

SIR RINGEL:

A Companion to The White Company

By SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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Illustrated by Joseph Clement Coll

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters at End of This Instalment

CHAPTER XVII. (Continued)

The Spaniards on the Sea

THE Basilisk had indeed been spied from the Spanish Admiral's ship before the fog closed down. With so light a breeze and such a fog, he could not hope to find her under sail. But by an evil chance not a bow-shot from the great Spanish carrack was a low galley, thin and swift, with oars which could speed her against wind or tide. She also had seen the Basilisk, and it was to her that the Spanish leader shouted his orders. For a few minutes she hunted through the fog, and then sprang out of it like a lean and stealthy beast upon its prey. It was the sight of the long dark shadow gliding after them which had brought that wild shout of alarm from the lips of the English knight. In another instant the starboard oars of the galley had been shipped, the sides of the two vessels grated together, and a stream of swarthy, red-capped Spaniards were swarming up the sides of the Basilisk and dropping with yells of triumph upon her deck.

For a moment it seemed as if the vessel was captured without a blow being struck, for the men of the English ship had run wildly in all directions to look for their arms. Scores of archers might be seen under the shadow of the fore-castle and the poop bending their bowstaves to string them with the cords from their waterproof cases. Others were scrambling over saddles, barrels and cases in wild search of their quivers. Each as he came upon his arrows pulled out a few to lend to his less fortunate comrades. In mad haste the men-at-arms also were feeling and grasping in the dark corners, picking up steel caps which would not fit them, hurling them down on the deck, and snatching eagerly at any swords or spears that came their way.

The center of the ship was held by the Spaniards, and having slain all who came in their way, they were pressing up to either end before they were made to understand that it was no fat sheep but a most fierce old wolf which they had taken by the ears.

If the lesson was late, it was the more thorough. Attacked on both sides and hopelessly outnumbered, the Spaniards, who had never doubted that this little craft was a merchant ship, were cut off to the last man. It was no fight, but a butchery. In vain the survivors ran, screaming prayers to the saints, and threw themselves down into the galley alongside. It also had been riddled with arrows from the poop of the Basilisk, and both the crew on the deck and the galley-slaves in the outriggers at either side lay dead in rows under the overwhelming shower from above. From stem to rudder every foot of her was furred with arrows. It was but a floating coffin piled with dead and dying men which wallowed in the waves behind them as the Basilisk lurched onward and left her in the fog.

In their first rush on the Basilisk, the Spaniards had seized six of the crew and four unarmed archers. Their throats had been cut and their bodies tossed overboard. Now the Spaniards who littered the deck, wounded and dead, were thrust over the side in the same fashion. One ran down into the hold and had to be hunted and killed squealing under the blows like a rat in the darkness. Within half an hour no sign was left of this grim meeting in the fog save for the crimson splashes upon bulwarks and deck. The archers, flushed and merry, were unstringing their bows once more, for in spite of the water-glue the damp air took the strength from the cords. Some were hunting about for arrows which might have stuck inboard, and some tying up small injuries received in the scuffle.

But an anxious shadow still lingered upon the face of Sir Robert, and he peered fixedly about him through the fog. "Go among the archers, Hawthorne," said he to his Squire. "Charge them on their lives to make no sound! You also, Loring. Go

to the afterguard and say the same to them. We are lost if one of these great ships should spy us."

For an hour with bated breath they stole through the fleet, still hearing the cymbals clashing all round them, for in this way the Spaniards held themselves together. Once the wild music came from above their very prow, and so warned them to change their course. Once also a huge vessel loomed for an instant upon their quarter; but they turned two points away from her, and she blurred and vanished. Soon the cymbals were but a distant tinkling, and at last they died gradually away.

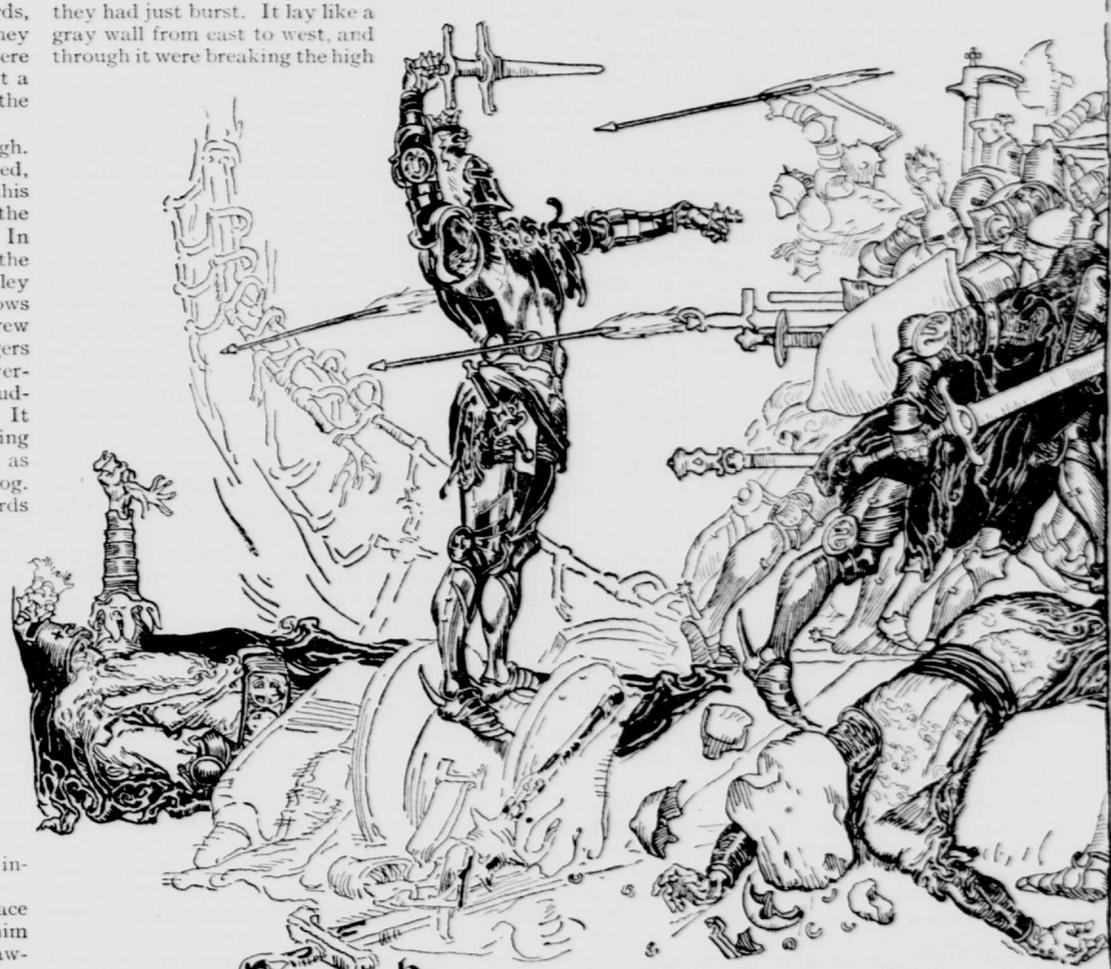
"It is none too soon," said the old shipman, pointing to a yellowish tint in the haze above them. "See yonder! It is the sun which wins through. It will be here anon. Ah! said I not so?"

A sickly sun, no larger and far dimmer than the moon, had indeed shown its face, with cloud-wreaths smoking across it. As they looked up it waxed larger and brighter before their eyes—a yellow halo spread round it, one ray broke through, and then a funnel of golden light poured down upon them, widening swiftly at the base. A minute later they were sailing on a clear blue sea with an azure cloud-flecked sky above their heads, and such a scene beneath it as each of them would carry in his memory while memory remained.

They were in mid-Channel. The white and green coasts of Picardy and of Kent lay clear upon either side of them. The wide Channel stretched in front, deepening from the light blue beneath their prow to purple on the far sky-line. Behind them was that thick bank of cloud from which they had just burst. It lay like a gray wall from east to west, and through it were breaking the high

shadowy forms of the ships of Spain. Four of them had already emerged, their red bodies, gilded sides and painted sails shining gloriously in the evening sun. Every instant a fresh golden spot grew out of the fog, which blazed like a star for an instant, and then surged forward to show itself as the brazen beak of the great red vessel which bore it. Looking back, the whole bank of cloud was broken by the wide-spread line of noble ships which were bursting through it. The Basilisk lay a mile or more in front of them and two miles clear of their wing. Five miles farther off, in the direction of the French coast, two other small ships were running down Channel. A cry of joy from Robert Knolles and a hearty prayer of gratitude to the saints from the old shipman hailed them as their missing comrades, the cog Thomas and the Grace Dieu.

But fair as was the view of their lost friends, and wondrous the appearance of the Spanish ships, it was not on those that the eyes of the men of the Basilisk were chiefly bent. A greater sight lay before them—a sight which brought them clustering to the fore-castle with eager eyes and pointing fingers. The English fleet was coming forth from the Winchelsea coast. Already before the fog lifted a fast galleass had brought the news down Channel that the Spanish were on the sea and the King's fleet was under way. Now their long array of sails, gay with the coats and colors of the towns which had furnished them, lay bright against the Kentish coast from Dungeness Point to Rye. Nine and twenty ships were there from Southampton, Shoreham, Winchelsea, Hastings, Rye, Hythe, Romney, Folkestone, Deal, Dover and Sandwich. With their great sails slued round to catch the wind,



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