LEGENDS

Robin Hood and Little John

England

Robin Hood is a perennial favorite. The first known reference to the popularity of his legend is in William Langland’s 1377 Piers Plowman in which a lazy priest named Sloth admits that he doesn’t really know the mass, “But I can [know] rymes of Robyn Hood...” (Cited in Barber, 1999, p.504; Leach, 1955, p.13.) Howard Pyle, however, was one of the first writers to put his many ballads together as a continuous story for children.

For the full introduction to this story and for other stories, see The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003


Up rose Robin Hood one merry morn when all the birds were singing blithely among the leaves, and up rose all his merry men, each fellow washing his head and hands in the cold brown brook that leaped laughing from stone to stone. Then said Robin: “Four fourteen days we have seen no sport, so now I will go abroad to seek adventures forthwith. But tarry ye, my merry men all, here in the greenwood, only see that ye mind well my call. Three blasts upon the bugle horn I will blow in my hour of need; then come quickly, for I shall want your aid.”

So saying, he strode away though the leafy forest glades until he had come to the verge of Sherwood. There he wandered for a long time, through highway and byway, through dingly dell and forest skirts. Now he met a fair buxom lass in a shady lane, and each gave the other a merry word and passed their way; now he saw a fair lady upon an ambling pad, to whom he doffed his cap, and who bowed sedately in return to the fair youth; now he saw a fat monk on a pannier-laden ass; now a gallant knight, with spear and shield and armor that flashed brightly in the sunlight; now a page clad in crimson; and now a stout burgher from good Nottingham Town, pacing along with serious footsteps; all these sights he saw, but adventure found he none. At last he took a road by the forest skirts; a bypath that dipped toward a broad, pebbly, stream spanned by a narrow bridge made of a log of wood. As he drew nigh this bridge he saw a tall stranger coming from the other side. Thereupon Robin quickened his pace, as did the stranger likewise; each thinking to cross first.

“Now stand thou back,” quoth Robin, “and let the better man cross first.”

“Nay,” answered the stranger, “then stand back thine own self, for the better man, I wot, am I.”

“That will we presently see,” quoth Robin; “and meanwhile stand thou where thou art, or else, by the bright brow of Saint Ælfrida, I will show thee right good Nottingham play with a clothyard shaft betwixt thy ribs.”

“Now,” quoth the stranger, “I will tan thy hide till it be as many colors as a beggar’s cloak, if thou darest so much as touch a string of that same bow that thou holdest in thy hands.”

“Thou protest like an ass,” said Robin, “for I could send this shaft clean thorough thy proud heart before a curtail friar could say grace over a roast goose at Michaelmas-tide.”
“And thou pratest like a coward,” answered the stranger, “for thou standest there with a good yew bow to shoot at my heart, while I have nought in my hand but a plain blackthorn staff wherewith to meet thee.”

“Now,” quoth Robin, “by the faith of my heart, never have I had a coward’s name in all my life before. I will lay by my trusty bow and eke my arrows, and if thou darest abide my coming, I will go and cut a cudgel to test thy manhood withal.”

“Ay, marry, that will I abide thy coming, and joyously, too,” quoth the stranger; whereupon he leaned sturdily upon his staff to await Robin.

Then Robin Hood stepped quickly to the coverside and cut a good staff of ground oak, straight, without flaw, and six feet in length, and came back trimming away the tender stems from it, while the stranger waited for him, leaning upon his staff, and whistling as he gazed round about. Robin observed him furtively as he trimmed his staff, measuring him from top to toe from out of the corner of his eye, and thought that he had never seen a lustier [robust] or stouter man. Tall was Robin, but taller was the stranger by a head and a neck, for he was seven feet in height. Broad was Robin across the shoulders, but broader was the stranger by twice the breadth of a palm, while he measured at least an ell around the waist.

“Nevertheless,” said Robin to himself, “I will baste thy hide right merrily, my good fellow”; then, aloud, “Lo, here is my good staff, lusty and tough. Now wait my coming, an thou darest, and meet me, an thou fearest not; then we will fight until one or the other of us tumble into the stream by dint of blows.”

“Marry, that meeteth my whole heart!” cried the stranger, twirling his staff above his head, betwixt his fingers and thumb, until is whistled again.

Never did the Knights of Arthur’s Round Table meet in a stouter fight than did these two. In a moment Robin stepped quickly upon the bridge where the stranger stood; first he made a feint, and then delivered a blow at the stranger’s head, that, had it met its mark, would have tumbled him speedily into the water; but the stranger turned the blow right deftly, and in return gave one as stout, which robin also turned as the stranger had done. So they stood, each in his place, neither moving a finger’s breadth back, for one good hour, and many blows were given and received by each in that time, till here and there were sore bones and bumps, yet neither thought of crying “Enough,” or seemed likely to fall from off the bridge. Now and then they stopped to rest, and each thought that he never had seen in all his life before such a hand at quarterstaff. At last Robin gave the stranger a blow upon the ribs that made his jacket smoke like a damp straw thatch in the sun. So shrewd was the stroke that the stranger came within a hair’s breadth of falling off the bridge; but he regained himself right quickly, and, by a dexterous blow, gave Robin a crack on the crown that caused the blood to flow. Then Robin grew mad with anger, and smote with all his might at the other; but the stranger warded the blow, and once again thwacked Robin, and this time so fairly that he fell heels over head into the water, as the queen pin falls in a game of bowls.

“And where art thou now, my good lad?” shouted the stranger, roaring with laughter.

“Oh, in the flood and floating adown with the tide,” cried Robin; nor could he forbear laughing at himself at his sorry plight. Then, gaining his feet, he waded to the bank, the little fish speeding hither and thither, all frightened at his splashing.

“Give me thy hand,” cried he, when he had reached the bank. “I must needs own thou art a brave and a sturdy soul, and withal, a good stout stroke with the cudgels. By this and by that, my head hummeth like to a hive of bees on a hot June day.”

Then he clapped his horn to his lips, and winded a blast that went echoing sweetly down
the forest paths. “Ay, marry,” quoth he again, “thou art a tall lad, and eke a brave one, for ne’er, I trow, is there a man betwixt here and Canterbury Town could do the like to me that thou hast done.”

“And thou,” quoth the stranger, laughing, “takest thy cudgelling like a brave heart and stout yeoman.”

But now the distant twigs and branches rustled with the coming of men, and suddenly a score or two of good stout yeomen, all clad in Lincoln green, burst from out the covert, with merry Will Stutely at their head.

“Good master,” cried Will, “how is this? Truly thou art all wet from head to foot, and that to the very skin.”

“Why, marry,” answered jolly Robin, “yon stout fellow hath tumbled me neck and crop into the water, and hath given me a drubbing beside.”

“Then shall he not go without a ducking and eke a drubbing himself!” cried Will Stutely. “Have at him, lads!”

Then Will and a score of yeomen leaped upon the stranger, but though they sprang quickly they found him ready and felt him strike right and left with his stout staff, so that, though he went down with press of numbers, some of them rubbed cracked crowns before he was overcome.

“Nay, forbear!” cried Robin, laughing until his sore sides ached again; “he is a right good man and true, and no harm shall befall him. Now hark ye, good youth, wilt thou stay with me and be one of my band? Three suits of Lincoln green shalt thou have each year, beside forty marks in fee, and share with us whatsoever good shall befall us. Thou shalt eat sweet venison and quaff the stoutest ale, and mine own good right-hand man shalt thou be, for never did I see such a cudgel-player in all my life before. Speak! Wilt thou be one of my good merry men?”

“That know I not,” quoth the stranger, surlily, for he was angry at being so tumbled about. “If ye handle yew bow and apple shaft no better than ye do oaken cudgel, I wot ye are not fit to be called yeomen in my country; but if there be any man here that can shoot a better shaft than I, then will I bethink me of joining with you.”

“Now by my faith,” said Robin, “thou art a right saucy varlet, sirrah; yet I will stoop to thee as I never stooped to man before. Good Stutely, cut thou a fair white piece of bark four fingers in breadth, and set it fourscore yards distant on yonder oak. Now, stranger, hit that fairly with a gray goose shaft and call thyself an archer.”

“Ay, marry, that will I,” answered he. “Give me a good stout bow and a fair broad arrow, and if I hit it not strip me and beat me blue with bowstrings.”

Then he chose the stoutest bow amongst them all, next to Robin’s own, and a straight gray goose shaft, well-feathered and smooth, and stepping to the mark—while all the band, sitting or lying upon the greensward, watched to see him shoot—he drew the arrow to his cheek and loosed the shaft right deftly, sending it so straight down the path that it clove the mark in the very centre. “Aha!” cried he, “mend thou that if thou canst;” while even the yeomen clapped their hands at so fair a shot.

“That is a keen shot, indeed,” quoth Robin, “mend it I can not, but mar it I may, perhaps.”

Then taking up his own good stout bow and nocking an arrow with care he shot with his very greatest skill. Straight flew the arrow, and so true that it lit fairly upon the stranger’s shaft and split it into splinters. Then all the yeomen leaped to their feet and shouted for joy that their master had shot so well.

“Now by the lusty yew bow of good Saint Withold,” cried the stranger, “that is a shot
indeed, and never saw I the like in all my life before! Now truly will I be thy man henceforth and for aye. Good Adam Bell was a fair shot, but never shot he so!"

"Then have I gained a right good man this day," quoth jolly Robin. "What name goest thou by, good fellow?"

"Men call me John Little whence I came," answered the stranger.

Then Will Stutely, who loved a good jest, spoke up. "Nay, fair little stranger," said he, "I like not thy name and fain would I have it otherwise. Little art thou indeed, and small of bone and sinew, therefore shalt thou be christened Little John, and I will be thy godfather."

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

"An thou make a jest of me," quoth he to Will Stutely, "thou wilt have sore bones and little pay, and that in short season."

"Nay, good friend," said Robin Hood, "bottle thine anger, for the name fitteth thee well. Little John shall thou be called henceforth, and Little John shall it be. So come, my merry men, and we will go and prepare a christening feast for this fair infant."

So turning their backs upon the stream, they plunged into the forest once more, through which they traced their steps till they reached the spot where they dwelt in the depths of the woodland. There they had built huts of bark and branches of trees, and made couches of sweet rushes spread over with skins of fallow deer. Here stood a great oak tree with branches spreading broadly around, beneath which was a seat of green moss where Robin Hood was wont to sit at feast and at merrymaking with his stout men about him. Here they found the rest of the band, some of whom had come in with a brace of fat does. Then they all built great fires and after a time roasted the does and broached a barrel of humming ale. Then when the feast was ready they all sat down, but Robin placed Little John at his right hand, for he was henceforth to be the second in the band.

Then when the feast was done Will Stutely spoke up. "It is now time, I ween, to christen our bonny babe, is it not so, merry boys?" And "Aye! Aye!" cried all, laughing till the woods echoed with their mirth.

"Then seven sponsors shall we have," quoth Will Stutely; and hunting among all the band he chose the seven stoutest men of them all.

"Now by Saint Dunstan," cried Little John, springing to his feet, "more than one of you shall rue it an you lay finger upon me."

But without a word they all ran upon him at once, seizing him by his legs and arms and holding him tightly in spite of his struggles, and they bore him forth while all stood around to see the sport. Then one came forward who had been chosen to play the priest because he had a bald crown, and in his hand he carried a brimming pot of ale. "Now who bringeth this babe?" asked he right soberly.

"That do I," answered Will Stutely. "And what name callest thou him?"

"Little John call I him."

"Now Little John," quoth the mock priest, "thou hast not lived heretofore, but only got thee along through the world, but henceforth thou wilt live indeed. When thou livedst not thou wast called John Little, but now that thou dost live indeed, Little John shalt thou be called, so christen I thee." And at these last words he emptied the pot of ale upon Little John’s head.

Then all shouted with laughter as they saw the good brown ale stream over Little John’s beard and trickle from his nose and chin, while his eyes blinked with the smart of it. At first he
was of a mind to be angry, but found he could not because the others were so merry; so he, too, laughed with the rest. Then Robin took this sweet, pretty babe, clothed him all anew from top to toe in Lincoln green, and gave him a good stout bow, and so made him a member of the merry band.

And thus it was that Robin Hood became outlawed; thus a band of merry companions gathered about him, and thus he gained his right-hand man, Little John; and so the prologue ends. And now I will tell how the Sheriff of Nottingham three times sought to take Robin Hood, and how he failed each time.