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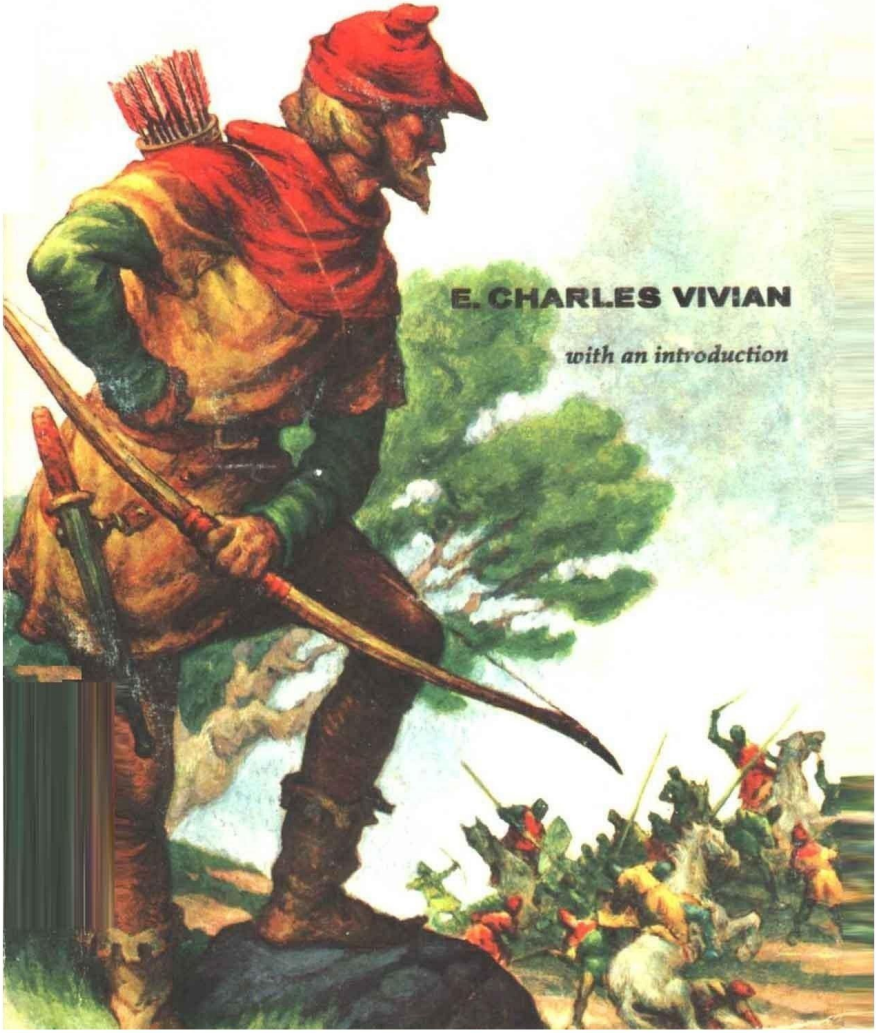
THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD



E. CHARLES VIVIAN

with an introduction

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THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD

So little is left of the England that Robin Hood and his merry men knew that it is doubtful if anyone of today would recognize it if it were possible to go to sleep in our England and to wake up in his.

Sherwood Forest stretched up from the neighborhood of Nottingham towards the little collection of huts that stood where Sheffield stands today. No man knew all its depths, and parts of it were believed to be enchanted, haunted by gnomes and elves, and even fiery dragons. Here and there lived bands of desperate men, driven out from their villages in fear of their lives, ready to pounce on any travelers and rob them of all they possessed. These men were safe in the forest.

Then came Robin Hood, born a freeman—that is to say, he had never been a serf, but held his own land. He was an adventurous sort of man even in his youth, and knew as much as anyone of the intricacies of Sherwood Forest. A friend of the poor, and one who hated injustice, he made many friends, farmed his land, and treated his men fairly. Often he talked of equal justice for rich and poor, but in the beginning it was only talk, for such a thing seemed impossible. Most of all he hated the unjust game laws. So things stood, with little law and still less justice in England, when Robin Hood was young.

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THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD

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CHAPTER I / How Sebald the Serf Got Food

WHITE winter lay heavily on Sherwood Forest, and far across the moors to the North Country where Whitby Abbey towered over the sea. Winter had been cruelly long that year, and now, though the time of spring sowing was near, there was no sign of the bitter cold relaxing.

A bare stone's throw into the Forest, on the edge of the lands that Guy of Gisborne stewarded for the rich Abbey of St. Mary's, a ragged figure skulked among the trees. Shreds of what had once been clothes hung about him as Sebald the Dolt glanced down the forest aisles, or crouched among the snow-laden undergrowth; about his legs and feet were tied wisps of dead grass for warmth, and as he moved he left little specks of red in each footprint, for the dead stalks and twigs had pierced the soles of his numbed feet. On and on he moved, away from the open lands and into the depths of the Forest.

Then he stiffened to absolute stillness, for, moving down wind, a dozen head of deer came, nosing at the snow for food, unconscious of his presence. They saw him too late for one of their number, for Sebald stepped out from behind the tree that had hidden him, lifted his bow and let fly; a young stag went down, kicking, and the rest of the deer vanished before Sebald could reach the wounded thing and end his work with a knife.

Working like a madman, he ripped the skin from the haunch of the dead beast, cut a slice of the warm flesh, and bolted it as a dog might have done. After that, he went at the carcase more carefully, cutting off the best of the meat and placing it in a pile on the snow, strip after strip of juicy venison. Then, with a cry that was more like a dog's bark, he started up, knife in hand, and faced the tall man whose shadow had fallen across him as he worked.

A young man, this new-comer, with reddish hair, a little pointed beard, and a lithe, muscular figure that betokened more than usual strength and quickness. Sebald faced him with knife upraised and terror in his gaunt face, of which every line told of hunger and fear.

"Put the knife down, Sebald," said the tall man quietly.

"Robin—Robin of Locksley!" Sebald gasped. "Master, I was starved."

"And like to be hanged," said Robin of Locksley. "For this is death, Sebald, if a forester find one head of deer taken."

"If I die of a rope, or of hunger, what difference is there?" Sebald asked doggedly. "Look you, Master Robin, when this winter began I had a wife and two little ones. But because I fell ill, a thing no serf may do, Guy of Gisborne turned us out of our hut and gave our shelter to Walter the Bald. A serf who cannot work, said Guy, shall neither eat nor shelter on his lands, and they drove us out, the wife and the children with me, though the little ones were all unfit."

"True," said Robin, nodding. "Guy of Gisborne is a

hard man, and cruel. But it is death to touch the deer, Sebald."

"Death? What is death but a kindness?" Sebald asked. "For so my wife found it when the cold wrapped her round and she fell asleep, never to wake more in this world. So the child Freda found it, for at least she will hunger no more, and now only the boy Waltheof is left me, and he a-crying with bitter hunger. By the Rood, Master Robin, if I hang, I hang with a full belly, and the boy shall have one more good meal!"

There was a look of pity in Robin's eyes. "Where is the boy?" he asked.

"There"—Sebald pointed along the way he had come—"in the hollow of a dead elm, wrapped in such rags as I could find him that he might not die of the cold."

"Then you harbour in the forest?" Robin asked.

Sebald nodded. "Else I must go back to Guy of Gisborne, being his man," he answered. "And to go back means lashes on the back, and labour from morn to night, with more lashes at the end of it, since I am all unhandy and slow, and so they call me the dolt, Master Robin. I tell you"—his voice rose to sudden fierceness—"there is no justice for us Saxon English under these dogs of Normans!"

"It is true," Robin answered moodily. "But look you, Sebald, bring the lad with you and come to my farm. We may then decide what can best be done for you."

Sebald looked incredulous. "To your farm, Master Robin? But—but I have killed the king's deer!"

A slow smile grew in Robin's eyes. "I may have loosed a shaft or two myself, at times, good Sebald,"

he said, "for the deer take toll of my crops without payment. Bring the boy and come—there is at the least a shelter among the cattle where he may keep warm."

"Master Robin," said Sebald, with tears in his eyes, "well do they say you've the kindest heart 'twixt Nottingham and York."

"Tush, man!" said Robin, and turned away. "Follow when you will, and come to me. I will have speech of Guy of Gisborne, and see if I may not keep you among my men."

He turned away then, and went out from the forest and across the open to where, a couple of miles away, rose a stout wooden dwelling with its stables and byres and ricks about it. Here Robin of Locksley had lived alone since his father's death, a freeman holding his two hundred acres of land under the Abbey of St. Mary's. His grandfather, in the time of Henry the First, had been granted the tenancy of this acreage, the best of all the lands belonging to the Abbey, and when Robin's father died Guy of Gisborne had tried vainly to thrust Robin out from his holding and take back the farm to the Abbey's use.

Now, as Robin went slowly back, thinking bitterly over the wrongs of men like Sebald, he left one track of footprints straight from the carcase of the deer to his own homestead. Presently came Sebald with his boy Waltheof, a lad of ten who shivered and even cried with the cold as he kept beside his father, and they left two more tracks in the snow.

Late that afternoon came Herbert the ranger along the edge of the forest, where Robin's lands began, and when he came to the tracks in the snow he

stopped and looked down. There was the clear, long-striding track of Robin's shod feet, and Herbert passed by that, knowing whose feet had made it. Then he came on the shapeless blurs made by Sebald's grass-wrapped feet, and beside them the small indentations where the child Waltheof had walked. Herbert saw red blots in the snow, where Sebald's torn feet had bled.

"Ha!" he said. "There has been a killing here!"

So he turned into the forest, following on the tracks, and came to the hollow elm where Sebald had left his boy. Thence he followed on, and came to a place where the snow was all disturbed and thrown about, and at one place had been made into a mound on which were still the traces of Sebald's hands.

"A killing," said Herbert to himself, "and a burying too."

He grubbed in the mound with his hands, and presently came on a two-tined antler. Grasping it, he dragged forth all that Sebald had left of the deer's carcase, and stared down at it as it lay before him.

"So!" said Herbert. "Master and man together go a-hunting! Fine news for Sir Guy! I think he will have Robin's farm at last, and for this news he will make me bailiff."

He slung the carcase across his shoulders and hurried off to Fosse Grange, as Guy of Gisborne's strong house of stone was named, since it stood by the old fosse that runs from the Abbey of St. Mary's down toward Newark. It was all but a castle, this hold from which Guy ruled the lands of St. Mary's for Hugo de Rainault, the Norman abbot who had been granted rule of St. Mary's while Henry Curtmantle was yet alive.

A tall man and a fierce was Guy, swarthy and sneering, a hater of Saxons, at whom he was wont to jeer as he told how his grandfather had seen their sires run from Senlac when their Harold died.

Into Guy's hall strode Herbert the ranger, the deer still across his shoulders. At the back of the hall was a great roaring fire of logs, before which stood Guy of Gisborne himself, warming his hands behind his back. To him went Herbert, and laid the deer before him.

"How now, man—how now?" growled Guy. "Who has been gnawing at that meat? Why is it not a whole carcase?"

"Because Robin of Locksley has gnawed it," said Herbert.

"Ha!" said Guy, his eyes alight. "Now by the teeth of St. Peter we have him! Have you proof, Herbert?"

"Proof enough, lord," said Herbert, "for there go his footprints from where the carcase lay buried in the snow, and on across his land to his own door. There went with them the prints made by some lumbering serf and a little lad, whom he got to do the foul work with him. Proof enough, lord."

"Aye," said Guy, "proof enough. We will have Locksley back for the Abbey, and we will have, too, the hand of Master Robin chopped from him, or I think, with a word from Abbot Hugo, I may get leave to tear out his eyes. The Saxon hound has flouted us long enough, eh, Herbert?"

"Full long, Lord Guy," Herbert agreed. "And I shall be bailiff of Locksley, an it please you?"

"That is for Abbot Hugo to settle," Guy answered, "but a word from me to him shall be your reward for this news. Now away with you while I arm," Guy

ordered. "Bid a dozen of our men-at-arms get mailed, and saddle me my roan horse, and I warrant you Locksley farm shall lack a tenant before the sun reddens to-morrow's snow. Hasten good Herbert, if you would see your vacant bailiffship waiting."

He put on a suit of mail while Herbert gathered the men, and an hour before sunset they rode out from the Fosse Grange toward Locksley farm. The afternoon had gone grey and sullen, with a moist wind under which the snow began to soften to slush, and the heavily armed retainers laboured panting behind Guy's strong horse on their way to their task.

In an empty byre at Locksley farm the boy Waltheof slept amid warm straw, full-fed for the first time that winter, while Sebald dozed beside him, fed and content too. In the stout porch of the homestead stood Robin, looking up at the sky and snuffing the wind.

"A week of this," he said to himself, "and we shall be sowing our barley. It is winter's end, for a certainty."

Then he saw how, across the whiteness of the open between the farmstead and the forest edge, came a little company of men plodding through the snow. They took no note of the winding track by which they should have come, but marched straight across the ploughed fields.

"Now what do these Norman hogs want?" Robin muttered angrily. "Must they tear up my young wheat with their clumsy hooves to come at me?"

CHAPTER 2 / How Robin Took to the Woods

GUY OF GISBORNE and his men were still a mile away when Robin's keen eyes—such eyes as were seldom equalled for their sure vision—picked out Guy as the leader of the band, and on the instant Robin linked up his glimpse of Herbert the ranger gazing at the house a while earlier, Sebald sheltering in the byre, and the carcase of the deer that Sebald had brought down.

He stepped back into the house, buckled on his sword, and reached for his long bow and its quiver. He had Will Scarlett, his head man, armed in like fashion and out rousing the serfs while Guy and his band were still half a mile distant.

He had with him Will Scarlett on his right, and on his left was a fat youth with a great yew bow. This lad was Much, son of old Much the miller, who should have been helping his father at the mill, but had stolen away to drink ale with Scarlett instead, being a lazy lad by nature. Yet, having drunk Robin's ale, he took his bow and stood by Robin now trouble threatened, though he knew nothing of the nature of the trouble.

Behind these three were six of Robin's serfs who could handle either bow or quarter staff well, since Robin always encouraged such play among them, not knowing when it might be useful. So stood the nine of them, with Sebald crouching somewhere in the rear, when Guy of Gisborne rode into hearing.