WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Robin Hood

HENRY GILBERT

Complete and Unabridged

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PREFACE

Once upon a time the great mass of English people were unfree. They could not live where they chose, nor work for whom they pleased. Society in those feudal days was mainly divided into lords and peasants. The lords held the land from the king, and the peasants or villeins were looked upon as part of the soil, and had to cultivate it to support themselves and their masters. If John or Dick, thrall of a manor, did not like the way in which the lord or his steward treated him, he could not go to some other part of the country and get work under a kinder owner. If he tried to do this he was looked upon as a criminal, to be brought back and punished with the whip or the branding-iron, or cast into prison.

When the harvest was plenteous and his master was kind or careless, I do not think the peasant felt his serfdom to be so unbearable as at other times. When, however, hunger stalked through the land, and the villein and his family starved; or when the lord was of a stern or exacting nature, and the serf was called upon to do excessive labour, or was otherwise harshly treated, then, I think, the old Teutonic or Welsh blood in the English peasant grew hot, and he longed for freedom.

The silence and green peace of forest lands stood in those days along many a league where now the thick yellow corn grows, or the cows roam over the rich pastures, or even where today the bricky suburbs of towns straggle over the country. Such forests must have been places of terror and fascination for the poor villein who could see them from where he delved in his fields. In their quiet glades ran the king's deer, and in their dense thickets skulked the boar, creatures whose killing was reserved for the king and a few of his friends, the great nobles, and princes of the

Church. A poor man, yeoman or peasant, found slaying one of the royal beasts of the forest was cruelly maimed as a punishment. Or if he was not caught, he ran and hid deep in the forest and became an outlaw, a 'wolf's-head' as the term was, and then anyone might slay him that could.

It was in such conditions that Robin Hood lived, and did deeds of daring such as we read of in the ballads and traditions which have come down to us. Because his name is not to be found in the crabbed records of lawyers and such men, some people have doubted whether Robin Hood ever really existed. But I am sure that Robin was once very much alive. It may be that the unknown poets who made the ballads idealised him a little – that is, they described him as being more daring, more successful, more of a hero perhaps, than he really was; but that is what poets and writers are always expected to do.

The ballads which we have about Robin Hood and his band of outlaws number about forty. The oldest are the best, because they are the most natural and exciting. The majority of the later poems are very poor; many are tiresome repetitions of one or two incidents, while others are rough, doggerel rhymes, without spirit or imagination.

In the tales which I have told in this book, I have used a few of the best episodes related in the ballads; but I have also thought out other tales about Robin, and I have added incidents and events which have been invented so as to give a truthful picture of the times in which he lived.

HENRY GILBERT
London, July 1912

CHAPTER ONE

How Robin Became an Outlaw

It was high noon in summer-time, and the forest seemed to sleep. Hardly a breeze stirred the broad fans of the oak leaves, and the only sound was the low hum of insects which flew to and fro unceasingly in the cool twilight under the wide-spreading boughs.

So quiet did it seem and so lonely, that almost one might think that nothing but the wild red deer, or his fierce enemy the slinking wolf, had ever walked this way since the beginning of the world. There was a little path worn among the thick bushes of hazel, dogberry, and traveller's joy, but so narrow was it and so faint that it could well have been worn by the slender, fleeting feet of the doe, or even by the hares and rabbits which had their home in a great bank among the roots of a beech near by.

Few, indeed, were the folks that ever came this way, for it was in the loneliest part of Barnisdale Forest. Besides, who had any right to come here save it was the king's foresters keeping strict watch and ward over the king's deer? Nevertheless, the rabbits which should have been feeding before their holes, or playing their mad pranks, seemed to have bolted into their burrows as if scared by something which had passed that way. Only now, indeed, were one or two peeping out to see that things were quiet again. Then a venturesome bunny suddenly scampered out, and in a moment others trooped forth.

A little way beyond the bank where the rabbits were now nibbling or darting off in little mad rushes, the path made a bend, and then the giant trunks of the trees were fewer, and more light came through from the sky. Suddenly the trees ceased, and the little sly path ran into a wide glade where grass

grew, and bushes of holly and hazel stood here and there.

A man stood close by the path, behind a tree, and looked out into the glade. He was dressed in a tunic made of a rough green cloth, open at the top, and showing a bronzed neck. Round his waist was a broad leathern girdle in which were stuck at one place a dagger, and at the other side three long arrows. Short breeches of soft leather covered his thighs, below which he wore hosen of green wool, which reached to his feet. The latter were encased in shoes of stout pig's leather.

His head of dark brown curls was covered by a velvet cap, at the side of which was stuck a short feather, pulled from the wing of a plover. His face, bronzed to a ruddy tan by wind and weather, was open and frank, his eye shone like a wild bird's, and was as fearless and as noble. Great of limb was he, and seemingly of a strength beyond his age, which was about twenty-five years. In one hand he carried a long-bow, while the other rested on the smooth bole of the beech before him.

He looked intently at some bushes which stood a little distance before him in the glade, and moved not a muscle while he watched. Sometimes he looked beyond far to the side of the glade where, on the edge of the shaw or wood, two or three deer were feeding under the trees, advancing towards where he stood.

Suddenly he saw the bushes move stealthily; an unkempt head issued between the leaves, and the haggard face of a man looked warily this way and that. Next moment, out of the bush where the hidden man lay, an arrow sped. Straight to the feeding deer it flew, and sank in the breast of the nearest doe. She ran a few feet and then fell; while the others, scared, ran off into the trees.

Not at once did the hidden man issue from his hiding-place to take up the animal he had slain. He waited patiently while one might count fifty, for he knew that, should there be a forester skulking near who should meet the scampering deer whose companion had been struck down, he would know from their frightened air that something wrongful had been done, and he would search for the doer.

The moments went slowly by and nothing moved; neither did the hidden man, nor he who watched him. Nor did a forester show himself on the edge of the shaw where the deer had fled. Feeling himself secure, therefore, the man came from the bush,

but there was no bow and arrows in his hand, for these he had left secure in his hiding-place to be brought away another day.

He was dressed in the rough and ragged homespun of a villein, a rope round his brown tunic, and his lower limbs half covered with loose trousers of the same material as his tunic, but more holed and patched. Looking this way and that, he walked half-bent across to where the doe lay, and leaning over it, he snatched his knife from his belt and began almost feverishly to cut portions of the tenderest parts from the carcass.

As the man behind the tree saw him, he seemed to recognise him, and muttered, 'Poor lad!' The villein wrapped the deer's flesh in a rough piece of cloth, and then rose and disappeared between the trees. Then with swift and noiseless footsteps the watcher went back through the path and into the depths of the forest. A few moments later the villein, with wary eyes looking this way and that, was passing swiftly between the boles of the trees. Every now and then he stopped and rubbed his red hands in the long, moist grass, to remove the tell-tale stains of blood.

Suddenly, as he came from behind the giant trunk of an oak, the tall form of the man who had watched him stood in his pathway. Instantly his hand went to his knife, and he seemed about to spring upon the other.

'Man,' said he in the green tunic, 'what madness drives you to this?'

The villein recognised the speaker at once, and gave a fierce laugh.

'Madness!' he said. ' 'Tis not for myself this time, Master Robin. But my little lad is dying of hunger, and while there's deer in the greenwood he shall not starve.'

'Your little lad, Scarlet?' said Robin. 'Is your sister's son living with you now?'

'Ay,' replied Scarlet. 'You've been away these three weeks and cannot have heard.' He spoke in a hard voice, while the two continued their walk down a path so narrow that while Robin walked before, Scarlet was compelled to walk just behind.

'A sennight since,' Scarlet went on, 'my sister's husband, John a' Green, was taken ill and died. What did our lord's steward do? Said, "Out ye go, baggage, and fend for yourself. The holding is for a man who'll do due services for it." '

' 'Twas like Guy of Gisborne to do thus,' said Robin; 'the evil-hearted traitor!'

'Out she went, with no more than the rags which covered herself and the bairns,' said Scarlet fiercely. 'If I had been by I could not have kept my knife from his throat. She came to me; dazed she was and ill. She had the hunger-plague in truth, and sickened and died last week. The two little ones were taken in by neighbours, but I kept little Gilbert myself. I am a lonely man, and I love the lad, and if harm should happen to him I shall put my mark upon Guy of Gisborne for it.'

As Robin had listened to the short and tragic story of the wreck of a poor villein's home, his heart burned in rage against the steward, Sir Guy of Gisborne, who ruled the manor of Birkencar for the White Monks of St Mary's Abbey with so harsh a hand. But he knew that the steward did no more than the abbot and monks permitted him, and he cursed the whole brood of them, rich and proud as they were, given over to hunting and high living on the services and rents which they wrung from the poor villeins, who were looked upon merely as part of the soil of the manors which they tilled.

Robin, or Robert of Locksley, as he was known to the steward and the monks, was a freeman, or socman, as it was termed, and he was a young man of wealth as things went then. He had his own house and land, a farm of some hundred and sixty acres of the richest land on the verge of the manor, and he knew full well that the monks had long cast covetous eyes upon his little holding. It lay beside the forest, and was called the Outwoods. He and his ancestors had held this land for generations, first from the lords to whom the manor of Birkencar had been given by King William, and for the last generation or so from the Abbey of St Mary, to which the last owner, the Lord Guy de Wrothsley, had left it in his will.

Robin held his land at a rent, and so long as he paid this to the monks they could not legally oust him from his farm, much as they would have liked to do this. Robin was looked upon by the abbot as a discontented and malicious man. He had often bearded the abbot in his own monastery, and told him to his face how wickedly he and his stewards treated the villeins and poorer tenants of their manors. Such defiance in those days was

reckoned to be almost unheard of, and the monks and Guy of Gisborne, their steward at Birkencar, hated Robin and his free speech as much as Robin hated them for their tyranny and oppression.

'Pity it is I was away,' said Robin in reply to Scarlet's last words. 'But you could have gone to Outwoods, and Scadlock would have given you food.'

'Ay, Master Robin,' said Scarlet, 'you have ever been the good and true friend of us all. But I, too, have been a freeman, and I cannot beg my bread. You have made enemies enough on our behalf as it is, and I would not live upon you to boot. No, while there is deer in the greenwood, I and the little lad shall not starve. Besides, Master Robin, you should look to yourself. If your unfriends had known how long you would be away they would – it hath been whispered – have proclaimed you an outlaw, and taken your land in your absence, and killed you when you returned.'

Robin laughed. 'Ay, I have heard of it while I was away.'

Scarlet looked at him in wonder. He thought he had been telling his friend a great and surprising secret.

'You have heard of it?' he replied; 'now that is passing strange.'

Robin made no answer. He knew well that his enemies were only looking out for an opportunity of thrusting him to ruin. Many a man going on a long journey had come back to find that in his absence his enemy had made oath to a justice that he had fled on account of some wrong-doing, and thus had caused him to be proclaimed an outlaw, whose head anyone could cut off.

Scarlet was silent, thinking of many strange tales which the villeins, when they sat together at ale after work, had spoken concerning their great friend Robin.

Suddenly, from a little way before them, came the sound as if a squirrel was scolding. Then there was silence for a space; and then the cry, a lonely sad cry it was, as of a wolf. Instantly Robin stopped, laid the long-bow he had in his hand at the root of a great oak, together with the arrows from his girdle. Then, turning to Scarlet, he said in a low stern voice:

'Place the deer's meat you have in your tunic beside these. Quick, man, ere the foresters see your bulging breast. You shall have it safely anon.'

Almost mechanically, at the commanding tones Scarlet took the rough piece of hempen cloth in which he had wrapped the flesh of the doe from the breast of his tunic and laid it beside the bow and arrows. Next moment Robin resumed his walk. When they had gone a few steps, Scarlet looked round at the place where they had placed the things. They were gone!

A cold chill seemed to grip his heart, and he almost stopped, but Robin's stern voice said: 'Step out, man, close behind!' Poor Scarlet, sure that he was in the presence of witchcraft, did as he was bidden; but crossed himself to fend off evil.

Next moment the narrow path before them was blocked by the forms of two burly foresters, with bows at their backs and long staves in their hands. Their hard eyes looked keenly at Robin and Scarlet, and for a moment it seemed that they meditated barring their way. But Robin's bold look as he advanced made them change their minds, and they let them pass.

'When freeman and villein are found together,' scoffed one, there's ill brewing for their lord.'

'And when two foresters are found together,' said Robin, with a short laugh, 'some poor man's life will be sworn away ere long.'

'I know ye, Robert of Locksley,' said the one who had first spoken, 'as your betters know ye, for a man whose tongue wags too fast.'

'And I know thee, Black Hugo,' replied Robin, 'for a man who swore his best friend to ruin to join his few poor acres to thine.'

The man's face darkened with rage, while the other forester laughed at his discomfiture. Black Hugo looked at Robin as if he would have thrown himself upon him; but Robin's fearless eyes overawed him, and he sullenly turned away without another word.

Robin and Scarlet resumed their walk, and in a little while had issued from the forest, and were tramping through the bush and thick undergrowth of the waste lands which divided the farms of the manor on this side from the forest.

At last they came to the top of an incline, and before them the land sloped down to the cultivated fields and the pasture which surrounded the little village of villeins' huts, with the manor-house at a distance beyond the village half-way up another slope. Scarlet looked keenly about him, to see if anyone in the fields

had seen him coming from the forest; for he had run from his work of dyke building to shoot the deer, and wondered whether his absence had been discovered. If it had, he didn't care for the scourging-post and the whip on his bare back, which might be his portion tomorrow when the steward's men came round to find his work only half done. At any rate, his little lad, Gilbert of the White Hand, would have a king's supper that night.

Would he? He suddenly remembered, and again fear shook him. Where had Robin's bow and arrows and his venison disappeared? Had some goblin or elf snatched them up, or had he really looked in the wrong place, and had the foresters found them by now? He clenched his jaw and looked back, his hand upon his knife, almost expecting to see the two foresters coming after him.

'Hallo,' said Robin carelessly, 'there are my bow and arrows and your venison, lad.'

Turning, Scarlet saw the things lying beside a tussock of grass at a little distance, where he was certain he had looked a moment before and seen nothing!

'Master,' he said in an awed voice, 'this is sheer wizardry. I – I – fear for you if unfriends learn you are helped by the evil spirits that dwell in the woods.'

'Scarlet,' said Robin, 'I thought thou wert a wiser man, but, like the rest, thou seemest to be no more than a fool. Have no fear for me. My friends of the woods are quite harmless, and are no worse than thou or I.'

'Master,' said Scarlet, sorry for his hasty speech, 'I crave pardon for my fool's words. My tongue ran before my thoughts, for the sight of those things where nothing had been a moment before affrighted me. But I know there cannot be worse things in the woods than there are in strong castles and abbots' palaces whose masters oppress and maim poor villeins. Say, master, is that which has helped us but now – is it a brownie, as men call it – a troll?'

Robin looked quietly into Scarlet's face for a moment or two without speaking.

'Scarlet,' he said, 'I think I see a time before us when thou and I will be much together in the greenwood. Then I will show thee my friends there. But until then, Scarlet, not a word of what has passed today. Thou swearest it?'

'By the gentle Virgin!' said Scarlet, throwing up his hand as he took the oath.

'Amen!' replied Robin, doffing his cap and bending his head at the name. 'Now,' he went on, 'take thy meat and hand me my bow and arrows. For I must back to the greenwood. And tell thy little man, Gilbert, that Robin wishes him to get well quickly, for I would go shooting with him again on the uplands at the plovers.'

'Ay,' said Scarlet, and his haggard, hungry face shone with a gentle look as he spoke, 'the little lad hath ever loved to speak of you since you took such note of him. Your words will hearten him bravely.'

When the two men had parted, Robin turned and plunged into the thick undergrowth, but in a different direction from that in which he had come with Scarlet. He looked up at the sun and quickened his pace, for he saw it was two hours past noon. Soon he had reached the trees, and threading his way unerringly among them, he struck southwards towards the road that ran for many a mile through the forest from Barnisdale into Nottinghamshire.

With a quick and eager step did Robin pass through the glades, for he was going to see the lady he loved best in all the world. Fair Marian was she called, the daughter of Richard FitzWalter of Malaset. Ever since when, as a boy, Robin had shot and sported in Locksley Chase, near where he had been born, Marian had been his playmate, and though she was an earl's daughter, and Robin was but a yeoman and not rich, they had loved each other dearly, and sworn that neither would marry anyone else.

This day she was to journey from her father's castle at Malaset to Linden Lea, near by Nottingham, to stay a while at the castle of her uncle, Sir Richard at Lee, and Robin had promised to guard her through the forest.

Soon he reached a broad trackway, carpeted with thick grass and with deep wheel-holes here and there in the boggy hollows. He walked rapidly along this, and did not rest till he had covered some five miles. Then, coming to where another road crossed it, he paused, looked about him keenly, and then disappeared among some hazel bushes that crowned a bank beside the four ways.

Proceeding for some distance, he at length gained a hollow where the ground was clear of bushes. On one side was a bare