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[Authors](#)
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[The White Company](#)

[Arthur Conan Doyle](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 32 - How The Company Took Counsel Round The Fallen Tree

"WHERE is Sir Claude Latour?" asked Sir Nigel, as his feet touched ground.

"He is in camp, near Montpezat, two hours' march from here, my fair lord," said Johnston, the grizzled bowman who commanded the archers.

"Then we shall march thither, for I would fain have you all back at Dax in time to be in the prince's vanguard."

"My lord," cried Alleyne, joyfully, "here are our chargers in the field, and I see your harness amid the plunder which these rogues have left behind them."

"By Saint Ives! you speak sooth, young squire," said Du Guesclin. "There is my horse and my lady's jennet. The knaves led them from the stables, but fled without them. Now, Nigel, it is great joy to me to have seen one of whom I have often heard. Yet we must leave you now, for I must be with the King of Spain ere your army crosses the mountains."

"I had thought that you were in Spain with the valiant Henry of Trastamare."

"I have been there, but I came to France to raise succor for him. I shall ride back, Nigel, with four thousand of the best lances of France at my back, so that your prince may find he hath a task which is worthy of him. God be with you, friend, and may we meet again in better times!"

"I do not think," said Sir Nigel, as he stood by Alleyne's side looking after the French knight and his lady, "that in all Christendom you will meet with a more stout-hearted man or a fairer and sweeter dame. But your face is pale and sad, Alleyne! Have you perchance met with some hurt during the ruffle?"

"Nay, my fair lord, I was but thinking of my friend Ford, and how he sat upon my couch no later than yesternight."

Sir Nigel shook his head sadly. "Two brave squires have I lost," said he. "I know not why the young shoots should be plucked, and an old weed left standing, yet certes there must be some good reason, since God hath so planned it. Did you not note, Alleyne, that the Lady Tiphaine did give us warning last night that danger was coming upon us?"

"She did, my lord."

"By Saint Paul! my mind misgives me as to what she saw at Twyham Castle. And yet I cannot think that any Scottish or French rovers could land in such force as to beleaguer the fortalice. Call the Company together, Aylward; and let us on, for it will be shame to us if we are not at Dax upon the trysting day."

The archers had spread themselves over the ruins, but a blast upon a bugle brought them all back to muster, with such booty as they could bear with them stuffed into their pouches or slung over their shoulders. As they formed into ranks, each man dropping silently into his place, Sir Nigel ran a questioning eye over them, and a smile of pleasure played over his face. Tall and sinewy, and brown, clear-eyed, hard-featured, with the stern and prompt bearing of experienced soldiers, it would be hard indeed for a leader to seek for a choicer following. Here and there in the ranks were old soldiers of the French wars, grizzled and lean, with fierce, puckered features and shaggy, bristling brows. The most, however, were young and dandy archers, with fresh English faces, their beards combed out, their hair curling from under their close steel hufkens, with gold or jewelled earrings gleaming in their ears, while their gold-spangled baldrics, their silken belts, and the chains which many of them wore round their thick brown necks, all spoke of the brave times which they had had as free companions. Each had a yew or hazel stave slung over his shoulder, plain and serviceable with the older men, but gaudily painted and carved at either end with the others. Steel caps, mail brigandines, white surcoats with the red lion of St. George, and sword or battle-axe swinging from their belts, completed this equipment, while in some cases the murderous maule or five-foot mallet was hung across the bowstave, being fastened to their leathern shoulder-belt by a hook in the centre of the handle. Sir Nigel's heart beat high as he looked upon their free bearing and fearless faces.

For two hours they marched through forest and marshland, along the left bank of the river Aveyron; Sir Nigel riding behind his Company, with Alleyne at his right hand, and Johnston, the old master bowman, walking by his left stirrup. Ere they had reached their journey's end the knight had learned all that he would know of his men, their doings and their intentions. Once, as they marched, they saw upon the further bank of the river a body of French men-at-arms, riding very swiftly in the direction of Villefranche.

"It is the Seneschal of Toulouse, with his following," said Johnston, shading his eyes with his hand. "Had he been on this side of the water he might have attempted something upon us."

"I think that it would be well that we should cross," said Sir Nigel. "It were pity to balk this worthy seneschal, should he desire to try some small feat of arms."

"Nay, there is no ford nearer than Tourville," answered the old archer. "He is on his way to Villefranche, and short will be the shrift of any Jacks who come into his hands, for he is a man of short speech. It was he and the Seneschal of Beaucair who hung Peter Wilkins, of the Company, last Lammastide; for which, by the black rood of Waltham! they shall hang themselves, if ever they come into our power. But here are our comrades, Sir Nigel, and here is our camp."

As he spoke, the forest pathway along which they marched opened out into a green glade, which sloped down towards the river. High, leafless trees girt it in on three sides, with a thick undergrowth of holly between their trunks. At the farther end of this forest clearing there stood forty or fifty huts, built very neatly from wood and clay, with the blue smoke curling out from the roofs. A dozen tethered horses and mules grazed around the encampment, while a number of archers lounged about: some shooting at marks, while others built up great wooden fires in the open, and hung their cooking kettles above them. At the sight of their returning comrades there was a shout of welcome, and a horseman, who had been exercising his charger behind the camp, came cantering down to them. He was a dapper, brisk man, very richly clad, with a round, clean-shaven face, and very bright black eyes, which danced and sparkled with excitement.

"Sir Nigel!" he cried. "Sir Nigel Loring, at last! By my soul we have awaited you this month past. Right welcome, Sir Nigel! You have had my letter?"

"It was that which brought me here," said Sir Nigel. "But indeed, Sir Claude Latour, it is a great wonder to me that you did not yourself lead these bowmen, for surely they

could have found no better leader?"

"None, none, by the Virgin of L'Esparre!" he cried, speaking in the strange, thick Gascon speech which turns every _v_ into a _b_. "But you know what these islanders of yours are, Sir Nigel. They will not be led by any save their own blood and race. There is no persuading them. Not even I, Claude Letour Seigneur of Montchateau, master of the high justice, the middle and the low, could gain their favor. They must needs hold a council and put their two hundred thick heads together, and then there comes this fellow Aylward and another, as their spokesmen, to say that they will disband unless an Englishman of good name be set over them. There are many of them, as I understand, who come from some great forest which lies in Hampi, or Hampti--I cannot lay my tongue to the name. Your dwelling is in those parts, and so their thoughts turned to you as their leader. But we had hoped that you would bring a hundred men with you."

"They are already at Dax, where we shall join them," said Sir Nigel. "But let the men break their fast, and we shall then take counsel what to do."

"Come into my hut," said Sir Claude. "It is but poor fare that I can lay before you--milk, cheese, wine, and bacon--yet your squire and yourself will doubtless excuse it. This is my house where the pennon flies before the door--a small residence to contain the Lord of Montchateau."

Sir Nigel sat silent and distraught at his meal, while Alleyne hearkened to the clattering tongue of the Gascon, and to his talk of the glories of his own estate, his successes in love, and his triumphs in war.

"And now that you are here, Sir Nigel," he said at last, "I have many fine ventures all ready for us. I have heard that Montpezat is of no great strength, and that there are two hundred thousand crowns in the castle. At Castelnaud also there is a cobbler who is in my pay, and who will throw us a rope any dark night from his house by the town wall. I promise you that you shall thrust your arms elbow-deep among good silver pieces ere the nights are moonless again; for on every hand of us are fair women, rich wine, and good plunder, as much as heart could wish."

"I have other plans," answered Sir Nigel curtly; "for I have come hither to lead these bowmen to the help of the prince, our master, who may have sore need of them ere he set Pedro upon the throne of Spain. It is my purpose to start this very day for Dax upon the Adour, where he hath now pitched his camp."

The face of the Gascon darkened, and his eyes flashed with resentment, "For me," he said, "I care little for this war, and I find the life which I lead a very joyous and pleasant one. I will not go to Dax."

"Nay, think again, Sir Claude," said Sir Nigel gently; "for you have ever had the name of a true and loyal knight. Surely you will not hold back now when your master hath need of you."

"I will not go to Dax," the other shouted.

"But your devoir--your oath of fealty?"

"I say that I will not go."

"Then, Sir Claude, I must lead the Company without you."

"If they will follow," cried the Gascon with a sneer. "These are not hired slaves, but free companions, who will do nothing save by their own good wills. In very sooth, my Lord Loring, they are ill men to trifle with, and it were easier to pluck a bone from a hungry bear than to lead a bowman out of a land of plenty and of pleasure."

"Then I pray you to gather them together," said Sir Nigel, "and I will tell them what is in my mind; for if I am their leader they must to Dax, and if I am not then I know not what I am doing in Auvergne. Have my horse ready, Alleyne; for, by St. Paul! come what may, I must be upon the homeward road ere mid-day."

A blast upon the bugle summoned the bowmen to counsel, and they gathered in little knots and groups around a great fallen tree which lay athwart the glade. Sir Nigel sprang lightly upon the trunk, and stood with blinking eye and firm lips looking down at the ring of upturned warlike faces.

"They tell me, bowmen," said he, "that ye have grown so fond of ease and plunder and high living that ye are not to be moved from this pleasant country. But, by Saint Paul! I will believe no such thing of you, for I can readily see that you are all very valiant men, who would scorn to live here in peace when your prince hath so great a venture before him. Ye have chosen me as a leader, and a leader I will be if ye come with me to Spain; and I vow to you that my pennon of the five roses shall, if God give me strength and life, be ever where there is most honor to be gained. But if it be your wish to loll and loiter in these glades, bartering glory and renown for vile gold and ill-gotten riches, then ye must find another leader; for I have lived in honor, and in honor I trust that I shall die. If there be forest men or Hampshire men amongst ye, I call upon them to say whether they will follow the banner of Loring."

"Here's a Romsey man for you!" cried a young bowman with a sprig of evergreen set in his helmet.

"And a lad from Alresford!" shouted another.

"And from Milton!"

"And from Burley!"

"And from Lymington!"

"And a little one from Brockenhurst!" shouted a huge-limbed fellow who sprawled beneath a tree.

"By my hill! lads," cried Aylward, jumping upon the fallen trunk, "I think that we could not look the girls in the eyes if we let the prince cross the mountains and did not pull string to clear a path for him. It is very well in time of peace to lead such a life as we have had together, but now the war-banner is in the wind once more, and, by these ten finger-bones! if he go alone, old Samkin Aylward will walk beside it."

These words from a man as popular as Aylward decided many of the waverers, and a shout of approval burst from his audience.

"Far be it from me," said Sir Claude Latour suavely, "to persuade you against this worthy archer, or against Sir Nigel Loring; yet we have been together in many ventures, and per-chance it may not be amiss if I say to you what I think upon the matter."

"Peace for the little Gascon!" cried the archers. "Let every man have his word. Shoot straight for the mark, lad, and fair play for all."

"Bethink you, then," said Sir Claude, "that you go under a hard rule, with neither freedom nor pleasure--and for what? For sixpence a day, at the most; while now you may walk across the country and stretch out either hand to gather in whatever you have a mind for. What do we not hear of our comrades who have gone with Sir John Hawkwood to Italy? In one night they have held to ransom six hundred of the richest noblemen of Mantua. They camp before a great city, and the base burghers come forth with the keys, and then they make great spoil; or, if it please them better, they take so many horse-loads of silver as a composition; and so they journey on from state to state, rich and free and feared by all. Now, is not that the proper life for a soldier?"

"The proper life for a robber!" roared Hordle John, in his thundering voice.

"And yet there is much in what the Gascon says," said a swarthy fellow in a weather-stained doublet; "and I for one would rather prosper in Italy than starve in Spain."

"You were always a cur and a traitor, Mark Shaw," cried Aylward. "By my hilt! if you will stand forth and draw your sword I will warrant you that you will see neither one nor the other."

"Nay, Aylward," said Sir Nigel, "we cannot mend the matter by broiling. Sir Claude, I think that what you have said does you little honor, and if my words aggrieve you I am ever ready to go deeper into the matter with you. But you shall have such men as will follow you, and you may go where you will, so that you come not with us. Let all who love their prince and country stand fast, while those who think more of a well-lined purse step forth upon the farther side."

Thirteen bowmen, with hung heads and sheepish faces, stepped forward with Mark Shaw and ranged themselves behind Sir Claude. Amid the hootings and hissings of their comrades, they marched off together to the Gascon's hut, while the main body broke up their meeting and set cheerily to work packing their possessions, furbishing their weapons, and preparing for the march which lay before them. Over the Tarn and the Garonne, through the vast quagmires of Armagnac, past the swift-flowing Losse, and so down the long valley of the Adour, there was many a long league to be crossed ere they could join themselves to that dark war-cloud which was drifting slowly southwards to the line of the snowy peaks, beyond which the banner of England had never yet been seen.