



Arthur Conan Doyle

The White Company



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Chapter I
HOW THE BLACK SHEEP CAME FORTH
FROM THE FOLD

The great bell of Beaulieu was ringing. Far away through the forest might be heard its musical clangour and swell. Peat-cutters on Blackdown and fishers upon the Exe heard the distant throbbing rising and falling upon the sultry summer air. It was a common sound in those parts—as common as the chatter of the jays and the booming of the bittern. Yet the fishers and the peasants raised their heads and looked questions at each other, for the angelus had already gone and vespers was still far off. Why should the great bell of Beaulieu toll when the shadows were neither short nor long?

All round the Abbey the monks were trooping in. Under the long green-paved avenues of gnarled oaks and of lichened beeches, the white-robed brothers gathered to the sound. From the vineyard and the vine-press, from the bouvary or ox-farm, from the marl-pits and salterns, even from the distant iron-works of Sowley and the outlying grange of St. Leonard's, they had all turned their steps homewards. It had been no sudden call. A swift messenger had the night before sped round to the outlying dependencies of the Abbey, and had left the summons for every monk to be back in the cloisters by the third hour after noontide. So urgent a message had not been issued within the memory of old lay brother Athanasius,

who had cleaned the Abbey knocker since the year after the Battle of Bannockburn.

A stranger who knew nothing either of the Abbey or of its immense resources might have gathered from the appearance of the brothers some conception of the varied duties, which they were called upon to perform, and of the busy, widespread life, which centred in the old monastery. As they swept gravely in by twos and by threes, with bended heads and muttering lips there were few who did not bear upon them some signs of their daily toil. Here were two with wrists and sleeves all spotted with the ruddy grape juice. There again was a bearded brother with a broad-headed axe and a bundle of faggots upon his shoulders, while beside him walked another with the shears under his arm and the white wool still clinging to his whiter gown. A long, straggling troop bore spades and mattocks while the two rearmost of all staggered along under a huge basket o' fresh-caught carp, for the morrow was Friday, and there were fifty platters to be filled and as many sturdy trenchermen behind them. Of all the throng there was scarce one who was not labour-stained and weary, for Abbot Berghersh was a hard man to himself and to others.

Meanwhile, in the broad and lofty chamber set apart for occasions of import, the Abbot himself was pacing impatiently backwards and forwards, with his long white nervous hands clasped in front of him. His thin, thought-worn features and sunken, haggard cheeks bespoke one who had indeed beaten down that inner foe whom every man must face, but had none the less suffered sorely in the contest. In crushing his passions, he had well-nigh crushed himself. Yet, frail as was his person there gleamed out ever and anon from under his drooping brows a flash of fierce energy, which recalled to men's minds that he came of a fighting stock, and that even now his twin-brother, Sir Bartholomew Berghersh, was one of the most

famous of those stern warriors who had planted the Cross of St. George before the gates of Paris. With lips compressed and clouded brow, he strode up and down the oaken floor, the very genius and impersonation of asceticism, while the great bell still thundered and clanged above his head. At last, the uproar died away in three last, measured throbs, and ere their echo had ceased the Abbot struck a small gong, which summoned a lay brother to his presence.

“Have the brethren come?” he asked, in the Anglo-French dialect used in religious houses.

“They are here,” the other answered, with his eyes cast down and his hands crossed upon his chest.

“All?”

“Two and thirty of the seniors and fifteen of the novices, most holy father. Brother Mark of the Spicarium is sore smitten with a fever and could not come. He said that—”

“It boots not what he said. Fever or no, he should have come at my call. His spirit must be chastened, as must that of many more in this Abbey. You yourself, Brother Francis, have twice raised your voice, so it has come to my ears, when the reader in the refectory has been dealing with the lives of God’s most blessed saints. What have you to say?”

The lay brother stood meek and silent, with his arms still crossed in front of him.

“One thousand Aves and as many Credos, said standing with arms outstretched before the shrine of the Virgin, may help you to remember that the Creator has given us two ears and but one mouth, as a token that there is twice the work for the one as for the other. Where is the master of the novices?”

“He is without, most holy father.”

“Send him hither.”

The sandaled feet clattered over the wooden floor, and the ironbound door creaked upon its hinges. In a few

moments, it opened again to admit a short square monk with a heavy, composed face and an authoritative manner.

“You have sent for me, holy father?”

“Yes, Brother Jerome, I wish that this matter be disposed of with as little scandal as may be, and yet it is needful that the example should be a public one.” The Abbot spoke in Latin now, as a language, which was more fitted by its age and solemnity to convey the thoughts of two high dignitaries of the order.

“It would, perchance, be best that the novices be not admitted,” suggested the master. “This mention of a woman may turn their minds from their pious meditations to worldly and evil thoughts.”

“Woman! Woman!” groaned the Abbot. “Well has the holy Chrysostom termed them *radix malorum*. From Eve downwards, what good has come from any of them? Who brings the plaint?”

“It is Brother Ambrose.”

“A holy and devout young man.”

“A light and a pattern to every novice.”

“Let the matter be brought to an issue then according to our old-time monastic habit. Bid the chancellor and the sub-chancellor lead in the brothers according to age, together with brother John, the accused, and brother Ambrose, the accuser.”

“And the novices?”

“Let them bide in the north alley of the cloisters. Stay! Bid the sub-chancellor send out to them Thomas the lector to read unto them from the ‘Gesta beati Benedicti.’ It may save them from foolish and pernicious babbling.”

The Abbot was left to himself once more, and bent his thin grey face over his illuminated breviary. Therefore, he remained while the senior monks filed slowly and sedately into the chamber seating themselves upon the long oaken

benches, which lined the wall on either side. At the further end, in two high chairs as large as that of the Abbot, though hardly as elaborately carved, sat the master of the novices and the chancellor, the latter a broad and portly priest, with dark mirthful eyes and a thick outgrowth of crisp black hair all round his tonsured head. Between them stood a lean, white-faced brother who appeared to be ill at ease, shifting his feet from side to side and tapping his chin nervously with the long parchment roll, which he held in his hand. The Abbot, from his point of vantage, looked down on the two long lines of faces, placid and sun-browned for the most part, with the large bovine eyes and unlined features, which told of their easy, unchanging existence. Then he turned his eager fiery gaze upon the pale-faced monk who faced him.

“This plaint is yours, as I learn, Brother Ambrose,” said he. “May the holy Benedict, patron of our house, be present this day and aid us in our findings! How many counts are there?”

“Three, most holy father,” the brother answered in a low and quavering voice.

“Have you set them forth according to rule?”

“They are here set down, most holy father, upon a cantle of sheep-skin.”

“Let the sheep-skin be handed to the chancellor. Bring in Brother John, and let him hear the plaints, which have been urged against him.”

At this order, a lay brother swung open the door, and two other lay brothers entered leading between them a young novice of the order. He was a man of huge stature, dark-eyed and redheaded, with a peculiar half-humorous, half-defiant expression upon his bold, well-marked features. His cowl was thrown back upon his shoulders, and his gown, unfastened at the top, disclosed a round, sinewy neck, ruddy and corded

like the bark of the fir. Thick, muscular arms, covered with a reddish down, protruded from the wide sleeves of his habit, while his white shirt, looped up upon one side, gave a glimpse of a huge knotty leg, scarred and torn with the scratches of brambles. With a bow to the Abbot, which had in it perhaps more pleasantry than reverence, the novice strode across to the carved *prie-dieu*, which had been set apart for him, and stood silent and erect with his hand upon the gold bell, which was used in the private orisons of the Abbot's own household. His dark eyes glanced rapidly over the assembly, and finally settled with a grim and menacing twinkle upon the face of his accuser.

The chancellor rose, and having slowly unrolled the parchment-scroll, proceeded to read it out in a thick and pompous voice, while a subdued rustle and movement among the brothers bespoke the interest, with which they followed the proceedings.

"Charges brought upon the second Thursday after the Feast of the Assumption, in the year of our Lord thirteen hundred and sixty-six, against Brother John, formerly known as Hordle John, or John of Hordle, but now a novice in the holy monastic order of the Cistercians. Read upon the same day at the Abbey of Beaulieu in the presence of the most reverend Abbot Berghersh and of the assembled order.

"The charges against the said brother John are the following, namely, to wit:

"First, that on the above-mentioned Feast of the Assumption, small beer having been served to the novices in the proportion of one quart to each four, the said brother John did drain the pot at one draught to the detriment of brother Paul, brother Porphyry and brother Ambrose, who could scarce eat their none-meat of salted stock-fish on account of their exceeding dryness."

At this solemn indictment, the novice raised his hand and twitched his lip, while even the placid senior brothers glanced across at each other and coughed to cover their amusement. The Abbot alone sat grey and immutable, with a drawn face and a brooding eye.

“Item, that having been told by the master of the novices that he should restrict his food for two days to a single three-pound loaf of bran and beans, for the greater honouring and glorifying of St. Monica, mother of the holy Augustine, he was heard by brother Ambrose and others to say that he wished twenty thousand devils would fly away with the said Monica, mother of the holy Augustine, or any other saint who came between a man and his meat. Item, that upon brother Ambrose reproving him for this blasphemous wish, he did hold the said brother face downwards over the piscatorium or fish-pond for a space, during which the said brother was able to repeat a pater and four aves for the better fortifying of his soul against impending death.”

There was a buzz and murmur among the white-frosted brethren at this grave charge; but the Abbot held up his long quivering hand. “What then?” said he.

“Item, that between nones and vespers on the feast of James the Less the said brother John was observed upon the Brockenhurst road, near the spot, which is known as Hatchett’s Pond in converse with a person of the other sex, being a maiden of the name of Mary Sowley, the daughter of the King’s verderer. Item, that after sundry japes and jokes the said brother John did lift up the said Mary Sowley and did take, carry, and convey her across a stream, to the infinite relish of the devil and the exceeding detriment of his own soul, which scandalous and wilful falling away was witnessed by three members of our order.”

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