

S I R N I G E L :

A Companion to The White Company

By SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Illustrated by Joseph Clement Coll

Copyright, 1905, by A. Conan Doyle



"or he would never dare show his face to the girls of Tilford again. Come, archers, let us leave these salt herrings in their pickle tub and try our luck out on the water."

The three archers at once ranged themselves on the same side as their comrade. They were bronzed, bearded men, short in stature, as were most Englishmen of that day, but hardy, strong and skilled with their weapons. Each drew his string from its waterproof case and bent the huge arc of his war-bow as he fitted it into the nocks.

"Now, master, we are at your back," said they as they pulled and tightened their sword-belts. But already Cock Badding had been car-

ried away by the hot lust of battle and had thrown aside every fear and doubt which had clouded him. To see a fight and not to be in it was more than he could bear.

"Nay, have it your own way!" he cried, "and may Saint Leon-

ard help us, for a madder venture I have never seen! And yet it may be worth the trial. But if it be done let me have the handling of it, little master, for you know no more of a boat than I do of a war-horse. The skiff can bear five and not a man more. Now, who will come?"

They had all caught fire, and there was not one who would be left out.

Badding picked up his hammer. "I will come myself," said he, "and you also, little master, since it is your hot head that has planned it. Then there is Black Simon, the best sword of the Cinque Ports. Two archers can pull on the oars, and it may be that they can pick off two or three of these Frenchmen before we close with them. Hugh Baddlesmere, and you, Dicon of Rye—into the boat with you!"

"What?" cried Aylward. "Am I to be left behind? I, who am the Squire's own man? Ill fare the bowman who comes betwixt me and yonder boat!"

"Nay, Aylward," said his master, "I order that you stay, for indeed you are a sick man."

"But now that the waves have sunk I am myself again. Nay, fair sir, I pray that you will not leave me behind."

"You must needs take the space of a better man; for what do you know of the handling of a boat?" said Badding shortly. "No more fool's talk, I pray you, for the night will soon fall. Stand aside!"

Aylward looked hard at the French boat. "I could swim ten times up and down Frensham pond," said he, "and it will be strange if I cannot go as far as that. By these finger-bones, Samkin Aylward may be there as soon as you!"

The little boat with its five occupants pushed

off from the side of the schooner, and dipping and rising, made its slow way toward the Frenchman. Badding and one archer had single oars, the second archer was in the prow, while Black Simon and Nigel huddled into the stern with the water lapping and hissing at their very elbows. A shout of defiance rose from the Frenchman, and they stood in a line along the side of their vessel shaking their fists and waving their weapons. Already the sun was level with Dungeness, and the gray of evening was blurring sky and water into one dim haze. A great silence hung over the broad expanse of nature, and no sound broke it save the dip and splash of the oars and the slow deep surge of the boat upon the swell. Behind them their comrades of the Marie Rose stood motionless and silent, watching their progress with eager eyes.

They were near enough now to have a good look at the Frenchman. One was a big swarthy man with a long black beard. He had a red cap and an ax over his shoulder. There were ten other hardy-looking fellows, all of them well armed, and there were three who seemed to be boys.

"Shall we try a shaft upon them?" asked Hugh Baddlesmere. "They are well within our bow-shot."

"Only one of you can shoot at a time, for you have no footing," said Badding. "With one foot in the prow and one over the thwart you will get your stance. Do what you may, and then we will close in upon them."

The archer balanced himself in the rolling boat with the deftness of a man who has been trained upon the sea, for he was born and bred in the Cinque Ports. Carefully he nocked his arrow, strongly he drew it, steadily he loosed it, but the boat swooped at the instant, and it buried itself in the waves. The second passed over the little ship, and the third struck in her black side. Then in quick succession—so quick that two shafts were often in the air at the same instant—he discharged a dozen arrows, most of which just cleared the bulwarks and dropped upon the deck. There was a cry on the Frenchman, and the heads vanished from the side.

"Enough!" cried Badding. "One is down, and it may be two. Close in, close in, in God's name, before they rally!"

He and the other bent to their oars; but at the same instant there was a sharp zip in the air and a hard clear sound like a stone striking a wall. Baddlesmere clapped his hand to his head, groaned and fell forward out of the boat, leaving a swirl of blood upon the surface. A moment later the same fierce hiss ended in a loud wooden crash, and a short, thick crossbow-bolt was buried deep in the side of their boat.

"Close in, close in!" roared Badding, tugging at his oar. "Saint George for England! Saint Leonard for Winchelsea! Close in!"

But again that fatal crossbow twanged. Dicon of Rye fell back with a shaft through his shoulder. "God help me, I can do no more!" said he.

Badding seized the oar from his hand; but it was only to sweep the boat's head round and pull her back to the Marie Rose. The attack had failed.

"What now, master-shipman?" cried Nigel. "What has befallen to stop us? Surely the matter does not end here?"

"Two down out of five," said Badding, "and twelve at the least against us. The odds are too long, little master. Let us at least go back, fill up once more, and raise a mantelet against the bolts, for they have an arbalist which shoots both straight and hard. But what we do we must do quickly, for the darkness falls apace."

Their repulse had been hailed by wild yells of delight from the Frenchmen, who danced with joy and waved their weapons madly over their heads. But before their rejoicings had finished they saw the little boat creeping out once more from the shadow of the Marie Rose, a great wooden screen in her bows to protect her from the arrows. Without a pause she came straight and fast for her enemy. The wounded archer had been put on board, and Aylward would have had his place had Nigel been able to see him upon the deck. The

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters at End of This Instalment

CHAPTER XIV. (Continued)

How Nigel Chased the Red Ferret

HIS bold and fiery words found their echo in the brave rough hearts around him. There was a deep-chested shout from both archers and seamen. Even Aylward sat up, with a wan smile upon his green face.

But Cock Badding shook his head. "I have never met the man who could lead where I would not follow," said he; "but by Saint Leonard! this is a mad business, and I should be a fool if I were to risk my men and my ship. Bethink you, little master, that the skiff can hold only five, though you load her to the water's edge. If there is a man yonder, there are fourteen, and you have to climb their side from the boat. What chance would you gain? Your boat stove and you in the water—there is the end of it. No man of mine goes on such a fool's errand, and so I swear!"

"Then, Master Badding, I must crave the loan of your skiff, for by Saint Paul! the good Lord Chandos' papers are not to be so lightly lost. If no one else will come then I will go alone."

The shipman smiled at the words; but the smile died away from his lips when Nigel, with features set like ivory and eyes as hard as steel, pulled on the rope so as to bring the skiff under the counter. It was very clear that he would do even as he said. At the same time Aylward raised his bulky form from the deck, leaned for a moment against the bulwarks, and then tottered aft to his master's side.

"Here is one that will go with you," said he,