The Rise of Robin Hood

Robin Hood

by Angus Donald, 1965–

Published: 2013

Spears of early morning sunshine drove through the lichen-green branches of a lush and sprightly oak tree and down on to the gold-flecked brown hair of a young man crouched at its base. The tree, one of many hundreds of thousands like it in that ancient forest, formed part of a wall of dense greenery on the western side of a leaf-strewn track. The forest road, while undoubtedly one of Henry Plantagenet's royal highways, might easily have been mistaken for a subterranean tunnel, for the oaks reached up from either side and joined above, their leaves and limbs mingling promiscuously into a thick canopy and allowing only the odd parcel of daylight to gleam through.

This thoroughfare, the main and indeed only direct route from Derby to Sheffield, was in poor condition that summer—one thousand one hundred and eighty years after the Incarnation of Our Lord—for there stood no sizeable manor or village nearby with responsibility for its upkeep, and its royal lord was far away, tending to his vexatious affairs across the Channel. And so in stretches it had become mired and muddy, with deep patches of near-bog, and the surface made treacherously uneven, on the drier parts, by roots and ruts, half-submerged boulders and fallen branches.

And it must be admitted that the young man at the bottom of the tree—a rake-thin stripling of perhaps fifteen or so summers, with curious silvery-grey eyes—was not in the best of condition either. He looked hungry and unkempt, and was as poorly garbed as a beggar. The sagging, scuffed leather boots, roughly patched grey hose and dark-green tunic that he wore were all smeared with leaf-mould and earth, and torn in places. He had clearly been sleeping under the summer skies for a month or more, and his disordered hair had not felt the tug of a comb for a fortnight at least. But the scabbarded sword—strapped to his lean waist by a leather belt, and surprisingly clean and well-kept—indicated that this was no ordinary discontented young villein or unruly apprentice seeking sanctuary in the woods from a cruel master.

'We need to cut here and here, John,' said the youngster to his companion, indicating invisible intersecting lines on the tree's trunk with his none-too-clean index finger, 'and dig out a handle in the living wood, here, to attach the rope. We do the same to each of the trees that I've marked. And I think I have found a bough, up ahead, that will serve as my station. But it does seem a pity to fell so much prime timber without a very good reason.'

His friend, a vast, muscular man with a rosy sun-baked face and yellow hair, was kneeling a yard or two away, searching for a roaming louse in his thick blond beard. As poorly dressed as the younger fellow, he carried about twice his bulk. A yard-long double-handed woodsman's saw was balanced against the giant's brawny knee, its teeth bright with fresh sharpening; a long keen-edged spear lay in the leafy-litter by his right hand, and two fat coils of rope hung from his shoulders, one on each side.

'No shortage of trees in Sherwood,' the big man said. Then he chuckled, a bubbling rumble of mirth. 'And we do have a good reason, Robin. Nearly five thousand round, bright, silvery reasons, if what your blacksmith friend in Derby said is true.'

'I suppose so,' said Robin, ignoring the jest. 'I just wish there was some other way to do it without bringing down so many old oaks.' He sighed. 'Well, come on, John, hand me the end of that saw, will you? They'll reach this spot by noon, if not before. We need to spend a little of our sweat.'

The constant jolting of the cart was making the skinny woman ill. It was not the fear, she told herself firmly, it was not the dread of what was to come the next day, or the next, or perhaps the day after that: the hungry red flames, the spiteful jeers of the crowd, the searing agony of scorched flesh, and lungs filled with tarry, suffocating smoke. No, it was not her forthcoming trial and execution that had caused her to cough a thin brown gruel down the front of her already filthy

sackcloth dress. It was the wild stirring of the cage, the twisting and hopping of the airy wooden cube that held her, as it jounced over the rough forest track drawn on the cart's two solid creaking wheels by a patient donkey. She clutched at the Y-shaped amulet that hung on a thin cord over her puke-soaked dress and bounced between her small breasts. She would not allow herself to fear. She was in the hands of the old gods, the true gods of these Blessed Isles: indeed, even now, in her moment of shame and weakness, she had a sense that Cernunnos, the horned spirit of the woodland, the age-old trickster, was close at hand; and the Great Mother, the ever-loving matriarch of the world, would surely keep her strong throughout the coming ordeal and, when it was over and the killing fire of the Christians had consumed her tortured flesh, her spirit would be taken directly into the Mother's loving bosom. For a blissful eternity.

The woman fixed her eyes on the glossy brown haunches of the horse that walked beside her cage and a little in front, watching the play of the equine muscles under the skin, her thin right hand grasping at a solid ash-wood bar as the cart under her feet wobbled and bucked. The big stallion bore on its back a man-at-arms in a mail hauberk and chausses, helmeted, spurred and carrying a twelve-foot steel-tipped lance. A kite-shaped shield slung on his back showed by its bold crosses of scarlet and white that the man served the Bishop of Lichfield, as did the blazons of the other eleven men who made up the conroi. So, too, did the leader of this well-armed party of travellers—Archdeacon Richard, the Bishop's trusted servant, who rode on a beautiful white palfrey at the head of the column and who had not once condescended to look into the wretched woman's eyes during the three days they had been on the road.

The escort of men-at-arms was not to prevent her escape, the woman knew—a couple of sturdy serving men could have fulfilled that purpose; the dozen soldiers were there to protect the wagon. It was four-wheeled and heavy, drawn by a single pair of lumbering oxen, and carried a precious cargo. The kind that would be attractive to the packs of masterless men and starving bandits said to infest these dank woodlands.

They were taking it and its cargo north to York. And her, too, for her trial. The Bishop had decreed a hearing before a panel of solemn churchmen for the foul crime of heresy. There could be only one outcome—the soul-cleansing fire. As the donkey cart lurched wildly over a tree root, her stomach clenched like a fist and her mouth filled once again with the sour taste of her own belly juices. But she was not afraid; she could not allow herself to be afraid.

Archdeacon Richard reined in his horse, barely able to check his growing fury. Another damn delay. They had already wasted a day in Derby while they waited for two of the horses to be re-shod. And, of course, once released from duty, the men-at-arms had taken the opportunity to drink themselves to near-insensibility in a common alehouse. The whole God-given day had been forfeit, the men almost all too drunk to ride after the noonday meal. It was only with threats, kicks and curses that they had been mustered from their sodden slumbers to their duty at cock-crow today. And now this: a vast, bushy tree had evidently been felled by a recent storm and was lying directly across the road in front of them, like a round, impenetrable hedge. The horsemen might have picked their way

round the obstruction; the heavy wagon and the donkey cart, never. The Archdeacon called angrily behind him to the leader of the men-at-arms, a grey-faced, hang-dog fellow who sat his horse a half dozen yards away, waving the man forward to his side.

'Get your drunken good-for-nothings to start clearing this blockage immediately, Sergeant. I want it done within the hour. We are already late.'

His words were interrupted by a light, musical voice, calling out in good French from high on his left, somewhere in the canopy of trees: 'Good day to you, kind sirs! May I bid you a friendly welcome to Sherwood Forest.'

Both the prelate and the unwell-looking sergeant whipped their heads around searching for the speaker, but it took a few moments for them to make out the form of a cheerful young man in ragged clothes, his face shrouded by a deep hood, seated on the limb of a tree, a dozen feet above the road's western verge.

'What do you want?' The Archdeacon's words rapped out, more a command than an enquiry.

'I regret to inform you that I must levy a soul tax on all the travellers who use this fine road—it is a shilling a man, I'm afraid, to pass this point. My deepest apologies. But for a gentleman of your quality, I'm sure that will not present any difficulties.'

'Who the Devil are you to demand payment of me?' said the priest. 'I ride on the Bishop of Lichfield's business; I ride on God's business. Get you gone, you contumelious cur, or I will have the hide ripped from your back for your impudence.'

'You refuse to pay?' said Robin happily. 'Very well. How about a prayer for my soul? I'm sure that a saintly fellow such as you must have the ear of the Almighty.'

The young man stood up on the branch. He balanced easily, lightly supporting himself with his left hand on what appeared to be a taut rope, disguised with mud and leaves, that rose up at a forward angle and disappeared into the canopy.

'A blasphemer, too! Sergeant, take up that man immediately. Bind him; throw him in the cart with the witch. I want him flogged raw, hanged and quartered the instant we get to York.'

'So, you will not even pray for me? Ah, well…' Robin lifted his right hand, waved it in the air, twice, as if hailing a friend.

And, it seemed, the entire wall of trees at the western side of the road began to move.

A few feet behind the last man-at-arms in the *conroi*, a rope jerked up from where it had lain unseen in the mud of the track, springing iron-taut for several moments under enormous strain, until a wedge-shaped chunk of timber the size of a small pig squealed and popped out from the base of a tall tree. And the big oak, unsupported now except for the couple of inches of trunk remaining, started to lean into the road, and, slowly, to fall, shrieking with protest, and finally landing with an earth-shaking thudding bounce directly across the highway. The travelling party erupted into chaos; horses screaming, men-at-arms shouting foul oaths. A couple of unfortunate men at the rear of the column were smashed from their saddles, their bodies crushed by the falling wood; even those quick enough to spur out of the toppling tree's path were clawed by its outermost branches as they

tried to make their escape. And, worse, there was no clear direction to run: the travellers were hemmed in before and behind by an impenetrable leafy barrier.

In the centre of the column, another rope leapt up horizontally from under the legs of the men-at-arms's skittering horses, another fat wedge was tugged free and another giant trunk began its leisurely but lethal fall on the Bishop's now wildly panicking band of trapped men. Yet another tree, nearer the front of what had been the column, was jerked from its semblance of rectitude, and it toppled and crashed on to the track, catching a man-at-arms attempting to flee, a thin branch spearing his mailed chest, smashing through ribs, lungs and heart, and nailing him to the muddy forest floor. It seemed as if all Sherwood were collapsing like a row of skittles tumbling to an expertly lobbed bowling ball, trees going down one after the next, each apparently knocked into the road by an invisible, God-like hand.

It all happened in fewer than a dozen heartbeats—the *conroi* shattered by this arboreal assault. A few brave souls had hauled out swords and were desperately seeking an enemy to battle. Others urged their mounts off the tree-strewn road and into the forest. One limb from a falling tree fell directly on top of the ash-wood cage that held the young woman. The cage bulged under the weight of the branch, split with a crash, and burst open like a sun-welcoming flower around its unscathed occupant.

The woman slowly stood, emerging from the wreckage of her wooden prison. For a heartbeat, she looked about at the chaos of careering horses and shouting men-at-arms, of toppling trees and springing mud-caked ropes. She looked at Archdeacon Richard, still astride his madly skittering horse at the head of his disordered company, his mouth open in a perfect 'O' of surprise. She looked beyond him and up at the hooded young man standing on a tree limb calmly surveying the chaos he had caused.

Then she ran like a hare into the trees and disappeared in the gloom of the greenwood.

A moment later, the young man pulled sharply on a hidden rope behind him; he bounced once, hard, on the limb on which he was standing, and the whole branch severed at the trunk, but was still attached to the higher branches. It gave a loud creak, a crack, dropped a foot, and began to loop down across the road straight towards the Archdeacon, like a gigantic child's swing.

The sawn branch—a couple of hundredweight of solid wood, with the young man still perched atop its green bark and hanging on to the ropes that reached up into the leaves—swung down like a pendulum into the shock-frozen Archdeacon, hitting his left arm and chest and his palfrey's neck all at once, and hurling both the venerable priest and the poor beast across the track to the ground. The thinner end of this unusual weapon, the lighter leafy branches, slashed across the *conroi* sergeant's sickly face, swatting him from the saddle as well and sending his horse crashing through the thick undergrowth, neighing in terror. The log, still bearing the laughing young man, reached the maximum extent of its arc on the far side of the road and began to make the return journey. When it reached the lowest part of its trajectory, Robin leapt from his perch and landed as softly as a cat on the forest floor.

He pulled his long sword from its scabbard—the hungover sergeant was running at him, yelling madly, his face badly ripped and bleeding, hacking down at Robin's head, a killing blow. But Robin's sword was up, and he caught the swinging blade against the cross-guard, twisted his wrist and shook the other man's weapon away and to the right, unbalancing the fellow. Robin's left fist shot straight out, the power coming from shoulder and hip, and he caught the man a stunning blow on the jaw. The sergeant stumbled away on jelly legs, arms loose by his sides, and Robin ran him through the hollow of the throat with a step and lunge. The man dropped, blood fountaining from his neck.

As Robin jumped back to allow a panicked riderless horse to gallop safely past him, he spotted the Archdeacon on his hands and knees in the mire, trying to crawl into the forest. The young man ran to the priest, lifted his sword, swung, and hacked the sharp edge into the prelate's neck. The blade sliced through his thick gold-embroidered woollen cloak, the hand-stitched silk vestments beneath, through the collar of his fine linen chemise, on down into the muscles that supported his skull, carving through vein, sinew, fat and cartilage, crunching the bones of his spine, and coming clear through the other side, freeing the tonsured head to roll in the mud of the forest floor.

One of the Bishop's men-at-arms, a rare fellow still in control of his horse in the carnival of frightened men and their hysterical mounts, kneed it towards the hooded man who had just dispatched his master. The soldier spurred back and set his mount thundering at Robin, his long lance couched, a shout of rage on his lips. Robin turned to face him, gripped his sword in both hands, and—

A long blur, a dark object, slashed through the air and sank into the charging horse's neck. It was a thrown spear, and for a few instants it waggled almost comically from the thick muscle before the horse's legs failed it and the animal tumbled, somersaulting over its own forelegs in death, crushing its bold rider between the high back of the wooden saddle and the ground, snapping his spine like a twig. Robin was forced to dodge the hurtling mass of dying man and mount as it came towards him, a spray of horse blood soaking the front of his tunic as he scrambled out of its path, and the spear shaft slashing just over his bare head.

A huge blond figure came sprinting out of the greenery on the eastern side of the road, following the flight of the spear.

'The wagon, John. We must take the wagon,' shouted Robin. And, sword in hand, he ran down the track, hurdled a fallen branch, ducked under another limb, towards a knot of men around the wagon and the oxen yoked to it.

'God's fat cock! Did you honestly think I'd forget that?' muttered the giant, tugging his spear free from the meaty suck of the dead horse.

Several of the Lichfield men-at-arms had been crippled or killed by the barrage of falling trees, some had been carried away by their fear-maddened horses, some, their courage sapped by a surfeit of ale and the general confusion, had fled when it seemed that the forest itself was attacking them—but three remained at their duty by the wagon, one still a-horse and two standing on the bed of the vehicle.

As Robin sprinted towards them, the last surviving Lichfield horseman plucked a long axe from behind his saddle and kicked his mount forward, swinging the heavy weapon down at his enemy, a vicious blow that would have caved in Robin's skull had it landed. But the young man dodged under the horse's neck, narrowly

avoiding a savage bite from the animal. The horseman turned his mount with his knees and carved the axe down again. Robin desperately blocked with his sword, before jumping to his right and rolling between the agitated hooves of the two huge oxen—a painful mistake! He emerged a few moments later, kicked, scraped, stepped on and bruised, but not seriously harmed, on the other side of the wagon.

Robin popped up, grinning ruefully, and, as fast as thought, he reached up his right hand to lance his long sword over the top of the wagon into the groin of one of the surprised men-at-arms standing on it. The poor man screamed out the Virgin's name and dropped to his knees, blood pouring from between his fingers as they clutched at his torn parts below the frayed cloth hem of his hauberk.

Behind them, the blond giant was fast approaching, his joyful battle shouts echoing through the trees. The horseman turned to this new assailant, kicked his horse towards the charging giant, his long axe swinging… and received the hurled spear directly in the centre of his chest. The weapon smacked home, the man plunged backwards in the saddle, both hands holding the spear shaft as if attempting to pull it from his torso, blood pouring from his gaping mouth, the axe dangling impotently from a little leather thong that attached it to his wrist.

Meanwhile, in one easy movement, Robin swung himself up and over the low side of the wagon, and on to its plank bed. He warded off a hacking sword blow from the second man-at-arms, lunged, was blocked, stepped in and lunged again, his sword tip finding a gap between coif and helmet and scoring a bloody line up his enemy's cheek. The man-at-arms, now terrified, swung wildly, a round-house flail aimed at the head. Robin parried, struck at his opponent's blade, knocked it aside—and took out his left knee with a swift downward-diagonal chop. The Lichfield man fell screaming; and Robin split his skull with a hard vertical strike.

All was suddenly quiet. John was still breathing heavily from his encounter with the mounted man-at-arms; a few of the enemy, wounded and lying in pain on the tree-obstructed track, were moaning pitifully; and somewhere in the woods a riderless horse gave an anxious neigh. Otherwise the wood was as silent as a graveyard. Even the birds had ceased their song-making.

The young man grinned at his friend. 'Our first battle, John; our first victory,' he said. 'Shall we look to the spoils of war?'

An hour or so later, Robin plunged his hands into the barrel and scooped out a double handful of bright silver pennies. He let them trickle slowly through his fingers back into the small wooden container. He looked up at his big friend. 'How much d'you think is here, John?'

By now, the two euphoric outlaws were a good three miles from the scene of the ambush, squatting on their haunches in the open curve of a vast old hollow oak tree, in a small clearing far from any of the larger forest trackways. They had carried two heavy barrels apiece on their shoulders, as fast as possible, by little-known deer paths, to the clearing of the hollow oak.

That ancient tree had been their refuge during a pummelling rainstorm three days ago and, since then, it had stood duty as, if not a home, then a semi-permanent shelter against the elements. A small fire blazed inside the body of the oak, which could comfortably accommodate the two men lying wrapped in their cloaks on the leaf-padded floor. John was kneeling over it, feeding sticks under a

three-legged iron pot containing spring water, wild garlic and marjoram. When the fire was burning merrily, he began cutting slivers of dried mutton from a square wood-like block of salt-preserved meat into the bubbling liquor to make a thin broth.

'Difficult to say, lad, without counting every penny. But I'd say five pounds of silver in each barrel—four barrels all together—about twenty pounds. A handsome sum, by any road.'

Robin rocked back on his heels, gawping at the older man. 'It's a bloody fortune. I've never seen so much money in my life. My father would be pleased if all his Edwinstowe lands brought in this much silver in a whole year—and his demesne is reckoned a fat one. Yet we took this in less time than it takes to mumble ten Paternosters.'

'Plus a few hours of sweat-work with the saw,' said John reproachfully. 'Not to mention a good deal of muscle-use hauling those damned wedges out. Not that I'm complaining… And we mustn't forget that we took the lives of half a dozen of the Bishop's men or more in that affair. There will be consequences, you know.'

'Damn the consequences. The Bishop will not find us here. We are quite safe—and quite rich. Just like that!' Robin snapped his fingers. 'Who would choose to trudge behind a plough all his life, or fetch and carry for a plump, idle lord, when there is all this wealth just for the taking?'

The two men ate the broth, dipping a little two-day-old bread in the steaming bowls and, when they had each had their fill, Robin sat with his back against the rough bark of the tree and began to clean his sword with a rag and a lump of mutton fat.

John spread a large green cloak on the floor of the clearing and poured the contents of the barrels on to it in a chinking, glittering, glorious pile. He bent his head over the hoard and, mumbling happily to himself, started to count the little silver pennies into mounds of twenty, each mound a shilling. With his tongue protruding from a corner of his mouth, he looked like nothing more than a massive child at some absorbing private game.

After a short while, Robin sheathed his sword and laid it down beside him, pulled his hood forward over his eyes, crossed his long legs and fell into a deep sleep.

When Robin awoke, the little clearing by the big hollow oak was filled with the sound of the roaring of beasts.

No, not beasts. Men. Indeed, one man.

John was at the centre of a scrum of desperately struggling men, eight or nine ragged fellows, all strangers and seemingly unarmed, or at least with their knives sheathed, who were attempting to subdue him with muscle power alone. The blond giant roared and fought like a great bear besieged by the dogs of the pit, his huge arms lashing out and felling anyone within range, while a few brave souls clung for their lives to his body and legs. John threw his attackers around like dolls, sometimes dislodging a fellow and hurling him several yards away. Whereupon another bold man would dart in and seize hold of an elbow or knee, ankle or wrist, and cling on grimly like a terrier until he too was violently

dislodged. But when dogs are set to bait a bear, more often than not, the bear loses. And the thrashing of John's powerful limbs was visibly growing ever weaker.

Robin took in all this in half a heartbeat and began to struggle to his feet, groping for his sword with his left hand.

'You'll stay just where you are, boyo,' said a voice. And Robin shook off the last shreds of unconsciousness to observe a squat man standing directly in front of him. He was immensely thick in the chest, his arms writhed with muscle, and his words, although in good English, had a foreign-sounding sing-song quality that Robin could not immediately place. In his strong, stubby hands was a bow, a tall weapon some six feet in length, with a yard-long arrow nocked, the goose fletching pulled back to the cheek, its bright barbed triangular point aimed at Robin's chest.

'From here I could nail you permanently to that tree, boyo,' said the bowman. 'And I'll happily do so if you stir so much as a hair.' Robin recognised him by his accent as coming from the half-civilized mountains of the West, where the men were dark, short and oak-tough, and lived only to eat meat and drink enormous quantities of ale, and to fight and fuck and sing with a strange and haunting beauty.

He was a Welshman.

'You'll ruin that bow if you keep it pulled back like that for too long,' said Robin. 'The stave will follow the cord and lose its shape.'

'Know all about bows, do you?' said the Welshman scornfully. But he relaxed the bowstring until the arrow was only half drawn. The point, however, he kept aimed unwaveringly at Robin's chest.

'A little; they interest me a good deal—but I would learn more. I would become a true master of the bow.' Robin smiled at the Welsh archer; his grey eyes twinkled. 'Perhaps you are the very man to instruct me in this noble art.'

'Hnnnf,' said the bowman. 'Teach an Englishman archery? They kill us well enough as it is, I think. I'll wager that those lessons would not bode so well for me and my countrymen.'

John's struggles had now ceased, and he lay on the grass of the clearing with two men holding down each limb; he was looking behind and to his right, his head twisted round uncomfortably. And for the first time, Robin noticed three figures standing just behind his supine friend, gazing at him silently. Of the trio, two were tall, tough-looking men-at-arms of middling years in rusty, ripped mail, steel caps, and bearing old-fashioned round shields. They had long swords at the hip and daggers in their belts, too. But while these two looked formidable, it was the one inbetween them who drew Robin's eye: a round and very, very fat fellow, not tall—indeed almost as broad as he was high—and bearing more than a passing resemblance to a trapped wild animal. Which impression was enhanced greatly by his choice of clothing. He had swathed his nearly spherical body in a suit of thick furs and pelts—deer and wolf and rabbit, all crudely stitched together and greasy with age and wear. But this was a man, clearly, for in one big grubby paw he cradled an axe, a war axe from an ancient saga, a truly beautiful weapon, its two shining semi-circular blades attached to a long, thick, leather-wrapped blackthorn staff. John, his head oddly twisted, was staring at the axe. He seemed utterly enchanted by it.

The fur-swathed man regarded Robin in silence. He was more heavily bearded than any fellow Robin had ever seen. Indeed, very little of his face was visible beneath the tangled grey-black hair that covered his scalp, cheeks and chin. A pair of reddish-brown eyes peered out from under bushy eyebrows that spilled over and joined the dense thatch on his cheekbones. His beard and moustache were long, matted with filth and extended down over his deep chest and huge belly almost to his groin.

Then he stepped forward, waddling slightly, and stopped before the spread cloak and the scattered piles of silver coins winking prettily against the green cloth. Behind him and his two tall attendants were a few dozen or so other men, and even a woman or two, all dressed in raggedy, very dirty clothes, and armed with a strange assortment of rusty blades, woodsman's axes and even pitchforks. The small clearing seemed to be crowded with them—perhaps thirty or forty souls. But they kept a respectful distance from the fur-covered man.

They're frightened, Robin realised—not of him or John but the vast round man. Only one of them, a thin woman in a sackcloth dress with a Y-shaped amulet hanging from her neck, did not seem afraid. Indeed, she was smiling at Robin and, when she caught his eye, she appeared to nod a friendly greeting.

Robin jerked his attention back to the fat fur-swathed fellow, who was now addressing him.

'You had a good take today, I see. Much silver, eh? You got some good fortune,' the man rumbled. He spoke in English but rather oddly, and Robin had the weird feeling that he was not quite comfortable with human speech. It was as if a giant overfed badger or some other powerful earth-dwelling creature were trying to speak the language of men. Robin was also conscious of a rich smell emanating from the man, a dank, moist, mushroomy odour with the sharp tang of weeks' old urine.

The fur-clad man fell silent again, clearly waiting for Robin to say something. So the young man cocked his head to one side and said, cheerily, 'I don't believe we have met before. I am Robert Odo, originally from lands around Edwinstowe, now a denizen of these charming and hospitable woods.'

The fat man said nothing, but he seemed to be scowling. He looked at the silver lying on the dark green cloak. Robin whispered, but in a tone not much quieter than his normal speaking voice, 'This is the part of the conversation where you tell me your name. That is… if you can recall it.'

The man-animal jerked. 'You want my name? I am Hussa; I am the Lord of Sherwood. This is my demesne, eh? All this. Everything in these woods belongs to me. You belong to me.'

'I think you will find—Master Hussa, is it?—that Sherwood is a royal forest; these lands are in the keeping of King Henry—'

The fur-clad man leapt forward, moving faster than Robin would have thought possible for a fellow of such great bulk. His right hand lashed out and an open palm the size of a trencher crashed into Robin's cheek, knocking his head back against the trunk of the tree with reckless, stunning force.

Robin was dazed momentarily; he tasted coppery blood in his mouth. And anger—dark, midnight anger. Something seemed to click in his head. To John, looking up at him from on the ground, his eyes appeared to change colour, the soft

grey hardening into a bright steely silver. Robin was on his feet instantly and within a heartbeat of throwing himself at the fat fur-covered man, when he heard the Welshman speak: 'One more step, boyo, I'll skewer you. I don't like to see a man struck without he is given a chance to return the blow, but Hussa truly is lord of these woods. His word is as good as law in Sherwood and you'd best remember that. Move again and I'll kill you. I swear it by the Blood of Christ.'

Robin relaxed; he leaned back against the trunk of the hollow oak and pushed his rage down into a tight, black corner of his soul. He tore his eyes from the ugly man in his foul-smelling furs and looked at the bowman, who had once more drawn his string back to his ear, a hair away from loosing.

'What is your name, Welshman?' Robin said. 'And what brings you to this fair part of the world?'

'My name is Owain, lad, and you'd do well to pay less mind to me and more to Lord Hussa—if you know what's good for you.'

'Thank you, Owain—I believe I'll take your advice.' Robin looked again at the gross man-animal before him.

'So, my lord, how may I serve you? What is your pleasure this fine evening?'

'You talk funny, eh? And far too much for a rabbit-skinny boy-thief,' rumbled Hussa. 'You should listen more. It is good manners. It is polite, eh? Else I will have to put you over my knee—eh?—and teach you the proper way to speak to me.'

Robin said nothing, but his eyes glinted like a pair of drawn daggers glimpsed by moonlight.

Hussa continued: 'These are my woods, eh? You thieve and rob and steal here by my leave—and you make your living under my protection. When the sheriff's men come, we go into hiding—a secret place, a place of secret caves, eh?—a place they will never find us. We feast and drink ale until they grow tired of the game and go home to their castles with only their foolishness and their shame for company. This is my protection, eh? And I offer it to all the masterless men of these woods. In return, you offer me tribute—a share of everything that you take in this forest. A two-thirds share of every purse of silver lifted, every hart or hind poached, every loaf of bread or hot meat pie snatched from a sill. All you take must be shared with me, eh? And I will know if you cheat me. In return, I give you protection. That is my law.'

'And what if I do not choose to accept your protection?'

The furry man moved, again as fast as summer lightning, his broad right hand smashing open-palmed into Robin's cheek, and rocking his head back, banging it painfully against the tree behind. This time Robin did not respond. He kept his eyes on the Welsh bowman, who was nodding his head slowly in appreciation of the young man's self-control. Someone in the crowd of raggedy followers behind Hussa snickered and muttered to a friend, who laughed a little too wildly in his turn.

'I think maybe that you are a bit stupid. A little slow, eh?'

Robin said nothing. A trickle of blood flowed from a cut inside his lip. His eyes were locked on Hussa's hairy face, seemingly drinking the gross features in. Then he smiled widely at the fat man—it was not a very friendly expression.

Hussa shook his head. 'I think maybe I'd better take all of this; maybe if I take all this, it will teach you a lesson in manners, eh? Teach you to be a good boy next

time.' He beckoned to one of his men-at-arms to gather up the cloak on which the silver hoard lay.

Robin held his tongue as his worldly wealth was parcelled up and carried away, but John indulged himself in a useless writhe under the carpet of bodies that pinned him to the earth.

'I leave you your sword—and your life, eh? But know this, boy, you bring me tribute at the full moon. Go steal, rob and kill the sheriff's men, if you will. But I must have my share at the full moon—in five days. Bring it to the caves, eh? Owain here will tell you where to go. And you'd best come to me unarmed. Fetch me something nice, boy. Otherwise I won't be so friendly next time, eh?'

And with those words the huge fur-covered lump shouldered his fine war axe and waddled across the clearing; the two men-at-arms, evidently his bodyguards, fell into step behind him, and the raggedy crowd parted before his passage, then flowed like a sea of misery after his shuffling form. The eight men on the ground released John all at the same time, sprang to their feet and hurried after their departing comrades. Only Owain remained, his bow again only half drawn, but the arrow still nocked.

John sat up scowling, rubbing his right shoulder and cursing.

'Is your master always as pleasant as that?' Robin asked the bowman. 'Or was this a particularly good day to make his acquaintance?'

Owain shrugged. 'He's a turd-stuffed pig's bladder. But he's the big man around here, the king shit, and if you give him what he wants, he'll mostly leave you alone. So find him something—a purse of silver, a brace of hares, or whatever you can get—and take it to the caves before the week is up. Be respectful, for your own sakes.'

'May I see your bow now?' Robin was holding out a hand to the Welshman. Owain looked wary suddenly. He took a step back, and lifted the point of the arrow.

'I mean you no harm,' said Robin. 'I would only admire that handsome weapon. Is that yew? May I have your leave to hold it? I swear I will harm neither it nor you.'

'I think not. You just listen carefully if you want to know how to get to the caves, and then I'll go and rejoin my friends…'

'How about this,' said Robin. 'If you will kindly lend me your bow, a spare string and half a dozen arrows, I will make you the captain of my bowmen when I come into my own. I shall rise to be a lord of men one day, do not doubt it, perhaps an earl with an army of my own to command, and if you will but lend me your bow, you shall have a hundred men under you.'

Slowly, Owain's face turned a deep, dark, beetroot red; his eyes closed, screwed up tight as rosebuds, and his helpless laughter echoed around the dusky clearing, frightening half a dozen roosting birds into rocketing flight.

Robin smiled indulgently at the roaring Welshman, who was now clutching at his belly, almost unable to stand for mirth.

'What do you have to lose?' the young man said. 'I might be a deluded fool who will be dead before Christmastide—in which case your circumstances are quite unchanged—or I might be a man destined for greatness and, if so, one day you will

be a captain of archers, a powerful man in my household. Either way, I'll return the bow and shafts when I bring Hussa's tribute at full moon. You cannot lose.'

The young fallow deer was a fine animal in its second year of life, lithe, bright-eyed, with a handsome brown and grey dappled coat and two slim, sharp horns about eight inches long that had the potential to grow into a fine set of proud antlers.

Robin watched the pricket from behind the solid bulk of a mature beech tree, Owain's yew bow in his right hand. The deer was unaware of his presence, he was fairly sure, and he had taken great care and more than an hour to move into his current position downwind of his prey and no more than fifty yards distant from it.

It was four days after the visit from Hussa, and Robin and John had spent most of that time in practising with the bow. After four days of drawing the powerful weapon and loosing arrows at a mark set up on the far side of the clearing by the hollow oak, Robin's back and shoulders ached as much as if he had been beaten black and blue, and the first three fingers of his right hand were red-raw from plucking the hempen string. But he found that now he could hit a man-sized mark nine times out of ten from a hundred paces. He was very far from proficient—indeed Owain, who had briefly demonstrated the use of the bow with huge good humour, had told him that to make a true archer took a dozen years of training. He himself had drawn his first light bow as a seven-year-old and the massive development of his chest and arms was proof that he had continued his training ever since and that he was able now to wield one of the man-killing war bows of the Welsh mountains.

The bow that Robin held—only a loan, Owain had firmly reminded him—was a lighter hunting bow with a draw weight of no more than fifty pounds. But Robin still found it took all of his strength to haul back the string and loose the shaft.

And he did so then, sending one of Owain's yard-long arrows with a triangular barbed hunting point across fifty yards of woodland to bury itself deep into a spot just behind the pricket's shoulder. The animal staggered under the punch of the shaft, then leapt in the air, its instinct to run unquenchable. But it was mortally wounded, the arrow point had sliced through skin and muscle and lung and lodged deep in its beating heart. The pricket's two elastic bounds after the strike caused the wildly thumping heart to lacerate itself against the razor-like edge of the arrow head. Within twenty yards the deer had foundered and collapsed, folding its body almost gracefully on the green grass and, just as Robin and John sprinted up to the still animal, the last spark of life went out of its eyes.

'A fine kill,' John said approvingly. 'It would make very fine eating, I have no doubt, after it has hung for a week or so.'

'You know as well as I do, John, that this venison is not for our pot,' said Robin, frowning at his friend. 'This animal is to be given in tribute to that Hussa person, as we both agreed. We have an urgent debt of honour to settle with him.'

John grunted. 'Yes, there is an unpaid debt between us, that's for sure.'

The next morning, a little before noon, Robin and John walked into the encampment of the Lord of Sherwood. It was a strange settlement based around a number of caves of varying sizes set in a limestone cliff and with the addition of a

scatter of crude huts fashioned from tree limbs and turfs, some thatched with coppery bracken.

It was a difficult place to find, despite Owain's detailed instructions, and they had taken several wrong turns before finding themselves standing at the edge of a wide, empty circular space in front of the dozen or so caves. The area was filthy, and littered with refuse: old bones and rags and discarded broken clay ale pots, even little piles of faeces—animal and human—in plain sight. The place stank. It seemed Hussa had not bothered to mark out any area as the camp midden.

The incoming pair were unarmed, as Hussa had decreed, and the gralloched pricket was laid across John's broad shoulders, while Robin carried nothing more than a long, thin bundle wrapped in an old piece of cloth. Nevertheless, their advance was halted by one of the tall, bodyguarding men-at-arms, who held up a flat palm and then insisted on checking that they carried no weapons. Robin called out cheerfully to Owain, who was standing a dozen yards away, but when the Welshman approached to take the cloth bundle, and receive a few profuse words of thanks from Robin, the young outlaw got no more than a restrained nod of recognition in return. The man-at-arms ordered Owain away and quite roughly patted both Robin and John all over their tunics and hose, looking inside belts, hoods and boot tops, to ensure that neither carried so much as a fruit knife.

When the man-at-arms had finished his labours, he nodded across the open space at the Lord of Sherwood, who was sat at a throne-like chair before a broad table, sipping from a vast drinking horn. In front of Hussa, on the table and only inches from his hand, lay the double-headed axe.

'Best look inside the deer, eh?' came the deep, gruff voice from behind the table. 'Not sure these thieves are trustworthy—ha-ha!'

The bodyguard motioned for John to put down the carcass, and briefly rummaged inside its body cavity before pulling out his hand, red to the wrist, and giving his lord a brisk shake of his helmeted head.

At last, Robin and John were allowed to approach the Lord of the Wood. Robin smiled cheerfully, even engagingly, at the man who had slapped his face twice and stolen all his worldly wealth. But John had a face like chiselled granite, and when he slipped the pricket from his shoulders, he allowed it to drop on to the table before Hussa with a jarring thump.

At this small act of defiance, the two bodyguards took a step closer, but said nothing. Robin noticed a crowd of Hussa's followers forming around the clearing, like courtiers, watching their meeting with dull eyes.

'You're a big, strapping fellow, eh?' said Hussa, looking up at John with his cunning red eyes. 'What name do you go by?'

John didn't answer for such a long time that Robin had to do it for him: 'He's called John, my lord—and he sometimes can be a little shy in exalted company.'

Hussa beamed: 'Like a child, eh? I think I shall call him Little John!' and the fat man broke into a thundering laugh, his whole body given over to the shakes of merriment. The men-at-arms on either side of Robin and John chuckled dutifully. And all the watching folk also set up a raucous cackle in appreciation of their lord's astounding wit.

John looked down at the axe on the table, expressionless.

Robin smiled even more broadly.

When the hilarity had finally died away, Hussa jerked his chin at the pricket lying before him. 'What's this, eh?'

'Tribute,' said Robin. 'This is to be your reward.'

'Good boy,' rumbled Hussa.

'Yes, I am, aren't I. I try hard to give people their due. It is a fine beast, isn't it.'

His hand casually stroked the furry skin between the animal's long, straight horns. A more discerning eye than Hussa's would have noticed something about the pricket's right horn: a very faint black marking, just a fine line, around the base, where the sharp antler met the deer's skull. If a man looked closely, he would notice that the horn had been sawn almost all the way though by a careful hand, and was attached by only a leaf-thin bridge of bone.

Hussa did not notice.

Robin's hand closed around the base of the antler, and with a jerk, he snapped the long spike from the deer's head, swung his arm in a short vicious loop and jammed the point straight into the right eye of the bodyguard next to him.

The man screamed and clapped both hands to his face. But Robin was moving faster than a cut adder. He had a hand on the man's sword hilt and a boot in his belly and, as the man sank to the ground, the jelly and gore spurting from his punctured eye-socket, Robin tore the sword free of its scabbard, whirled and struck the head clean off the second man-at-arms.

But Hussa did not merely sit idle while his men died. His hand dived for the leather-wrapped handle of the axe, and he had lifted it an inch from the table when John's wide left palm slapped down very hard, flat, on the shiny double-head, trapping Hussa's fat fingers painfully against the wood of the table.

Then John hit Hussa full in the face with his bunched right hand, a superb blow, perfectly timed and with his full strength behind it. Two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle and bone, concentrated into four big knuckles and fuelled by five days of rage and frustration, connected with Hussa's doughy face, crushing flesh, cartilage and bone and sending him backwards in his chair and over the high back of it; the Lord of Sherwood tumbling away towards the cave behind him like a kicked ball. When Hussa finally came to a halt, he lay deadly still.

John picked up the axe and made a tiny noise, mewing like a mother over her baby. Then he and Robin turned to face the crowd of raggedy men and woman surging towards them across the clearing, with cries of rage and fear issuing from every mouth. It was a wall of righteous anger, a furious mob, some forty souls strong, armed and ready to kill. These two incomers had entered their home and done bloody violence to their comrades.

They must be slaughtered.

Robin adjusted his stance and took a two-handed grip on his stolen sword; John hefted the double-headed axe…

'Stand fast,' said a lilting voice, a voice from the mountains in the West. 'Stand fast, Robin, and do not hurt these poor people or I will loose! I swear it.'

Owain, standing a dozen yards away, a little apart from the advancing crowd of poorly armed Sherwood folk, had a bow in his hands once again, and once again a nocked arrow poised to pierce Robin's breast.

'Wait, wait, all of you,' another voice cried, a woman this time. 'Do not harm these two strangers.' And a skinny figure in a filthy sackcloth dress with a Y-

shaped amulet dangling from her neck emerged from the crowd and stood between Robin and John and the ill-looking mob that sought to tear them limb from limb.

'This man here is the spirit of the woods—he has the wild spirit of Cernunnos, the Woodland God, within him!' The woman jabbed a grubby finger at Robin. 'See! He kills with the very horn of Cernunnos, plucked from the sacred animal's brow. He commands the trees of the forest to do his bidding—and they obey. He orders them to fall, and they fall. I have seen this. You must not harm him. I forbid it! I put a curse on any man or woman who harms a hair of his head. He is sacred to me. He is sacred to these woods. He is sacred to Cernunnos. My curse protects him. Touch him and your private parts will shrivel and dry up, your bowels will be infested with seething black worms, your children will sicken and waste away; your animals will all die.'

Although the witch-woman's words made no sense at all to Robin, he was relieved to see that the crowd had stopped in its tracks, and the people were muttering in a confused manner, many looking plainly terrified by her dire threats.

'Stand aside, Brigid,' said Owain. 'There is no need for your curses. We must have justice. These men have come here and done bloody violence to our friends and to our lord. We have all witnessed this. They cannot be allowed to walk free.'

'If it is justice that you want,' said Robin, in a loud clear voice, 'I am the man who can give it to you.'

The space grew suddenly quiet. Robin fixed the murmuring crowd with his silvery eyes and spoke directly into the silence.

'I know about injustice. I know about desperation and hunger; I know about cruel masters and callous lords. I know what drives a man or a woman from their own hearth and home, to take up the life of an outlaw grubbing a meagre living in the wilderness. Hungry most of the time; chilled to the bone in winter, your children always sick. I know how you have suffered. And I can change all that.'

Robin paused, took a breath and smiled at the shabby crowd of Sherwood folk. He saw that they were all listening intently, almost greedily, to his words.

'I can make you strong and well-fed; healthy and happy. And keep you that way. I can make sure that your children grow up with food on the table, and a warm hearth to eat it by… I can make you free from hunger and poverty, I can make you free from the oppression of sheriffs and lords, and I can do it here. In this wilderness. In this very place. These very caves. All I ask is that you allow me to lead you. If you will only follow my guidance, we can all live together in this place.,.. and make it a paradise on Earth, as long as God grants us breath. We will steal from the rich, from bloated churchmen and cruel lords, we will take freely from those who have oppressed us, kill them when we must. And we shall be hidden here and safe from their reprisals. We will take their silver and it shall be shared out among us all. Under my leadership, every man will be the equal of his fellow; every woman and child will be under the care and protection of us all. There will discipline, yes, and I will take a small share of the spoils. But there will be justice for all—'

'Kill them, kill them now,' a rough, clogged voice broke into Robin's words.

Robin looked to his left and saw the round bulk of Hussa standing and swaying slightly on the edge of the space. His face was a mass of blood, his beard clotted

with his own gore, but he had a sword in one hand and a mace in the other, and he gestured with them to the crowd, urging them forward.

'Kill these incomers, all of you, go on, take them. Kill them now, eh? Or I promise it will be the worse for all of you.'

Robin could see several of the crowd looking at Hussa, then back at himself and John. Their lives hung by a thread.

A bowstring thrummed. A shaft sped, a swift black line across the clearing, and thumped into Hussa. The engorged beast-man looked down at the arrow protruding from his chest. He blinked, fell to his knees, and looked over at Owain. A hole appeared in his blood-matted beard, and he seemed to be trying to ask the bowman a question. But his lungs were pierced, through and through. All that emerged was a shallow whisper that might have been the single word: 'Why?'

Owain spoke: 'It's simple, really, boyo, I like this young fellow's ideas a whole lot better than yours.'