

SIR NIGEL

A Companion to The White Company

By SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

CHAPTER XXVI. (Concluded)

Illustrated by Joseph Clement Coll

Copyright, 1906, by A. Conan Doyle

How Nigel Found His Third Deed

A FEARSOME sight was Pommers that day, his red eyes rolling, his nostrils gaping, his tawny mane tossing, and his savage teeth gnashing in fury, as he tore and smashed and ground beneath his ramping hoofs all that came before him. Fearsome too was the rider, ice-cool, alert, concentrated of purpose, with heart of fire and muscles of steel. A very angel of battle he seemed as he drove his maddened horse through the thickest of the press; but strive as he would the tall figure of his master upon his coal-black steed was ever half a length before him.

Already the moment of danger was passed. The French line had given back. Those who had pierced the hedge had fallen like brave men amid the ranks of their foemen. The division of Warwick had hurried up from the vineyards to fill the gaps of Salisbury's battle-line. Back rolled the shining tide, slowly at first, even as it had advanced, but quicker now as the bolder fell and the weaker shredded out and shuffled with ungainly speed for a place of safety. Again there was a rush from behind the hedge. Again there was a reaping of that strange crop of bearded arrows which grew so thick upon the ground, and again the wounded prisoners were seized and dragged in brutal haste to the rear. Then the line was restored, and the English, weary, panting, and shaking, awaited the next attack.

But a great good fortune had come to them—so great that as they looked down the valley they could scarce credit their own senses. Behind the division of the Dauphin, which had pressed them so hard, stood a second division hardly less numerous, led by the Duke of Orleans. The fugitives from in front, blood-smear'd and bedraggled, blinded with sweat and with fear, rushed amidst its ranks in their flight, and in a moment, without a blow being struck, had carried them off in their wild rout. This vast array, so solid and so martial, thawed suddenly away like a snow-wreath in the sun. It was gone, and in its place thousands of shining dots scattered over the whole plain as each man made his own way to the spot where he could find his horse and bear himself from the field. For a moment it seemed that the battle was won, and a thunder-shout of joy pealed up from the English line.

But as the curtain of the Duke's division was drawn away it was only to disclose stretching far behind it, and spanning the valley from side to side, the magnificent array of the French King, solid, unshaken, and preparing its ranks for the attack. Its numbers were as great as those of the English army; it was unscathed by all that was past, and it had a valiant monarch to lead it to the charge. With the slow deliberation of the man who means to do or to die, its leader marshaled its ranks for the supreme effort of the day.

Meanwhile during that brief moment of exultation when the battle appeared to be won, a crowd of hot-headed young knights and squires swarmed and clamored round the Prince, beseeching that he would allow them to ride forth.

"See this insolent fellow who bears three martlets upon a field gules!" cried Sir Maurice Berkeley. "He stands betwixt the two armies as though he had no dread of us."

"I pray you, sir, that I may ride out to him, since he seems ready to attempt some small deed," pleaded Nigel.

"Nay, fair sirs, it is an evil thing that we should break our line, seeing that we still have much to do," said the Prince. "See! he rides away, and so the matter is settled."

"Nay, fair prince," said the young knight who had spoken first. "My gray horse Lebryste could

run him down ere he could reach shelter. Never since I left Severn side have I seen steed so fleet as mine. Shall I not show you?" In an instant he had spurred the charger and was speeding across the plain.

The Frenchman, John de Helennes, a squire of Picardy, had waited with a burning heart, his soul sick at the flight of the division in which he had ridden. In the hope of doing some redeeming exploit or of meeting his own death, he had loitered betwixt the armies; but no movement had come from the English lines. Now he had turned his horse's head to join the King's array, when the low drumming of hoofs sounded behind him, and he turned, to find a horseman hard upon his heels. Each had drawn his sword, and the two armies paused to view the fight. In the first bout Sir Maurice Berkeley's lance was struck from his hand, and as he sprang down to recover it the Frenchman ran him through the thigh, dismounted from his horse and received his surrender. As the unfortunate Englishman hobbled away at the side of his captor a roar of laughter burst from both armies at the spectacle.

"By my ten finger-bones!" cried Aylward, chuckling behind the remains of his bush, "he found more on his distaff that time than he knew how to spin. Who was the knight?"

"By his arms," said old Wat, "he should either be a Berkeley of the West or a Popham of Kent."

"I call to mind that I shot a match of six ends once with a Kentish woldsmen—" began the fat bowyer.

"Nay, nay, stint thy talk, Bartholomew!" cried old Wat. "Here is poor Ned with his head cloven,



them. Two divisions of the French had been repulsed, and yet there was many an anxious face as the older knights looked across the plain at the unbroken array of the French King moving slowly toward them. The line of the archers was much thinned and shredded. Many knights and squires had been disabled in the long and fierce combat at the hedge. Others, exhausted by want of food, had no strength left and were stretched panting upon the ground. Some were engaged in carrying the wounded to the rear and laying them under the shelter of the trees, whilst others were replacing their broken swords or lances from the weapons of the slain. The Captal de Buch, brave and experienced as he was, frowned darkly and whispered his misgivings to Chandos.

But the Prince's courage flamed the higher as the shadow fell, while his dark eyes gleamed with a soldier's pride as he glanced round him at his weary comrades and then at the dense masses of the King's battle which now, with a hundred trumpets blaring and a thousand pennons waving, rolled slowly over the plain. "Come what may, John, this has been a most noble meeting," said he. "They will not be ashamed of us in England. Take heart, my friends; for if we conquer we shall carry the glory ever with us; but if we be slain then we die most worshipfully and in high honor, as we have ever prayed that we might die, and we leave behind us our brothers and kinsmen who will assuredly avenge us. It is but one more effort, and all will be well. Warwick, Oxford, Salisbury, Suffolk, every man to the front! My banner to the front also! Your horses, fair sirs! The archers are spent, and our own good lances must win the field this day. Advance, Walter, and may God and Saint George be with England!"

Sir Walter Woodland, riding a high black horse, took station by the Prince, with the royal banner resting in a socket by his saddle. From all sides the knights and squires crowded in upon it, until they formed a great squadron containing the survivors of the battalions of Warwick and Salisbury as well as those of the Prince. Four hundred men-at-arms who had been held in reserve were brought up and thickened the array; but even so Chandos' face was grave as he scanned it and then turned his eyes upon the masses of the Frenchmen.

"I like it not, fair sir. The weight is overgreat," he whispered to the Prince.

"How would you order it, John? Speak what is in your mind."

"We should attempt something upon their flank whilst we hold them in front. How say you, Jean?" He turned to the Captal de Buch, whose dark resolute face reflected the same misgivings.

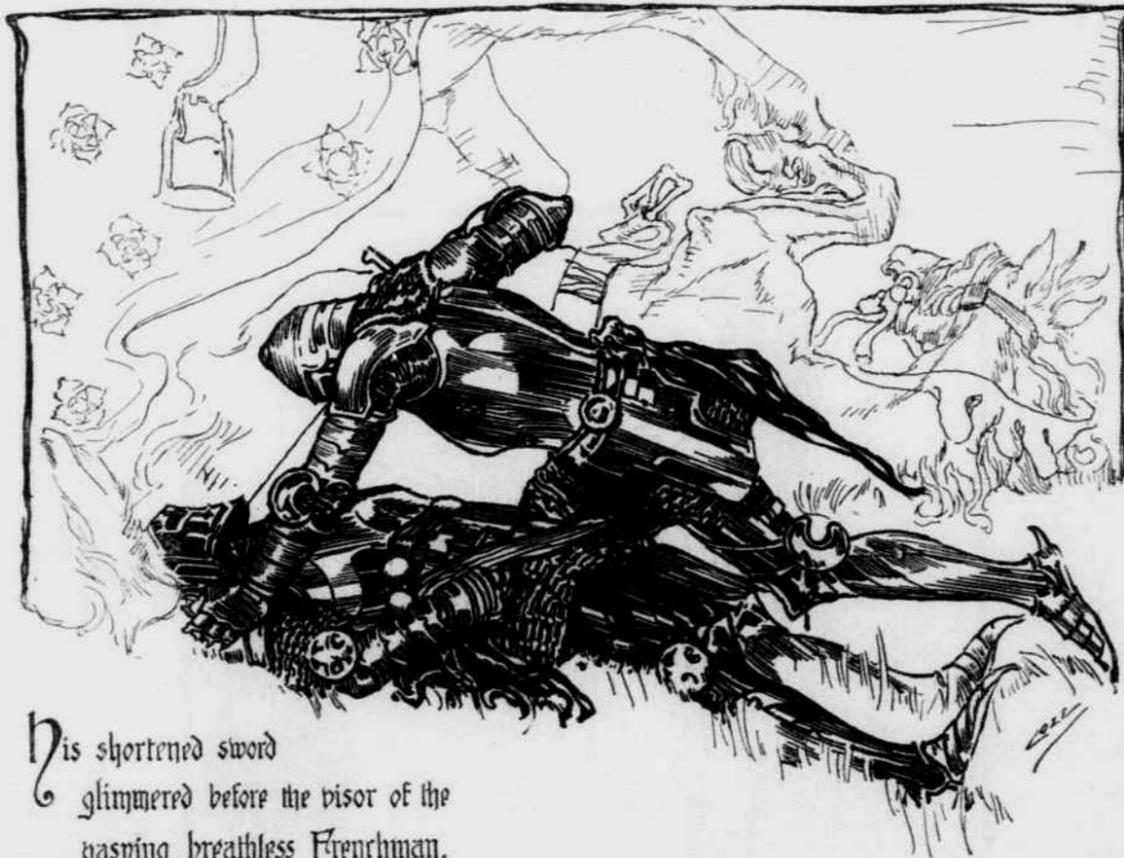
"Indeed, John, I think as you do," said he. "The French King is a very valiant man, and so are those who are about him, and I know not how we may drive them back unless we can do as you advise. If you will give me only a hundred men I will attempt it."

"Surely the task is mine, fair sir, since the thought has come from me," said Chandos.

"Nay, John, I would keep you at my side. But you speak well, Jean, and you

shall do even as you have said. Go ask the Earl of Oxford for a hundred men-at-arms and as many hobblers, that you may ride round the mound yonder and so fall upon them unseen. Let all that are left of the archers gather on each side, shoot away their arrows, and then fight as best they may. Wait till they are past yonder thorn-bush, and then, Walter, bear my banner straight against that of the King of France. Fair sirs, may God and the thought of your ladies hold high your hearts!"

The French monarch, seeing that his footmen had made no impression upon the English, and



His shortened sword glimmered before the visor of the gasping, breathless Frenchman.

and it would be more fitting if you were saying aves for his soul, instead of all this bobance and boasting. How now, Tom of Beverley?"

"We have suffered sorely in this last bout, Wat. There are forty of our men upon their backs, and the dean foresters on the right are in worse case still."

"Talking will not mend it, Tom, and if all but one were on their backs he must still hold his ground."

Whilst the archers were chatting, the leaders of the army were in solemn conclave just behind