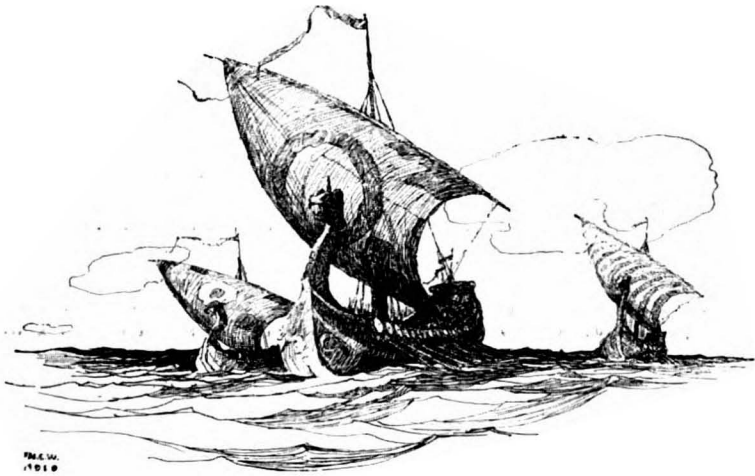




Drawn by N. C. Wyeth.

THE FIRST CARGO.

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THROUGH THE MISTS

II

THE FIRST CARGO

"Ex ovo omnia"

By Arthur Conan Doyle

ILLUSTRATIONS BY N. C. WYETH



WHEN you left Britain with your Legion, my dear Crassus, I promised that I would write to you from time to time, when a messenger chanced to be going to Rome, and keep you informed as to anything of interest which might occur in this country. Personally, I am very glad that I remained behind when the troops and so many of our citizens left, for though the living is rough and the climate is infernal, still by dint of the three voyages which I have made for amber to the Baltic, and the excellent prices which I obtained for it here, I shall soon be in a position to retire, and to spend my old age under my own fig-tree, or even perhaps to buy a small villa at Baia or Posuoli, where I could get a good sun-bath after the continued fogs of this accursed island. I picture myself on a little farm,

and I read the Georgics as a preparation, but when I hear the rain falling and the wind howling, Italy seems very far away.

In my previous letter I let you know how things are going in this country. The poor folk, who had given up all soldiering during the centuries that we guarded them, are now perfectly helpless before these Picts and Scots, tattooed barbarians from the north, who overrun the whole country and do exactly what they please. So long as they kept to the north, the people in the south, who are the most numerous and also the most civilized of the Britons, took no heed of them; but now the rascals have come as far as London, and the lazy folk in these parts have had to wake up. Vortigern, the king, is useless for anything but drink or women, so he sent across to the Baltic to get some of the North Germans, in the hope that they would come over and help him. It is bad enough to have a bear in your house, but it does not seem

to me to mend matters if you call in a pack of ferocious wolves as well. However, nothing better could be devised, so an invitation was sent and very promptly accepted. And it is here that your humble friend appears upon the scene. In the course of my amber-trading I had learned the Saxon speech, and so I was sent down in all haste to the Kentish shore that I might be there when our new allies appeared. I arrived there on the very day when their first vessel appeared ("ceol" they call it, or "keel," exactly as we say "carina") and it is of my adventures that I wish to tell you. It is perfectly clear to me that the landing of these warlike Germans in England will prove to be an event of historical importance, and so your inquisitive mind will not feel wearied if I treat the matter in some detail.

It was, then, upon the day of Mercury, immediately following the Feast of Our Blessed Lord's Ascension, that I found myself upon the south bank of the river Thames, at the point where it opens into a wide estuary. There is an island there named Thanet, which was the spot chosen for the landfall of our visitors. Sure enough, I had no sooner ridden up than there was a great red ship, the first as it seems of three, coming in under full sail. The white horse, which is the ensign of these rovers, was hanging from her top-mast, and she appeared to be crowded with men. The sun was shining brightly, and the great scarlet ship, with snow-white sails, and a line of gleaming shields slung over her side, made as fair a picture on that blue expanse as one would wish to see.

I pushed off at once in a boat, because it had been arranged that none of the Saxons should land until the king had come down to speak with their leaders. Presently I was under the ship, which had a gilded dragon in the bows, and a tier of oars along either side. As I looked up, there was a row of bearded heads looking down at me, and among them I saw, to my great surprise and pleasure, that of Eric the Swart, with whom I do business at Venta every year. He greeted me heartily when I reached the deck, and became at once my guide, friend, and counsellor. This helped

me greatly with these barbarians, for it is their nature that they are very cold and aloof unless one of their own number can vouch for you, after which they are very hearty and hospitable. Try as they will, they find it hard, however, to avoid a certain suggestion of condescension, and in the baser sort, of contempt, when they are dealing with a foreigner.

It was a great stroke of luck meeting Eric, for he was able to give me some idea of how things stood before I was shown into the presence of Kenna, the leader of this particular ship. The crew, as I learned from him, was entirely made up of three tribes or families, those of Kenna, of Lanc, and of Hasta. Each of these tribes gets its name by putting the letters "ing" after the name of the chief, so that the people on board would describe themselves as Kennings, Lancings, and Hastings. I observed in the Baltic, that the villages were each named after the families who lived in them, so that I have no doubt if these fellows get a footing on shore, we shall see settlements with names like these rising up among the British towns.

The greater part of the men were sturdy fellows, with red, yellow, or brown hair, mostly the latter. To my surprise, I saw several women among them. Eric, in answer to my question, explained that they always take their women with them so far as they can, and that instead of finding them an incumbrance as our Roman dames would be, they look upon them as helpmates and advisers. Of course, I remembered afterward that our excellent and accurate Tacitus has remarked upon this characteristic of the Germans. All laws in the tribes are decided by votes, and a vote has not yet been given to the women, but many are in favor of it, and it is thought that woman and man will soon have the same power in the state. I observed to Eric that it was fortunate there were several women on board, as they could keep each other company, but he answered that the wives of the chiefs had no desire to know the wives of the inferior officers, and that both of them combined against the more common women, so that any companionship was out of the question. He pointed as he spoke to Editha, the wife of

Kenna, a red-faced, elderly woman, who walked among the others with no more notice than if they did not exist.

Whilst I was talking to my friend Earic a sudden altercation broke out upon the deck, and a great number of the men paused in their work and flocked toward the spot, with faces which showed that they were deeply interested in the matter. Earic and I pushed our way among the others, for I was very anxious to see as much as I could of the ways and manners of these barbarians. A quarrel seemed to have broken out about a child, a little fellow with curly yellow hair, who appeared to be greatly amused by the hubbub of which he was the cause. On one side of him stood a white-bearded old man, of very majestic aspect, who signified by his gestures that he claimed the lad for himself; while on the other was a thin, earnest, anxious person, who strongly objected to the boy being taken from him. Earic whispered in my ear that the old man was the tribal high-priest, who was the official sacrificer to their great god Woden, whilst the other was a man who took somewhat different views, not upon Woden, but upon the means by which he should be worshipped. The majority of the crew were on the side of the old priest, but a certain number, who liked greater liberty of worship and to invent their own prayers instead of always repeating the official ones, followed the lead of the younger man. The difference was too great and too old to be healed among the grown men, but each had a great desire to impress his view upon the children. This was the reason why these two were now so furious with each other, and the argument between them ran so high that several of their followers on either side had drawn the short saxes or knives from which their name of Saxon is derived, when suddenly a great, burly, red-headed man pushed his way through the throng, and in a voice of thunder brought the controversy to an end.

"You folk, who argue about the things which no man can know, are more trouble aboard this ship than all the dangers of the sea," he cried. "Can you not be content with worshipping Woden, over which we are all agreed, and not make so much of

those small points upon which we differ? If there is all this fuss about the teaching of the children, then I shall forbid either of you to teach them, and they must be content with as much religion as they can learn from their mothers."

The two angry teachers crept away with discontented faces; but Kenna—for it was he who spoke—ordered that a whistle should be sounded and that the crew should assemble. I was pleased with the free bearing of these people, for though this was their greatest chief, they showed none of the exaggerated respect which soldiers of a legion might show to the prætor, but met him on a respectful equality which showed how highly they rated their own manhood.

From our Roman standard, his remarks to his men would seem very wanting in eloquence, for there were no graces or metaphors to be found in them, and yet they were short, strong, and to the point. At any rate, it was very clear that they were to the minds of his hearers. He began by reminding them that they had left their own country because the land was all taken up, and that there was no use returning there, since there was no place where they could dwell as free and independent men. This island of Britain was but sparsely inhabited, and there was a chance that every one of them would be able to found a home of his own. "You, Whitta," he said, addressing some of them by name, "you will found a Whitting hame, and you, Bucka, we shall see you in a Bucking hame, where your children and your children's children will bless you for the broad acres which your valor will have gained for them." There was no word of glory or of honor in his speech, but he said that he was aware that they would do their duty, on which they all struck their swords upon their shields so that the Britons on the beach could hear the clang. Then, his eyes falling upon me, he asked me whether I was the messenger from Vortigern, and on my answering, he bid me follow him into his cabin, where Lanc and Hasta, the other chiefs, were waiting for a council.

Picture me then, my dear Crassus, in a very low-roofed cabin, with these three

huge barbarians seated round me. Each was clad in some sort of saffron tunic, with chain-mail shirt over it, and helmet, with a horn of the ox on either side, laid upon the table before him. Like most of the Saxon chiefs, their beards were shaved, but they wore their hair long, and their huge light-colored moustaches drooped down to their shoulders. They are gentle, slow, and somewhat heavy in their bearing, but I can well fancy that their fury is the more terrible when it does arise.

Their minds seem to be of a very practical and positive nature, for they at once began to ask me a series of questions upon the numbers of the Britons, the resources of the kingdom, the conditions of its trade, and other such subjects. They then set to work arguing over the information which I had given, and became so absorbed in their own contention that I believe there were times when they forgot my presence. Everything, after due discussion, was always decided between them by vote, the one who found himself in the minority always submitting, though sometimes with a very bad grace—indeed, on one occasion Lanc, who usually differed from the others, threatened to refer the matter to the general vote of the whole crew. There was a constant conflict in the point of view, for whereas Kenna and Hasta were anxious to extend the Saxon power and to make it greater in the eyes of the world, Lanc was of opinion that they should give less thought to conquest and more to the comfort and advancement of their followers. At the same time it seemed to me that really Lanc was the more combative of the three, so much so that even in time of peace he could not forego this contest with his own brethren. Neither of the others seemed very fond of him, for they were each, as was easy to see, proud of his chieftainship and anxious to use his authority, referring continually to those noble ancestors from whom it was derived; while Lanc, though he claimed to be equally well born, took the view of the common men upon every occasion, claiming that the interests of the many were superior to the privileges of the few. In a word, Crassus, if you could imagine a free-booting Gracchus on one side, and two piratical patricians upon the other, you

would understand the effect which my companions produced upon me.

There was one peculiarity which I observed in their conversation which soothed me very much. I am fond of these Britons, among whom I have spent so much of my life, and I wish them well. It was very pleasing, therefore, to notice that these men insisted upon it in their conversation that the whole object of their visit was the good of the Islanders. Any prospect of advantage to themselves was pushed into the background. I was not clear that these professions could be made to agree with the speech in which Kenna had promised a hundred hides of land to every man on the ship, but on my making this remark, the three chiefs seemed very surprised and hurt by my suspicions, and explained very plausibly that, as the Britons needed them as a guard, they could not aid them better than by settling on the soil, and so being continually at hand in order to help them. In time, they said, they hoped to raise and train the natives to such a point that they would be able to look after themselves. Lanc spoke with some degree of eloquence upon the nobleness of the mission which they had undertaken, and the others clattered their cups of mead (a jar of that unpleasant drink was on the table) in token of their agreement.

I observed also how much interested, and how very earnest and intolerant, these Barbarians were in the matter of religion. Of Christianity they knew nothing, so that although they were aware that the Britons were Christians, they had not a notion of what their creed really was. Yet without examination they started by taking it for granted that their own worship of Woden was absolutely right, and that therefore this other creed must be absolutely wrong. "This vile religion," "this sad superstition," and "this grievous error" were some among the phrases which they used toward it. Instead of expressing pity for anyone who had been misinformed upon so serious a question, their feelings were those of anger, and they declared most earnestly that they would spare no pains to set the matter right, fingering the hilts of their long broad-swords as they said so.

Well, my dear Crassus, you will have had enough of me and of my Saxons. I

have given you a short sketch of these people and their ways. Since I began this letter I have visited the two other ships which have come in, and as I find the same characteristics among the people on board them, I cannot doubt that they lie deeply in the race. For the rest, they are brave, hardy, and very pertinacious in all that they undertake, whereas the Britons, though a great deal more spirited, have not the same steadiness of purpose, their quicker imaginations suggesting always some other course, and their more fiery passions being succeeded by reaction. When I looked from the deck of the first Saxon ship and saw the swaying, excited multitude of

Britons on the beach, contrasting them with the latent, silent men who stood beside me, it seemed to me more than ever dangerous to call in such allies. So strongly did I feel it that I turned to Kenna, who was also looking toward the beach.

“You will own this island before you have finished,” said I.

His eyes sparkled as he gazed.

“Perhaps,” he cried, and then suddenly collecting himself and thinking that he had said too much, he added:

“A temporary occupation—nothing more.”