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Robin Hood to the Rescue

A splendid, long story of adventure on land and sea, introducing the famous Outlaws of Sherwood Forest.

CHAPTER I.

THE GERMAN TRADER.

MASTER ROBIN HOOD sat on the high poop of the good ship *Rose* of London, with his three trusty comrades, Little John, Friar Tuck, and Little Thom Cure All, travelling doctor and friend to all except his enemies.

After a week of storm, the sea had gone down. It was almost calm and only a faint breeze stirred the wisps of fog floating on the face of the waters.

"By all the rules I should be sad," said Robin. "Yet I feel blithe enough this morning, though, truly, Fortune hath treated me like a shuttlecock. Only a few weeks ago I was a-working on Gaffer Hood's farm, wi' all my troubles in front o' me."

"Yet a shuttlecock goes up as well as down," remarked Tuck sagely.

"Seems to me I began w' the down, then," Robin said. "All along o' saving Thom here, from fellows that were mishandling him, that villain, Black Peter, has me outlawed."

"That were a down, for sure," agreed Little John.

"Then I go into the greenwood and by good shooting win me to headship of the good fellows that harboured there. Likewise I found that I was of good blood and heir to the very fine estates Black Peter holds."

"That counts an up," quoth the friar. "All to the good."

"Next, the parchments that prove the same, were stolen by that gallows bird, Red Hugh. Winning them back, we take also letters that show Peter and Prince John, his friend to boot, to be traitors."

"Still up," nodded the friar.

"Then the said Peter falls on us,

scatters our good band to the rightabout, follows us to London where we go to tell good King Richard of the danger—"

"And the said King being gone away to France, we have great ado to save our skins by getting to sea in this here most uncomfortable o' ships," Friar Tuck finished for him. "All which is down, down, down."

"Wherefore, I say that Fortune is now due to toss me up again," went on Robin. "But how?"

"Sail ahoy!" bawled the hoarse voice of the lookout from the crow's-nest at the top of the *Rose's* single mast, as though in answer.

The crew of the *Rose* sprang to life at once and peered eagerly out at the vessel looming up through the fog wreaths about two bowshots away, whilst her master, Joe Willet, roused from sweet slumber, tumbled up from below, and after one glance at the stranger began to bellow orders.

"Swords and bucklers, all of ye!" he yelled. "Half-a-dozen take stones aloft to the top. Light the galley fire. And for you, good sirs, take your bows and stand ready."

"Why, how d'you know she will prove an enemy?" asked Tuck. "You can scarce see her."

"I sees enough to know she be a stranger, which be the same as an enemy at sea," replied Willet. "Howsumdever, if she don't come for to hurt us, we won't hurt she. But 'tis well to be ready." **A**

So preparations for a fight went swiftly forward. A stout rope netting was quickly stretched along the bulwarks of the low waist, from poop to forecastle, to keep out boarders, while the crow's-nest became a fighting top, filled with the heaviest stones from the ship's ballast,

Thom Cure All looked on these preparations sadly. He had no skill of weapons, though in the fight with Black Peter in the Thames, a few days before, a sort of Greek fire which he had compounded had given the Rose's folks the victory.

"Can ye not make some more of you horrid, flaming stuff?" asked Friar Tuck, as he passed the little man with his arms full of sheaves of arrows.

Thom shook his head.

"Brimstone was the chief part o' it, and I did use all there be on board," he replied. "None the less, I will get me down into the hold and look about. There may be a wee keg that I saw not before, or something else which may serve."

He went down the ladder to the cabin and thereafter was seen no more for a while.

Meantime the stranger drew gradually nearer, though the fog was still too thick for Willet to make out what she was. Yet from the glint of steel that now and then showed as the curling wisps of vapour thinned, he guessed that she was full of well-armed men.

An hour or more passed, during which each seemed to be taking the other's measure. Then the sluggish breeze veered round and freshened, driving the fog banks clear.

"We be in for it!" grunted Willet. "That there be a ship of Hamburg. They folks do hate we of London most bitter hard, seeing that o' late years we ha's cut mortal deep into the trade w' the Flemings. Look 'ee there!"

The stranger's bow swung round and gathering way she bore down on the Rose.

"A murrain on the wind!" quoth Willet bitterly. "It favour's 'em. They can choose their distance, bust 'em!"

"What manner o' fighters be these folks?" asked Little John.

"Tough enow," replied Willet. "They ha' fine weapons, too. I'll wager every man yonder has a good coat o' mail, and a steel helmet also, while we ha' to be content w' leather jackets and iron pots. None the less, they like better to fight at a distance, rather than come hand to hand except the odds be with 'em. Hey, look yonder, in the bow of her! They ha' artillery, bust 'em!"

The German ship was now within long bowshot and every detail of her could be plainly seen, from the cluster of men in

her top to the group around the catapult in her bows.

These tugged at levers, hauling back the beam of the thing till it lay level with its bed, while three others came staggering forward with a huge stone.

"Mark 'em!" roared Willet. "An' yon chunk cometh aboard, my poor Rose will be muckle the worse! Can ye not shoot, confound ye?"

But Robin Hood's bow was already rising.

"You take the foremost, Friar, me the middle, you the other, John," said he. "Now!"

The three bowstrings twanged as one, the arrows glanced across the intervening waves, and a roar of delight went up from the Rose's crew.

The stone bearers had reached the top of the fore-castle ladder with their burden as the shafts dropped upon them out of the blue. Down went two, fairly skewered through the neck and breast, whilst the third, winged in the shoulder, staggered to and fro plucking at the feathered head.

The stone crashed down to the lower deck, knocking over men right and left like ninepins as it rolled aft amidst a racket of curses and yells.

"First blood to we!" yelled Willet. "Keep to it, my bonnie lads! Look'ee, we'll play their game for a while. Out w' sweeps, men, and we'll keep our distance. Smart, my pipkins!"

The pipkins flew to obey. The sweeps or long oars, began to swing. Aided by the fitful breeze, the Rose maintained her distance, whilst the three bow-men kept up a constant, accurate fire on everything that showed a mark.

But they were not to have matters all their own way. Volley after volley of bolts shot from strong arbalests or cross-bows, hummed and sung over the ship. From such a hail, the ill-protected men of the Rose could not hope to escape scatheless. Soon several were on their backs and the ship's speed slackened accordingly.

"They ha' near double our force yonder, or I would in and board," quoth Willet, frowning, as man after man left the oars to bind up his wounds. "We are losing over fast."

"They be none too happy yonder," growled Tuck, wiping away the blood trickling from a wound across his shaven scalp. "Though self praise be little honour, I date swear there ain't three

men afloat hereabouts as can shoot like we. Them decks be well clustered by now."

"And so be ourn," responded Willet sadly. "Hey, what's that?"

Thom Cure All had stuck his nose above the hatchway.

"Master Willet—Master Willet!" he called. "Can you put this here ship o' vourn t'other side o' that there? This wind do be contrary to my desire."

"Save the man!" ejaculated Willet. "Dost think I can control the elements?"

"I thought as you could control the ship!" bleated Thom mildly. "Put her so that the wind blows from us to them. I would fain try an artfulness on these men of blood."

"Saints preserve us. Send that it be a good un! But there ain't no artfulness that I knows on as'll take the old Rose dead to wind'ard, except rowing of 'er."

"Then do it that way!" said Thom, and dived below again.

"Which'll take us along close aboard of 'em! Not me!" growled Willet.

"Ha! What be they up to now?"

From the strong after-castle of the enemy, from which, all this while, the cross boy-men had kept up a ceaseless and galling discharge, appeared a group of men so covered by long shields that, though the three foresters shot their best, they were not hit as they ran forward along the waist.

Midway they stopped, picked up the great stone, and went on again.

In vain Robin, Tuck and Little John let drive shaft after shaft. One man fell but the others gained the fore-castle unhurt, and grouped themselves round the catapult.

Their shields hung over their backs while they laid the stone in place, then they crouched low, while their leader, a man of great stature and bulk, stooped to discharge the weapon.

For a single moment he was exposed, and that was long enough for Robin Hood.

He let fly, the big man leapt into the air and fell over backwards with an arrow fast in his head.

Yet, as he fell, he released the trigger of the catapult.

The beam or throwing arm, impelled by stone springs of twisted rope, swung, the stone flew singing through the air and fell with a terrific smash on the Rose's mast, midway between deck and top.

There was a loud crack, a howl of dismay from the crew, and discharging the load of stones placed in the crow's-nest, the mast, with its yard and broad square sail attached, swayed and toppled over-side.

"Axes!" yelled Willet. "Cut it adrift. Smart, ye lubbers, or we be all dead men!"

He set an example, hewing and hacking with the best, while Robin and his fellows shot and shot again at the on-coming foe. Only in the nick of time was the raffle cleared away and the sweeps again manned, for the German ship now sought to close.

She had a vantage since from her top she would be able to shower down stones upon the Rose's decks and board through the gap in her bulwarks made by the falling mast.

But not for naught had Willet's crew made their way up the twisting Thames' channel many a time and oft, in spite of fog and foul weather. The ship was clumsy, but she had one quality that served well at this crisis of the fight. She could spin about almost in her own length.

"Easy steerboard! Pull larboard—pull!" yelled Willet, as the Hamburger came surging down on them under the impuse of sail and oars.

Round came the Rose like a well-trained steed, and ere the German could change her course, lo! she was past, and the Rose to windward.

From the hatchway darted Thom Cure All, his arms full of a bundle of dripping linen cloths.

"Here!" he shouted, his roedy voice cutting across the uproar like a broken winded bugle. "Tie these over your mouths and noses. You done that well, Cap'n. Now, stand 'ee by for my part."

He flung his burden right and left as he raced among the astounded men, and in a moment was below again.

"Tie 'em on," roared Willet. "I dunno what he be up to, but do 'ee as he tells."

They obeyed marvelling.

And then they began to undersand.

A belch of smoke burst from the portholes of the cabin below and roared directly across the enemy's deck, a scant cable length away. It was not an ordinary smoke, though that would have been blinding enough, but horrible, suffocating stench.

Willet, leaning outboard to see what

it portended, caught a good whiff and reeled back choking and gasping, and swabbing his streaming eyes.

"'Tis the breath o' the bottomless pit!" he sputtered. "Lordy—he spat—look at them there furriners!"

If the small sample he had tasted were bad, the whole bulk that the Hamburgers received must have been a lot worse. Between the wreaths of the slow rolling abomination they could be seen staggering or running wildly from the shelter of the castles fore and aft, seeking air fit to breathe.

"Now we have 'em. Smite and spare not!" squealed Thom, rising from the hatch, black as any imp of the pit. "On wi' you before they recover themselves. Gloria! St. George for Merrie England!"

"Right you be, mannikin!" quoth Willet. "Lay to it, lads! Way enough. Stand by to board. Come on."

And as the Rose bumped into the foe he led the way to deck followed by his raging crew. Little they cared if they wore nothing stronger than leather jacks against the mail of their opponents or that the odds of the numbers were against them. Thom's abomination had squared that, for if their Germans were numerous, they were already in part demoralised by that awful stench.

They gave back as the storm of clout-decked Englishmen burst over their bulwarks, and though they fought with the desperation of despair, in ten minutes the ship was won.

Of her crew none remained alive, for no quarter had been given, since that was the way of the sea in those days.

"And now that you be done, gi' me a hand aboard," cried Thom from the Rose. "I be no fighting man, but I promise you I be a great rummager. Moreover, days must pass o'er that cabin where I made my most potent stench, will be fit to live in."

"But my clothes be there?" cried Willet.

"Make your mind easy. Them as is left won't be fit to wear, but most of 'em, all of your shirts, to wit, I did tear up for them clouts you be all a-wearing."

Willet looked as though he would have swallowed the little man; then he laughed.

"Well, you ha' made, free wi' my wardrobe, but seeing it has brought us a fine ship and much good booty also,

I say no more. How made you that horrible smoke?"

But Thom shook his head.

"That be a mystery," said he. "I stick to it. And now, let us count the chicks which have hatched from it."

With which, he approached the main hatch.

CHAPTER II.

DIVIDING THE SPOIL.

WITH the valour of ignorance, Master Thom Cure All would have gone poking round the cabins and hold of the German ship alone and unarmed, had not Robin stopped him.

"There may still be some lying hid below," said he. "We'll oome wi' you."

And arrow on string, Tuck and Little John at his heels, he insisted on leading the exploring party.

In the main cabin under the poop, or aftercastle, they found much rich clothing, fine arms and plate, all of which were of German make and had evidently belonged to the master of the ship.

But along with these were other things that could only have come from the south and the far east. It was the same in the other cabins and in the after hold. The ship was stuffed with a wealth of goods from half the world.

Willet, coming below for a peep, solved the question.

"This here ship, I take it, belonged to one o' them there German lordlings that goes out a-pirating, taking everything they can lay hands on. There be many such. I reckon there be the pickings o' half a dozen ships here, at least. She'd be going home a'ter a long cruise, down along the Bay, mebbe, and farther, when she were drove out o' her course, spied us, and thought to wind up wi' a Londoner."

"To her bane," said Tuck cheerfully. "What might be in here, think you? Something mighty precious, I guess."

He pointed to a low door secured by a heavy padlock. Little John broke it with an axe and held a lantern inside, his weapon poised ready to strike.

Something stirred within.

"Be you German or Christian men?" asked a feeble voice.

"Christian Englishmen who have sent these pirates to feed the fishes. Benedicite, meus filius!" replied Tuck promptly.



Little John broke the door down with an axe and held a lantern inside, his weapon poised ready to strike.

A tall thin man, wrapped in a white mantle with a blood red cross upon the shoulder, the badge of a knight Templar, rose from a pile of straw and tottered into the friar's arms.

"The saints be praised!" he croaked, blinking at the light. "Nigh on two months have I lain prisoner since these miscreants took the ship in which I travelled from Palestine to a house of our Order in England. Five times I have heard the noise of battle, and four times the revelry the wretches made thereafter. And now, say you, they will revel no more!"

"There be luck in odd numbers," answered the friar, nodding cheerfully. "Take you my arm, reverend and valiant sir. We will e'en drink a cup together."

"Wait," said the knight. "Bring also my fellow in misfortune. Barnabas, come forth!"

The straw rustled and something large and brown and hairy waddled into the doorway. It was a big bear, very thin, and looking the more forbidding because of the straws clinging to his fur. At sight of the men, he whined pathetically, and rising on end, danced a step or two.

"He belonged to the captain of the ship I sailed on," said the Templar. "Often he tumbled and played the soldier, as he had been taught. He was plump as a partridge then, poor beast. After that we were taken, he mourned for his master and would not tumble for these German hounds. Wherefore they shut him along with me, who was sore wounded, saying we might keep each other company. They meant it not, but truly he has been much solace."

"I will take him in charge," cried Thom Cure All. "I love all beasts, the bigger the better. Barnabas, follow you me."

Evidently something in his voice pleased the bear, for he grunted, dropped on all fours, and obediently followed the little man on deck, to be stuffed with the first eatables that come handy.

Meanwhile the crew had not been idle. The decks of both ships had been cleansed of the stains of conflict. Then, since the Rose, besides being disabled, smelt anything but roselike below, owing to Thom's highly successful experiment, all hands came aboard the Hamburg er,

only two men being left to steer the ship which was taken in tow.

With a light but steady breeze almost dead astern, the two ships proceeded northwards. Willet, his head bandaged, but wearing, with a very jaunty air, a splendid scarlet cloak which he had found below, climbed the ladder to the poop and sat him down beside Robin Hood and his three friends.

"We ha' done mighty well," said he. "A fine ship crammed wi' goods such as I ha' never clapped eyes on save once or twice in rich merchants' warehouses. Comes now the dividing of 'em, for, look you, had it not been for your archery, and that most notable, beastly smoke, methinks the day would have gone against us. Therefore, me and my men has talked, and agreed as the first pick be yours, us dividing profits after, according to our custom."

"There be arms and mail enough for many a man," said Robin. "There be some stout fellows wait my coming up Hadden Bay, that could do with some o' those, and still there would be enough for your tars."

"Take what you will," said Willet. "Now, Master Little John!"

"I have a fancy to go in fine clothes," said Robin's lieutenant. "A suit or two and a fine cloak like yours, wi' some gaud or jewel to hang at the neck, would suit me very well."

"What you will. And you, good friar?"

"I lust not after fine clothes nor weapons, but—" he paused and looked lovingly at the empty silver tankard in his hand. "There be some dozen o' these pots below stairs. Wi' them, and a barrel or two of the good wine from the hold, I would be well content."

"You be modest. Take 'em. And you, Master Thom?"

Thom looked down at the bear, Barnabas, who, replete and round as a barrel, snored at his feet.

"I ha' took a fancy to this beast and him to me. Likewise there be some pots o' balsam and the like, good for medicines. And I would ha' a gown o' silk and the one lined wi' fur for the cold days. Be that too much?"

"Too much! Go to, man! Shalt have 'em, and since none o' ye can speak, I myself shall make selection over and above. Think you that we sailor men treat good fellows so scurvily? Nay, ye shall see."

And see they did, when about a week later, the Rose and her prize put into Hadden Bay and landed the four, together with the knight, who had elected to go with them.

Willet gave sharp orders. His crew grinned as they hoisted out bale after bale from the hold to the boats and carried them to the beach.

"Surely you be not going to unlade here?" asked Robin.

"Nay!" said Willet. "But seeing you would ask so little, why me and my men, we chooses for ye. Here be all you did ask for and a fairish bit over. And now that we be come to part, I tell ye, ye be all proper men and the days will be long till we claps eyes on you again. When ye will, command us. Till then, fare ye all well."

Then, after much handshaking and a rousing volley of cheers, the ships got under way again, and disappeared round the northerly headland, leaving the travellers to seek shelter in a rude inn at one end of a tumble-down village.

But scarcely had they stowed their goods and themselves in the one barn-like room it had to offer, than there was a clatter of many feet outside and in burst Scarlett, one of the band of outlaws that had ranged Sherwood Forest under Robin Hood's command.

"Scattered by overwhelming forces, they had agreed to muster again at Hadden Bay where they would be unmolested for a while, and though Robin had hardly expected they would win across country so soon, here they were at the trysting-place.

"Welcome!" shouted Scarlett, gripping Robin's hand. "Some of us ha' been here a week or more, lying up on the cliff yonder keeping an eye out for you. We thought not you might come by sea. We be all here now, all that be left, that is, which be two and thirty all told. Come you out o' this hole to the cave we hide in."

"Wait," said Robin, and stepped to the Templar Knight, who, seated on a pile of baggage, surveyed the wild-looking newcomer curiously.

"Sir Knight," Robin went on. "Here I be headship o' my men again and would have you for our guest. But, before you accept, I tell you plainly, that most of us be outlaws and the rest tarred more or less from the same brush.

Yet we all love good King Richard and would do him a service if we might, wherein I think you could help."

"I have served under the King in Palestine and love him well," replied the knight. "As for the outlawry, you have delivered me from a hard captivity and I owe you much for it. I can blink an eye and hold my tongue as well as another. I shall be glad to be your guest for a little and aid your purpose."

"Then let us out!" cried Robin, and with Little John, Friar Tuck, and Thom, leading Barney the bear, walked to the door of the inn, where a rattle of cheers from the assembled band greeted them.

For a minute they were nearly pulled to pieces by handshakes and hugs. Then, carrying the gear with them, the whole party took the road which ended at the mouth of a large, dry cavern running into the face of the cliff overlooking the bay.

A fire burned before the mouth, and over it hung a huge pot from which came a smell so appetising that the voyagers forgot everything except that they were hungry.

Not till they were satisfied and the friar's dozen of silver tankards had received due baptism, were the bales of Captain Willet's packing undone, when it was discovered that the good mariners had been generous to excess.

Besides mail shirts, helmets, swords, and axes of the best, enough to arm all, were pickings from the rest of the Hamburger's cargo of plunder, so that there was something for each man of the band.

"And now that we can face Black Peter's men w' equal arms, shall we back to Sherwood?" asked Robin. "The salt sea be well enough, but give me the leaves overhead and the bonnie brown deer for provender."

"Aye! We too! Back to Sherwood!" they cried in a chorus.

"Then get ye all to rest. We shall start to-morrow with the sun," said Robin, and being himself hardly free of the feeling that the earth was rocking under him, set the example.

Half an hour later, save for the soft tread of a sentinel, there was never a sound but snores from the cave.

CHAPTER III.

BACK TO THE FOREST.

FOR two days the band trudged through thinly inhabited country, sleeping around a camp fire at night. But on the morning of the third day Robin proposed that they should now separate again into smaller parties and take different roads back to the forest.

"For we be coming to places where folks lie thick," said he. "Likewise bailiffs, town reeves, and such like cattle. An' they see the pack of us together, they will ask questions, and belike raise the hue and cry on our tail. Therefore, split we up. We shall foregather in the old camp, and build it again, stronger an' better."

As he said, so it was done. The company split into parties of three or four, each taking a separate way. Presently the inseparable Little John, Friar Tuck, and Thom Cure All with his bear Barney, alone remained with Robin Hood and the Templar.

"And you, valiant sir," said Robin, addressing the latter. "Had better now take the road for York. Yonder it lies. There is a preceptory of your order, where you will have all things needful. And now I will impart the business on which we have need of your help."

Thereupon he drew out a bundle of letters written by certain Frenchmen, which clearly proved that his mortal enemy, Sir Pierre le Noir, usually called Back Peter, was treacherously plotting to deliver the town of Rouen, in Normandy, into the hands of the French King.

"And mark also that King Richard's own brother, Prince John, is in this also," he went on. "He plans to seize the throne of England. Once we have tried to warn the King, but our enemy is too strong. Yet you, sir, might very well bear these letters to Richard who is now in Normandy, for none would suspect you and you could pass where we would for a certainty be stopped."

"I will do it, on my knightly word," said the Templar. "I rode knee to knee with Richard on the great day of Jaffa, when we drove the infidel before us like hares. Though he has little friendship for my order, yet he loves me well. I will to York, get me horse, and spare not an hour till I reach him. Also I will tell him all I know of your honest endeavour. Fear not. John Beauchamp

forgets not a friend in need. Fare you all well, my brethen."

So saying, he embraced Robin like a brother, then, since he was priest as well as knight, gave them his blessing ere he strode away.

The four watched him till the white mantle fluttered out of sight beyond a turn in the track.

"A good man!" quoth Friar Tuck heartily. "I would we had had more of his company. I would fain have heard tales about this same friend of Jaffa and the cleaving of infidels."

"Let be!" answered Robin. "Sure we have had fighting enow of late to satisfy a glutton of blows. Talk we of peaceful things."

"Of a certain most fair lady, to wit, yea, even the Lady Marian de Vaux," murmured the friar with a twinkle.

"Surely, seeing she hath saved my life three times," said Robin. "Firstly, when I saved Thom here, she did call off Black Peter's crew, who would have ended us. Secondly, when she came by night to warn me that Peter had caused me to be made outlaw. And thirdly, when she helped me escape from Castle Rising when that I had been laid by the heels. I thank the saints that she be now safe wi' her uncle in London."

"I doubt me if she be safe there, seeing—" began Thom.

The friar coughed loudly, drowning his thin voice.

"Let be, fool!" he muttered in Thom's ear. "Can you not let the lad be happy for a while? If he gets to thinking her in danger he will grieve, because he can do nought at present to aid her. Rather make your beast dance, that we may laugh."

Thom took the hint and gave the word of command. Barnabas—or Barney, as he was now called for short—rose on his hind legs and danced clumsily along before them as they walked, winding up by turning a splendid somersault.

"A bonny beast he will be when he is a little fatter," said the friar, laughing. "Why, what be the matter wi' him? Is't some trick?"

Barney had stopped gambolling, and stood growling, glaring into the bushes that grew thick by the roadside, like a pointer that smells game.

Robin strung his bow and sent an arrow into the thicket at random. There was a stir, then the sound of someone

retreating through the under-bush that quickly died away in the distance.

"Some footpad, belike," said Robin carelessly. "He spied our pretty bundles, and thought maybe we might dtop something."

"Maybe," replied the friar. "Yet I think we may be wise to seek an inn to-night. What say you, John?"

"That there be folks hereabouts who would think us of Sherwood gentle babes in that we do no violence. I have heard tell that there is a gang here who do murder all they rob. Seeing that sleeping out would mean a wakeful sentinel, I say let us to an inn also."

After that they marched with a wary eye on the coverts. Twice, as evening drew on, Barney gave warning that they were being spied upon, though they neither heard nor saw anything.

It was with hearty relief, therefore, that they saw at last a solitary house, built at the edge of a clump of trees, over whose door hung a bunch of withering branches, the sign of an inn.

"It looks not over lively," observed Thom as they approached. "This be a lonely road, though, and travellers few."

"The warmer the welcome for us, then," said Little John, whose mind was already running on a good supper. "What say you to a goose or two, or two-three pair of them ducks as I hears quacking? I be sharp set."

"Here be the man to tell that to," said Tuck, as the innkeeper came running to the door, a broad smile of welcome on his dirty face.

"Glad of your company, gentles!" he cried. "Yours be the first fresh faces I ha' seen these four days past. Gar-r-r! What be that horrid, outlandish thing?"

Barney had risen on his hinder end, growling threateningly.

"He be a bear, a gentle beast, and tame," replied Thom, tugging at the leading-rope. "He be hungry, that is all, and we likewise."

"'Tis a disease I am here to cure," said the landlord. "This way, gentles! Sit ye down, and ye shall be served right speedily! Ho! Bring ale, wench! Set the capons to the spit! Get ye bread!"

He disappeared, bawling commands, and the travellers sat down on a rough wooden bench beside a long table that ran across one end of the bare room.

"What ailed the beast to growl at the man?" asked Little John, staring at Barney, who lay at his master's feet, still rumbling in his throat.

"Nay, I know him not well enough yet to say," replied the little man. "Yet the sight o' the fellow's face would serve as an excuse. Saw you ever a more roguish, thieving mug?"

"And where be greater thieves than innkeepers?" demanded Tuok. "They water their wine and their ale, and give short measure to boot. Little wonder their faces tell a tale of knavery!"

With much bustle, a sluttish serving-girl appeared, bearing platters, bread, ale, and mugs.

Friar Tuck looked at the latter sourly. "Each man must eat a peck o' dirt ere he die, 'tis said," he remarked. "Yet I will not mix as much with my liquor an' I can help it."

With which he opened his pack and took four of his precious silver tankards from their wrappings, a sight at which the girl opened wide her bleared eyes. She must have given word of them to the landlord, for in a minute he strolled in to tell them that supper was coming in haste.

"They be mighty fine mugs," said he enviously. "They look to be worth a great price."

"Oh, aye!" agreed Tuck, carelessly. "Solid silver. One might buy a good house wi' the value of them."

"Such fine things be rarities here," the landlord sighed. "Wood and earthenware and a few bits o' pewter are all I ever sets eyes on. Well, here be capons twain. Set ye about them, fair sirs. A good appetite to ye."

He left them busily plying knives and fingers, while Barney, supplied with a dish of porridge for first course, contentedly crunched the bones for a second.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INNKEEPER'S FATE.

SOON it grew dark. They finished their meal by rushlight, and, being weary, asked where they were to sleep.

It seemed to Thom, who was nearest to her, that the wench's face went pale under its coating of dirt as she replied:

"In the mill-room, an' it please you. There be a fine great bed there, big enough for the four of ye."

"The mill-room?" asked Robin.

"Aye, Here was once a windmill, look ye." She opened a door and pointed across the yard to a squat tower with a narrow door and narrow slits of windows. "The walls be thick and the place warm. I ha' often slept there mysel' in the

winter and been glad of it, for the wind be cruel cold hereabouts. But here is the measter. He will show you your chamber."

The landlord had appeared at the head of a stair that evidently led to the cellar, for under one arm he carried carefully a little keg.

"Here is for your nightcap," said he, smirking. "It were the sight o' yon braw mugs as set me thinking on it. I ha' had it by me for years, and never a customer who would pay the price."

"How much might it be?" asked Tuck eagerly.

"A crown," answered the landlord. "But pay me not now. In the morning will do. I will carry it above for ye. It is ready tapped and spiled. This way!"

Torch in hand, he led them to the door, so low and narrow that they could scarce squeeze their well-stuffed packs through it, and up a steep stair into a circular room, in which stood a huge bed.

"This be rough, but I warrant you snug," said mine host, setting down his burden tenderly upon a stool. "There be blankets enow. Since ye ha' your cups, there will be naught else, I reckon."

"Will you not stay and share a sip of your tippie?" asked the hospitable Tuck.

The man shook his head, with a sickly smile.

"I thank you, but nay. My wife, poor soul, lieth sick abed, which was why I ha' put you here. She doteth on my company. Ow! Keep the brute off!"

He jumped for the stairs as Barney, growling horribly, made a shuffling step towards him, with neck fur erect.

"Down!" cried Thom sharply. "Me-thinks he loves you not, landlord. Yet be not uneasy, for he will be gone early. Call us at day break."

"That I will!" replied the man from below.

They heard a faint snigger, then the door was shut with a clang.

"Wherefore did he giggle?" grumbled Thom. "True, I am little, but I will show him he may not mock me!"

"What be Barney at?" interrupted Little John. "Stop him!"

But he spoke too late. Still growling, the bear had shuffled to the little keg, sniffed at it, then, with one tremendous, swinging blow of a forepaw, sent it flying, to smash against the wall.

There was a crash, a gush, and the wine spread itself like a pool of blood over the floor.

Friar Tuck said something that no friar should even have thought, and reached for his quarter-staff.

"Evil abomination, I will o'en chastise thee!" he roared. "I'll teach thee to waste good liquor!"

But Thom stayed him with a gesture as he stooped over the wine pool.

"Wait!" he begged. "Look! Here is something against nature. Barney be fond o' a drop o' wine as you, but he aint' touched this here. Bide a moment."

He sniffed long, then tasted a thimbleful that remained in a hollow of a stave. When he turned, his face was very glum.

"'Tis drugged!" he said in a whisper.

"Here be matters I like not better than that fellow's countenance. But for Barney, we had tossed it down most like, and fallen sound asleep as David's sow. What would have been towards after that? I ask you."

"We should be in a fair way to have our throats cut!" exclaimed Robin, aghast. "Likely enough this innkeeper is one with they who sneaked beside us in the bushes. Barney knew the scent of him, and sensed that the wine was not what it should be. He shall have a comb of honey for this ere I be much older!"

"H'm!" said Little John. "It seems like to me that we will have yet another fight on our hands ere we be much older. Shall we out and take to our heels?"

"With a rabble shooting at us out of every thicket? Nay; here we be in a fortress. Therefore let us bide till day. First let us look to the door."

Robin went down softly and tried the latch, only to find that the door had been made fast outside. He felt about for bolts, but there were none, nor could he secure it in any way, since the door opened outward.

"No matter!" cried Tuck stoutly. "An' anyone can win up that stair against our archery, I will eat him. Look out o' that window, Thom, and tell if anything comes."

Thom climbed on the stool and looked through the narrow embrasure.

"There look to be several in yon room where we had supper," he said. "I see the shadows of 'em. Now the landlord looks from the door this way. Here come some more fellows, crawling along the ~~bed~~."

"How many?" asked Robin, taking his bow from its case.

"It be too dark to see plain, but there be at least a dozen all told."

"The more the merrier," said the friar cheerily.

There was a sudden sharp twang, and Robin uttered an exclamation.

"My bow-string hath snapped!" he said, approaching the torch, now flickering to its end. "Ha! As I thought! It hath been nicked half through! Look to yours, brothers. Be they the same?"

Tuck and Little John looked and cursed, for both had been treated in the same way.

"But there be a bundle o' new strings in my pack," said Robin. "Reach me the light. Plague on it!"

The torch had gone out as it was moved.

"The landlord comes alone, to see if we be sleeping, most like," whispered Thom from the window.

"I will see to him!" growled Little John. "String my bow when yours be ready, Robin, and do ye all snore."

Fumbling in the darkness, Robin found the packet of strings, and went to work on the bows, while all four snored like the four Seven Sleepers.

Little John, crouched on the floor by the ladder-head, saw the door below open slowly and silently.

The figure of the innkeeper hovered for a moment, listening. Ever so cautiously he came up a few steps, his ears pricking for every sound, no doubt. Then, satisfied that his victims were sound, he retreated to the door and whistled softly.

"They be coming," said Thom, from the window.

Surely it could not have been the first time that travellers had been done to death in that old mill-tower, for the miscreants advanced with the confidence that comes only with practice.

One of them even made an evil jest as they crowded about the door.

The innkeeper spoke.

"Hold your tongue, Gamlyn!" he growled. "There be a beast o' a bear up there! Belike he snoozes lightly. See that you settle him first."

"Beast or man be all one to me!" grunted Gamlyn. "But we need a light. In this murk we may well hurt each other if the creature shows fight."

"As you will," said the innkeeper, and ran to the house.

Ere he returned, Robin had strung the three bows and passed two to his friends.

"Had that fellow had the brains of a mouse, he would ha' nicked the bow—not the string," he said. "Then we might have had reason to grumble. Wait till the foremost be near up. Here they come!"

The innkeeper handed a flaring torch to Gamlyn, and very prudently allowed

that gentleman and several others to pass before him.

Stealthily they mounted higher and higher, till Gamlyn's head and shoulders rose through the opening in the floor.

For a moment the torch light in his eyes dazzled him; then he saw three stern faces, three pairs of eyes, inflexible and hard as steel—and with that saw no more on earth, but reeled back with an arrow buried in his forehead.

A dreadful scream of surprise and terror rang from those who followed. They tried to turn, only to impede each other on the narrow stair, whilst hissing shafts drove through and through breast and arm and head.

Only for the hindmost was there a chance of escape.

The landlord, crouching low, darted across the yard and disappeared from view, but the others lay in a horrible, writhing heap on the stair-foot, dead or mortally wounded. At such short range the rapid discharge had wrought its utmost havoc.

Robin lifted the smoking torch from the floor and went down a few steps, covered by the others.

"Be any of you living?" he asked.

"With Bow and Blade"

is the title of another Fine,
Long, Complete Tale of the

Outlaws of Sherwood Forest

which appears in No. I of

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But no voice answered him, and the writhing had ceased. If any lived in that pile, he preferred to suffer in silence.

"We ha' settled that lot!" said he, returning. "I shot ten shafts."

"And I the like," growled Little John.

"And I nine, which be nine-and-twenty," said Tuck. "Two or three a-piece. La! An' they had time to think, they must ha' fancied they had run into the great porcupine, a beast which throweth his spikes at his enemy. Now, I will take a turn at watching while you snooze."

Thus they snatched a brief rest on the very field of battle, and with the first light took their packs and descended the stairs.

The dead lay as they had fallen—no pretty sight.

"As ragged a crew of rascals as ever came to their just end," quoth the friar. "They be of the sort that would cut an old woman's throat for a farthing and quarrel over dividing of the spoil."

"Yet they were honest beside that Judas of a landlord," Robin said. "Would I might have a sight of him. He would play no more tricks on travelers."

But they searched the inn in vain, discovering only the serving maid hidden in the cellar, who could or would tell nothing, so, after making a hearty meal on the best the place provided, though they risked no drink, they went on their way.

Hardly had they done a mile, however, than Barney stopped short, growled fiercely, and dashed into the underbush with the four at his heels.

"Tally ho!" yelled the friar, who, in spite of his bulk, was nimble as a cat, and first to burst through the fringe of copse to the open ground beyond. "It be Judas! Yonder he goes—and likewise Barney! Lord, I thought not the creature could move so fast!"

Truly, the bear, in spite of his clumsy gait, was moving at a tremendous pace. The landlord, glancing over his shoulder, saw him drawing up and howled terribly. Evidently he lost his wits also, since if he had but had the courage to stand and use the long knife that gleamed in his hand, he might have crippled his pursuer and dodged his masters amongst the rocks that strewed the hillside.

Instead, he did a mad thing. Almost ahead of him a tall tree jutted from the verge of a deep ravine. Putting on a

spurt, the wretched man reached it, and climbed with frantic haste to the fork.

Barney followed. The innkeeper worked his way out upon a branch overhanging the precipice, and gibbering like a maniac, menaced the bear with his knife. Barney hesitated, tried the bough with cautious paw, and drew back as with a loud crack the branch gave way.

There was a frightful scream, a thud, then silence.

"He be gone to his account!" said Friar Tuck solemnly. "Come you down, Barney, you ha' done your part."

CHAPTER V.

ROBIN HOOD TO THE RESCUE.

WITHOUT further incident, save that once they had to lie hid while a long cavalcade of soldiers passed northwards towards the Scottish border, they came near the borders of Sherwood.

Robin Hood halted on the crest of a ridge, and pointed down to a little farmstead nestling among the trees.

"Yonder lies the place where I spent my days till von evil beast Peter drove me forth," he said. "I would like well to grip good Gaffer Hood's hand again and hear old Goody, that keeps his house and brought me up, say: 'There be a mighty fine sweet cake a-baking in the oven for 'ee, Robin my lad.' A rare good hand at cooking is Goody."

"I wonder if you will say as much when you win to your proper place and sit to dinner in your own hall?" asked Friar Tuck. "Sir Robert Fitzurze may not ha' the same tastes, nor the same friends as run-the-wood Robin Hood."

"Whatever befall, I will ne'er be false to the one or the other," declared Robin earnestly. "If ever I come to mine own and sit in Castle Rising, ye three shall be ever welcome."

"Then make we haste," said Little John, "for yonder ride some that look to be they who hold your castle at present. As I live it is Black Peter—and by him rides that dog you winged but were fool enough to spare, Red Hugh."

"This makes home, sweet home, in sooth," laughed Robin. "They are over strong and over far off to have a fling at 'em. Yet next time they come seeking us in the greenwood, they may not come off so lightly. We can face 'em now, thanks to that Hamburg ship."

"I wonder whither they ride?" muttered the friar. "They be mighty gay. Is there perchance a tourney or other gaiety toward?"

"That we shall find presently," said Little John.

And so it proved, since when they reached the camp in the forest, late in the day, they found the outlaws who had already arrived all talking of but one thing as they worked at the rebuilding of the huts.

"It be the talk of the countryside for many a mile around," explained Scarlett, resting a moment from his labours. "Prince John be coming to Nottingham, a month hence. He has made proclamation that there he will hold a grand spear running, wi' fine prizes. Black Peter rides about the country bidding the knights come."

"But will they? He is not loved over well."

"I have heard he speaks very sweetly to each, promising favours no end."

"More Judas work!" grunted Tuck.

"See you, Robin, the Prince is about to do treason against his brother, our good King Richard. Therefore he tries to win as many as he may to his party beforehand, and this tournament is a good way to gather them together."

"So that many a man who comes innocently will find himself marked as a traitor, and perhaps will turn one in sooth, thinking that thus he may best save his head," cried Robin. "Oh! A very neat way! I ha' a mind to try to warn 'em."

"An outlaw and a wolf's head!" gibed the friar. "Think you any would believe? You would be delivered over to John Hangman instanter, or to Black Peter, which would be worse. Let us wait. That good Templar is even now on his way to warn the King."

There was no help for it. With all the patience he could muster, Robin set himself to strengthening the camp. Pitsfalls were dug around it, with a multitude of sharp stakes set between. Soon it was so strong that it looked able to withstand any force likely to be brought against it.

Meanwhile, merchants travelling to Nottingham with goods to sell at the festival came through the forest in ever-increasing numbers.

Once, before Robin's coming, they would have been stripped of all their gear but since he had pointed out that

this was to kill the goose that laid golden eggs, another plan had been followed.

From each merchant with his goods they took ten ducats, and though this was a heavy toll, they paid it willingly enough, because it gave them security against certain murderous villains who sneaked about the forest borders.

Once the toll was paid, Robin had them escorted to the safety of the high road, and they were content with the arrangement.

"We be doing well," said Friar Tuck blithely, as he stowed away a bag that chinked in the treasury chest. "An' it were safe, we might all go to this tournament and enjoy of ourselves wi' the best. 'Tis not long now. The knights begin to come."

Robin sighed. If he had but his rights, he, too, might have been riding gaily to tilt with his fellows in the lists. If only he might have gone to King Richard himself and told his story, he believed that the good king would set him in his proper place. But it was not to be, he thought sadly, or at least not for a long while.

"Yet I would like well to learn how to manage a lance," he said half aloud.

"A brave sport it must be, this tilting," Little John, sprawled on a bench beside him, looked up.

"Hey! Would you now?" he grunted. "Well, if that be your wish, I can teach you the trick of it. It will be easy, since you ride full well and have a steady hand."

"You!" cried Robin in astonishment. "And how come you to know anything of the game?"

"You be not the only one here of gentle birth," growled John. "Myself had a good knight for father, though I never tell his name. He brought me up in all knightly ways, and left me what he thought was a fair heritage."

"Then how come you to be a wolf's head in the greenwood?" asked Tuck.

"Through one of your cloth," replied Little John, scowling. "My father held his land of an abbey. The abbot was a grasping grab-all. He claimed of me tithes and dues no end that I might succeed to what had been my father's."

"That would be escuage or the knight's fee, tallage, and so forth," murmured Tuck.

"It was more than I could pay, at least," went on John. "So the abbot

sent men to seize all my goods. I was young, but I withstood them. Two I dropped in their tracks, and the others fled. I had to do the like, being outlawed, and here I be. But I know well how to manage a lance, Robin, and will teach you right willingly."

"Then let us to it now," Robin exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Two of yon horses we took from the copier yesterday in lieu of fee will serve, and we ha' armour enough and to spare."

"If you must needs be bowled over a horse's tail, so be it!" assented Little John. "But blame me not an' you go bruised to bed."

Quickly the horses were saddled, and taken to a level strip of turf in an open glade near the camp, where all of the outlaws who were not on duty gathered at once to see the sport.

Robin and Little John, clad in mail, appeared, and were greeted with cheers. Each carried his helmet and triangular shield, while Thom Cure All staggered behind them with two long and heavy tilting lances with blunt heads.

The pair mounted, cantered to and fro, and charged past each other several times that the horses might become used to the clink of their harness; then they took their lances.

"Now, Robin," said Little John, "balance your lance and lay it in rest, so. Aim for the middle of my shield, and keep it steady, so. Rein short, that you may keep the mastery of your horse, so."

"So, so, so," gibed Robin, imitating his movements. "Why, it is simple enow. A child could do it if he had the strength."

"Let us see," chuckled Little John. "Simple things are not always easy."

They wheeled to either end of the sward, turned, and at a word from Tuck, charged.

Alack and alas for Robin! The heavy lance wobbled woefully, swung wide, missing John's shield altogether, and in a twinkling he was borne over his horse's crupper to roll across the turf like a shot rabbit, amidst a roar of laughter from the onlookers.

But though he was cast down, he was not discomfited.

"Dogged does it, lads!" he shouted, scrambling to his feet. "Every trade must be learned. Have at you again, John."

He remounted. Again the pair thun-

dered against each other, and this time Robin contrived to hold his lance in line.

With a crack and a crash, both of the tough ash shafts flew to splinters, both horsemen reeled, recovered themselves, and passed on waving their lance butts.

"Well done, Robin!" shouted John. "If you go on like this, 'twill soon be my turn to roll."

And in the course of a day or two, during which they practised constantly, this came to pass. Little John was slung from his saddle like a stone from a sling, and rolled across the glade, even as he had prophesied.

"You'll do!" he gasped, sitting up. "You have the seat and the hands and the knack of the game."

"And no chance to put it in practice," muttered Robin. "For even if I were to go to Nottingham in disguise, I might not ride the lists, for I am no knight."

"Take it not to heart," said Little John. "That may come sooner or later. Meanwhile, keep we to it, that you may be ready when it does."

So time passed till the day before the one on which the great tournament was to be held came round.

Robin lay alone in a thicket overlooking the main road on the outskirts of the forest, staring enviously after a gay party of knights and ladies disappearing in the direction of Nottingham.

With all his heart and soul he wished that he were one of those care-free gallants riding so blithely to tilt for the honour of his lady love. The road was empty now. The merchants with their laden mules and pack-horses, and all the riff-raff who followed fairs and other gatherings, were already in Nottingham.

Robin sighed wearily and was about to turn away when a movement in the light birchwood that fringed the roadway everywhere caught his eye. He lay still, watching.

Presently a briar clump stirred and an evil-looking face peeped out, gazing long down the road, drawing back again as someone plucked his shoulder.

"This looks like evil intended for the next comer," thought Robin, shifting his quiver. "Maybe I can bear a hand."

An hour passed, during which heads to the number of at least a score popped up and down impatiently.

Robin watched, his heart hot with anger, for the ill deeds of these scum were like to be laid at his door. With a single blast of his horn he might have

summoned aid, but most likely the foul gang would fly ere it came. It would be better to wait a fitter opportunity.

Far down the road appeared the figures of a knight, with his squire riding beside him. They rode quite at ease, with never a thought of danger; their helmets at their saddle bows, and the breeze carried the sound of music. The knight was singing as he rode, the squire accompanying him on a lute.

The gang in the brushwood crept together. From his vantage ground Robin could see that several were armed with bows. The unsuspecting travellers were to be shot down with never a chance to strike a blow in self-defence, since even a bungler could scarce miss their unprotected heads.

Swiftly Robin made up his mind. He broke the iron head from an arrow, took careful aim, and let fly. Glancing high in a long arc, it dropped and shivered down upon the knight's breastplate.

Evidently the man was an old campaigner. Even before the splinters reached the road he had dived his head into his helmet and drawn his sword.

There was an howl of rage from the brushwood men. Their bows twanged, the two horses reared high and fell kicking. The knight leapt clear, but the squire was entangled beneath his fallen steed. As his master turned to free him, the miscreants swarmed from their ambush, many more than Robin had thought, and rushed in yelling ferociously.

Robin blew his horn, then fell to shooting into the pack raging like wolves around the knight, who, standing over his squire, kept them at bay with sweeping swordstrokes.

Robin ran forward, pausing to shoot between each stride, yet though the outermost of that villainous ring fell to his shafts, the others, eager for so rich a booty as the knight's splendid equipment, promised, took no heed of what was happening behind them.

Several had dropped beneath that swinging blade, when a fellow who seemed to be their leader, a gigantic brute of a man, heaved aloft a great pole and brought it crashing on the knight's neck from behind.

Not the strongest man on earth could have stood up to such a blow. The knight tottered, his sword dropped, he swayed forward, blinded and dizzy.

Robin fired his last shafts, dropping

two more fellows, drew his sword, and dashed in, hewing right and left.

Though he had thinned the gang not a little, a round dozen were still on their legs. They closed about him as he gained the knight's side, striking, clanging. A heavy stone struck his cheek, he felt a knife grate his ribs, dashed his left fist in a gibbering face, and through a red mist saw a scarlet wound leap up on another man's shoulder as his sword went home.

Then the crowd melted suddenly. They seemed to fall away from him as he struck, there was a rush of feet, a babel of shouts, twanging of bows and the hiss and thud of arrows finding their mark.

"Be you hurted, cap'n?" bawled Friar Tuck, striding to his side and thrusting forth a supporting arm. "By the saints! You have had a warm minute here."

"I be all right. Deal wi' those varlets!"

Tuck looked round. Already the men of the company were turning back to their leader, unstringing their bows as they came.

"They be dealt with," replied Tuck. "Never a varlet o' them all has won clear, so far as I can see. But who be this gentleman?"

The knight raised himself slowly, lifted his helmet, and surveyed them smiling.

"Well met, good fellows," he cried in a round, hearty voice. "It seems I owe ye life, especially this lad whom I marked running to me, shooting as he came. I thank you all. Hither, lad!"

He beckoned Robin imperiously, threw his arm around him and kissed him on either cheek.

"Presently we will talk," he went on. "Meantime, my good squire hath had the breath trampled out of him, though I think he has no other hurt. Lift him up, good fellows, and bear him to wherever ye have your habitation. Strip the harness from these poor beasts that will never bear rider again and fetch it also. I will e'en with you, to bathe and refresh myself, for such a clapper-clawing has ne'er fallen to me before."

Robin smiled at this calm assumption of command, but nodded to his men to obey, even to his country breeding it was evident that the stranger was a man of rank.

"Yet, I venture, fair sir, that you have seen many a greater field than this," he said, offering his arm.

"True, lad. I have taken some small

part in great battles; yet, never have I been nearer death than in this roadside bicker. Indeed, I thought it the end, for when I was a babe a wise woman foretold that I should live through great fights and perish in a little one. Presently you shall see me not ungrateful that you cheated fate this once."

"Perchance you were at the battle of Jaffa, in the Holy Land?" asked Robin.

"Indeed, I was!" replied the knight, smiling oddly. "What know you of it?"

"I ha' met with a good knight, a Templar named John Beauchamp, who rode with our brave King Richard on that day."

"Know you Beauchamp? How?"

"It was my fortune to help deliver him from captivity aboard a ship of Hamburg," said Robin. "He is now gone to serve the King on a matter of great importance. Know you the King, messire?"

"I know him very well," replied the knight. "Certes, none love him better, though there are those that say I am his worst enemy. But that is the way of the world. Are you loyal men to His Majesty?"

"That are we all," answered Robin stoutly. "We be outlawed, 'tis true, but our chief enemy is one that purposes treason. He is called Black Peter, and is hand in glove wi—"

"Name no names!" said the knight sharply, and was silent until the party reached the camp, where he looked about him with a keen, soldierly glance.

"You ha' made yourselves a strong place," he said. "And now, I will bathe me and rest."

He stepped to his squire's side, laying a finger on his lips, whispered in his ear, then followed Robin to his hut.

"Call on us freely for aught you may need, Sir Knight," said Robin, and left the pair together, while he went to look to his own cuts and bruises which were many.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LANCES OF SHERWOOD.

TWICE had the broken pot that served for bell been well banged by the cook's boy, the outlaws were all seated in their messes, when the rescued knight came out of Robin's hut, his squire walking a pace behind him.

Though he wore his sword, he had put off his mail and donned a long robe of silk, trimmed with an edging of ermine, a beautiful garment that made Little John, who loved fine clothing, sigh with envy.

Robin Hood led him to the table, seated him at the head, and the squire at the foot.

"Ye be our guests," said he. "Therefore I would not constrain ye. Yet it is our custom to drink to our valiant King ere we start to eat."

"I will drink the toast with a right good will!" cried the knight, gasping his cup. "The poor man hath need of all kind wishes."

"The King!" shouted Robin. "May he soon come back and make England merrie once again!"

The band responded with a cheer, emptied their mugs and set to the business of eating. Robin helped his guest from a huge venison pasty.

"Ha!" cried the knight, tasting it. "You have a good cook and good victuals in the greenwood. Truly, this is the most toothsome rabbit I have tasted for a long while."

"Rabbit!" cried Tuck indignantly. "I would have you know that this is

"Rabbit!" insisted the knight. "Since well I know that such loyal folks as you be would ne'er loose a shaft at the King's deer, the same being a felony."

"Ah! Um!" mumbled the friar. "Have it your own way. At least, I warrant me you had no such provender in Palestine. Tell me, is it true as I have heard that our King Dickie be a poor trencher man. One told me that he ate no more than a bird. A Dickie-bird, forsooth! What be the matter, young man?"

He turned to the squire, who had spluttered as though about to choke.

"Nought! Nought!" said the youth, and dropped his nose over the tankard. The knight's face purpled, but his mouth was too full of pastry to reply at once.

"That same is a foul lie!" he roared, when chewing had cleared the way.

"A fable! A black tarradiddle! Go to, man! Richard and I are a twin match therein, and what say you to my work?"

"Fair, very fair!" admitted the friar, refilling the knight's empty plate.

"'Tis sad how a man's fair fame may be blackened behind his back."



The Germans fell back as the storm of Englishmen burst over the bulwarks.

And through the remainder of the meal he muttered vengefully against all backbiters.

Meanwhile, the knight talked with Robin, and little by little, without seeming to question him, drew forth his whole story, how his parents had been foully slain, most likely by Black Peter, who held his whole patrimony.

So far did he win the young man's confidence, that Robin showed to him the papers that proved his story true. These the knight glanced through swiftly.

Then, beckoning his squire to his side, he rose to his feet and motioned imperiously.

"Draw in, good fellows!" he cried. "Come close about me. I have something to say that concerns you all, though mostly your captain. Hither, young man!"

Hardly knowing why he was so meek, Robin obeyed, while the outlaws around crowded the table open mouthed.

"Kneel!" commanded the knight.

Still in a daze, Robin dropped mechanically on his knees. The knight's great sword flashed from its scabbard.

"Be just! Be loyal!—Be valiant!" he cried in a loud voice. The sword flickered and fell flatways on Robin's neck. "Arise, Sir Robin! Kiss me, brother!"

With that Robin was drawn to his feet, the knight's brawny arm went round his shoulders, he was kissed on either cheek and then on the forehead. Robin's dearest wish was fulfilled. He had been dubbed a knight!

The stockade rang with cheering. None of those men but understood what that blow upon neck and shoulder meant. Quite unselfishly, they rejoiced that an honour so undreamt of should have fallen upon their young captain out of the sky, as it were.

"But—but—who be you that deal knighthood to an outlawed man?" he stammered, as the shouting died down.

"Raoul, tell them," quoth the knight.

The squire leapt upon the table.

"Good people all!" he cried. "Lift your voices, shout, give tongue with joyful hearts! I present ye all to this most puissant lord, Richard, Count of Anjou, of Poictou, Overlord of Brittany and of Aquitaine, Duke of Normandy and—King of England!"

At that you would have thought a thunderbolt had smitten through these

close packed ranks. Down went those sinners on their knees and a cry went up from the very bottom of their hearts:

"Pardon, Lord King!"

"Especially unto me that did call thee a dickie-bird," croaked Tuck.

Richard laughed.

"Nay, friar, penitence doth ill become you. It sticks in my memory that you did most stoutly denounce that vile accuser. Get up! Get you all on your legs, men. I be a soldier like yourselves, and soldiers need no long speeches. I give ye all free pardon for your offences, and will presently see that it is writ down and shouted at the crossways."

"The saints keep your noble majesty!" they shouted.

"Nay, I look to you who be sinners, for that," said Richard dryly. "Harkee, men! I am here in secret, having had word sent me by your good captain. I am come to spy out the land, and break a lance at my fair brother's tourney. To-morrow in the morning, I ride to Nottingham, with one or two only. Perhaps I may have need to leave in haste. Then will I come hither, trusting your stout arms to keep me from harm."

"Trust us for that, my liege!" said Sir Robin. "Now it seemeth to me that the first question is of horses. We have nags a few, but they are sorry beasts, though Little John and I ha' run many a course w' them."

"You have? Then you know something of knightly arms already?"

"But a little, sire."

"Then I will myself teach you more. Arm me, Raoul, then take a horse, ride back to Sir John Beauchamp. Bid him camp here to-morrow, but bring you horses here instanter. Now, Sir Robin, don your armour, and I will instruct you as I may."

"Oh, sire!" said Robin gratefully, and ran to put on his fighting gear.

It was a great honour. Richard was the greatest general of his time, and one of the best jousters that ever laid lance in rest, yet he did not disdain to instruct a beginner.

"These are sorry steeds for the work," he said, as the horses were brought out, "To-morrow you shall have better. Now, mark my seat."

He bent his long body a little forward, gripping the horse with his legs.

"Remember you have a hingo midway. Let it give to my stroke, else I will tilt

you clean out of the saddle. Take your distance. Now!"

They charged. Robin shivered his lance fairly against what seemed an unyielding pillar of iron, and by giving to the counter thrust just escaped being hurled over his horse's tail.

"None so bad!" cried Richard. "Nay, very good. Let me tell you, lad, that there be seasoned knights' that would ha' gone down to that. Try me again."

They ran another course with much the same fortune, and would have ridden again had not the horses refused to move out of a trot.

"Poor beasts! They are not used to such work. Now, my great horse, Saladin, carried me through the day of Jaffa, though the sun was hotter than ever England knows," said Richard alighting. "But he was desert bred, from Saladin's own stud. Indeed that worthy king sent him to me but a week before with a message of brotherly kindness."

"But—I thought that he was an infidel, sire, a follower of the prophet Mahound!" cried Robin in amazement.

"Truly, yet none the less there was a regard between us that continues to this day. There be many worst kings in Christendom than Saladin Yussuf Ibn Ayub. He, I could trust to keep his word. There be those nearer who—"

He broke off, frowning darkly as his thoughts flew to his brother's treachery.

"By Lacy!" he muttered. "He shall—" His hand leapt to his sword hilt. "What under Heaven is that?"

A huge, hairy form had risen before him as he entered the stockade around the camp, a thing near as tall as he, holding a lance at the salute.

"Tis another of your majesty's subjects would pay his homage," said the voice of Thom Cure All. "His name be Barney. Hup!"

Barney threw three somersaults in quick succession, presented arms with his spear, danced a shuffling breakdown, and finally squatted on end with a paw upraised as though begging forgiveness.

"If it is pardon you want, Master Ursus, you have it!" said Richard, laughing. "You have taught him well, man. I knew not the greenwood harboured so much talent. You shall have a place as bearward at Windsor, an' you will."

"I thank your majesty—but I be a doctor," replied Thom with much dignity. "I can cure many ills."

"Would you cure the fever that lingers in my bones?" cried Richard.

"I can ease it at least," said Thom boldly. "There was an old knight of York that taught me a remedy. He had it from a Moor of Spain, having fought there. If your majesty will but try it, it will bring relief."

Richard looked at him earnestly, then nodded.

"Bring me the draught. This is no court where one needs a taster," he said.

And when presently Thom brought him a cup of odd smelling liquor, he tipped it down unhesitatingly.

"An' this eases the burning that ever troubles me, you shall go with me hereafter and walk in velvet," he promised.

"That will be fine; but to know as I've done 'ee good will please me better," murmured Thom. "Now lie you down and cover you up till it works."

Quite forgetting all etiquette, he hustled Richard to Robin's bed, made him lie down, and tucked him up.

Richard grinned indulgently.

"You have good hearts in the greenwood," he muttered, and fell into a sleep from which he awakened late in the afternoon mightily refreshed, to find Raoul returned with four splendid chargers, fully equipped.

"You have done well," said Richard.

"Hither, Master Doctor! Your draught hath made a new man of me. Trust me, you shall have your reward. Sir Robin, shall we ride for Nottingham presently? If we leave it till morning, the horses will be tired, and we may need them fresh. What say you?"

"You are right, sire. How say you if a half of these, your faithful bowmen, come with us so far as the edge of the forest and lie there ready? Should this treason come to a head, and we have to leave in haste, they will be there to cover the retreat."

"A right soldierly thought," agreed the King. "Now, it is fitting that you should have a squire."

"That job will I take," said Little John.

"And I crave to take command of they who will lie in wait," said Friar Tuck.

"Lest the Dickie-bird should have to fly, eh?" chuckled Richard. "So be it. Now remains but one thing. These shields have no device, but Raoul can twiddle a paint brush indifferent well.

What shall it be? We will have the same on each, which will puzzle folks rarely, seeing we are of a height, though you have not yet my bulk."

"Since we come out of Sherwood, and the trees thereof are mostly oak, would an oak tree serve, sire?" suggested Robin.

"Good. An oak proper, Raoul. And throw in a running deer—no, a rabbit with antlers, for good measure. If there were time and room therefor I would have a right huge party also, but those will serve. We shall be the Lances of Sherwood. Speed, lad, speed!"

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK PETER BETRAYS THE KNIGHTS.

THE lists for the great tournament had been set up in a meadow outside the walls of Nottingham.

On one side of the space, fenced off by a breast-high paling of sharpened stakes, stood a line of stands reserved for Prince John and all the great lords and ladies of his court.

Opposite these was another, but less gaily decorated row, which served for the mayor of Nottingham and those wealthy burghers who had, very much against their will, paid all the expenses of the show, for which John took the credit.

That was a little way he had, and his brother's good subjects liked him none the better for it.

Nevertheless, a show was always welcome, and though their betters looked a trifle glum, the citizens who hadn't paid a farthing shouted themselves hoarse when the Prince was seen at the head of the procession which issued from the castle gates and rode slowly across the field to the grand-stand.

At once there was a bustle among the groups of tents at either end of the ground where those knights who had not lodged in town or castle had spent the night.

Saddle girths were tightened, spurs buckled on, then a mighty clanking and rattling as the heavily armoured knights were hoisted into their saddles, to join the tail of the procession.

One or two late comers, who had not yet satisfied the heralds that they were entitled to take part, had just proved their claim, and Rouge Dragon, the chief herald present, a very gorgeous gentleman attended by two trumpeters, was about to order the lists to be cleared when a page saluted him.

"My lord, here are two knights who will not tell their names or quality to the scrivener, but would speak with you privily. They bear the same arms, and keep their faces hid."

"Confound all silly fools who will play these knight-errant tricks!" growled Rouge Dragon. "Why could they not come earlier?"

But all the same he rode towards the little booth where was kept the roll on which would be jousters names and rank were inscribed.

It was not unusual for a young knight who wished to create a mild sensation, to hide his name and his face, till he had done something to distinguish himself; and sometimes a man of great reputation would do the same so that he might have the pleasure of knocking about those who would otherwise have avoided an encounter with him.

Rouge Dragon thought he had a sample of either sort before him as he ran his eyes over the two finely accoutred knights who silently saluted him.

One was evidently young and not yet quite at home with his gear, the other lounged in his saddle with an ease of bearing that told of long habit.

"Ye must give your names and bearings to me, gentles," said the herald. "Here is no place for nameless men. N'theless, as ye know, I am silent till ye bid me speak, so your secrets be safe with me."

He motioned them aside to the cover of a pavilion apparently unoccupied.

"This," said the elder knight, in a high, false voice, pointing to his companion, "is Sir Robin Fitzurze, a young gentleman of good blood."

"Fitzurze!" exclaimed the herald with a start of surprise. "That is a good name and old, though it hath not been heard of these many years past. Yet I remember it not in my list of those admitted to the calendar of arms of late."

"Then the sooner you put it there, the better for you!" growled the knight. "I knighted him myself yesterday. Judge for yourself whether I have the right!"

He threw back the hood that covered his face. The herald gasped, and nearly fell off his horse in sheer astonishment.

"My liege lord!" he stammered. "Of a certainty, none better. But have care, sire. I am loyal, and so kept in the dark, but there are those who would not shrink from treason. There is danger, sire."

"And danger is dearer than meat and drink to me," quoth Richard carelessly. "Have no fear. My hands can guard my head. Now, write us down as the Lances of Sherwood, and we will to work."

With fingers that trembled, Rougo Dragon hastened to obey, after which the pair followed him into the lists, never heeding the man in black armour who peered after them from the shadow of the pavilion door.

"Oh, miracle of luck!" chuckled Black Peter softly, "that it should bring hither the two chiefest of my enemies, the young springald, who hath claim to my lance, and Richard himself! They have delivered themselves into the net of the fowler."

In high good humour he sought to speak with Prince John, but found he must wait a while, for the prince was making a high-flor'n speech to the knights assembled below him. Several courses had already been run before he reached John's side, and found him staring at a tall knight who was just taking his place at the further end of the lists.

"Surely I have seen that tall fellow before," muttered John. "Yet I have never set eyes on yon device on his shield. What is it?"

"It should be a curtain, or a pillar of smoke, since it hides the man behind it from your eyes, my lord," said Peter, with an evil grin.

"Nay, I make it a tree and a deer, though never saw I stag with ears so long or legs so short. Ha! He rides mighty well. Oh, good lance! Saw you ever a stroke like that? Look, Do Vere is rolling still."

The tall knight's opponent had been slung clear out of his saddle, and with such violence that when the attendants ran to pick him up they found him senseless.

"Oh, truly a good lance," assented Peter, as he thought how John's tunc

would change when he learned who the good lance was. He was in no hurry to tell him now. There was much of the cat in his nature. He loved to play with the victims of his humour.

"And here comes another with the same device," went on the prince. "Not so old and not so skilful. Still, he shapes well. Be they brothers?"

"Brothers in arms, belike," replied Peter.

"And in fortune, I hope," added John. "Good lad, I wish him luck!"

All he had learned so recently ran through Robin's mind as, with lance in rest, he sat his great war horse, waiting the trumpets to sound the charge. Of all the throng he saw but one, his

opponent, sitting motionless as a statue.

He was a broad, thickset fellow, who looked as though he were made all in one piece.

"No hinge in his middle," thought Robin, recalling Richard's words. And as the trumpets sounded shifted his lance a little.

Down the lists they thundered, nearer and nearer, till Robin could see the glint of his opponent's eyes through the slit in his helmet, brought

his lance-point to a line with them, and they closed with a crash.

Robin felt the other's lance-head jar home on the shield hanging on his breast, and gave back enough to lose the full force of the blow as the shaft shivered into fragments, though he held his own weapon straight.

Its tough and well-seasoned wood withstood the shock of meeting. The man whose helmet met it did not. Stiff and unyielding as a hogshead, he capsize heels over head out of his saddle, and lay where he fell.

"Oh, good lance!" yelled John, who loved to see such merry sport, though he seldom ventured his precious person himself. "Who 'is he?"

Black Peter's moment had come.

Two More Splendid Romances

of

ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY MEN

will appear on

MAY 15th

See page ii of cover.

"I was in my tent, and heard Rouge Dragon ask the same question."

"And the answer, man? What are you grinning for?"

"For pure joy," answered Peter. "The younger fellow's name was given as Sir Robin Fitzurze. But you may better remember him as the pestilent thief who stole those letters of mine, and escaped me, as I told you. In short, he is the outlaw, Robin Hood!"

John's ruddy face grew dark red with anger.

"Go!" he growled. "Take him and hang him! But first let him be scourged round the lists because he hath pretended to be a knight."

"Wait," said Peter. "What of the other, the one who said he had dubbed him knight, the one Rouge Dragon called 'liege lord' and 'sire' when he saw his face?"

The flush died from John's cheeks, leaving him deadly pale.

"Richard here!" he whispered. "I might have known it. There was something in his carriage and bearing I thought I knew. How much can he have learned about—about—"

"About our precious treason?" asked Peter coolly. "All, I should say. Now is the moment for a bold stroke, my lord, beyond those yonder. I will take my man Red Hugh and sundry others and see to it."

"Go, then!" muttered John. "Yet stay. He is my brother, and—"

But Black Peter had waited for no after thoughts. He knew his master, and knew also that if his own neck were to be saved, Richard must die. He crept out behind the stand, and began to muster those of his men upon whom he could depend utterly.

Meantime Robin Hood had wheeled his horse and rode slowly back beneath the balcony where were gathered all the ladies of John's court. Flowers showered down upon him, kerchiefs fluttered, and bright eyes looked down upon him kindly, for he bore himself bravely.

Robin looked up as he dropped his lance point in salute, and from all that bank of fair faces set like blossoms in a fine garden, one seemed to leap to his eyes.

There, in the uppermost row, with two stalwart serving maids and a grim man at arms behind her seat, was the Lady Marian de Vaux!

Robin was thunderstruck. He had

imagined her safe with the old knight, her uncle, far away in London, secure from the evil Black Peter, who, with an eye to her lands, had had himself made her guardian. Yet here she was, apparently in his power once again!

She glanced at Robin indifferently, since she could not guess that the young yeoman she had known was before her, transformed to a gallant knight, nor dare Robin make a sign lest her watchful attendants, who seemed in some sort jailers also, should see.

It seemed to him odd that she should be constrained among so many people, but it was no time to linger. He passed on and out to the tent that had been set aside for the couple, and found Richard awaiting him patiently.

"I have seen enough," said the King. "Some of these people are dipped too deep to go back, no doubt, but the great part of them are but lukewarm traitors. I think we will slip quietly off, return with force, and persuade my sweet brother that the air of a tower top at Windsor will be good for his health. Summon me Raoul."

Robin turned about to do so.

"To horse, sire!" he yelled, flashed out his sword and struck down the foremost of a dozen men who had crept up silently, and now rushed into the pavilion with their daggers drawn.

He saw Richard slash out at one who struck at his unprotected head, saw him cut the canvas side of the tent open, then a tremendous weight seemed to beat on his brain and he sunk down insensible.

Richard leapt through the hole he had made, turned, saw Robin fall, and without a thought for his own safety would have gone to his assistance had not Raoul, his squire and Little John jumped into the breach before him.

"Fly, sire, and return with force!" cried the squire. "Think of England, not of us!"

And Richard did what he had never done before, turned his back upon the fight, sprang upon the nearest horse, and drove home the spurs. What the squire suggested was true. If he should fall, the kingdom would be ruled by his brother, faithless, cruel, and detested John. Even at the price of seeming a coward, Richard preferred to save his country from such a fate, if he could.

The horse roared, a man with a red beard darted at its head, clatching the

rein, whilst his other hand whirled up a sword to strike.

Richard drew the beast on its haunches and smote his gauntleted hand in the fellow's face. It crumpled under the blow. Red Hugh, with a hoarse cry, loosed his grip and fell as the King thundered over him.

A knight in black armour, with several more at his tail, galloped from behind the line of stands, seeking to cut off his retreat, but Richard was already clear.

Yet they hung on, only a few strides behind him as he turned off from the road, leapt the hedge, and on the rough ground speedily began to gain on his pursuers.

For a little while they kept on hoping for a stumble that might give them a chance to close, but the great black horse seemed tireless. He soared like a bird over every obstacle, increasing his lead with every stride.

The pursuers drew rein. Richard turned in his saddle, threw back the hood from his face, and shouted in a great voice:

"Home to your kennels, dogs! And wot well that if harm befalls my friends you shall pay!"

At that he was gone down a long slope of clean turf, while five of the six who had hunted him turned upon the man in black.

"You told us that here were only two varlets who made mock of us by pretending to be knights!" cried one.

"And it is the King!" yelled another, in a voice hoarse with fright.

"Oh, aye!" replied Black Peter calmly. "The King it is. Had ye but been a little more forward, I might have been able to say, 'the King it was!'"

"And you have made us traitors!" cried another. "He will never forgive us!"

"I think it very unlikely," went on Peter evenly. "Richard of Anjou is not built that way. Your necks are in the noose. Ye had best side w' him that will keep you clear of that most uncomfortable scarf, to wit, the noble John. He hath a force here gathered that will deal with this vengeful king. Shall we ride?"

The five looked at each other. They were between the devil and the deep sea, so it seemed. Muttering together, they rode back to the tilting ground.

Jousting was still going on. The attention of everybody had been riveted

on the lists, and the brief struggle behind the group of pavilions had passed unnoticed.

Prince John's mood had changed. From craven fear, he had veered to the opposite extreme of boastful self-confidence, as he recounted to himself all the promises of support that had been given him.

He looked around upon the courtiers, all pledged to back him in his effort to seize his brother's throne.

"Pah!" he muttered. "Richard must have had a word of what was brewing and come off in his usual hotheaded fashion with only a man or two at his back. We will drive them headlong, and take him. Then——"

He did not finish, but smiled darkly. Already he had doomed Richard to a vile death by poison or starvation in a dungeon's cell.

"We ha' missed the lion, but caught the jackals," said the voice of Black Peter at his elbow.

"Ha!" growled John. "String them up incontinent! Give them no chance to talk."

"They have been gagged," replied Peter. "But one is Richard's squire, Raoul de Coutanges. He is of high blood and if he be hanged, his folks will set up a great buzz. I counsel that we hold him in prison, yet hurt him not. For the others, I ha' a sweeter plan that will give pleasure to the people and keep their minds from thinking evil of your doings."

"Out with it, then."

"This Robin Hood hath been guilty of strange things," said Peter. "Once he came in a disguise to Castle Rising, and cast me into a deep sleep. He was put in bond in a safe place. Leopards prowled without, he had no arms. Yet he slew the beasts with arrow and steel and flew away over the walls, as can be proved by sundry of any men. And again, when I would have taken him from a ship in London river, he caused a demon of the pit to leap flaming upon us so that we escaped but hardly."

"Stuff!" barked John.

"Maybe, it was but Greek fire," admitted Peter. "But I have men who will swear that it was magic art. In short, have this Robin and t'other outlaw before the Bishop's court. He is your man and will do the business in short order. Then, to-morrow let them burn here in these lists. The whole town will

crowd to see the show and Malvoisin and his men will take the gates without hindrance."

"They are but a short march away," said John. "They could be here in the morning. Send word at once. And what after that?"

"Simply that you shall proclaim yourself in your brother's stead. Those of the town who will not swear allegiance to you will not be let in again, and you will have made a fair beginning to sweep the kingdom. Richard can have no force."

"No," agreed John. "We must have them commit themselves. The plan is crude, but it will serve. See to it."

CHAPTER VIII.

MARION DE VAUX AT CASTLE RISING.

ROBIN HOOD came to his senses on a pile of straw in a narrow cell of Nottingham Castle. His head ached horribly, and though the gag had been removed, his mouth was so swollen that only a harsh gurgle came forth when he strove to speak to his companions in misfortune, Raoul and Little John.

They too had suffered in the same way. For a while they could do nothing but mouth at each other.

Presently a jailor entered with a flagon of wine and a manchet of bread which he placed before Raoul.

"These are for you, young sir," he said. "Eat and fear not. No harm is intended you. You are to bide here a little, that is all. As for you, varlets, get you on your legs and follow me."

Robin made a sound that faintly resembled the word "whither."

The jailor grinned horribly.

"Where ye will not be happy, I reckon. Ye are to come before the good Bishop, instanter and immediate, to answer if ye may the charge of witchcraft. Come!"

Clanking the heavy irons that had been put upon them, the unfortunate couple were thrust forth into the midst of a group of men at arms, who hustled them down a long corridor and into a long, low room almost before the full meaning of the words had time to reach their dazed brains.

Witchcraft! There was horror in the very sound. Too often, the mere accusation was taken for proof, and the wildest fables found ready belief. It was but

one step from judgment to execution where witchcraft was concerned.

Neither Robin nor Little John could think of anything that they had done to give colour to the charge. Yet when they saw who sat on the bench beside the Bishop of Nottingham, who was to be their judge, they knew that the trial was a mere farce and that their doom was sealed.

Black Peter scowled at them, though he was quite happy. At last his enemy was in his hands.

The Bishop was a bigot who hated Richard and all his friends. He opened the business with a snarl, as it were.

"Ye be accused, fellows, of notorious witchcraft. Inasmuch as ye are already out of law, ye should have been hanged ere now. Yet since sorcery toucheth the Church right nearly, the matter hath been given into my hands that I might inquire into it strictly."

He paused and Robin tried to speak, but his swollen tongue and lips refused their office. He only babbled, while Little John could but grunt incoherently.

"The devil, their master, has stricken them dumb, methinks," said Peter.

"Doubtless," replied the Bishop, whose eyes were dim. "Crier, call the first witness."

Gaston la Touche, Peter's trusty lieutenant, stepped forward and took oath.

"Know you either of these men?" asked the Bishop.

"Yea, my lord. They are both known outlaws and robbers, who harbour in Sherwood Forest. This one is called Robin Hood. He came to Castle Rising in disguise, stole certain papers of my lord's, but was taken as he tried to go out. We put him in ward, but he broke out and got away."

"Tut! Here is no sorcery, fool!" said the Bishop sourly.

"Wait, my lord, till you hear of the manner of his going," said Gaston hastily. He wasn't the fellow to boggle over a lie or two, so let his imagination loose. "I was on guard upon the curtain wall, my lord, when, wi' these mortal eyes I did see this man, that I thought fast in the court below, come out upon the donjon top. He cried out something that sounded like 'Amen,' wi' a tail to it, whereat I stood stock still, not able to stir finger or shoot my arbalest at him as I had meant. Then two mighty great wings grew out of his

shoulders, he leapt from the tower top and floated out into the darkness. Nor of the patrol that I sent forth after him have any been heard of since."

The Bishop leaned forward eagerly in his chair.

"These words he cried out—were they 'Amen Haten, perchance?' he asked.

"Those very words," cried Gaston. "But my tongue could not get the twist o' them."

"See it does not," said his lordship, settling back. "They be the words that witches cry when they do start out on their broomsticks to ride the air. Truly, very evil words. Verily, I smell sulphur in them. Is that all you know?"

"Nay, my lord. Later on, being with my master in London, we did sight this sturdy rogue and that other who stands with him. We chased after them in a boat to the ship where they had taken refuge. We were at point of entering into the ship and laying hold of them, when out of the sky there came a fiery great bird, or maybe, it was a dragon. It had a beak longer than a man and belched fire continually, so that the boat was consumed, we being discomfited."

"Ay! Ay!" chuckled the Bishop, highly delighted. "That would be the bird Phoenix of which the ancients tell, a mortal, horrible creature. You are lucky to be alive, my man. Anything more?"

"I have spoken with Sir Guy of the Doubs, who tilted wi' this Robin today. He tells me that ere they closed he felt a strange weakness come over him, as though his blood were turned to water, so that he, who is a good lance, went down like a nine-pin. But of that he can speak himself, an' you will."

Sir Pierre le Noir, or Black Peter, was next called.

His evidence was very much the same sort of thing as his lieutenant's. He confirmed the yarn about the fiery bird, (which in truth, had but been a pair of trunk hose filled with a kind of Greek fire, by Thom Cure All) and clinched it by producing a piece of charred wood which he said had been part of the burned boat.

The other witnesses all took the same line. After hearing three of them, the Bishop professed himself satisfied.

"Have you anything to say for yourselves, graceless reprobates that ye are?" he asked glowering at the unhappy pair.

They looked at him speechless.

"Ha! Ye be still in the clutch of the evil one, I perceive," cried the Bishop. "There is no hope for such as ye. I therefore condemn ye both to death, and since it would ill become me to cause the shedding of blood, let it be done by fire, outside this fair city in the place his Highness shall appoint. Take them away!"

Robin and Little John were hauled back in the cell. They found that Raoul had been removed to another, but that food and wine had been placed for them.

"Eat well!" said the jailer. "Tomorrow in the morning ye roast, my bonnie birds. How the folks will laugh to hear ye howling. Sleep well!"

With a brutal laugh he left them to get what rest they might.

At once Robin made a sign to his companion to stand close to the wall beneath the window. Getting on his shoulders he managed to reach the sill and look out. There was no hope that way. Even if they could contrive to rid themselves of their fetters the window was too heavily barred to yield to anything but a blacksmith. While, should they succeed in passing the window, they would never cross the courtyard below unseen.

So they had perforce to resign themselves, and try to sleep in the hope that the morrow might perhaps bring a rescue.

But with the dawn came the gaoler. His mood seemed to have changed in the night. He no longer scowled and growled, but lowered his voice to a whisper, as he stooped, unlocked their irons, and made them fast again with a thin string.

"Look ye, I risk my neck to do this. I ha' fought for Dickie myself. Promise ye will not betray me," he murmured.

"That we will not," mumbled Robin, who had recovered a little of the power of speech. "Who paid you?"

"Ne'er mind that. If you have the chance, made a dash for it. At the worst, ye will be cut down, which is better than burning. You are to come wi' me now."

The sun still cast long shadows athwart the trampled turf of the lists, and Robin and his friend were led forth between two lines of heavily armed men; but a huge crowd was already assembled to see them die.

Everybody believed devotedly in witches. Anything in the least unusual was always put down to witchcraft. If

a housewife lost her thimble, or spoiled a batch of bread, or the butter wouldn't come, the cause was always the same—witchcraft.

Naturally, they were glad that their good bishop had succeeded in catching two who practised such a horrible art.

Prince John, with Black Peter in attendance, rode uneasily to and fro, glancing ever to the eastwards.

"Malvoisin is late," he said impatiently. "Did you not assure me he lay within a four hours' march?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I saw his camp myself three days back, when I carried him the money he required."

John groaned. He detested spending money on anyone but himself. Malvoisin, a captain of Free Companions, or soldiers who fought for anyone who would pay their price, had insisted on cash down. And since without these soldiers John's whole plot would fall to pieces, he had had to pay and look as happy as he might over the transaction.

He glanced at the sun. If the Free Companions, delayed much longer every thing would go to pieces, the people would go back to their houses, and the pretty plan of keeping out all but those who would back up his treason, come to naught.

"Hurry not the roasting," he said. "Spin out the agony. Ha! What are they all laughing at?"

"'Tis a mad fellow with a tumbling bear," said Peter, after one careless glance. "The creature is dancing with a mighty great pike in his paws."

"Let him dance a while before they light the bonfire," cried John, biting his nails. "Anything to keep 'em amused. You, fellow, ride out beyond the town and see if von scoundrels be not in sight."

Gaston la Touche bowed, and galloped away, leaving John and Black Peter to fidget.

Meanwhile Robin Hood and Little John had been taken to the foot of a pile of faggots heaped around a thick stake of green wood, from which dangled two sets of chains.

There the procession stopped and looked expectantly towards Prince John, waiting for word to begin.

The town executioner fumbled with flint and steel, kindled a torch, and waited, his eye on the town bailiff, who looked to the under-sheriff, who watched the mayor. And at this moment the

man with the bear came rolling and tumbling into the space kept clear around the place of execution.

"Thom Cure All and Barney!" gasped Robin under his breath.

But such a Thom! Even when Robin had first set eyes on him clad in a coat of many coloured patches, he had not looked such a wild scarecrow as now.

He had painted his face half yellow, half red. His clothes were daubed with spots of the same colours, while knots of bright ribbons floated from breast and neck and knees.

He sang as he pranced, a song without rhyme and without any particular tune.

"The lion ate deer and called it rabbit!
What ho! The merry tilting!
Though the lion may run he'll soon be
back.

What ho! The merry tilting!
So keep up your heart, my gentles all,
And watch the merry tilting!"

With that he began to put Barney through his drill, drawing over a little nearer the line of armed men about the prisoners. Robin's heart began to bound with excitement, for if the words meant anything at all, they surely signified that Richard was returning, and not alone.

And now there came the ring of hoofs upon the road. Prince John and Peter turned.

"Here is Gaston, and I hear the tramp of Malvoisin's men not far behind him," said Peter in a tone of great relief. "Will your Highness now bid the burning begin? I am fain to see the last of yonder villains."

"Truly, so am I," said John, and waved his hand to the under-sheriff, who waved to the town bailiff, who, turning about to the town executioner, cried briskly:

"Light up, John!" in a matter of fact way as though he were ordering a fire at an inn, instead of the roasting of two fellow-creatures.

"I must fix 'em up first," replied John. "Ha' either o' you warlocks any fancy about the way he'd like to look? There's some likes east and—waow! Keep away, you brute! Pike him!"

Barney seemed to have gone suddenly demented. In answer to a loud call from Thom he had rolled slap into the guard, bowling them over left and right by the unexpected assault.

In a jiffy he had cannoned into the executioner, sending him flying, and next

Instant the long spear he bore was in Robin's grip.

The strings that fastened the irons had given way the moment strain was put upon them. With all the strength of despair he lunged at the nearest guard, spitting him through the neck.

Little John, who had not been slow to follow his leader's example, snatched the fellow's halberd, and swung it to the executioner's ear. Down he went upon the pile of firewood, which being soaked with oil, instantly burst into a blaze as the flaming torch fell from his limp hand.

Then high above the laughter that rose from the people at this strange sight of an executioner about to execute himself, rose the shrill voice of Gaston la Touche, as with loose rein he galloped into the lists.

"Fly, my lord!" he yelled. "Malvoisin has sold us to Richard! They are hard on my heels, a thousand strong!"

At that the assembly fell to pieces.

The good citizens of Nottingham, disappointed of their jolly spectacle, bolted for home. They had no wish to be ridden over by the horsemen, who could now be seen topping the ridge but a short way off.

Prince John sprang on to a fresh horse, and with a few of those who were deepest in the plot, rode off towards the coast, where he had prudently kept a ship in case of accidents.

Black Peter did not go with him. He had other fish to fry. Shouting a war-cry to gather his men, he made off at top speed for Castle Rising.

As he passed out of one end of the tilt yard, King Richard, with Friar Tuck close at his heels, rode in at the other. Reining his weary horse beside the blazing pile of faggots, before which Robin Hood, Little John, and Thom Cure All with Barney, stood in a clump, brandishing their weapons, he leapt down.

"By'r Lady! Ye have had a warm time here!" he exclaimed, looking first at the men on the ground, then at the miserable executioner, who had wriggled from his fiery couch and lay howling beside it.

"Over warm to be comfortable," mumbled Robin.

Richard embraced him.

"Think not that I left you willingly," he said. "It would have served you not at all had I fallen, and this unhappy

country would have been much the worse. But now they fly at the first bruit of my coming. Let us first into the castle to refresh ourselves, then to council. My fair brother has not waited to welcome me, I see. Well, we will think of him anon."

"If it please you, sire, might inquiry be made for a certain Lady Marian de Vaux?" asked Robin. "I fear me she has fallen into the power of Black Peter. I saw her yesterday in a balcony, and with her some of his people."

"Ha! We have a lady in the case!" chuckled Richard. "It shall be seen to."

He gave orders to the under-sheriff, who, cap in hand, now came forward to offer his duty. The man hurried away, and presently returned with the news that the lady had been sent off to Castle Rising on the night before.

"Then thither go we when the horses are rested," said Richard. "Tut, man! Look not so sad! You ha' served me well. You shall have your reward."

So, with the four reunited friends, and Barney at his back, he strode to the castle.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SIEGE OF CASTLE RISING.

IT was never Richard Lion Heart's way to waste time when he was on a campaign.

Orderlies began to fly hither and thither, bidding various small bodies of men then on the march from the south to concentrate on Castle Rising. Only there was there any likelihood of resistance, for already all John's flimsy plans were falling to pieces as the news of Richard's return spread like wildfire across the country.

"And how came you to hear of our plight?" asked Robin of Thom, when the three, washed and clothed in the best that the castle wardrobe could provide, sat down for a sorely needed meal, with Friar Tuck as master of ceremonies.

"Well," replied Thom, "I had a liking for tilts and such like gaieties. I took Barney and stole away, saying nought to nobody. But seeing we had no fine horses to carry us, we came not to Nottingham till last night. Then we heard tell o' your troubles. So, thinks I, may be, an' I can't do more, I will save the lad from resting, that most discomfortable death. Steel were better, says I."

"True. But I ha' no desire for either," muttered John.

"So I got me that great pike for Barney, tucked my sword under my coat, and went bright and early to the place where they were building yon horrid fire, purposing to give you each a jab in the ribs if nought else served."

"Truly it was a kindly thought!" exclaimed Robin, laughing. "We will neither of us e'er forget it. But how came the king to get this fellow Malvoisin's men?"

"That I can tell," Tuck said. "He came racing to where I was posted as though the muckle diel were at his tail. 'Tuck,' says he, 'I ha' spied yonder some fellows that may be to my purpose. Send one of your men back, bidding Beauchamp come to Nottingham wi' all speed. Meantime come you wi' me, and we will talk with these hirelings.'

"So, cool as you please, he turns about wi' us after him, and we marches a matter o' four or five miles till we reach this Malvoisin's camp. Out he comes wi' a picket. Says our Dickie: 'Bend your bows, men, and down him if I give the word.'

"Malvoisin doffs his bonnet and says: 'Sire, I am for your brother, the Prince John. You are my prisoner.'

"You are an ass!" says our Dickie, rides at him, and cuts him down out of hand. Then into the camp we goes. The men run out shouting. Dickie holds up a hand to quiet 'em.

"'You mostly know me,' says he. 'You had an ass for leader. I ha' just settled him. Will you ha' me instead? You shall have the same pay, and you know that I am like to lead you where the pickings are good.'

"They made no bones about it, but crowds round him, kissing his hand and vowing they were his men. A lot o' them had been wi' him before, you see, which made things easy. So we broke camp and marched, and here we be, and I be most mortal thirsty."

He concluded his tale by emptying a huge flagon, then beamed on his audience.

"I see the end of Black Peter," said Little John. "He will never be able to hold Castle Rising against all the force that is marching thereon."

"We shall see," replied Robin. "Peter is more slippery than an eel. Ha! There go the trumpets. We shall soon know the kind of metal he is made of. Boot and saddle, lads!"

Like magic the courtyard filled with

armed men, who ranged themselves quickly under the banners of their leaders, and swung off. After them creaked a long line of waggons bearing victuals, and all the things necessary for a siege. And when they were at length clear of the town Richard appeared, and with the friends in his train, rode slowly along the whole column, closely scrutinising everything.

A roar of cheers greeted him everywhere, and when he passed the ordered ranks of the Free Companions, the din was terrific. There was no mistaking who these men preferred to fight for.

They made good speed, yet evening was falling ere the vanguard came in sight of Castle Rising. The drawbridge was up, the battlements manned, and Black Peter's banner floated defiantly from the topmost turret.

"Call the herald!" quoth Richard.

Rouge Dragon rode up, accompanied by his two squires.

"Summon me that place, Sir Herald. Tell them that if they open their gates at once I will be merciful to all except that hound their captain, but if once I draw my lines about their walls, I will hang every man jack when I get in. Speed, good herald!"

Rouge Dragon bowed, rode out to the edge of the moat before the gate tower, and after sounding the trumpets, delivered his message.

Black Peter himself answered it.

"Tell your master that seeing I am to hang in any case, I will e'en make a fight for it," he cried.

"Good!" growled Richard. "This man is no coward it seems. That is all to the better. It would be a pity if so many brave knights and men-at-arms were gathered together for nought. Now to work, gentry all."

He rapped out a series of orders that sent men wheeling right and left, to take up their positions. Soon camp fires twinkled in an unbroken circle, just beyond bowshot of the walls, and the siege of Castle Rising begun.

All night men laboured to get catapults into position, driven by Richard's relentless energy. The first blink of dawn was the signal for the action to begin.

From the King's headquarters, in front of the gates, a shrill trumpet sounded, the camp awoke, and at the same instant the beam of Big Meg, the largest piece of artillery, swung high in air, and sent

a huge stone crashing against a turret of the gate tower, which crumpled into ruin at the terrible impact.

But Black Peter had not spent the night in bed. He, too, had toiled on his defences.

He had reminded his men that though Richard had promised them mercy, he would not protect them from all the folks for miles around the Castle, who would surely wreak a bitter vengeance for many a year's oppression.

Thus he had won them to support his desperate resistance, heartening them by telling of the great army Prince John would surely bring to their rescue, though he could guess that this was very far from the truth.

So they too had wrought upon machines, and scarcely had the crash of falling masonry died away than a volley of stones and heavy arrows replied.

One after another, all Richard's catapults got into action. The air was full of the hum of flying stones, the smash of their falling, and the shouts of the men who worked them.

Richard came out of the tent where he had snatched a brief sleep and mounted his horse.

"Will you make the rounds with me, Sir Robin?" he said, as the young man, fully armed, hastened to his side.

"I am honoured, sire," replied John, and a minute later almost repented, for Richard rode straight to the edge of the moat and disregarding the storm of missiles showered upon them, examined the damage already done.

"You are a young soldier," said he kindly. "Therefore, I will tell you something of the art of war. Think you this tower will long endure our battering?"

"It is strong, sire. And it seemeth to me that when it is down, we are but little nearer our end since it is but an outer defence. To my mind, the wall yonder is the weaker spot."

"Right!" said Richard approvingly. "You have the root of the matter in your head. But I batter this place and mass my men before as if for an attack for a purpose. See how this villainous Peter is using all his force to strengthen what we beat down? What is that they do behind the gate?"

"Methinks they are building another wall."

"And methinks that carrying stones is hard work and tiring to a small force,"

Richard said dryly. "Let them amuse themselves while our fellows keep themselves fresh. Wow! That was a good shot! Let us jog further."

A heavy stone had whizzed between them grazing Robin's head, wherefore he was devoutly thankful to follow his sovereign away from such a dangerous neighbourhood. Slowly they rode completely round the castle, Richard pointing out its weak spots.

"This Peter is a sad fool," he said as they returned to their starting place. "He had been wiser to run while he had the chance. We will be in at night-fall. Bid the engineers keep at it, Raoul, and you, Sir Robin, put your bowmen under cover near that spot you pointed out. 'Twill serve us very well for a way in. Are the ladders ready? Good! Bid the men have dinner by companies, and when they are fed we will up the walls."

The catapults continued their battery. By this time the gate tower had been beaten into a ruin, but behind it rose the new wall, so painfully built, making the place even stronger than before.

Black Peter laughed as he looked from it at the infantry massed opposite, the foremost carrying long planks with which to bridge the moat.

"They are like to bruise their noses," said he. "Even if Richard leads the assault, they will have a drubbing. Can you see him? Be they coming on, think you, Gaston?"

"I see him not, and I like it not," answered Gaston. "Nay, those ranks look mighty thin for a column of assault. Nay, it seemeth to me that it is not a column at all. No, by Belzebub! The ranks are but rows of dummies hung on planks stuck in the ground. Here is some crafty stratagem."

He had no time to look further into the deception, for now came a great shouting, and the horns of the sentinels on the thinly held curtain wall calling an alarm, and high above all the shrill whistle of a storm of arrows searching every embrasure.

Richard's simple plan had gone like clockwork, as simple plans will when a capable man directs them. While Peter gathered most of his men to repel the threatened assault on the gate, the King had left a skeleton force to keep him in play and swung the great part of his footmen round under cover of the fringing brushwood.

The front ranks carried planks to

bridge the moat. The second bore long scaling ladders, behind them came men at arms in heavy armour, and at the rear of all were the whole force of archers, the Sherwood men included, with Little John in command, for Robin had begged that he might be allowed to go with the scaling party.

A single note from a shrill bugle set the whole array in motion.

Leaving the cover at a run, the plank bearers had reached the moat almost before an alarm was given. The planks were thrust out and made secure with cross pieces, the ladder bearers staggered across and reared their ponderous burdens, while the archers opened a fire so accurate and strong that no defender who looked forth lived to tell of what he saw.

And now the ladders were in place.

"I'll race you, boy!" quoth Richard, springing up the nearest.

Robin followed his example, the heavy armed men swarming in their rear.

It was at this moment that Black Peter arrived above with the majority of his men. Stones and beams were tossed down on the heads of the stormers. Robin's shield was torn from his hand by a hook thrown down at a rope's end, and looking up he saw the successful fisher balance a heavy stone to drop on his head.

"That will have my life!" he thought.

Like a gigantic cockchafer, an arrow hummed past his ear. The stone fell back out of sight, the fellow who held it threw up his hands and sagged across the parapet with the shaft through his head, while Robin, hoisted aloft by the men behind him, stumbled across his body and staggered on to the wall top. "You win!" cried the voice of Richard. "Youth will be served."

Robin spared a single glance from the enemy and saw the King, half his helmet shorn away by some desperate blow, leaping to his side.

Then they were at it, hammer and tongs, for thirty breathless seconds, no more, though at the time it seemed to Robin that they fought for as many minutes ere Black Peter's men gave way and fled.

A few cried for quarter and got it, in spite of Richard's threat, the rest threw themselves into the keep.

"We have the rats in their trap," cried Richard exultantly. "There are not enough left to give us trouble. I will

give them yet another chance. Let Rouge Dragon go offer them my mercy for the last time."

It was Gaston who answered the summons.

"Will the King give us all pardon?" he asked.

"All but your master, Sir Pierre le Noir, known here as Black Peter," answered the herald. "My Lord Richard is firm that he must hang, for treason done, and fifty other counts."

"May we have time to think on it?"

"Half an hour and no more," Rouge Dragon replied. "See that the answer be favourable. Already my lord is fidgety."

The time passed slowly. It was near gone when the low, iron-studded door of the keep swung open and a little page boy with a face bruised and bleeding from recent blows tottered out.

Robin recognised the lad. He was the Lady Marian de Vaux's attendant.

"Where is she?" cried Robin dashing forward and seizing his arm. "Where is your mistress?"

"Ride, my masters, ride!" answered the child. "They have tricked you. There is a way out. 'Tis a tunnel that issues in a wood over yonder away. They are gone by it this long while and Peter has taken my lady wi' him. They beat me senseless ere they went. You are choused!"

CHAPTER X.

LADY MARIAN AND SIR ROBIN.

RICHARD'S face grew dark when he heard how he had been tricked.

"Know you where this wood is, boy?" he asked.

"No, my lord, except that it lies over yonder," replied the page, pointing to the east.

"No matter. They will have horses waiting, belike?"

"I heard that horses were sent out before your men came last night, sire."

"Enough. Take what force you think fit, Sir Robin. Hang me this knave if you can catch, and bring back the lady, the which is a task after your liking, I take it?"

"Truly, sire," answered Robin blushing.

"Go to, man! Be not bashful! I too have loved, and sung, and fought in my lady's honour. There is a chapel in this place. An' you would put it to a

joyous use, get you gone and fetch the fair she."

Robin needed no urging. In a few minutes he was galloping eastwards as hard as horses could carry him, with the friar and Little John by his side and a goodly company at his back.

"Here be the first taste of prosperity, Sir Robin," said the good Tuck, glancing back at the column of splendid soldiers. "You dreamed not of this a short week since."

"The pace has been somewhat rapid and I am yet a little breathless," admitted Robin. "One day an outlaw, the next a knight, then a sorcerer to be burnt at the stake, and a short while after a captain wi' a great band to do my bidding. Sure, it makes my head whirl."

"This business will need cool wits, so you had best stop its spinning," said Tuck. "Yonder is a fellow going from the plough. Hey, man! Have you seen ought of a company of soldiers wi' a lady or two in their midst?"

"If it be Black Peter you seek, he hath gone that way, making for the fens-lands. I take it. Be you friends o' his?"

"Most bitter enemies," said Robin, flinging him a piece of silver. "That for your news, good man."

"Luck to your hunting!" called the ploughman after them. "Beware lest he cheat you. Half of his horses he hath had shod wi' the shoes wrong side first. Beware!"

Half an hour later they had reason to bless the information, for at a place where four roads joined, Peter had split up his men into four parties each of which had taken a separate way.

"Still we are little helped," growled Little John, as he alighted to examine the tracks. "How are we to tell t'other from which in this welter o' mud? And how say with which party ride Peter and the lady?"

A grey-haired soldier who had ridden next to Robin, touched his arm.

"We have one with us skilled in reading signs, sir knight," said he. "Pass the word for Abdullah."

Swiftly the command ran down the line. A brown-faced man, muffled in a woollen cloak drawn over his mail and shivering, though the weather was warm, spurred to the front.

"Abdullah is a Christian Moor," explained the soldier. "He hath been with

our company a long while, and seldom fails at a job o' this sort."

He spoke to the man in a mixed jargon of French and Spanish. Abdullah grinned, alighted, and ran to and fro a while, stooping over the tracks. Robin thought of a hunting dog as he watched him cast about.

Finally the Moresco uttered a little yelp of satisfaction, darted off along one of the tracks and presently returned with a shred of something white in his hand, which he handed to Robin, speaking swiftly to the soldier the while.

"He says that a led horse has been taken that way. He thinks the rider of the led horse went unwillingly, for the beast's gait is uneven. Also that it was a woman. She tore this from her clothes and set it on the hedge for a sign to us."

"It is a scrap of scarf," said Robin. "Forward. Keep you in front, Abdullah."

The man obeyed. Presently he pointed to another strip of white fluttering from a low hanging bough. It was a second fragment of the same material.

Thereafter they rode confidently, finding further pieces to tell they were on the right road. The way grew more muddy. Frequent pools of water spread over the fields on either side and encroached upon the track. Soon they were trudging fetlock deep.

"The floods are out," explained Tuck. "I was born and bred at Ely, so know this part of the world a trifle. With the wind setting as it is now, these lands will soon be all swamped. It will be ill work going back if we go much further forward."

Robin called a halt and looked about him.

"Over yonder is higher land," said he. "Also a house of sorts, which shows that floods do not commonly go so high. A dozen of you come with me, while the rest go back to dry ground till I send word."

It began to grow dark. As they drew near the house a light gleamed out from one of its narrow windows and a horse neighed.

"Is it an ambush?" asked Little John, drawing his bow from its case. "There are beasts yonder that have winded ours. Shall we not take more force?"

"Nay, there is no room for very many folks yonder," replied Robin. "See, it is all water beyond. The road ends here.

We shall not find what we seek. They have taken boat, I'll be bound."

And even so it proved. As they scrambled up on to dry ground, an old woman hobbled out of the ramshackle house and scrutinised them.

"Who be you for?" she asked doubtfully.

"For good King Richard, dame," replied Robin. "Have you see anything of—"

"A black beast of a man and a fair lady?" she broke in. "Aye. That I have. Yonder in the byre be their horses. Half a score of them there was and the lady. They made my old man rise from his supper and get out the boat. The lady she spok'e me fair and gied me a pretty brooch, saying: 'Tell them that will come presently to rescue me, the way we are gone.'"

"Well, which way did they go?" asked Robin impatiently.

"Down stream, for sure not ten seconds past. A ship has been laying some three or four mile down these many weeks past. I reckon they was going to her."

"Have you another boat? Be quick!"

The old woman whimpered with fright.

"Lor', you do be right fierce! Don't 'ee go to fly down a body's throat so. Yes, there be another boat but she be old and leaketh sadly. Drat the man! Be he daft?"

Robin had whirled past her to a rough landing stage and was already hauling in a crazy boat, half full of water.

"Fetch oars and basins or pipkins to bale," he cried. "She will hold six, all told. Little John and Tuck, come wi' me and three of you men who are used to boats. The rest bide here till we return."

"But the floods be running fast and it be getting dark!" quavered the old woman. "You uns will be drowned for certain."

"That will be a change," laughed Robin. "Seeing I was to be burned no longer than yesterday morning. Are ye all ready? Loose her, Tuck. Pull, men. Keep your light burning dame. We may need a guide."

They shot away at a fair pace though the boat was heavy, four of them rowing, Robin and Tuck bailing in bow and stern.

"Sure this is a forlorn hope if ever there was one," grumbled the friar, scanning the turbulent water before

them. "There is but one comfort and that is that no ship can sail out o' this here river while the wind bides in this quarter."

"Ay, but she can 'row, maybe," growled Robin. "Pull, doar fellows, pull as it were for all ye love!"

"Easy!" commanded Tuck. "I see something ahead against the light. Robin, lad, you be a good captain enough ashore, but afoat on these here waters I will take the lead, an' it please you. There is no need to let yon losels know that we are so close on them, else they will pull in and take us at a vantage. Veer we into that bank and keep under its shadow."

He put his weight on the steering oar and turned the boat in as he spoke.

"Take you care not to splash wi' the oars," he continued. "The sound carries far on water. There! Yonder is a mast cutting against the sky, between those two trees. We have not far to go now."

They crept on. The wind that had soughed across the reeds in strong gusts, died down for a moment. Clearly as though they wore aboard, they heard a chorus of rough voices strike up a chanty.

"They be getting up the anchor. Let us hasten!" hissed Robin impatiently.

"More hurry, less speed," quoth the imperturbable friar. "I want no bolts through my noddle. We be six, and good as twelve ordinary men, I make no doubt. Now, on yon ship there be Black Peter and the nine he took with him, who will not be the weakest vessels, I warrant me. Likewise the ship's company, a score at the least. Thirty against twelve is no fair match."

"Also the light is gone and so we cannot ha' the vantage o' good shooting," put in Little John. "But what is that? Some one be swearing mighty hard, surely!"

A dark object loomed ahead. Only a sudden swerve saved them from a collision with a large boat, which an old man, tugging valiantly at the oars, was trying to persuade up stream. He sweetened the task by calling down all manner of evil on one whom he dubbed, "That 'ere chap wi' the dark mug."

"Black Peter is loved by none," said the friar softly. "Here is our old woman's old man. Stop, friend!"

He ranged alongside and laid hold of the gunnel.

"Didn't he pay you?" he asked.

The old fellow used some more frightful language.

"He offered to bash my head in, he did, when I axes for a fair wage. Calls himself a knight, does he?"

"Wherefore you'd do him a bad turn, more especially if you were paid a fair wage to do it?"

"Ess!" said the ancient heartily, and held out his hand for the shilling Tuck showed him. "What be I to do?"

"Is there any way of going past that ship so as to get ahead of her without being seen? Any side channel or such like?"

"Plenty. There be one over there, what comes back to t' river about a mile down."

"The reeds are too green to burn this time o' the year, aren't they?"

"Ess. But they make a powerful thick smoke if you do gather old uns enough to start un. Be that your notion?"

"I want to get aboard that ship w' out being seen if that is any ways possible," replied Tuck. "We'll try that way."

"Orright," chuckled the old man. "Come you aboard here. Chuck that there stone over for anchor. I'll show that there chap as I can't be put upon."

Once in the side channel they were able to make good way without fear of being observed and came out into the river again with plenty of time to spare.

The old fellow got ashore upon the mudflats fringing the stream. They heard the sound of crackling. A tongue of flame leapt up, and was obscured by a dense cloud of acrid smoke which rolled across and up the river, blotting out everything.

They listened. A block creaked almost overhead. A harsh voice called somewhere, cursing the ship and her skipper. Then a dark blur crept upon them and, with an almost imperceptible bump, the boat was laid alongside the ship.

"This is my part," whispered Robin. "You are the most skilful boatman, friar, so bide here. The rest, follow me and be silent as ye may."

His dagger between his teeth, he reached up, caught the cat-head from which swung the anchor and drew himself to the deck. Little John followed, then the three of the company.

There was no one on the fore-castle. Robin peeped through the open hatch.

Below, packed tight as herrings, some dozen or more men sat around a steaming pot. He pointed to the hatch cover.

"Put that on and bolt it home at the first sound from us," he whispered.

They crept down the ladder, shot the bolt on the outer side of the narrow fore-castle door, then began to crawl aft.

A man loomed up in the obscurity.

"Why the murrain are you not keeping an eye ahead?" he growled. "We will be—"

Little John's fist caught him squarely on the jaw. His knees sagged, he toppled forward stunned. Little John eased him to the deck.

"One!" he whispered. "I hear Black Peter on the poop top. Sure, he be cursing the ship man!"

"He is not our mark—yet!" replied Robin. "Here is the main hatch. There are more below."

Again he peeped. There were more men, sprawling on bales and piles of straw. Robin left the second man of the company to stand by the hatch. Then abruptly, came an interruption to their even progress.

The quarrel on the after castle top seemed to reach a climax.

"Have it your own way, then, Sir Peter!" yelled an infuriated voice. "An' we go ashore, blame not me!"

A torch flickered through the driving smoke, a man bounced down the poop ladder with his light aloft.

"Come on deck, ye lazy hounds!" he bellowed. "To the oars w' you! Hallo! Who be you?"

His mouth opened wide with astonishment as he beheld the four men grouped about the hatch.

"To arms!" he yelled. "Here be—"

Robin's sword flashed and fell flatways, beating him to the deck. Little John snatched the torch, hurled it through the open hatch on to a pile of straw that burst into flame at the touch, and together they seized the cover, drew it in place and made it fast, all in quick time.

"The cabin!" cried Robin, and hurled himself at the door. It gave. Someone inside gave a smothered exclamation, and in the light of the single, smoky candle, Robin saw the Lady Marian de Vaux.

"Out!" he cried, and since it was no time for ceremony, grabbed her arm and whisked her out upon the deck, just as a

man in black armour jumped from the ladder to bar his way.

His sword was aloft, but Robin was the quicker. With all the memory of the wrongs he had suffered from this man he struck with all his strength.

The blow fell full on Peter's wrist, cut through the thin cuff of mail, ay, and deep into the bone beneath. With a bellow of pain and rage, he reeled back out of sight amidst a fresh waft of smoke.

"Away!" yelled Little John. "They are breaking the door down forward."

He snatched Lady Marian up in his brawny arms, ran forward and dropped her into the boat.

The others followed and thrust away just as a belch of flame gushed from the main hatch, and howling like fiends, the crew scrambled on deck.

They did not heed the boat as she pulled out of sight. Most likely they did not see her, for they had enough to do. The last glimpse Robin had as he tugged at an oar, showed a line of buckets tosing against the flare as the seamen wrought frantically to save their floating home.

Something splashed alongside, a hand gripped the gunwale, and a dripping figure hoisted itself aboard.

"We done that proper, eh?" chuckled the old man, grabbing the steering oar from Tuck. "Worth another shilling, I reckon. Here, I'll take ye back to my house a short way."

"You shall have a pound!" cried Robin, and turned to Lady Marian. "We have met again, sweet lady," said he softly.

"Amidst strife, once again," she replied. "Yet you are welcome however you come."

"I had dreamed you safe with your uncle in London, till I saw you in the tiltyard at Nottingham."

"Were you there? I caught the bruit of some strange tale about King Richard, but Black Peter kept me close confined."

"King Richard has made a knight of me," said Robin blithely. "Also I am to have the lands which were my father's, the same being Castle Rising and all the manors therewith. And since a man with lands must needs have a wife—"

"Stop!" she said. "This good friar hath ears."

"And uses them, lady," said Tuck bluntly. "Go to, my pretty bird, never heed me. Get on wi' the billing and cooing. Yet tell me first how you come to be in Peter's paws again?"

"He found that his wife and I had taken refuge with my uncle, and wrought with Prince John to have us given up. The which being done, that poor lady could bear that thought of being with him no longer, but died soon. Whether Peter had a hand in it I know not, though I think the worse. After which he began to go about to marry me for my broad land's sake, and would ha' done it too if it had not been for—"

"Sir Robin Fitzurze, which I like better to call him by his old name of Robin Hood," put in Tuck. "Still, a rose is sweet and comely, call it what you will, and Lady Marian Fitzurze will fit your bonnie face rarely."

"I trust it may," whispered Robin. "Look! Yonder is the beacon light we steer for, shining true and steady. That, dear lady, is a token of what our life together will be."

They clasped hands in the darkness.

And with that the boat came to the landing. They got ashore, and rode away through the darkness to the prospect of happiness.

Two days later, with King Richard himself to stand in her father's place, Lady Marian was wed to Sir Robin.

"Now give we up the greenwood for ever and ay," said Little John, a thought disconsolately as he sat by the hall fire quaffing ale. "Now shall we live fat and easy till our days be done."

"Maybe," said Friar Tuck, twiddling his toes before the blaze. "I am no prophet. But life is a little business. I fear me we have many a storm to endure before we win to a peaceful haven. We shall see what we shall see!"

THE END.

(Two more Fine Long Stories of Robin Hood and His Merry Men will appear on May 15th. Please order in advance.)