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## [The White Company](#)

### [Arthur Conan Doyle](#)

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## Chapter 36 - How Sir Nigel Took The Patch From His Eye

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IT was a cold, bleak morning in the beginning of March, and the mist was drifting in dense rolling clouds through the passes of the Cantabrian mountains. The Company, who had passed the night in a sheltered gully, were already astir, some crowding round the blazing fires and others romping or leaping over each other's backs for their limbs were chilled and the air biting. Here and there, through the dense haze which surrounded them, there loomed out huge pinnacles and jutting boulders of rock: while high above the sea of vapor there towered up one gigantic peak, with the pink glow of the early sunshine upon its snow-capped head. The ground was wet, the rocks dripping, the grass and ever-greens sparkling with beads of moisture; yet the camp was loud with laughter and merriment, for a messenger had ridden in from the prince with words of heart-stirring praise for what they had done, and with orders that they should still abide in the forefront of the army.

Round one of the fires were clustered four or five of the leading men of the archers, cleaning the rust from their weapons, and glancing impatiently from time to time at a great pot which smoked over the blaze. There was Aylward squatting cross-legged in his shirt, while he scrubbed away at his chain-mail brigandine, whistling loudly the while. On one side of him sat old Johnston, who was busy in trimming the feathers of some arrows to his liking; and on the other Hordle John, who lay with his great limbs all asprawl, and his headpiece balanced upon his uplifted foot. Black Simon of Norwich crouched amid the rocks, crooning an Eastland ballad to himself, while he whetted his sword upon a flat stone which lay across his knees; while beside him sat Alleyne Edrickson, and Norbury, the silent squire of Sir Oliver, holding out their chilled hands towards the crackling faggots

"Cast on another culpon, John, and stir the broth with thy sword-sheath," growled Johnston, looking anxiously for the twentieth time at the reeking pot.

"By my hilt!" cried Aylward, "now that John hath come by this great ransom, he will scarce abide the fare of poor archer lads. How say you, camarade? When you see Hordle once more, there will be no penny ale and fat bacon, but Gascon wines and baked meats every day of the seven."

"I know not about that," said John, kicking his helmet up into the air and catching it in his hand. "I do but know that whether the broth be ready or no, I am about to dip this into it."

"It simmers and it boils," cried Johnston, pushing his hard-lined face through the smoke. In an instant the pot had been plucked from the blaze, and its contents had been scooped up in half a dozen steel head-pieces, which were balanced betwixt their owners' knees, while, with spoon and gobbet of bread, they devoured their morning meal.

"It is ill weather for bows," remarked John at last, when, with a long sigh, he drained the last drop from his helmet. "My strings are as limp as a cow's tail this morning."

"You should rub them with water glue," quoth Johnston. "You remember, Samkin, that it was wetter than this on the morning of Crecy, and yet I cannot call to mind that there was aught amiss with our strings."

"It is in my thoughts," said Black Simon, still pensively grinding his sword, "that we may have need of your strings ere sundown. I dreamed of the red cow last night."

"And what is this red cow, Simon?" asked Alleyne.

"I know not, young sir; but I can only say that on the eve of Cadsand, and on the eve of Crecy, and on the eve of Nogent, I dreamed of a red cow; and now the dream has come upon me again, so I am now setting a very keen edge to my blade."

"Well said, old war-dog!" cried Aylward. "By my hilt! I pray that your dream may come true, for the prince hath not set us out here to drink broth or to gather whortleberries. One more fight, and I am ready to hang up my bow, marry a wife, and take to the fire corner. But how now, Robin? Whom is it that you seek?"

"The Lord Loring craves your attendance in his tent," said a young archer to Alleyne.

The squire rose and proceeded to the pavilion, where he found the knight seated upon a cushion, with his legs crossed in front of him and a broad ribbon of parchment laid across his knees, over which he was poring with frowning brows and pursed lips.

"It came this morning by the prince's messenger," said he, "and was brought from England by Sir John Fallislee, who is new come from Sussex. What make you of this upon the outer side?"

"It is fairly and clearly written," Alleyne answered, "and it signifies To Sir Nigel Loring, Knight Constable of Twynham Castle, by the hand of Christopher, the servant of God at the Priory of Christchurch."

"So I read it," said Sir Nigel. "Now I pray you to read what is set forth within."

Alleyne turned to the letter, and, as his eyes rested upon it, his face turned pale and a cry of surprise and grief burst from his lips.

"What then?" asked the knight, peering up at him anxiously. "There is nought amiss with the Lady Mary or with the Lady Maude?"

"It is my brother--my poor unhappy brother!" cried Alleyne, with his hand to his brow. "He is dead."

"By Saint Paul! I have never heard that he had shown so much love for you that you should mourn him so."

"Yet he was my brother--the only kith or kin that I had upon earth. Mayhap he had cause to be bitter against me, for his land was given to the abbey for my upbringing. Alas! alas! and I raised my staff against him when last we met! He has been slain--and slain, I fear, amidst crime and violence."

"Ha!" said Sir Nigel. "Read on, I pray you."

"God be with thee, my honored lord, and have thee in his holy keeping. The Lady Loring hath asked me to set down in writing what hath befallen at Twynham, and all that concerns the death of thy ill neighbor the Socman of Minstead. For when ye had left us, this evil man gathered around him all outlaws, villeins, and masterless men, until they were come to such a force that they slew and scattered the king's men who went against them. Then, coming forth from the woods, they laid siege to thy castle, and for two days they girt us in and shot hard against us, with such numbers as were a marvel to see. Yet the Lady Loring held the place stoutly, and on the second day the Socman was slain--by his own men, as some think--so that we were delivered from their hands; for which praise be to all the saints, and more especially to the holy Anselm, upon whose feast it came to pass. The Lady Loring, and the Lady Maude, thy fair daughter, are in good health; and so also am I, save for an imposthume of the toe-joint, which hath been sent me for my sins. May all the saints preserve thee!"

"It was the vision of the Lady Tiphaine," said Sir Nigel, after a pause. "Marked you not how she said that the leader was one with a yellow beard, and how he fell before the gate. But how came it, Alleyne, that this woman, to whom all things are as crystal, and who hath not said one word which has not come to pass, was yet so led astray as to say that your thoughts turned to Twynham Castle even more than my own?"

"My fair lord," said Alleyne, with a flush on his weather-stained cheeks, "the Lady Tiphaine may have spoken sooth when she said it; for Twynham Castle is in my heart by day and in my dreams by night."

"Ha!" cried Sir Nigel, with a sidelong glance.

"Yes, my fair lord; for indeed I love your daughter, the Lady Maude; and, unworthy as I am, I would give my heart's blood to serve her."

"By St. Paul! Edricon," said the knight coldly, arching his eyebrows, "you aim high in this matter. Our blood is very old."

"And mine also is very old," answered the squire.

"And the Lady Maude is our single child. All our name and lands centre upon her."

"Alas! that I should say it, but I also am now the only Edricon."

"And why have I not heard this from you before, Alleyne? In sooth, I think that you have used me ill."

"Nay, my fair lord, say not so; for I know not whether your daughter loves me, and there is no pledge between us."

Sir Nigel pondered for a few moments, and then burst out laughing. "By St. Paul!" said he, "I know not why I should mix in the matter; for I have ever found that the Lady Maude was very well able to look to her own affairs. Since first she could stamp her little foot, she hath ever been able to get that for which she craved; and if she set her heart on thee, Alleyne, and thou on her, I do not think that this Spanish king, with his three-score thousand men, could hold you apart. Yet this I will say, that I would see you a full knight ere you go to my daughter with words of love. I have ever said that a brave lance should wed her; and, by my soul! Edricon, if God spare you, I think that you will acquit yourself well. But enough of such trifles, for we have our work before us, and it will be time to speak of this matter when we see the white cliffs of England once more. Go to Sir William Felton, I pray you, and ask him to come hither, for it is time that we were marching. There is no pass at the further end of the valley, and it is a perilous place should an enemy come upon us."

Alleyne delivered his message, and then wandered forth from the camp, for his mind was all in a whirl with this unexpected news, and with his talk with Sir Nigel. Sitting upon a rock, with his burning brow resting upon his hands, he thought of his brother, of their quarrel, of the Lady Maude in her bedraggled riding-dress, of the gray old castle, of the proud pale face in the armory, and of the last fiery words with which she had sped him on his way. Then he was but a penniless, monk-bred lad, unknown and unfriended. Now he was himself Socman of Minstead, the head of an old stock, and the lord of an estate which, if reduced from its former size, was still ample to preserve the dignity of his family. Further, he had become a man of experience, was counted brave among brave men, had won the esteem and confidence of her father, and, above all, had been listened to by him when he told him the secret of his love. As to the gaining of knighthood, in such stirring times it was no great matter for a brave squire of gentle birth to aspire to that honor. He would leave his bones among these Spanish ravines, or he would do some deed which would call the eyes of men upon him.

Alleyne was still seated on the rock, his griefs and his joys drifting swiftly over his mind like the shadow of clouds upon a sunlit meadow, when of a sudden he became conscious of a low, deep sound which came booming up to him through the fog. Close behind him he could hear the murmur of the bowmen, the occasional bursts of hoarse laughter, and the champing and stamping of their horses. Behind it all, however, came that low-pitched, deep-toned hum, which seemed to come from every quarter and to fill the whole air. In the old monastic days he remembered to have heard such a sound when he had walked out one windy night at Bucklershard, and had listened to the long waves breaking upon the shingly shore. Here, however, was neither wind nor sea, and yet the dull murmur rose ever louder and stronger out of the heart of the rolling sea of vapor. He turned and ran to the camp, shouting an alarm at the top of his voice.

It was but a hundred paces, and yet ere he had crossed it every bowman was ready at his horse's head, and the group of knights were out and listening intently to the ominous sound.

"It is a great body of horse," said Sir William Felton, "and they are riding very swiftly hitherwards."

"Yet they must be from the prince's army," remarked Sir Richard Causton, "for they come from the north."

"Nay," said the Earl of Angus, "it is not so certain; for the peasant with whom we spoke last night said that it was rumored that Don Tello, the Spanish king's brother, had ridden with six thousand chosen men to beat up the prince's camp. It may be that on their backward road they have come this way."

"By St. Paul!" cried Sir Nigel, "I think that it is even as you say, for that same peasant had a sour face and a shifting eye, as one who bore us little good will. I doubt not that he has brought these cavaliers upon us."

"But the mist covers us," said Sir Simon Burley. "We have yet time to ride through the further end of the pass."

"Were we a troop of mountain goats we might do so," answered Sir William Felton, "but it is not to be passed by a company of horsemen. If these be indeed Don Tello and his men, then we must bide where we are, and do what we can to make them rue the day that they found us in their path."

"Well spoken, William!" cried Sir Nigel, in high delight. "If there be so many as has been said, then there will be much honor to be gained from them and every hope of advancement. But the sound has ceased, and I fear that they have gone some other way."

"Or mayhap they have come to the mouth of the gorge, and are marshalling their ranks. Hush and hearken! for they are no great way from us."

The Company stood peering into the dense fog-wreath, amidst a silence so profound that the dripping of the water from the rocks and the breathing of the horses grew loud upon the ear. Suddenly from out the sea of mist came the shrill sound of a neigh, followed by a long blast upon a bugle.

"It is a Spanish call, my fair lord," said Black Simon. "It is used by their prickers and huntsmen when the beast hath not fled, but is still in its lair."

"By my faith!" said Sir Nigel, smiling, "if they are in a humor for venerie we may promise them some sport ere they sound the mort over us. But there is a hill in the centre of the gorge on which we might take our stand."

"I marked it yester-night," said Felton, "and no better spot could be found for our purpose, for it is very steep at the back. It is but a bow-shot to the left, and, indeed, I can see the shadow of it."

The whole Company, leading their horses, passed across to the small hill which loomed in front of them out of the mist. It was indeed admirably designed for defence, for it sloped down in front, all jagged and boulder-strewn, while it fell away in a sheer cliff of a hundred feet or more. On the summit was a small uneven plateau, with a stretch across of a hundred paces, and a depth of half as much again.

"Unloose the horses!" said Sir Nigel. "We have no space for them, and if we hold our own we shall have horses and to spare when this day's work is done. Nay, keep yours, my fair sirs, for we may have work for them. Aylward, Johnston, let your men form a harrow on either side of the ridge. Sir Oliver and you, my Lord Angus, I give you the right wing, and the left to you, Sir Simon, and to you, Sir Richard Causten. I and Sir William Felton will hold the centre with our men-at-arms. Now order the ranks, and fling wide the banners, for our souls are God's and our bodies the king's, and our swords for Saint George and for England!"

Sir Nigel had scarcely spoken when the mist seemed to thin in the valley, and to shred away into long ragged clouds which trailed from the edges of the cliffs. The gorge in which they had camped was a mere wedge-shaped cleft among the hills, three-quarters of a mile deep, with the small rugged rising upon which they stood at the further end, and the brown crags walling it in on three sides. As the mist parted, and the sun broke through, it gleamed and shimmered with dazzling brightness upon the armor and headpieces of a vast body of horsemen who stretched across the barranca from one cliff to the other, and extended backwards until their rear guard were far out upon the plain beyond. Line after line, and rank after rank, they choked the neck of the valley with a long vista of tossing pennons, twinkling lances, waving plumes and streaming banderoles, while the curvets and gambades of the chargers lent a constant motion and shimmer to the glittering, many-colored mass. A yell of exultation, and a forest of waving steel through the length and breadth of their column, announced that they could at last see their entrapped enemies, while the swelling notes of a hundred bugles and drums, mixed with the clash of Moorish cymbals, broke forth into a proud peal of martial triumph. Strange it was to these gallant and sparkling cavaliers of Spain to look upon this handful of men upon the hill, the thin lines of bowmen, the knots of knights and men-at-arms with armor rusted and discolored from long service, and to learn that these were indeed the soldiers whose fame and prowess had been the camp-fire talk of every army in Christendom. Very still and silent they stood, leaning upon their bows, while their leaders took counsel together in front of them. No clang of bugle rose from their stern ranks, but in the centre waved the leopards of England, on the right the ensign of their Company with the roses of Loring, and on the left, over three score of Welsh bowmen, there floated the red banner of Merlin with the boars'-heads of the Buttethorns. Gravely and sedately they stood beneath the morning sun waiting for the onslaught of their foemen.

"By Saint Paul!" said Sir Nigel, gazing with puckered eye down the valley, "there appear to be some very worthy people among them. What is this golden banner which waves upon the left?"

"It is the ensign of the Knights of Calatrava," answered Felton.

"And the other upon the right?"

"It marks the Knights of Santiago, and I see by his flag that their grand-master rides at their head. There too is the banner of Castile amid yonder sparkling squadron which heads the main battle. There are six thousand men-at-arms with ten squadrons of slingers as far as I may judge their numbers."

"There are Frenchmen among them, my fair lord," remarked Black Simon. "I can see the pennons of De Couvette, De Brieux, Saint Pol, and many others who struck in against us for Charles of Blois."

"You are right," said Sir William, "for I can also see them. There is much Spanish blazonry also, if I could but read it. Don Diego, you know the arms of your own land. Who are they who have done us this honor?"

The Spanish prisoner looked with exultant eyes upon the deep and serried ranks of his countrymen.

"By Saint James!" said he, "if ye fall this day ye fall by no mean hands, for the flower of the knighthood of Castile ride under the banner of Don Tello, with the chivalry of Asturias, Toledo, Leon, Cordova, Galicia, and Seville. I see the guidons of Albornes, Cacoria, Rodriguez, Tavora, with the two great orders, and the knights of France and of Aragon. If you will take my rede you will come to a composition with them, for they will give you such terms as you have given me."

"Nay, by Saint Paul! it were pity if so many brave men were drawn together, and no little deed of arms to come of it. Ha! William, they advance upon us; and, by my soul! it is a sight that is worth coming over the seas to see."

As he spoke, the two wings of the Spanish host, consisting of the Knights of Calatrava on the one side and of Santiago upon the other, came swooping swiftly down the valley, while the main body followed more slowly behind. Five hundred paces from the English the two great bodies of horse crossed each other, and, sweeping round in a curve, retired in feigned confusion towards their centre. Often in bygone wars had the Moors tempted the hot-blooded Spaniards from their places of strength by such pretended flights, but there were men upon the hill to whom every ruse and trick of war were as their daily trade and practice. Again and even nearer came the rallying Spaniards, and again with cry of fear and stooping bodies they swerved off to right and left, but the English still stood stolid and observant among their rocks. The vanguard halted a long bow shot from the hill, and with waving spears and vaunting shouts challenged their enemies to come forth, while two cavaliers, pricking forward from the glittering ranks, walked their horses slowly between the two arrays with targets braced and lances in rest like the challengers in a tourney.

"By Saint Paul!" cried Sir Nigel, with his one eye glowing like an ember, "these appear to be two very worthy and debonair gentlemen. I do not call to mind when I have seen any people who seemed of so great a heart and so high of enterprise. We have our horses, Sir William: shall we not relieve them of any vow which they may have upon their souls?"

Felton's reply was to bound upon his charger, and to urge it down the slope, while Sir Nigel followed not three spears'-lengths behind him. It was a rugged course, rocky and uneven, yet the two knights, choosing their men, dashed onwards at the top of their speed, while the gallant Spaniards flew as swiftly to meet them. The one to whom Felton found himself opposed was a tall stripling with a stag's head upon his shield, while Sir Nigel's man was broad and squat with plain steel harness, and a pink and white torse bound round his helmet. The first struck Felton on the target with such force as to split it from side to side, but Sir William's lance crashed through the camail which shielded the Spaniard's throat, and he fell, screaming hoarsely, to the ground. Carried away by the heat and madness of fight, the English knight never drew rein, but charged straight on into the array of the knights of Calatrava. Long time the silent ranks upon the hill could see a swirl and eddy deep down in the heart of the Spanish column, with a circle of rearing chargers and flashing blades, Here and there tossed the white plume of the English helmet, rising and falling like the foam upon a wave, with

the fierce gleam and sparkle round it until at last it had sunk from view, and another brave man had fallen to peace.

Sir Nigel, meanwhile, had found a foeman worthy of his steel for his opponent was none other than Sebastian Gomez, the picked lance of the monkish Knights of Santiago, who had won fame in a hundred bloody combats with the Moors of Andalusia. So fierce was their meeting that their spears shivered up to the very grasp, and the horses reared backwards until it seemed that they must crash down upon their riders. Yet with consummate horsemanship they both swung round in a long curvet, and then plucking out their swords they lashed at each other like two lusty smiths hammering upon an anvil. The chargers spun round each other, biting and striking, while the two blades wheeled and whizzed and circled in gleams of dazzling light. Cut, parry, and thrust followed so swiftly upon each other that the eye could not follow them, until at last coming thigh to thigh, they cast their arms around each other and rolled off their saddles to the ground. The heavier Spaniard threw himself upon his enemy, and pinning him down beneath him raised his sword to slay him, while a shout of triumph rose from the ranks of his countrymen. But the fatal blow never fell, for even as his arm quivered before descending, the Spaniard gave a shudder, and stiffening himself rolled heavily over upon his side, with the blood gushing from his armpit and from the slit of his vizor. Sir Nigel sprang to his feet with his bloody dagger in his left hand and gazed down upon his adversary, but that fatal and sudden stab in the vital spot, which the Spaniard had exposed by raising his arm, had proved instantly mortal. The Englishman leaped upon his horse and made for the hill, at the very instant that a yell of rage from a thousand voices and the clang of a score of bugles announced the Spanish onset.

But the islanders were ready and eager for the encounter. With feet firmly planted, their sleeves rolled back to give free play to their muscles, their long yellow bow-staves in their left hands, and their quivers slung to the front, they had waited in the four-deep harrow formation which gave strength to their array, and yet permitted every man to draw his arrow freely without harm to those in front. Aylward and Johnston had been engaged in throwing light tufts of grass into the air to gauge the wind force, and a hoarse whisper passed down the ranks from the file-leaders to the men, with scraps of advice and admonition.

"Do not shoot outside the fifteen-score paces," cried Johnston. "We may need all our shafts ere we have done with them."

"Better to overshoot than to undershoot," added Aylward. "Better to strike the rear guard than to feather a shaft in the earth."

"Loose quick and sharp when they come," added another. "Let it be the eye to the string, the string to the shaft, and the shaft to the mark. By Our Lady! their banners advance, and we must hold our ground now if ever we are to see Southampton Water again."

Alleyne, standing with his sword drawn amidst the archers, saw a long toss and heave of the glittering squadrons. Then the front ranks began to surge slowly forward, to trot, to canter, to gallop, and in an instant the whole vast array was hurtling onward, line after line, the air full of the thunder of their cries, the ground shaking with the beat of their hoots, the valley choked with the rushing torrent of steel, topped by the waving plumes, the slanting spears and the fluttering banderoles. On they swept over the level and up to the slope, ere they met the blinding storm of the English arrows. Down went the whole ranks in a whirl of mad confusion, horses plunging and kicking, bewildered men falling, rising, staggering on or back, while ever new lines of horsemen came spurting through the gaps and urged their chargers up the fatal slope. All around him Alleyne could hear the stern, short orders of the master-bowmen, while the air was filled with the keen twanging of the strings and the swish and patter of the shafts. Right across the foot of the hill there had sprung up a long wall of struggling horses and stricken men, which ever grew and heightened as fresh squadrons poured on the attack. One young knight on a gray jennet leaped over his fallen comrades and galloped swiftly up the hill, shrieking loudly upon Saint James, ere he fell within a spear-length of the English line, with the feathers of arrows thrusting out from every crevice and joint of his armor. So for five long minutes the gallant horsemen of Spain and of France strove ever and again to force a passage, until the wailing note of a bugle called them back, and they rode slowly out of bow-shot, leaving their best and their bravest in the ghastly, blood-mottled heap behind them.

But there was little rest for the victors. Whilst the knights had charged them in front the slingers had crept round upon either flank and had gained a footing upon the cliffs and behind the outlying rocks. A storm of stones broke suddenly upon the defenders, who, drawn up in lines upon the exposed summit, offered a fair mark to their hidden foes. Johnston, the old archer, was struck upon the temple and fell dead without a groan, while fifteen of his bowmen and six of the men-at-arms were struck down at the same moment. The others lay on their faces to avoid the deadly hail, while at each side of the plateau a fringe of bowmen exchanged shots with the slingers and crossbowmen among the rocks, aiming mainly at those who had swarmed up the cliffs, and bursting into laughter and cheers when a well-aimed shaft brought one of their opponents toppling down from his lofty perch.

"I think, Nigel," said Sir Oliver, striding across to the little knight, "that we should all acquit ourselves better had we our none-meat, for the sun is high in the heaven."

"By Saint Paul!" quoth Sir Nigel, plucking the patch from his eye, "I think that I am now clear of my vow, for this Spanish knight was a person from whom much honor might be won. Indeed, he was a very worthy gentleman, of good courage, and great hardiness, and it grieves me that he should have come by such a hurt. As to what you say of food, Oliver, it is not to be thought of, for we have nothing with us upon the hill."

"Nigel!" cried Sir Simon Burley, hurrying up with consternation upon his face, "Aylward tells me that there are not ten-score arrows left in all their sheaves. See! they are springing from their horses, and cutting their sollerets that they may rush upon us. Might we not even now make a retreat?"

"My soul will retreat from my body first!" cried the little knight. "Here I am, and here I bide, while God gives me strength to lift a sword."

"And so say I!" shouted Sir Oliver, throwing his mace high into the air and catching it again by the handle.

"To your arms, men!" roared Sir Nigel. "Shoot while you may, and then out sword, and let us live or die together!"