



## How Robin Hood Came to Be an Outlaw

**I**n merry England long ago, when good King Henry the Second ruled, a famous outlaw lived in Sherwood Forest near the town of Nottingham. His name was Robin Hood, and no archer was his equal, nor was there ever such a band as his hundred and forty merry men. They lived carefree lives in the forest; they passed the time competing at archery or battling with the quarterstaff; they lived on the King's deer and washed it down with strong October ale. They were outlaws, of course, but the common people loved them—for no one who came to Robin in need went away empty-handed.

Robin Hood had not always been an outlaw. Before he became Robin Hood the outlaw, he

was known as Robin of Locksley.

One day, when Robin of Locksley was a strong and bold young man of eighteen, the Sheriff of Nottingham announced an archery match. The prize was to be a keg of ale. "Now, that is my kind of prize," Robin said to himself. Taking his sturdy longbow of yew wood and a quiver of arrows, he set off from Locksley Town through Sherwood Forest toward Nottingham.

It was an early May morning, when flowers bloom and birds sing and people clean their homes. The sun threw playful shadows on the path and Robin whistled as he walked, thinking about winning the prize.

As he strode merrily along, he came upon some fifteen of the King's foresters seated beneath an oak tree. They were yeomen: that is to say, free men of the working class; they were able to handle weapons but ranked below the nobility. The job of the King's foresters was to protect the King's forests from trespassers and make sure that no one hunted the King's deer, for that was against the law. These particular foresters were taking time from their work to feast and make merry. They helped themselves to a huge meat pie, washing it down with ale from a nearby barrel. Then one, with his mouth full, called out to young Robin, "Hello, lad, where are you taking that toy bow and those cheap arrows?"

Robin grew angry, for no young man likes that kind of talk.

“My bow and arrows are as good as yours,” he said. “I go to the shooting match at Nottingham Town; there I will shoot against other strong yeomen, to win a keg of good ale.”

Then a man holding a horn of ale cried out, “Why, boy, your mother’s milk is barely dry on your lips. You talk of competing with good strong men at archery—yet you can hardly draw a man’s bow!”

“I’ll bet your best archer fifteen pounds,” bold Robin said, “that I hit the target at three hundred yards.”

At this all laughed aloud, and one said, “It is easy for you to brag and offer bets, boy. You know that there are no targets around here, so we cannot hold you to your words.”

Another mocked, “Soon he will be mixing ale with his milk.”

At this Robin grew infuriated. “Listen, and look,” he said. “I see a herd of deer far away at the edge of the clearing, even more than three hundred yards away. I will bet you fifteen pounds that I can slay the best of the herd.”

“Done!” cried the forester who had spoken first, pulling out golden coins. “And here are fifteen pounds. I bet that you will not kill a single deer, let alone the best of the herd.”

Robin took his longbow in his hand, strung

it easily, and placed a broad English arrow trimmed—'fletched,' as they say—with gray goose feathers. He raised, aimed, pulled the string back to his ear, and in the next moment the bowstring sang. The arrow sped down the clearing like a sparrow hawk. A magnificent buck, with the largest antlers in the herd, leaped with the impact and fell dead in the green grass.

"Ha!" cried Robin "How do you like that shot, good fellow? I would have won this bet even had it been three hundred pounds."

All the foresters were filled with rage, but the angriest was the one who had lost the bet.

"No!" he cried. "It was a silly bet. Get out of here, right now, or I'll spank you so hard you'll never walk again."

"Do you not know," said another, "that you just killed one of the King's deer? According to the law of our good King Henry, your ears should be cut off for this!"

"Catch him!" cried a third.

"No," said a fourth, "let him go. He is just a child."

Robin said nothing but glared at the foresters—especially the one who refused to pay his bet. He turned on his heel and strode away with the bitter anger of any hot-tempered youth who gets disrespect from his elders.

It would have been far better for the loser of the bet had he left Robin alone, but he had drunk

more than his share. Before anyone could interfere, he sprang to his feet and fitted an arrow to his bow. "Yes, and I'll give you reason to hurry!" he said, and sent the arrow whistling after Robin.

Had the forester been sober, Robin would never have taken another step, but fortunately the older man's head was spinning with the ale. Even so, the arrow came within three inches of Robin's head. Robin turned, quickly drew his own bow, and sent back an arrow in reply.

"You said I was no archer," he cried. "Say so now!"

The shaft flew straight. The man fell forward with a cry and lay face down in the grass. His arrows spilled rattling from his quiver, wet with the blood of his heart. Then, before the others could gather their wits, Robin vanished into the depths of the forest. Some started after him but with no enthusiasm, for each feared the same fate. Soon they all came back, lifted their dead comrade up, and carried his body away to Nottingham.

Meanwhile Robin ran through the green wood. All the joy and brightness was gone from everything for his heart was sick with the realization that he had slain a man. "Poor devil," he cried, "your wife will weep today and because of me! I wish you had never said a word to me, or that I had never come your way, or even that my right forefinger had been cut off before this! I shot in haste, but I will grieve forever!"

And so he came to be called Robin Hood and to live in the forest. Gone forever were the happy, carefree times with his friends in Locksley Town. He had committed two crimes: murder and shooting the King's deer. A reward of two hundred pounds was offered for his capture. The Sheriff of Nottingham swore to bring this renegade Robin Hood to justice. He wanted the reward money but he also wanted revenge, for the slain forester was a relative of his.

Robin Hood hid in Sherwood Forest for the next year, during which he gathered around him many other outcasts. Some had gotten hungry in wintertime and been spotted shooting deer, yet escaped; others had lost their lands and property to powerful nobles or even to the King himself. Sherwood became a refuge for those who had been wronged or were on the run from the law. Over a hundred strong yeomen came to Sherwood that year, and they chose Robin Hood as their chief.

They vowed to treat their oppressors as they had been treated. Barons, abbots, knights, nobles, and squires all got rich—at the expense of the poor—with burdensome taxes, high rents, and wrongful fines. Robin's merry men would steal from them in turn. They would help the poor, giving them back what had been unfairly taken from them. They vowed never to harm a child or wrong any woman. Many a poor family came to

Sherwood in need and found kindness and help. Soon the common people felt that Robin was one of their own, and they praised and admired him.

One merry morning, when all the birds were singing among the leaves and his men were washing in the cold stream, Robin said to them, "For fourteen days we have had no sport, and I am going out to seek adventure. Wait here, my merry men, and listen well. If I am in trouble, I will sound three blasts of my horn—come quickly!"

With that he strode away through the leafy forest and soon came to the edge of Sherwood. There he wandered for a long time, on highways and side roads, through woods and fields. He joked and laughed with lovely young maidens and tipped his cap to dignified ladies on carriages. He saw fat monks on heavily laden donkeys, gallant knights with flashing armor and lances, pageboys in crimson, and merchants from Nottingham Town—but no adventure. Finally he came to a wide, rocky stream with only a single great log for a bridge. As he approached, he saw a tall stranger coming from the other side. Each hurried, thinking to cross first.

"Stand back," Robin said, "and let the better man cross first."

"Then stand back yourself," answered the stranger, "for I am the better man."

"We will see," Robin replied. "Meanwhile, stay back, or I will welcome you to Nottingham

with an arrow in the ribs.”

“Now,” the stranger said, “if you even dare touch your bowstring, I will beat you until your hide is as many colors as a beggar’s cloak.”

“You talk like a donkey for I could put this arrow clear through that proud heart of yours before a friar could say ‘grace.’”

“And you sound like a coward,” answered the stranger. “There you stand with a good yew bow to shoot at me, while I have only a plain blackthorn staff to fight you with.”

“I have been called many things but never a coward,” replied Robin. “Very well; I will set aside my bow and arrows, and go cut myself a staff. Then we will see what kind of man you are. Wait here.”

“With pleasure,” the stranger said, leaning on his strong staff.

Then Robin Hood stepped into the forest, picked out a small oak tree, and quickly cut away the limbs and roots. Before long he had a six-foot quarterstaff, just thick enough to fill his strong hands. As he worked, he kept an eye on the newcomer, for never before had he seen such a huge, stout fellow. Robin was tall, but this man was at least seven feet tall—and even broader in the shoulders than Robin.

“Even so,” Robin said to himself, “I will give you a merry beating, my good fellow.” Then, aloud: “Here is my staff. Now meet me on the



log—if you are not afraid, of course—and we will fight until one of us falls into the stream.”

“A fine plan!” cried the stranger, twirling his staff over his head until it whistled.

In a moment Robin met the stranger on the bridge, faked in one direction, then launched a blow at the stranger’s head that would have sent him right into the water. But the stranger skillfully blocked the blow, answering with one just as powerful; this Robin also blocked. So they stood, neither backing off, trading blows and blocks and bruises for over an hour. Neither thought of giving up. Sometimes they stopped to rest, each thinking that he had never in all his life seen such great skill with the quarterstaff.

At last Robin gave the stranger a belt in the ribs that made dust fly from his jacket like smoke. The bigger man nearly fell off the bridge but regained his balance and replied with a thwack that caught Robin along the head, drawing blood. Robin grew angry and swung with all his might, but the stranger successfully blocked this blow. Then he got through Robin’s guard with one more mighty swing, bowling him head over heels into the water with a splash.

“And where are you now, young man?” shouted the stranger, roaring with laughter.

“Oh, in the drink!” cried Robin, laughing at his sorry state. Then he got to his feet and waded ashore.



“Shake my hand,” cried Robin, when he had reached the bank. “I must say, you are a strong and brave man, and very good with the cudgel. My head is humming like a hive of bees in June.” Then he clapped his horn to his lips and sounded a blast that echoed through the forest. “No one between here and Canterbury Town could have done this to me.”

“And you,” laughed the stranger, “know how to take your cudgeling like a true yeoman.”

But now the woods rustled, and suddenly forty good men in Lincoln green burst into view, led by merry Will Stutely.

“Good master,” cried Will, “how is this? You are soaked to the skin.”

“Yes, indeed,” answered jolly Robin. “That fellow over there has not only tumbled me into the water, but given me a good beating.”

“Then he shall have a ducking and a beating himself!” cried Will Stutely. “Have at him, lads!”

Will and twenty yeomen leaped on the stranger, but he was ready. He struck left and right with his staff, and even though he was brought down by sheer numbers, many of Robin’s men were soon rubbing sore heads.

“No, stop!” cried Robin, laughing until his sore sides ached again. “He is a good, brave man, and we will not harm him. Now listen, newcomer: will you join my band? You will have three suits of Lincoln green each year, as well as

a salary of twenty-five pounds, plus a share of anything else good that we find. You will dine on fresh deer meat and drink stout ale, and you will be my right-hand man, for never in my life did I see such skill with the staff. Will you be one of my merry men?"

"I do not know," growled the stranger, for he was angry at being roughed up. "If you handle a bow no better than you do a staff, you would not be called yeomen where I come from. But if any of you can outshoot me, then I will reconsider."

"You have a lot of nerve," Robin said, "but I will humor you. Will Stutely, cut a piece of white bark four fingers wide, and set it eighty yards away on that oak. Now, stranger, hit that with an arrow and call yourself an archer."

"I will," he answered. "Give me a good stout bow and a fair arrow, and I will."

He chose the sturdiest bow among them all, next to Robin's own, and an arrow with perfect gray-goose fletching. Then he stepped up to the mark. All the band sat to watch him shoot. The newcomer drew the arrow to his cheek and let it fly, sending it so straight that it hit the bark in the very center. "Aha!" he cried. "Beat that, if you can!" The yeomen clapped their hands at so fine a shot.

"A good shot indeed," answered Robin. "I cannot beat it, but perhaps I can ruin it."

Then Robin took his own bow, chose and drew an arrow, and shot with all his skill. The arrow flew straight, so truly that it hit the end of the stranger's arrow and splintered it. All the yeomen leaped to their feet and cheered their master's amazing shot.

"I swear on my honor," cried the stranger, "I have never seen or even heard of anything like that in my whole life! I will be one of your men."

"Then I have gained a good man this day," Robin said. "What is your name, good fellow?"

"Men call me John Little," answered the stranger.

Then Will Stutely, who loved a good joke, eyed the huge man and said, "No, my friend, I think you should have another name. You should be baptized Little John!"

Robin Hood and his band laughed aloud until the stranger began to grow angry.

"Make fun of me," John Little said to Stutely, "and you will have sore bones—and soon."

"Do not be angry, good friend," Robin Hood said, "for the name fits. From this day you shall be called Little John. Come, my merry men: we must prepare a feast to baptize the little one!"

They turned and plunged into the forest again to their camp. It was deep in the woods;

they had built huts of bark and branches, with couches and beds of deerskin stuffed with grasses. There was a great spreading oak tree, under which Robin Hood usually sat on a seat of green moss. Here they found the rest of the band, some of whom had been hunting and had brought in two fat does. They built great fires and roasted the deer, opening a barrel of strong ale.

When the feast was ready they all sat down, but Robin sat Little John on his right, for he was to be second in command. The band ate, joked, and drank merrily for an hour. When the feast was done, Will Stutely spoke up. "It is now time to christen our lovely baby, is it not?"

"Yes! Yes!" everyone cried, laughing till the woods echoed.

"The child must have seven sponsors," said Will Stutely, and from the band he chose the seven biggest and strongest men.

"By Saint Dunstan," cried Little John, springing to his feet, "lay a finger on me, and plenty of you will regret it."

But they rushed him without warning, seizing him by his legs and arms and holding him too tightly to struggle. The seven carried him forth while the rest stood around to watch. Then one man, who had been chosen to play the priest because he was bald-headed like a traveling friar, came forward with a full pot of ale. "Who brings the baby for baptism?" he asked, soberly.

“I do,” answered Will Stutely.

“And what name do you give him?”

“I call him Little John.”

“Now, Little John,” said the mock priest, “you have not really lived before, but merely gotten along; you were called John Little. From this day, you will truly live. I baptize you ‘Little John.’” And with that, the bald man emptied the pot of ale on Little John’s head.

All shouted with laughter as they saw the brown ale stream over Little John’s beard and trickle from his nose and chin, his eyes blinking with the sting. His first impulse was to be angry, but the merriment of the others swayed him and he laughed along. Then Robin took him, clothed him from head to toe in Lincoln green, gave him a good sturdy bow, and so made him a member of the merry band.

And that is how Robin Hood became an outlaw and gained a band of merry companions, including his right-hand man Little John.