

The Rook

Jeffery Farnol

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The Rook

By Jeffery Farnol

"Very 'ot, it be," quoth Landlord John, mopping his rubicund visage.

"Ay, it is, John," answered little Parson Mildmay. "I trust it won't keep Sir Robert from our customary game."

"Not a 'ot day, sir! Fire nor flood wouldn't keep 'im away. I know 'im well, sir! Me, as seen him rally our broken line at Malplaquet, so bold and cool, when he lost his arm! And yonder 'e comes I do b'lieve!" and away sped Landlord John as horsehoofs clattered in the yard below; and very presently he was back again to usher in Sir Robert Madden, squire of Isfield, a big, hearty man who, tossing hat and riding-whip on the settle, flapped his empty right sleeve at Parson Mildmay in cheery greeting.

"How are ye, Will, man?" quoth he, clasping the little cleric's spare shoulder, affectionately. "Aha, the armies stand ready marshaled, I see," he laughed, gesturing towards the chessboard. "Well, have at ye!"

He tugged at the bell-rope. "Mary lass," said he to the trim maid who answered, "ask the gentleman who rode in with me to walk upstairs. I know him not—I met him on the road," he added. "But he expressed a desire to watch our game."

And presently, with quick, light tread and jingle of spurs, a courteous stranger entered, a slim, neat man in Ramillie wig and laced coat, who bowed to each in turn, hat a-flourish.

"Gentlemen, I protest you're very kind!" said he, drawing up a chair as the others, bowing their acknowledgments, seated themselves at the table. "As an humble student of this great and ancient game, I thank you."

The game began. At once the Squire became fierce-eyed and tremendously grim, the Parson remained as mildly serene as ever, while the Stranger watched each move with an expression keenly alert, as the game progressed.

Presently the little Parson spoke:

"Sir Robert, my dear Bob, I give you checkmate!"

"Egad and checkmate it is, Will!" exclaimed the Squire.

The Stranger, keen gaze upon the pieces, hitched his chair a little nearer:

"Your pardon, sir," said he, "but had you brought up your knight—"

"Sir," cried the Squire, rising, "up and at it; take my seat, play him yourself and if you win, by George, we'll have a bottle to celebrate your victory, egad!"

"Sir," said the Stranger, taking the proffered chair with a certain eagerness, "I vow you're very kind!"

The pieces were set, Parson and the Stranger bowed to each other and began to play.

Move followed move in a hushed and expectant silence, until at last Sir Robert leaned back and chuckled:

"Fore gad, Will, 'tis no blundering soldier thou'rt facing now!"

"Indeed, no, Bob!" murmured the little Parson, studying the pieces with his gentle, untroubled eyes. "'Tis desperate attack and I'm hard beset, still I do not despair," and he moved his Queen.

"Check, sir!" said the Stranger, instantly countering with a Bishop.

"How now, Will, man?" quoth the Squire. "He hath thee front and flank!"

"'Tis awkward situation, Bob, yet excellent game!"

And now was silence again while the battle raged—attack and counter-attack, cunning feints, bold advances and masterly retreats....

"Hey ... Will..." gasped the Squire suddenly, "by heaven ... thy Queen's lost, man!" The Parson nodded:

"'Twould seem so, Bob—ay, 'tis gone!" he sighed as the Stranger swept it from the board. "Ay, my Queen is no more, but"—his small hand moved the Castle, "I thus give—checkmate!"

A moment's breathless silence, the Stranger's chair fell crashing:

"Ha, the devil!" he exclaimed with a strange, wild look. "'Twas the Rook—the accursed Rook!" and he smote the board so violently that divers of the pieces leapt through the open lattice into the yard below. "Ha, by God, the curse is on me!" Then, snatching up hat and whip, "Gentlemen," said he in the same strange agitation, "I crave your pardon, but—"

"Sir," quoth the Squire, black brows knit across hawk-nose, "you ha' need ... some explanation—"

"'Tis simple and mayhap you'll judge sufficiently foolish, sirs. I am a man o' desperate ventures ... I am superstitious ... it hath been foretold me ... ah, I was warned ... warned 'gainst the Rook!"

"Incredible folly, sir—" cried the Squire.

"Sir, I pray it may prove so—farewell!" And with the word, he was gone; they heard the jingle of his spurs upon the stair and a moment or so thereafter a wild gallop dying rapidly in distance.

"The gentleman would seem in desperate haste, Bob," quoth the little Parson, placid gaze upon the open lattice. "A something strange person! Yet he played notable good game, Bob! Ay, had not my Queen lured him—"

"Hah, 'twas loss strategic, then?"

"Bob, even so!"

"Then faith, we'll crack a bottle; thou'rt mightier player e'en than I dreamed thee, Will." Reaching for the bell-rope, Sir Robert paused as from the road came sudden hubbub, loud voices ... a noise of horses ... and then, clear-ringing on the stilly evening air, a sharp report, followed by others in rapid succession.

"Pistol shots!" said the Squire.

Descending to the inn-yard they beheld a crowd of villagers, who, espying Sir Robert's tall, familiar presence, touched their hats, grinned and stood aside, showing four sturdy fellows hauling between them a man, torn and bloody, in whom they recognized the polite Stranger.

"Why, how's this? What's here?" demanded Sir Robert.
"I'm a magistrate—what do ye with this gentleman?"

"Gentleman, your honor?" cried one of the four with hoarse laugh. "This same fine gentleman be Cap'n Jasper the Highwayman!"

"Eh—are ye sure?"

"As death, your honor. Knows 'is face, I do! Knows 'is hoss, I do—nothin' on four legs to catch his bay mare, but she went lame an' no wonder—caught in 'er hoof, jammed 'twixt shoe and frog was—this here!" and the speaker held up a Red Castle.

"So ... you see—gentlemen," gasped the pallid captive, "the prophecy was ... true! That accursed ... Rook!"

[The end of *The Rook* by Jeffery Farnol]