the most noted prince in Europe. He sat with his hands clasped round his knees, his head slightly bent, and an expression of trouble upon his clear, well-chiselled features. Below on either side of the steps were forty or fifty English and Gascon barons, knights, and courtiers.

"There sits the prince," whispered Sir John Chandos as they entered. "He on the right is Pedro, whom we are about to put upon the Spanish throne. The other is Don James, whom we purpose with the aid of God to help to his throne in Majorca."

The prince had observed their entrance, and, springing to his feet, he advanced with a winning smile and the light of welcome in his eyes. "Welcome to Aquitaine, Sir Nigel Loring, and Sir Oliver Buttershorn," said he. "Nay, keep your knee for my sweet father at Windsor. I would have your hands, my friends. We are like to give you some work to do ere you see the downs of Hampshire once more. How many have you in your train?"

"I have forty men-at-arms, sire," said Sir Oliver. "And I have one hundred archers and a score of lances; there are also three hundred men of the White Company who wait for me on this side of the water upon the borders of Navarre."

"We hope to see you both in the banquet-hall anon," rejoined the prince. He bowed, and Chandos, plucking Sir Oliver by the sleeve, led them both away to the back of the press of courtiers.

The young ruler had sat listlessly upon his stool with the two puppet monarchs enthroned behind him, but of a sudden a dark sprang passed over his face, and he sprang to his feet in one of those gusts of passion which were the signal blot upon his noble and generous character.

"How now, Don Martin de la Carra?" he cried. "How now, brother? What message do you bring to us from our brother of Navarre? The new-comer to whom this abrupt query had been addressed was a tall and handsome cavalier who had just been ushered into the apartment. "Are the passes open to us, or does your master go back from his word pledged to me at Libourne no later than last Michaelmas?"

"It would ill become my gracious master, sire, to go back from promise given. He does but ask some delay and certain conditions and hostages—"

"Conditions! Hostages! is he speaking to the Prince of England, or is it to the bourgeois provost of some half-captured town? Conditions, quotha? He may find much to morn in his own condition, ere long. The passes are, then, closed to us?"

"Nay, sire—" "They are open, then?" "Nay, sire, if you would but—" "Enough, enough, Don Martin," cried the prince. "It is a sorry sight to see so true a knight pleading in so false a cause. We know the doings of our Cousin Charles. We know that while with his right hand he takes our fifty thousand crowns for the holding of the passes open, he hath his left outstretched to Henry Frastanare, or to the King of France, already ready to take as many more for the keeping them closed. I know our good Charles, and he shall learn that I know him. He sets his kingdom up to the best bidder, like some scullion farrier selling a gandered horse. He is—"

"My lord," cried Don Martin, "I cannot stand here to hear such words of my master. Did they come from other lips I should know better how to answer them."

that Gascony is too small a cock to crow so lustily. "The smaller cock, my Lord Audley, may have the longer spur," remarked the Captain de Buch. "May have its comb clipped if it makes over-much noise," broke in an Englishman. "My lady of Rocamadour!" cried the Lord of Mucident, "this is more than I can abide. Sir John Charnell, you shall answer to me for those words!"

"Freely, my lord, and when you will," returned the Englishman carelessly. "My Lord de Clisson!" cried Lord Audley, "you look somewhat fixedly in my direction. By St. Stephen, I should be right glad to go further into the matter with you."

"And you, my Lord of Pommeurs," said Sir Nigel, pushing his way to the front. "It is in my mind that we might break a lance in gentle and honorable debate over the question."

For a moment a dozen challenges flashed backward and forward at this sudden bursting of the cloud which had lowered so long between the knights of the two nations. Furious and gesticulating the Gascons; white and cold and sneering the English, while the prince with a half-smile glanced from one party to the other, like a man who loved to dwell upon a fiery scene, and yet dreaded lest the mischief go so far that he might find it beyond his control.

"Not I, sire," Lord Audley answered. "I have seen them fight too often not to know that they are very hardy and valiant gentlemen."

"And so say I," quoth the other Englishman; "but, certes, there is no fear of our forgetting it while they have a tongue in their heads."

"Nay, Sir John," said the prince, reprovingly. "But you hear, my lords of Gascony; that these gentlemen had no thought to throw a slur upon your honor or your valor, so let all anger fade from your mind. Clisson, Captain de Pommeurs, I have your word?"

"We are subjects, sire," said the Gascon barons, though with no very good grace. "Your words are our law."

"Then shall we bury all cause of unkindness in a flagon of muloise," said the prince cheerily. "Ho, there! the doors of the banquet-hall! I have been over-long from my sweet spouse, but I shall be back with you anon."

CHAPTER XIV.

While the prince's council was sitting, Alleyn and Ford remained in the outer hall, where they were soon surrounded by a noisy group of young Englishmen of their own rank, all eager to hear the latest news from England.

"How is it with the old man at Windsor?" asked one. "And how with the good Queen Philippa?"

"How of England, my lads of Loring?" said a squire, named Humphrey. "I take it," said Ford, "that it is much as it was when you were there last, save that perchance there is a little less noise there."

"If my hand is not hard, it is ready." "Ready? Ready for what?" "For the hem of my lady's train." "Ready to chastise insolence, sir?" cried Alleyn with flashing eyes. "Sweet little coz!" answered the burly squire. "Such a dainty color! Such a mellow voice! Eyes of a bashful maid, and hair like a three years' babe! Viola!" He passed his thick fingers roughly through the youth's crisp golden curls.

"You seek to force a quarrel, sir," said Alleyn white with anger. "What then?" "Why, you do it like a country boor, and not like a gentle squire. I have been bred and as ill taught? I serve a master who could show you how such things should be done."

"And how would he do it, oh, pink of squires?" "He would neither be loud nor would he be unmannerly, but rather more gentle than in his wont. He would say, 'Sir, I should take it as an honor to do some small deed of arms against you, not for mine own glory or advancement, but for the sake of the name of my lady and for the upholding of chivalry.' Then he would draw his glove, thus, and throw it on the ground; or, if he had cause to think that he had to deal with a churl, he might throw it in his face—as I do now."

A buzz of excitement went up from the knot of squires as Alleyn, his gentle nature turned by this unceremonious attack into fiery resolution, dashed his glove with all his strength into the sneering face of his antagonist.

"Your life for this!" said the bully, with a face which was distorted with rage. "If you can take it," returned Alleyn. "Good lad!" whispered Ford. "Stick to it close as wax."

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might catch his foeman's blade, and by a quick turn of his wrist snap it across. Tranter, though in no very friendly mood, was of a light and graceful build, with a narrow sloping pommal and a tapering sword.

"Tranter well knew his advantage and lost little time in putting it to use. As his opponent walked toward him he suddenly bounded forward, and in a twinkling cut which would have severed the other in twain had he not sprung lightly back from it. Quick as a panther, Alleyn sprang in with a thrust, but Tranter, who was as active as he was strong, had already recovered himself and turned it aside with a movement of his heavy blade. Again he whizzed in a blow which made the spectators hold their breath, and the pair stood breathing quickly and swiftly side from under it, and sent back two lightning thrusts which the other could scarce parry. So close were they to each other that Alleyn had no time for sprig back from the next cut, which beat down his sword and grazed his forehead, sending the blood streaming into his eyes and down his cheeks. He sprang out beyond sword-sweep, and the pair stood breathing heavily, while the crowd of young squires buzzed their applause.

"Bravely struck on both sides!" cried Roger Harcomb. "You have both won honor from this meeting, and it would be sin and shame to let it go further."

"You have done enough," Edricson said Norbury. "You have carried yourself well," cried several of the older squires.

"But my part, I have no wish to wish this young man," said Tranter, wiping his brow. "Does this gentleman crave my pardon for having used me despitously?" asked Alleyn.

"Nay, not I." "Then stand on your guard, sir!" With a clatter and clash the two blades met once more, Alleyn pressing in so as to keep within full sweep of the heavy blade, while Tranter continually sprang back to have space for one of his great cuts. A three-partied parried blow drew blood from Alleyn's left shoulder, but at the same moment he wounded Tranter slightly, while Tranter's sword slipped into the fatal notch, there was a sharp cracking sound with a tinkling upon the ground, and he found a splintered piece of steel fifteen inches long was all that remained to him of his weapon.

"Your life is in my hands!" cried Tranter, with a bitter smile. "Another sword," cried Ford. "Nay, sir," said Harcomb, "that is not the custom."

"Throw down your hilt, Edricson!" cried Norbury. "Never!" said Alleyn. "Do you crave my pardon, sir?" "You are mad to ask it."

"Then on your guard again!" cried the young squire, and sprang in with a fire and a fury which more than made up for the shortness of his weapon. It had not escaped him that his opponent was breathing in short, hoarse gasp, like a man who is dizzy with fatigue. Now was the time for the purer living and the more agile limb to show their value. Back and back gave Tranter, ever seeking time for a last cut. On and on came Alleyn, his jagged point low at his foe's neck, his sword well that such efforts could not be long sustained. Let him relax for one instant and his death-blow had come. Relax he must! Flesh and blood could not stand the strain. Already the target was lost, for the foot less ready, although there was no abatement of the spirit in the steady gray eyes. Tranter, cunning and wary from years of fighting, knew that his chance had come. He brushed aside the frail weapon which was opposed to him, whirled up his great blade, sprang back to get the fairer sweep—and vanished into the waters of the Garonne.

So intent had the squires, both combatants and spectators, been on the matter in hand, that all thought of the steep bank and swift, still stream had gone from their minds. Tranter's last spring, carried him clear of the edge, and he found himself in an instant eight feet deep in the ice cold stream. Once and twice his gasping face and clutching fingers broke up through the green water, sweeping outward in the swirl of the current. Alleyn had dropped his shattered sword and was standing, trembling in every limb, with his rage all changed in an instant to pity. For the third time the drowning man came to the surface, his eyes turned in despair to the shore. In an instant Alleyn, too, was in the Garonne, striking out with powerful strokes for his late foeman.

Yet the current was swift and strong, and good swimmer as he was, it was no easy task which Alleyn had set himself. To clutch at Tranter and to seize him by the hair was the work of a few seconds, but to hold his head above water and to make their way out of the current was another matter. Then at last, amid a shout of joy and praise from the bank, they slowly drew clear into more stagnant water, at the instant that a rope, made of a dozen swordblades linked together by the buckles, was thrown by Ford into their hands. Three pulls from eager arms, and the two combatants, dripping and pale, were dragged up the bank, and lay panting upon the grass.

John Tranter was the first to come to himself, for he had done nothing during the fierce battle with the current. He staggered to his feet and looked down upon his elbow, and was smiling faintly at the buzz of congratulations and of

praise which broke from the squires around him. "I am much beholden to you, sir," said Tranter, though in no very friendly mood. "Certes, I should have been in the river now but for you."

"I ask no thanks," Alleyn answered shortly. "Give me your hand to rise, Ford." "The river has been my enemy," said Tranter, but it hath been a good friend to you, for it hath saved your life this day."

"That is as it may be," returned Alleyn. "Alas, for my poor sword, which lies at the bottom of the Garonne!" said Tranter.

"Here is your point, Edricson," said Harcomb bluntly. "Let it drop, sir, for you have come very well out of it."

"Nay," said Alleyn, "this quarrel is none of my making, but now I am here, I swear that I shall never leave this spot until I have that which I have come for: so ask my pardon, sir, or choose another glove and to it again."

The young squire was deadly white from his exertions, both on the land and in the water, his face looking and stained, with a smear of blood on his white shoulder, and another on his brow, there was still in his whole pose and set face the stamp of an inflexible resolution. His opponent's duller and more material mind quailed before the fire and intensity of a higher spiritual nature.

"I had not thought that you had taken it so amiss," said he awkwardly. "It was but such a jest as we play upon each other, and, if you must have it so, I am sorry for it."

"Then I am sorry too," quoth Alleyn warmly, "and here is my hand upon it."

"And the none-moment horn has blown three times," quoth Harcomb. "By my troth! Master Ford, your friend here is in need of a cup of wine, for he hath drunk deeply of Garonne water. I had not thought from his fair face that he had stood to this matter so shrewdly."

"Faith," said Ford, "this ale of Bordeaux hath turned out turtle-dove into a game-cock. A milder or more courteous youth never came out of Hampshire."

"His master also, as I understand, is a very gentle and courteous gentleman," remarked Harcomb. "I do not think that they are either of them men with whom it is very safe to tangle."

(To be Continued Next Week.)

DIPLOMAT'S WIFE MEXDLING.

Ambitious American Woman Interfered in Affairs of State.

The ambitions of Mrs. Bellamy Storer for the promotion of her husband, formerly United States ambassador to Austria-Hungary, are now blamed for his removal from the diplomatic service of the United States. It is claimed that Mrs. Storer's ambition was so intense that she not only tried to bring pressure to bear on the President for the advance of her husband, but that her personal desire to have another American ambassador became objectionable. She advocated Archbishop Ireland for the position, and asked President Roosevelt to use his influence in the archbishop's behalf in Rome.

President Roosevelt wrote in reply that he would like to see the archbishop of St. Paul a cardinal and spoke very highly of the archbishop's public services and breadth of view, but he declared he could not become involved in any matter of church politics, and he pointed out to Mrs. Storer how improper it would be for him to advocate the selection by the Pope of any person for any place.

Mrs. Storer, it is averred, made use of the expression of the President that he would like to see the archbishop made a cardinal, and caused it to come to the attention of high dignitaries in such a way that it appeared to be the wish of the President that the action should be taken.

President Roosevelt wrote to Vienna expostulating, and calling attention to his original note, in which he said he would like to have Archbishop Ireland elevated, but could not meddle in such affairs, and he pointed out that the qualification had not been made use of in connection with the apparent endorsement of the proposed new cardinal. Other questions arose, and the administration found itself embarrassed in other ways, and the final result was that the connection of Mr. Storer with the diplomatic service ceased.

The Emperor of the British Empire has 54,000,000 white subjects. The remainder are black, brown and yellow.

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"THE PRINCE OBSERVED THEIR ENTRANCE WITH ALIGHT OF WELCOME IN HIS EYES."

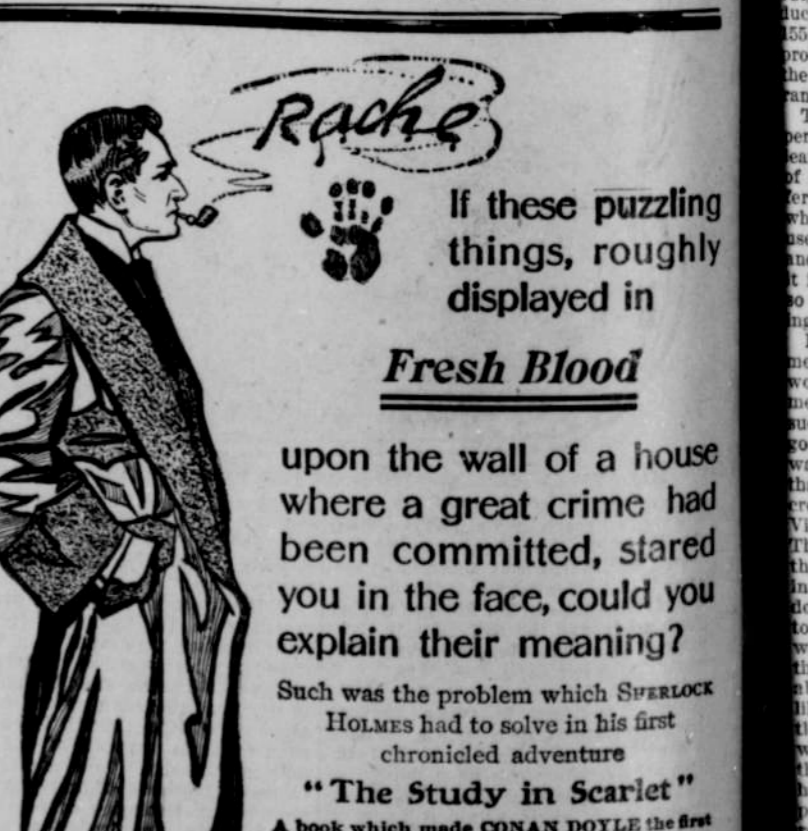
Close to the bank of the Garonne there lay a little tract green-sward. The river ran deep and swift up to the steep bank. Here the two combatants drew their swords. In such combats, as well as in the formal sports of the tilting-yard, Tranter had won the name for strength and dexterity. On the other hand, Alleyn had used his weapons in constant exercise and practice for every day for many months, and being by nature quick of eye and prompt of hand, he might pass now as no mean swordsman. An unequal fight it seemed to most; but there were a few, and they the most experienced, who saw something in the youth's steady gray eye and wary step which left the issue open.

"Hold, Sirs, hold!" cried Norbury, ere now had been struck. "This gentleman hath a two-handed sword, a good foot longer than that of our friend."

"Nay, mine, Alleyn!" said Ford. "I understand the weight and balance of mine own. To work, sir, for our lords may need us."

Tranter's great sword was indeed a mighty contrivance in his favor. The weapon he held straight up in front of him with blade erect, so that he might either bring it down with a swinging blow, or be a turn of the heavy blade he might cross his own head and shoulders. A further protection lay in the breast and powerful sword which crossed the hilt, and which was furnished with a deep and narrow notch, in which an expert swordsman

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