

England Under King John, Called Lackland

At two-and-thirty years of age, JOHN became King of England. His pretty little nephew ARTHUR had the best claim to the throne; but John seized the treasure, and made fine promises to the nobility, and got himself crowned at Westminster within a few weeks after his brother Richard's death. I doubt whether the crown could possibly have been put upon the head of a meaner coward, or a more detestable villain, if England had been searched from end to end to find him out.

The French King, Philip, refused to acknowledge the right of John to his new dignity, and declared in favour of Arthur. You must not suppose that he had any generosity of feeling for the fatherless boy; it merely suited his ambitious schemes to oppose the King of England. So John and the French King went to war about Arthur.

He was a handsome boy, at that time only twelve years old. He was not born when his father, Geoffrey, had his brains trampled out at the tournament; and, besides the misfortune of never having known a father's guidance and protection, he had the additional misfortune to have a foolish mother (CONSTANCE by name), lately married to her third husband. She took Arthur, upon John's accession, to the French King, who pretended to be very much his friend, and who made him a Knight, and promised him his daughter in marriage; but, who cared so little about him in reality, that finding it his interest to make peace with King John for a time, he did so without the least consideration for the poor little Prince, and heartlessly sacrificed all his interests.

Young Arthur, for two years afterwards, lived quietly; and in the course of that time his mother died. But, the French King then finding it his interest to quarrel with King John again, again made Arthur his pretence, and invited the orphan boy to court. 'You know your rights, Prince,' said the French King, 'and you would like to be a King. Is it not so?' 'Truly,' said Prince Arthur, 'I should greatly like to be a King!' 'Then,' said Philip, 'you shall have two hundred gentlemen who are Knights of mine, and with them you shall go to win back the provinces belonging to you, of which your uncle, the usurping King of England, has taken possession. I myself, meanwhile, will head a force against him in Normandy.'

Poor Arthur was so flattered and so grateful that he signed a treaty with the crafty French King, agreeing to consider him his superior Lord, and that the French King should keep for himself whatever he could take from King John.

Now, King John was so bad in all ways, and King Philip was so perfidious, that Arthur, between the two, might as well have been a lamb between a fox and a wolf. But, being so young, he was ardent and flushed with hope; and, when the people of Brittany (which was his inheritance) sent him five hundred more knights and five thousand foot soldiers, he believed his fortune was made. The people of Brittany had been fond of him from his birth, and had requested that he might be called Arthur, in remembrance of that dimly-famous English Arthur, of whom I told you early in this book, whom they believed to have been the brave friend and companion of an old King of their own. They had tales among them about a prophet called MERLIN (of the same old time), who had foretold that their own King should be restored to them after hundreds of years; and they believed that the prophecy would be fulfilled in Arthur; that the time would come when he would rule them with a crown of Brittany upon his head; and when neither King of France nor King of England would have any power over them. When Arthur found himself riding in a glittering suit of armour on a richly caparisoned horse, at the head of his train of knights and soldiers, he began to believe this too, and to consider old Merlin a very superior prophet.

He did not know - how could he, being so innocent and inexperienced? - that his little army was a mere nothing against the power of the King of England. The French King knew it; but the poor boy's fate was little to him, so that the King of England was worried and distressed. Therefore, King Philip went his way into Normandy and Prince Arthur went his way towards Mirebeau, a French town near Poitiers, both very well pleased.

Prince Arthur went to attack the town of Mirebeau, because his grandmother Eleanor, who has so often made her appearance in this history (and who had always been his mother's enemy), was living there, and because his Knights said, 'Prince, if you can take her prisoner, you will be able to bring the King your uncle to terms!' But she was not to be easily taken. She was old enough by this time - eighty - but she was as full of stratagem as she was full

of years and wickedness. Receiving intelligence of young Arthur's approach, she shut herself up in a high tower, and encouraged her soldiers to defend it like men. Prince Arthur with his little army besieged the high tower. King John, hearing how matters stood, came up to the rescue, with HIS army. So here was a strange family-party! The boy-Prince besieging his grandmother, and his uncle besieging him!

This position of affairs did not last long. One summer night King John, by treachery, got his men into the town, surprised Prince Arthur's force, took two hundred of his knights, and seized the Prince himself in his bed. The Knights were put in heavy irons, and driven away in open carts drawn by bullocks, to various dungeons where they were most inhumanly treated, and where some of them were starved to death. Prince Arthur was sent to the castle of Falaise.

One day, while he was in prison at that castle, mournfully thinking it strange that one so young should be in so much trouble, and looking out of the small window in the deep dark wall, at the summer sky and the birds, the door was softly opened, and he saw his uncle the King standing in the shadow of the archway, looking very grim.

'Arthur,' said the King, with his wicked eyes more on the stone floor than on his nephew, 'will you not trust to the gentleness, the friendship, and the truthfulness of your loving uncle?'

'I will tell my loving uncle that,' replied the boy, 'when he does me right. Let him restore to me my kingdom of England, and then come to me and ask the question.'

The King looked at him and went out. 'Keep that boy close prisoner,' said he to the warden of the castle.

Then, the King took secret counsel with the worst of his nobles how the Prince was to be got rid of. Some said, 'Put out his eyes and keep him in prison, as Robert of Normandy was kept.' Others said, 'Have him stabbed.' Others, 'Have him hanged.' Others, 'Have him poisoned.'

King John, feeling that in any case, whatever was done afterwards, it would be a satisfaction to his mind to have those handsome eyes burnt out that had looked at him so proudly while his own royal eyes were blinking at the stone floor, sent certain ruffians to Falaise to blind the boy with red-hot irons. But Arthur so pathetically entreated them, and shed such piteous tears, and so appealed to HUBERT DE BOURG (or BURGH), the warden of the castle, who had a love for him, and was an honourable, tender man, that Hubert could not bear it. To his eternal honour he prevented the torture from being performed, and, at his own risk, sent the savages away.

The chafed and disappointed King bethought himself of the stabbing suggestion next, and, with his shuffling manner and his cruel face, proposed it to one William de Bray. 'I am a gentleman and not an executioner,' said William de Bray, and left the presence with disdain.

But it was not difficult for a King to hire a murderer in those days. King John found one for his money, and sent him down to the castle of Falaise. 'On what errand dost thou come?' said Hubert to this fellow. 'To despatch young Arthur,' he returned. 'Go back to him who sent thee,' answered Hubert, 'and say that I will do it!'

King John very well knowing that Hubert would never do it, but that he courageously sent this reply to save the Prince or gain time, despatched messengers to convey the young prisoner to the castle of Rouen.

Arthur was soon forced from the good Hubert - of whom he had never stood in greater need than then - carried away by night, and lodged in his new prison: where, through his grated window, he could hear the deep waters of the river Seine, rippling against the stone wall below.

One dark night, as he lay sleeping, dreaming perhaps of rescue by those unfortunate gentlemen who were obscurely suffering and dying in his cause, he was roused, and bidden by his jailer to come down the staircase to the foot of the tower. He hurriedly dressed himself and obeyed. When they came to the bottom of the winding stairs, and the night air from the river blew upon their faces, the jailer trod upon his torch and put it out. Then, Arthur, in

the darkness, was hurriedly drawn into a solitary boat. And in that boat, he found his uncle and one other man.

He knelt to them, and prayed them not to murder him. Deaf to his entreaties, they stabbed him and sunk his body in the river with heavy stones. When the spring-morning broke, the tower-door was closed, the boat was gone, the river sparkled on its way, and never more was any trace of the poor boy beheld by mortal eyes.

The news of this atrocious murder being spread in England, awakened a hatred of the King (already odious for his many vices, and for his having stolen away and married a noble lady while his own wife was living) that never slept again through his whole reign. In Brittany, the indignation was intense. Arthur's own sister ELEANOR was in the power of John and shut up in a convent at Bristol, but his half-sister ALICE was in Brittany. The people chose her, and the murdered prince's father-in-law, the last husband of Constance, to represent them; and carried their fiery complaints to King Philip. King Philip summoned King John (as the holder of territory in France) to come before him and defend himself. King John refusing to appear, King Philip declared him false, perjured, and guilty; and again made war. In a little time, by conquering the greater part of his French territory, King Philip deprived him of one-third of his dominions. And, through all the fighting that took place, King John was always found, either to be eating and drinking, like a gluttonous fool, when the danger was at a distance, or to be running away, like a beaten cur, when it was near.

You might suppose that when he was losing his dominions at this rate, and when his own nobles cared so little for him or his cause that they plainly refused to follow his banner out of England, he had enemies enough. But he made another enemy of the Pope, which he did in this way.

The Archbishop of Canterbury dying, and the junior monks of that place wishing to get the start of the senior monks in the appointment of his successor, met together at midnight, secretly elected a certain REGINALD, and sent him off to Rome to get the Pope's approval. The senior monks and the King soon finding this out, and being very angry about it, the junior monks gave way, and all the monks together elected the Bishop of Norwich, who

was the King's favourite. The Pope, hearing the whole story, declared that neither election would do for him, and that HE elected STEPHEN LANGTON. The monks submitting to the Pope, the King turned them all out bodily, and banished them as traitors. The Pope sent three bishops to the King, to threaten him with an Interdict. The King told the bishops that if any Interdict were laid upon his kingdom, he would tear out the eyes and cut off the noses of all the monks he could lay hold of, and send them over to Rome in that undecorated state as a present for their master. The bishops, nevertheless, soon published the Interdict, and fled.

After it had lasted a year, the Pope proceeded to his next step; which was Excommunication. King John was declared excommunicated, with all the usual ceremonies. The King was so incensed at this, and was made so desperate by the disaffection of his Barons and the hatred of his people, that it is said he even privately sent ambassadors to the Turks in Spain, offering to renounce his religion and hold his kingdom of them if they would help him. It is related that the ambassadors were admitted to the presence of the Turkish Emir through long lines of Moorish guards, and that they found the Emir with his eyes seriously fixed on the pages of a large book, from which he never once looked up. That they gave him a letter from the King containing his proposals, and were gravely dismissed. That presently the Emir sent for one of them, and conjured him, by his faith in his religion, to say what kind of man the King of England truly was? That the ambassador, thus pressed, replied that the King of England was a false tyrant, against whom his own subjects would soon rise. And that this was quite enough for the Emir.

Money being, in his position, the next best thing to men, King John spared no means of getting it. He set on foot another oppressing and torturing of the unhappy Jews (which was quite in his way), and invented a new punishment for one wealthy Jew of Bristol. Until such time as that Jew should produce a certain large sum of money, the King sentenced him to be imprisoned, and, every day, to have one tooth violently wrenched out of his head - beginning with the double teeth. For seven days, the oppressed man bore the daily pain and lost the daily tooth; but, on the eighth, he paid the money. With the treasure raised in such ways, the

King made an expedition into Ireland, where some English nobles had revolted. It was one of the very few places from which he did not run away; because no resistance was shown. He made another expedition into Wales - whence he DID run away in the end: but not before he had got from the Welsh people, as hostages, twenty-seven young men of the best families; every one of whom he caused to be slain in the following year.

To Interdict and Excommunication, the Pope now added his last sentence; Deposition. He proclaimed John no longer King, absolved all his subjects from their allegiance, and sent Stephen Langton and others to the King of France to tell him that, if he would invade England, he should be forgiven all his sins - at least, should be forgiven them by the Pope, if that would do.

As there was nothing that King Philip desired more than to invade England, he collected a great army at Rouen, and a fleet of seventeen hundred ships to bring them over. But the English people, however bitterly they hated the King, were not a people to suffer invasion quietly. They flocked to Dover, where the English standard was, in such great numbers to enrol themselves as defenders of their native land, that there were not provisions for them, and the King could only select and retain sixty thousand. But, at this crisis, the Pope, who had his own reasons for objecting to either King John or King Philip being too powerful, interfered. He entrusted a legate, whose name was PANDOLF, with the easy task of frightening King John. He sent him to the English Camp, from France, to terrify him with exaggerations of King Philip's power, and his own weakness in the discontent of the English Barons and people. Pandolf discharged his commission so well, that King John, in a wretched panic, consented to acknowledge Stephen Langton; to resign his kingdom 'to God, Saint Peter, and Saint Paul' - which meant the Pope; and to hold it, ever afterwards, by the Pope's leave, on payment of an annual sum of money. To this shameful contract he publicly bound himself in the church of the Knights Templars at Dover: where he laid at the legate's feet a part of the tribute, which the legate haughtily trampled upon. But they DO say, that this was merely a genteel flourish, and that he was afterwards seen to pick it up and pocket it.

There was an unfortunate prophet, the name of Peter, who had greatly increased King John's terrors by predicting that he would be unknighthed (which the King supposed to signify that he would die) before the Feast of the Ascension should be past. That was the day after this humiliation. When the next morning came, and the King, who had been trembling all night, found himself alive and safe, he ordered the prophet - and his son too - to be dragged through the streets at the tails of horses, and then hanged, for having frightened him.

As King John had now submitted, the Pope, to King Philip's great astonishment, took him under his protection, and informed King Philip that he found he could not give him leave to invade England. The angry Philip resolved to do it without his leave but he gained nothing and lost much; for, the English, commanded by the Earl of Salisbury, went over, in five hundred ships, to the French coast, before the French fleet had sailed away from it, and utterly defeated the whole.

The Pope then took off his three sentences, one after another, and empowered Stephen Langton publicly to receive King John into the favour of the Church again, and to ask him to dinner. The King, who hated Langton with all his might and main - and with reason too, for he was a great and a good man, with whom such a King could have no sympathy - pretended to cry and to be VERY grateful. There was a little difficulty about settling how much the King should pay as a recompense to the clergy for the losses he had caused them; but, the end of it was, that the superior clergy got a good deal, and the inferior clergy got little or nothing - which has also happened since King John's time, I believe.

When all these matters were arranged, the King in his triumph became more fierce, and false, and insolent to all around him than he had ever been. An alliance of sovereigns against King Philip, gave him an opportunity of landing an army in France; with which he even took a town! But, on the French King's gaining a great victory, he ran away, of course, and made a truce for five years.

And now the time approached when he was to be still further humbled, and made to feel, if he could feel anything, what a wretched creature he was. Of all men in the world, Stephen Langton seemed raised up by Heaven to oppose and subdue him.

When he ruthlessly burnt and destroyed the property of his own subjects, because their Lords, the Barons, would not serve him abroad, Stephen Langton fearlessly reproved and threatened him. When he swore to restore the laws of King Edward, or the laws of King Henry the First, Stephen Langton knew his falsehood, and pursued him through all his evasions. When the Barons met at the abbey of Saint Edmund's-Bury, to consider their wrongs and the King's oppressions, Stephen Langton roused them by his fervid words to demand a solemn charter of rights and liberties from their perjured master, and to swear, one by one, on the High Altar, that they would have it, or would wage war against him to the death. When the King hid himself in London from the Barons, and was at last obliged to receive them, they told him roundly they would not believe him unless Stephen Langton became a surety that he would keep his word. When he took the Cross to invest himself with some interest, and belong to something that was received with favour, Stephen Langton was still immovable. When he appealed to the Pope, and the Pope wrote to Stephen Langton in behalf of his new favourite, Stephen Langton was deaf, even to the Pope himself, and saw before him nothing but the welfare of England and the crimes of the English King.

At Easter-time, the Barons assembled at Stamford, in Lincolnshire, in proud array, and, marching near to Oxford where the King was, delivered into the hands of Stephen Langton and two others, a list of grievances. 'And these,' they said, 'he must redress, or we will do it for ourselves!' When Stephen Langton told the King as much, and read the list to him, he went half mad with rage. But that did him no more good than his afterwards trying to pacify the Barons with lies. They called themselves and their followers, 'The army of God and the Holy Church.' Marching through the country, with the people thronging to them everywhere (except at Northampton, where they failed in an attack upon the castle), they at last triumphantly set up their banner in London itself, whither the whole land, tired of the tyrant, seemed to flock to join them. Seven knights alone, of all the knights in England, remained with the King; who, reduced to this strait, at last sent the Earl of Pembroke to the Barons to say that he approved of everything, and would meet them to sign their charter when they would. 'Then,' said the Barons, 'let the day be the fifteenth of June, and the place, Runny-Mead.'

On Monday, the fifteenth of June, one thousand two hundred and fourteen, the King came from Windsor Castle, and the Barons came from the town of Staines, and they met on Runny-Mead, which is still a pleasant meadow by the Thames, where rushes grow in the clear water of the winding river, and its banks are green with grass and trees. On the side of the Barons, came the General of their army, ROBERT FITZ-WALTER, and a great concourse of the nobility of England. With the King, came, in all, some four-and- twenty persons of any note, most of whom despised him, and were merely his advisers in form. On that great day, and in that great company, the King signed MAGNA CHARTA - the great charter of England - by which he pledged himself to maintain the Church in its rights; to relieve the Barons of oppressive obligations as vassals of the Crown - of which the Barons, in their turn, pledged themselves to relieve THEIR vassals, the people; to respect the liberties of London and all other cities and boroughs; to protect foreign merchants who came to England; to imprison no man without a fair trial; and to sell, delay, or deny justice to none. As the Barons knew his falsehood well, they further required, as their securities, that he should send out of his kingdom all his foreign troops; that for two months they should hold possession of the city of London, and Stephen Langton of the Tower; and that five-and- twenty of their body, chosen by themselves, should be a lawful committee to watch the keeping of the charter, and to make war upon him if he broke it.

All this he was obliged to yield. He signed the charter with a smile, and, if he could have looked agreeable, would have done so, as he departed from the splendid assembly. When he got home to Windsor Castle, he was quite a madman in his helpless fury. And he broke the charter immediately afterwards.

He sent abroad for foreign soldiers, and sent to the Pope for help, and plotted to take London by surprise, while the Barons should be holding a great tournament at Stamford, which they had agreed to hold there as a celebration of the charter. The Barons, however, found him out and put it off. Then, when the Barons desired to see him and tax him with his treachery, he made numbers of appointments with them, and kept none, and shifted from place to place, and was constantly sneaking and skulking about. At last he appeared at Dover, to join his foreign soldiers, of whom numbers

came into his pay; and with them he besieged and took Rochester Castle, which was occupied by knights and soldiers of the Barons. He would have hanged them every one; but the leader of the foreign soldiers, fearful of what the English people might afterwards do to him, interfered to save the knights; therefore the King was fain to satisfy his vengeance with the death of all the common men. Then, he sent the Earl of Salisbury, with one portion of his army, to ravage the eastern part of his own dominions, while he carried fire and slaughter into the northern part; torturing, plundering, killing, and inflicting every possible cruelty upon the people; and, every morning, setting a worthy example to his men by setting fire, with his own monster-hands, to the house where he had slept last night. Nor was this all; for the Pope, coming to the aid of his precious friend, laid the kingdom under an Interdict again, because the people took part with the Barons. It did not much matter, for the people had grown so used to it now, that they had begun to think nothing about it. It occurred to them - perhaps to Stephen Langton too - that they could keep their churches open, and ring their bells, without the Pope's permission as well as with it. So, they tried the experiment - and found that it succeeded perfectly.

It being now impossible to bear the country, as a wilderness of cruelty, or longer to hold any terms with such a forsworn outlaw of a King, the Barons sent to Louis, son of the French monarch, to offer him the English crown. Caring as little for the Pope's excommunication of him if he accepted the offer, as it is possible his father may have cared for the Pope's forgiveness of his sins, he landed at Sandwich (King John immediately running away from Dover, where he happened to be), and went on to London. The Scottish King, with whom many of the Northern English Lords had taken refuge; numbers of the foreign soldiers, numbers of the Barons, and numbers of the people went over to him every day; - King John, the while, continually running away in all directions.

The career of Louis was checked however, by the suspicions of the Barons, founded on the dying declaration of a French Lord, that when the kingdom was conquered he was sworn to banish them as traitors, and to give their estates to some of his own Nobles. Rather than suffer this, some of the Barons hesitated: others even went over to King John.

It seemed to be the turning-point of King John's fortunes, for, in his savage and murderous course, he had now taken some towns and met with some successes. But, happily for England and humanity, his death was near. Crossing a dangerous quicksand, called the Wash, not very far from Wisbeach, the tide came up and nearly drowned his army. He and his soldiers escaped; but, looking back from the shore when he was safe, he saw the roaring water sweep down in a torrent, overturn the waggons, horses, and men, that carried his treasure, and engulf them in a raging whirlpool from which nothing could be delivered.

Cursing, and swearing, and gnawing his fingers, he went on to Swinestead Abbey, where the monks set before him quantities of pears, and peaches, and new cider - some say poison too, but there is very little reason to suppose so - of which he ate and drank in an immoderate and beastly way. All night he lay ill of a burning fever, and haunted with horrible fears. Next day, they put him in a horse-litter, and carried him to Sleaford Castle, where he passed another night of pain and horror. Next day, they carried him, with greater difficulty than on the day before, to the castle of Newark upon Trent; and there, on the eighteenth of October, in the forty-ninth year of his age, and the seventeenth of his vile reign, was an end of this miserable brute.