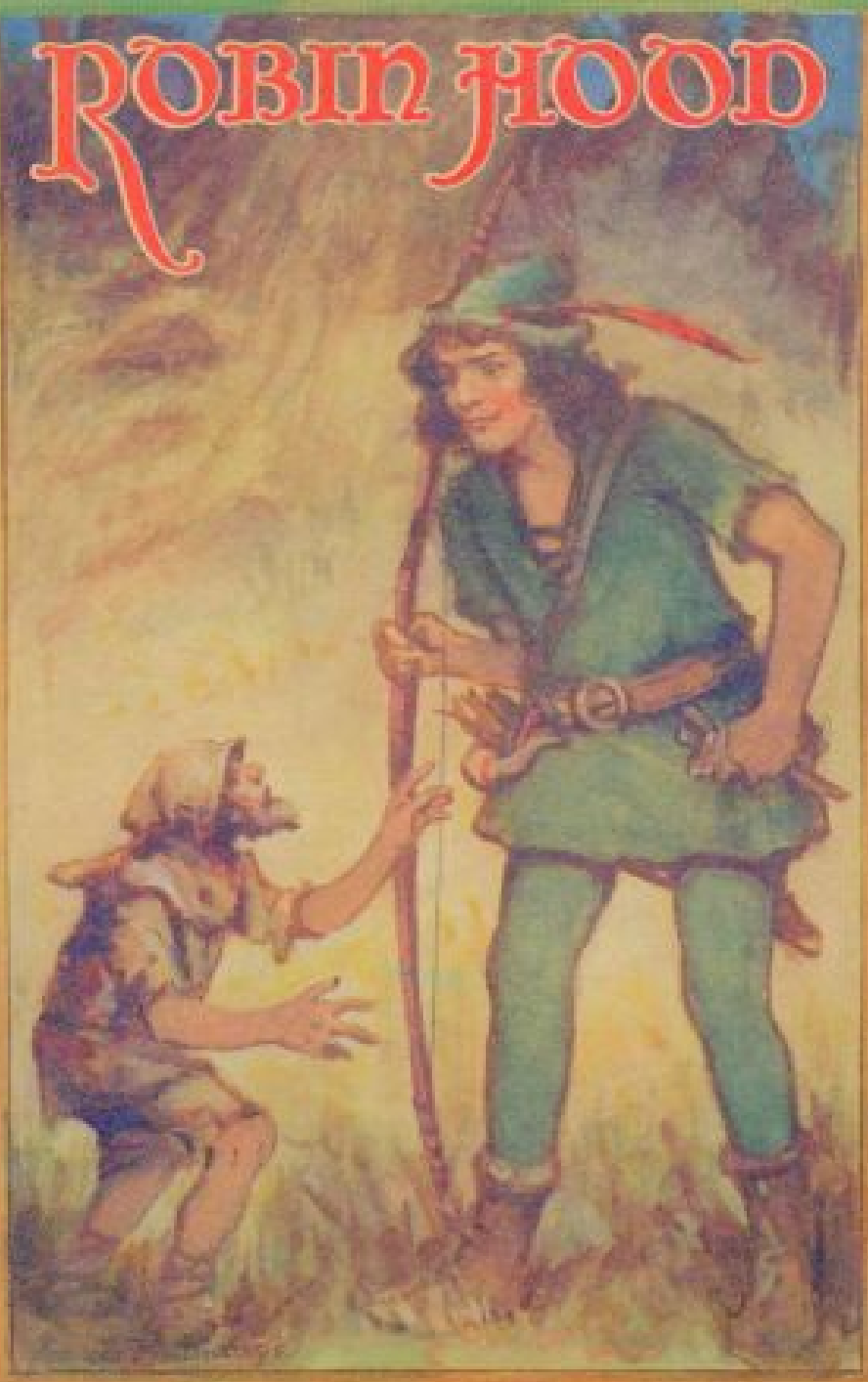
ROBIN HOOD



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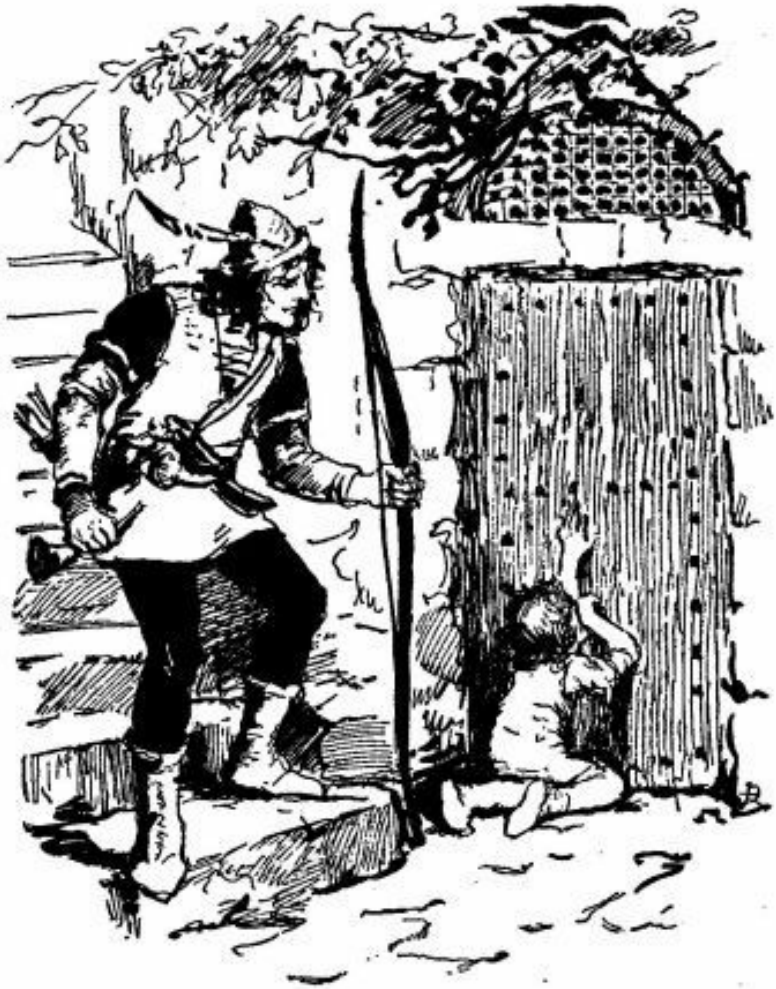

Darting back to the door, he put his lips to a crack and cried delightedly, "Here is Robin come to take you out."

ROBIN HOOD

HENRY GILBERT

Illustrations by

FRANCES BRUNDAGE

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PREFACE

ONCE upon a time the great mass of English people were unfree. They could not live where they chose, nor work for whom they pleased. Society in those feudal days was mainly divided into lords and peasants. The lords held the land from the king, and the peasants or villeins were looked upon as part of the soil, and had to cultivate it to support themselves and their masters. If John or Dick, thrall of a manor, did not like the way in which the lord or his steward treated him, he could not go to some other part of the country and get work under a kinder owner. If he tried to do this he was looked upon as a criminal, to be brought back and punished with the whip or the branding-iron, or cast into prison.

When the harvest was plenteous and his master was kind or careless, I do not think the peasant felt his serfdom to be so unbearable as at other times. When, however, hunger stalked through the land, and the villein and his family starved; or when the lord was of a stern or exacting nature, and the serf was called upon to do excessive labor, or was otherwise harshly treated, then, I think, the old Teutonic or Welsh blood in the English peasant grew hot, and he longed for freedom.

The silence and green peace of forest lands stood in those days along many a league where now the thick yellow corn grows, or the cows roam over the rich pastures, or even where to-day the bricky suburbs of towns straggle over the country. Such forests must have been places of terror and fascination for the poor villein who could see them from where he delved in his fields. In their quiet glades ran the king's deer, and in their dense thickets skulked the boar, creatures whose killing was reserved for the king and a few of his friends, the great nobles, and princes of the Church. A poor man, yeoman or peasant, found slaying one of the royal beasts of the forest was cruelly maimed as a punishment. Or if he was not caught, he ran and hid deep in the forest and became an outlaw, a "wolf's-head" as the term was, and then any one might slay him that could.

It was in such conditions that Robin Hood lived and did deeds of daring such as we read of in the ballads and traditions which have come down to us. Because his name is not to be found in the crabbed records of lawyers and such men, some people have doubted whether Robin Hood ever really existed. But I am sure that

Robin was once very much alive. It may be that the unknown poets who made the ballads idealized him a little, that is, they described him as being more daring, more successful, more of a hero, perhaps, than he really was; but that is what poets and writers are always expected to do.

The ballads which we have about Robin Hood and his band of outlaws number about forty. The oldest are the best, because they are the most natural and exciting. The majority of the later poems are very poor; many are tiresome repetitions of one or two incidents, while others are rough, doggerel rhymes, without spirit or imagination.

In the tales which I have told in this book I have used a few of the best episodes related in the ballads; but I have also thought out other tales about Robin, and I have added incidents and events which have been invented so as to give a truthful picture of the times in which he lived.

Just as King Arthur was the hero of the knightly classes of England in feudal times, so Robin Hood was the hero or popular figure among men of the poorer sort. The serf and the yeomen were tied to their fields and their unvarying round of labor by the shackles of custom; any offense against the laws was visited with swift and harsh punishment. It was sweet, therefore, in hours of leisure, to hear songs about the bold outlaw, Robin Hood, who once had been as bound in set laws as they, but who had fled to the freedom of the forest, where, with cool daring and thrilling effrontery, he laughed to scorn the harsh forest laws of the king, and waged war upon all those rich lords and proud prelates who were the enemies of humble folk.

Nor are the virtues ascribed to Robin Hood by the makers of the ballads inferior to those which were said to be possessed by King Arthur. Certainly Robin was a robber, but his great redeeming features were gentleness and generosity. He was always good-humored and genial, and took a beating in good part. Noble in bearing, his courteous dignity lifted him high above the ordinary rough manners of his time. Then, too, he was religious, and had especial reverence for the Virgin Mary, and for her sake he treated all women with the greatest courtesy, and would not harm any who were in their company. Most of all, he was helpful to the poor, the hungry and the distressed, and if he robbed the rich, he gave liberally to humble folk.

Robin Hood, indeed, is as gallant and generous a hero as any to be found in English literature, and while delight in the greenwood, and love of wild things continue to glow in the hearts of healthy boys and girls, I am sure that tales of Robin Hood and his outlaws will always be welcome.

HENRY GILBERT.

ROBIN HOOD

CHAPTER I

HOW ROBIN BECAME AN OUTLAW

It was high noon in summertime, and the forest seemed to sleep. Hardly a breeze stirred the broad fans of the oak leaves, and the only sound was the low hum of insects which flew to and fro unceasingly in the cool twilight under the wide-spreading boughs.

So quiet did it seem and so lonely, that almost one might think that nothing but the wild red deer, or his fierce enemy the slinking wolf, had ever walked this way since the beginning of the world. There was a little path worn among the thick bushes of hazel, dogberry, and traveler's joy, but so narrow was it and so faint that it could well have been worn by the slender, fleeting feet of the doe, or even by the hares and rabbits which had their home in a great bank among the roots of a beech near by.

Few, indeed, were the folks that ever came this way, for it was in the loneliest part of Barnisdale Forest. Besides, who had any right to come here save it was the king's foresters keeping strict watch and ward over the king's deer? Nevertheless, the rabbits which should have been feeding before their holes, or playing their mad pranks, seemed to have bolted into their burrows as if scared by something which had passed that way. Only now, indeed, were one or two peeping out to see that things were quiet again. Then a venturesome bunny suddenly scampered out, and in a moment others trooped forth.

A man stood close by the path, behind a tree, and looked out into the glade. He was dressed in a tunic made of a rough green cloth, open at the top, and showing a bronzed neck. Round his waist was a broad leathern girdle in which were stuck at one place a dagger, and at the other side three long arrows. Short breeches of soft leather covered his thighs, below which he wore hosen of green wool, which reached to his feet. The latter were encased in shoes of stout pig's leather.

His head of dark brown curls was covered by a velvet cap, at the side of which was stuck a short feather, pulled from the wing of a plover. His face, bronzed to a ruddy tan by wind and weather, was open and frank, his eye shone like a wild bird's, and was as fearless and as noble. Great of limb was he, and seemingly of a strength beyond his age, which was about twenty-five years. In one hand he carried a long-bow, while the other rested on the smooth bole of the beech before him.

He looked intently at some bushes which stood a little distance before him in the glade, and moved not a muscle while he watched. Sometimes he looked beyond far to the side of the glade where, on the edge of the shaw or wood, two or three deer were feeding under the trees, advancing toward where he stood.

Suddenly he saw the bushes move stealthily; an unkempt head issued between the leaves, and the haggard face of a man looked warily this way and that. Next moment, out of the bush where the hidden man lay an arrow sped. Straight to the feeding deer it flew, and sank in the breast of the nearest doe.

Not at once did the hidden man issue from his hiding-place to take up the animal he had slain. He waited patiently while one might count fifty, for he knew that, should there be a forester skulking near who should meet the scampering deer whose companion had been struck down, he would know from their frightened air that something wrongful had been done, and he would search for the doer.

The moments went slowly by and nothing moved; neither did the hidden man, nor he who watched him. Nor did a forester show himself on the edge of the shaw where the deer had fled. Feeling himself secure, therefore, the man came from the bush, but there was no bow and arrows in his hand for these he had left secure in his hiding-place to be brought away another day.

He was dressed in the rough and ragged homespun of a villein, a rope round his brown tunic, and his lower limbs half covered with loose trousers of the same material as his tunic, but more holed and patched. Looking this way and that, he walked half-bent across to where the doe lay, and leaning over it, he snatched his knife from his belt and began almost feverishly to cut portions of the tenderest parts from the carcass.

As the man behind the tree saw him, he seemed to recognize him, and muttered, "Poor lad!" The villein wrapped the deer's flesh in a rough piece of cloth, and then rose and disappeared between the trees. Then with swift and noiseless footsteps the watcher went back through the path and into the depths of the forest.

Suddenly, as he came from behind the giant trunk of an oak, the tall form of the man who had watched him stood in his pathway. Instantly his hand went to his knife, and he seemed about to spring upon the other.

"Man," said he in the green tunic, "what madness drives you to this?"

The villein recognized the speaker at once, and gave a fierce laugh.

"Madness!" he said. "'Tis not for myself this time, Master Robin. But my little lad is dying of hunger, and while there's deer in the greenwood he shall not starve."

"Your little lad, Scarlet?" said Robin. "Is your sister's son living with you now?"

"Ay," replied Scarlet. "You've been away these three weeks and cannot have heard." He spoke in a hard voice, while the two continued their walk down a path so narrow that while Robin walked before, Scarlet was compelled to walk just behind.

"A sennight since," Scarlet went on, "my sister's husband, John a' Green, was taken ill and died. What did our lord's steward do? Said 'Out ye go, baggage, and fend for yourself. The holding is for a man who'll do due services for it.'"

"'Twas like Guy of Gisborne to do thus," said Robin; "the evil-hearted traitor!"

"Out she went, with no more than the rags which covered herself and the bairns," said Scarlet fiercely. "If I had been by I could not have kept my knife from his throat. She came to me; dazed she was and ill. She had the hunger-plague in truth, and sickened and died last week. The two little ones were taken in by neighbors, but I kept little Gilbert myself. I am a lonely man, and I love the lad, and if harm should happen to him I shall put my mark upon Guy of Gisborne for it."

As Robin had listened to the short and tragic story of the wreck of a poor villein's home, his heart burned in rage against the steward, Sir Guy of Gisborne, who ruled the manor of Birkencar for the White Monks of St. Mary's Abbey with so harsh a hand. But he knew that the steward did no more than the abbot and monks permitted him, and he cursed the whole brood of them, rich and proud as they were, given over to hunting and high living on the services and rents which they wrung from the villeins, who were looked upon merely as part of the soil of the manors which they tilled.

Robin, or Robert of Locksley, as he was known to the steward and the monks, was a freeman, or socman, as it was termed, and was a young man of wealth as things went then. He had his own house and land, a farm of some hundred and sixty acres of the richest land on the verge of the manor, and he knew full well that the monks had long cast covetous eyes upon his little holding. It lay beside the forest, and was called the Outwoods.

Robin held his land at a rent, and so long as he paid this to the monks they could not legally oust him from his farm, much as they would have liked to do this. Robin was looked upon by the abbot as a discontented and malicious man. He had often bearded the abbot in his own monastery, and told him to his face how wickedly he

and his stewards treated the villeins and poorer tenants of their manors. Such defiance in those days was reckoned to be almost unheard of, and the monks and Guy of Gisborne, their steward at Birkencar, hated Robin and his free speech as much as Robin hated them for their tyranny and oppression.

"Pity it is I was away," said Robin in reply to Scarlet's last words. "But you could have gone to Outwoods, and Scadlock would have given you food."

"Ay, Master Robin," said Scarlet, "you have ever been the good and true friend of us all. But I, too, have been a freeman, and I cannot beg my bread. You have made enemies enough on our behalf as it is, and I would not live upon you to boot. No, while there is deer in the greenwood, I and the little lad shall not starve. Besides, Master Robin, you should look to yourself. If your unfriends had known how long you would be away they would—it hath been whispered—have proclaimed you an outlaw, and taken your land in your absence, and killed you when you returned."

Robin laughed. "Ay, I have heard of it while I was away."

Scarlet looked at him in wonder. He thought he had been telling his friend a great and surprising secret.

"You have heard of it?" he replied; "now that is passing strange."

Robin made no answer. He knew well that his enemies were only looking out for an opportunity of thrusting him to ruin. Many a man going on a long journey had come back to find that in his absence his enemy had made oath to a justice that he had fled on account of some wrongdoing, and thus had caused him to be proclaimed an outlaw, whose head any one could cut off.

Suddenly, from a little way before them, came the sound as if a squirrel was scolding. Then there was silence for a space; and then the cry, a lonely sad cry it was, as of a wolf. Instantly Robin stopped, laid the long-bow he had in his hand at the root of a great oak, together with the arrows from his girdle. Then, turning to Scarlet, he said in a low stern voice: "Place the deer's meat you have in your tunic beside these. Quick, man, ere the foresters see your bulging breast. You shall have it safely anon."

Almost mechanically, at the commanding tones Scarlet took the rough piece of hempen cloth in which he had wrapped the flesh of the doe from the breast of his tunic and laid it beside the bow and arrows. Next moment Robin resumed his walk. When they had gone a few steps, Scarlet looked round at the place where they had placed the things. They were gone!

A cold chill seemed to grip his heart, and he almost stopped, but Robin's stern voice said: "Step out, man, close behind!" Poor Scarlet, sure that he was in the presence of witchcraft, did as he was bidden; but crossed himself to fend off evil.

Next moment the narrow path before them was blocked by the forms of two burly foresters, with bows at their backs and long staves in their hands. Their hard eyes looked keenly at Robin and Scarlet, and for a moment it seemed that they meditated barring their way. But Robin's bold look as he advanced made them change their minds, and they let them pass.

"When freeman and villein are found together," scoffed one, "there's ill brewing for their lord."

"And when two foresters are found together," said Robin, with a short laugh, "some poor man's life will be sworn away ere long."

"I know ye, Robert of Locksley," said the one who had first spoken, "as your betters know ye, for a man whose tongue wags too fast."

"And I know thee, Black Hugo," replied Robin, "for a man who swore his best friend to ruin to join his few poor acres to thine."

Black Hugo looked at Robin as if he would have thrown himself upon him; but Robin's fearless eyes overawed him, and he sullenly turned away without another word.

Robin and Scarlet resumed their walk, and at last came to the top of an incline, where the land sloped down to the cultivated fields and the pasture which surrounded the little village of villeins' huts, with the manor-house at a distance beyond the village half-way up another slope. Scarlet looked keenly about him, to see if any one in the fields had seen him coming from the forest; for he had run from his work of dyke building to shoot the deer, and wondered whether his absence had been discovered. If it had, he didn't care for the scourging-post and the whip on his bare back, which might be his portion to-morrow when the steward's men found his work only half done. At any rate, his little lad, Gilbert of the White Hand, would have a king's supper that night.

Would he? He suddenly remembered, and again fear shook him. Where had Robin's bow and arrows and his venison disappeared? Had some goblin or elf snatched them up, or had he really looked in the wrong place, and had the foresters found them by now? He clenched his jaw and looked back, his hand upon his knife, almost expecting to see the two foresters coming after him.

"Hallo," said Robin carelessly, "there are my bow and arrows and your venison, lad."

Turning, Scarlet saw the things lying beside a tussock of grass, where he was certain he had looked a moment before and seen nothing!

"Master," he said, in an awed voice, "this is sheer wizardry. I—I—fear for you if unfriends learn you are helped by the evil spirits that dwell in the woods."

"Scarlet," said Robin, "I thought thou wert a wiser man, but, like the rest, thou seemest to be no more than a fool. Have no fear for me. My friends of the woods are quite harmless, and are no worse than thou or I."

"Master," said Scarlet, sorry for his hasty speech, "I crave pardon for my fool's words. My tongue ran before my thoughts, for the sight of those things where nothing had been a moment before affrighted me. But I know there cannot be worse things in the woods than there are in strong castles and abbots' palaces whose masters oppress and maim poor villeins. Say, master, is that which has helped us but now—is it a brownie, as men call it—a troll?"

Robin looked quietly into Scarlet's face for a moment or two without speaking.

"Scarlet," he said, "I think I see a time before us when thou and I will be much together in the greenwood. Then I will show thee my friends there. But until then, Scarlet, not a word of what has passed to-day. Thou swearest it?"

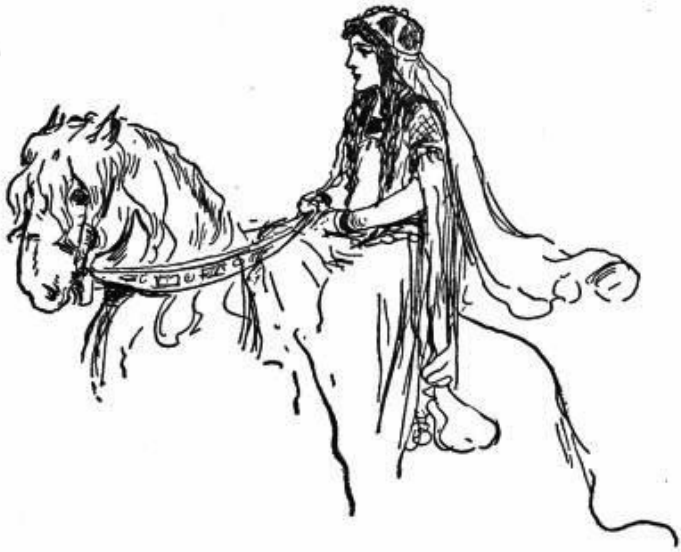
"By the gentle Virgin!" said Scarlet, throwing up his hand as he took the oath.

"Amen!" replied Robin, doffing his cap and bending his head at the name. "Now," he went on, "take thy meat and hand me my bow and arrows. For I must back to the greenwood. And tell thy little man, Gilbert, that Robin wishes him to get well quickly, for I would go shooting with him again on the uplands at the plovers."

When the two men had parted, Robin turned and plunged into the thick undergrowth, but in a different direction from that in which he had come with Scarlet. He looked up at the sun and quickened his pace, for he saw it was two hours past noon. Soon he had reached the trees, and threading his way unerringly among them, he struck southward toward the road that ran for many a mile through the forest from Barnisdale into Nottinghamshire.

With a quick and eager step did Robin pass through the glades, for he was going to see the lady he loved best in all the world. Fair Marian was she called, the daughter of Richard FitzWalter of Malaset. Ever since when, as a boy, Robin had shot and sported in Locksley Chase, near where he had been born, Marian had been his playmate, and though she was an earl's daughter, and Robin was but a yeoman and not rich, they had loved each other dearly, and sworn that neither would marry anyone else.

This day she was to journey from her father's castle at Malaset to Linden Leam, nearby Nottingham, to stay a while at the castle of her uncle, Sir Richard at Lee, and Robin had promised to guard her through the forest.



This day Fair Marian was to journey from her father's castle at Malaset to Linden Leam.

Soon he reached a broad trackway, carpeted with thick grass and with deep wheel-holes here and there in the boggy hollows. He walked rapidly along this, and did not rest till he had covered some five miles. Then, coming to where another road crossed it, he paused, looked about him keenly, and then disappeared among some hazel bushes that crowned a bank beside the four ways.

Proceeding for some distance, he at length gained a hollow where the ground was clear of bushes. On one side was a bare place where the sand showed, and to this Robin walked straightway. On the bare ground were a few broken twigs which to the ordinary eye would have seemed to have been blown there by the wind; but Robin bent and scanned them keenly.

"One bent at the head and eight straight twigs," he said under his breath; "a knight on horseback, that will mean, with eight knaves afoot. They are halted on the western road not far from here. Now what means that?"

He stood up, and turning away, quickly crossed the road by which he had come, and dived into the forest which skirted the right-hand road. Suddenly he dropped on his knees, and began working away further into the trees. He had heard the tiniest noise of a jingling bridle before him. In a little while, peering from between the branches of a young yew-tree, he saw, drawn up into the deepest shadow of the trees, a band of armed men with a knight in chain-mail on horseback in their midst.

Eagerly he scanned each, in the endeavor to learn to what lord they belonged; but the men on foot were dressed in plain jerkins, and the knight bore a blank shield,

kite-shaped. For some moments he was baffled in his attempt to learn who these men were, and why they lay hid in the wood as if about to set on some travelers whom they expected to pass by. Then the knight swept his glance round the forest, and with a gesture of impatience and an oath quieted his restive horse.

At the sound of his voice Robin recognized him, and his face went stern, and a fierce light came into his eyes. "So, Roger de Longchamp," he said to himself, "you would seize by force my lady whose favor you cannot get by fair means!"

For this Sir Roger was a proud and tyrannical knight, who had asked for the hand of Fair Marian, but her father had refused him. FitzWalter loved his daughter, and though he laughed at her for her love of Robin, he would not give her to a man with so evil a fame as Roger de Longchamp, brother of that proud prelate, the Bishop of Fécamp, and favorite of Duke Richard.

A man came running through the trees, and going up to the knight, said in a low voice: "They are coming! The lady and one varlet are on horseback, the others are walking. There are nine in all, and they are mere horse-churls."

"Good!" said the knight. "When they come near I will ride against them and seize the lady's bridle. Should the churl who is riding seek to follow me, do you knock him down."

Robin smiled grimly as he listened and slipped an arrow from its fastening at his belt. Almost immediately the voices of men were heard coming along the grassy road, with the beat of horses' hoofs, and in a little while Robin's heart warmed as he saw through the leaves the gentle womanly figure of Marian on a horse, with her hood thrown back from her face. She was conversing with Walter, the steward of her father's house, who rode beside her.

Next moment the knight had burst through the trees, followed by his men. The brave Walter instantly pushed his horse before that of his mistress, and with a stout staff which he carried prepared to defend her, while the others of her guards also ran before her. Sir Roger struck at the steward with his sword, which sliced a huge splinter from the staff which the other held. With a quick turn of the staff, however, Walter beat on, the knight's sword hand, and so shrewd was the blow that the weapon fell from the knight's fingers. It was hung by a strap at his wrist, however, and with a furious cry he regained the haft again.

In a second more the sword would have pierced the body of the brave steward, but suddenly he was jerked from his horse by one of Sir Roger's men and fell senseless on the ground.

Already the hand of Sir Roger was on the reins in Marian's fingers, and with flashing eyes she was trying to back her horse away, when suddenly there came a

sound like a great bee, and as she looked at the bars of the knight's vizor she was aware that something flew into them, and next moment she saw the long yellow shaft of an arrow quivering before them.

The knight gave a deep groan, swayed, and then fell from his horse. Instantly his men ceased fighting; one, the chief among them, ran to the dead knight, drew the ruddily tipped arrow from his master's eye, and then all looked swiftly up and down the broad track and at the dense green forest at their sides.

" 'Tis but one man!" said one of them. "It came from the left side here."

"Ay, but I know the bolt! It is——" began he that still held the arrow, but he never ended his words. Again came a swift sound through the air, but this time like the low whistling of a forest bird, and he sank to the ground with a small black arrowshaft jutting from his breast. The bolt had been shot from the right side, showing that more than one bowman observed them.

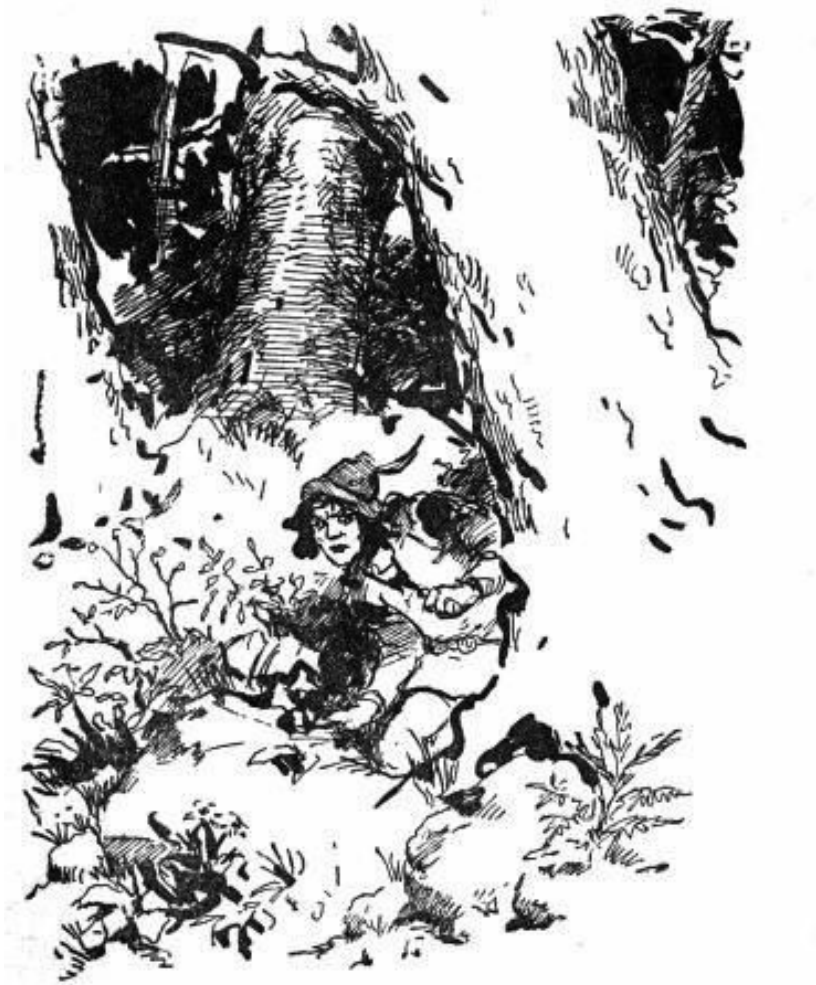
Instantly the others scattered and ran into the forest, but ere the last could reach its shade an arrow, no larger than a birding bolt, issued from the trees on the right and sank into the shoulder of the last fugitive, who shrieked, but still ran on.

Next moment Marian saw Robin, with cap in hand, issue from the wood beside her. He came to her side, and with flushing cheeks she bent to him and said: "Sweet Robin, I knew thou wouldst not fail me. That was a brave shot of thine which struck down that felon knight. But, dear heart of mine, if he be whom I think he is, his death will work thee much harm."

She gave him her hand, and fondly Robin kissed it.

"He is Roger de Longchamp, sweetheart," replied Robin; "but if it had been King Henry himself lurking thus to do you harm, I would not have saved my bolt."

"But, Robin dear," went on Marian, and her eyes were soft yet proud, "the bishop his brother will pursue thee and outlaw thee for this. And thou wilt lose lands and name for my sake! O Robin! Robin! But I will take counsel of Sir Richard at Lee, who loves thee dearly, how best to get thee pardon from the bishop."



Suddenly he dropped on his knees, and began working away further into the trees.

"Sweet Marian," said Robin, and very stern was his look and voice, "I will have no pardon from any proud prelate for any ill I do the evil brood of priests. Come soon, come late, I knew that ere long I should do some deed against the doers of evil who sit in strong castles or loll in soft abbeys and oppress and wrong poor or weaker folk. It is done at last, and I am content. Trouble not for me, dear heart. But now, let us get thee to a safe place ere those runaway rogues raise the hue and cry after me. Walter," said Robin to the poor steward, who, dazed and faint, was now sitting up in the road, "gather thy wits together, brave man, and see to thy mistress.

Lads," he said to the villeins, most of whom were wounded, "think no more of thy wounds till thy lady be safe. The knight that is slain hath friends as evil as he, and they may be down upon us ere long, and then you may not escape so lightly. And now trot forward to where the roads fork, and I will join thee anon."

Robin helped Walter on his horse, and Fair Marian and her faithful villeins went forward. When they had passed, Robin pulled the dead knight out of the track and far into the forest, then raised the vizor of the helm, placed the dead man's sword-hilt on his breast, and folded the limp arms over it, so that it seemed as if the dead were kissing the cross of the sword. Then, with bared head, kneeling, he said a short prayer for the repose of the knight's soul. He did the same with the dead body of the marauder who had been slain by the second arrow, and then, picking up both his own bolt and the smaller arrow, he slashed the knight's horse across the loins and saw it go flying down a forest drive that would lead it quite away from the spot. All this he did so as to put pursuers off the track as long as possible.

Then, going a few steps into the forest in the direction in which the knight's men had fled, he put a horn to his lips and blew a long shrill blast with strange broken notes at the end. Afterward he hastened to rejoin Fair Marian, and with his hand upon the bridle of her horse he led the way from the beaten track, and passing by secret ways and tiny paths only half visible he rapidly pushed on, and very soon they were in the deeps of the forest.

Fair Marian, content to know that Robin was with her, saw nothing to fear in the silence and somber shadows about them; but many of the villeins, as they walked in single file along the narrow way made by the hoofs of the horses, often crossed themselves as they passed along some gloomy grove of trees, or wound across the solitary glades.

To their simple minds they were risking the loss not only of their lives, but of their immortal souls, by venturing into these wild places, the haunts of wood-demons, trolls, and witches. They kept close together, the last man in the line looking ever behind him in dread; while all glanced furtively this way and that between the close trunks of the mossy trees, expecting every moment to see the evil eyes of elves gleaming out at them, or dreading that warlocks or witches, with red grinning mouths, would dart from behind some great screen of ivy or dodder which hung from some of the old trees.

The light from the sky showed that the afternoon was drawing to even. Little had Robin spoken since he began the swift flight through the forest, but now he turned to Marian, and with a smile said:

"Forgive me, sweet lady, for my seeming churlishness. But Roger de

Longchamp's friends at his castle of Evil Hold are men not to be despised. Their cruel deeds are not fit for thy ears, and I have hastened to escape them speedily. Have I taxed thee beyond thy strength?"

"Nay, nay, Robin dear," said Marian, with a sweet look. "I knew what was in thy heart, and therefore I troubled thee not with talk. But what mean you by the Evil Hold? I knew not Roger de Longchamp's castle of Wrangby was so named."

"That is how it is named by the poor folk who own him lord," replied Robin, "because of the nameless deeds that are committed there by him and his boon comrades, Isenbart de Belame, Niger le Grym, Hamo de Mortain, Ivo de Raby, and others."

Marian shuddered and paled at the names.

"I have heard of them," she said in a low voice. "Let us push on. I am not tired, Robin, and I would fain see thee safe in Sir Richard's castle."

"Have no fear for me," laughed Robin. "While I have my good bow, and the greenwood stands to shelter me, I can laugh at all who wish me ill. In a little while now you shall be greeting your uncle, and safe within his strong walls."

Suddenly from somewhere in the twilight forest before them came a scream as of some animal or bird in the talons of a hawk. Robin stopped and peered forward. Then there came the lonely cry of a wolf, causing the villeins behind to shudder as they, too, strained their eyes into the murky depths of the trees.

Robin stepped forward, and as he did so he gave a cry as if a blackcock called his mate; then he led Marian's horse forward at a slow pace. In a little while they came to rising ground, and approaching the top they saw the sinking sun gleaming redly through the trees. At the summit they found the trees gave place to a gentle slope of green sward, and before them, beyond some meadows, lay a castle, and on a trackway not far from the forest were two riders passing toward the castle.

"I think," said Robin, "that yonder horsemen are Sir Richard and his kinsman, Sir Huon de Bulwell."

Robin blew a blast on his horn. The horsemen turned their heads at the sound, and Marian, pushing her horse away from the trees, waved a kerchief at them. Instantly they recognized her, and waving their hands in greeting, began to ride toward the party.

"Tell me, Robin," said Marian, as, having dismounted to rest her stiffened limbs, she walked beside her lover, "what meant those cries we heard but now? It was as if some one signaled and you answered them."

"It meant, sweetheart," replied Robin, "that a friend of mine in the greenwood there saw these horsemen and thought they might be our enemies. But I guessed they

could not have reached this spot so quickly as we, and that they whom he saw were some of Sir Richard's meinie (followers) come to look for thee. Then I warned him that I thought all was well, and so came on."

"Who are these friends who guard you thus when you pass through the forest?" she asked. "Is it the same who shot those smaller arrows at Sir Roger's men?"

"I will tell thee, sweeting," replied Robin. "They are dwellers in the forest whom once I rescued from a fearful death at the hands of evil and cruel men. And ever since they have been my dear friends, to guard and watch for me when I am in the greenwood."

But now Sir Richard at Lee and his kinsman had come up, and great was their joy to find Fair Marian was safe, for they had been much troubled to find no sign of her upon the road by which she usually came; and were riding back to the castle to collect a body of retainers to search the forest roads for her.

When Sir Richard and Sir Huon were told of Sir Roger's attempt to kidnap Marian, and of how Robin had slain him, they looked grave, and Sir Huon shook his head. But Sir Richard, a gray-haired man with a noble countenance, turned to Robin and shook him by the hand heartily.

"Thou hast rid the earth of a vile oppressor and a felon knight," he cried, "and I for one thank thee heartily. The evil that he hath done to poor folks, the robbery of orphans, the cruelties to women—all his crimes have cried long to heaven for vengeance. And I rejoice that your good bolt hath pierced his evil brain."

"Ye say truth," said Sir Huon gravely, "but I think me of what Robin may suffer. The bishop will not let his brother go unavenged, nor will the comrades of Roger rest in their efforts to capture Robin and take him to their crucet-house (torture-house), which men rightly call the Evil Hold."

"Fear not for me," said Robin, with a quiet yet firm voice. "I doubt not I shall escape all their traps and snares. But do you and the father of my dear lady take care that, in despite, those evil knights do not capture Fair Marian and wreak their vengeance upon her. As for me, I will do all I may to shield her."

"Ye say truth," said Sir Richard. "I had not thought on that, but of a surety Isenbart de Belame and Niger le Grym will wish to seize our fair niece as a prize. God and Our Lady forfend us all from their evil wiles."

"Amen," said Robin; "and meanwhile I will keep a watch upon Castle Wrangby and its villainous lords."

For the next three days Robin and Marian, with Sir Richard and the Lady Alice, his wife, spent the time merrily together, hunting with hawks along the leas, or hunting the wild boar in the woods. At night in the hall they played hoodman blind, or

danced to the viols, or sat at draughts or chess, or heard minstrels sing to them or tell them tales of Arthur's knights, of Roland, and of Oliver his dear friend, or of Ogier the Dane, or Graelent, and how they had all vanished away into the realms of the Fairy Queen.

But on the fourth day Robin went into the forest to shoot small birds, and as he sat on a bank he heard the tapping as of a woodpecker. Looking up into the limbs of the wych-elm above him, he saw a little man's face peeping out through the leaves.

"Come down, Ket the Trow," said Robin, "and tell me thy news, lad."

"Come down, Ket the Trow, and tell me thy news, lad."

Next moment the little man had dropped from the tree and stood beside Robin. Ket was no taller than a medium-sized lad of fourteen, but he was a man full grown, with great breadth of chest, long, hairy arms and legs, the muscles on which stood up like iron bands. His hair was black, thick, and curly; he had no shoes on his feet, and the only covering he wore was a stout leather jacket laced in front, and close-fitting breeches of doeskin reached to his knees. His face, broad and good-natured, was lit up with a smile as he returned Robin's kindly gaze, and his eyes, bright and keen, yet gentle as those of a fawn, rested on Robin's face with a look of respect that was almost reverence.

"You followed the men that fled. Where went they?" asked Robin.

"Through the forest north by west went they, till they came to the burn," answered Ket. "They forded it at the Stakes and crossed the moor to the Ridgeway. Through Hag's Wood they wended and then I knew where they would go; by the Hoar Tree and the Cwelm stone, over Gallows Hill and by the Mark Oak, till they came to the Dead Man's Hill, and so by the lane of the Red Stones to the Evil Hold.

All night I watched in the Mark Oak, and at dawn I saw three knights ride from the castle. One went south by east, and with him on horses were two of the knaves I had followed. Two went east, and these I followed. They had ten horsed knaves with them. They went through Barnisdale Wood, and I left them on the wide road which leads to Doncaster."

"You did well, Ket," replied Robin. "And then?"

"I went to thy house, Outwoods, by Barnisdale Wood," replied Ket, "and Scadlock thy man I met in Old Nick's Piece, and sad was he, for he said that he saw Guy of Gisborne and two monks riding by thy land the day before, and they spoke together, and stopped and pointed at thy fields. And he thinks the curse of that Judas, Sir Guy, is on thy land, and that ruin cometh quickly to thee, and much he longed to see thy face."

Robin was silent for a while, and he was sunk in thought.

"Heard you aught else? What of Scarlet and the little lad?"

"I saw them not, but at night I crept down to the village and stole beside the cot with the bush before the door (the village alehouse), and leaned my ear against a crack and listened. And much woe and anger was in the mouths of the villeins so that they drank little."

"What said they?" asked Robin. "How many think you were there?"

Ket lifted up both hands and showed ten, then he dropped one hand and showed five fingers and then two more.

"Were they the young men or the older?"

"Most were full of fiery words, and therefore young I guess," went on Ket. "They that had the sorest backs spoke most bitterly. Cruel had been the beatings at the post that day, it seems; one was yet in the pit, too sore to move; one had been burned that day with the branding-iron because the steward swore he was a thief and he was most fierce of all; and many said their lives were too bitter to be borne. The work they must do on the lord's land was more than was due from them, and their own fields were left untilled, and therefore they starved."

"Ay!" said Robin, in a bitter voice, "poor folks have no friends in these days. The king's own sons rebel and war upon their father, the lords and monks fight for power and wider lands, and grind the faces of their villeins to the soil which they delve and dig, and squeeze from them rents and services against all rightful custom. Ket!" he said, rising, "I will go home this day. Find Hob, your brother, and when I have said farewell to my friends I will come anon."

That day, when the shadows of the trees cast by the sinking sun lay far over the fields, Robin with quick soft steps came to the edge of Barnisdale Forest where it

marched with his own land.

The forest side was on high ground, which then sank gently away to his fields. Long and earnestly he looked at his house, and beyond to the cots of the five villeins who were part of his land. His own house and the garth or yard in the low quickset hedge about it seemed quite peaceful, as indeed it should be at that time. Perhaps Scadlock, his bailiff, was inside, but the villeins must still be at work in the fields. Then it struck him that perhaps it was too quiet. There were no children tumbling and playing about in the dusty space before the villeins' cottages, but every door was fast closed, and no life stirred.

He was about to continue his walk under the trees to gain the footpath which led to the front of his house, when he saw a woman, a serf's wife, steal from the door of her hovel and creep along to the end of the hedge. There she stood, and seemed to watch for some one coming across the fields on the other side of the house. Suddenly he saw her with both hands gesticulating, as if signing to some one to keep away. At length the woman, having apparently succeeded in giving her warning, stole cautiously back into her house and quietly closed the door.

Something was wrong. Of that Robin was certain now. Glancing warily this way and that, he went further among the trees, and approached the head of the footpath with every care. Suddenly as he looked from behind a tree he dodged down again. A man-at-arms stood beneath the next tree, which threw its broad branches over the footpath.

From behind the beech trunk Robin keenly observed the man, whose back was toward him. He had evidently been put there to guard the approach from the forest. From where he stood the soldier could see the front of the house, and sometimes he gave a laugh or a grunt of satisfaction.

Robin's eyes went hard of look. He knew the man by his tunic of red cloth and his helm to be one of the guard of armed retainers which the abbot of St. Mary's, lord of the manor, had formed for his own dignity and to add to his retinue of lazy and oppressive menials.

With the stealthiness and quietness of a wildcat, Robin covered the space until only the trunk of the tree separated him from the unsuspecting soldier. He rose to his full height, but as he did so his leg snapped a twig jutting from the tree. The man half swung round at the noise, but next moment Robin's fingers were about his throat, and in that grip of iron he was powerless.

The man swooned, and then, laying him down, Robin quickly bound his hands and feet and placed a rough gag in his mouth, so that when he revived, he would be unable to do any harm.

When Robin turned to see what had drawn the man's attention so much, a groan burst from his lips. Tied to posts in front of the house were Scadlock and three of the poor villeins. Their backs were bare, and before each stood a burly soldier with a long knotted strap in his hand.

A little way from them stood others of the men-at-arms and their chief, Hubert of Lynn, a man whom for his brutal insolence and cruelty Robin had long hated. In the still air of the afternoon Robin's keen ears could catch the laughter which came from Hubert and his men. At length, when all seemed ready, the voice of the leader rang out:

"A hundred lashes first for these dogs that would resist the servants of their lord, and then an arrow for each. Now—go!"

Almost as if one man moved the four whips, they rose in the air and came down upon the bare backs which, since Robin had been their lord, had never been wealed by the cruel whip.

Robin, under the beechen boughs, twanged his bowstring, saw that it was well set to the bow, and laid each arrow apart before him. Then kneeling on one knee, he whispered a prayer to Our Lady.

"The light is bad, fair and sweet Mother of Christ," he said, "but do thou guide my arrows to the evil hearts of these men. Six bolts have I, and out of the pity I have for my poor folk, I would slay first him with the bitterest heart, Hubert of Lynn, and then those four with whips. Hear me, O our sweet Lady, for the sake of thy Son who was so stern against wrong, and pitiful for weak folk. Amen."

Then he notched the first shaft and aimed it at the breast of Hubert. Singing its deep song as if in exultation, the great arrow leaped through the air upon its way.

With a cry, Hubert sank on one knee to the ground, the shaft jutting from his breast. Feebly he tried to pluck it forth, but his life was already gone. He fell over on his side, dead. At the same time the place seemed full of great bees. First one man dropped his whip, spun round with his hands upon a bolt in his side, and then fell. Another sank to the ground without a murmur; a second leaped in the air like a shot rabbit; and the other, with one arm pinned to his side by an arrow, ran across the field, swaying this way and that until he dropped in a furrow and lay still.

There were four who remained untouched, but filled with such consternation were they that they broke and fled in all directions. So dazed was one that he came flying up the field path at the head of which Robin still kneeled, terrible in his wrath, with his last bolt notched upon his string. The fellow ran with open arms, terror in his eyes, thinking not at all of whither he was going.

He pulled up when he came within a few yards of Robin, and yelled: "O master,

be you fiend or man, shoot not! Thy witch bolts spoke as they came through the air. I yield me! I yield me!"

The man fell before Robin, crying: "I will be your man, lord. I was an honest man two days ago, and the son of an honest man, and my heart rose against the evil work I was in."

Robin rose to his feet and the man clutched his hands and placed his head between in token of fealty.

"See to it," said Robin sternly, "that you forget not your plighted word. How long have you been with Hubert and his men?"

"But two days, lord," said the man, whose simple and honest eyes were now less wide with terror. "I am Dudda or Dodd, son of Alstan, a good villein at Blythe, and forasmuch as my lord beat me without justice I fled to the woods. But I starved, and for need of food I crept out and lay at the abbey door and begged for bread. And they fed me, and seeing I was strong of my limbs said I should bear arms. And I rejoiced for a time till the cruel deeds they boasted of as done upon poor villeins like myself made me hate them."

"Get up, Dodd," said Robin. "Remember thy villein blood henceforth, and do no wrong to thy kind. Come with me."

Robin went down to the garth of his farm, released poor Scadlock and his other men, then entered the house and found salves wherewith he anointed their wealed and broken backs.

" 'Twas but yesterday, master," said Scadlock, in reply to Robin's question as to what had happened, "that they proclaimed you an outlaw from the steps of the cross at Pontefract, and this morning Hubert of Lynn came to possess your lands for the lord abbot. We here—Ward, Godard, Dunn and John—could not abear to see this wrong done, and so, like poor fools, with sticks and forks we tried to beat them back."

"Ay, poor lads, foolish and faithful, ye had like to have paid with your lives for it," said Robin. "But now come in and feed, and I will take counsel what must needs be done."

By this time it was dark. One of the women was called in from the serfs' cottages, a fire was lit in the center of the one large room which formed Robin's manor-house, and soon bowls of good hot food were being emptied, and spirits were reviving. Even the captured man-at-arms was not forgotten; he was brought in and fed, and then lodged securely in a strong outhouse for the night.

"Master," said Scadlock, as he and Robin were returning to the house from this task, "what is in your mind to do? Must it be the woods and the houseless life of an

outlaw for you?"

"There is no other way," said Robin with a hard laugh. "And glad I shall be, for in the greenwood I may try to do what I may to give the rich and the proud some taste of what they give to the poor men whom they rule."

"And I will go with you, master, with a very glad heart," said Scadlock. "And so will the others, for after this day they can expect no mercy from Guy of Gisborne."

Suddenly they heard across the fields toward the village the sound of many voices, and listening intently, they could hear the tramp of feet.

"It is Guy of Gisborne and his men-at-arms!" said Scadlock. "Master, we must fly to the woods at once."

"Nay, nay," said Robin, "think you Guy of Gisborne would come cackling like so many geese to warn me of his approach? They are the villeins of the manor, though what they do abroad so late is more than I may say. They will smart for it to-morrow, I ween, when the steward learns of it."

"Nay, master," came a voice from the darkness at their elbow, "there'll be no morrow for them in bondage if you will but lead us."

It was the voice of one of the older villeins, who had stolen up before the crowd. It was Will of the Stuteley, generally called Will the Bowman—a quiet, thoughtful man, whom Robin had always liked.

"What, Will," said Robin, "what would they with me? Where should I lead them?"

"Give them a hearing, Master Robert," said Will. "Their hearts are overfull, but their stomachs are nigh empty, so driven and stressed beyond fair duty have they been this winter and summer. First the failure of harvest, then a hard winter, a hungry summer, and a grasping lord who skins us. I tell thee I can bear no more, old as I am."

"Well, well, Will, here they are," replied Robin, as a crowd of dark forms came into the yard. "Now, lads, what is it you want of me?" he cried.

"We would run to the greenwood, master," some cried. "Sick and sore are we of our hard lot, and we can bear no more," cried others.

"Well," said Robin earnestly, "and if you run to the woods, what of your wives and children?"

"No harm can come to them," was the reply. "Our going will give them more worth in the eyes of the lord and his steward. We do not own them. They are the chattels of the lord, body and soul. There will be more food for them if we go."

"How many of ye are there?" asked Robin. "Are there any old men among ye?"

"There are thirty of us. Most of us are young and wiser than our fathers,"

growled one man. "Or we will put up with less these days," added another.

"So you will let the work of the manor and the due services ye owe to the lord fall on the shoulders of the old men, the women, and the youngsters?" said Robin, who was resolved that if these men broke from their lord they should know all the consequences. "Come, lads, is it manly to save our own skins and let the moil and toil and swinking labor light on the backs of those less able to bear the heat of the noonday sun, the beat of the winter rain?"

Many had come hot from the fierce talk of the wilder men among them as they sat in the alehouse, and now in the darkness and the chill air of the night their courage was oozing, and they glanced this way and that, as if looking how to get back to their huts, where wife and children were sleeping.

But others, of sterner stuff, who had suffered more or felt more keenly, were not to be put off. Some said they were not married, others that they would bear no more the harsh rule of Guy of Gisborne.

Suddenly flying steps were heard coming toward them, and all listened, holding their breath. The fainter hearted, even at the sound, edged out of the crowd and crept away.

A little man crashed through the hedge and lit almost at the feet of Robin.

"'Tis time ye ceased your talking," he said, his voice panting and a strange catch in it.

"'Tis Much, the Miller's son!" said they all, and waited.

"'Tis time ye ceased plotting, lads," he said, with a curious break in his voice. "Ye are but serfs, of no more worth than the cattle ye clean or the gray swine ye feed —written down on the lawyers' parchments with the ploughs, the mattocks, the carts, and the hovels ye lie in, and to be sold at the lord's will as freely!"

Tears were in his voice, so great was his passion, so deeply did his knowledge move him.

"I tell thee thou shouldst creep back to the sties in which ye live," he went on, "and not pretend that ye have voice or wish in what shall befall ye. For the lord is sick of his unruly serfs, and to-morrow—to-morrow he will sell thee off his land!"

A great breath of surprise and rage rose from the men before him.

"Sell us?" they cried. "He will sell us?"

"Ay, he will sell some ten of thee. The parchment is already written which shall pass thee to Lord Arnald of Shotley Hawe."

"That fiend in the flesh!" said Robin, "and enemy of God—that flayer of poor peasants' skins! But, lads, to sell thee! Oh, vile!"

A great roar, like the roar of maddened oxen, rose from the throats of the

villeins. Oh, it was true that, in strict law, the poor villeins could be sold like cattle, but on this manor never had it been known to be done. They held their little roods of land by due services rendered, and custom ruled that son should inherit after father, and all things should be done according to what the older men said was the custom of the manor.

But now to be rooted out of the place they and their folk had known for generations, and sold like cattle in a market-place! Oh, it was not to be borne!

"Man," said one, "where got you this evil news?"

"From Rafe, man to Lord Arnald's steward," replied Much. "I met him at the alehouse in Blythe, and he told it me with a laugh, saying that Guy of Gisborne had told the steward we were an unruly and saucy lot of knaves whom he knew it would be a pleasure for his lordship to tame."

"Ye say there are ten of us to be sold?" asked a timid voice. "Do ye know who these be?"

"What matter?" roared one man. "It touches us all. For me, by the holy rood, I will run to the woods, but I will put my mark on the steward ere I go."

"How many of us are here, lads?" said Will the Bowman in a hard voice.

"We were thirty a while ago," said one with a harsh laugh. "But now we are but fourteen, counting Much."

"Where is Scarlet and his little lad?" asked Robin. He had suddenly remembered that his friend was not among others—yet Scarlet had been the boldest in opposing the unjust demands and oppressive exactions of the steward.

"Will Scarlet lies in the pit," said Much, "nigh dead with a hundred lashes! Tomorrow he will be taken to Doncaster, where the king's justice sits, to lose his right hand for shooting the king's deer."

"By the Virgin," cried Robin, "that shall not be! For I will take him from the pit this night." He started off, but many hands held him back.

"Master, we will go with thee!" cried the others.

"See here, Master Robin," said Will the Bowman, speaking quietly, but with a hard ring in his voice. "We be fourteen men who are wearied of the ill we suffer daily. If we do naught now against the evil lord who grinds us beneath his power we shall be forever slaves. I will rather starve in the greenwood than suffer toil and wrongful ruling any more. What say you, lads all?"

"Yea, yea! We will go to the greenwood! Whether Master Robin leads us or not, we will go!"

Robin's resolution was quickly taken.

"Lads," he cried, "I will be one with you. Already have I done a deed which I

knew would be done ere long, and I am doubly outlaw and wolf's-head. The abbot's men-at-arms came hither while I was away and claimed my lands. Scadlock and my good lads resisted them, and were like to suffer death for doing so. With my good bow I shot five of the lord's men, and their bodies lie in a row beneath that wall."

"I saw them as I entered," said Will the Bowman, "and a goodly sight it was. Had you not slain Hubert of Lynn, I had an arrow blessed by a goodly hermit for his evil heart, for the ill he caused my dear dead lad Christopher. Now, lads, hold up each your hand and swear to be true and faithful till your death day to our brave leader, Robert of Locksley."

All held up their hands and in solemn tones took the oath.

"Now, lads, quickly follow," said Robin.

In a few moments the garth was empty, and the dark forms of Robin and his men were to be seen passing over the fields under the starlit sky.

In those days, whenever the villein raised his bended back from the furrows, and his eyes, sore with the sun-glare or the driving rain, sought the hut he called home with thoughts of warmth and food, he was also reminded that for any offense which he might commit, his lord or the steward had speedy means of punishment. For, raised on a hill as near as possible to the huts of the serfs, was the gaunt gallows, and, near by, lay the pit. Gallows or Galley Hill is still the name which clings to a green hill beside many a pretty village, though the dreadful tree which bore such evil fruit has long since rotted or been hewn down.

It was thus with the village of Birkencar. On the wold to the north were the gallows and the pit, only a few yards from the manor-house, in the parlor of which Guy of Gisborne dealt forth what he was pleased to term "justice." The manor-house was now dark and silent; doubtless Guy was sleeping on the good stroke of business he had done in getting rid of his most unruly, stiff-necked serfs.

Over the thick grass of the grazing fields the steps of Robin and his men made no noise, and, having arrived at a little distance from where the gallows stood, Robin bade the others wait until he should give them a sign. Then, passing on as quietly as a ghost, Robin approached the prison built under ground, in which serfs were confined when they awaited even sterner justice than that which the lord of the manor could give.

The prison was entered by a door at the foot of a flight of steps dug out of the soil. Robin crept to the top of the steps and looked down. As he scanned keenly the dark hole below him, down which the starlight filtered faintly, he was surprised to see a small figure crouching at the door. He heard a groan come from within the prison,

and the form beneath him seemed to start and cling closer to the door.

"O uncle," said a soft voice, which he knew was that of little Gilbert of the White Hand, "I thought thou didst sleep awhile, and that thy wounds did not grieve thee so much. Therefore I kept quiet and did not cry. Oh, if Master Robin were but here!"

"Laddie, thou must go home," came the weak tones of Scarlet from within the prison. "If Guy or his men catch thee here they will beat thee. That I could not bear. Laddie, dear laddie, go and hide thee somewhere."

"O Uncle Will, I can't," wailed the little lad. "It would break my heart to leave thee here—to think thou wert lying here in the dark with thy poor back all broken and hurt, and no one near to say a kind word. Uncle, I have prayed so much this night for thee—I am sure help must come soon. Surely the dear sweet Virgin and good Saint Christopher will not turn deaf ears to a poor lad's prayers."

"But, laddie mine, thou art sick thyself," came Scarlet's voice. "To stay here all night will cause thee great ill, and——"

"Oh, what will it matter if thou art taken from me?" cried the little boy, all his fortitude breaking down. He wept bitterly, and pressed with his hands at the unyielding door.

"Hallo, laddie, what's all this coil about?" cried Robin in a hearty voice, as he rose and began to descend the steps.

Little Gilbert started up half in terror; then, as he realized who it was, he rushed toward Robin, and seizing his hands covered them with kisses. Then, darting back to the door, he put his lips to a crack and cried delightedly: "I said so! I said so! God and His dear Saints and the Virgin have heard me. Here is Robin come to take you out."

"Have they scored thee badly, Will?"

"Have they scored thee badly, Will?"

"Ay, Robin, dear man," came the answer with a faint laugh; "worse than a housewife scores her sucking pig."

"Bide quiet a bit, lad," replied Robin, "and I'll see if what axe has done axe can't undo."

With keen eyes he examined the staples through which the ring-bolt passed. Then with two deft blows with his axe and a wrench with his dagger he had broken the bolt and pulled open the door.

Robin gave the cry of a plover, and Scadlock with two of his own villeins hurried up.

"Quick, lads," he said. "Bring out Will Scarlet; we must take him to Outwoods and bathe and salve his wounds."

"Where are the others?" asked Robin of Scadlock, when two of the men had raised Scarlet on their shoulders and were tramping down hill.

"I know not," said Scadlock. "They were whispering much among themselves when you had gone, and suddenly I looked round and they were not there. I thought some wizard had spirited them away for the moment, but soon I saw some of them against the stars as they ran bending over the hill."

"Whither went they?" asked Robin, a suspicion in his mind.

"Toward the manor-house," was the reply.

"Go ye to Outwoods," Robin commanded. "Do all that is needed for Scarlet, and await me there."

With rapid strides Robin mounted the down, while the others with their burden wended their way toward Fangthief Wood. When Robin reached the top of the down the manor-house stood up before him all black against the stars. He ran forward to the high bank which surrounded it, but met no one. Then he found the great gate, which was open, and he went into the garth and a few steps along the broad way leading up to the door.

Suddenly a form sprang up before him—that of Much, the Miller's son.

"Ay, 'tis Master Robin," he said in a low voice, as if to others, and from behind a tree came Will Stuteley and Kit the Smith.

"What's toward, lads?" asked Robin. "Think ye to break in and slay Guy? I tell ye the manor-house can withstand a siege from an armed troop, and ye have no weapons but staves and your knives."

"Master Robin," said Will the Bowman, "I would that ye stood by and did naught in this matter. 'Tis a villein deed for villein fowk to do. 'Tis our right and our deed; in the morn when we're in the greenwood we'll do thy biddin' and look to no one else."

A flame suddenly shot up from a heap of dried brush laid against a post of the house before them, then another near it, and still another. The sun had been shining fiercely the past two weeks, and everything was as dry as tinder. Built mainly of wood the manor-house would fall an easy prey to the flames.

"But at least ye must call out the women," urged Robin. "There is the old dame, Makin, and the serving-wench—would ye burn innocent women as well?"

Already the inmates were aware of their danger. A face appeared at a window shutter. It was that of Guy. A stone hit the frame as he looked out and just missed him as he dodged back.

"Guy of Gisborne!" came the strong voice of Will the Bowman, "thy days are ended. We have thee set, like a tod (fox) in his hole. But we've no call to burn the women folk. Send 'em out, then, but none o' thy tricks."

They heard screams, and soon the front door was flung open and two women stood in the blazing entrance. One of the men with a long pole raked the blazing brushwood away to give them space to come out. They ran forward and the door closed. Next moment it had opened again, and a spear came from it. It struck the villein with the pole full in the throat, and without a groan he fell.

A yell of fury rose from the others who were standing by, and some were for rushing forward to beat down the door.

"Ha' done and keep back!" came the stern level tones of Will the Bowman. "There's nobbut the steward in the house and he'll burn. Heap up the wood, and keep a keen watch on the back door and the windows."

An arrow came from an upper window and stuck in a tree near which Will was standing. Will plucked out the quivering shaft and looked at it coolly.

"Say, Makin," he said to the old woman who had come from the house, "are there any of the abbot's archers in th' house?"

"Noa," replied the old housekeeper; "nobbut the maister."

"I thought 'twas so," replied Will. "Yet he should shoot a bolt better than that."

"You're no doomed to die by an arrow," said the old dame, and laughed, showing her yellow toothless gums.

"No, maybe so," replied Will, "and maybe not. I lay no store by thy silly talk, Makin."

"Nor will the maister die by the fire ye've kindled so fine for un," went on the old woman, and laughed again.

Will the Bowman looked at the fiercely burning walls of the house and made no answer. But he smiled grimly. Who could escape alive from this mass of twisting and whirling flames?

Suddenly from the rear of the house came cries of terror. Robin, followed by Will, quickly ran round, and in the light of the burning house they saw the villeins on that side with scared faces looking and pointing to a distance. They turned in the direction indicated, and saw what seemed to be a brown horse running away over the croft.

Glancing back they saw that the door of a storehouse which adjoined the manor-house was open, though its wood and frame were burning. With a cry of rage Will the Bowman suddenly started running toward the horse.

"Come back! come back!" cried the villeins in terrified voices. " 'Tis the Specter Beast! 'Twill tear thee to pieces!"

But he still ran on, and as he ran they could see him trying to notch an arrow to his bow.

"Whence did it come?" asked Robin of the villeins.

"It burst on a sudden from the house, with a mane all of fire and its eyes flashing red and its terrible mouth open," was the reply. "It ran at Bat the Coalman there, and I thought he was doomed to be torn to pieces, but the Bargast turned and dashed away over the croft."

"I think Guy has escaped you," said Robin, who suspected what had happened.

"How meanst tha?" asked Bat the Charcoal-burner.

"I doubt not that Guy of Gisborne has wrapped himself in some disguise and frightened you, and has now got clear away," replied Robin.

"But 'twas the Specter Mare!" the villeins asserted. "We saw its mane all afire, and its red flashing eyes and its terrible jaws all agape."

Robin did not answer. He knew it was in vain to fight against the superstition of the poor villeins. Instead, he went back to where he had left Makin, the old woman.

"Makin," he said, "did thy master flay a brown horse but lately?"

"Ay, but two days agone."

"And where was the hide?"

"In th' store beyond the house."

"Thou saidst thy master should not die by fire, Makin?"

"Ay," replied the old woman, and her small black eyes in a weazened yellow face looked narrowly into Robin's.

"Will the Bowman hath gone to shoot thy master," went on Robin; "but I think he will not catch him. I think thou shouldst not bide here till Will comes back, Makin. He will be hot and angry, and will strike blindly if he guesses."

The old woman smiled, and gave a little soft laugh. Then, with a sudden anger and her eyes flashing, she turned upon Robin, and in a low voice said:

"And could I do aught else? A hard man he's been and a hard man he'll be to his last day—as hard to me as to a stranger. But these arms nursed him when he was but a wee poor bairn. 'Twas I told him what to do wi' the hide of the old mare. Could I do aught else?"

"Ay," said Robin, "I know thou'st been mother to a man who has but a wolf's heart. But now get thee gone ere Will of Stuteley comes."

Without another word the old woman turned and hurried away in the darkness.

A little while later Will the Bowman returned, and full of rage was he.

"The dolterheads!" he cried. "Had ye no more sense in thy silly heads as not to know that so wily a man would be full of tricks? Specter in truth and in deed! Old women ye are, and only fitten to tend cows and be sold like cows! Could ye not see his legs beneath the hide of the horse which he'd thrown over himself?—wolf in horse's skin that he is. Go back to thy villein chores; ye're no worthy to go to the greenwood to be free men."

He went off in great anger and would say no word to anyone.

It was only later that he told Robin that he had run after the horse-like figure, and had distinctly seen the human legs beneath the hide. He had tried a shot at it but had missed, and the figure ran forward to the horse pasture on the moor. There his suspicions had been proved to be true, for he had seen Guy of Gisborne pull the hide off himself and jump on one of the horses in the field and ride away, taking the hide with him.

"Now, lads," said Robin to the villeins, "'tis no use wasting time here. The wolf hath stolen away and soon will rouse the country against us. You must to the greenwood, for you have done such a deed this night as never hath been done by villeins against their lord's steward as far back as the memory of man goeth."

"Thou'rt right, maister," they said. "'Tis for our necks now we must run. But great doltheads we be, as Will said truly, to let the evil man slip out of our hands by a trick!"

No more, however, was said. All made haste to leave the burning manor-house, most of which was now a blackening or smoldering ruin. Rapidly they ran down hill, and having picked up Scadlock and the other villeins with Scarlet and the little lad, Robin led the way under the waning stars to the deep dark line of the forest which rose beside his fields.

CHAPTER II

HOW LITTLE JOHN STOLE THE FORESTER'S DINNER, AND OF HIS MEETING WITH ROBIN HOOD

"Ay, lads, but this be bliss indeed!"

The speaker was Much, the Miller's son. He gave a great sigh of satisfaction, and rolled himself over on the grass to make himself even more comfortable than he was. Grunts or sighs of satisfaction answered him from others of the twenty forms lying at full length under the deep shadow of the trees. Some, however, answered with snores, for the buck they had eaten had been a fine one and the quarterstaff play that morning had been hard, and for ringing heads slumber is the best medicine.

It was in a small glade deep in the heart of Barnisdale Forest where the outlaws lay, and was known to them as the Stane Lea or Stanley.

Seated with his back against the trunk of a fallen elm was Robin, his bearing as bold, his eye as keen and fearless and his look as noble now as when a short month ago he was not an outlaw, a "wolf's-head" as the phrase was, whom any law-abiding man could slay and get a reward for his head.

Strict had been his rule of these twenty men who had come to the greenwood with him and had chosen him as their leader. Slow of step and of movement they were, but he knew that the lives of all of them depended upon their learning quickly the use of the quarterstaff, the sword and the long-bow. Every day, therefore, he had made them go through set tasks. Chapped and hard with toil at the plow, the mattock and the hedge knife, their hands took slowly to the more delicate play with sword, quarterstaff and bow; but most of them were but young men, and he had hopes that very soon they would gain quickness of eye and deftness of hand, besides the lore that would tell them how to track the red deer and to overcome the fierce wolf and the white-tusked boar in his wrath.

"What should us be doin' now," murmured Dickon the Carpenter, "if we were still bondsmen and back in the village?"

"I," said Will Stuteley bitterly, "should be cursing the evil abbot who broke my poor lad's heart. When I feel I should be happiest, I think and grieve of him the most. Oh, that he were here!"

No one spoke for a few moments. All felt that although all had suffered, Will the Bowman had suffered most bitterly from the heartlessness of the lord abbot of St.

Mary's and Sir Guy of Gisborne's treacherous dealing. Will had had a son, a villein, of course, like himself. But the lad had run away to Grimsby, had lived there for a year and a day in the service of a shipman, and thus had got his freedom. Then he had saved all he could, toiling manfully day and night, to get sufficient money to buy his father's freedom. He had scraped and starved to win the twenty marks that meant the end of his father's serfdom. At length he had saved the amount, and then had gone to the lord abbot and offered it for his father's freedom. The abbot had seized him and cast him into prison, and taken the money from him. Then witnesses were found to swear in the manor court that the young man had been seen in his father's hut during the year and a day, and by this the abbot claimed him as his serf. As to the money he had saved—"All a serf got was got for his lord" was an old law that none could deny. The young man, broken in health and spirit, had been released, had worked in the manor fields dumb and dazed with sorrow, and one night had been found dead on his pallet of straw.

"And I," said Scarlet, leaning on his left elbow and raising his clenched right hand in the air, "I should be reaping the lord's wheat, and with every stroke of my sickle I should be hungering for the day when I should sink my knife in the evil heart of Guy of Gisborne, who made me a serf who was once a socman, because of the poverty which came upon me."

"Master," said Much, the Miller's son, "it seemeth to me that we be all poor men who have suffered evil from those who have power. Surely now that we are outlaws thou shouldst give us some rule whereby we may know whom we shall beat and bind, and whom we shall let go free?"

"It was in my mind to speak to you of such things," said Robin. "First, I will have you hurt no woman, nor any company in which a woman is found. I remember the sweet Virgin, and will ever pray for her favor and protection, and I will, therefore, that you shield all women. Look to it, also, that ye do not any harm to any honest peasant who tilleth his soil in peace, nor to good yeomen, wherever you meet them. Knights, also, and squires who are not proud, but who are good fellows, ye shall treat with all kindness. But I tell thee this, and bear it well in mind—abbots and bishops, priors, and canons, and monks, ye may do all you will upon them. When ye rob them of their gold or their rich stuffs ye are taking only that which they have squeezed and reived from the poor. Therefore, take your fill of their wealth, and spare not your staves on their backs. They speak the teaching of the blessed Jesus with their mouths, but their fat bodies and their black hearts deny Him every hour."

"Yea, yea!" shouted the outlaws, moved by the fire which had been in Robin's voice and in his eyes.

"And now, lads," went on Robin, "though we be outlaws, and beyond men's laws, we are still within God's mercy. Therefore I would have you go with me to hear mass. We will go to Campsall, and there the mass-priest shall hear our confessions and preach from God's book to us."

In a little while the outlaws in single file were following their leader through the leafy ways of the forest, winding in and out beside the giant trees, across the fern-spread glades whence the red deer and the couching doe sprang away in affright, wading across brooks and streams, then skirting some high cliff or rocky dell.

Suddenly Much, who walked beside Robin, stopped as they entered a small glade.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the other side. "'Tis an elf—a brownie! I saw it step forth for a moment. 'Tis no bigger than a boy. It is hiding behind that fern. But this bolt shall find it if 'tis still there!"

He raised his bow and notched an arrow.

He raised his bow and notched an arrow, but Robin struck down his wrist, and the arrow shot into the earth a few yards ahead of them.

"The brownies are my friends," said Robin, laughing, "and will be yours, too, if you deserve such friendship. Hark you, Much, and all my merry fellows. Shoot

nothing in the forest which shows no desire to hurt thee, unless it is for food. So shall ye win the service of all good spirits and powers that harbor here or in heaven."

The men wondered what Robin meant, and during the remainder of their walk they kept a keen lookout for a sight of Much's brownie. But never a glimpse did they get of it, and at length they began to chaff Much, saying he had eaten too much venison, and took spots before his eyes to be fairies.

At the little forest village, set in its clearing in the midst of giant elms and oaks, the men went one by one and made confession to the simple old parish priest, and when this was done, at Robin's request the mass service was said. Before he knelt Robin looked around the little wooden church, and saw a young and handsome man kneeling behind him, dressed in a light hauberk. In one hand he held a steel cap, and a sword hung by his side. He was tall and graceful, yet strongly built, and was evidently a young squire of good family.

Mass was but half done when into the church came a little man, slight of form, dark of face. With quick looks his eyes swept the dim space, and then, almost as by instinct, they rested on Robin, where in the front row of his men he kneeled before the priest. Swiftly and with the stealthy softness of a cat, the little man crept along the aisle past the kneeling outlaws. As their bent eyes caught the lithe form stealing by, they looked up, some with wonder in their eyes, while others gazed almost with terror on the uncanny dwarfish figure.

They watched it creep up to Robin and touch his elbow. Then their master bent his head, and the little man whispered a few quick words into his ear.

"Two of the four grim knights have followed thee, Maister," were the words he said. "They are within a bowshot of the kirk door. A churl hath spied upon thee these last days. There are twenty men-at-arms with the knights."

"Go and keep watch at the door," said Robin in a whisper. "Evil men must wait till God's service be done."

The little man turned and crept quietly back the way he had come, and the outlaws nudged each other as he passed, and gazed at him in wonder. Much, the Miller's son, smiled with triumph.

The mass went on and the outlaws responded in due manner to the words of the priest; the last words were said, and the men were just rising from their knees, when, with a hum like a huge drone, an arrow came through one of the narrow window slits, and speeding across the church, twanged as it struck in the wall at the opposite side.

"Saint Nicholas shield us!" said the priest in affright, and shuffled away through a door at the back of the church.

"Now, lads," said Robin, "to-day will prove whether ye have at heart those daily lessons with the long-bow. To the window slits with you! The knights of the Evil Hold have run us down, and would dearly like to have our bodies to torture in their crucet-house."

The faces of the outlaws went grim at the words. Throughout the length and breadth of the Barnisdale and Peak lands the tales of the cruelties and tortures of the robber lords of Wrangby had been spread by wandering beggars, jugglers and palmers. The outlaws flew to the window slits, while Robin and Scarlet, having shut the big oaken door, kept their eyes to the arrow slits in the thick oak panels. Every church in those hard days was as much a fortress as a place of worship, and Robin saw that this little wooden building could be held for some hours against all ordinary enemies save fire.

The young squire went up to Robin and said:

"Who are these folk, good woodman, who wish thee harm?"

"They are lords of high degree," replied Robin, "but with the manners of cutpurses and tavern knifers. Niger le Grym, Hamo de Mortain——"

"What!" interrupted the knight hotly; "the evil crew of Isenbart de Belame, grandson of the fiend of Tickhill?"

"The same," said Robin.

"Then, good forester," said the young man, and eager was his speech, "I pray thee let me aid thee in this. Isenbart de Belame is the most felon knight that ever slew honest man or oppressed weak women. He is my most bitter enemy, and much would I give to slay him."

"Of a truth," replied Robin, "ye may help me as you may, seeing your anger is so great. Who may ye be?"

"I am Alan de Tranmire, squire to my father Sir Herbrand de Tranmire," replied the other. "But I love most to be called by the name which my friends give me—Alan-a-Dale."

While he talked the outlaw had kept one eye on the arrow slit before him, and saw how the men-at-arms on the borders of the forests were forming in a body, headed by two knights on horseback, to make a dash at the door of the church.

"I hope, young sir," said Robin, "that thy sword may not be needed. For I hope with my good fellows to keep those rascals from coming so near as to let them use their swords, of which, I admit, my men are as yet but sorry masters."

"But I love the bow," said Alan, "and in the forest near my father's manor I have shot many a good bolt."

"Good!" said Robin, and his eyes showed that his appreciation of the young

squire was increased by what he had said. "Ho, there, Kit the Smith! Give this gentleman, Alan-a-Dale here, one of the spare bows thou hast, and a bunch of arrows. Now," went on the outlaw when this had been done, "do you all, my lads, stand at the arrow slits which command that group of rascals there at the woodside. They plot to beat down this door, thinking we are but poor runagate serfs with no knowledge of weapons whom they can butcher as a terrier doth rats in a pit. Prove yourselves this day to be men of the good yew-bow. Mark each your man as they advance, and let them not reach the door."

Eagerly the outlaws crowded to the arrow slits which commanded the place where, in the shade of the shaw, the men-at-arms seemed busy about something. At length they could be seen to lift some weight from the ground, and then their purpose was seen. They had felled a young oak, which, having lopped off its branches, they intended to use as a battering-ram wherewith to beat down the door.

Soon they were seen advancing, some dozen of the twenty ranged beside the trunk which they bore. Two outlaws stood at each window slit, a short man in front and a tall man behind, and each man squinted through the slit with a grim light in his eyes, and held his arrow notched on the string with the eagerness of dogs held in leash who see the quarry just before them.

"Much, Scadlock, Dickon, and you twelve fellows to the right, mark each your man at the tree," came the low stern tones of Robin, "and see that you do not miss. You other eight, let your arrows point at the breasts of the others. By the rood!" he exclaimed, marking how confidently the knights' men advanced over the open ground, "they think the hunting of runaway serfs is like hunting rabbits. Hold your bolts till I give the word!" he said.

"O master!" cried one man, quivering with excitement, "a murrain on this waiting! If I shoot not soon, the arrow will leap from my hand."

"Shoot not till I say," said Robin sternly. "Forty paces is all I trust thee for, but not eight of the rascals should be standing then. Steady, lads!"

For one tremendous moment all nerves were taut as they waited for the word. The men-at-arms, coming now at a trot, seemed almost at the door when Robin said "Shoot!"

Twenty-one arrows leaped from the slits in the wooden walls, and hummed across the space of some sixty feet. To the men in the church peering out, bated of breath, the effect seemed almost one of wizardry. They saw eight of the men who ran with the tree-trunk suddenly check, stagger, and then fall. Of the others, three dashed to the ground, one got up and ran away, and two others, turning, pulled arrows from their arms as they too fled back to the wood. One of the horses of the

knights came to the ground with a clatter and a thud, throwing his master, who got up, and, dazed with the blow or the utterly unexpected warmth of the defense, gazed for a moment or two at the church.

The other knight, who was untouched, yelled something at him, and fiercely pulling his horse round, rode swiftly back to the shelter of the forest, whither all the men who could run had already fled. Suddenly the unhorsed knight seemed to wake up, and then turning, ran as swiftly as his armor would allow him toward the forest. An arrow came speeding after him, but missed him, and soon he had disappeared.

"Now, lads," said Robin, "to the forest with you quickly, and follow them."

Quickly the door was unbarred, and the outlaws gained the forest at the spot where their attackers had disappeared. The traces of their hurried flight were easily picked up as the outlaws pushed forward. Alan-a-Dale came with them, and Robin thanked him for the aid he had given them.

"If at any time," said Robin, "you should stand in need of a few good bowmen, forget not to send word to Robert of Locksley, or Robin of Barnisdale, for by either name men know me."

"I thank thee, Robin of Barnisdale," said Alan, "and it may be that I may ask thy help at some future time."

"What," said Robin with a laugh, "has so young and gallant a squire already an enemy?"

"Ay," replied Alan, and his handsome face was gloomy. "And little chance as yet do I see of outwitting my enemy, for he is powerful and oppressive."

"Tell me thy tale," said Robin, "for I would be thy friend, and aid thee all I can."

"I thank thee, good Robin," replied Alan. "It is thus with me. I love a fair and sweet maiden whose father has lands beside Sherwood Forest. Her name is Alice de Beauforest. Her father holds his manor from that great robber and oppressor, Isenbart de Belame, who wishes him to marry the fair Alice to an old and rich knight who is as evil a man as Isenbart himself. The knight of Beauforest would rather wed his daughter to myself, whom she hath chosen for the love I bear to her; but the lord of Belame threatens that if he doth not that which he commands, he will bring fire and ruin upon him and his lands. Therefore I know not what to do to win my dear lady. Brave is she as she is fair, and would face any ill for my sake, but she loveth her father, who is past his fighting days and desires to live in peace. Therefore her loyalty to him fights against her love for me."

"Is any time fixed for this marriage?" asked Robin.

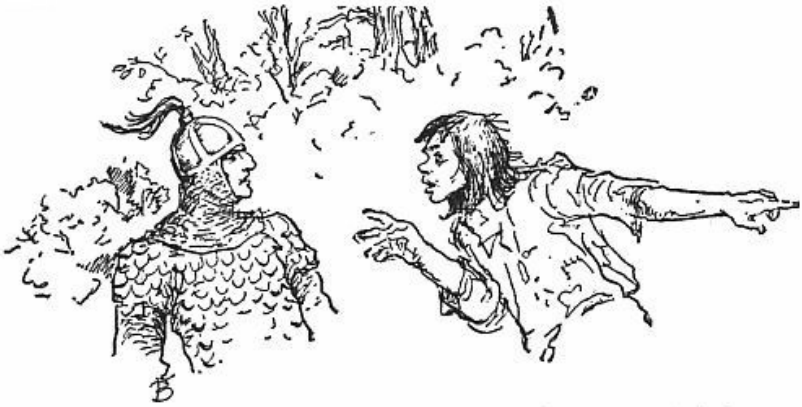
"Belame swears that if it be not done within a year, Beauforest shall cook his goose by the fire of his own manor-house," was the reply.

"There is time enow," said Robin. "Who knows? Between this and then much may happen. I am sure thou art brave. Thou must also have patience. I shall be faring south to merry Sherwood ere long, and I will acquaint myself of this matter more fully, and we shall meet anon and speak of this matter again. But see, who are these—knight and churl, who speak so privily together?"

Robin and Alan had separated from the main body of outlaws, and were about to enter a little glade, when at the mouth of a ride at the other end they saw a man in armor, on foot, speaking to a low-browed, sinister-looking man in the rough tunic of a villein—his only dress, except for the untanned shoes on his feet. As Robin spoke, the knight turned and saw them, and they instantly recognized him as the man who had been unhorsed before the church. The churl pointed at them, and said something to the knight.

"Ha, knaves!" said the latter, advancing into the glade toward them. "Thou art two of those company of run slaves, as I guess."

"Run slaves we may be," said Robin, notching an arrow to his string, "but, sir knight, they made you and your men run in a way you in no whit expected."



The churl pointed at them, and said something to the knight.

"By Our Lady," said the knight, with a harsh laugh, "thou speakest saucily, thou masterless rascal. But who have we here," he said, glancing at Alan; "a saucy squire who would be the better of a beating, as I think."

Alan-a-Dale had already dressed his shield, which hitherto had hung by a strap on his back and, drawing his sword, he stepped quickly toward the other.

"I know thee, Ivo le Ravener," he said in a clear ringing voice, "for a false knight —a robber of lonely folk, an oppressor of women and a reiver of merchants' goods.

God and Our Lady aiding me, thou shalt get a fall from me this day."

"Thou saucy knave!" cried the other in a rage; and with great fury he sprang toward Alan, and the clash of steel, as stroke came upon guard or shield, arose in the quiet glade.

Fast and furious was that fight, and they thrust at each other like boars or stags in deadly combat. Alan was the nimbler, for the other was a man of foul life, who loved wine and rich food; and though he was the older man and the more cunning in sword-craft, yet the younger man's swiftness of limb, keenness of eye and strength of stroke were of more avail. Alan avoided or guarded his opponent's more deadly strokes, and by feinting and leaping back, sought to weary the other.

At last Sir Ivo's shield arm drooped, for all his efforts to keep it before him, and his sword strokes waxed fainter, and his breath could be heard to come hoarsely. Suddenly Alan leaped in upon him and with an upward thrust drove his sword into the evil knight's throat.

At the same moment Robin, who had been watching intently the fight between Alan and the knight, heard the hiss as of a snake before him and then a footstep behind him. He stepped swiftly aside, and a knife-blade flashed beside him. Turning, he saw the churl who had been speaking with the knight almost fall to the ground with the force of the blow he had aimed at Robin's back. Then the man, quickly recovering, dashed away toward the trees.

As he did so a little dark form seemed to start up from the bracken before him. Over the churl tripped and fell heavily, with the small, pixie-like figure gripping him. For a moment they seemed to struggle in a deadly embrace, then suddenly the big body of the churl fell away like a log, the brownie rose, shook himself, and wiped a dagger blade upon a bracken leaf.

"I thank thee, Hob o' the Hill, both for the snake's warning and thy ready blow," said Robin. "I should have kept my eyes about me. Who is the fellow, Hob?"

"'Tis Grull, the churl from the Evil Hold," said Hob. "He hath haunted the forest by the Stane Lea where was thy camp these three days past. I thought he was a serf that craved his freedom, but he was a spy."

Hob o' the Hill was brother to Ket the Trow or Troll, but in build and look he differed greatly. He was no taller than his bigger brother, but all his form was in a more delicate mold. Slender of limb, he had a pale face, which set off the uncanny blackness of his eyes, black curly hair and short beard. His arms were long, and the hands, as refined almost as a girl's, were yet strong and rounded. He, too, was dressed in a laced leather tunic and breeches of doeskin that reached the ankles, while on his feet were stout shoes.

Robin went to Alan, whom he found seated on the ground beside his dead enemy. He was weary and faint from a wound in his shoulder. This Robin bound up with cloth torn from Alan's shirt of fine linen, after which the outlaw asked him what he would do now.

"I think I will take me home to Werrisdale," said Alan. "I am staying at Forest Hold, the house of my foster-brother, Piers the Lucky, but there will be hue and cry raised against me ere long for the slaying of this rascal knight, and I would not that harm should happen to my brother for my fault.

"So, I will get me home if I can come at my horse, which I left at a forester's hut a mile from here."

Together Robin and Alan went on their way toward the hut of the forester.

While the events just described had been taking place a man had been passing along a path in a part of the forest some mile and a half distant. He was a tall man, with great limbs, which gave evidence of enormous strength, and he was dressed in the rough homespun garb of a peasant. He seemed very light-hearted. Sometimes he twirled a great quarterstaff which he held in his hands, and again he would start whistling, or begin trolling a song at the top of a loud voice.

"John, John," he said suddenly, apostrophizing himself, "what a fool thou art! Thou shouldst be as mum as a fish, and shouldst creep like a foot-pad from bush to bush. Thou singest like a freeman, fool, whereas thou art but a runaway serf into whose silly body the free air of the free forest has entered like wine. But twenty short miles separate thee from the stocks and whipping-post of old Lord Mumblemouth and his bailiff, and here thou art trolling songs or whistling as if a forester may not challenge thee from the next brake and seize thee for the chance of a reward from thy lord. Peace, fool, look to thy ways and—Saints! what a right sweet smell!" He broke off, and lifting up his head, sniffed the sunlit air of the forest, casting his bright brown eyes humorously this way and that. "Sure," he went on, "I have hit upon the kitchen of some fat abbot! What a waste to let so fat a smell be spent upon the air! Holy Virgin, how hungry I am! Let me seek out the causer of this most savory odor. Maybe he will have compassion upon a poor wayfarer and give me some little of his plenty."

Saying this, John pushed aside the bushes and stole in the direction of the smell. He had not gone far before he found himself peering into a glade, in the midst of which was a tree to which was tethered a horse, while not far from the bushes where he stood was a hut of wood, its roof formed of turves in which grew bunches of wallflower, stitchwort, and ragged robin. Before the door of this abode a fire was burning brightly without flame, and on skewers stuck in the ground beside it were

cutlets of meat.

John eyed the juicy steaks and his mouth watered. For a moment he thought no one watched the sputtering morsels, and he was thinking that for a hungry man to take one or even two of them would be no sin; but as he was thinking thus a man came from the hut and, bending down, turned two of the skewers so that the meat upon them should be better done.

John's face gloomed. The man was one of the king's rangers of the forest, as was shown by his tunic of green, his hose of brown, and the silver badge of a hunting-horn upon his hat. Moreover, his face was surly and sour—the face of a man who would sooner see a poor man starve than grant him a portion of his meal.

It was Black Hugo, the forester who had accosted Robin and Scarlet in so surly a manner when he had met them in the forest.

John thought for a few moments, and then, backing gently away so that he made no noise, he reached a spot at some distance from the glade. Then casting caution aside, he tramped forward again, and reaching the glade, burst into it, and then stopped, as if surprised at what he saw before him. He had dropped his quarterstaff in the bushes before he issued from them.

The surly forester glared at him from the other side of the fire.

"How now?" said he; "thou lumbering dolt! Who art thou to go breaking down the bushes like some hog? Hast thou no fear of the king's justice on all who disturb his deer?"

"I pray your pardon, master ranger," said John, pulling a forelock of his hair and pretending to be no more than a rough oaf. "I knew not whither I was going, but I smelt the good smell of your meat, and thought it might be that some good company of monks or a lord's equipage was preparing their midday meal, and might spare a morsel for a wayfarer who hath eaten naught since dawn."

"Go thy ways, churl," said the ranger, and his face looked more surly than ever when he heard John ask for a portion of his meat. "Thou seest I am no monk or lord, but I prepare my own meal. So get thee gone to the highway ere I kick thee there! Get thee gone, I say!"

Black Hugo spoke in angry tones, looked fiercely at the apparently abashed churl, and started forward as if about to put his threat into action. John, pulling his lock again, retreated hurriedly as if thoroughly frightened. Black Hugo stood listening for a few moments to the peasant's heavy footsteps as he crashed through the bushes toward the highway again, and then, turning to the hut, drew from a chest a huge piece of bread, from which he cut a thick slice. Then, going to the fire, he bent down and took up one of the skewers and pushed off the meat with a knife on the

slice. He did the same to the second, and then bent to the third.

Suddenly a small pole seemed to leap like a lance from the bush nearest to him, and flying across the space to the fire, one end caught the bending forester a sounding thwack on the side of the head. He fell sideways almost into the fire, stunned, and the skewer with the meat upon it flew up into the air.

John, leaping from the bush, caught the skewer as it fell, saying: "I like not dust on my food, surly ranger."

He deposited the meat on the bread beside the others, and then, going to the prostrate ranger, turned him over and looked at the place where the pole had struck him.

"'Twas a shrewd throw!" said John, with a chuckle, "and hit the very spot! An inch lower would have slain him, perhaps, and an inch higher would have cracked his curmudgeon skull. As 'tis, he'll get his wits again in the turn of a fat man's head, just in time to see me eating *my* dinner."

He lifted the forester as easily as if he were a child and, propping him in a sitting position against one of the posts of the hut, he lashed him securely to it with a rope which he found inside. Then, with his quarterstaff beside him, he began demolishing the three juicy venison steaks.

In a few moments Black Hugo, with a great sigh, opened his eyes, lifted his head and looked in a dazed manner before him. At sight of John biting huge mouthfuls out of the bread, all his wits returned to him.

"Thou runagate rogue!" he said, and his face flushed with rage. He strove to pull his hands from the rope, but in vain. "I will mark thee, thou burly robber! Thou shalt smart for this, and I will make thee repent that thou didst ever lay me low with thy dirty staff. I will crop thy ears for thee, and swear thy life away, thou hedge-robber and cutpurse!"

"Rant not so, thou black-faced old ram!" said John, with a laugh, "but think thee how sweeter a man thou wouldst have been hadst thou shared thy meat with me. See, now, surly old dog of the woods, thou hast lost all because thou didst crave to keep all. Thy cutlets are done to a turn; thou'rt a good cook—a better cook, I trow, than a forester; and see, here is the last morsel. Look!"

Saving which, John perched the remaining piece of meat on the last piece of bread, and opening his huge mouth popped them both in, and gave a great laugh as he saw the other's black looks.

"I thank thee, forester, for the good dinner thou didst cook for me," went on John. "I feel kindly to thee, though thou dost look but sourly upon me. I doubt not thou dost ache to get at me, and I would like to try a bout with thee. Say, wilt thou

have a turn with the quarterstaff?"

"Ay," said Black Hugo, his eyes gleaming with rage. "Let me have at thee, thou masterless rogue, and I will not leave one sound bone in thy evil carcass."

"By Saint Peter," said John, with a laugh, "art thou so great with the quarterstaff? Man, I shall love to see thy play. Come, then, we will set to."

Rising, John approached the ranger for the purpose of unloosing his bonds, when the sound of voices was borne to him through the forest. He stopped and listened, while the eyes of Black Hugo glared at him in triumph. Doubtless, if, as was probable, the travelers who were approaching were law-abiding, he would soon be released, and could wreak his vengeance on this rogue. The sounds of steps and voices came nearer, until from the bushes there issued Alan-a-Dale and Robin, who looked at the tall form of the serf and then at the ranger tied to the post.

John bent and took up his staff and, turning to Black Hugo, said:

"I doubt thy honesty, good ranger, if, as thy evil face seems to say, these are thy friends. But fear not I shall forget. We will have that bout together ere long. Thanks for thy dinner again."

Saying this, John disappeared among the bushes and noiselessly stole away.

Robin and Alan-a-Dale came up, and could not forbear laughing when they saw the sour looks of Black Hugo.

"What is this?" asked Robin. "The king's forester bound to a post by some wandering rogue! What, man, and has he taken thy dinner too?"

"Unloose me," cried Black Hugo, in a rage, "and I will let thee know what 'tis to laugh at a king's forester, thou broken knave and runagate rascal!"

"I think, friend," said Alan gently, in the midst of his laughter, "thou dost foolishly to threaten this bold woodman whilst thou art in bonds. 'Twere more manly to stay thy threats till thou art free. Thou'rt over bold, friend."

"Knowest thou not who this rogue is?" cried Hugo. "He is the leader of a pack of escaped serfs, and for their crimes of firing their lord's house and slaying their lord's men they are food for the gallows or for any good man's sword who can hack their wolves' heads from their shoulders."

"Whatever you may say of this my friend," said Alan coldly, "I can say that both he and his men are bold and true men, and if they have fled from a tyrant lord I blame them not."

Alan with a haughty look went toward his horse. Robin ceased his laughter, and now addressed the forester:

"My heart warms to that long-limbed rascal who tied thee up and ate thy dinner," he said. "Thou who with others of thy sort live on poorer folk by extortion

and threats, hast now had a taste of what thou givest to those unable to withstand thee. I will give thee time to think over thy sins and thy punishment. Bide there in thy bonds until the owl hoots this night."

Together Robin and Alan-a-Dale moved from the glade, and the forester was left to cool his anger. The sun poured down its heat upon his naked head, and the more he strained at his bonds the more the flies settled upon him and tormented him. Then he shouted for help, hoping that one of his fellow-foresters might be near, or that some traveler on the highway would hear and come and release him.

But no one came, and he grew tired of shouting. The sunlight burned through his hose, his tongue and throat were dry, and his arms, pinned to his sides and bound by ropes, were almost senseless.

The blue of the sky became slowly gray, the darkness deepened under the trees, and strange things seemed to be moving in the gloom. There came a great bird flying with noiseless wings, and hovered over the glade. Then it sank, and a sudden shriek rose for a moment as of something from which life was being torn. Then came the weird cry of "To whee—to whee—to whoo!"

The ranger shivered. Somehow the cry seemed like that of a fiend; besides, the cold air was creeping along the ground. He pulled at his arms, which seemed almost dead, and to his wonder his bonds fell away and he found that he was free. He looked behind and inside the hut, but he could see no one. Then with lifeless fingers he picked up the rope which had bound him to the post and found that it had been cut by a keen knife.

He looked round affrighted, and crossed himself. Robin the Outlaw had said he should be free when the owl hooted, but who had crept up and cut his bonds so that he had not been aware of it?

He decided that some day ere long he would be revenged upon that seven-foot rascal who had stolen his dinner and tied him up. As for Robin the Outlaw, he would earn four marks by cutting off his head and taking it to the king's chief justice in London.

Meanwhile Robin and Alan-a-Dale had pursued their way, discoursing on many things. Both found that they loved the forest, and when they parted they shook hands and each promised the other that soon they would meet again.

Then Robin turned back toward the meeting-place at the Stane Lea, and was near the end of his journey when he came to the brook which, further up stream, ran beside the very glade where his men would be busy round a big fire cooking their evening meal. At this place, however, the stream was broad, with a rapid current, and the forest path was carried across it on a single narrow beam of oak. It was only

wide enough for one man to cross at a time, and of course had no railing.

Mounting the two wooden steps to it, Robin had walked some two or three feet along it, when on the other bank a tall man appeared, and jumping on the bridge, also began to cross it. Robin recognized him at once, by his height, as the fellow who had tied the forester to his door-post and stolen his dinner. He would have been content to hail the big man as one he would like to know but that he had a very stubborn air as he walked toward him, as one who would say: "Get out of my way, little man, or I will walk over thee."

Robin was some twelve or fourteen inches shorter than the other, and being generally reckoned to be tall, and strong withal, he deeply resented the other's inches and his bragging air.

They stopped and looked frowningly at each other when they were but some ten feet apart.

"Where are thy manners, fellow?" said Robin haughtily. "Sawest thou not that I was already on the bridge when thou didst place thy great splay feet on it?"

"Splay feet yourself, jackanapes," retorted the other. "The small jack should ever give way to the big pot."

"Thou'rt a stranger in these parts, thou uplandish chucklehead!" said Robin. "Thy currish tongue betrayeth thee. I'll give thee a good Barnisdale lesson if thou dost not retreat and let me pass."

Saying which, Robin drew an arrow from his girdle and notched it on his string. 'Twas a stout bow and long, and one that few men could bend, and the tall man, with a half-angry, half-humorous twinkle in his eye, glanced at it.

"If thou dost touch thy string," he said, "I'll leather thy hide to rights."

"Thou ass," said Robin, "how couldst thou leather any one if this gray goose quill were sticking in thy stupid carcass?"

"If this is thy Barnisdale teaching," rejoined John, "then 'tis the teaching of cowards. Here art thou, with a good bow in thy hand, making ready to shoot me who hath naught but this quarterstaff."

Robin paused. He was downright angry with the stranger, but there was something honest and manly and good-natured about the giant which he liked.

"Have it thy way, then," he said. "We Barnisdale men are not cowards, as thou shalt see ere long. I will e'en lay aside my bow and cut me a staff. Then will I test thy manhood, and if I baste thee not till thou dost smoke like a fire, may the nicker who lives in this stream seize me."

So saying, Robin turned back and went to the bank and with his knife he cut a stout staff from as fine a ground oak as could be found anywhere in Barnisdale.

"Now," said Robin, "we will have a little play together. Whoever is knocked from the bridge into the stream shall lose the battle. So now, go!"

With the first twirl of Robin's staff the stranger could see that he had no novice to deal with, and as their staves clanged together as they feinted or guarded he felt that the arm of Robin had a strength that was almost if not quite equal to his own.

Long time their staves whirled like the arms of a windmill, and the cracks of the wood as staff kissed staff were tossed to and fro between the trees on either side of the stream. Suddenly the stranger feinted twice. Quickly as Robin guarded, he could not save the third stroke, and the giant's staff came with a smart rap on Robin's skull.

"First blood to thee!" cried Robin, as he felt the warmth trickle down his face.

"Second blood to thee!" said the giant, with a good-natured laugh.

Robin, thoroughly angry now, beat with his staff as if it were a flail. Quick as lightning his blows descended, now here, now there, and all the quickness of eye of his opponent could not save him from getting such blows that his very bones rattled.

Both men were at the great disadvantage of having to keep their footing on the narrow bridge. Every step made forward or backward had to be taken with every care, and the very power with which they struck or guarded almost threw them over one side or the other.

Great as was the strength of the big man, Robin's quickness of hand and eye were getting the better of him. He was indeed beginning "to smoke," and the sweat gathered on his face and ran down in great drops. Suddenly Robin got a blow in on the big man's crown; but next moment, with a furious stroke, the stranger struck Robin off his balance, and with a mighty splash the outlaw dived into the water.

For a moment John seemed surprised to find no enemy before him; then, wiping the sweat from his eyes, he cried:

"Hallo, good laddie, where art thou now?"

He bent down anxiously, and peered into the water flowing rapidly beneath the bridge. "By Saint Peter," he said, "I hope the bold man is not hurt!"

"Faith!" came a voice from the bank a little further down, "here I am, big fellow, as right as a trivet! Thou'st got the day," Robin went on with a laugh, "and I shall not need to cross the bridge."

Robin pulled himself up the bank, and, kneeling down, laved his head and face in the water. When he arose, he found the big stranger almost beside him, dashing the water over his own face.

"What!" cried Robin, "hast not gone forward on thy journey? Thou wert in so pesty a hurry to cross the bridge just now that thou wouldst not budge for me, and

now thou'st come back."

"Scorn me not, good fellow," said the big man, with a sheepish laugh. "I have no whither to go that I wot of. I am but a serf who hath run from his manor, and to-night, instead of my warm nest (hut), I shall have to find a bush or a brake that's not too draughty. But I would like to shake hands with thee ere I wend, for thou'rt as true and good a fighter as ever I met."

Robin's hand was in the other's big fingers at once and they gave a handshake of mutual respect and liking. Then John turned away, and was for crossing the bridge.

"Stay awhile," said Robin; "perhaps thou wouldst like supper ere thou goest a-wandering."

With these words, Robin placed his horn to his lips and blew a blast that woke the echoes, made the blackbirds fly shrieking away from the bushes, and every animal that lurked in the underwood to dive for the nearest cover. The stranger looked on marveling, and Robin stood waiting and listening. Soon in the distance could be heard sounds as if deer or doe were hurrying through the bushes, and in a little while between the trees could be seen the forms of men running toward them.

Will Stuteley the Bowman was the first to reach the bank where Robin stood.

"Why, good master," said he, "what hath happened to thee? Thou'rt wet to the skin!"

Will looked at the stranger, and glared angrily at him.

"'Tis no matter at all," laughed Robin. "You see that tall lad there. We fought on the bridge with staves, and he tumbled me in."

By this time Much, the Miller's son, Scarlet, and the others had reached the bank, and at Robin's words Scarlet dashed at the stranger, and by a quick play with foot and hand tripped up the big man. Then the others threw themselves upon the stranger, and seizing him cried:

"Swing him up and out, lads! Duck him well!"

"Nay, nay," shouted Robin, laughing. "Forbear, lads. I have no ill-will—I've put my hand in his, for he's a good fellow and a bold. Get up, lad," he said to the stranger, who had been powerless in the hands of so many, and would next moment have been swung far out into the stream. "Hark ye, seven-footer," said Robin. "We are outlaws, brave lads who have run from evil lords. There are twenty-two of us. If thou wilt join us, thou shalt share and share with us, both in hard knocks, good cheer, and the best that we can reive from the rich snuffling priests, proud prelates, evil lords, and hard-hearted merchants who venture through the greenwood. Thou'rt a good hand at the staff; I'll make thee a better hand at the long-bow. Now, speak up, jolly blade!"

"By earth and water, I'll be thy man," cried the stranger, coming eagerly forward and holding out his hand, which Robin seized and wrung. "Never heard I sweeter words than those you have said, and with all my heart will I serve thee and thy fellowship."

"What is thy name, good man?" asked Robin.

"John o' the Stubbs," replied the other; "but"—with a great laugh—"men call me John the Little."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the others, and crowded round, shaking hands with him and crying out: "John, little man, give me thy great hand!"

"His name shall be altered," said stout Will the Bowman, "and we will baptize him in good brown ale. Now, shall we not go back to camp, master, and make a feast on it?"

"Ay, lads," replied Robin, "we will be merry this night. We have a new fellow to our company, and will e'en bless him with good ale and fat venison."

They raced back to camp, where over the fire Scadlock had a great cauldron, from whence arose the most appetizing odors for men grown hungry in greenwood air. Robin changed his garments for dry ones, which were taken from a secret storeplace in a cave near by, and then, standing round John the Little, who overtopped them all, the outlaws held each his wooden mug filled to the brim with good brown ale.

"Now, lads," said Stuteley, "we will baptize our new comrade into our good free company of forest lads. He has hitherto been called John the Little, and a sweet pretty babe he is. But from now on he shall be called Little John. Three cheers, lads, for Little John!"

How they made the twilight ring! The leaves overhead quivered with the shouts. Then they tossed off their mugs of ale, and gathering round the cauldron they dipped their pannikins into the rich stew and fell to feasting.

Afterward Little John told them of his meeting with the forester, and how he had tied him up and ate up his dinner before his eyes. They laughed hugely over this, for all bore some grudge against Black Hugo and the other foresters for their treacherous oppression of poor peasants living on the forest borders.

Then Robin continued Little John's tale, and told how he left the ranger in his bonds "to think over his sins till the owl hooted."

"What mean you, master?" said Little John. "Did you go back and cut the rogue loose?"

It was dark now, and only the flicker of the firelight lit up the strong brown faces of the men as they lay or squatted.

"Nay, I cut not the rogue loose! But he is free by now, and, I doubt not, crying o'er his aching limbs, and breathing vengeance against us both."

"How, then, master?" said Little John, gaping with wonder while the others also listened.

"I have friends in the greenwood," said Robin, "who aid me in many things. Yet they are shy of strangers, and will not willingly show themselves until they know ye better. Hob o' the Hill, show thyself, lad!"

Then, to the terror of them all, from a dark patch near Robin's feet there rose a little man whose long face shone pale in the firelight, and whose eyes gleamed like sloes. Some of the men, keeping their eyes on him, dragged themselves away; others crossed themselves; and Much, the Miller's son, took off his tunic and turned it inside out.

"Holy Peter," he murmured, "shield us from the power of evil spirits!"

"Out upon thee all!" cried Robin in a stern voice. "Hob is no evil spirit, but a man as thou art, with but smaller limbs, maybe, but keener wits."

"'Tis a boggart, good maister," said one of the outlaws; "a troll or lubberfiend, such as they tell on. He leads men into bogs, or makes them wander all night on the moors."

"'Tis such as he," said Rafe the carter, "who used to plait my horses' manes in the night, and drove them mad."

"Old women, all of ye," said Robin, with scorn. "Hob is a man, I tell thee, who can suffer as thou canst suffer—hath the same blood to spill, the same limbs to suffer torture or feel the hurt of fire. Listen," and his voice was full of a hard anger. "Hob hath a brother whose name is Ket. They are both my very dear friends. Many times have they aided me, often saved my life. I charge you to harbor no evil or harm against them."

"Why, good master, are they friends of thine?" asked Little John, who smiled good-humoredly at Hob. "How came ye to win their love?"

"I will tell thee," went on Robin. "'Twas two summers ago, and I walked in the heart of the forest here and came to a lonely glade where never do ye see the foresters go, for they say 'tis haunted, and the boldest keep far from it. In that glade are two green mounds or hillocks. I passed them, and saw three knights on foot and two lying dead. And the three knights fought with two trolls—this man and his brother. Hob here was gravely wounded, and his brother also, and the knights overpowered them. Then I marveled what they would do, and I saw them make a great fire, and creeping nearer I heard them say they would see whether these trolls would burn, as their father had burned on Hagthorn Waste, or whether they were

fiends of the fire, and would fly away in the smoke. Then as they dragged the two men to the fire I saw a door of green sods open in the side of one of the hills, and from it rushed three women—one old and halt, but the other two young, and, though small, they were beautiful. They flung themselves at the feet of the knights, and prayed for pity on their brothers, and the old woman offered to be burned in place of her sons. The felon knights were struck dumb at first with the marvel of such a sight, and then they seized the three women and swore they should burn with their brother trolls. Then I could suffer to see no more, and with three arrows from my belt I slew those evil knights. I pulled the two poor hill folk from the fires, and ever since they and their kin have been the dearest friends I have in the greenwood."

"Master," said Little John soberly, "'twas bravely done of thee, and truly hast thou proved that no man ever suffers from an honest and kindly deed." He rose and bent his giant form down to little Hob, and held out his hand. "Laddie," he said, "give me thy hand, for I would be friend to all who love good Master Robin."

"And I also," said brave Will Stuteley and Scarlet, coming forward at the same moment.

The little man gave his hand to each in turn, looking keenly into each face as he did so.

"Hob o' the Hill would be brother to all who are brothers of Robin o' the Hood," said he.

"Listen, friends all," went on Robin. "Just as ye have suffered from the oppression and malice of evil lords, so hath suffered our friend here and his brother. The five knights whom they and I slew were of that wicked crew that haunt Hagthorn Waste, and hold all the lands in those parts in fear and evil custom. I know there was some cruel deed which was done by Ranulf of the Waste upon the father of these friends of ours, and some day before long it may be that we may be able to help Hob and his brother to have vengeance upon that evil lord for the tortures which their father suffered. What sayest thou, Hob, wilt thou have our aid if needs be?"

"If needs be, ay," replied Hob, whose eyes had become fierce, and whose voice was thick and low, "but we men of the Underworld would liefer have our vengeance to ourselves. In our own time will we take it, and in full measure. Yet I thank thee, Robin, and these thy fellows, for the aid thou dost offer."

Then came little Gilbert, and put his hand in the strong clasp of the mound man, and after him Much, the Miller's son; and all the others, putting off their dread of the uncanny, seeing that Robin and Little John and the others were not afraid, came up also and passed the word of friendship with Hob o' the Hill.

"Now," said Robin, "we are all brothers to the free folk of the wood. Never more need any of ye dread to step beyond the gleam of fire at night, and in the loneliest glade shall ye not fear to tread by day. Ye are free of the forest, and all its parts, and sib to all its folds."

"So say I," said Hob, "I—whose people once ruled through all this land. Broken are we now, the Little People, half feared and half scorned; we and our harmless deeds made into silly tales told by foolish women and frightened bairns around their fires by night. But I give to ye who are the brothers of my brother the old word of peace and brotherhood, which, ere the tall fair men ravened through our land, we, the Little People, gave to those who aided us and were our friends. I whose kin were once Lords of the Underworld and of the Overworld, of the Mound Folk, the Stone Folk, and the Tree Folk, give to you, my brothers, equal part and share in the earth, the wood, the water, and the air of the greenwood and the moorland."

With these words the little dark man glided from the circle of the firelight, and seemed suddenly to become part of the gloom of the trees.

CHAPTER III

HOW ROBIN HOOD MET FATHER TUCK

For many miles up and down the country bordering on the broad forest lands the fame of Robin Hood and his men had spread. Wandering peddlers, jugglers, and beggars told tales of his daring deeds, and minstrels already, when they found a knot of villeins in a village alehouse, would compose rough rhymes about him—how he did no evil to poor men, but took from rich, proud prelates, merchants and knights.

Then, when times were hard, when the labors of sowing, reaping or digging imposed upon the poor villeins seemed beyond all bearing, as they were already beyond all custom, one or two in a manor would find that their thoughts shaped for freedom, and taking the opportunity they would creep away from their village of little mean hovels and run to the greenwood.

It was thus that Robin Hood's band, which at first had numbered but twenty, had gradually grown until the runaway villeins in it numbered thirty-five, though he had only taken to the forest a full year. But there was another way in which Robin obtained good men of their hands. Wherever he heard of a man who was a good bowman, or one who could wield the quarterstaff well, or was a skillful swordsman, he would go and seek this man out and challenge him to fight.

Most times Robin conquered, but several times he came across men who were more skillful than he, or more lucky in their strokes. But, whatever the result, Robin's manliness and courtesy generally won them to become his comrades, and to join him and his band under the greenwood tree.

When Robin Hood first went to the greenwood he found there were many bands of robbers in it—men who had been made outlaws for crimes of murder or robbery; and these had recruited their bands from runaway serfs and poor townsmen and other masterless men who were not really vicious themselves, but had had to seek the woods to escape from punishment.

Robin had had a very short way with these marauding bands of robbers, who made no distinction between rich and poor, but would as soon rob a poor serf of his last piece of salted pork or bag of meal as a rich priest of his purse of gold. Whenever Robin learned of the hiding-place of a band such as these, he would go there secretly with his men and surprise them before they could lay hand to weapon. Then, while every one was covered by a yard-long arrow, he would say:

"I am Robin Hood, whom ye know, and I give ye this choice. Cease your evil pilferings, wherein ye respect neither the poor nor the needy, and join band and take our oath, or fight with me to the death, and put the choice to the ordeal by combat."

Generally the robbers would give in, and joined Robin's band, taking the oath which all had sworn—to do harm to no poor man, honest yeoman, or courteous knight or squire, and to do no ill to any woman or any company which included a woman; but to help the poor and needy, and succor them whenever it was in their power.

By all these means his band, that had first been no more than twenty, now numbered fifty-five. All were dressed in Lincoln green while the leaves were on the trees, but when the leaves began to turn russet and to fall, and the forest to be filled with the somber light of autumn, all the men assumed their tunics, hoods and hose of brown, or longhooded capotes of the same color, so that they passed among the trees unseen by many of the travelers from whom they were about to take toll.

One day in July Robin and many of his band were passing the time in their caves in Barnisdale. Outside all was wet and stormy, for the rain beat down like great gray spears. In their caves on Elfwood Scar, Robin and his band sat dry and cozy, telling tales to each other, or listening to the travels of wayfarers who were with them.

One was a quack-doctor, a merry, wizened rogue, with a wise look which he often forgot to wear in the midst of his solemn talk. He had with him, he asserted, a little of the very elixir which had given Hercules his god-like strength, and some of the powder which had made Helen of Troy so beautiful.

"'Tis a marvel thou takest not some of Hercules' liquor thyself," said Little John, laughing, "for thy wizened frame was no good to thee when that great rogue at the Goose Fair at Nottingham downed thee with his fist for saying thy salve would cure his red nose."

"I need not strength of arm," said the quack, his little black eyes lit up merrily. "Confess now, thou big man, did not my tongue scorch him up? Did not my talk cause the sheriff's man to hustle the big fellow away with great speed? Why do I need strength of limb when I have that which is greater than the strongest thews"—he tapped his forehead—"the brains that can outwit brute strength?"

"Yet I doubt if thy wit availed thee much," said a voice in a far corner of the cave, "when thou earnest across the curtal hermit of Fountains Dale. Tell this good company what befell thee that day."

"Tell us the tale, doctor!" cried the outlaws, enjoying the quack's discomfiture, while others besought the pilgrim to relate it. But to all their appeals the quack turned a deaf ear, his face red with anger and his mouth filled with muttered curses on the

loose tongue of the pilgrim-rogue.

"Tell us, good pilgrim," commanded Little John, whereat the quack snapped out:

"That rogue is no pilgrim! I know the gallows face of him. He is a run thrall of the abbot of Newstead, and I could get a mark for my pains if I put the abbot's bailiff on his track."

All looked at the pilgrim. He was big of body and limbs, but by his face he looked as if he had suffered some illness.

"Ay, he speaks truth," said the man; "I am Nicholas, cottar and smith of my lord, the abbot of Newstead. But," and his voice became hard and resonant, "I will not be taken back alive to the serfdom in which I served until yesterday's blessed morn. I seek only to work in freedom under a master who will give me due wage for good work done. I can do any smith's work well and honestly—I can make and mend plows, rivet wheels and make harrows, and I have even made swords of no mean workmanship. But because I fell ill and could not work, my lord's bailiff thrust my poor mother out of her holding and her land, ay, with blows and evil words he thrust her out, and while I was on my pallet of straw too weak to move, they bore me out to the wayside, and the sturdy villein whom they put in our place jeered at us with evil words. And thus against all right and custom were we cast out!"

"A foul deed, by the Virgin!" cried Robin. "But, poor lad, thou canst not expect aught else of priests and prelates and their servants. Their hearts are but stones. And so thou hast run. 'Twas well done. But what of thy mother?"

"She is out of it all, thanks be to God," said Nicholas solemnly, "and under the turf of the churchyard, where no lord's bailiff can harm her more."

"Lad, if thou wantest work in freedom," said Robin, "stay with me and thou shalt have it, and thy due wage every Michaelmas. Many's the brown bill or sword blade we want mended. Wilt thou come with us?"

"Ay, master, willingly," said Nicholas. Coming forward, he put his hand in Robin's and they grasped each other's hands in sign of agreement.

"But now tell us, good Nick," said Robin, "who is this hermit of Fountains Dale, and how served he our friend here, Peter the Doctor?"

"Oh," said Nick with a smile, "I meant no ill-will to Peter. Often hath his pills cured our villeins when they ate too much pork, and my mother—rest her soul—said that naught under the sun was like his lectuary of Saint Evremond."

"Thou hearest, good folks!" cried the little quack, restored to good humor by the smith's friendly speech. "I deserve well of all my patients, but"—and his eyes flashed—"that great swine-headed oaf of a hermit monk—Tuck by name, and would that I could tuck him in the deepest, darkest hole in Windleswisp Marsh!—that great ox-

brained man beguiled me into telling him of all my good specifics. With his eyes as wide and soft as a cow's he looked as innocent as a mawkin (maiden), and asked me this and that about the cures which I had made, and ever he seemed the more to marvel and to gape at my wisdom and my power. The porcine serpent! He did but spin his web the closer about me to my own undoing and destruction. When I had told him all, and was hopeful that he would buy a phial of serpent's oil of Jasper—a sure and certain specific, my good freemen, against ague and stiffness—for he said the winter rains did begin to rust his joints a little, the vile rogue did seize me by the neck and take my box of medicaments. Then he tied my limbs to the tree outside his vile abode, and from my store he took my most precious medicines, sovereign waters and lectuaries, and did force me to swallow them all. Ugh, the splay-footed limb of Satan! He said that I was too unselfish—that I gave all away and obtained none of the blessings myself, and that when he had done with me I should be as strong and as big as Hercules, as fair as Venus, as wise as Solomon, as handsome as Paris, and as subtle as Ulysses. Then, too, did he stick hot plasters upon my body, making me to suffer great pain and travail. In a word, if it had not been that I always keep the most potent and valuable of my medicines in a secret purse, I should not only have been killed but ruined, for——"

Further words were drowned by the burst of uncontrollable laughter which greeted his unconscious "bull."

"But now tell us," said Robin Hood, "who is this hermit who treated thee to so complete a course of thy own medicines? Where doth he dwell?"

"I will tell thee," replied Peter the quack. "I have heard it said of thee that since thou hast come to the greenwood thou dost allow no one to rob and reive and fight and oppress poor folks. Well, this runaway priest is one who doth not own thee master. He is a man who shoots the king's own deer, if it were known, with a great long-bow; he is such a hand with the quarterstaff that he hath knocked down robbers as great as himself. He liveth a wicked and luxurious life. He hath great dogs to defend him, who I believe are but shapes of evil fiends. He is a great spoiler of men, and would as lief fight thee, Robin Hood, as a lesser man."

"This is not truth which Peter saith," said Nick the Smith angrily. "Father Tuck is no false hermit; he liveth not a wicked life as other false hermits do. He ever comes and solaces the poor in our village, and any good he can do if one is sick, that he doth for no payment. He is great of limb, and can fight well with the bow, the staff or the sword, but he is, no robber. He is humble and kind in heart, but he can be as fierce as a lion to any that would do ill to a poor man or woman. Evil wandering knights have sometimes striven to thrust him from his hold, but with the aid of his

great ban-dogs and his own strong arms he hath so prevailed that neither knight nor other lord nor robber hath made him yield."

"He is a strong and a masterless rogue, this curtal monk," repeated Peter, "a man that will not confess that any one is his better. 'Tis said that he was thrust forth from the brotherhood of Fountains Abbey to the north by reasons of his evil and tumultuous living, and hath come into this forest to hide. If thou art truly master of the greenwood, Sir Robin," he said, "thou hadst best look to this proud and truculent hermit and cut his comb for him."

Little more was said about the hermit then, and in a little while, when the rain had ceased and the sun shone out, making every leaf dazzle as if hung with a priceless pearl, the wayfarers went on the road again, and the outlaws separated to their various tasks.

It was some days before Robin found an opportunity of faring south to seek the hermit of whom Peter and the runaway workman had spoken. The boldness and independence of the hermit, Father Tuck, had excited his curiosity, and Robin was eager to put the skill of the fellow to the test.

The sun was nearly overhead when Robin set out, and he traveled for some hours through the fair forest roads before he began to approach the neighborhood of the curtal monk's abode. At length he reached the silent solitudes of Lindhurst Wood. As he was riding through the trees a sound made him check his horse and listen. He looked about him, peering under the giant branches flung out by the gray monarchs of the forest. In the green twilight he could see nothing moving, yet he felt conscious that something watched him. He turned his horse aside into a dim alley which seemed to lead to an opening among the trees. His horse's feet sank noiselessly into a depth of moss and leaves, the growth of ages. He reached the opening among the great gray trees, and whether it was a flicker of waving leaves or the form of a skulking wolf he was not sure, but he believed that away in the dark under the trees to his left, something had passed, as silent as a shadow, as swift as a spirit.

He turned back upon his proper path, looking keenly this way and that. At length he came to where the trees grew less thickly, and he knew that he was approaching the stream near which the hermit's hold was situated. Dismounting, he tied his horse to a tree and then gave a long, low bird's note. Twice he had to give this before a similar note answered him from a place away to the right of him. He waited a few moments and then a squirrel churred in the thick leaves of the oak above his head. Without turning to look, Robin said:

"Sawest thou, Ket, anyone in the wood but now as I came down by the Eldritch

Oaks?"

For a moment there was silence, then from the leaves above Ket answered:

"Naught but a charcoal burner's lad, belike."

"Art sure 'twas not some one that spied on me?"

"Nay, sure am I 'twas no one that meant thee hurt."

This was not a direct reply, and for a moment Robin hesitated. But he did not know any reason for thinking any one knew of his presence in Lindhurst, and therefore he questioned Ket no more.

"Keep thy eye on my horse, Ket," said Robin; and began to walk toward the stream. Soon the trees opened out, and he saw the water gleaming in the sunlight. Looking up and down, he saw where a small low house stood beside the stream to the left. It was made of thick balks of timber, old and black with age. A wide, deep moat surrounded it on three sides, and before a low-browed door stretched a wide plank which was the means by which the inmate of the house gained the land. This plank had chains fixed to it whereby it could be raised up, thus effectually cutting off the dwelling from attack or assault by all who had not boats.

He looked more closely by the trees, and saw where a little path came down through the trees to the water as if to a ford, and on the opposite bank he saw where it issued again from the stream and went like a tunnel through the trees that there came down to the water's edge. Sitting, as if in meditation, by a tree beside the path on this side of the stream was a man in the rough homespun garb of a monk. He seemed big and broad of body, and his arms were thick and strong.

"A sturdy monk, in faith!" exclaimed Robin. "He seems deep in thought just now, as if the holy man were meditating on his sins. By the rood, but I will test his humility at the point of a good clothyard arrow!"

Drawing an arrow, and notching it upon the string of his long-bow, Robin advanced and said:

"Ho, there, holy man, I have business t'other side of the stream. Up and take me on thy broad back, lest I wet my feet."

"Ho, there, holy man, I have business t'other side of the stream. Up and take me on thy broad back, lest I wet my feet."

Without a word the monk rose and bent his back before Robin, who got upon it. Then slowly the monk stepped into the stream and walked as slowly across the paved ford till he came to the other side. He paused for a moment there as if to take breath. Then he stepped up to the bank, and Robin prepared to leap off. But next moment he felt his left leg seized in an iron grip, while on his right side he received a great blow in the ribs. He was swung round, and fell backward upon the bank, and the monk, pressing him down with one knee, placed great fingers upon his throat, and said:

"Now, my fine fellow, carry me back again to the place whence I came, or thou shalt suffer for it."

Robin was full of rage at his own trick being turned upon him in this way, and tried to snatch at his dagger, but the monk caught his wrist and twisted it in a grasp so powerful that Robin knew that in strength, at least, the monk was his master.

"Take thy beating quietly, lad," said the monk, with a slow smile. "Thou'rt a saucy one, but thou hast not reached thy full strength yet. Now, then, up with thee, and carry me back."

The monk released him, and Robin, in spite of his rage, wondered at this. Why had he not beaten him senseless, or even slain him, when he had him in his power? Most other men would have done this, and none would have blamed them. Already in his heart Robin regretted that he had treated the monk with so high a hand. He

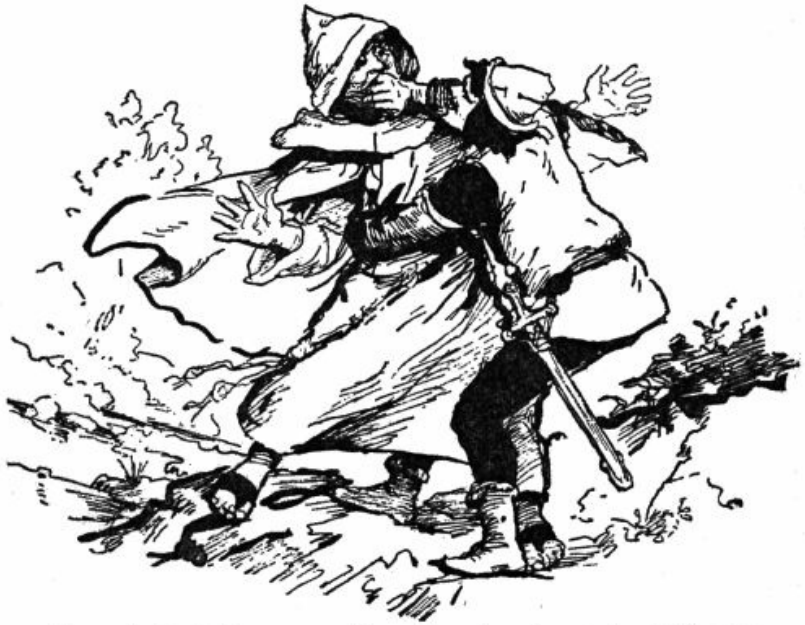
saw now it was in his ignorance that he had scorned Father Tuck.

Without a word, therefore, he bent his back, and the monk slowly straddled upon it and clasped his hands round Robin's neck, not tightly, but just enough to make him understand that if he tried to play another trick the monk was ready for him.

When he was nearing the bank he suddenly heard a laugh come from the hermit's hold, and looking up he saw at a little window hole which looked upon the stream the face of a lady. As he looked up the face swiftly disappeared. He did not know who the lady might be, but the thought that he was made to appear so foolish in her eyes made Robin almost mad with rage. He reached the bank, and when the monk had got from his back he turned to him and said:

"This is not the last thou shalt see of me, thou false hermit and strong knave. The next time we meet thou shalt have a shaft in thy great carcass."

"Come when thou likest," said the monk with a jolly laugh. "I have ever a venison pasty and a bottle or two of Malvoisie for good friends. As to thy bow shafts, keep them for the king's deer, my pretty man. Pay good heed to thy wits, young sir, and try not thy jokes on men until thou knowest they go beyond thy strength or not."



In an instant they were struggling fiercely, each striving to throw the other into the stream.

So enraged was Robin at the monk's saucy answer that next moment he had dashed at him, and in an instant they were struggling fiercely, each striving to throw the other into the stream. The end of it was that both slipped on the soft bank and rolled into the stream.

They crawled out quickly, and Robin, still blinded with rage, ran to his bow and arrows, which he had dropped on the bank, and notching a bolt, he turned and looked for the monk. The latter had disappeared, but next moment he came from behind a tree with a buckler in one hand and a sword in the other, while on his head was a steel cap. Robin drew the string to his ear, and the arrow twanged as it sped from the bow. He looked to see it pierce the great body of his enemy, but instead with a laugh the monk caught it on his buckler, and it glanced off and stuck in the ground, where it stood and shook for a moment like a strange stiff kind of plant moved by the wind.

Three more arrows Robin shot at him, but each was deftly caught by the monk upon his shield.

"Shoot on, my pretty fellow," cried the monk. "If you wish to stand shooting all day I'll be thy mark, if it gives thee joy to waste thy arrows."

"I have but to blow my horn," returned Robin angrily, "and I should have those beside me who should stick so many arrows in thy carcass that thou wouldst look like a dead hedgehog."

"And I, thou braggart," said the monk, "have but to give three whistles upon my fingers to have thee torn to pieces by my dogs."

As the monk spoke, Robin was aware of a noise in the trees beside him. He looked, and saw a slim youth running toward him, with a hood round his head so that his face was almost concealed, a bow slung on his back, and a staff in his hand. Robin thought the youth was about to attack him, and therefore brought his buckler up and drew his sword. At the same time came other sounds from the woods as of men dashing through the undergrowth. There came a shrill whistle, and then Robin heard a scream as of an animal or bird in the talons of a hawk. Robin recognized it at once as the danger-signal of Ket the Trow, and knew that enemies were upon him.

He thought the slim youth who had paused for a moment at the sound of the whistle was some spy of Guy of Gisborne's who was leading an ambush upon him. Robin lifted his sword and rushed upon the youth. He was but the space of a yard from the other, and noticed how he stood panting and spent as with running. The youth raised his head, and Robin caught a glimpse of the face in the shadow of the hood.

"Marian!" he cried, for it was his sweetheart. "What is this? What——"

"Robin," she panted, and her face flushed as she looked at him, and laid one fair hand on his arm, "sound thy horn for thy men, or thou art lost indeed."

Instantly she turned and ran to the monk and said some rapid words to him. The notes of Robin's horn rang out clear and shrill, and reverberated through the dim leafy alleys. Almost at the same moment the monk raised two fingers, and putting them in his mouth, blew so shrill a whistle as almost to split the ear. As he did so, men came running from the trees, and Robin knew them for the men-at-arms of the abbot of St. Mary's.

"Quick, Marian!" cried Robin, "get thee to the monk's hold. There is still time!"

Swiftly Robin looked about for some point of vantage whence he could defend himself, and saw a spit of land where it jutted into the stream. He notched an arrow on his bowstring, shot the first man down, then ran to the spit, and notched another arrow as he ran. Marian and the monk reached it as soon as he.

"Nay, nay," repeated Robin, "go ye across the bridge to the monk's hold. If my fellows are not near 'twill go hard with me, and I would not have thee harmed, sweetheart." He notched a third arrow.

"Nay, Robin," cried Marian. "I can bend a bow, as thou well knowest, and the good monk Tuck will aid us. Look, here are the dogs!"

The men-at-arms by this time were but some ten yards away, and already Robin had sent three arrows among them, wounding two and killing one.

Black Hugo was leading them, and cried:

"Lads, we must get together and rush him. If he can hold us at distance with his arrows we shall all be shot down."

Even as he spoke, the long score of an arrow suddenly stopped, and the man beside him fell with the clothyard wand sticking through his throat. The men began to egg each other on, but the great arrows made them wary. While they hesitated, suddenly they heard a baying, and before they were aware of the cause ten great ban-dogs had leaped upon them. Fierce brutes they were, of the size of bloodhounds, with great collars about their necks in which were set keen spikes.

The men fought blindly with sword and dagger against these strange and terrible foes. Suddenly a shrill whistle sounded, a giant man in monk's form, bearing a buckler, came toward them, crying upon the dogs by name to cease. Five hounds lay wounded or dead, but the others at the sound of their master's voice ceased and drew back, licking their wounds.

Black Hugo wiped the sweat from his swarthy face, and looked about him, and his face went suddenly white. Across the lea or open field which was on this side of the monk's hold, were the forms of a score of men in green running toward them as

fast as they could, and each was notching an arrow to his bow even as he ran.

"Save thyselves!" cried Black Hugo; "here come more rogues than we can face."

The men gave a swift look across the lea, and then, turning, they dashed for the cover of the trees. The outlaws paused for a moment, and a flight of arrows droned through the air, cutting the fans of leaves, and disappearing into the bushes. Three were slain by these bolts, but the others rushed madly on in the green twilight of the old trees, scattering as they ran, to make pursuit more difficult.

When the last of the outlaws had disappeared after the fleeing men-at-arms, Robin turned to Marian, who, with heightened color and quick breath, tried to forestall the anger which she feared her lover would have against her.

"Be not angry with me, Robin," she said, "but I have feared for thee so much that I had to come to the greenwood to learn how it fared with thee. You know how many a time and often we have shot and hunted on Locksley Chase when we were boy and girl together. Why should I not do that now?"

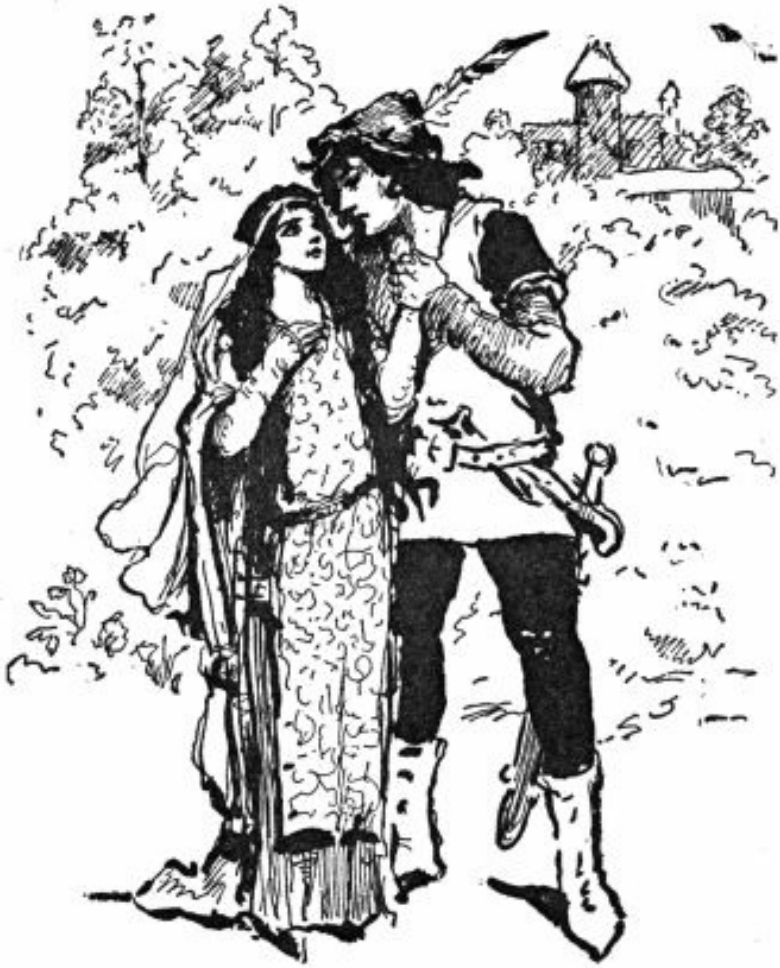
"Why shouldst thou not, sweetheart?" answered Robin. "Because I am an outlaw, and thou art a lording's daughter. My head is for any one to take who may, and those who aid me run the same danger. But tell me, Marian, how long is it since thou hast donned the clothes that make thee so sweet-looking a lad, and how dost thou know this rascal monk?"

"He is no rascal, Robin, but a good man," answered Marian. "He is Sir Richard at Lee's good friend, and hath ever spoken well of thee, and cheered me greatly when I have sorrowed for thee. And when at last I resolved to don these clothes and come to the greenwood to learn, if I might, how thou didst live, I spoke to Father Tuck, and he promised to aid me. For he hath friends throughout the forest, and thus I got to know thy friends the trolls. And I watched thee in the forest as thou didst ride hither, and Ket knew I was there."

While Marian had been talking, she had led Robin across the drawbridge, and they were now in the dwelling of the monk. It was a room which partook of the character of kitchen, oratory, and hall.

As they entered, a lady rose from a seat, and Marian ran to her with hands outstretched, and drew her impulsively forward.

"Alice, this is my Robin," she said.



"Almost you persuade me, sweetheart mine," he said. "I know thou lovest but me alone."

Robin recognized the lady's face. She it was who had seen him carrying the monk across the river, and had laughed at him. The lady had a bright and merry face, and looked at him with a twinkle in her eye. Then she put forth her hand and said: "So you are that bold outlaw whose head Sir Ranulf de Greasby swears every night ere he goes tipsy to bed shall yet be hung on the walls of Hagthorn Castle."

She gave so merry a laugh, and her eyes spoke her admiration of the handsome

outlaw so eloquently, that Robin's heart was completely won. He bent his knee and kissed the lady's hand very gallantly.

"I am Robert or Robin Hood, as men call me," he said, "and I think you must be Mistress Alice de Beauforest, whom Alan-a-Dale loves so well."

The lady's face flushed for a moment and then went pale, and a look of pain came into her eyes. She turned away and Marian went to her with a tender look and put her arm about her neck.

Just then the monk entered. "By my faith," he said, "but thou'rt a wasteful fellow to aid. Four of my poor hounds have barked their last bark and gnawed their last bone on thy account."

"Good hermit," said Robin, going up to him with outstretched hand, "I hear thou hast been a true friend to the lady I love best in the world, and I would that thou wert my friend also."

"Robin, lad," replied Father Tuck with a smile on his broad good-humored face, "I ha' been thy well-wisher since I heard how thou didst help burn Sir Guy's house about his ears. I think we are not enemies at heart, lad, you and I. Since I ha' kept this hold these seven years with the help of my good friend, Sir Richard at Lee, I ha' never heard of a man whose doings I like to hear o' so well as thine."

Thereafter there was much talk between them all. Marian told how Father Tuck had been her guide through the forest ways during the summer, teaching her woodcraft, and giving her much knowledge of herbs and cures. She told him that she had also made friends with Ket the Trow and Hob o' the Hill and their mother and sisters, and through them had been kept informed of all that had befallen Robin and his men.

"Robin," said Father Tuck, "a proud man thou shouldst be to think so fair a maid should do all this for love of thee."

"Proud I am," said Robin, "and yet I have sorrow in my heart to think that I am an outlawed man, and can offer her, who hath ever known the softest ways of living, only the bare and houseless life of the wild forest. I would not change my life for anything the king could offer me, but for my nut-brown maid here to wish to wed me against her kinsmen's wishes would be to doom herself to a life that I would not—nay, that I cannot ask her to share."

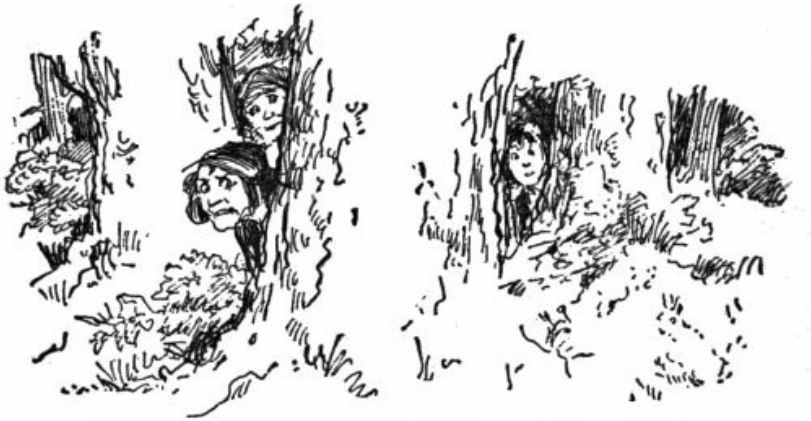
"Robin," said Marian, "I love but you alone, and I will wed none but thee. I love the woodland life even as thou dost, and I should be happy, though I forsook all my kindred. You think doubtless that I should repine when the leaves fall from the trees, when the wind snarls down the black ways or the snow-wreaths dance in the bitter winter. But my heart would be warm having thee to turn to, and I would never repent

leaving the thick walls of my father's castle. He is kind to me, but he scorns me and daily rails at me for my love of thee, and though I would leave him with sorrow, I will come to thee swiftly if and when thou hast need of me."

There was a little shake in her gentle voice as she ended, and tears were in the brave eyes. Robin took her hands and raising them to his lips, kissed them fervently.

"Almost you persuade me, sweetheart mine," he said. "I know thou lovest but me alone, but it is not right that a maid should run to the wood with an outlaw, to live in dread, watching day and night lest their enemies approach. But this I promise thee, Marian, that if at any time ye are in peril from those that wish ye ill, and are alone and pursued by evil men, then do ye send to me and I will come, and we will be wed by this good monk here, and then together we will suffer whatever fortune doth betide us."

A horn sounded from the forest outside, and going to the door, Robin espied Little John and the other outlaws. Little John reported that the abbot's men and the king's rangers had been chased to the highway beyond Harlow Wood, several having been wounded. That then two knights, who seemed to be waiting for them, had striven to rally the men-at-arms, but that the arrows of the outlaws had put them all to the rout, one of the knights riding away with an arrow in his side.



"It shows that their spies watch us continually."

"Was there aught to show who they were?" asked Robin.

"One had a blank shield, the other had a red tower on his," replied Little John.

"The red tower was a man I did not know," said Scarlet, "but he with the white shield was one of those whom we beat back last year at the church at Campsall."

"Scarlet speaks truth," said Will the Bowman, "he is Niger le Grym, and I think

the other, by the snarl in his voice and the fire of his curses, was no other than the fiend Isenbart de Belame himself."

"I doubt it not," said Robin. "It shows that their spies watch us continually. Go into the forest and keep within sound of my horn. There are two ladies here within whom we must guard to their homes."

Within, Father Tuck was preparing a woodland meal, and Marian having changed into her proper attire, they all sat to eat. Afterward two horses were brought forward from their hiding-place in the forest, and the ladies, having mounted, bade good-bye to the monk and set off with Robin to the castle of Sir Richard at Lee, where both were dwelling for a time.

As they rode along down the sunny forest ways, Robin saw that the lady Alice still seemed sad and thoughtful, and he asked Marian why his words had caused such sorrow in her.

"Because," said Marian, "she can no longer save herself from wedding the old and evil lord, Sir Ranulf de Greasby. The day of marriage is set and her lover, Alan-a-Dale, is outlawed, and is hiding in the wild hills of Lancaster."

"I heard not of that," said Robin. "Why is the young squire outlawed?"

"Sir Isenbart de Belame got him proclaimed outlaw because he slew Ivo le Ravener," was the reply.

"He did in truth slay Ivo le Ravener," said Robin, "but 'twas in fair fight, for I was by them when they fought, but I know not how the report could have been made that Alan slew him, because there was no one of his party near him, except a churl whom Ket the Trow slew."

"I remember now," said Marian, "that Sir Richard told me that word was given by a forester that on the day when the knight was found slain, Alan-a-Dale came to him for a horse which he had left in his charge, and he had a sore wound on his shoulder."

"That was Black Hugo," said Robin, "who was with the men-at-arms to-day. Said he aught else? Said he anything of who was with Alan when he came for his horse, or of the plight in which Hugo was himself?"

"Nay, I think not."

Robin told Marian of how they had found Black Hugo tied up to his own door-post, while a big man was seated before him eating the toasted collops which the forester had prepared for his own dinner.

"See you that tall fellow there?" said Robin, pointing to where the fine athletic figure of Little John, supple and wiry, strode before them, glancing keenly here and there into the forest beside them. "He is the villein who tied up the forester, and a

jollier comrade and a finer fighter I ne'er wish to meet."

Marian thereupon wished to speak to Little John, who was called up by his leader, and soon Little John, his face flushing, was speaking to the first lady he had ever met in his life.

While they spoke thus together, Robin rode forward to the lady Alice where she rode with her woman beside her.

"Lady Alice," said the outlaw, "sorry am I that those words of mine caused your sad thoughts to rise. But tell me how soon is it appointed that thou shalt wed the old knight whom those tyrants of Wrangby wish to be thy husband?"

"Sir Outlaw," said the lady, "my hateful marriage is fixed for three days hence on the feast of St. James at the church of Cromwell. My poor father can no longer resist the wicked demands of Sir Isenbart, who threatens fire and sword if he submit not to his will and weds me to the old tyrant, Sir Ranulf. And we have no great and powerful friends to whom we may appeal for protection, and my lover is outlawed and cannot save me."

"Take heart, dear lady. There may be hope in a few strong arms and stout hearts, though the time is but short. Hast thou anyone who could take a message to thy lover from me?"

"Thanks for thy great cheer, good Robin," replied the lady, and smiled through her tears. "There is a serf of my father's who knoweth my lover's hiding-place and hath taken four messages from me, though the way is fearsome and long for a poor untraveled villein. Yet he is brave, and loves to do my behests."

"How is he named and where doth he live?"

"He is named John or Jack, son of Wilkin, and dwelleth by the Hoar Thorn at Cromwell."

"Give me something which he will know for thine," said Robin, "for I will send one of my fellows to him ere the vesper bell rings to-night."

Lady Alice took a ring from one slender finger and put it in Robin's hand.

"This will he know as from me, and he will do whatsoever the bearer telleth him to do gladly," she said, "for my sake."

The waiting-woman now put out her hand, holding a thick silver ring between her fingers.

The waiting-woman riding beside her now put out her hand, holding a thick silver ring between her fingers.

"Bold Outlaw," said the girl, a dark-haired, rosy-cheeked and pretty lass with a high look, "let thy man take this also to Jack, and bid him from me, whom he saith he loves, that if he do not what you tell him and that speedily, then there is his ring back again, and when I see him again he shall have the rough side of my tongue and my malison besides. For if he'll not bestir his great carcass for the love of my lady who is in such a strait, then he is no man for Netta o' the Meering."

"I will do thy bidding, fair lass," said Robin with a smile. "And as I doubt not he is a brave man indeed from whom thou hast accepted this ring, I have no fear that all will go well."

In a little while they had reached Sir Richard's castle, and the ladies were safely in hall again. By this time the afternoon light was softening to evening, and Robin knew that no time was to be lost. He called Will the Bowman to him, and giving him the two rings entrusted him with the mission he had planned. A few moments later, on Robin's own swift horse, Will was galloping with loose rein along the forest drives that led eastward to the waters of the Trent.

CHAPTER IV

HOW BY THE HELP OF ROBIN HOOD AND JACK, SON OF WILKIN, ALAN-A-DALE WAS WED TO THE LADY ALICE

JACK, son of Wilkin, as he stood in the wood tying the last bundle of faggots on a rough cart little thought that there was hastening to him a message that would have a very great effect on all his future life. Jack was a well-built, sturdy youth of about twenty, good looking, with quick brown eyes and freckled skin.

The forest he had heard was a place of dread, for the other villeins had told terrible tales. Of monsters who flew by night and hid in dark thickets by day to snap up unwary travelers; of hills from whose tops at night the glow of fire shone forth, and within which little dark elves or spirits dwelled. Indeed, the fear of little malicious fiends was never very distant from Jack's mind in those times.

One day the lady Alice, like a vision from heaven for beauty and graciousness, had met him in a lonely place, and giving him a parchment wrapped in silk, had begged him to take it to her lover, who lay hid at a certain place in the forests of Lancaster. He was the only man she could trust, she had said, and her words had seemed to make Jack's heart swell in his breast.

Three times since then he had done the journey, and every time his dread of the strange roads and the wild waste country, which lies between Sherwood and Werrisdale, had returned to him, but his pluck and his shrewdness had carried him safely through the various adventures he had met.

He had never seen an outlaw or real robber of the woods. Peddlers, and lusty beggar men, or saucy minstrels had tried to frighten or defraud him of his few poor possessions or his bag of food; but never had he seen any of those terrible men who had fled from their rightful lords, forsaking land and home and the daily customs of their forefathers.

That evening, as he stood tying the last faggot on the little cart, he was wondering what he should have done had one dashed upon him from the thicket on one of his journeys, and demanded the precious thing which the lady Alice had entrusted to him. He would have fought to the death rather than give it up.

He clicked his tongue to the rough pony which drew the cart, and led it down the track out of the wood. He looked west and saw far away over the shaggy line of the forest the upper limb of the huge red sun in whose light the tree stems around him

shone blood red. The light dazzled his eyes. He heard a twig break beside him, a man stepped from behind the trunk of a tree and stood barring his passage.

"Art thou Jack, son of Wilkin?" said the stranger, in a sharp commanding tone.

Jack stepped back, and his hand fell to the haft of the knife stuck in his belt. He looked keenly at the man, who was short and sturdy. He was dressed in green tunic and hose, much worn in places and torn here and there as if by brambles. A bow was slung across his back, and a bunch of arrows was tied to his girdle beside a serviceable sword.

Jack wondered, as he scowled at the stranger, who he might be. He looked by his clothes to be some lord's woodman, and his face, covered with a great grizzled beard, seemed honest though stern. Yet there was an air about the man that seemed to say that he owned no one lord but himself. The stamp of the freeman was in his keen eyes, in the straight look, and the stiff poise of the head.

These thoughts took but an instant to pass through Jack's mind; then he said:

"What's that to thee who I be?"

"It's much to thee who ye be," said the stranger with a laugh. "Look 'ee, lad, I mean thee no harm."

There was an honest ring in the other's laugh which pleased Jack. The stranger's left hand went to his pouch and drew something from it. Then he pulled forth his dagger and upon the point of it he slipped two rings—one of gold, the other of silver—and held the weapon up to the light. The dying rays of the sun struck a diamond in the tiny hoop of gold, so that it dazzled and glowed like a fairy light in the darkening wood.

"Do ye know aught of these, lad?" asked the man.

"Where got ye them?" asked Jack, his face dark with anger. "Ha' ye robbed them from those who wore them? If 'tis so, then thou'lt never leave this place alive."

"Soft, brave lad," replied the other, watching keenly the involuntary crouching movement which Jack made as if he was preparing to spring upon the other. "My master got them from the hands of their fair owners, with these words. The lady Alice, thy mistress, said: 'Jack is brave and loves to do my behests. He will know this is from me, and he will do whatsoever the bearer telleth him to do gladly, for my sake.' "

"Said the lady Alice those words?" asked Jack. His face was flushed, the blood seemed suddenly to have swept hotly into his heart and he glowed with the pleasure of hearing his lady's praise even by the mouth of this rugged old woodman. "And what," he went on, "what would my lady wish me to do?"

"Go with me and lead me to Alan-a-Dale," said Will the Bowman.

For a moment Jack hesitated. Go with this stranger through the wild forest and the lonely lands of the Peak! But his loyalty suffered no question of what he would do.

"I will do this, friend," replied Jack. "Tell me thy name and who thou art."

"I am called Will the Bowman," was the reply. "Robin Hood is my master."

"What!" said Jack, and started back. "Thou art an outlaw! One of Robin Hood's men?"

"That am I," replied Will, "and proud to serve so brave and wise a master."

Jack looked in wonder for a moment. This was no desperate and reckless cut-throat, such as he had imagined; but a man with a homely face, with eyes that could be stern but which could also smile. Jack put out his hand on an impulse, and the other gripped it.

"Thou art the first outlaw I have seen," said Jack with a hearty laugh, "and if thy master and thy fellows are like thee, then my heart tells me that thou art honest and good fellows. And Robin Hood will befriend my lady?"

"Ay, that will he," said Will, "but now let's chatter no more, but get to the forest ere the light is wholly gone."

No more words were said. Jack led the horse and cart to the rough track which led to the village, and then gave a slash to the horse and knew as it cantered on that it would soon reach home in safety. Before sending it off, however, he tore a strip of traveler's joy from the hedge and twined it round the pony's head. By this his mother would know that again he had set off suddenly at the bidding of the lady Alice.

When the two men had left the wood a mile behind them Will said:

"Ye asked not what message came with the silver ring, lad."

Jack laughed. "Nay, I did not. First, because my lady's message drove it from my head, and, second, because I doubt not 'twas no soft message."

" 'Twas a maid's message," replied Will, "and that's half bitter and half sweet, as doubtless ye know. Then I guess the maid Netta o' the Meering flouts thee as often as she speaks kind words?"

"Ye are older than I," said Jack with a little awkward laugh, "and doubtless ye know the ways of girls better than I. What was the message she sent me?"

Will told him, and Jack's face reddened at the telling. "I needed not her rough tongue," he said with some shade of haughtiness in his voice, "to make me stir myself for my lady's sake."

Thereafter he would say no more, but Will noticed that he quickened his pace and seemed very full of thought. By the time the last faint light had died from the clear sky, they were deep in the forest ways. They rested and ate food from their

scrip until the moon arose, and then by its gentle light they threaded the paths of the greenwood, looking like demons as their dark forms passed through the inky blackness, and like fairies covered with magic sheen when they stepped silently across some open glade.

Two days later, in the morning, the villeins of Cromwell village stood in groups about their hovels talking of the sad fate that was to befall their beloved young mistress that morning. All knew that she had given her heart to Alan-a-Dale, but that some hard destiny which ruled the lives of knights and ladies was forcing her to wed old Ranulf de Greasby, a white-haired, evil old lord who lived in the fenlands to the east.

Some of the villeins stood in the churchyard, in the church of which the ceremony was to take place. They often looked along the road to the north, for it was from thence that the wedding party would come. Already the priest had been seen ambling along toward the manor-house, from whence he would probably accompany the bride to the church.

"He goes to take comfort to her to whom he can give none," said one young woman with a baby in her arms. "Poor lady!" she went on, "why should he be denied her whom she loves best in all the world?"

" 'Twould be at the price of his head if he came here this day," said a man near her. "Outlaw he is and a broken man."

"Oh, 'tis a foul wrong!" cried a young girl. "Is there no one of all her kin who would save her?"

"Her kin are a weak people, Mawkin," said an old wrinkled woman, "and they would be like mice in the jaws of Isenbart de Belame if they stood against his will."

Just then there came the sound of horses' hoofs along the rough road coming from the north, and ten mounted men-at-arms rode up wearing the livery of Ranulf de Greasby. Men of hard, coarse looks they were, and without a word they rode their horses into the gate and up to the church porch, scattering the poor villeins, who got out of the way of the horses as quickly as they could. The horsemen ranged themselves five on each side of the porch, and, dismounting, each stood by his horse and glared insolently at the villeins, who were now huddled together by the gate.

"Is it from such rubbish as these that the old man fears a rescue?" asked one man-at-arms.

The others laughed at the joke. "Our old lord hath been flouted so long by the pretty young jade," said another, "that now she is almost in his hand he fears some evil hap may snatch her from him."

"Ay, she hath flouted him overlong," said another. "I'd not give much for her

flouts once she's in his castle by Hagthorn Waste. There be ways he hath of taming the fiercest maid, as his last wife knew, so they say."

"I remember her," said the first speaker. "She lived two years. She 'scaped from him one winter's night, and was found at the dawn in Grimley Mere frozen stiff."

"Ye are cheerful bridesmen, by the rood," said he who was evidently the leader. "Let us have that minstrel to give us a rousing song more fitting for a wedding. Hi, there, varlet!"

The minstrel sang them a ballad about a wedding, which pleased them mightily.

A tall minstrel, wearing a gaudy striped doublet and patched hose, had strolled from the village up to the group of villeins, and was laughing with them, while he twanged the harp which he wore round his neck by a soiled ribbon. At the call of the soldier, the minstrel stepped to the gate and, taking off his velvet cap, swept it before him with a bow.

"What would you, noble squires? A song of war and booty, or one of the bower and loving maidens, or one which tells of the chase of the good red deer?"

"Sing what thou likest, so it be a jolly song," commanded the chief man-at-arms.

Whereupon with a few preliminary twangings and a clearing of the throat, the minstrel gave them a popular song called "The Woodstock Rose." He had a rich

tenor voice, and the ditty was a rollicking one, with a chorus in which all took part. Afterward the minstrel sang them a ballad about a wedding, which pleased them mightily. When the minstrel appeared wishful to depart, the leader said:

"Stay, jolly fellow, for I think we shall have need of thee. We are like to have a sad-faced bride here soon, and thy lively songs may brighten her, so that my lord may take cheer of her gay looks. If thou pleasest our lord this day thou shalt have good reward, I doubt not."

The minstrel was not unwilling to stay and was preparing to sing another lay, when four horsemen were seen riding swiftly toward the church. The tallest one was Sir Ranulf de Greasby, an old gray knight with a red and ugly face. His lips were cruel, and his red eyes were small and fierce. He was dressed in a rich cloak of red silk, his belt was encrusted with diamonds and his sword-hilt blazed with jewels. The three men with him were younger knights, of a reckless air, well-dressed but slovenly in bearing. One of them was Sir Ranulf's nephew, Sir Ector of the Harelip, a ruffianly-looking man, whose fame for cruelty was as great as that of his uncle's.

The old knight drove through the gate furiously as if in a great hurry.

"Hath the lady come yet?" he cried in a hoarse voice to the men-at-arms, and his red, foxy eyes gleamed suspiciously from one to the other.

"Nay, lord," replied the leader.

"Plague on it!" the old knight rapped out, and turning in his saddle he glanced sourly up and down the road, then at the crowd of villeins and the hovels beyond. "She keeps me waiting still," he muttered into his beard, while they could hear his teeth grind and could see the fierce red eyes close to slits through which came an evil light. "It shall be hers to wait, anon, if she speak not fair to me!"

"Who art thou, knave?" he said, suddenly glancing down at the minstrel who stood beside his horse.

"I am Jocelyn, the minstrel, Sir Knight," replied the man, and twanged his harp.

"Thou hast a knave's face," said Sir Ranulf suspiciously; "thou'rt not sleek enough for a gleeman."

"Nevertheless, Sir Knight, I am a poor gleeman come to give your highness pleasure with my simple song, if ye will have it," said the minstrel, and twanged his harp again.

"Sing then, rascal, and let thy song be apt, or thou'lt get but a basting."

The gleeman screwed up two strings of his harp, and began:

"Though lord of lands I sadly strayed,
I long despised my knightly fame,
And wakeful sighed the night hours through!
A thrall was I to that fair dame,
To whom long time in vain I prayed—
The haughty lady Alysoun.

Blow, northern wind,
Send me my sweeting,
Blow, northern wind, blow, blow, blow."

As he finished the last line, a scornful laugh, strangely shrill, rang out. Men looked this way and that, but could see naught. It seemed to come from above their heads, but there was nothing to be seen except the wooden front of the church tower. Round this a few daws were flying and crying, and in and out of the arrow slits swallows were passing to and from their nests.

The gleeman sang another verse.

"Ah, how her cruel looks tortured me,—
How like two swords her eyes of gold,—
Until my cheeks waxed wan with woe!
But, happy me, though I am old
Ah, now she, winsome, smiles on me
My lady fair, my Alysoun.

Blow, northern wind,
Send me my sweeting,
Blow, northern wind, blow, blow, blow."

Again the laugh rang out, this time with a more mocking note in it. Sir Ranulf looked at the gleeman.

"Who made that noise, knave?" he said, anger in his voice. "Hast thou any fellow with thee?"

"No one is with me, lord," the minstrel replied.

"Belike, lord," said one of the men, who had fear in his eyes, "it is a nixie in the church tower."

"Belike, fool," roared Sir Ranulf, "thou shalt have a strong whipping when thou art home again. Go ye round the church in opposite ways and see if no churl is hiding. And if any be there, bring him here and I will cut his tongue from his mouth. I'll teach aught to fleer at me!"

Four of the men went round the church, while others went among the graves, lest some one was hiding behind the low wooden slabs raised over some of the burial places; but both parties returned saying they had seen nobody. The knight was in a

furious rage by now, and sending five of his men, he commanded them to scatter the villeins who stood by the churchyard gate, marveling at the strange happening. The villagers did not wait for the blows of the soldiers, but fled among their hovels.

"Now, rogue," cried Sir Ranulf to the gleeman, "sing another verse of thy song, and if another laugh be heard I shall know it to be caused by thyself. Think ye that I know not the wizard tricks of thy juggling tribe?"

"As I hope to be saved," said the jongleur gravely, "it is not I who do make that laughter. Nevertheless, I will sing another verse and stand to the issue thereof."

Thereupon, making his harp to accompany his tune, he sang:

"A gracious fate to me is sent,
Methinks it is by Heaven lent!
Ah now as mate she will me take,
For ever, sweet, to be thy thrall,
While life shall last, my all in all,
My gentle, laughing Alysoun.

Blow, northern wind,
Send me my sweeting,
Blow, northern wind, blow, blow, blow."

A shout of mocking laughter, so fierce and grim as to startle all, sounded immediately above the heads of the listeners, so that all involuntarily looked up, but there was nothing to be seen. The noise ceased for a moment; then a croaking laugh came from over the road, as if that which caused the sound was slowly passing away. Then the sound came nearer for a moment, and all heard distinctly words uttered with a fierce and threatening cry: "Colman Grey! Colman Grey!"

At the sound of these words Sir Ranulf started back and fiercely pulled his horse so that he leaned against the very church door, at which he beat with clenched fists, and cried out: "Avaunt! Avaunt! Keep him from me! Call the priest! Call the priest! 'Tis an evil spirit—keep it from me!"

He seemed in mortal terror. His face that had been red was now white; his lips twitched and gibbered, and while with one hand he crossed himself repeatedly, with the other he now seemed to push something from him and covered his eyes.

At length he came to himself: he saw the wonder in the eyes about him, and recovering his spirit somewhat, though he still trembled, he drove his horse forward among his men-at-arms.

"What gape ye at, ye knaves and fools?" he cried violently, and raising the whip which hung on his saddle he slashed it at the men. They gave way before him; he charged them to stand still, but they would not, and in a mad fury he dashed his

horse this way and that, beating at them, where they stood among their horses. The animals reared and began to bite and tear at each other, and an almost inextricable confusion arose. Suddenly his nephew, Sir Ector, caught the arm of the mad old lord and cried: "Sir Ranulf, the lady comes! Cease!"

The furious man looked up the northern road and saw a party of riders coming toward the church. Instantly he dropped the whip, set his hat straight and righted his tunic. Then he bade his sullen men mount their horses and prepare to receive the lady. Already the priest and the sacristan had entered the church by a side door, and now the great doors behind them swung open, and the darkness of the church yawned.

Sir Ranulf, seeing that all was now in order, cast a fierce eye around for the minstrel. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Where went that rogue the juggler?" he asked one of his companion knights.

"I know not," said the other. "I kept my eye upon him till thou didst begin to whip thy knaves, and then in the confusion he crept off, for I saw him not again!"

"Good Sir Philip," said Sir Ranulf, "do thou do me the greatest favor, and go search for that varlet. I shall not be happy till I have him in my hands and see him under torture. Then will I learn what the knave knows and—and—what—what—meant that cry. Thou canst take two of my men with thee, but seek him out, and when thou hast seized him take him to Hagthorn Waste, and lodge him in my hold there."

A few words to two of the men-at-arms, and they and the knight rode out of the churchyard just as Sir Walter de Beauforest and a friend of his, with the lady Alice between them, rode up, accompanied by a house villein and the lady Alice's maid, both on horseback behind them. The old knight, Sir Ranulf, his crafty face all smiles now, stood at the churchyard gate doffing his hat, and with his hand on his heart, bowed to the lady Alice, greeting her. The lady Alice, with face pale and sad, hardly looked at him. She was clad in a rich dress of white silk, ropes of pearls were about her neck, her light summer cloak was sewn with pearls, and her wimple cloth was richly embroidered with gold; but this richness only showed up the dreadful pallor of her face and her eyes that looked as if they strained to weep but would not.

Sir Walter, her father, looked no more wretched than he felt. He was a proud knight, and hated to think that he had to submit to the commands of a tyrant lord, and to marry his only daughter to a knight with the evil fame which Sir Ranulf de Greasby had possessed so long. Robbery on the highways and cruel tyranny of poor folk for the sake of their meager hoards or their lands were the least of the crimes which report lay to the guilt of Sir Ranulf. Tales there were of a tortured wife and of

poor men and women put to cruel torment in the dungeons of his castle on Hagthorn Waste.

All rode up to the church door and then dismounted. Netta, whose eyes were red, went to her mistress, and under pretence of arranging her cloak, whispered words of cheer to her while for sorrow she could hardly keep herself from weeping. Then Sir Walter, taking his daughter by the hand, led her into the church and up the dim aisle toward the altar, where already the priest stood ready to perform the ceremony.

Four of the men-at-arms stood without the church with the horses, the other four went in with Sir Ranulf and his two knights, of whom Sir Ector acted as his best man. Together they approached the altar, and then, while the others kept back, Sir Walter Beauforest placed his daughter's hand in the hand of Sir Ranulf, who immediately led her up to the priest.

The old priest was as sad as any of the poor villeins who now crept into the church and sat in the back benches. He had known the lady Alice when she was brought to the font to be baptized, he had taught her to read and to write, and had loved her for her graciousness and kindness. Moreover, Sir Walter had always been a good friend to the poor priest. Nevertheless, he had to do his duty, and now, opening his service-book, he prepared to read the words that should make these two man and wife.

Suddenly from the gloom along the wall of the church came a movement, and a man stepped forth into the light of the candles which stood upon the altar. It was the minstrel, but now in his hand he bore a long-bow, and his harp was carried by a fair young man—Gilbert of the White Hand.

"This is an evil and unfitting match," he cried in a loud, stern voice. "Sir Ranulf of the Waste, get thee gone lest ill and death befall thee. Sir Priest, this maiden shall wed him she loveth best, at a more fitting time."

All eyes were turned to the tall figure in green. The lady Alice, her eyes bright and a flush in her cheeks, had torn her hand from the fingers of Sir Ranulf, and stood trembling, her hands clasped together.

Sir Ranulf, his face dark with passion, looked from the lady to the minstrel. He was almost too furious to speak.

"So!" he said mockingly. "Who is this? Is this the wolf's-head, the broken fool for whom this maiden here hath flouted me and put me off this year and more?"

None answered. Sir Walter peered at the minstrel and shook his head. Sir Ranulf, with a gesture of rage, drew his sword, and made a step forward.

"Who art thou, knave, to dare to withstand me?" he cried.

From the darkness of the roof above their heads came a croaking voice:

"Colman Grey! Colman Grey!"

Sir Ranulf faltered at the name and looked up, his face white with terror. As he did so, the hum as of a bee was heard, and a short black arrow shot down and pierced his throat. Without a cry he fell heavily to the ground, twitched a little and lay still.

The knights and men-at-arms who looked on stood motionless, too surprised to do or say aught. The minstrel placed a horn to his lips and blew a shrill blast which filled the church with echoes. Instantly, as if the sound awoke him from his stupor, Sir Ector drew his sword and with a yell of rage dashed at Robin Hood, for he was of course the minstrel. Hardly had Robin time to draw his own sword, and soon he and Sir Ector were fighting fiercely in the gloom. At the sound of the horn, also, there came the sound of clashing weapons at the door, and the men-at-arms who had hitherto stood too amazed to move, now seized their swords and ran toward the door, only to be stayed by three of their fellows who ran into the church, pursued by a flight of arrows which poured in like a horde of angry wasps. Two men fell dead, and another tottered away sorely wounded. Next moment into the church came some half-score men in green. The five remaining men-at-arms, knowing the hatred with which any men of Sir Ranulf's were looked upon, dashed against the bowmen and strove to cut their way through, for they knew that no quarter would be given them. The fight raged furiously at the door, the men in green striving to thrust them back, and the Greasby men struggling to win through to the open.

Suddenly a scream rang through the church. Looking quickly around, Sir Walter saw the second knight who had been with Sir Ranulf rushing toward the priest's side door, and in his arms was the lady Alice, struggling to free herself from his powerful grasp.

Behind him ran Netta the maid, screaming, and tearing at the knight's garments; but as he reached the door he turned and struck the girl a blow which laid her senseless. Next moment he had disappeared through the arras which hid the door.

At the same moment Robin Hood, after a fierce struggle with Sir Ector, slew him, though wounded himself, and then swiftly made for the door through which the other knight had dashed with the lady Alice. Looking out, he saw nobody in sight, and guessed that the knight had rushed forward to the horses which stood before the church.

This was indeed the truth. Still clutching his struggling burden, the knight reckoned on seizing a horse and escaping before any one would recover from the confusion. When he reached the front of the church he found two men in deadly

combat. One was the knight who had gone off in pursuit of the minstrel, the other was a stranger. But at sight of the latter the lady Alice, breathless and panting, cried out: "Alan! Alan! Save me!"

Her cry was almost the death-knell of her lover, for, surprised at the voice of his sweetheart crying so near him, Alan turned his head, and the knight struck at him a deadly blow, which would most surely have sheared his head from his shoulders had not Jack, son of Wilkin, who was standing near, seen the danger and with his staff struck a shrewd blow at the knight's shoulder. This saved Alan's life and gave him time to turn. Furiously he strove to beat down his foe, knowing that he must slay this one before he could turn upon the knight who was bearing off his lady.

But the knight, Sir Philip, was a stout and crafty fighter, and meanwhile the knight who bore the lady had reached a horse, had thrown her across the saddle, and had swung himself into the seat. Next moment he had dashed toward the churchyard gate, cutting down two poor brave villeins who, seeing their lady thus used, hoped with their staves to check the robber knight. With a yell of exultation the knight saw his way clear before him, put spurs to the steed, and spoke mockingly to the now unconscious form of the lady lying across the horse before him.

Suddenly he felt some one leap on the haunches of the animal behind him. Ere he could think what to do, a long knife flashed in the sun before his eyes. He felt a thud on his breast and a keen pain like fire, then blackness swept down upon him. He rocked in his seat, the reins were caught from his hands, and Jack, son of Wilkin, heaving the dead knight from before him, checked the frightened horse, brought it to a standstill, and lifted the unconscious body of his mistress tenderly to the ground.

By this time Alan-a-Dale had leaped in under the guard of his adversary and by a swift blow had despatched him, and instantly had run to the side of his mistress, for whom already Jack, Wilkin's son, had brought water. Soon she revived and sat up, and hearing who was her rescuer, gave her hand to Jack, who kneeled and reverently kissed it.

"Jack," she said, smiling sweetly though wanly, "for this great service thou shalt be a freeman, and my father shall give thee free land."

Jack glowed with gladness, but was too tongue-tied to say aught but "Thank you, my lady!"

By now, too, Netta, a little dazed, came forward and tended her mistress. Robin Hood, going into the church to fetch Sir Walter, found that of his own men two had been slain in the fierce encounter with the men-at-arms, of whom but one of the ten had escaped alive by rushing away through the side door.

"Sir Walter," said Robin, when father and daughter had embraced each other,

"this hath been a red bridal, and I have meddled in thy affairs to some purpose."

"I cannot be ungrateful to you, Sir Outlaw," said Sir Walter, who, proud and stiff as he was, knew a brave leader from a paltry one, and honored courage, whether found in earl or churl, villein or freeman; "I thank thee from my heart for saving my daughter from this ill-starred and unhappy match. I must stand the issue of it, for the knights you have slain have powerful aiders, and I doubt not their vengeance will be heavy upon us all."

"You speak of Belame and the Wrangby lords?"

"They are the rulers of these parts in these present unhappy times," replied the knight. "While the king's own sons plunge the country in civil war and wretchedness, weak men have to submit to the gross tyranny of stronger neighbors."

"Ranulf of Greasby and Ector Harelip are two the less," said Robin grimly. "Mark me, Sir Walter," he went on, "the lords of Wrangby have already filled the cup of suffering beyond men's bearing. As I hope to be saved, by the Virgin's dear word, I swear it here and now, that ere long they shall lie as low as do these robber knights, and when I pull them down, I will root out their nest, so that not one evil stone shall stand upon another."

"I will help thee all I may, Sir Outlaw," said the knight, "and when the time comes thou mayst call on me to give thee all aid. Meanwhile, what's to be done?"

"This shall be done, Sir Walter," replied Robin. "Thy daughter and the man she loves shall dwell with me in the greenwood, and when they have been thrice called in a church they shall be wedded. If thou fearest assault by the robber baron, De Belame, thou canst leave thy house and live with us also; but if thou wouldst liefer stay beneath thy own roof, twenty of my men shall stay to guard and watch with thee. Dost thou agree?"

"I will liefer stay in my own house, good Robin," said Sir Walter, "if thy brave fellows will aid me to repel attack."

It was thus agreed. Within the next three weeks Father Tuck, in a church nearby his dell, had published the banns of marriage between Alan and Alice, and it was the valiant monk himself who married the lovers, thus making them happy once for all.

On the day when Robin thus saved Alice from wedding the evil Sir Ranulf, the cruel lord, Isenbart de Belame, sat in the high seat of his castle at Wrangby, with just men called Evil Hold, and waited for his supper. About the board sat others as evil as himself, as Sir Niger le Grym, Hamo de Mortain, Sir Baldwin the Killer, Sir Roger of Doncaster, and many others.

"What means this?" said De Mortain. "There are names on the scroll here!"

"Plague take him!" at length cried De Belame, "I'll wait no longer for him. Is Ranulf so jealous of his pretty bride that he fears to bring her here for us to give her our good wishes?"

The others laughed and made jeering jests.

"And where's Ector, Philip and Bertran?" said Sir Niger. "They were to go with the bridegroom to give the shy fellow heart and courage in the ordeal."

"Ho! scullions," roared De Belame, "serve the meats! And when Ranulf comes, we'll make such game of him and his bride that he'll be——"

Whang! Something had seemed to score through the air from above their heads, and lo! here, sticking in the board before Sir Isenbart, was a black arrow, with a piece of parchment tied to it. Only for a moment De Belame lost his presence of mind. He looked up to the ceiling of the high hall and shouted:

"'Twas shot from the spy hole! Ho, there, knaves, up and search the castle for him that shot this!" He rose himself and hurried away, while the men-at-arms from the lower table scattered throughout the castle.

Niger le Grym drew the arrow from the wood and looked at the parchment, on which were names in red and black. But being no scholar he could read naught of them. In a while came back De Belame, red with rage, cursing his knaves and their non-success.

"What means it?" said De Mortain. "There are names on the scroll here!"

De Belame had been a monk in his early youth and could read. He looked at the slip of parchment, and his face went fierce and dark with fury.

"Look you," he said, "there are strange powers against us! Ranulf, Ector and the others have been done to death this day. Written in blood upon this parchment are the names of all who once made our full company and are now dead. Thus, here are the names of Roger de Longchamp and Ivo le Ravener, and now there appear those of Ranulf de Greasby, Ector de Malstane, Philip de Scrooby, and Bertran le Noir—all written in blood!"

"This is passing strange!" said some. Others looked with whitened faces at one another, while one or two even crossed themselves.

"Also," went on De Belame, "our own names, the names of us still living, are written in black, but underneath each is a red line!"

He laughed hoarsely, and his bloodshot eyes glared at the faces beside him. He picked up the arrow, a short, stout bolt, the shaft and feathers being a jet black.

"This is a trick of that saucy knave, Robin Hood," he said. "He thinks to frighten us, the braggart fool. He would do justice as he terms it upon me—lord of Wrangby, grandson of Roger de Belame, at whose name the lords of forty castles shuddered when he lived. I have been too mild with this pretty outlaw! I will cut his claws! I will cut his claws! Lads, we will lay our snares, and when we have him in the crucet-house below, we will tame him of his sauciness!"

But in spite of De Belame's fierce and violent laughter, supper was eaten but moodily.

Next day strange tales began to spread about the countryside. The noise of the fight at the church spread far and wide. It was said that when Robin and the priest went to bring out the dead from the church the body of Sir Ranulf could not be found. Men said that the Evil One himself had carried him off, just as it must have been some fiend at whose call he had shown fear, and by whose black arrow he had been slain.

Then a villein raced home late the same night from a village near Hagthorn Waste and said that in the twilight he had seen, across the marsh, a dead man being borne by things that had no bodies but only legs—demons of the fen, no doubt, who were taking home the body of their evil master.

But strangest thing of all was that late that night, the moon being full, the men-at-arms on Hagthorn Castle, watching for the return of their master and his bride, had suddenly heard shrieks of fiendish joy sound far off in the waste, and looking closely they seemed to see where a flickering light danced to and fro, and small black forms that heaped up a great fire. Whereat, fearing they knew not what, they crossed themselves, but said that something fell and evil stalked abroad through the sedgy pools and stony wilderness that lay about them. Closely did they keep watch throughout the night, but at the darkest hour before the dawn, a strange drowsiness fell upon those that watched, so that all within the castle slept heavily.

They woke again with fierce flames heating upon their faces, the thick reek of smoke blinding their eyes and choking them. Dashing, to and fro, they sought for ways of escape, but found that every door was locked, every egress barred either by flame or by stout iron-studded doors. Then did these men who had never shown mercy cry for it to the red reaching hands of the flames, but found none. They who had tortured the poor and the weak were tortured and tormented in their turn, and all their prayers were unheard.

When dawn broke, the gray light shone wanly over a red and glowing ruin. Men and women from neighboring villages came and stood marveling to see it. Thin and poor, with wolfish, famished faces, they looked, and could scarce believe that at length the evil thing was brought to ruin—that the cruel power which had oppressed them and theirs so long was lifted from their backs, that no longer had it power to cripple their limbs, starve their bodies and stunt their souls.

CHAPTER V

HOW ROBIN HOOD SLEW THE SHERIFF

ONE day, as Robin and Much were walking disguised as merchants through the town of Doncaster, they saw a man ride into the market-place, and checking his horse he cried out:

"Oyez, oyez, oyez! Hear, all good people, archers, sergeants and men-at-arms, woodmen, foresters, and all good men who bear bows. Know ye that my master, the noble sheriff of Nottingham, doth make a great cry. And doth invite all the best archers of the north to come to the butts at Nottingham on the feast of St. Peter, to try their shooting one against the other. The prize is a right good arrow, the shaft thereof made of pure silver and the head and feathers of rich red gold. No arrow is like it in all England, and he that beareth off that prize shall forever be known as the greatest and best archer in all the northern parts of England beyond Trent. God save King Richard and the Holy Sepulcher!"

"What think you of that, master?" asked Much. "Is it not some sly plot of the sheriff's to attract thee into his power, since he knoweth that thou wilt never let this shooting go without thou try thy bow upon it?"

"I doubt not, indeed, that such may be their plot," said Robin, with a laugh. "Nevertheless, we will go to Nottingham, however it fall out, and we will see if the sheriff can do any more in the open than he hath done in the greenwood."

When they got back to the camp at the Stane Lea, Robin took counsel of his

chief men, and it was decided that the most part of the outlaws should go to Nottingham on the day appointed, entering into the town by various gates as if they came from many different parts. All should bear bows and arrows, but be disguised, some as poor yeomen or villeins, others as woodmen or village hunters.

"As for me," said Robin, "I will go with a smudgy face and a tattered jerkin as if I am some wastrel, and six others of ye shall shoot with me. The rest shall mingle with the crowd, and should it be that the sheriff means ill, then there will be bows and arrows buzzing when he shows his treachery."

On the day appointed, which was fair and bright, great was the multitude of people which gathered by the butts.

A scaffolding of seats was set up near the shooting-place, and in this sat the sheriff, some of the knights of the castle of Nottingham and others of their friends. Near by stood the officers of the sheriff, who were to keep the course and regulate the trials.

First came the shooting at a broad target. It was placed at two hundred and twenty yards, and a hundred archers shot at it.

Each man was allowed three shots, and he that did not hit within a certain ring twice out of thrice was not allowed to shoot again. Then the mark was placed at greater distances, and by the time it was set up at three hundred yards the hundred archers had dwindled down to twenty.

The excitement among the crowd now began to grow, and when the butt was removed and the "pricke" or wand was set up, the names of favorites among the competing archers were being shouted. Of the seven outlaws, one had fallen out, and there remained Robin, Little John, Scadlock, who had become an excellent bowman, Much, the Miller's son, an outlaw named Reynold, and Gilbert of the White Hand, who by constant practice had become very skillful.

At the first contest of shooting against the wand, seven of the twenty failed, among them being Scadlock and Reynold. Then the wand was set further back at every shooting until, when it stood at four hundred yards, there were not more than seven archers remaining. Among these was Robin and Gilbert; three others were bowmen in the service of the sheriff, the sixth was a man of Sir Gosbert de Lambley, and the remaining one was an old man of great frame and fierce aspect, who had said he was a yeoman, and called himself Rafe of the Billhook.

Now came the hardest contest of all—"shooting at roavers" as it was called, where a man was set to shoot at a wand of which he had to guess the distance, so that he had to use his own wit in the choice of his arrow, and as to the strength of the breeze.

"Now, bully boys of Nottingham, show thy mettle!" cried a stout man with a thick neck and a red face, who stood near the sheriff's seat. He was Watkin, the chief officer or bailiff of Sheriff Murdach.

"Forward, sheriff's men," cried a citizen in the crowd, "show these scurvy strangers that Sherwood men are not to be overborne."

"Scurvy thyself," said a voice somewhere in the rear. "Yorkshire types be a breed that mak' Sherwood dogs put their tails atween their legs."

The horn sounded its note to show that the contest had begun, and all eyes were bent upon the rival archers. The Nottingham men went first, and of these two failed to hit the wand, the arrow of one going wide and the other falling short. The third man struck the top of the wand with his bolt, and the roar of triumph which went up showed how keenly the defeat of the other two Nottingham men had been felt.

Then Robin stepped up to the shooting-line. He had put aside the huge six-foot bow which he had used for shooting at the butt, and now bore one which was but a yard in length, but so thick that a laugh went up here and there, and a young squire cried out mockingly: "Does this ragged wastrel think he can shoot with that hedge-pole?"

"Stand at twelve score paces and see!" said a quiet voice somewhere near at hand.

"He'll drill a bolt through thy ribs at fifteen score paces," said another, "and through thy mail shirt as well."

Robin, in a ragged and frayed brown tunic and hose, with a hood of similar hue, raised his bow, notched his arrow and looked for one long moment at the mark. He had let his hair and beard grow longer than usual and both were unkempt and untidy. With the aid of some red dye he had colored his face, so that he looked to be but a dissipated haunter of alehouses and town taverns.

"Dry work, toper, is't not?" cried a waggish citizen. A great laughter rose from the crowd at the joke. The archer seemed not to notice it and shot his bolt. All craned their necks to see how it had sped, and a gasp of wonder came and then a hearty shout. The wand had been split in two!

"Well done, yeoman!" cried a well-dressed citizen, going up and clapping Robin on the back. "Thy hand and eye must be steadier than it seems by thy face they ought to be." He looked keenly in Robin's face, and Robin recognized him as a burgher whom he had once befriended in the forest. The man knew him and muttered as he turned away, "I thought 'twas thee. 'Ware the sheriff! Treachery is about!" Then he strolled back to his place in the crowd.

The other three now shot at the mark. Rafe of the Billhook missed the wand by

the width of three fingers' span, and the bolt of Sir Gosbert's man flew wide. Young Gilbert of the White Hand now shot his arrow. Very carefully he measured with his eye the distance of the wand, chose an arrow with a straight-cut feather and then discharged it. The bolt made a beautiful curve toward the wand and for a moment it seemed that it must strike the mark. But a wandering breeze caught it and turned it, so that it flew about a hand's space to the left. The crowd cheered, however, for the youth and courteous bearing of the lad made them feel kindly toward him.

The contest now lay between the sheriff's man, by name Luke the Reid or Red, and Robin. In the next shooting there was no difference between them for the bolt of each fairly struck the wand. Then the sheriff spoke:

"Ye are fairly matched, but you cannot both have the golden arrow. Devise some play that shall show which of you is the keener bowman."

"By your leave, my lord sheriff," said Robin, "I would propose that we look not on the wand while it is shifted to some distance you may choose, and that then we turn and shoot while one may count three. He that splits the wand shall then be judged the winner."

There were murmurs of wonder and some mocking at this proposal. It meant that a man must measure the distance, choose his bolt and shoot it in a space of time that allowed little judgment, if any.

"Are you content to accept that, Luke the Reid?" asked the sheriff of his man.

The latter stroked his gray beard for a moment and said; "'Tis such a shot I have seen but thrice made, and only once have I seen the wand struck, and that was when I was a boy. Old Bat the Bandy, who was the chief archer to Stephen of Gamwell was he who split the wand, and men reckoned that no one north of Trent could match him in his day. If thou canst split the wand, yeoman," he said, turning to Robin, "then for all thou lookest like a worthless fellow, thou art such an archer as hath not been seen in the north country for the last fifty years."

The two archers were then commanded to turn their backs, while an officer of the sheriff's ran to the wand and moved it ten paces further off. Then at the word of the sheriff, Luke turned, and while Watkin the chief officer counted slowly "One—two—three!" he shot his arrow. The great crowd held its breath as the arrow sped, and a groan of disappointment broke from them when they saw it curve to earth and stick in the ground, some six paces short of the wand.

"Now, boaster!" cried the bull-necked officer angrily to Robin. Then, speaking quickly, he shouted, "Turn! one—two—three!"

Robin's arrow sped forth as the word "three" was uttered, and men craned their necks to mark the flight. Swiftly and true it sped and sliced the wand in two. Men

gasped, and then a great shout rose, for though Robin, being a stranger and looking to be but a mean fellow, had turned most of the crowd against him, the sense of fair play made them all recognize that he had fairly won the prize.

Luke the Reid came up to Robin and held out his hand to him. "Thou'rt a worthier man than thou lookest, bowman," he said, and his honest eyes looked keenly into Robin's. "So steady a hand and clear an eye go not with such a reckless air as thou wearest, and I think thou must be a better man than thou lookest."

Robin shook his hand and returned his keen look, but said no word in reply.

The note of the sheriff's horn rose as a signal that the prizes were to be given. There were ten of these for those who had shot the best according to certain rules, and one by one the men were called up to the sheriff's seat and his wife presented the gift to the successful archer. When it was Robin's turn he went boldly to the place and bent his knee courteously to the lady. Then the sheriff began to speak, and said:

"Yeoman, thou hast shown thyself to have the greatest skill of all who have shot this day. If thou wouldst wish to change thy present condition and will get leave of thy lord, I would willingly take thee into my service. Come, archer, and take from my lady the golden arrow which thou hast fairly won."

Robin approached Dame Margaret, and she held out the golden arrow to him, smiling kindly upon him as she did so. He reached out his hand to take the gift and met the lady's eyes. She went pale, her mouth opened as if she was about to speak; then she bit her lips and returned Robin's final courtesy. Robin knew that she had recognized him.

The sheriff looked keenly at his wife and then suspiciously at Robin, as the latter turned away and tried to get among the crowd. Men and women pressed about the outlaw, however, congratulating him with rough good humor, and Robin could not hide himself from the sheriff's eyes. Suddenly something familiar in the look of Robin struck the sheriff. He rose quickly and whispered in the ear of the bull-necked man, who, turning, saw Robin in the midst of a crowd of men bearing bows, who seemed to be talking to him as they all walked away. Watkin the bailiff plunged forward and thrust this way and that among the archers, bidding them in a thick fierce voice make way in the name of the sheriff.

Suddenly men turned upon him and shouldered him off. "Let me come, varlets," he cried. "I will have thee whipped and branded. I am Watkin the sheriff's bailiff!"

"Let him go, lads," rang out a clear voice. It was Robin who thus commanded his men who had rallied about him.

"I arrest thee, Robin Hood, outlaw! in the name of the king!" shouted Watkin,

though he was still some paces away.

"Enough of thy bellowing, thou town bull!" said Little John, who was beside Watkin, and picking up the sheriff's man, the giant ran with him to the outskirts of the crowd and dumped him heavily on the ground, where he lay dazed for a few moments.

A bugle note rang clear and shrill. It was the call of the greenwood men, and from all parts of the wide grounds the outlaws gathered. Another horn sounded, and the sheriff's men formed in ranks, with bows strung. Men and women in the crowd between the two parties fled this way and that, shrieking with fear, and at a word from the sheriff his men shot a flight of arrows against the men of the greenwood. Next moment, however, the great clothyard arrows of the outlaws scored back in reply so thick and strong that the sheriff's men, or such as could run, darted this way and that into shelter.

Slowly and in good order the outlaws retreated, sending their arrows into the sheriff's men, who now, under the furious leadership of Watkin, were following them closely from cover to cover. Once they saw a man ride swiftly away from where the sheriff stood, and enter the town.

"That means, lads, that they go to beg help from the castle," said Little John. "Once we reach the greenwood, however, little avail will that help be."

The forest, however, was still nearly a mile away, and the outlaws would not run. From time to time they turned and shot their arrows at their pursuers, while keeping a good distance from them and taking care that none got round their flanks.

Suddenly with a moan Little John fell, an arrow sticking from his knee.

"I can go no further, lads, I fear," he cried. Robin came up to him and examined the wound, while the sheriff's men, seeing the outlaws check, came on more swiftly.

"Master," said Little John, "for the love thou bearest me, let not the sheriff and his men find and take me alive. Take out thy brown sword instead, and smite my head off, I beseech thee."

"Nay, by the sweet Virgin!" cried Robin, and his eyes were pitiful, "I would not have thee slain for all the gold in England. We will take thee with us."

"Ay, that we will," said Much; "never shall I and thee part company, thou old rascal," he went on. Saying this, he lifted John upon his broad back, and the outlaws went on again. Sometimes Much put John down for a moment, and notching an arrow to his string, took a shot at the sheriff's men.

Then they saw a large company of archers on horseback issue from the town gate, and Robin's face went stern and grim at the sight. He could not hope to win the shelter of the forest before this troop came upon him, and fight as they would, they

must in the end be overwhelmed. Robin looked around for some means of escape, but saw none. Already the mounted men were gaining upon them, and the sheriff's men were holding to the stirrup leathers of their allies and leaping and running beside them over the down. Three knights were at the head of the troop, and the sheriff rode in front of all.

Rapidly the outlaws retreated, and at Robin's command they fled along a hollow or combe in the downs which would lead them to a knoll of trees, where he thought they could make a desperate stand. Suddenly he remembered with some bitterness that they were near the castle of Sir Richard at Lee. He knew that Sir Richard loved him, and would help him if he begged aid of him, but seeing that by helping an outlaw Sir Richard would lose lands and life, Robin knew that he would have to make his last fight alone, although within an arrow flight of his friend's castle.

"Never shall I and thee part company," and he lifted John upon his broad back.

They gained the knoll of trees, and Robin arranged his men and gave them short, sharp orders. Behind them rose the castle of Sir Richard, but Robin looked not that way, all his attention being given to their enemies who were now rapidly coming up. Suddenly a small figure ran up the knoll and came to Robin. It was Ket the Trow.

"Master," he said breathlessly, "a troop hath been sent round by the Levin Oak to take thee in the rear. Look, where they ride!"

Robin looked, and grim despair entered his heart. He saw that it was impossible to make a stand. At that moment a knight in armor came riding furiously from the direction of the castle of Sir Richard at Lee. It was Sir Richard himself.

"Robin! Robin!" he cried. "Thou canst not hope to save thyself. Withdraw to my castle. Come at once, man, or all is lost!"

"But thou losest life and land if thou dost shelter me!" cried Robin.

"So be it!" said the knight. "I lose them any way, for if ye stay here, I stay with thee, Robin, and end with thee."

"Come then," replied the outlaw. "Friend indeed as thou art, I will accept thy aid and requite thee to the full for thy nobility."

Not a moment too soon did the outlaws reach the drawbridge. In good order they retreated, and barely did they avoid being caught in the rear by the horsemen who had ridden to cut them off, but a strong flight of arrows dealt destruction among them on the very verge of the ditch, and when they had recovered, they saw Robin was the last to step across the drawbridge, which then rattled and groaned its swift way up, putting the yawning water of the ditch between them and their prey. For a moment the troop, headed by Watkin, the sheriff's officer, stood shouting threats at the walls, until a flight of bolts among them caused them quickly to draw off, taking their dead and wounded with them. They rode to join the main body of the sheriff's forces, who now came up and halted at a respectful distance from the castle walls, on whose battlements steel caps now gleamed amid the bonnets of the outlaws.

The sheriff sent a herald under a flag of truce, charging Sir Richard with harboring and aiding an outlaw against the king's rights and laws, to which Sir Richard made a valiant answer, in legal form, saying that he was willing "to maintain the deeds which he had done upon all the lands which he held from the king, as he was a true knight." Thereupon the sheriff went his way, since he had no authority to besiege Sir Richard, who would have to be judged by the king or his chancellor.

"Sir Richard," said Robin, when the knight came from the wall after giving his reply to the sheriff, "this is a brave deed thou hast done, and here I swear that whatever befall me, I do avow that I and my men shall aid thee to the last, and whatsoever thou needest at any time, I will eagerly give it thee."

"Robin," said Sir Richard, "I love no man in the world more than I do thee, for a just man and a brave, and rather than see thee fall into the hands of the sheriff I would lose all. But I have ill news for thee. Walter, the steward of Sir Richard FitzWalter, sent a message to me this morning, saying that his master is dead, and

that Fair Marian is in danger of being seized by the strongest lord among her neighbors, so that she may be wedded to one of them and her lands meanwhile held and enjoyed by them."

"Now, by the black rood," said Robin, "the time hath come when I said I would take sweet Marian into my keeping! Sir Richard, I will instantly set forth to Malaset and bring Fair Marian back to the greenwood. Father Tuck will wed us, and she shall live in peace with me and my merry men."

Quickly, therefore, Robin selected twenty of his best men, and as soon as harness, arms, and horses had been obtained for them all from their secret stores in the forest caves, the band set off toward the western marches, where, in the fair valleys of Lancashire, the castle of Malaset stood in the midst of its broad lands.

On the evening of the second day they approached the castle and found it shut up, dark and silent. A clear call on a bugle brought a man to the guardroom over the gate. This was Walter the steward, and quickly, with the aid of the men-servants, the bridge was lowered, the portcullis raised, and Robin and his men were welcomed by the brave steward into the great hall.

"Where is the lady Marian, Walter?" asked Robin.

"Alas, Master Robin, I know not!" replied Walter, wringing his hands and the tears starting from his eyes. "If thou dost not know, then I am indeed forlorn, for I had thought she had fled to thee. She slept here last night, but this morning no sign could be found of her anywhere about the castle!"

"This is hard to hear," said Robin, and his face was full of grief. "Hath any robber lord or thieving kinsman seized her, think you?"

"Several have been here since when, three days ago, my lord was laid in his tomb in the church," replied Walter, "but ever with her wit and ready tongue my lady spoke them fair and sent them all away, each satisfied that they were the kinsmen to whom she would come when her grief was past. Yesterday there came the sacrist of St. Mary's Abbey, and did bring with him the order of the king's chancellor, William de Longchamp himself, the Lord Bishop of Ely, commanding her to hold herself and all she possessed as the ward of the king, and telling her that to-morrow would come Sir Scrivel of Catsty, to be the king's steward and to guard her from ill."

"Scrivel of Catsty!" cried Robin angrily, "Scrivel the catspaw rather, for he's naught but a reiving mountain cat, close kin to Isenbart de Belame! I see it all! The new abbot of St. Mary's hath got his uncle the chancellor to do this, and under cover of being but the steward of the king's rights, he will let that evil crew of Wrangby take possession. But, by the black rood, I must find what hath befallen Marian, and that speedily!"

Next day and for several days thereafter Robin and his men scoured the marches of Lancashire for many miles. But all was in vain, and at the end of a week Robin was in despair.

Meanwhile word was sent to him by Walter that Scrivel of Catsty with a hundred men had taken possession of the castle, and was furious to learn that the lady Marian had disappeared. He also was sending everywhere to learn where she had fled. So earnest did he seem in this that Walter thought that he and the Wrangby lords had not had any hand in kidnapping Marian, and that either she must have fled herself or been taken by some party of her kinsmen.

Full of sorrow, Robin at length turned his horse's head towards Barnisdale, and he and his band rode with heavy hearts into their camp by the Stane Lea one morning when the sun shone warmly, when the birds sang in the boughs and all seemed bright and fair. Hardly had Robin alighted when there came the beat of horses' feet rapidly approaching from the south, and through the trees they saw the figure of a lady riding swiftly toward them, followed by another. Robin quickly rose, and for the moment joy ran through his heart to think that this was Marian! But next instant he recognized the lady as the wife of Sir Richard at Lee.

"God save you, Robin Hood," she said, "and all thy company. I crave a boon of thee."

"It shall be granted, lady," replied Robin, "for thine own and thy dear lord's sake."

"It is for his behalf I crave it. He hath been seized by the sheriff—he was hawking but an hour agone by the stream which runs by a hunting-bower of his at Woodsett, when the sheriff and his men rushed from the wood and seized him. They have tied him on a horse and he is now on his way to Nottingham, and if ye go not quickly, I doubt not he will soon be slain or in foul prison."

"Now by the Virgin," said Robin, and he was wondrous wroth, "the sheriff shall pay for this! Lady," he said, "wait here with thy woman until we return. If we have not Sir Richard with us, I shall not return alive."

Then he sounded his horn with curious notes which resounded far and wide through the forest, so that scouts and watchers a mile off heard the clear call through the trees. Quickly they ran to the Stane Lea, and when all had assembled, there were seven score men in all. Standing with bows in hand they waited for their master to speak. He stood by the lady where she sat on her palfrey, and they could see by his flashing eyes that he was greatly moved.

"Lads," he cried, "those that were with me when we shot at the butts in Nottingham know how courteously this lady's brave lord befriended us and saved us

from death. Now he hath himself been seized by the sheriff, who, learning that I was far from Barnisdale, hath dared to venture into our forest roads and hath seized Sir Richard at Woodsett, where the knight hath a hunting-seat. Now, lads, I go to rescue the knight and to fight the sheriff. Who comes with me?"

Every outlaw of all that throng held up his bow in sign that he would volunteer, and a great shout went up. Robin smiled proudly at their eagerness.

"I thank thee, but you cannot all go, lads," he cried. "As the sheriff hath a stout force with him, eighty of you shall go with me. The others must stay to guard the camp and the knight's lady."

Soon all was ready, and silently the band, with Robin at their head, sank into the forest, and quickly yet stealthily made their way to the southeast, toward the road which the sheriff must take on his way back to Nottingham.

Now that the sheriff had captured the knight, he was very anxious to leave the dangerous neighborhood, for he feared that Robin might return at any time. He therefore pushed his men to do their utmost, and while he himself rode beside Sir Richard, who was bound securely on a horse, the company of fifty men-at-arms had to walk, and in the hot noonday sun of the summer they moiled and sweated woefully at the pace set by the sheriff.

At length they got among the deep woods and hills of Clumber Forest, and the sheriff felt more at ease in his mind, though he did not abate the pace at which he went. Under the shade of the great oaks and chestnuts, however, the men felt less exhausted and pushed on with a will.

There was a long steep hill upon their road called Hagger Scar, and up this they were toiling manfully, when suddenly a stern voice rang out.

"Halt!" it cried, and at the same moment as the men-at-arms looked about them, they saw that on each side of the forest way stood archers with bent bows, the gleaming arrows pointing at each of their breasts. The whole company stood still, and men angrily murmured beneath their breath.

Out of the wood some ten paces from the sheriff stepped Robin, his bow strung and a fierce look on his face.

"So, sheriff," he cried; "you learned that I was away, and therefore stole up to seize my friend. By the Virgin, but thou hadst better have stayed within thy town walls! I tell thee I will spare thee no more. Say thy last prayer, for thy end hath come."

Now that he knew that his last hour had really come the sheriff was brave.

"Thou lawless wolf's-head!" he cried, "the chancellor will harry every thicket in these woods to catch thee for this deed. I——"

He spoke no more. Robin's arrow pierced the chain-mail coat he wore, and he swayed and fell from the saddle to the ground, dead. Then Robin went to the knight and cut his bonds and helped him from the horse.

"Now," said he to the sheriff's men, "throw down thy weapons!"

When they had done this he told them to march forward, take up the body of their master and proceed on their way. They did as he commanded them, and soon the fifty men-at-arms, weaponless and sore at heart for having been so completely conquered by the bold outlaw, disappeared over the crest of the hill.

Turning to the knight, Robin said: "Sir Richard, welcome to the greenwood! Thou must stay with me and my fellows now, and learn to go on foot through mire, moss and fen. Sorry I am that a knight should have to leave his castle to his enemies without a blow and to take to the woods, but needs must when naught else can be done!"

"I thank thee, Robin, from my heart," said the knight, "for taking me thus from prison and death. As for living with thee and thy fellows in the greenwood, I wish no better life, since I could not live with braver men."

Thereupon they set off through the leafy wilderness and before evening had rejoined the lady of the knight, and great was her joy and gratitude to Robin and his men for having restored her husband to her.

When the camp was hushed in slumber, and there was no sound but the crackle of the dying embers of the fires and the rustle of the wind in the trees overhead, or the murmur of the little stream beside the camp, Robin took his way into the dark forest. He was very unhappy and much distressed by reason of the disappearance of Fair Marian. He pictured her a captive in some castle, pining for liberty, oppressed by the demands of some tyrant kinsman or other robber knight, who had captured her for the rich dowry which would go to him she wedded.

Filled with these fears, therefore, Robin determined to walk through the forest to the green mounds where Ket the Trow and Hob o' the Hill lived, to hear whether either of those little men had learned any news of Marian. As soon as he had learned of his lady's danger when he had reached Sir Richard's castle, he had sent off Ket the Trow to Malaset to watch over Marian, but had since heard nothing from the troll, and this silence was very disquieting.

Looking intently toward the mounds Robin was now aware of a dark space on the flank of the further one which looked like the outstretched figure of a man. He knew that this mound was the one in which the brothers dwelt, and he wondered whether Ket or Hob was lying out there sleeping. He thought to give the call of the night-jar, which was their signal by night; but suddenly he saw the figure move

stealthily. He watched intently. He knew this could not be either of the brothers, for the man's form was too large, and it wriggled with infinite slowness upward toward the top of the mound.

Suddenly against the sky-line there leaped from the top of the mound the small figure of a man, which precipitated itself upon the form which Robin had first seen. For a moment the latter was taken by surprise; it half rose, but was pushed back, and instantly the two forms were closed in a deadly grapple. Robin rushed up the mound toward them, catching the glint of knives as he approached. He heard the fierce panting of the two fighters as they struggled on the steep slippery side of the mound. They pressed this way and that, losing their footing one moment, but regaining it the next. Just as Robin reached them and could see that it was Ket the Trow and one of his own outlaws, Ket thrust the other from him and the man fell, rolling like a log down the side of the mound, and lay at the bottom still and inert.

"What is this, Ket?" asked Robin. "Hath one of my own men tried to break into thy house?"

"He's not one of the band, master," said the panting man, staunching a wound on his shoulder with one hand. "He is a spy who hath followed me these three days, but he'll spy no more."

Together they descended the mound, and Ket turned over the dead man. Though the body was dressed like one of Robin's men he knew by the face that it was not one of his outlaws.

"How is it he wears the Lincoln green?" asked Robin.

"He slew a poor lad of thine, Dring by name, by Brambury Burn," said Ket, "and took his clothes to cover his spying."

"Poor lad," said Robin; "Dring was ever faithful. But what hast thou been doing by Brambury Burn? 'Tis far north for thee to roam on the quest I gave thee. How ran the search so far?" asked Robin eagerly, wondering if Ket had aught to tell.

"Thereby hangs my tale, master," said Ket. "But do thou come into the mound and listen while I bind my wound."

Robin followed Ket up the flank of the great barrow. He had only once been inside Ket's home, and he knew that the method of entry was not by the door on the side, which indeed was too small for a man of ordinary girth to enter, but by the chimney, which could be made wide enough to admit him. On the top of the mound was a dark hole, down which Ket disappeared, after telling Robin to wait until he showed a light.

Soon Ket's face appeared in the light of the torch at the bottom of a slanting hole, the sides of which were made of stones. Taking out one here and there Ket

made the aperture wider, and then Robin, by alternately sliding and stepping, climbed down the slanting chimney. There was still another similar passage to descend, but at length he stood on the floor of the apartment which was the home of Ket and Hob and of his mother and two sisters. By the light of Ket's torch, which he stuck between two stones, Robin saw that the walls of the cave were made of stones, deftly arranged, without mortar, one above the other, so that the whole chamber was arched in the form of a beehive, the height being some eight feet.

When Robin had helped Ket to bind up a deep wound on his left shoulder, and a cut or two on his arm, the little man looked up into his master's face with a bright merry air, and said:

"If thou'lt promise to make no sound I'll show thee a treasure I ha' found but lately."

"Ket!" said Robin in eager tones; "hast thou really found my dear lady? Oh, good little man!"

For answer Ket beckoned Robin to follow him to a part of a chamber which was curtained off by a piece of arras that must at one time have adorned a lord's hall. Peering behind this, Robin saw reclining on a horse-cloth thrown over a couch of sweet-smelling ferns the form of Marian, sleeping as softly as if she was in her own bed of linen at Malaset.

Robin helped Ket to bind up a deep wound on his left shoulder and a cut or two on his arm.

Silently Robin and Ket crept away to the furthest corner of the chamber, and Ket then told his tale.

"When you sent me away to watch over the lady Marian until you came," said Ket the Trow, "I reached the castle by Malaset Wood at evening, and I crept into the castle when no one saw me. I found the lady Marian in her chamber, and already she had resolved to fly to you, leaving no word behind, so that steward Walter and her people should not be judged guilty of aiding her escape. I bade her wait for you, but she yearned for the open moors and would not stay. By a secret way we issued from the castle at dawn and took to the moors. Master Robin, thy lady is a wood-wise lass, though over quick to act. She feared that there were those of her enemies who watched the castle, and therefore she would not have us walk together lest, as she said, if both were taken or I was slain, there would be no one to tell you. We started out on the way which should lead us to meet you; but not two miles had we wended ere from the thickets on Catrail Ring twenty men sprang out and seized her.

I barely 'scaped them by creeping back, for they would not believe she was alone, and they sought for me. They were men of the Thurlstan Lord, whom ye know to be close sib to him of Wrangby. Fierce and evil-looking were they, and not over gentle with my lady, so that more than once I had it in mind to loose a bolt in the throat of Grame Gaptooth, their leader. They put her on a spare horse and fast they traveled, keeping to the moors and the lone lands, so that hard was I put to it to hold to them on my two feet. That night they reached Grame's Black Tower on the Wall, and when I heard the gate clang down, well, my heart dropped with it. Next day they sent two riders south, and I knew that they went to tell the evil man Isenbart that they held thy dear lady and could strike at thee through thy tenderest part. Two days I wandered round that evil and black tower, conning how I could win into it and out again with my dear lady unscathed. On the evening of the third day the riders returned with others, and these were from Sir Isenbart, and at their head was Baldwin the Killer, come to take my lady to the dungeons of Wrangby. Thou know'st, master, that we little people have many secrets and strange lore, and some unkent powers, and how we can break and overcome hard things. It was so now, and by the aid of that knowledge I was able to see the weak part of that strong peel. I entered that peel tower in the dark, and I let down my brave lady from the wall, but ere I left I put so heavy a mark on some that slept that never will they rise to do evil more. Far did we go that night, and ever was she bold and brave. She lay hid by day while I fared abroad to get us food; but by Brambury Burn I met young Dring, and he was hot to go and find thee and tell thee the good news. That rogue that lies dead on the mound outside saw me and Dring as we spoke and knew me for thy friend, and thinking to win the favor of the Wrangby lords, he slew Dring, and putting on his clothes followed me. I reached here but four hours agone, and ever since my lady hath slept."

"Let her sleep long, brave lass," said Robin, "for she must have sore need of it. I cannot thank thee enough, good Ket," he went on, "for having brought her safe and sound out of such peril. What reward shall I make thee that is fitting?"

"Master," said Ket; "there is no need to talk of rewards between thee and me. I and mine owe our lives to thee, and whatsoever we do, you or I, is for the love we bear each other. Is it not so?"

"It is so," replied Robin, and they gripped hands in a silent oath of renewed loyalty to each other.

Robin slept in the trolls' mound that night on a bed of fern with Ket beside him, and in the morning great was the joy of Marian when she awoke to find Robin himself was near by. Much loving talk passed between them, and both said that

never more would they part from each other while life should last. That very day, indeed, Robin went to Father Tuck to prepare him for their marriage.

CHAPTER VI

KING RICHARD MEETS ROBIN

WHEN it became known throughout the countryside that Robin the outlaw had wedded Marian FitzWalter, heiress to the wide lands of Malaset and ward of the king, some men wondered that he could be so daring as to fly thus in the face of the king's rights, while others were glad that Robin had been so bold, and had shown how he set at naught the powers of prelates and proud lords.

For some time there were rumors that William de Longchamp, the king's chancellor, was going to send a great army into the forests of Clipstone, Sherwood and Barnisdale, to stamp out and utterly destroy this bold and insolent outlaw. But nothing came of this.

Then all good men sorrowed to learn that their gallant King Richard had been captured and lay imprisoned in a castle in Germany, and that a vast sum was demanded for his ransom. To raise the money every man was taxed, be he a layman or a monk; citizens and yeomen, knights and squires had to pay the value of a quarter of their year's income, and the abbots were required to give the value of a year's wool from the vast flocks of sheep which they possessed.

Many men paid these taxes very grudgingly, and the money was long being collected. Meantime the king whiled away the long hours in his prison, feeling that, as he wrote in a poem which he composed at that time and which men may still read:

> "True is the saying, as I have proved herein,
> Dead and prisoners have no friends, no kin."

During all this time Robin and Marian had lived very happily in the greenwood. She had lost her wide lands, it was true, and instead of living in a castle with thick walls and being dressed in rich clothes, she dwelt in a wooden hut, and had the skins of animals or plain homespun Lincoln green wherewith to clothe herself. But never before had she been so happy, for she was with him she loved best, and ever about her was the free life of the fresh woods and the wild wind in the trees.

So much did Robin desire that his king should speedily be freed that, when he learned what taxes were imposed in order to raise the king's ransom, he collected the half of all his store of gold and silver, and having sold many fine garments and rich clothes, he sent the whole of the money under a strong guard to London, and delivered it into the hands of the mayor himself, who, having opened the parcel when

his visitors had gone, found therein a piece of doeskin on which was written:

"From Robin Hood and the freemen of Sherwood Forest, for the behoof of their beloved king, whom God save speedily from his evil enemies at home and in foreign parts."

Thereafter, also, Robin set aside the half of all he took from travelers and placed it in a special secret place, to go toward the king's ransom. When, also, he heard that any rich franklin, well-to-do burgess or yeoman or miserly knight, abbot or canon had not yet paid his due tax, Robin would go with a chosen party of his men and visit the house of the man who begrudged liberty to his king; and if the yeoman or knight did not resist him he would take from the man's house what was due for the tax; but if, as sometimes happened, the man fought and resisted, then Robin would take all he could find, and leave the curmudgeon and his men with their wounds and their empty purses.

When King Richard was at length released from prison, most of his enemies who were holding castles on behalf of his brother John, who had plotted to win the crown for himself, gave them up and fled for fear of the king's vengeance. Others were besieged by the friends of King Richard and surrendered after a little while. There were certain knights who held the castle of Nottingham for Earl John, and they resisted the besiegers very fiercely, and would not give up the castle to them. When King Richard landed at Sandwich after coming from Germany, he heard how the castle of Nottingham still refused to submit to his councillors, and being greatly angry, he marched to that city and sat down before the castle with a vast army. He made an assault upon it, and so fiercely did he fight that he captured part of the outer works and laid them in ruins and slew many of the defenders. Then he ordered gibbets to be erected in the sight of the besieged, and upon them he hung the men-at-arms whom he had captured, as an example to the rebels within the castle.

Two days afterward the wardens of the castle, among whom was Ralph Murdach, brother of the sheriff whom Robin had slain, came forth and surrendered the castle, and threw themselves upon the mercy of the king. He received them sternly and ordered them to be kept under a strict guard.

Now when the king and his lords sat at dinner one day, it was told King Richard how there was a bold and insolent outlaw who harbored with many lawless men in the forests of Clipstone, Sherwood, and Barnisdale, which lay north of Nottingham. More especially did his chancellor William de Longchamp wax wroth at the recital of Robin's crimes.

"Such a man, my lord," he said, "thy father King Henry, of blessed memory, would not have suffered to commit his crimes for all these years, but most surely he

would have sent an army of archers into the forests where he hideth and would have hunted out every rogue and hung him forthwith."

"It was thy office, my lord bishop, to do this," retorted Richard sternly. "I left thee to rule my land justly and to keep down robberies and murders and brawls, but thou seemest to have added to the confusion and disorder."

Many of the nobles who hated the bishop smiled to see the look of chagrin on William de Longchamp's face. They had chased him from England because of his pride and oppression, and the king's reply pleased them mightily.

"Moreover, sir," said Hamelin, Earl de Warenne, "had my lord bishop been able to hang this stout outlaw, it is likely your highness would have been longer in prison."

Men looked in surprise at De Warenne as he said this, and saw the smile on his face.

"How is that, De Warenne?" asked King Richard. "What had this rascal to do with my release?"

"This, sire," was the reply, "that though he loves his king's deer overmuch, it seems he loves his king also, and in that he doth exceed the love many of thy knights and lords bear thee. He lives by taking toll from travelers through thy forests, and half of that wealth he did send to my lord mayor of London, and the amount of it was an earl's ransom. With it he sent a message which ran: 'From Robin Hood and the freemen of Sherwood, for the behoof of their beloved king, whom God save speedily from his evil enemies at home and in foreign parts.' Further, sire," De Warenne went on, while men looked at each other in wonder, "he took upon himself the office of tax-gatherer for these parts, and many a fat canon, abbot or prior who would not have paid the tax which was to set thee free, and many a miserly burgess, knight or yeoman hath had a visit by night from this outlaw and been forced to pay the tax. By my head, but as men have told me, they have had to pay their tax twice over—once to Robin Hood and again to the treasurer's sergeants—and much they grieved thereat!"

The king laughed heartily, and his nobles joined in his merriment.

"And the toll and tax which he thus gathered," went on De Warenne, "this outlaw sent again to the lord mayor with this message, as I am told: 'For to release my lord the king, from unwilling knights, monks and other surly knaves who love him not a groat's worth, by the hands of Robin Hood and his men of the greenwood.' "

"By my faith, but I will see this outlaw," said the king; "and know what sort of man he is. How did he break the law?"

"By the slaying of my brother, sire," said William de Longchamp. "He slew Sir Roger on the highway, and afterward he slew five men-at-arms of the abbot of St.

Mary's at York. Since then his murders and robberies have been numberless."

"I think he slew your brother, lord bishop, because Sir Roger would have seized FitzWalter's daughter, the lady Marian," said De Warenne in a quiet voice. "Is it not so?"

"And, by my halidom," said King Richard, who ever praised brave deeds that had to do with the saving of ladies from ill-usage or oppression, "'twas a righteous deed, if as I remember 'twas not the first lady thy brother Roger had oppressed, my lord bishop?"

William de Longchamp looked fiercely at Earl de Warenne, who smiled carelessly at his enemy's wrathful glances.

"I will have you to know, sire," said William the chancellor, turning to the king, "that if you may not deem the slaying of my own poor kinsman of much worth, yet this thief and murderer, Robin Hood, hath done deeds of late that shall surely not gain him thy favor. He hath slain the sheriff of Nottingham, Robert Murdach, he hath wed the lady Marian, one of thy wards, and moreover, hath caused Sir Richard Lee to go with him and thieve and rob in thy forests."

"I will seize his lands," said the king angrily, "and his head shall be cut off—the recreant! Make proclamation," he went on, turning to one of the clerks of the treasury who stood behind his seat, "that whosoever taketh that knight and brings his head to me shall have his lands."

"If it please you, sire," said an old knight, who stepped forth from a group of richly dressed lords waiting behind the king, "I would say that there is no man living who could hold the knight's lands while his friend Robin and his men can range through the forest and draw a bow."

"Who are you?" asked the king, "and how know you this?"

"I am John de Birkin, sire," said the old knight, "and Sir Richard at Lee was my friend. Since Sir Richard fled, the new sheriff of Nottingham hath striven to hold his castle and lands in thy name, but no man will bide there. As they walk to and fro upon the fields they are pierced by arrows from the woods, their servants are beaten or have run away, and all the villeins that dwell upon the land have joined their master in the greenwood."

"By the soul of my father," said the king, starting from his seat, "if ye speak true, then the best men dwell in the forests, and the caitiffs are law-abiding fools that pretend to rule for me while they let me pine in my prison. I will see this outlaw—look you, De Birkin, send word to this rascal outlaw that he shall have my protection while he cometh and goeth, for I would willingly speak to him who loves me, yet who slays my sheriff and knights."

"Knowest thou not, Sir Forester," asked the king, "where my messenger may get word with this outlaw?"

When the castle of Nottingham had been surrendered into the hands of the king he went hunting in the forest every day, and did not stay in one place; but never could he get to learn where Robin Hood was hiding. At last he called to him the chief forester of Sherwood, by name Sir Ralph Fitz-Stephen.

"Knowest thou not, Sir Forester," asked the king, "where my messenger may get word with this outlaw? Thou keepest this forest ill, since thou permittest seven score outlaws to live in it unmolested, and to slay my deer at their will. Find me this Robin Hood, or thou shalt lose thy office."

Two days later Ralph Fitz-Stephen came to where the king was staying at the castle of Drakenhole, and craved audience of him. When he saw the king he bent on one knee, and when King Richard had commanded him to speak he said:

"Sire, I have learned that since you have kept in these northern parts, the outlaw Robin has been haunting the roads by Ollerton, stopping rich travelers and taking of their wealth. Now I give thee counsel in what way thou mayest get word with this rascal. Take five of thy lords and borrow monks' weeds (garments) from the abbot of Maddersey across the river here. Then I will lead you to the road Robin and his comrades do haunt, and I lay my head on it that ye shall see that rascal ere you reach Nottingham."

"By my faith," said Richard with a hearty laugh, "but I like thy counsel, forester. Do thou get the monkish garb from my lord abbot for myself and thee and my five lords, and we will go with thee."

Though the day was already far gone, Richard would set out at once, and as soon as the monks' garments were brought he put the great black gown over his rich surcoat, which blazed with the leopards of Anjou and the lilies of France, and then

upon his head he put a hood and a wide brimmed hat, such as ecclesiastics wore when they traveled. He was very elated at the prospect of so strange an adventure, and joked and laughed with the five knights whom he had chosen to go with him. These were Hamelin, Earl de Warenne, Ranulf, Earl of Chester, Roger Bigot, William, Earl of Ferrers, and Sir Osbert de Scofton.

In an hour they were on the road, the party having the appearance of five rich monks or chief officers of some great abbey, traveling on the business of their house.

For an hour they rode until it was dark, Richard joking with his knights or at times carolling in his glee. When night compelled them to call a halt, Ralph Fitz-Stephen suggested that they should turn a little from their way to the house of the canons of Clumber, where they would be sure of a lodging for the night. This was agreed to by the king, and after a short ride through the forest, they were received in the canons' guest chamber. Except for a merchant and his three men who were already eating their meal, and a man, who, by his careless air and dress, and his possession of a citole or little harp seemed to be a minstrel or jongleur, the great hall was empty. The king's party did not tell any one who they were, or they would have been invited into the private hall to sup with the canons; but King Richard preferred to remain unknown.

Food was therefore brought forth from the store carried on the sumpter horses, and the king and his lords and Ralph Fitz-Stephen ate at one of the tables in the hall, which was dimly lighted by three or four torches which spluttered and flared and smoked in their sockets on the pillars.

"I tell thee thou art a fool!" came suddenly the angry voice of the merchant. He seemed to be in altercation with the jongleur, who laughed and twanged his citole as he made some mocking reply. "Such a wastrel as thou art knoweth not the value of money, and its loss therefore is nothing to thee."

"What a moil and a coil thy money causes thee, good merchant!" replied the minstrel. "Thou art condemned from thy own mouth. He that hath money seems ever in fear of losing it. Tell me, canst thou ever sleep soundly at night? Doth thou ever trust wholly one of these thy men? Art thou not ever in fear of some foot-pad dashing upon thee and cutting thy throat for thy pelf? No, he that hath money taketh unto himself a familiar fiend, which forever tortures and torments. As for me, why, I have no money, and therefore I care not." He twanged his citole and broke out gayly into the snatch of a gay song.

"The rogue! He should have his eyes burnt out and his ears cropped!" cried the merchant. "If I had told him truly all I had, I should not now be robbed of every groat I made at Nottingham Fair!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the jongleur loud and long. "There sits the wind, does it? The outlaw played his old trick upon thee, did he? and thou didst fall—thy miserly soul could not tell the truth, and therefore when he found that thou hadst more money than thou didst confess, he took it all!"

"What sayest thou?" cried the king from where he sat, turning toward the merchant. "Who hath robbed thee?"

"Who hath robbed me, sir priest?" replied the merchant, with a jeering voice, for the monks were not beloved by merchants, because of the high tolls and dues they demanded for leave to sell goods in their markets; "who else but that limb of Satan —that landloping rogue Robin Hood! And if thou travelest that road to-morrow, sir priest, I hope he may do as much to thee as he hath done to me."

"Count not his words against him, lord abbot," said the minstrel. "'Tis not the man who speaks, but the merchant robbed of his profits. Hallo, here's some one that's as blithe as the merchant is gloomy."

The door of the hall had opened to the knocking of another wayfarer, and across the straw and rushes on the floor came a poor-looking old man and woman. They were raggedly dressed, and each bore a small bundle, which probably contained all they possessed.

"God bless ye all, gentles," said the old man, and his face was wreathed in smiles as he doffed his ragged cap, first to the dark-robed monks and then to the minstrel, who grinned in reply, and getting up, swept his own hat with its ragged feather in an elaborate bow before the old man.

"Greeting to thee, old merry heart!" he said. "Did I not know that the nearest alehouse is twelve long miles away I would charge thee with having in thee the blessed liquor of the ruddy grape. What cheer, nunks?"

"Sir," said the old man gleefully, as he put his bag down on a bench, "I ha' met the finest adventure and the gentlest nobleman that ere I ha' known or heard on. 'Twas but four short miles out of Ollerton, and oh, but I had a dread of the woods! Thick they were with trees, and every moment I was afraid that out of the dark some fearsome robber would dart and cut our throats for the few poor pennies we have."

"We be only poor folk, sir," interjected the old woman, who had a gentle face, though her hands were knotted and lined with a lifetime's toil, "and we be not used to traveling. We be going to get our poor son from prison at Tickhill."

"How got thy son in prison, dame?" came a kindly voice from among the black-robed monks. It was the king who spoke.

"Oh, sir priest, he was tired of the hard toil for Master Peter Greatrex the armorer, and he wandered away to do better. And after many months we ha'

learned that he ha' been took up for wanderin' and ha' been chained so long in prison at Tickhill till one foot is perished from him. And so we be going to claim him and take him home again."

"But, good soul," said the king, "they will not deliver thy son out of prison to thee."

"Oh, but we be his parents, sir priest," said the old woman, and tears came to her eyes, "and we be sure our Dickon hath done no wrong. Surely they will give him to us."

"Ay, old lass," said her husband, "dry thy tears and let be to me. Ha' I not Robin Hood's own words that he will see to it that when we get there they will give Dickon up to us?"

"God bless ye all, gentles," said the old man, his face wreathed in smiles.

"And is Robin the gentle nobleman ye have met to-day, old man?" asked the king.

"Ay, sir priest, saving your presence, he is that. For 'twas he sent one of his men to us—they spied us through the leaves as we passed along the fearsome road—and when I thought 'twas a thievish rogue come to spoil us, why, 'twas a messenger from Robin himself who would have us speak with him."

"I would ha' run e'en then, sirs," said the old woman, "so feared was I of this Robin Hood, for he's a great outlaw as I've heard tell. But my old man said——"

"I bade her have no fear, sir," went on the old man, impatient of his wife's interruption, "for I told her Robin was too good a man, as I heard tell, to rob poor folks, and belike he would but learn from us whether any rich merchants or priests—saving your presence—were coming behind us. But he asked us naught of that. Nay, sirs, 'twas the gentlest nobleman he was"—the old fellow became quite excited as he went on; his face flushed, his eyes shone, and his hands gestured this way and that. "He asked us all about ourselves, who we were, whence we came, whither we were wending, and why. Then he ordered them to bring food and wine—he fed us as if we were lord and lady, waiting upon us with his own hands—sirs, 'tis the truth I'm telling ye, as heaven is my witness. Then he crammed bread and meat into my bundle here and a bottle of wine, and led us to the road again. And he gave me this," he held up a coin which flashed dully in the torchlight: it was a silver penny; "and his last words were, 'Old lad, I'll see to it that thy son is given to thee when thou gettest to Tickhill.' And if any saucy rogue stops thee on the road and would harm or rob thee, say to him that Robin gives thee peace through the forest land, and charge the rogue to let thee go."

"Saw one ever such a cross-grained rascal as this Robin," came the shrill voice of the merchant, who had heard all. "From me he taketh all I possess, and to this old churl who knoweth not the value of a groat, he giveth a silver penny, and belike it is one the rogue stole from me!"

"Oh, cease thy noise, old huckster!" cried the minstrel sternly. "I tell thee when the great trump sounds, 'twill be Robin will pass before thee up to St. Peter's knee, or I know not what is a good man, a noble doer. I will make a poem of this that thou tellest me, old man, for indeed 'tis a deed worthy of a poet's praise, and of the fame a poet's song can give to it."

The king was silent for some time and was sunk in deep thought. At length he said:

"Methinks this is no common man, this Robin Hood. Almost it seems that he doeth right in spite of the laws, and that they be wrong indeed if they have forced him to flee to the greenwood and become outside the law. He robs the rich and the proud who themselves have robbed to glut their greed and their pride; but he giveth

aid and comfort to the poor, and that seemeth to be no man's desire to do. I will gladly see this man, and by the favor of heaven I will make him my friend."

Then the king gave orders that beds should be set up, and all retired to rest.

Next morning the party of the king had not proceeded more than five miles along the leafy highway leading to Ollerton when suddenly out of the wood came a tall man dressed in an old green tunic and trunk hose of the same color. In his hand he bore a great bow taller than himself, at his side was a good sword, and in his belt a dagger of Spanish steel. On his head was a velvet hat, and stuck therein was a long feather from a cock pheasant's tail.

He lifted his sharp eyes to the foremost rider and said, holding up one big brown hand as he did so:

"Stay, sir abbot. By your leave ye must bide awhile with me."

He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. Almost immediately out of the shadow of the trees came forth some twenty archers on each side of the road. Each was dressed in green tunic and hose, torn and worn in places; but each was a stout man of his hands, well knit and bold of look, and each bore a bow.

"We be yeomen of this forest, sir abbot," said Robin, for the first man had been the outlaw himself; "and we live on the king's deer in this forest, and on what rich lords and knights and priests will give us of their wealth. Give us then some of thy money ere thou wouldst wend further, sir abbot."

"Good yeoman," replied the king, "I have with me no more than forty pounds, for I have stayed with our king at Blythe and I have spent much on lordings there. Nevertheless I will willingly give thee what I have."

The king commanded one of the cloaked figures behind him to produce his purse, which being done was handed to Robin, who took it and said:

"Lord abbot, thou speakest like an honest and a noble man. I will therefore not search thy saddlebags to know whether thou speakest truth. Here," he said, "are twenty pounds which I render to thee again, since I would not have thee fare away without money to spend. The other twenty shall be toll for thy safe journey. Fare thee well, lord abbot."

Robin stood away to let the horses pass, taking off his hat in a dignified salute as he did so. But the abbot placed his hand in his breast and produced a piece of parchment, which he opened with much crackling of the stiff skin. There was writing upon it, and below hung a big red ball of wax, bearing a seal upon it.

"Gramercy, good yeomen," said the king, "but I bear with me the greetings of our good King Richard. He hath sent thee his seal and his bidding that ye should meet him in Nottingham in three days' time, and this shall be thy safe conduct to and

fro."

Robin looked keenly into the shadowed face within the cowl of the abbot as he approached and took the parchment. He bent on his knee to show his respect for the king's letter and said:

"Sir abbot, I love no man in all the world so well as I do my comely king. His letter is welcome, and for thy tidings, sir abbot, do thou stay and dine with us in greenwood fashion."

"Gramercy," said the king, "that will I do willingly."

Forthwith the king and his knights were led on foot into a deeper part of the forest, where, under the trysting-tree of the outlaws, dinner was being cooked. Robin placed a horn to his lips and blew a curious blast. Hardly had the last notes died away ere from all parts of the forest which surrounded the glade in which they sat, came men in green, with bows in hand and swords at their side. Each had the quick, brave look of men used to the open air and a free life, and each as he approached where Robin stood, doffed his hat to his leader.

"By the soul of my father," muttered Richard into the ear of De Warenne, "this is a seemly sight, yet a sad one. These be fine men, and they be more at this outlaw's bidding than my own knights be at mine."

The king and his knights did full justice to the good dinner set before them, and when it was over Robin said: "Now, lord abbot, thou shalt see what manner of life we lead, so that when thou dost return to our king thou mayst tell him."

Thereupon targets were set up at which a chosen number of the outlaws began to shoot, and so distant and small was the mark that the king marveled that any should hit it. But he marveled more when Robin ordered a wand to be set up, from the top of which hung a garland of roses.

"He that doth not shoot through the garland," cried Robin, "shall lose his bow and arrows, and shall bear a buffet from him that was the better archer."

"'Tis most marvelous shooting," said Richard, as he sat apart with his knights. "Oh that I could get five hundred as good archers to come with me across the sea. I would riddle the coat of the king of France and make him bow to me."

Twice Robin shot at the mark and each time he cleft the wand. But others missed, and those who fell before Robin's buffet were many. Even Scarlet and Little John had to bear the weight of his arm, but Gilbert of the White Hand was by now almost as good an archer as Robin. Then Robin shot for the third time, and he was unlucky, for his bolt missed the garland by the space of three fingers. There was a great burst of laughter from the archers, and a cry of "A miss! a miss!"

"I avow it," cried Robin laughing, and just then he saw through the trees at the

other end of the glade a party riding toward them. They were Fair Marian his wife, clad in green, with her bow and arrows beside her, and with her were Sir Richard at Lee and Alan-a-Dale and Dame Alice his wife.

Robin turned to the abbot and said:

"I yield my bow and arrow to thee, lord abbot, for thou art my master. Do thou give me such a buffet as thou mayst."

The king smiled, bared his arm, and gave so stout a blow full on Robin's breast that the outlaw was hurled some feet away and almost fell to the ground. He kept his feet, however, and coming to the king, from whose face the cowl had dropped away by reason of the violence of his blow, he said: "By the sweet Virgin, but there is pith in thy arm, lord abbot—if abbot thou art or monk—and a stalwart man art thou."

At this very moment Sir Richard at Lee leaped from his saddle, and doffing his hat ran forward, crying, "'Tis the king! kneel, Robin!" The knight knelt on his knees before the king, who now thrust the cowl from off his head of brown hair, and revealed the handsome face and blue eyes of Richard Cœur-de-Lion. Then he tore aside the black robes he wore, showing beneath the rich silk surtout blazoned with the leopards of Anjou and the fleur-de-lys of France.

Robin and his outlaws and Alan-a-Dale kneeled at the sight, and Fair Marian and Dame Alice getting from their horses curtsied humbly.

"By the soul of my father," said Richard with a gay laugh, "but this is a right fair adventure. Why do ye kneel, good Robin? Art thou not king of the greenwood?"

"My lord, the King of England," said Robin; "I love thee and fear thee, and would crave thy mercy for myself and my men for all the deeds which we have done against thy laws. Of thy goodness and grace give us mercy!"

"Rise, Robin, for by the Trinity, I have never met in the greenwood a man so much after my heart as thou art," said the king. He caught Robin by the hand and lifted him to his feet. "But, by the Virgin, thou must leave this life and be my liege servant and rule thyself as a lawful man."

"This will I do willingly, my lord the king," said Robin, "for I would liefer keep thy law and do what good I may openly than live outside the law."

"So let it be," replied the king; "I have heard all that thou hast done. Thou hast wedded a rich ward of mine against all my right and due! Is this fair lady she who hath left wealth and honors and lands for love of thee?"

Fair Marian cast herself upon her knees before the king, who gave her his hand to kiss, after which he raised her to her feet.

"Come," said the king, "thou hast given up much to come to thy good archer, fair lady. I can only agree that thou hast chosen a bold man and a brave one. Thou wert

ward of mine, and I give thee willingly where thou hast already given thyself."

So saying the king joined the hands of Robin and Marian, both of whom felt very happy in having the king himself pardon them for so willfully acting against his rights.

"But," went on the king, smiling, "thou hast committed so many bold deeds, Robin, that I must doom thee to some punishment for them. Go thou and lead a quiet life after these years of strife and hiding. Take thy fair dame and dwell with her on her lands at Malaset, at peace with my deer and all thy fellow subjects. Uphold the laws which my wise councilors make for the peace and prosperity of this realm. By so doing thou shalt win my pardon."

"My lord king," said Robin, deeply moved at the king's generosity, "for this thy great mercy and favor I will ever be thy faithful and loyal servant."

"See to it, De Warenne," said Richard, "that Robin, by virtue of his dame Marian, be put in possession of all her lands and dues."

"I will see to it, sire," said the stout Earl Hamelin, "the more eagerly because I look forward to having Robin's good help in collecting thy taxes with due promptitude in the manors and boroughs on the Lancashire marches."

The king laughed and turned to Robin. "For thy aid in gathering my ransom I give thee thanks," he said.

Then Robin brought Sir Richard at Lee to the king, who heard Sir Richard's prayer and was pleased to give him his lands again, and to grant him full pardon for having offended against the laws in giving aid to Robin.

Finally Alan-a-Dale and Dame Alice kneeled before the king, who heard how they, with Sir Walter de Beauforest, the lady's father, had incurred the enmity of Sir Isenbart de Belame, and ever lived in fear of that knight's sudden attack upon their manors and lands. The king inquired narrowly of the deeds of the lords of Wrangby, and his brow went dark with anger when he heard of their manifold and wicked oppressions.

Two days later the king's messenger handed a parchment to the gate-guard at the castle of Wrangby and would not stay for food or lodging, as a sign of the king's displeasure. When Isenbart de Belame read the writing on the parchment his mouth went wry with a bitter sneer.

"So!" he said mockingly, "the king takes outlaws to his bosom because he wants good archers for his wars in Normandy. And he will have me to know that any harm done upon Sir Walter de Beauforest, Alan de Tranmire or Dame Alice, or any of their lands, manors, villeins, or other estate will be crimes against the king, to be punished as acts of treason."

As the king had bidden him, Robin went with Fair Marian to the lands of

Malaset, and received them back from the guardianship of Scrivel of Catsty, who yielded up the castle, the manor and the fair broad lands with an evil grace. There Robin dwelled in peace and comfort, tending the estates of his wife with good husbandry and careful rule, guarding the lands from encroachment by neighboring lords, and knitting all his villeins and freeholders to himself by his kindliness and frankness.

With him went Hob o' the Hill and Ket the Trow, together with their two sisters. Their mother had died in the "howe," or green mound, a little while before, and they had therefore wished to leave the place. Little John also went with Robin, and Gilbert of the White Hand, who married Sibbie, one of the fairy sisters, and lived in a cottage which Robin gave to them. The other sister, Fenella, wedded Wat Graham of Car Peel, a brave fighter from the borderlands, and their children were long said to have the fairy gifts of second sight, invisibility and supernatural strength.

The other outlaws all yielded to King Richard's offer of high wages and great loot, and went with him to Normandy, there to fight the French king and the rebellious "weathercocks" of Poitou. Most of them left their bones there; a score or two came back, after King Richard was slain, some rich with plunder, others as poor as they went forth, and all these gradually drifted to Malaset, where "Squire Robin," as he was called, settled them on lands.

With those who came back from France were Will the Bowman, Scarlet, and Much, the Miller's son. Arthur-a-Bland was slain at the taking of the castle of Chaluz, where the king also met his death, and Scadlock was drowned in a storm at sea, just outside Rye. With the old outlaws who remained, Robin formed as fine a body of fighting men as ever marched south under the banners of the barons when, in the year 1215, they at length set their hands to the struggle with their king to wrest from him freedom from tyranny and oppression.

Sixteen years thus passed over the heads of Robin and his fair spouse Marian; and in spite of the trouble and confusion which agitated the minds of men and brought disorder into the kingdom when King John defied the pope, these were happy years at Malaset.

CHAPTER VII

THE BURNING OF EVIL HOLD

It was an early winter day in the year 1215. A band of men were marching across the high moorlands east of the wild waste lands of the Peak. At their head rode Robin Hood, clothed in chain mail. Behind him came sixty of his men, bronzed, honest-faced yeomen, each with his bow and quiver, and a sword strapped to his side. A score of them were his old outlaws, and head and shoulders above them stalked Little John. Immediately behind Robin walked Ket the Trow, sturdy though small, a fighter, yet a man of craft in every look and gesture of him. Not far off were Scarlet, Will Stuteley, and Much, the Miller's son.

The face of Robin wore a thoughtful, even a moody air. He had gone with the barons when they had wrested the charter of liberty from the tyrannous hands of John; and had stayed south with them, believing that the fight for freedom had been gained. Then suddenly they had learned that foreign mercenaries were landing to aid the king against his rebel barons; the foreign hordes, thirsting for blood and plunder, had been seen in such strength that the barons had almost lost heart and had retreated. Many had gone to defend their own castles and lands when they learned that the king's mercenaries had stolen north, harrying, burning, and slaying, and Robin Hood had done likewise, fearing lest evil should befall his gentle wife in the peaceful vale of Malaset upon the marshes of Lancaster.

Robin wondered, indeed, whether he had started too late. At every step of the way northward they saw the marks of rapine and massacre where the king had passed with his foreign hordes. Every house and village they passed was destroyed by fire, corpses lay stiff on the snow, or weltered on the hearthstone which had known the laughter and the joy in life of those who now lay dead. Smoke rose over the wintry horizon, showing where the burning and slaying of the ruffianly army of the shameless king still went on.

At length the road descended from the moors and wound round crags and limestone cliffs down toward the valley of Malaset. Almost unconsciously Robin pushed on faster, so eager was he to reach a point where at a bend in the road he could see the castle. At length he reached the place, stopped for a moment, and his men, hurrying behind him, heard him give a dreadful cry. Next moment he had struck spurs into his horse's flanks and thundered down the sloping track.

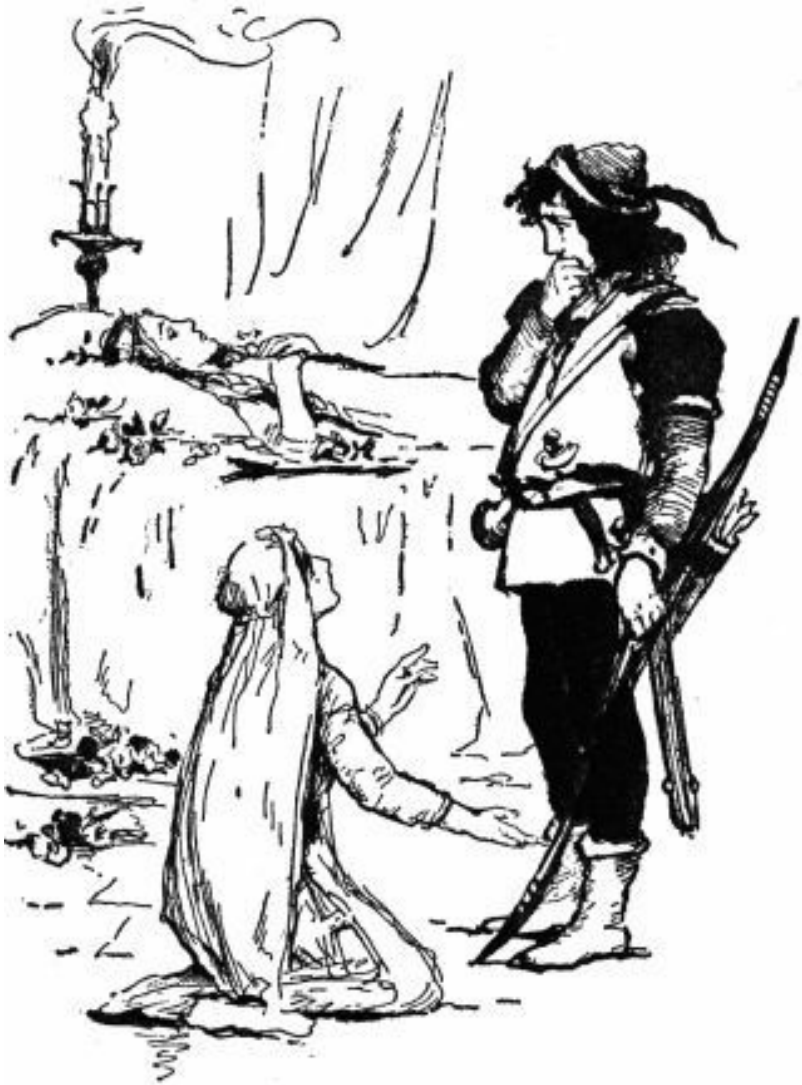
They reached the bend and looked upon the low keep of the castle. A light gray smoke, as if from smouldering timber, rose from the pile, and a dreadful silence brooded over all. The men groaned, and then began to run, uttering fearful cries of vengeance and despair as they rushed toward ruined homes and slain loved ones.

With a strange, cold calmness on him, Robin leaped from his horse in the courtyard, in which bodies of men lay here and there, still and contorted. He strode into the hall; a thin reek of smoke filled the apartment. The place had been fired, but the fire had not caught. Only some broken benches smouldered in a heap, amid which the bodies of defenders and their assailants were mingled together in the close fierce embrace in which they had given each other death. Up the winding-stair in the wall he strode, to the solar or lady's bower.

The door was shut, and he opened it gently. There in the light of the westering sun lay a figure on the bed, its face very white and set. It was Marian. Her body was draped in black and was very still, and he knew that she was dead. On her breast her long fair hands were folded, and her dark hair framed her face and breast in a soft beauty. A short black arrow lay beside the corpse.

A sudden movement came from behind the arras and the slight figure of a woman darted toward him and threw herself on her knees before him. It was Sibbie, wife to Gilbert of the White Hand, the fairy maid who had been tirewoman to Fair Marian. She did not weep, but her face looked up into his with grief in the great brown, faithful eyes.

"Who has done this, Sibbie?" asked Robin in a quiet low voice.



A sudden movement came from behind the arras and the slight figure of a woman darted toward him and threw herself on her knees before him.

"Who but that fiend, Isenbart de Belame!" said the woman in a fierce, restrained voice. "He slew her while she spoke with him from the gateguard room. With this arrow—the selfsame arrow which my brother Hob shot in his table at Evil Hold—he let out her dear life. She fell into my arms, smiled at me, but could not speak, and so

died. On the second day—'twas but yesterday they left—they stormed the castle, but bitter and hard was the fighting in the courtyard and the hall, and then, for fear you should return, they plundered far and wide through the manor and so left with Hob my brother wounded and a prisoner, and ten others, whom they promised to torture when they reached Evil Hold again."

Robin bent and kissed the cold forehead of his wife. Then, uncovering, he knelt beside her and prayed. He spoke no word, but he craved the aid of the Virgin in his vow to stamp out utterly the life and power of the lord of the Evil Hold and all his mates in wickedness.

That night, by the light of torches, the body of Marian was lowered to the grave beside her father and her kinsfolk in the little church of Malaset, while in the castle those of the villeins and freemen who had fled from their farms and holdings at the approach of De Belame and his evil horde were busily engaged in furbishing up arms and harness. All were filled with a hard resolution, and each had made up his mind to die in the attempt to pull down the Evil Hold and its power.

At dawn, in silence, Robin and his band set forth. They did not look back once, but stubbornly they mounted the moorside road and kept their faces fixed toward the east.

On his way to Wrangby Robin called at the castles and manor-houses of other knights to ask their aid. Some places he found were gutted and in ruins, with their brave defenders lying dead, the prey of their king's malignant cruelty. Many men, however, quickly responded to his appeal, so that when at evening, as the twilight was creeping over the misty moor, Robin rode in sight of Wrangby Castle, he had three hundred men at his back, sufficient at least to prevent the garrison from breaking forth.

He stopped a bowshot from the great gate and sounded his horn. On the tower above the portal appeared two men in complete mail.

"I would speak to Isenbart de Belame!" cried Robin.

"Wolf's-head!" came the reply, like the snarl of a wolf, "you are speaking to Sir Isenbart de Belame, lord of Wrangby and the Fells. What do you and your rabble want?"

"I will tell ye," cried Robin. "Deliver yourself up to me with the prisoners you have taken! You shall have the judgment of your peers upon your evil deeds, and for the murder of my wife, the lady Marian. If you do not do this, then we will take your evil castle by storm, and the death of you and your men shall be on your head!"

"If ye do not leave my lands by dawn," was the fierce reply, "you and your tail of whipped curs and villeins, I will come out and beat you to death with my dogwhips.

Go, wolf's-head and rascal! I will speak no more with thee!"

That night Robin and his men hemmed the castle closely, so that no one could come out or go in unseen. Under the Mark Oak he took counsel with the knights who had brought aid.

"Squire Robin," said one, Sir Fulk of the Dykewall, "I cannot see how we can hope to beat down that strong keep. We have no siege engines, we cannot break down the wall in any place, the ditch is full of water, and I doubt not that De Belame is well provisioned for a long siege."

"I see no reason why we should not take the castle," said young Squire Denvil of Toomlands, as eager and brave as a hawk. "We can get the Wrangby peasants, who hate their lords, to cut down trees and make rafts for us. With these, and under cover of our shields, we can pole across the ditch and cut the chains of the drawbridge. Then we can prise up the portcullis, and once within can hack down the gate."

After long council this seemed the only way by which they could hope to take the castle. Ket the Trow was called and bidden to go to the villeins of Wrangby in the hovels a mile from the castle, and ask them to come to aid Robin in rooting out their evil lords. In an hour he returned.

"I went to Cole the Reeve," he said, "and gave him the bidding. He called the homagers (chief men) and told them what you wanted. Their eyes said they would quickly come, but long they thought in silence. Then one said, 'Six times hath the Evil Hold been set about by strong lords and never hath it been taken. Satan loves his own, and 'tis vain to fight against the evil lords. They have ever had power, and will ever keep it.' And they were silent to all I urged upon them, and shook their heads and went away."

Robin thereupon commanded parties of his own men to take it in turn during the night to cut down young trees to make rafts with them, and short scaling-ladders to get at the chains of the drawbridge, and by the light of torches, in among the trees, the work went on all night, while Robin went from place to place seeing that strict guard was kept. Just before daybreak he took some sleep, but was awakened by the arrival of a band of peasants from Wrangby, the very men who the night before had refused to aid him against their lords. At their head was an old man, gray, of great frame and fierce aspect. In his hands he bore a tall billhook, with a long, wide blade as keen and bright as a razor. When Robin saw him he knew him for one of the men who had shot with him at the contest at Nottingham before the sheriff.

"Master," said the old man, going to Robin, "I bring you these men. They denied you last night. They were but half men then, but I have spoken with them, and now

they will help you to pull down this nest of bandit lords and slayers of women and children and maimers of men."

"I thank thee, Rafe of the Billhook," replied Robin, and turned to the peasants. One of them stepped forth and spoke for his fellows.

"We have taken the oath," he said, "and we will go with thee to the end. Rather we will be destroyed now than live longer in our misery under our evil oppressors."

"Ye will not fail, brother," said Rafe, and his look was fierce as he shook his huge billhook. "I swore when they thrust me from my cot in Barnisdale Wood and slew my wife and my boy that I would come back and help to root these fiends out of their nest of stone. The time has come, brothers, and God and the Virgin are fighting for us."

"You are Thurstan of Stone Cot, whom De Belame thrust from your holding thirty winters ago?" asked Robin.

"You speak truly," replied Thurstan; "I have returned at my appointed time."

Under the guidance of this man, and with the eager help of Little John and Gilbert of the White Hand, preparations were soon ready, and after a good meal had been taken and mass had been heard, the rafts were carried down to the ditch before the great gate. Showers of arrows greeted them, but the raft bearers were supported by archers who were commanded by Scarlet and Will Stuteley, and who scanned with keen eyes every slit in the walls. Their bolts searched out and struck everything that moved behind the arrow slits, and any one who came to the battlements of the castle was hit by several arrows. Quickly the rafts were launched and poled across the ditch, and ladders were reared on the sills beside the huge drawbridge which blocked up the portcullis and the gates beyond. Soon the blows of iron upon iron told how mightily the smiths were striving to cut the chains on either side which held the drawbridge up. For a time it looked as if they would have an easy task, for Robin's archers made it impossible for any one to lean from the battlements to shoot them. Suddenly, however, the inside gates were thrown open and a crowd of bowmen began to shoot at the smiths through the bars of the portcullis. One smith fell from his ladder into the ditch, a great arrow sticking in his breast; the other had his hand transfixed.

Others took their places at once, however, and Scarlet, Will the Bowman, and two other archers stood on the ladders with the smiths, and returned the shooting as best they could, though the space was so confined that hardly could they draw their bows. At length a shout went up—one chain was cut through and the drawbridge shook and trembled. A few more blows with the hammer on the other side, and with a mighty crash the drawbridge fell across the moat, being smashed in half by reason

of its weight. Robin and a select band of archers swarmed over the ruined drawbridge which held together sufficiently to allow of this, and, shooting between the bars of the portcullis, poured in such flights of arrows that the garrison was compelled to retreat behind the gates, which finally they had to close.

Then a great tree-trunk was run forward by forty willing hands, and the bridge having been covered with rafting to support the weight of extra men, the battering-ram was dashed against the portcullis. Again and again this was done, the archers on the bank picking off those on the castle wall or at the arrow slits who tried to shoot down the besiegers. Many of Robin's men were killed, however, for the defense was as bitter as the attack, and everywhere in the castle could be heard the voices of Sir Isenbart and his fellow knights, Sir Baldwin, Sir Scrivel, or Sir Roger of Doncaster, angrily urging the archers and stonethrowers to continue their efforts.

At last the castle gate was thrown open again and a deadly flight of arrows flew out, dealing death from between the bars of the portcullis. But Robin led up his archers, and again compelled the garrison to retreat, while other men-at-arms took the vacant places beside the ram, the head of which was now so split and torn that it seemed like a mop. Still it thudded and crashed against the bars of the portcullis, two of which were so bent and cracked that soon the great grille would be broken through sufficiently to allow men to enter.

"Three more good blows from master oak, lads," cried Robin, "and in we go. The wooden gate will not keep us long!"

Just then there came quick shouts from Will the Bowman who stood with his archers on the bank.

"Back! back!" he cried, "they throw fire down!"

"Into the moat!" shouted Robin, hearing the warning cries.

Down from the battlements poured a deluge of boiling tar, and quickly after came burning brands and red-hot stones. Some half-dozen men who had not heard the cries were whelmed in the deathly rain and killed. The lighted brands and red-hot stones instantly set fire to the rafting, the drawbridge and the ram, which were covered with tar, and soon a furnace fire raged, cutting off the besiegers from what a few moments before had seemed almost certain victory.

Robin and those who had escaped swam to the bank, while Will and his archers searched the walls with their arrows.

Robin looked at the gulf of fire before him and at the angry and gloomy faces of his men.

"Never mind, lads," he cried. "They can't get out themselves, and when the fire has burned itself out we will cross by fresh rafts. A few more blows and the bars will

be broken enough to let us in. Will and you, Scarlet," he cried, turning to Stuteley and the other old outlaw, "see that you let no one' of the evil crew mend those broken bars."

It was now past noon, and while a party watched the portcullis, and others took a hasty meal, a third party was sent with the peasants to cut fresh rails.

As Robin was directing the work of the woodcutters, he saw, coming over the moor, a great party of footmen, preceded by two knights on horseback. His keen eyes gazed at the blazons on their shields, and at sight of the three white swallows of the one, and the five green trees of the other he waved his hand in welcome. They were Sir Walter de Beauforest and young Alan-a-Dale, and in a little while they were shaking hands with Robin.

"We received thy message yesterday," said Sir Walter, "and we have come as quickly as we could. I trust we have not arrived too late."

Robin related what had been done and the plans he had made for taking the place, which they found were good, and promised to aid him all they could. Alan told him that Sir Herbrand was sending a party to help Robin, but being old and feeble he could not come himself, much as he would like to have struck a blow against his enemies of Wrangby.

Now all this while Ket the Trow wandered through the camp with a gloomy look. Sometimes he took his place with the archers by the moat, and his was the keenest eye to see a movement at an arrow slit or on the battlements, and his was the swiftest arrow to fly at the mark. But things were going too slowly for Ket.

He lay in a thick bush of hazel at the rear of the castle and scanned the walls narrowly. Now and then he cast his eyes warily round the moorland to where the forest and the fells hemmed in the Wrangby lands.

What was that? At one and the same moment two strange things had happened. He had seen a sword flash twice from the battlements of the castle, as if it was a signal, and instantly there had been a momentary glint as of a weapon from between the leafless trees of a wood on the edge of the forest some half a mile away. He looked long and earnestly at the point, but nothing stirred or showed again.

"Strange," thought Ket; "was that a signal? If so, who was he to whom the man in the castle was making signs?"

Ket's decision was soon taken, and like a ferret, creeping from bush to bush, he made his way toward the wood. He reached the verge and looked between the trees. There, with the muzzles of their horses tied up to prevent their making a noise, lay some thirty fierce moss-riders. He knew them at once. They were the men of Thurlstan, from whom he had rescued Fair Marian several years before. A man

raised his great shock head of white hair and looked over the moor toward the camp of the besiegers. Then his teeth showed in a mocking sneer, and Ket knew that this was old Grame Gaptooth himself, lord of Thurlstan.

"'Twill be dark in an hour, and then we will make that rabble fly!" said the old raider.

With the stealth of a wildcat, Ket began to back away and to creep deeper into the wood behind where the moss-riders lay. With infinite care he proceeded, since the cracking of a twig might reveal his presence to the fierce raiders. When he had covered some fifty yards he carefully rose to his feet and then, like a shadow, flitted from tree to tree toward the camp of Robin.

In a little while the twilight and the mist deepened over the land, the forest seemed to creep nearer and darkness descended rapidly.

"Now, lads," said Grame Gaptooth, getting to his feet and grasping his horse's bridle, "mount and make ready. Walk your horses till ye are a hundred yards from where thou seest their fires burning, then use the spur and shout my cry, 'Gaptooth o' the Wall.' Then with spur and sword mow me those dogs down, and when Belame hears us he will come forth, and the killing will be a merry one between us. Now, up and away!"

Quietly over the long coarse grass the raiders passed, and then, with a sudden fierce shout, they dashed upon the groups about the fires. But, strangely enough, the men-at-arms they rode among turned as if they expected them; three knights rode out of the gloom against the raiders, and amid the shouts of "Gaptooth o' the Wall, Gaptooth o' the Wall," the fierce fighting began.

Counselled by Ket the Trow, Robin had ordered his men to retreat a little toward the castle, so that the garrison should hear clearly when the border men attacked them; and this was done. Eagerly the moss men followed, and their enemies seemed to fly before them. They pressed on more quickly, still shouting their war cry. Suddenly they heard answering cries. "Belame! Belame!" came like a fierce bellow from the castle gate, which was dashed open, the portcullis slowly mounted, and out from its yawning jaws swept knights and men-at-arms. Robin had placed the rafts over the blackened timbers of the drawbridge so that the garrison could come out without delay, and over these they came in a mad rush, causing the timbers to heave and rock, and soon the cries of "Gaptooth" and "Belame" mingled in fierce delight.

Suddenly, above the din, came the clear call of a bugle from somewhere in the rear. At the same time three short, sharp notes rose from beneath the castle walls. Out of the forest of the Mark Oak swept ten knights and a hundred men-at-arms, the force which Sir Herbrand had sent, and which had arrived as darkness fell, in

time to form part of the plan which Robin and the knights, with the counsel of Ket the Trow, had formed for the destruction of their enemy.

The men who had seemed to be caught between those who shouted "Belame!" and those who cried "Gaptooth!" now suddenly came back in greater numbers. The troop of De Belame heard the rush of men behind them where, as they thought, they had left none but their own garrison; and the moss-riders turned, as avenging cries of "Marian! Marian!" answered by other shouts of "Tranmire and St. George!" sounded fiercely all about them.

Then indeed came the fierce crash of battle. Caught between the two wings of Robin's party, which now outnumbered De Belame and his friends, the Wrangby lords fought for dear life. No quarter was asked or given. Peasant with bill or ax fought men-at-arms on foot or hacked at the knight of coat-armor on horseback; and everywhere Rafe of the Bill fought in fierce delight, his glittering bill in his hand, looking out meanwhile for Sir Isenbart himself. Robin also sought everywhere in the gloom for the slayer of his wife. Distinguishable by the bronze of his helmet, Sir Isenbart raged like a boar to and fro, dealing death or wounds with every blow, chanting the while his own fierce name. Robin saw him and strove to follow him, but the press of battle kept them asunder. Close behind Robin stalked Little John, a huge double-headed ax in his hand, making wider the path cleared by his master through their foes.

Sir Isenbart raged like a boar to and fro.

"John, for the love of the Virgin, go strike down that bronze helm," cried Robin

at length. "It is De Belame! Man, for love of me, let him not escape!"

Little chance there seemed of that now, even if the brave, fierce tyrant wished to run. He was checked in his path of slaughter now, for Rafe of the Bill and twenty Wrangby villeins had surrounded him, tearing at his limbs, wrenching at his armor to drag him down among their feet.

Swiftly he struck here and there, shaking off his assailants as a bear tosses off the dogs. Rafe strove to reach him with his great bill, thrusting and hacking at him, but De Belame's stout shield received all the fierce blows, and for the moment it seemed that he would win through.

Robin and John broke through the weakening ranks of their foes at last, and leaping over the dead that lay in heaps they rushed toward Sir Isenbart. But too late they reached him. With a great shearing blow, the bill in the vengeful hands of old Thurstan had lighted upon the right shoulder of the knight, cutting deep into the bone. Another moment and the bill would have swept De Belame's head from his shoulders; but Robin caught the stroke on his shield, crying:

"Kill him not; the rope shall have him!"

Rafe dropped his bill. "Ay, you are right," he growled. "He deserves not to die by honest steel—let the hangman have the felon."

De Belame, his right arm paralyzed, yet kept his seat and cried: "Kill me, wolf's-head! Kill me with thy sword! I am a gentleman of coat-armor! *I* yield not to such carrion!" He thrust spurs into his horse and strove to dash away.

But the great arms of Rafe were about him, and they dragged him from his seat.

"Coat-armor," snarled the fierce man. "Had I my way I would blazon thy skin with as evil a pattern as thou and thy fiends have cut on poor folks' bodies. Coat-armor and a good hempen rope will go well together this night!"

"John and you, Rafe, bind up his wound, then bring the prisoner to the castle, which I doubt not is ours," said Robin, and he would not leave them until he saw the wound bound up. Then, securely tied, De Belame, silent now and sullen, was carried toward the castle.

The battle had ceased everywhere by now. Few of the Wrangby men were left alive; so fierce had been the hatred of them that no more than a dozen had staggered away in the darkness, and among these was only one knight, Sir Roger of Doncaster, a sly man who preferred plotting to fighting. Of the moss-riders, not one was alive, and Gaptooth himself had ridden his last cruel foray.

As to the castle, this had been quickly seized. With young Squire Denvil and a chosen party of forty men, Ket had silently hidden in the water beside the rafts which lay before the great gate. When De Belame and his men had dashed from the castle

in exultant answer to Gaptooth's call, and the gate-guard were standing under the portcullis, certain of victory and grumbling at being left behind and out of the killing, dripping men had risen as if from their very feet, and hardly had they realized what it meant before death had found them. Then, silently, Ket and the Squire of Toomlands, followed closely by their men, had swept into the castle, cutting down all who opposed them.

A little later, into the hall where Sir Isenbart and his fellow knights had often sat carousing over their cups or torturing some poor captive, came Robin and such of the knights as had come unharmed through the battle. Taking his seat in De Belame's chair at the high table, Robin bade the prisoners be brought in.

"Isenbart de Belame," began Robin in a stern voice, "here in thy castle, in thy hall where often thy miserable captives, men and women, rich and poor, gentle and simple, craved thy mercy and got naught but brutal jests or evil injury—here thou comest at last to find thy judgment. All who have anything to charge against this man De Belame, or his comrade in cruelty and oppression, Baldwin, stand forth, and as God hears and sees all, tell the truth on peril of his soul!"

"He put out my father's eyes!" cried one. "The harvest failed one year," cried another, "and because I could not pay him my yearly load of wheat, he pressed my son to death," said another. Others stepped quickly up, and each gave in a few harsh words his tale of cruel deeds. When all had ended Ket the Trow stood forth.

"With his own evil hand that man slew the kindest lady between Barnisdale and Combes o' the Moors," he cried, pointing his finger at De Belame. "He slew her while she spoke to him from her castle gate, and laughed when he saw her fall."

"He stood by and jested when Ranulf of the Waste tortured by fire our father, Colman Grey!" cried Hob o' the Hill, limping forth with bandaged leg and arm, and shaking his fist at De Belame.

"It is enough—and more than enough!" said Robin at last. "What say you, sir knights? These men are of knightly blood and wear coat-armor, and so should die by the sword. But they have proved themselves no better than tavern knifers and I adjudge them a shameful death by the rope!"

A great shout of assent rang through the lofty hall—"To the rope! to the rope with them!"

It was done. Amid the shouts of triumph of the fierce men standing about, Little John hacked off the spurs from the heels of the two Wrangby lords, and then with a great roar of rageful glee they were hurried out amid the surging crowd, torches tossing their lurid light upon hard faces and gleaming eyes, whose usual good nature was turned to savagery for the moment.

When the act of wild justice had been done, pitch and tar and oil were poured into every chamber in the castle, and torches were thrust in, and lighted straw heaped up. Then all fled forth and stood before the black walls, through whose slits the black and oily smoke began to curl. Soon, gathering power, the fire burst up through the floors of the great hall and the chambers above, and roared like a furious torrent to the dark sky. Great noises issued as the thick beams split, and as balk and timber, rafter and buttress fell, the flames and sparks leaped higher until the light shone far and wide over the country. Shepherds minding their sheep far away on the distant fells looked and looked, and would not believe their eyes; then crossed themselves and muttered a prayer of thankfulness that somehow the Evil Hold of Wrangby was ruining in fire.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEATH OF ROBIN HOOD

NEVER again after the death of his wife Marian did Robin Hood leave the greenwood. The lands at Malaset were taken by a distant kinsman of the Earl FitzWalter, who ruled them well and treated his villeins and yeomen kindly, with due regard to the customs of the manor.

Many of those who had been outlaws with Robin and had become his tenants at Malaset refused to go back there, but once having tasted again the wild free life of the greenwood, kept with Robin; and the numbers of his band swelling by reason of the cruelties and slaying, sacking and plundering by the tyrannical king, they eagerly fell in with Robin's proposal to harass the royal army. Many a raiding party engaged in some dreadful deed of plunder and torture of knights or yeomen did Robin and his brave men fall upon, and with their great war arrows destroy or rout them utterly, thus earning the gratitude of many a knight and dame, villein and franklin, who ever after held the name of Robin Hood in special reverence.

One day Robin was with Little John and Scarlet on the borders of Sherwood and Barnisdale. They were waiting for news of a party of evil men who had begun to haunt that part of the country, and who were in the pay of Sir Roger of Doncaster. This was the knight who with some ten men-at-arms had managed to escape from the fight before Evil Hold.

By and by there came the sound of a scolding squirrel and Robin responded, for this was a sign between the scouts. In a few moments Ket the Trow came into the glade and went up to Robin.

"Master," he said, "I and Hob have watched the manor-house, at Syke, of Roger of Doncaster. He and his men left at dawn this morning and have gone toward the Stone Houses by Barnisdale Four Wents. I think they lie in wait there to fall upon the bishop's convoy of food and gear which goes to-day from Wakefield Abbey to Lincoln."

"Up, John," said Robin, "and thou, Scarlet, and do thou go quickly to the Stane Lea and take all the men thou canst find and try thy wits against that robber knight and his hedge-knifers. As for me, I will follow thee anon."

With instant obedience Little John and Scarlet started off, but Ket stood still and waited for further instructions.

"Ket," said Robin, at length, "do thou go to Will the Bowman, and bid him bring the score of men he hath watching with him, and scatter them across the road and forest tracks from Doncaster hitherward. If thou seest thy brother Hob, send him to me."

When Ket left him, Robin went out of the glade into the road and began to walk under the leafy boughs. When he had gone about half a mile toward the south he came to a small path which ran through the trees at the side, and looking down this he saw a low-browed man, with a cruel look, dressed like a yeoman, standing looking furtively up and down the narrow path. In his hand he bore a bow, and a quiver of arrows hung beside him.

"Good morrow, good fellow," said Robin.

"Good morrow to you, good woodman," replied the yeoman, who was taken somewhat by surprise at Robin's quiet approach, and his eyes glanced here and there, and did not look straight at Robin. "I ha' lost my way through the forest. Canst thou tell me my way to Roche Abbey?"

Robin seemed to look at him carelessly as he replied: "Ay, I can lead thee into thy road. Thou hast come far out of thy way. When didst thou find thou wast wandering out of thy road?"

"Oh, but an hour or two," was the reply. "I was told at Balby my road lay through the hamlet of Scatby, but hours have I walked as it seemeth, and never a roof do I see in these wild woods."

Robin laughed. He could have told the man that he must have been wandering since the previous midday, when he had seen him through the leaves skulking like a wildcat through the forest ways.

"'Tis but a mile or two more thou must go," replied Robin, "and thou wilt strike the right road. But by the bow thou bearest it would seem that thou shouldst be a good archer?"

"Ay," said the man with a crafty look, "I am as good a bowman—and better—than many a braggart thief who shoots the king's deer."

"Then let us have some pastime," said Robin, "and see who is the better archer of us two."

"I am with thee," said the man, and drew an arrow from his quiver. His eyes looked narrowly at Robin and there was an evil glint in them.

Robin went to a hazel bush and cut down two straight hazel wands, which he peeled in their upper parts, so as to show up more plainly. One of these he stuck in the ground where they stood, and from the top he hung a rough garland of dogwood leaves, which were now turning red in the autumn, and therefore stood out against

the white of the hazel.

"Now," said Robin, "let us measure off fifty paces. I will set this other wand at the place from whence we shoot."

While doing all this Robin did not turn his face from the other man, who all the time had had his arrow half-notched upon his string, as if eager to begin the shooting.

"'Tis a plaguey hard shot thou wouldst have us try," he said with a growl.

Robin took no notice, but went on counting until he had completed the fifty paces, and the man, almost as if against his will, sullenly walked with him. Robin bade the man shoot first at the mark, but he said he would rather Robin had the first try. Robin took two arrows from his quiver and shot one at the mark. The arrow went through the garland, about two fingers' span from the wand.

"I like not this way of shooting," growled the low-bred man. "'Tis such shooting as thou seest silly squires and village fools use."

Robin made no reply, and the man shot at the mark. As was to be expected he missed the garland altogether, and his arrow went wide.

"Thou needest more practice, good friend," said Robin. "Trust me, 'tis well worth thy while to test thy skill at a fine mark such as this. 'Tis no credit to creep up and shoot on top of thy game from behind a tree—often a long shot is the most honest."

So saying, Robin took careful aim, and this time his arrow struck the thin wand and split it in twain.

"'Twas not fair shooting!" cried the other in a rage. "A flaw of wind did carry thy bolt against the wand!"

"Nay, good fellow," said Robin in a quiet voice, "thou art a fool to talk so. 'Twas a clean shot, as thou knowest well. Do thou go now and take this wand here and set it up in place of that which I have split. I will cut a new one and we will set it up at thirty paces, so that thou mayest have a little practice ere I lead thee on thy way."

With muttered words and dark looks the rascal took the wand which stood where they had been shooting, and went away with slow steps toward the split mark fifty paces away. When he had got some twenty paces he turned his head quickly and saw that Robin was apparently busy at a hazel thicket, searching for a straight stick. Swiftly the rogue put an arrow to his string and shouted as the bolt left his bow:

"Thou art the mark I seek, thou wolf's-head!"

Robin seemed to fall into the bush as if struck, and with a cruel laugh the man stepped nearer as if to make sure that he had really slain the outlaw for whom he had been spying so long. He could see the legs sticking out stiffly from among the hazels

and he grinned with delight. Then, putting his fingers to his lips, he whistled long and shrill, and came forward at a run to gloat over his victim.

But suddenly with a jerk the dead man arose, and in one hand was the arrow which the would-be murderer had shot.

"Thou bungling hedge-knifer!" said Robin with a scornful laugh. "Even the mark at which thou hast been loosing thy arrow these two days thou canst not strike, and that at twenty paces! Ay, thou canst run, but thy own arrow shall slay thee!"

The man had turned, and with swift steps was running this way and that from side to side of the path, so as to confuse Robin's aim.

Robin drew his bow to its utmost, and paused for one moment; then the string twanged with a great sound and the arrow sped. The man gave a yell, jumped three feet clear up into the air, then fell flat, the arrow sticking from his back.

At the same moment Robin heard the sound of breaking branches beside him, and hardly had he thrown down his bow when out of the hazel bush beside him leaped a strange figure. For a moment as Robin took a step back to give him time to draw his sword, he was startled, so weird was the figure. It seemed as if it was a brown horse on its hind legs which dashed toward him. The great white teeth were bared as if to tear him, and the mane rolled behind, tossing in the fury of attack.

Then Robin laughed. The horse's skin contained a man; in one hand was a naked sword; in the other a buckler. It was Sir Guy of Gisborne, who now dashed upon the outlaw.

"Ha, ha! Guy of Gisborne, thou false knight!" cried Robin mockingly. "Thou hast come thyself at last, hast thou? For years thou hast sent thy spies, thy ambushers, thy secret murderers to slay me, and now thou hast come to do the deed thyself—if thou canst!"

For some time naught was heard but the clang of sword upon sword as stroke met guard. Round and round they trod in this fierce dance that should end in death for one of them, each with his eyes bent upon the keen looks of the other. Suddenly Robin's sword leaped over the guard of the other's sword, and his point pierced and ripped the horse's hide and cut into the shoulder of Sir Guy.

"Thy luck hath fled, Guy of Gisborne!" said Robin in triumph. "Thou didst 'scape with thy life once from thy burning house in that horse's hide, and thou didst think it would bring thee luck against my sword point."

"Thou wolf's-head! Thou hedge-robber!" cried Guy of Gisborne. "'Twas but a scratch, but my good sword shall yet let thy life out!"

With a double feint, swift and fierce, Guy thrust under Robin's sword arm. His point cut through Robin's tunic of Lincoln green and a hot spark seemed to burn the

outlaw's side. Guy's point had wounded him slightly. It did not check Robin for an instant. Swiftly as a lightning stroke the outlaw lunged forward, and ere Guy could recover, Robin's sword had pierced his breast. The cruel knight dropped his sword, staggered back, spun round once, and then fell heavily to the ground.

Robin, breathless, leaned upon his sword as he looked down upon his slain enemy.

"Thus," he said, "my sword hath avenged, by the aid of the pitiful sweet Virgin, all the cruelties and oppressions which thy evil will and cruel mind hath caused—the torture of poor men by hunger, scourging and forced labors, the aching hearts of women and children, whom thy evil will did not spare from blows and tears. Would that my sword could slay as easily the tyranny and wrongdoing of all those in high place to-day who make poor men weep and suffer!"

Turning, he saw Hob o' the Hill approaching him, who now ran up and said: "Master, I saw the good fight and the shrewd stroke thou gavest him. There is only one now of all thy enemies who yet liveth, and he is Sir Roger of Doncaster."

"Nay, Hob," replied Robin; "there are a many of the enemies of poor men who yet live in their stronge castles and carved abbeys whom I shall never slay."

"Ay, ay, master, thou speakest truth," said Hob. "But now, master, I come to tell thee that Roger of Doncaster's men have doubled south and even now are at Hunger Wood. I guess that they do but follow the orders of this slain steward here, and will to ambush thee."

"Go thou and hasten to Little John. Bid him turn back if he hath not already learned that Roger's men are coming south. Let him get behind them, but not so that they know he is nigh them. When he is north of Hunger Wood, bid him make two horns through the woods so as to encompass the rogues. Then with Will's men I will drive them back, and John should see to it that no one escapes alive."

Swiftly Hob darted away, while Robin hastened toward the Doncaster road, where he soon found Will the Bowman waiting in a glade.

"How now, master," said old Will, grizzled and gray, but as hale and sturdy as ever; "my scouts tell me that these rascals are many and do come through the woods as if they feared naught. 'Tis said that a wily rogue, a Brabanter cut-throat named Fulco the Red, doth lead them, and he has warred through France and Allemain and Palestine, and knoweth all the arts of war. We are but a score here, and Little John and his party are three miles to the northwest."

"I have sent Hob to tell Little John to return," replied Robin. "He will be here in an hour. Till then we must hold these rascals in check."

In a little while a scout came in to say that the enemy was marching toward

Beverly Glade, and Robin instantly ordered the score of archers under Will to hide themselves in the thickets on the edge of the glade. Soon, issuing from the trees on the other side of the clearing, could be seen the headpieces of the foreigners. Fierce and cruel were the faces of these men, for they warred for any hand that paid them well.

There were some fourscore of them, twenty of them with crossbows, and at their head was a man with a red face of fierce aspect, clothed in complete mail from head to foot. They advanced warily, with scouts on their flanks amidst the trees, and they looked to and fro keenly as they advanced. Not until they were within twenty paces of the thickets where the outlaws lay hid did Robin give the signal agreed upon. Then, at the shrill whistle, twenty great arrows boomed through the air, and as many of the enemy staggered and fell.

Then with a fierce yell of command the leader, Fulco the Red, dashed forward into the thickets, followed by his surviving men, who still outnumbered the outlaws. As quick as ferrets and as stealthily, Robin's men retreated, running from tree to tree, but whenever opportunity offered, a great arrow buzzed out from some innocent-looking bush and another rascal fell writhing in his death-throes.

Suddenly he saw Fulco dash forward at a bush where he had seen a lurking outlaw. It was Gilbert of the White Hand, who, finding himself discovered, and not having time to draw his bow, sought safety in flight. He rushed close beside the tree behind which Robin stood, Fulco following with uplifted sword. As the Brabanter passed, Robin dashed forth with sword in hand and beat at the foreigner. The latter quickly parried the blow with his buckler, and next moment had swung round and had fiercely engaged Robin. Round and round in a wild fight the two wheeled, their swords clanging, as stroke on stroke was guarded. Suddenly one of the other men crept up, resolved to slay Robin from behind. Will the Bowman saw what he intended and dashed forward, sword in hand, only to be hewed down as another Fleming leaped from behind a tree. The old man cried out with his dying breath, "Robin, guard thee!"

An arrow flew from a bush and the man who was creeping upon Robin leaped up, then fell heavily and lay still. A second arrow slew the man who had slain Will Stuteley, and then for the time both parties in their hiding-places seemed to stand and watch the combat between the two leaders.

The Brabanter, famed for his sword play as he was, had found his match. Such strength of wrist, such force of stroke as was in Robin he had never met before, and it was in vain that he tried his wiles upon the slim man who seemed to be surrounded by a cage of steel, while yet it was only the one sword that leaped so swiftly to

guard. Fulco, rageful at the long resistance, was wearing out his strength in vain through fierce attacks. Suddenly he saw Robin's eyes gleam with a strange look which almost fascinated him with its fierce intentness. Then he saw the outlaw make a pass which laid his left breast open. Quickly the Brabanter, parrying the pass, dashed his point at Robin's breast. The outlaw leaped aside, Fulco's sword lunged into the empty air, and next moment, with a great sweep of his arm, Robin's sword had hewed into the neck of the marauder, who fell dead at his feet.

A great cheer rose from the throats of the outlaws, and heartened by the victory the bowmen pressed into the open and sought their enemies. These, losing courage at the loss of their leader, began to retreat, running backward from tree to tree. But in vain they sought shelter. The deadly arrows, like great bees, searched their hiding-places narrowly.

Suddenly from three directions behind them and beside them came the challenging call of the blackcock. So saucily it sounded, that from hidden outlaws here and there chuckles of laughter rose, while others wondered whether it could indeed be Little John, whose warning cry this was. An answering call from Robin reassured them on that point, and soon through the trees could be seen coats of Lincoln green darting from tree to tree.

It is needless to dwell upon the last fight. It could but end in one way. The Englishmen hated these foreign invaders with a hatred too deadly for mercy, and as they shot them down they knew that their arrows were loaded with vengeance for unutterable deeds of murder and cruelty committed upon defenseless women, little children and unweaponed men, when these marauding wretches had spread like a plague through the land under the banner of King John.

Roger of Doncaster, waiting with his half-dozen men-at-arms on the edge of the forest, wondered why Guy of Gisborne and Fulco lingered so long.

Then at last they saw a charcoal-burner coming with his sack of coal through the trees. Two men-at-arms caught him and brought him up to where the knight sat on his horse. Sir Roger asked him whether he had not seen a troop of men-at-arms coming through the wood.

"Na, na," said he in his rough speech: "no living man ha' I seen; but I ha' seen a pile o' foreign-looking men lying dead in Beverly Glade, and each had a clothyard stickin' in un. There mun be threescore of un!"

Sir Roger dragged his horse round, a savage oath on his lips. "That wolf's-head is the fiend himself!" he said.

Quickly he and his men hurried off, leaving the charcoal-burner looking after them. "Ay, ay," said he under his breath, "no one of thy cruel rascals can hope to get

aught but death while Robin is king o' these forests. Three- or fourscore there were of the murdering Easterlings, and each had Robin's sign upon him."

After this, for many years Robin was left undisturbed in the forests of Barnisdale and Sherwood, and, outlaw though he was, most good men came to respect his name, while those that were oppressors feared him.

Indeed, I should want a book of the same length as this one to relate all the famous deeds which Robin did while he was in the greenwood at this time. For fifteen years he dwelled there, and every year his fame increased by reason of his deeds.

One day when Robin had thus passed some ten years in this second period of his outlawry, a lady rode into his camp at the Stane Lea. For a moment Robin did not recognize her.

"I am thy cousin," she said at length with a smile, "Dame Alice of Havelond. Dost thou not remember how thou didst aid me and my husband more than a score years ago when two evil neighbors oppressed us?"

"By my faith," said Robin, and kissed his cousin on her cheek; "'tis so long since I have seen thee that I knew thee not."

He made Dame Alice very welcome, and she and her two women and three serving-men spent the night in a little bower which Robin caused to be made for them.

"Now," said she at length, "I am an old woman, Robin, and thou art old also. Thy hair is gray, and though thy eyes are keen and I doubt not thy strength is great, dost thou not often long for a place where thou canst live in peace and rest, away from the alarms which thy life here must bring to thee? Couldst thou not disband thy men, steal away, and live in my house with me at Havelond?"

"Nay, dear cousin," he said, "I have lived too long in the greenwood ever to crave any other living place. I will die in it, and I pray I be buried in some glade under the whispering trees, where in life I and my dear fellows have roamed at will."

"Then," replied the dame, "if thou wilt not seek this asylum with me, which I offer to thee in memory of that great kindness which thou didst for my dead husband, then I shall betake myself to Kirklees and live out my last years in the nunnery of which, as thou knowest, our aunt Dame Ursula is abbess. I would have thee come to me whenever thou wishest, Robin, for old age makes us fond of our kin, and I would see thee often."

Robin promised that he would not forget to visit Kirklees, to see Dame Alice, and this he did once in every six months, as much for the purpose of seeing his cousin as to have at her hands the medical treatment which his aging years seemed to

demand more and more. In those days women had much lore of medicinal herbs, and instead of going to doctors when they felt sick, people would go to a woman who was famed to have this knowledge, and she would give them medicine. Men also believed that if a vein in the arm was cut and a certain amount of blood was allowed to escape, this was a cure for certain diseases. It was for this purpose, also, that Robin Hood visited Kirklees Nunnery, and he stayed there for two or three days at a time, in order that the wound in his arm might thoroughly heal.

On these visits he often saw his aunt, Dame Ursula the abbess. She was a dark, lean woman with crafty eyes, but she always spoke fair to him.

Now it happened one day, late in the summer, that Robin felt giddy and ill, and resolved to go to Kirklees to be tended by his cousin.

"Go with me, Little John," said Robin, "for I feel I am an old man this day, and my mind is mazed."

"Ay, dear Robin, I will go with thee," said Little John, "but thy sickness will pass, I doubt not. I would that ye did not go into that nunnery, for ever when ye have gone, I ha' wondered as I waited under the trees without, whether I should see thy face again, or whether some evil trick would be played on thee."

"Nay, John," said Robin, "they will play me no tricks. The women are my kinsfolk, and what enemies have we now?"

"I know not," replied John doubtfully, scratching his grizzled head; "but Hob o' the Hill hath heard that Sir Roger of Doncaster is friend to the nuns of Kirklees."

They prepared to go to Kirklees, Robin and John on horses and the rest of their band on foot. When they arrived at the edge of the forest which overlooked the nunnery, Little John and Robin dismounted, leaving the horses with the men, who were to hide in the woods until Robin returned. Then, supported by John's arm, Robin walked to the gate of Kirklees, where John left him.

"God preserve thee, dear Robin," he said, "and let thee come again soon to me. I have a fear upon me this day that something shall befall thee to our sorrow."

"Nay, nay, John," said Robin, "fear not. Sit thou in the shaw, and if I want thee I will blow my horn."

So the two old comrades in arms parted with warm handclasps, and Robin knocked at the great iron ring upon the door. Very soon the door was opened by his aunt, who indeed had been watching his approach from a window.

"Come thou in, Robin," said she with wheedling tones, while her crafty eyes looked in his face with a sidelong furtive glance. She saw that he was ill, and a smile played over her thin lips. "Come in and have a jack of ale, for thou must be wearied after thy journey."

"I thank thee, dame," said Robin, and wearily he stepped in. "But I will neither eat nor drink until I have been blooded. Tell my cousin Alice I have come, I pray thee."

"Ah, Robin," said his aunt, "thou hast been long away from us, and thou hast not heard, I ween. Thy cousin died in her sleep in the spring, and now she lies under the churchyard mold."

"Sorry I am to hear that," replied Robin, and in the shock of the news he staggered and would have fallen, but that his aunt put her arm about him. "I—I—repent me," he went on, "that I came not oftener. Poor Alice! But I am ill, dame. Do thou nick my arm and blood me, and soon I shall be well, and will trouble thee no more."

"Of a surety 'tis no trouble, good Robin," said the abbess, and she guided him into a room remote from the living rooms of the nunnery. She led him to a truckle bed which stood in one corner, and he lay down with a great sigh of relief. Then he bared his arm slowly, and the abbess took a little knife from a satchel which hung from her girdle. She held the brown arm, now much thinner than of yore, and with the point of her knife she cut deep into a thick blue vein. Then, having tied the arm so that he should not move it, she set a jar beneath the cut in the arm as it hung outside the bed.

Then she went from the room and quickly returned with some drink in a cup. "Drink this, good Robin," she said. "'Twill clear thee of the heaviness which is upon thee."

She raised Robin's head and he drank the liquor to the lees. With a sigh Robin sank back on his pillow and smiled as he said: "Thanks, best thanks, good aunt. Thou art kind to a lawless man."

He spoke drowsily; his head fell back upon the pillow and he began to breathe heavily. The drug which the abbess had placed in the cup was already working. The dame smiled wickedly, and she went to the door of the room and beckoned to some one outside. A man crept into the chamber—an old, thin man, with white hair, sly, shifty eyes, and a weak, hanging lower lip. She pointed with one lean finger to the form of Robin Hood, and the old man's eyes shone at the sight. His gaze followed the drops of blood as they oozed from the cut vein and dripped into the jar beneath.

"If you were even a little like a man," she said scornfully, "you would draw your dagger and give him his death yourself—not leave it to my lancet to let his life out drop by drop."

Robin stirred at the sound of her voice, and the thin old man turned and skipped from the room in terror. The abbess followed him, her beady black eyes bent upon

his shifty looks. She drew a long key from her satchel and locked the door of the room where Robin lay.

"When will he be dead?" asked the old man in a whisper.

"If the blood floweth freely, he will be dead by night!" said the abbess.

"But if it do not, and he dieth not?" said the old man.

"Then I and Kirklees nunnery are richer by thirty acres of good meadow land," replied the abbess mockingly, "the gift of the good Sir Roger of Doncaster; and you, Sir Roger, will have to find some other way of killing this fox. Why dost thou not go in thyself and do it now?"

She held out the key to him, but he shrank away, his teeth gnawing at his finger-nails, his baleful eyes gleaming angrily at the mocking face of the abbess.

Sir Roger of Doncaster, coward and poltroon, had not the courage to slay a sick man, but turned and slunk away. He left the house and rode away, his chin sunk on his breast, enraged to think how the abbess despised him, and how she might yet outwit him in the wicked conspiracy they had made together for the slaying of Robin Hood.

Little John sat patiently in the shade of the forest trees all the afternoon. When the long shadows began to creep across the wolds he wondered why Robin had not appeared at the door as was his wont. In his anxiety Little John arose and walked impatiently up and down.

What was that? Faintly, from the direction of the nunnery, he heard three bugle blasts—Robin's call!

With a roar like that of an enraged bull, Little John shouted to the men hiding in the thickets:

"Up, lads! Heard ye those weary notes? Treachery is being done our poor master!"

Snatching up weapons, the whole band rushed after Little John, who ran at top speed to the nunnery gate. With blows from a hedge-pole they battered this in, and with the same weapon they beat down the door, and then amid the shrieks and prayers of the affrighted nuns they poured into the place.

Very cold and stern was Little John as he stood before the bevy of white-faced women.

"Ha' done with thy shrieking!" he said. "Find me the abbess."

But the abbess was nowhere to be found.

"Quick, then, lead me to where my master, Robin Hood, is lying."

But none knew of his having come to the nunnery. Full of wrath and sorrow and dread, John was about to order that the whole place be searched, when Hob o' the

Hill pushed through the outlaws and said: "I ha' found where our master lies."

They stormed up the stairs after Hob, and having reached the door they broke the lock and rushed in. What a sight met their eyes! There was their master, white and haggard, with glazed eyes, half reclining upon the bed, so weak that hardly could he raise his head to them.

Little John threw himself on his knees beside Robin, tears streaming from his eyes.

"Master, master!" he cried. "A boon, a boon!"

"What is it, John?" asked Robin, smiling wanly upon him, and raising his hand he placed it fondly on the grizzled head of his old comrade.

"That thou let us burn this house and slay those that have slain thee!"

Robin shook his head wearily.

"Nay, nay," he said: "that boon I'll not grant thee. I never hurt woman in all my life, and I'll not do it now at my end. She hath let my blood flow from me and hath taken my life, but I bid thee hurt her not. Now, John, I have not long to live. Open that casement there and give me my bow and an arrow."

They opened the casement wide, and Robin looked forth with dim, dying sight upon the quiet evening fields with the great rolling forest in the distance.

"Hold me while I shoot, John," said Robin, "and where my arrow falls there dig me a grave and let me lie."

Men wept as they stood and watched him hold the great bow in his feeble hand, and saw him draw the string while he held the feather of the arrow. Once he alone of all men could bend that bow, but now so spent was his life that his strength barely sufficed to draw it half-way. With a sigh he let go, the arrow boomed through the casement, and men watched with dim sight its flight over the fields until it came to ground beside a little path that led from the meadows up to the forest trees.

Robin fell back exhausted, and Little John laid him gently down.

"Lay me there, John," he said, "with my bow beside me, for that was my sweetest music while I lived, and I would have it lie with me when I am dead. Put a green sod under my head, and another at my feet, for I loved best to sleep on the greensward of the forest while I was alive, and I would lie upon them in my last sleep. Ye will do this all for me, John?"

"Hold me while I shoot, John," said Robin.

"Ay, ay, master," said John, choking for sheer sorrow.

"Now kiss me, John—and—and—good-bye!"

The breath fluttered on his lips as John with uncovered head bent and kissed him. All sank to their knees and prayed for the passing soul, and with many tears they pleaded for mercy for their bold and generous leader.

They would not suffer his body to stay within the nunnery walls that night, but carried it to the greenwood, and watched beside it all through the dark. Then at dawn they prepared his grave, and when Father Tuck, white-haired and bent now, came at noon, all bore the body of their dear master to his last resting-place.

Afterward, the outlaws learned of Sir Roger of Doncaster's visit to the nunnery while Robin lay dying, and they sought for him far and wide. To escape the close search which Hob o' the Hill and Ket his brother made for him, Sir Roger fled to Grimsby, and barely escaped on board a ship with a whole skin, so close was Hob behind him. The knight sought refuge in France, and there he died shortly afterward, lonely and uncared for.

When Robin died, the band of outlaws speedily broke up. Some fled overseas, some hid in large towns and gradually became settled and respectable citizens, and others again hired themselves on distant manors and became law-abiding men, if their lords treated them not unkindly.

As for Little John and Scarlet, they were given lands at Cromwell, where Alan-a-Dale now was lord over the lands of the lady Alice; while Much was made bailiff at Werrisdale, which also belonged to Alan-a-Dale, his father, Sir Herbrand, being now dead.

Gilbert of the White Hand would not settle down. He became a great fighter in Scotland with the bow and the sword, and his deeds were sung for many years by many a fireside in the border lands.

What became of Hob o' the Hill and his brother Ket the Trow nobody ever knew for certain. The little men hated the ways of settled life, and though Alan-a-Dale offered them lands to live on, they preferred to wander in the dim forest and over the wild moors. The grave of Robin Hood was ever kept neat and verdant, though for a long time no one knew whose were the hands that did this. Then tales got abroad that at night two little men came out of the forest from time to time and put fresh plants on the grave and cut the edging turf clean. That these were Ket and Hob no one doubted, for they had loved Robin dearly while he lived, and now that he was dead they could never stray far from his grave.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Robin Hood* by Henry Gilbert]