

King John Captured from Sir Nigel by Sir Aurther Connan Doyle

"Bring water!" said the Prince. "Let the royal leech see to him; for I had rather lose many men than the good Sir James. Ha, Chandos, what have we here?"

A knight lay across the path with his helmet beaten down upon his shoulders. On his surcoat and shield were the arms of a red griffin.

"It is Robert de Duras the spy," said Chandos.

"Well for him that he has met his end," said the angry Prince. "Put him on his shield, Hubert, and let four archers bear him to the monastery. Lay him at the feet of the Cardinal and say that by this sign I greet him. Place my flag on yonder high bush, Walter, and let my tent be raised there, that my friends may know where to seek me."

The flight and pursuit had thundered far away, and the field was deserted save for the numerous groups of weary horsemen who were making their way back, driving their prisoners before them. The archers were scattered over the whole plain, rifling the saddle-bags and gathering the armor of those who had fallen, or searching for their own scattered arrows.

Suddenly, however, as the Prince was turning toward the bush which he had chosen for his headquarters, there broke out from behind him an extraordinary uproar and a group of knights and squires came pouring toward him, all arguing, swearing and abusing each other in French and English at the tops of their voices. In the midst of them limped a stout little man in gold-spangled armor, who appeared to be the object of the contention, for one would drag him one way and one another, as though they would pull him limb from limb. "Nay, fair sirs, gently, gently, I pray you!" he pleaded. "There is enough for all, and no need to treat me so rudely." But ever the hubbub broke out again, and swords gleamed as the angry disputants glared furiously at each other. The Prince's eyes fell upon the small prisoner, and he staggered back with a gasp of astonishment.

"King John!" he cried.

A shout of joy rose from the warriors around him. "The King of France! The King of France a prisoner!" they cried in an ecstasy.

"Nay, nay, fair sirs, let him not hear that we rejoice! Let no word bring pain to his soul!" Running forward the Prince clasped the French King by the two hands.

"Most welcome, sire!" he cried. "Indeed it is good for us that so gallant a knight should stay with us for some short time, since the chance of war has so ordered it. Wine there! Bring wine for the King!"

But John was flushed and angry. His helmet had been roughly torn off, and blood was smeared upon his cheek. His noisy captors stood around him in a circle, eying him hungrily like dogs who have been beaten from their quarry. There were Gascons and English, knights, squires and archers, all pushing and straining.

"I pray you, fair Prince, to get rid of these rude fellows," said King John, "for indeed they have plagued me sorely. By Saint Denis! my arm has been well-nigh pulled from its socket."

"What wish you then?" asked the Prince, turning angrily upon the noisy swarm of his followers.

"We took him, fair lord. He is ours!" cried a score of voices. They closed in, all yelping together like a pack of wolves. "It was I, fair lord!"—"Nay, it was I!"—"You lie, you rascal, it was I!" Again their fierce eyes glared and their blood-stained hands sought the hilts of their weapons.

"Nay, this must be settled here and now!" said the Prince. "I crave your patience, fair and honored sir, for a few brief minutes, since indeed much ill-will may spring from this if it be not set at rest. Who is this tall knight who can scarce keep his hands from the King's shoulder?"

"It is Denis de Morbecque, my lord, a knight of St. Omer, who is in our service, being an outlaw from France."

"I call him to mind. How then, Sir Denis? What say you in this matter?"

"He gave himself to me, fair lord. He had fallen in the press, and I came upon him and seized him. I told him that I was a knight from Artois, and he gave me his glove. See here, I bear it in my hand."

"It is true, fair lord! It is true!" cried a dozen French voices.

"Nay, sir, judge not too soon!" shouted an English squire, pushing his way to the front. "It was I who had him at my mercy, and he is my prisoner, for he spoke to this man only because he could tell by his tongue that he was his own countryman. I took him, and here are a score to prove it."

"It is true, fair lord. We saw it and it was even so," cried a chorus of Englishmen.

At all times there was growling and snapping betwixt the English and their allies of France. The Prince saw how easily this might set a light to such a flame as could not readily be quenched. It must be stamped out now ere it had time to mount.

"Fair and honored lord," he said to the King, "again I pray you for a moment of patience. It is your word and only yours which can tell us what is just and right. To whom were you graciously pleased to commit your royal person?"

King John looked up from the flagon which had been brought to him and wiped his lips with the dawnings of a smile upon his ruddy face.

"It was not this Englishman," he said, and a cheer burst from the Gascons, "nor was it this bastard Frenchman," he added. "To neither of them did I surrender."

There was a hush of surprise.

"To whom then, sir?" asked the Prince.

The King looked slowly round. "There was a devil of a yellow horse," said he. "My poor palfrey went over like a skittle-pin before a ball. Of the rider I know nothing save that he bore red roses on a silver shield. Ah! by Saint Denis, there is the man himself, and there his thrice-accursed horse!"

His head swimming, and moving as if in a dream, Nigel found himself the center of the circle of armed and angry men.

The Prince laid his hand upon his shoulder. "It is the little cock of Tilford Bridge," said he. "On my father's soul, I have ever said that you would win your way. Did you receive the King's surrender?"

"Nay, fair lord, I did not receive it."

"Did you hear him give it?"

"I heard, sir, but I did not know that it was the King. My master Lord Chandos had gone on, and I followed after."

"And left him lying. Then the surrender was not complete, and by the laws of war the ransom goes to Denis de Morbecque, if his story be true."

"It is true," said the King. "He was the second."

"Then the ransom is yours, Denis. But for my part I swear by my father's soul that I had rather have the honor this Squire has gathered than all the richest ransoms of France."

At these words spoken before that circle of noble warriors Nigel's heart gave one great throb, and he dropped upon his knee before the Prince. "Fair lord, how can I thank you?" he murmured. "These words at least are more than any ransom."

"Rise up!" said the smiling Prince, and he smote with his sword upon his shoulder. "England has lost a brave Squire, and has gained a gallant knight. Nay, linger not, I pray! Rise up, Sir Nigel!"