



Robin Hood's Coup!

A thrilling old-time romance of the days of Robin Hood, telling how the outlaw chief of Sherwood Forest cleverly outwits King John in a matter of life and death.

THE FIRST CHAPTER

A Dispatch for the King.

GRAMERCY! What have we here, my merry men?"

Robin Hood bounded to his feet, and, shading his eyes with one hand, peered down the road beside him in the glare of the setting sun.

Little John, Will Scarlet, and a dozen other outlaws had also leaped to their feet and were likewise staring down the road, which ran due west and east through Sherwood Forest. The spot lay about midway between King John's palace at Clipstone, in the heart of the forest, and Chesterfield, in the adjoining county of Derbyshire.

Well might Robin Hood and his companions gaze, amazed, down the road, for round a

sharp bend in it had come a most curious sight—three men standing upon one another's shoulders in the form of a human ladder. The undermost was walking along with arms folded, without even staggering beneath the weight of his double burden.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Robin Hood. "They are tumblers, of course, making their way to Clipstone for the revels in the morning, and practising their tricks on the journey. I have a good mind to ask them to accompany us to our camp at Creswell, to entertain us with a performance to-night."

"We should have to blindfold them, chief," said Little John deprecatingly, "to prevent them betraying the place afterwards to King John's varlets."

He broke off as there came the rapidly

approaching sound of a horse galloping upon soft turf. Then out of the wood beside the human ladder burst a mounted man-at-arms. He rode straight at the tumblers, and must have ridden them down had not all three immediately jumped apart and out of his way.

Laughing derisively, the man-at-arms wheeled his horse and came on at unabated speed up the road towards the outlaws, who were hidden from him by the trees.

"That Norman boor cared not if he had killed or maimed those poor fellows," said Robin Hood. "He did it just to have the laugh of them. He sadly needs teaching a lesson, methinks. Stay you here, lads, until I call you!"

The man-at-arms was now close upon the hidden outlaws, and Robin sprang out right in his path.

"Stand! Whither away so fast, fellow?" he called out.

"Fellow in your teeth!" roared the horseman; and, quickly couching his lance, he rode full tilt at Robin.

The outlaw chief waited until the lance-point was within a couple of feet of his body, then skipped nimbly aside, whipping forth his sword as he did so. His trusty longbow was on his back, his quiver of clothyard shafts at his girdle.

The lance-point, being directed downward, struck the road just beyond him, and the rider was tumbled headlong out of the saddle with the force of the impact even as Robin seized and dragged upon the bridle. Releasing the horse promptly and calling to his men to secure it, the outlaw chief turned and planted a foot upon the soldier's breast.

"You are a Norman, I warrant, from your behaviour to poor Saxon folk. Yield, and be thankful I do not pin you to the earth with my sword for your attempt to spit me on your lance."

"Have a care, caitiff! Let me up and suffer me to continue my journey to Clipstone Palace. It boots of no delay, you malapert fool!" snarled the fallen man. "I am the bearer of a dispatch to King John himself from the Welsh Marches."

"Say you so? What is the burden of your dispatch, knave?"

"As if I would tell such as you! Who are

you? You are a bold one to dare molest the King's messenger."

"I am Robin Hood of Sherwood. Methinks you will have heard of me."

"That pestiferous robber!"

"Civility, knave, if you value your life! Hither, lads, and search me this fellow for a dispatch he carries to King John."

In spite of the man-at-arms' alternate threats and protestations, Little John and Will Scarlet obeyed their leader's behest and speedily produced the dispatch from his wallet. Showing no respect for the imposing-looking seals upon it, Robin Hood slit it open with his dagger and unfolded it.

"So," he said, when he had read it, "this is the sign-manual of William de Stuteville, Lord Warden of the Welsh Marches, to the usurper John, acquainting the usurper that the Welsh have again risen in revolt under their prince, Llewellyn, and urging the instant execution of the twenty-eight Welsh hostages, in his custody at Nottingham Castle, in reprisal. Well, I trow the royal tyrant needs no such urging."

The three tumblers had now come up, and were standing by, looking on rather fearfully.

"Your mercy, kind sir," ventured one, "but you will be the famous Robin Hood, the defender of all poor, simple folk?"

"I am Robin Hood, and these are some of my merry men. You have nothing to fear from us. Pass on if you will; but see you tell no man of this meeting or my vengeance will surely overtake you."

"We will keep silent on the matter; never doubt it, good captain. We be tumblers, or strolling players, on our way to the revels at Clipstone to-morrow, to earn what we can with our tricks."

"Hark you, good fellows! Come with us to-night to our camp and entertain us with your tumbling, and, I promise, you will go to Clipstone in the morning with your pockets already well lined, and your stomachs also, for that matter."

"We will go with you gladly, good sir, and do our tricks for your entertainment. And none shall ever learn from us aught that can injure you," cried all three tumblers together eagerly.

"Ye must, howbeit, submit to being blindfolded," returned Robin, "along with our prisoner here. I trust none but sworn members of my company with the secrets of our haunts. Fear not, though; no harm will come to you. That I promise you on my honour."

"And 'tis well known you never broke your word yet to the gentle or simple, sir," cried the eldest tumbler. "Blindfold us by all means."

of flaring torches, safeguarded in their fastness by the cordon of sentinels and scouts thrown out. They treated their three guests and their prisoner, the Norman man-at-arms, to a feast fit for royalty itself, and were in turn entertained by the tumblers, who performed various acrobatic feats for their amusement.

For the most part, however, Robin Hood sat apart, thinking deeply, while his men and his guests enjoyed themselves. And



As Robin Hood skipped aside, the lance-point of the man-at-arms struck the road beyond, and he was flung from the saddle.

Still further to guard against betrayal of their camp, the foresters led their blindfolded guests and prisoner by a roundabout route, northward to Creswell Crags. Those romantic rocks were a favourite retreat of Robin Hood and his greenwood company, honeycombed as they were with deep caverns, ages old, in which snug quarters were to be had in winter-time or very wet weather.

In a deep ravine between the two high ranges of wooded cliffs the greenwood company held jolly revel that night by the light

when the revelry was at an end he called Little John, Will Scarlet, and Friar Tuck aside.

The four walked down to the stream, which ran through the ravine, and strolled to and fro for some time beside the bank, talking very earnestly.

"By the bones of my forefathers, but I shall act on De Stuterville's suggestion! I will show these Welsh rebels I am not to be trifled with. Varlet, ride forthwith to Not-

tingham Castle, give this ring to the governor, and tell him instantly to erect twenty-eight scaffolds in a row upon the ramparts, for the execution of the brats of the Welsh chiefs we hold as hostages. I will myself at once return to Clipstone, partake of noonmeat, and follow you to Nottingham thereafter.

"Yet, stay! I see no reason why I should abandon my day's diversion. Tell the governor to expect me in the forenoon to-morrow, when I will have the brats executed under my eyes."

The scene was a glade in Sherwood, not far from Clipstone, and the speaker, King John, who was hunting with a brilliant retinue. Before him knelt a man-at-arms, who had just ridden up to the party and delivered the intercepted dispatch from De Stuteville.

Receiving the signet ring, the messenger rose, sprang to horse again, and galloped off, due south, in the direction of Nottingham.

"Beshrew me," he muttered, when well out of hearing of any of the royal train, "but 'tis the first time I ever bowed the knee to the tyrant, and I trust it will be the last time, too. But I had to bemean myself to effect my purpose—to try to save those twenty-eight innocent young lives. By it I have got the usurper's signet ring as token I come from him, and so will readily be admitted to Nottingham Castle. And my name is not Robin Hood if I do not now achieve my object before to-morrow's sun rises, and carry off the whole twenty-eight young hostages to safety."

Nottingham at that period was enclosed by a strong wall, built within a moat thirty feet wide and twenty feet deep, on all sides but the east, where it was protected by marshy ground.

Entering unchallenged at one of the northern gates, the disguised Robin made his way up the steeply sloping streets to the Castle Hill. King John's signet ring promptly obtained his admission to the castle and an interview with the Norman governor.

"It is his royal highness's order that the twenty-eight young Welsh hostages you have here be at once confined to the dungeons

until his coming, which will be some time to-morrow morning," said Robin.

Without replying, the governor stepped to an open window which overlooked the castle terrace, and, thrusting his head out, shouted:

"Arrest every one of those Welsh brats forthwith, and convey them to the cells below ground."

Robin Hood followed him to the casement, and looking forth, beheld the twenty-eight youths playing at various games. Some of them were mere children, and cried out in alarm and wept bitterly when they were seized by their guards, only too well realising that some dreadful doom was in store for them.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

In the Night!

IT was the midnight hour when Robin Hood, still in the guise of a man-at-arms, rose softly from the bench allotted him as a sleeping-place in the castle hall, and stole past the slumbering retainers around him out into the corridor. Quietly unbolting a side-door there, he slipped forth into the court.

He had doffed his heavy boots, and like a shadow he hurried round to where a low-browed iron door was deep sunk in a portion of the rock on which the castle stood. Three gentle taps he gave upon this door, when it was immediately opened from within, disclosing Little John, Will Scarlet, and two more of his band with drawn bows.

They at once recognized Robin and put up their bows.

"Call the others, Will," he breathed.

And Will Scarlet skipped back down the subterranean passage, to return in a moment at the head of a strong force of outlaws.

All had straw or hay bound round their boots to deaden the sound of their footsteps, and all, too, were armed with bows and swords.

"Follow me," ordered Robin Hood; and he led the way back to the side door.

Altogether, the band numbered fully seventy men. Inside the castle they all marched as silently as mice, and their leader conducted them to the stairs leading down

to the dungeons. These, like the subterranean passage they had come in by, were tunnelled in the solid rock.

Quickly the best pick-locks amongst them started operations upon the several dungeon-doors; and as the first of these rolled open, Robin Hood stepped across the threshold, whispering :

"Silence on your lives, my brave boys! We are here to rescue you. I am Robin Hood, and these are my men; so have no fear. You will have heard, even in your native Wales, I trow, of Robin Hood, the Outlaw of Sherwood."

"We have, indeed; and, if you be that noble Englishman, we know we are in safe hands," replied one of the six youths in the dungeon—a manly stripling of seventeen years of age. "I am David, son of Prince Llewellyn of North Wales, and this is my younger brother Griffin."

And he indicated a lad some two years his junior.

"Come softly, fair youths, and I will soon have you all safe out of this and in one of my snuggest retreats in merry Sherwood," said Robin. "Then it shall be my pleasant task to convey you with all speed and safety to your own country."

"Our blessings be on your head, kind sir!" huskily returned Prince David, as he and his companions followed the outlaw chief from the dungeon.

Little John, Will Scarlet, Allan-a-Dale, and others of the greenwood company, who, as usual, were all clad in Lincoln green, had meanwhile entered the other cells and reassured the youthful inmates.

Hurriedly now, all twenty-eight boys were marshalled and placed in the middle of their rescuers, being told to remove their boots or shoes and make no noise. Dark lanterns had been lighted with flint and steel as soon as the vaults were invaded. Taking one each in the left hand and gripping a short, double-edged sword in the right hand, Robin Hood and Will Scarlet put themselves at the head of the procession and led the way back up the steps to the ground floor, while the giant, Little John, and Allan-a-Dale, the harper, brought up the rear.

With such a strong force at his command—seventy men, all well armed and ready for action—Robin Hood might very easily have seized the castle there and then; for all in it, except the sentinels on the outer walls and at the gate, were fast asleep. In other circumstances, perhaps, he would not have hesitated to do so; but hampered as he was with the youthful Welsh hostages, it would have been the height of folly. The townspeople, mostly Normans, would sooner or later in such an event beleaguer him, cutting off his retreat; and, moreover, it was highly essential he should get the young hostages away as quickly as possible to a safe retreat, whence they might be transported at leisure and secretly to their kinsfolk.

Discretion, therefore, was the order of the moment, and stealth was enjoined upon all until they should have negotiated the subterranean passage in the hill and were well away from the castle, if not within the friendly shelter of Sherwood Forest itself.

Silently they all filed along the ground-floor corridor, blowing out their dark lanterns ere issuing into it, and passed through the open side door into the court.

They were closely hugging the walls of this, and Robin Hood and Will Scarlet were within a few strides of the yawning mouth of the secret passage, when the shrill blast of a warden's horn smote the brooding silence of the night, rousing all the slumbering echoes of fortress, town, and cliff.

A sentinel had espied the long triple line of moving shadows stealing so soundlessly round the court, and, filled though he was with superstitious terror at the sight—taking them all, as he did, for ghosts—he yet had the sense of duty to wind his horn and alarm the castle.

"Confusion!" snapped Robin Hood. "We are discovered. Quick, Will, see to the children! Get them and the men here down the subterranean galleries with all speed. I go to join Little John and Allan-a-Dale, and help cover the retreat." And he darted away back along the line.

Will Scarlet hastily bade the men near to follow him with the young hostages, as fast as

they could, inside the secret passage, and down it.

The children needed no urging. Inside the rocky cavern they scampered, the foresters preventing any blind panic, however, and keeping them in something like order.

Hewn in the solid rock of the hill in bygone times by the ancient inhabitants of Nottingham, the cavern wound down just within the face of the precipice, showing here and there an embrasure cut through to the open air.

Lighted lanterns had been left by the foresters within the passage in case of just such an emergency, and picking these up, Will Scarlet and those with him were enabled to guide their terrified young charges safely down to the outlet, beside the road near the little River Leen, at the foot of the precipice. This lower exit was concealed by a wild growth of bushes. Just within the outlet were some ten more outlaws, under the command of sturdy Friar Tuck, waiting with some thirty horses, saddled and bridled, to mount the youthful hostages upon. And hidden all around outside, extending to the marshes on the east side of the castle and town, were at least a score more of Robin Hood's band, under the leadership of Much the miller's son.

In quick rotation the children were set upon the horses. Then a forester mounted behind each, and, led by Friar Tuck, the cavalcade dashed away at top speed round the foot of the cliff towards the marshes eastward.

Will Scarlet remained behind with such men as

had not been accommodated with mounts, to help Robin Hood and the rearguard to cover the flight, with the support of Much and his party.

Robin Hood, Little John and Allan-a-Dale were the last three to descend the subterranean passage. They were about half-way down it when the light of torches came flashing along in their wake, accompanied by echoing shouts in Norman-French of :

"Follow! Follow! Death to the scurvy intruders! They are carrying off the Welsh hostages. Our very lives depend on their recovery. King John will exact a terrible revenge upon us if we lose them!"

With the crush in the narrow gallery the



outlaw chief and those with him forming the rearguard could not hope to outstrip their pursuers.

"Stand, men!" ordered Robin Hood, just after rounding a curve of the cavern. "Only four of you, that is, as well as Little John, Allan and myself. Three will kneel to shoot, and the four others will shoot over. The rest of you there get ahead as smartly as you can!"

The leading pursuers burst round the curve, brandishing blazing torches and flashing spears.

On the instant the seven bows twanged in rapid succession, and almost as many Norman soldiers fell in a heap, impeding those behind, some of whom tumbled over them, increasing the barrier.

Nevertheless, about half a dozen of the pursuers managed to get over it, but only to be shot down with a second flight of arrows. On that, their comrades pushed their way back by main force round the curve, out of sight again.

"Run now, every man!" cried Robin, springing to his feet once more. "Run until you overtake your fellows, then face about again!"

With the way cleared for some distance by their diversion, the seven had only to turn at bay once more and repeat their defence, round another curve, before reaching the exit of the subterranean passage.

There they broke and ran their fastest round the cliff-foot, their comrades, under Will Scarlet and Much, covering their flight by such showers of arrows from the adjoining swamps that it was death for a would-be pursuer to show himself outside the cavern-mouth.

Robin Hood, Little John and Allan-a-Dale, with their four companions, were given horses by some of Much's detachment, and, joined by about half its number, who also had mounts, galloped hard after Friar Tuck's cavalcade. This was in



The outlaws' bows twanged in rapid succession as the pursuers charged forward, and a number of the soldiers fell to the ground.

case Tuck had been intercepted by unlooked-for foes. The safety of the twenty-eight young hostages was of paramount importance ; and the outlaw chief knew well that the division left behind, with Much and Will Scarlet, could look after itself. Everything was done according to plan.

Only when Robin Hood and those accompanying him were out of sight round the hill, to the north, did Much wind his horn for his men and Will Scarlet's to desist shooting at the passage-outlet and seek their own safety.

But, well disciplined as they were, and bound to one another by the closest ties of brotherhood, the foresters under Much and Will did not flee incontinently after their comrades. They drew off from the scene—that was all—fell back along the paths through the swamps.

Still keeping their faces turned towards the foemen, they retreated in good order, wheeling about ever and anon to send another flight of arrows as a warning that it would not do to press them too closely.

Owing to the flurry of the sudden alarm, the Normans were mainly armed only with spears and swords, and had few crossbowmen amongst them. They, therefore, did not follow up the fugitives with any great ardour ; and these, being scattered over the marshes and ever on the move, presented indifferent marks in the darkness, which soon swallowed them up.

All safely reached the shelter of Sherwood, and Robin Hood had the satisfaction of knowing that he had brought off his grand *coup*, and once more frustrated the brutality of King John, without the loss of a single member of his band.

Much and Will Scarlet overtook the rest of the company under their beloved leader just within the depths of the forest. Amid the utmost jubilation the whole reunited party marched leisurely back to the camp at Creswell Crags. There, safe from all chance of recapture by the baffled myrmidons of King John, the young hostages were regaled at a

grand feast by their outlaw host, and were afterwards shown to equally welcome couches within the caves.

Knowing that all the roads to Wales must be closely guarded by King John's orders, when he learned of how his meditated vengeance had been foiled, Robin Hood kept the children at Creswell for over a week, entertaining them with feats of archery and other sports. But he sent trusty messengers to Prince Llewellyn, to relieve their kinsfolk of all anxiety on their account, as well as to arrange where they were to be met.

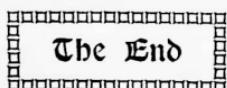
The very next evening after their rescue, the giant, Little John, came to Robin, consumed with merriment.

"Captain, would you believe ? " he said, his great shoulders shaking with his mirth. " King John was so enraged at being balked of his looked-for revenge upon the noble Welsh children that he had twenty-eight dummies, dressed to look like them, hanged in a row upon the walls of Nottingham Castle this afternoon. Needless to add, the secret is being well kept by the garrison, and everyone in the town believes he has actually hanged the children."

"I marvel much," rejoined Robin, " that he did not string up twenty-eight men of the garrison itself, including its governor, to mark his vengeful fury the more. But doubtless he thought better than to do so, knowing how few retainers he can safely count on, even amongst the Normans themselves."

Robin Hood and his entire greenwood company escorted their youthful guests safely to the Welsh border, travelling on horseback by night and lying snugly hidden during the day in coppices or lonely mountain defiles. They passed through the Peak district of Derbyshire, and thence through the southern part of Cheshire into Denbighshire, or North Wales.

Prince Llewellyn's men met them at Wrexham, and cordial indeed were the farewells of the youths and their friends to the gallant outlaw chief and his band.



A CYCLING TRAGEDY!

by
MICKY DESMOND.



"TOM BROWN, Tom Brown, lend me your new bike
All-along, down-along, out-along lea;
For a holiday spin to the seaside I'd like
With Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob Cherry,
Dick Russell, Dick Rake, Jimmy Silver, Jack Blake,
Horace Coker, the joker, and Skinner, the sinner,
Old Uncle Pete Toddy and all!"

"And when shall I see again my new bike?
All-along, down-along, out-along lea."
"By the end of the Vac.—if I ever get back,
With Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry," etc.

So with Browney's consent, like a whirlwind I went
All-along, down-along, out-along lea;
With a whirring of wheels, I flew hard on the heels
Of Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry, etc.

With a smile and a song, I went skimming along.
All-along, down-along, out-along lea;
Till a steam-roller loomed, and I shouted, "I'm
doomed!"
So are Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry," etc.

I swerved left and right, then I shot out of sight,
All-along, down-along, out-along lea.
Like a demon I darted, and found myself parted
From Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry, etc.

I jammed on the brake as I saw a vast lake,
All-along, down-along, out-along lea;
Then head-over-heels I went hurtling, with squeals
Of "Wharton! Tom Merry! and cheery Bob
Cherry!" etc.

In a horrified trance, I gave a last glance
All-along, down-along, out-along lea.
In the mud of the mere did I then disappear,
Without Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry, etc.

My cries of distress could be heard, I confess,
All-along, down-along, out-along lea.
I was hauled to the bank and for this I must thank
Harry Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob
Cherry, etc.

When I came home again, I travelled by train
All-along, down-along, out-along lea;
And, shure as I'm Michael, no more will I cycle
With Wharton, Tom Merry, and cheery Bob Cherry,
Dick Russell, Dick Rake, Jimmy Silver, Jack Blake
Horace Coker, the joker, and Skinner, the sinner,
Old Uncle Pete Toddy and all!

