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## [The White Company](#)

### [Arthur Conan Doyle](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#)

#### Chapter 6 - How Samkin Aylward Wagered His Feather-Bed

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HE was a middle-sized man, of most massive and robust build, with an arching chest and extraordinary breadth of shoulder. His shaven face was as brown as a hazel-nut, tanned and dried by the weather, with harsh, well-marked features, which were not improved by a long white scar which stretched from the corner of his left nostril to the angle of the jaw. His eyes were bright and searching, with something of menace and of authority in their quick glitter, and his mouth was firm-set and hard, as befitted one who was wont to set his face against danger. A straight sword by his side and a painted long-bow jutting over his shoulder proclaimed his profession, while his scarred brigandine of chain-mail and his dented steel cap showed that he was no holiday soldier, but one who was even now fresh from the wars. A white surcoat with the lion of St. George in red upon the centre covered his broad breast, while a sprig of new-plucked broom at the side of his head-gear gave a touch of gayety and grace to his grim, war-worn equipment.

"Ha!" he cried, blinking like an owl in the sudden glare. "Good even to you, comrades! Hola! a woman, by my soul!" and in an instant he had clipped Dame Eliza round the waist and was kissing her violently. His eye happening to wander upon the maid, however, he instantly abandoned the mistress and danced off after the other, who scurried in confusion up one of the ladders, and dropped the heavy trap-door upon her pursuer. He then turned back and saluted the landlady once more with the utmost relish and satisfaction.

"La petite is frightened," said he. "Ah, c'est l'amour, l'amour! Curse this trick of French, which will stick to my throat. I must wash it out with some good English ale. By my hilt! camarades, there is no drop of French blood in my body, and I am a true English bowman, Samkin Aylward by name; and I tell you, mes amis, that it warms my very heart-roots to set my feet on the dear old land once more. When I came off the galley at Hythe, this very day, I down on my bones, and I kissed the good brown earth, as I kiss thee now, ma belle, for it was eight long years since I had seen it. The very smell of it seemed life to me. But where are my six rascals? Hola, there! En avant!"

At the order, six men, dressed as common drudges, marched solemnly into the room, each bearing a huge bundle upon his head. They formed in military line, while the soldier stood in front of them with stern eyes, checking off their several packages.

"Number one--a French feather-bed with the two counter-panes of white sandell," said he.

"Here, worthy sir," answered the first of the bearers, laying a great package down in the corner.

"Number two--seven ells of red Turkey cloth and nine ells of cloth of gold. Put it down by the other. Good dame, I prythee give each of these men a bottrine of wine or a jack of ale. Three--a full piece of white Genoan velvet with twelve ells of purple silk. Thou rascal, there is dirt on the hem! Thou hast brushed it against some wall, coquin!"

"Not I, most worthy sir," cried the carrier, shrinking away from the fierce eyes of the bowman.

"I say yes, dog! By the three kings! I have seen a man gasp out his last breath for less. Had you gone through the pain and unease that I have done to earn these things you would be at more care. I swear by my ten finger-bones that there is not one of them that hath not cost its weight in French blood! Four--an incense-boat, a ewer of silver, a gold buckle and a cope worked in pearls. I found them, camarades, at the Church of St. Denis in the harrying of Narbonne, and I took them away with me lest they fall into the hands of the wicked. Five--a cloak of fur turned up with minever, a gold goblet with stand and cover, and a box of rose-colored sugar. See that you lay them together. Six--a box of monies, three pounds of Limousine gold-work, a pair of boots, silver tagged, and, lastly, a store of naping linen. So, the tally is complete! Here is a groat apiece, and you may go."

"Go whither, worthy sir?" asked one of the carriers.

"Whither? To the devil if ye will. What is it to me? Now, ma belle, to supper. A pair of cold capons, a mortress of brawn, or what you will, with a flask or two of the right Gascony. I have crowns in my pouch, my sweet, and I mean to spend them. Bring in wine while the food is dressing. Buvons my brave lads; you shall each empty a stoup with me."

Here was an offer which the company in an English inn at that or any other date are slow to refuse. The flagons were re-gathered and came back with the white foam dripping over their edges. Two of the woodmen and three of the laborers drank their portions off hurriedly and trooped off together, for their homes were distant and the hour late. The others, however, drew closer, leaving the place of honor to the right of the gleeman to the free-handed new-comer. He had thrown off his steel cap and his brigandine, and had placed them with his sword, his quiver and his painted long-bow, on the top of his varied heap of plunder in the corner. Now, with his thick and somewhat bowed legs stretched in front of the blaze, his green jerkin thrown open, and a great quart pot held in his corded fist, he looked the picture of comfort and of good-fellowship. His hard-set face had softened, and the thick crop of crisp brown curls which had been hidden by his helmet grew low upon his massive neck. He might have been forty years of age, though hard toil and harder pleasure had left their grim marks upon his features. Alleyne had ceased painting his pied merlin, and sat, brush in hand, staring with open eyes at a type of man so strange and so unlike any whom he had met. Men had been good or had been bad in his catalogue, but here was a man who was fierce one instant and gentle the next, with a curse on his lips and a smile in his eye. What was to be made of such a man as that?

It chanced that the soldier looked up and saw the questioning glance which the young clerk threw upon him. He raised his flagon and drank to him, with a merry flash of his white teeth.

"A toi, mon garcon," he cried. "Hast surely never seen a man-at-arms, that thou shouldst stare so?"

"I never have," said Alleyne frankly, "though I have oft heard talk of their deeds."

"By my hilt!" cried the other, "if you were to cross the narrow sea you would find them as thick as bees at a tee-hole. Couldst not shoot a bolt down any street of Bordeaux, I warrant, but you would pink archer, squire, or knight. There are more breastplates than gaberdines to be seen, I promise you."

"And where got you all these pretty things?" asked Hordle John, pointing at the heap in the corner.

"Where there is as much more waiting for any brave lad to pick it up. Where a good man can always earn a good wage, and where he need look upon no man as his paymaster, but just reach his hand out and help himself. Aye, it is a goodly and a proper life. And here I drink to mine old comrades, and the saints be with them! Arouse all together, me, enfants, under pain of my displeasure. To Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!"

"Sir Claude Latour and the White Company!" shouted the travellers, draining off their goblets.

"Well quaffed, mes braves! It is for me to fill your cups again, since you have drained them to my dear lads of the white jerkin. Hola! mon ange, bring wine and ale. How runs the old stave?--

We'll drink all together To the gray goose feather And the land where the gray goose flew."

He roared out the catch in a harsh, unmusical voice, and ended with a shout of laughter. "I trust that I am a better bowman than a minstrel," said he.

"Methinks I have some remembrance of the lilt," remarked the gleeman, running his fingers over the strings, "Hoping that it will give thee no offence, most holy sir"--with a vicious snap at Alleyne--"and with the kind permit of the company, I will even venture upon it."

Many a time in the after days Alleyne Edricson seemed to see that scene, for all that so many which were stranger and more stirring were soon to crowd upon him. The fat, red-faced gleeman, the listening group, the archer with upraised finger beating in time to the music, and the huge sprawling figure of Hordle John, all thrown into red light and black shadow by the flickering fire in the centre--memory was to come often lovingly back to it. At the time he was lost in admiration at the deft way in which the jongleur disguised the loss of his two missing strings, and the lusty, hearty fashion in which he trolled out his little ballad of the outland bowmen, which ran in some such fashion as this:

What of the bow? The bow was made in England: Of true wood, of yew wood, The wood of English bows; So men who are free Love the old yew tree And the land where the yew tree grows.

What of the cord? The cord was made in England: A rough cord, a tough cord, A cord that bowmen love; So we'll drain our jacks To the English flax And the land where the hemp was wove.

What of the shaft? The shaft was cut in England: A long shaft, a strong shaft, Barbed and trim and true; So we'll drink all together To the gray goose feather And the land where the gray goose flew.

What of the men? The men were bred in England: The bowman--the yeoman-- The lads of dale and fell Here's to you--and to you; To the hearts that are true And the land where the true hearts dwell.

"Well sung, by my hilt!" shouted the archer in high delight. "Many a night have I heard that song, both in the old war-time and after in the days of the White Company, when Black Simon of Norwich would lead the stave, and four hundred of the best bowmen that ever drew string would come roaring in upon the chorus. I have seen old John Hawkwood, the same who has led half the Company into Italy, stand laughing in his beard as he heard it, until his plates rattled again. But to get the full smack of it ye must yourselves be English bowmen, and be far off upon an outland soil."

Whilst the song had been singing Dame Eliza and the maid had placed a board across two trestles, and had laid upon it the knife the spoon, the salt, the tranchoir of bread, and finally the smoking dish which held the savory supper. The archer settled himself to it like one who had known what it was to find good food scarce; but his tongue still went as merrily as his teeth.

"It passes me," he cried, "how all you lusty fellows can bide scratching your backs at home when there are such doings over the seas. Look at me--what have I to do? It is but the eye to the cord, the cord to the shaft, and the shaft to the mark. There is the whole song of it. It is but what you do yourselves for pleasure upon a Sunday evening at the parish village butts."

"And the wage?" asked a laborer.

"You see what the wage brings," he answered. "I eat of the best, and I drink deep. I treat my friend, and I ask no friend to treat me. I clap a silk gown on my girl's back. Never a knight's lady shall be better betrimmed and betrinketed. How of all that, mon garcon? And how of the heap of trifles that you can see for yourselves in yonder corner? They are from the South French, every one, upon whom I have been making war. By my hilt! camarades, I think that I may let my plunder speak for itself."

"It seems indeed to be a goodly service," said the tooth-drawer.

"Tete bleu! yes, indeed. Then there is the chance of a ransom. Why, look you, in the affair at Brignais some four years back, when the companies slew James of Bourbon, and put his army to the sword, there was scarce a man of ours who had not count, baron, or knight. Peter Karsdale, who was but a common country lout newly brought over, with the English fleas still hopping under his doublet, laid his great hands upon the Sieur Amaury de Chatonville, who owns half Picardy, and had five thousand crowns out of him, with his horse and harness. 'Tis true that a French wench took it all off Peter as quick as the Frenchman paid it; but what then? By the twang of string! it would be a bad thing if money was not made to be spent; and how better than on woman-- eh, ma belle?"

"It would indeed be a bad thing if we had not our brave archers to bring wealth and kindly customs into the country," quoth Dame Eliza, on whom the soldier's free and open ways had made a deep impression.

"A toi, ma cherie!" said he, with his hand over his heart. "Hola! there is la petite peeping from behind the door. A toi, aussi, ma petite! Mon Dieu! but the lass has a good color!"

"There is one thing, fair sir," said the Cambridge student in his piping voice, "which I would fain that you would make more clear. As I understand it, there was peace made at the town of Bretigny some six years back between our most gracious monarch and the King of the French. This being so, it seems most passing strange that you should talk so loudly of war and of companies when there is no quarrel between the French and us."

"Meaning that I lie," said the archer, laying down his knife.

"May heaven forfend!" cried the student hastily. "Magna est veritas sed rara, which means in the Latin tongue that archers are all honorable men. I come to you seeking knowledge, for it is my trade to learn."

"I fear that you are yet a 'prentice to that trade," quoth the soldier; "for there is no child over the water but could answer what you ask. Know then that though there may be peace between our own provinces and the French, yet within the marches of France there is always war, for the country is much divided against itself, and is

furthermore harried by flayers, skimmers, Brabacons, tardvenus, and the rest of them. When every man's grip is on his neighbor's throat, and every five-sous-piece of a baron is marching with tuck of drum to fight whom he will, it would be a strange thing if five hundred brave English boys could not pick up a living. Now that Sir John Hawkwood hath gone with the East Anglian lads and the Nottingham woodmen into the service of the Marquis of Montferrat to fight against the Lord of Milan, there are but ten score of us left, yet I trust that I may be able to bring some back with me to fill the ranks of the White Company. By the tooth of Peter! it would be a bad thing if I could not muster many a Hamptonshire man who would be ready to strike in under the red flag of St. George, and the more so if Sir Nigel Loring, of Christchurch, should don hauberk once more and take the lead of us."

"Ah, you would indeed be in luck then," quoth a woodman; "for it is said that, setting aside the prince, and mayhap good old Sir John Chandos, there was not in the whole army a man of such tried courage."

"It is sooth, every word of it," the archer answered. "I have seen him with these two eyes in a stricken field, and never did man carry himself better. Mon Dieu! yes, ye would not credit it to look at him, or to hearken to his soft voice, but from the sailing from Orwell down to the foray to Paris, and that is clear twenty years, there was not a skirmish, onfall, sally, bushment, escalado or battle, but Sir Nigel was in the heart of it. I go now to Christchurch with a letter to him from Sir Claude Latour to ask him if he will take the place of Sir John Hawkwood; and there is the more chance that he will if I bring one or two likely men at my heels. What say you, woodman: wilt leave the bucks to loose a shaft at a nobler mark?"

The forester shook his head. "I have wife and child at Emery Down," quoth he; "I would not leave them for such a venture."

You, then, young sir?" asked the archer.

"Nay, I am a man of peace," said Alleyne Edricson. "Besides, I have other work to do."

"Peste!" growled the soldier, striking his flagon on the board until the dishes danced again. "What, in the name of the devil, hath come over the folk? Why sit ye all moping by the fireside, like crows round a dead horse, when there is man's work to be done within a few short leagues of ye? Out upon you all, as a set of laggards and hang-backs! By my hilt I believe that the men of England are all in France already, and that what is left behind are in sooth the women dressed up in their paltocks and hosen."

"Archer," quoth Hordle John, "you have lied more than once and more than twice; for which, and also because I see much in you to dislike, I am sorely tempted to lay you upon your back."

"By my hilt! then, I have found a man at last!" shouted the bowman. "And, 'fore God, you are a better man than I take you for if you can lay me on my back, mon garcon. I have won the ram more times than there are toes to my feet, and for seven long years I have found no man in the Company who could make my jerkin dusty."

"We have had enough bobance and boasting," said Hordle John, rising and throwing off his doublet. "I will show you that there are better men left in England than ever went thieving to France."

"Pasques Dieu!" cried the archer, loosening his jerkin, and eyeing his foeman over with the keen glance of one who is a judge of manhood. "I have only once before seen such a body of a man. By your leave, my red-headed friend, I should be right sorry to exchange buffets with you; and I will allow that there is no man in the Company who would pull against you on a rope; so let that be a salve to your pride. On the other hand I should judge that you have led a life of ease for some months back, and that my muscle is harder than your own. I am ready to wager upon myself against you if you are not afeard."

"Afeard, thou lurden!" growled big John. "I never saw the face yet of the man that I was afeard of. Come out, and we shall see who is the better man."

"But the wager?"

"I have nought to wager. Come out for the love and the lust of the thing."

"Nought to wager!" cried the soldier. "Why, you have that which I covet above all things. It is that big body of thine that I am after. See, now, mon garcon. I have a French feather-bed there, which I have been at pains to keep these years back. I had it at the sacking of Issodum, and the King himself hath not such a bed. If you throw me, it is thine; but, if I throw you, then you are under a vow to take bow and bill and hie with me to France, there to serve in the White Company as long as we be enrolled."

"A fair wager!" cried all the travellers, moving back their benches and trestles, so as to give fair field for the wrestlers.

"Then you may bid farewell to your bed, soldier," said Hordle John.

"Nay; I shall keep the bed, and I shall have you to France in spite of your teeth, and you shall live to thank me for it. How shall it be, then, mon enfant? Collar and elbow, or close-lock, or catch how you can?"

"To the devil with your tricks," said John, opening and shutting his great red hands. "Stand forth, and let me clip thee."

"Shalt clip me as best you can then," quoth the archer, moving out into the open space, and keeping a most wary eye upon his opponent. He had thrown off his green jerkin, and his chest was covered only by a pink silk jupon, or undershirt, cut low in the neck and sleeveless. Hordle John was stripped from his waist upwards, and his huge body, with his great muscles swelling out like the gnarled roots of an oak, towered high above the soldier. The other, however, though near a foot shorter, was a man of great strength; and there was a gloss upon his white skin which was wanting in the heavier limbs of the renegade monk. He was quick on his feet, too, and skilled at the game; so that it was clear, from the poise of head and shine of eye, that he counted the chances to be in his favor. It would have been hard that night, through the whole length of England, to set up a finer pair in face of each other.

Big John stood waiting in the centre with a sullen, menacing eye, and his red hair in a bristle, while the archer paced lightly and swiftly to the right and the left with crooked knee and hands advanced. Then with a sudden dash, so swift and fierce that the eye could scarce follow it, he flew in upon his man and locked his leg round him. It was a grip that, between men of equal strength, would mean a fall; but Hordle John tore him off from him as he might a rat, and hurled him across the room, so that his head cracked up against the wooden wall.

"Ma foi!" cried the bowman, passing his fingers through his curls, "you were not far from the feather-bed then, mon gar. A little more and this good hostel would have a new window."

Nothing daunted, he approached his man once more, but this time with more caution than before. With a quick feint he threw the other off his guard, and then, bounding upon him, threw his legs round his waist and his arms round his bull-neck, in the hope of bearing him to the ground with the sudden shock. With a bellow of rage, Hordle John squeezed him limp in his huge arms; and then, picking him up, cast him down upon the floor with a force which might well have splintered a bone or two, had not the archer with the most perfect coolness clung to the other's forearms to break his fall. As it was, he dropped upon his feet and kept his balance, though it sent a jar through

his frame which set every joint a-creaking. He bounded back from his perilous foeman; but the other, heated by the bout, rushed madly after him, and so gave the practised wrestler the very vantage for which he had planned. As big John flung himself upon him, the archer ducked under the great red hands that clutched for him, and, catching his man round the thighs, hurled him over his shoulder--helped as much by his own mad rush as by the trained strength of the heave. To Alleyne's eye, it was as if John had taken unto himself wings and flown. As he hurtled through the air, with giant limbs revolving, the lad's heart was in his mouth; for surely no man ever yet had such a fall and came scathless out of it. In truth, hardy as the man was, his neck had been assuredly broken had he not pitched head first on the very midriff of the drunken artist, who was slumbering so peacefully in the corner, all unaware of these stirring doings. The luckless limner, thus suddenly brought out from his dreams, sat up with a piercing yell, while Hordle John bounded back into the circle almost as rapidly as he had left it.

"One more fall, by all the saints!" he cried, throwing out his arms.

"Not I," quoth the archer, pulling on his clothes, "I have come well out of the business. I would sooner wrestle with the great bear of Navarre."

"It was a trick," cried John.

"Aye was it. By my ten finger-bones! it is a trick that will add a proper man to the ranks of the Company."

"Oh, for that," said the other, "I count it not a fly; for I had promised myself a good hour ago that I should go with thee, since the life seems to be a goodly and proper one. Yet I would fain have had the feather-bed."

"I doubt it not, mon ami," quoth the archer, going back to his tankard. "Here is to thee, lad, and may we be good comrades to each other! But, hola! what is it that ails our friend of the wrathful face?"

The unfortunate limner had been sitting up rubbing himself ruefully and staring about with a vacant gaze, which showed that he knew neither where he was nor what had occurred to him. Suddenly, however, a flash of intelligence had come over his sodden features, and he rose and staggered for the door. "Ware the ale!" he said in a hoarse whisper, shaking a warning finger at the company. "Oh, holy Virgin, 'ware the ale!" and slapping his hands to his injury, he flitted off into the darkness, amid a shout of laughter, in which the vanquished joined as merrily as the victor. The remaining forester and the two laborers were also ready for the road, and the rest of the company turned to the blankets which Dame Eliza and the maid had laid out for them upon the floor. Alleyne, weary with the unwonted excitements of the day, was soon in a deep slumber broken only by fleeting visions of twittering legs, cursing beggars, black robbers, and the many strange folk whom he had met at the "Pied Merlin."