

Robin Hood's Treasure
a Robin Hood & Marian Mystery
by Clayton Emery

"-- almost defiled me! The indignity of it! The nerve! Burned my barn and my castle! Laid hands on me! And stole -- *stole* -- the last of the money I'd planned for my old age! A pittance to you, no doubt, good Sheriff, but the only bulwark I had against the cold and the wolves of the forest! And now it's *gone*! I say to you, I demand of you, what are you going to do about it! *What?* Tell me!"

"Good lady, I --"

"You don't care! Why should you? You have money! You have wealth! You have silver enough and gold too to last the winter! What care you? Eh? *Tell* me!"

"Good lady, we --"

"Oh, it's all very well to talk! That's all you men ever do! Here I am, practically naked as a virgin before the world, and you can only boast of catching these ruffians and bringing them to justice! But any real help? *No!* Where am I to get it? Needs I take myself to the forest and beg help from some scurrilous outlaw? He's a friend of the poor and the sick and elderly and the widowed! He's not sitting here in a silver chain swilling wine while --"

"Madame, I'll get your money back!"

Nicholas, High Sheriff of Nottingham, was reminded of that Greek king who could never eat his meals for the harpy women who swooped from the skies and shit on his plate. Even his wine tasted sour. The Lady Amabillia, formerly of Three Oaks above Derby (Would she sell her land cheaply, he wondered?) hung over him like a gallows tree, alternately wringing her scrawny hands or sketching in the air the horrors she had suffered. Her sleeves brushed against his forehead time and again, no matter how far back he leaned. The Blue Boar's patrons peeked and chuckled. The lady's sleeve dipped in the mustard sauce on his plate, then striped across his forehead. Nicholas clambered to his feet and upset the table. His breakfast, barely begun, landed on the floor.

"Will you, good Sheriff, will you?" Lady Amabillia cried with joy. Her

hands hooked as if to caress his cheeks. He jerked back and tripped over his stool. "Yes, m'lady, yes, I will. I'll have your gold back by tomorrow."

"Will you start right now? Right away? *Now?*"

She swayed back enough that the sheriff could scuttle upright. A boy had come to clean the mess. He held up the sheriff's slice of mutton. It was speckled with straw and dirt and dried dog shit. "Will you take this with you, milord?"

The sheriff's hands shook as he fumbled out a silver penny and threw it at the boy. He scampered for the door with the widow right behind.

Out in the sunshine his men snapped to attention. One let go a milkmaid's waist. One lobbed a tankard behind a tree. Three got up from dicing in the dust. They tightened cinches and untwisted reins.

The sheriff squinted in the light. Nicholas of Nottingham was a short man with flat black hair and beard. He was dressed in a silver-chased doublet and satin-lined cloak and new hose, all in the blue of Nottingham, with the silver-antlered chain of office on his breast. His matching hat had a short peacock feather that constantly intruded on his side vision. The widow clung to his tails like a swarm of hornets. He grabbed at his saddle pommel and jerked himself astride.

"Which way did they go, milady? I want to get after them as soon as possible."

"Which way? I don't know! I had to flee! But they'll likely come this way, so you go *that way!*"

The sheriff followed her finger. Through Sherwood Forest. Of course.

The widow raised her voice. "One hundred ten marks it was they got! Almost all gold, except for the silver! Good Roman florins! There were four of them -- don't you want to know how many? Sheriff, are you *listening?*"

The sheriff was not listening. He rode as fast as his mount and sour stomach would go.

"We could give more to the crippled ones that crawl in here on hands and knees."

"And more to them little parish churches that have to give to the bishops."

"And more to the orphans. We could do a lot more, Robin."

"A lot more with what?"

"Money!"

Robin Hood opened a sleepy eye and fixed it on his cousin. Green-tinged shafts of light and silver birch pillars gave the greenwood a cathedral air. The morning forest hummed with spring noise. They had to raise their voices above bird song. "What would you do with more money, Will?"

Will Scarlett intoned, "I would give it to the poor."

Everyone hooted.

"Then they wouldn't be poor no longer." Old Will Stutely recited the old joke. "And we know what you'd do with it."

Scarlett laughed. "And what would I do with it?"

"You'd spend it on lust."

"And malmsey," added Little John.

"And you'd gamble the rest away," added Hard-Hitting Brand.

"And buy food," added Much. He'd been turning the deer on the spit over the firepit.

"And he'd waste the rest," muttered Robin Hood. "Aren't you supposed to be on watch, Brand?"

"This is more interesting."

"Must be powerful boring out there, then."

Will Scarlett nodded. "You're right. I'd spend the money on them things and more. I'd spend it *right*."

"And that's wrong," Robin finished. He sat up straight and stretched his arms. He scratched both armpits and then his beard. Robin had been up since yesterday, visiting Marian who'd slipped out of the nunnery, and they'd spent the night wandering the woods, gathering spring flowers, kissing and hugging, talking. He didn't know if he were ready for the day

or not. "When we steal, it's not for us. It's for the poor and anyone else as needs it. We're not the receivers. We're just the vessels, carriers for Our Lady."

"I know some ladies in Nottingham would love to receive some money," said Scarlett.

"You never knew a lady in your life," Little John told him.

Robin picked up his great bow and stretched the string, taking imaginary aim. The weapon fairly hummed. "Gold can't buy anything important."

Will Scarlett clucked his tongue. "But really, Rob. Why can't we keep some of what we steal?"

"You know the answer to that, Will. Because it wouldn't be right. We didn't become outlaws to steal money. We became outlaws and that's *why* we steal money. Don't get things backwards. You're always doing that."

Little John rumbled, "But you know, Rob. He's right about one thing --"

"*Ach!*" Robin Hood let his bowstring twang, something he never did. "All this talk about money! I don't remember Jesus talking about getting rich! I seem to remember just the opposite! All we ever talk about is *money!* How many times a week do I have to dig up our treasure chest? Eh?"

Little John rocked his quarterstaff across his lap so the ends thumped on the ground. "Last time you opened it you frightened a mole."

Robin Hood swung his bow in a great sweeping arc. "Would you *look* at this glade? Would you *look* at that lime tree? This cave? These oaks, that were saplings when Our Saviour walked on water? This glade, this forest, yon brook, this way of life we have here -- sitting around a tree and lazing the day away and watching the sun come up and *talking* about *nothing* at all -- we might's well be steeped in emeralds --"

"In what?" asked Brand.

-- when we could be chained to some plow scratching a furrow across rocks, or hobbling crippled a leper on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or lost, or alone, or hurt or unloved or without families -- all *this*, and you lot want *money?*"

The outlaws looked at one another. They looked at their camp, which showed no sign of human life other than the firepit and Will Scarlett's spare shirt hanging on a bush. They looked at their leader. Robin Hood's shirt and trousers were worn through at the knees and elbows. His leather tunic was scuffed almost white, his belt cracked. Only his deerhide boots, tall and greased, were presentable. Even the feather in his hat drooped. The King of Sherwood was the poorest-dressed among them.

Little John cleared his throat. "If we did keep more of the money, Robin, we could build a chapel."

Robin grunted, his voice tight from pulling his bowstring. "I could build a chapel without leaving this glade. From stone below and trees above."

"We could have a gilt cross."

"Jesus hung on a wooden one."

"What about our arrowheads, eh? You don't find them growing on trees."

"No, I find them hiding in the pack of ironmongers from Kent."

Scarlett said, "Rob, all we're sayin' is --"

"*Enough!*" Robin Hood hopped into the air and landed facing them. "I'm for a walk! Good day!"

He strode off for the woods, the arrows in his back quiver clicking rhythmically. They watched him go.

Will Stutely sucked one of his few teeth. "Much, that deer done yet?"

Scarlett poked his chin with a long finger. "Too bad you mentioned malmsey, John. That's got me thirsty. If we had a few pennies we could walk to the Boar."

"Oh, shut up, Will."

"No, there's nothing like it, Ned, nothing at all. We rise when we please, we hunt the king's deer, we sleep when we're tired, visit whom we please when we please -- there's just nothing like it at all. I'd not trade places with King Henry. No king's treasure could amount to a hundredth's part of mine."

"Tell us more, pray." The challenge came from a shadow that filled the doorway. Dust motes whirled around the stolid figure. In a blink the doorway darkened with two more men, then another. Long tapers hung from black hands. They shooed a few peasants past them and shut the door and slammed the shutters. Sunlight and fairy dust were banished outside.

The Blue Boar was quiet. Robin Hood had several bowls of ale under his belt by now. He enjoyed talking to the innkeeper Ned, who'd been the cook in Robin's father's household in the old days. Robin loved to hear stories about his father's careless Saxon tastes and his mother's refined French ones. And of how Ned would make him a berry duff if the boy Robin pestered him enough.

The outlaw chief squinted as the men advanced. Ned the innkeeper moved slowly down the bar, but froze as a man barked. Ned and Robin Hood and the inn's boy, Cnut, waited.

The gruff men were knights, dusty from the road. The four wore leather hauberks with rusted iron plates, scratched Norman helmets and broken shoes. They carried long knives at their belts and slim swords in their hands, and faces stern from recent sin. A tall thin knight dropped a leather sack onto the planks of the bar with a clank.

The four surrounded Robin where he leaned on the bar. The outlaw stood as straight as he could.

"I said," growled the knight, "tell us more."

Robin squinted again. "More about what?"

The knight used his free hand to punch Robin in the chest.

Quick as a snake Robin's right hand came off the bar and slammed the knight's jaw shut with a *clack!* His left swung wide for the second knight's face or throat -- Robin didn't care which, as long as the man fell back. He did, and Robin smashed his shoulder into the man who'd hit him. He clawed for the man's sword. Robin had only his long Irish knife: his bow and quiver hung from a peg on the wall. The outlaw grabbed, but the man clutched his sword tight. Robin had the disquieting thought this plan might not work.

With a toe-popping lurch, he ripped the sword free. It was just in time, for a silver blade swung at his neck like an executioner's blade. Robin shoved his steel into the air and even managed to back the flat side with

his other hand. The knight's sword struck his with a muffled *clang* that hurt to hear. It was a solid blow, too solid. Off-balance and clumsy, Robin was knocked sprawling. He tossed the sword rather than cut his face open.

Somewhere along the way he hit the dirt floor with his back, then his head. Someone kicked his foot. Someone kicked him in the ribs. He rocked forward to get clear and almost ran onto a sword blade.

"*Ouch!*"

The tip was dull. It did no more than puncture his tunic and bruise his breastbone. But it stopped him cold. He sighted along the shimmering blade. It seemed to go on forever, like a one-color rainbow. The tip of the sword skipped from Robin's breastbone to just under his chin.

"Don't kill him, Wycliff! He said treasure!"

Treasure? thought Robin. I said that? His thoughts jiggered like tadpoles in a pond. Treasure?

A third knight shouted. "Where is this treasure you spoke of, lout? It means your life."

"Umm... Yes, milord."

"It's `milord,' now," said a man. Robin couldn't see any of them well, up there in the dark of the rafters. "He's scared."

"Hush. Talk! Who are you, anyway? Why are you in devil's green?"

"He looks like a beggar."

"Not with them boots, he don't."

Ned spoke from behind the bar. "He's Robin Hood, the famous outlaw. He robs the sheriff and others on the road. Rich folk. He's got a lot of treasure hidden away, back there in the forest."

"How much?" Someone kicked him. "How much?"

"Oh --" Robin's croaked and tried again. "Oh, some. Gold marks, a double fistful at least."

"No."

"Aye. Some stamped with William's head. Some with Harald's."

The sword at Robin's throat backed an inch. "What else?"

"German pennies. Ecus. Florins. They're all the same, same size and weight. Lots of silver. Fifty marks if it's a penny."

Ned asked, "Would you lords like a drink while you plan? My ale's fresh-brewed in new vats."

"Aye. That's good." The greedy man, the leader, sheathed his sword. "Rufus, watch him. Don't let him up."

The knights stepped to the bar and took jacks of foaming ale. Rufus spilled ale out the corner of his mouth as he tried to stare at Robin. The outlaw laid his head back on the cool earth and rested and listened. His eyes burned.

Ned talked as if the knights were his best customers. He topped off their ale and asked whence they travelled, what they'd seen, what the news. They bragged about their latest coup. "We've gained a small fortune just this morning. Robbed a widow down Derby way. Fired her house and barn. Cooked one of her sucklings for dinner. And got that." He pointed with his jack to the leather sack on the bar. "Sixty marks if it's a penny."

The man with the sore jaw and fiery temper, Wycliff, laughed. "We left her her son and her virtue. How's that for a bargain?"

The leader choked on his ale. "I wonder where *she* // sleep tonight?"

"Not in the barn, nor the house neither!" One knight, an older man, wheezed so hard he snorted ale through his nose.

Ned chuckled with them. He hunted back of the bar, then nodded to his boy. "Cnut, run to the house and fetch that cask of special brandy I've been keeping. Let me know if you can't find it."

"Yes, father." The boy put down his broom and left. A few minutes later he stuck his head in the door. He squeaked, "I can't find it, father."

"*Gah!* You useless sopdoll." He banged down a pitcher. "I'll be right back, milords. I've something you'll like."

The leader of the knights nodded. The men drained their jacks and refilled them from the pitcher. It was quiet in the room. Robin stared at the blackened beams. He thought it curious no one else came in: someone must be steering people clear. The Blue Boar sat by the road

by itself, halfway between Edwinstowe and Nottingham. Ned liked to be alone. They waited some more. The inn's cat, a piebald, slipped into the room and rubbed along the hearthstones.

Wycliff banged his fist on the smooth oak planks. "Where is that fool?"

The leader put down a pitcher. "Hey. I bet he's run off."

From the floor, Robin Hood said, "He's gone for the sheriff. He told me Nicholas was here just this morning, with eight men-at-arms."

Wycliff threw his jack at the fireplace. "Bugger! Let's burn this place to the ground!"

The outlaw said, "The smoke'll attract attention."

Wycliff walked over and peered down at him. "I haven't forgotten you punched me in the jaw."

Robin told him, "Please forgive me that, lord. But 'tis better you slip off quietly into the woods -- with me -- to fetch that gold. That or fight the sheriff's men."

Rufus gulped the rest of his ale and tossed his jack. "He's right there."

The leader frowned. Wycliff kicked Robin in the side. "There better be lots of gold. A double handful for each of us. You better not be tricking us."

Robin rolled his eyes. "Me? Trick you? I don't think I could. There's plenty. I took it from the Bishop of Hereford himself."

"That's a sin," said Rufus.

"May I get up now?"

The leader grabbed the sack from the bar. He bounced it to feel its weight. "Aye, get up, you scut." He jerked Robin's knife out of his belt and threw it across the room to thud against a wall. "Lead us to this gold. And no tricks."

Robin pushed the door open to blinding sunshine. "Follow me."

"Where're you bound, lad?"

The voice came from the trees. Alphonse jumped like a rabbit struck

with an arrow.

One of Robin's foresters had appeared from nowhere. He was tall and broad, Saxon blonde, with a crooked nose and large bony fists. He wore forester's green and a tunic of chain mail scraps, with a bow taller than himself and arrows half as long, and a staghorn knife in his belt. In the green wilderness Alphonse found him more terrible than a dragon.

"A-are you Robin Hood's man, Little John?"

The man reared back and laughed. "Me? No, I'm just a little titch compared to Little John! He's *big!* Come along and meet him. Are you bearing news or asking for help? You don't act smug enough to have news, so you must need help. Am I right? And stop shaking. Your teeth chattering will scare the deer."

Robin's camp was only a meadow at the base of a tall hill. A lime tree filled the sky and shaded the glade. Oak trees loomed so high they could crush a boy and never notice. A cave mouth in the hillside beckoned and repelled Alphonse at the same time. Caves led to hell.

Robin's band of Merry Men (as Alphonse had heard them called in songs) lay around like cows in a paddock. There was an older man with a head grey and white like a badger's, a squat and ugly and snaggle-toothed idiot, a smiling rogue in red, a peasant fresh from the plow. Most noticeable of all was a man who covered too much grass. And as he stood... Alphonse found himself staring up at the giant's face, silhouetted against the sky like the face of God. The giant had a blonde beard cut like a spade and a long braid down his back. His hand was bigger than the Bible in the parish church.

The man with the crooked nose called, "Someone looking for help."

"Looks more like he's after food," said the man in red. Alphonse had smelt roasting deer. "I'll cut him a haunch before he faints and we don't get our news."

"None of the deer you shoot are ever edible, Will," put in the grey man, "You always gutshoot the poor things and let 'em run. Makes 'em bitter."

"You're just cranky 'cuz you ain't got the teeth to chew 'em with, Will."

"Least when I shoot 'em, they go down and not long."

Robin's cousin cut away a long wide slice of golden-brown venison and juggled it as he rolled it into a tube. He handed it to the hungry boy, whose eyes shone with appreciation.

The man with the crooked nose, Hard-Hitting Brand, poked Alphonse with a finger. "Your news, boy?"

The boy spoke around a mouthful. "I'm Alphonse, son of Amabillia, widow of Richard of Three Oaks near to Derby."

"Widow Amabillia. We know of her," said the giant. His voice rumbled as if from under the ground.

"We was attacked early this morning. Before dawn. There were four knights tried to get into our manse. They stayed the night in our barn, and when they couldn't get inside this morn, they fired the barn. Then they fired the door and broke in. They took mother's treasure."

The man in red, Will Scarlett, asked, "How much treasure?"

Little John pointed a finger like the short end of a club. "Tha's none of your business, Will. Go on, lad."

"That's all there is to tell. They took our money. That's what Mother told me to tell y'."

"And she expects us to get her silver back?"

"Gold, it was, she said. Near to ninety marks. All we had in the world, and now us thrown out in the cold to starve."

Will Scarlett scratched his head. He signalled to old Will Stutly and Little John to move away. He whispered, "I've seen this Widow Amabillia before, and heard more of her. She's the one loses her cattle all the time. Has six head and loses thirteen or more a year. She thinks the pindar works for her. I'll bet if she says she lost ninety pounds it's closer to forty-five. Or thirty."

"You're daft, Will," Little John told him. "Not everyone's a thief like you."

"And she couldn't conjure up four wastrel knights from the ground." Will Stutly scowled, "Still, I don't believe anything until I see it with my own two eyes. We'll set out on their trail. It's what Robin would do."

They walked back to the boy.

Alphonse, skinny and dirty and fifteen or so, gulped down a hunk of

venison a dog couldn't have swallowed. Little John carved off another piece. Will Scarlett sat on his heels across from the boy. "All right lad -- you're a bright looking type, you know that? I hope my little Tam grows up as sharp as you -- why don't you tell us everything that happened? Let's start with descriptions of these knights, their weapons, and their mounts..."

The boy's throat tired from answering questions. Finally Will Scarlett said, "That's all very well, but these knights could have gone anywhere."

"But probably they'll go to Nottingham," said Will Stutly. "With that gold weighin' 'im down, they'll be wanting to spend it, and town's the place to waste money. Just ask Scarlett."

"It's as good as any," Little John agreed. "We can take the Black Brook Trail to the Salt Road. Maybe we'll get there before 'em."

"Specially if they stop at the Boar," added Scarlett.

"You've yet to pass it by, tha's true," replied John.

"This'll be grand. If we collect the robbers and the money too, that'll do Rob in the eye."

"This ain't a contest. Be sensible. Now let's go. Much, you stay here in camp. To tell Robin where we are, or in case anyone else comes. Where are we going?"

Much furrowed his black brows. "Af-ter knights. To Nott'in'um."

"Good!" The giant slapped the idiot on the back. "We'll be back tonight, or maybe not. Rob'll understand."

He caught Alphonse under the arm and picked him clean off the ground, then set him down. "Come on, son. Let's catch these marauders of yours. Maybe we can collect their heads to adorn your mother's gate."

Alphonse choked on his meat but stood ready as the foresters shouldered their quivers and picked up their bows. He stepped out after them, then found himself running to keep up with their long woodsmen's strides.

Will Stutly called over his shoulder, "Where's your mother now, boy?"

"Oh, she's safe. She's asking the sheriff to help."

Before Will Scarlett could say anything, Little John poked him.

"How much farther?"

Robin stopped and turned. Any time they addressed him he stopped, and was slow to start again. "Eh?"

"I said, how much farther?"

"Farther?"

"To camp, you oaf!"

Robin Hood leaned against the bole of an oak tree that reared to the sky. This was climax forest, where the trees had almost ceased to grow. The lowest branches were fifty feet off the ground. The ground was carpeted with oak leaves and nothing else, as clean as if overgrazed by goats. The only moving things were brown moths. High overhead a green woodpecker laughed, the sound eerie.

Behind him had come the four robber knights on their horses. The beasts' hooves were silent on the dead pliant leaves. Only an occasional thud of iron on root sounded in the cathedral of forest. That and the knights' grumbling.

The leader, whose name was Roger, kicked his mount to crowd Robin. He slapped at him with the end of his reins. Robin Hood took it on his shoulder. "How much farther to this stinking outlaw camp of yours? And the gold?"

Robin rubbed his chin. "Oh. To camp, milord. Let's see now..." Robin pretended to think. He yawned.

Roger's face turned bright red. He scabbled off his horse and ripped his sword from its sheath to level it at Robin's belly. "Yes, you goddamned yellow scurvy outlaw bastard mongrel whoremongering fool! Yes, to the camp and the treasure you spoke of, you idiot! And why are you *yawning*, you dick-headed harlequin? Aren't you afraid?"

Robin waved an apologetic hand. "Of course I'm afraid, milord. Terrified. But I was up all night and I drank my breakfast -- we outlaws live to carouse, you know -- and -- I'm tired."

In truth, Robin Hood had planned to lead these men on a little farther, past this stand of oaks and down a slope to the edge of a fen. There, in the holly and hawthorn, cattails and bullrushes, he had planned to run

away from them. Horses couldn't penetrate that swamp without sinking, even if a rider could force them onto the deer trails. But if he did lead them to the fen... There would be mosquitoes down there -- he and Marian had had to avoid some of their favorite places because of the clouds. It was a warm spring. And the fairies might still be abroad, since they stirred in the spring along with everything else, and their first thoughts were in discomfiting humans. And Robin didn't himself like that fen. There were barrows back there, and probably barrow wights. And he was hungry and thirsty and tired, and he didn't feel like running...

"No, I'm addled," he said. "T'will be quicker to cut up north and come to camp that way. The trail should be dry by now."

Roger wagged his sword. "So how far?"

Robin scratched his elbow where it protruded from his shirt. "Oh, not an hour's walk."

The knights looked at one another. Clearly, they didn't know what to make of this rogue. Roger jabbed at Robin's chest, scarring his tunic again below the fresh cut of the morning. "Well, let's get to it! We're tired of wandering these damned woods for nothing."

"Me, too," Robin replied. He pointed. "That way."

The men mounted and Robin took the lead. He turned for a slight detour so he could drink from a brook.

He pondered his new plan. He would lead the knights towards camp. He'd make noise to alert the lookout, sing a signal, and his Merry Men would ambush these knights. They were begging to be killed anyway.

He hoped the lookouts weren't asleep.

"'West by northwest. West by northwest.' What kind of directions are those?"

Cnut, the boy from the Blue Boar Inn, had almost given up hope of finding Robin Hood's camp when he saw the smoke. It spiralled up in the middle distance, white and thick. A cook fire full of grease, he guessed. Didn't it seem unwise to make so much smoke if they were hiding from the sheriff's soldiers?

Cnut came to the clearing at the foot of a hill. The smoke came from an

animal carcass -- it must be a deer -- that had ignited from too hot a fire.

A man beat at the flames with a stick. His mad flailing broke the spit and dropped the meat into the fire. More beating whipped up flames and ash and set the stick afire. In flailing the stick about, he set fire to the back of his tunic.

Cnut ran up, snatched off his filthy apron, and whapped at the flames on the forester's back.

Much the Miller's Son spun around. Someone was hitting him. He struck back with the charred stick. The boy tried to get behind him. Robin Hood had told Much never to turn his back on an enemy, so the idiot danced in circles. The boy followed, shouting. Much hit him with the stick and left black streaks on his hat and face.

Cnut finally just pushed the forester over to crash on his back. Then he backpedaled out of range.

Much got up slowly, like a turtle. He tried to remember what all the excitement had been. He studied the boy, a young boy from town. (Anyone not a forester was "from town.") "Hail," Much told him, in Robin's voice. "Wel-come to camp. What do you want? Why you wear a skirt?"

Cnut panted as he tied his apron back on. "I don't know. It's not. We need help. Or you do. Not us, you. There are robbers and they've got Robin Hood. They knocked him down and kicked him --"

Much remembered. "You knocked me down."

"Y-yes, I did. You were on fire."

"Oh." Much frowned. "What do you want?"

"These robbers, knights, false knights, with horses. They've got Robin Hood. They took him away."

"Where they take him?"

"Uh, to camp." Cnut looked around. Some crows had landed on the lower branches of an oak tree to investigate the meat smell, but that was the only activity. "To here, we thought. To get Robin's treasure."

"Rob-in's trea-sure? What trea-sure?"

"Uh, I don't know. Don't you know about his treasure?"

Much shook his head gravely. "You hungry? Boys are always hungry."

"N-no, I'm not hungry, thank you, milord."

"I'm no man's lord. I'm Much the Mill-er's Son. I get you some food."

Much drew a slim knife and dragged the smouldering deer clear of the fire. He poked around, hacked with his knife, used his hands and tore a bloody chunk loose. He dropped it on the grass, speared it, brushed it off, finally presented it to the boy with black fingers. "Eat. Sit. Wel-come to camp."

Cnut took the meat and sat cross-legged on the grass. He tried to nibble at the lump. He wondered how it could be raw and burned black at the same time. He closed his eyes and bit deep, tried not to spit it out.

Much sat across from him, too close. He dandled the sharp knife in his hand. "Why you come here?"

Mouth smeared with blood, Cnut started, "I'm the slops boy at the Blue Boar Inn. This morning --"

"Boars are black," Much told him. "With grey --" he plucked at his hair and pulled it around to look at it. "-- hairs."

Very slowly, not eating his meat, Cnut explained what had happened to Robin Hood. It took a long time. In the end he said, "So Robin Hood is coming here -- I think -- with the bad men -- here. No, not yet. They're *coming* -- to steal your treasure. Robin's *gold*."

"Gold!" Much exclaimed. He got up and ambled off towards the cave. Cnut threw his meat into the bushes, wiped his hands on his singed apron, and followed.

The boy crept into the cave after the idiot. The inside of the hill was very dark after the sunshine. He waited for his eyes to adjust. He smelt water and dry stone. The cave was surprisingly large, the ceiling higher than he could have jumped. Some bulky objects -- barrels and sacks and a chest or two -- were stacked at the back. That was all. This was an outlaw's life? Living with idiots in caves in the woods?

Much knelt at the far side of the cave without any light. Cnut heard digging. Much moved something aside, stomped dirt flat, picked up the

something and headed out. Cnut got out of his way.

Back on the sunny spring grass of the clearing Much brushed dirt off a small wooden box. It was iron-bound, riveted to be strong, with a hasp but no lock or even peg. Much pried up the lid and something sparkled brighter than the sun.

It was silver and some gold, more than Cnut had ever seen, even working in an inn all his life. There were fat Norman coins with Stephen and William's heads, and older coins with faces he didn't know. There were coins stamped with city walls. The silver was black with tarnish, but thick and round or cut square. When Much closed the box it seemed like sundown.

"Robin's gold," said the idiot.

"Well, sir Much, I don't know what you should do with it. Except hide it, maybe. Those robbers are coming soon. They should have been here by now." Cnut gulped. The sight of all that money and the thought of marauders coming to steal it unnerved him. "I have to go, milord."

Much stood up and picked his nose. "You hun-gry? Boys al-ways hun-gry."

The boy shook his head. "No, no thank you. I'm full from that venison I had. Really."

But Much headed back towards the firepit. "Non-sense. Boys always hun-gry. Can't send you 'way emp-ty." He shooed crows away from the scorched wreck and ripped another hunk loose. He picked up the deerhide from the grass, shook off the ants, wrapped it up and gave it to the boy.

"Thank you muchly, uh, Much. Will you hide that treasure? It shouldn't be left out."

The idiot stood over the box. "Hide it. Hide it. Hide it where? Hey, where you go?" Cnut had made his getaway.

Eventually Much picked up the chest, set it on his sloping shoulder, and settled it into place.

He marched off into the woods.

"I know you lot don't appreciate the forest. You'd rather a town. Bright lights, alehouses, painted women. But it's a lovely place to be. There's no other spot on Earth like it. Not a one. Why just *look* at those trees, would you? Just *look* at them! Other men see only the wood in them, that they'd fell and cut out the heart of, but I say they're *beautiful*, God's *finest* works --"

"Would you shut up with your drasty speech? You'll drive us all mad! You talk and talk and talk and say nothing!"

Robin Hood turned in complete innocence. The four knights scowled at him. Or three did. The fourth, the old man, clung in the saddle and panted. Robin calculated. They were past the lookout's post, so the Merry Men knew they were here. He hadn't hailed or blown his horn, so they expected trouble. A signal would cap it. He asked, "If I mayn't talk, may I sing?"

"No!"

Robin had already launched into "Pour Mon Coeur." "*At-tend-ez moi, les pe-tites* --"

The lead knight spurred his horse and swiped at Robin with his fist. The outlaw sidestepped by moving close to a tree trunk. The knight cursed him. "Shut up and *move!*"

Robin Hood shrugged and walked. With every pace he expected the *zip* and *thop!* of an arrow hitting a man or horse, and he tightened his belly for the dash for cover. But one step followed another, and eventually he could see the bright green-yellow of the camp clearing. Then he was in the open and the horses were snorting behind him.

The King of Sherwood stood and stared at the empty camp. The only thing out of place was a misshapen burned deer on the grass. Nothing moved. What the hell?

Roger walked his horse beside Robin. "Well? Fetch out the treasure!"

Robin Hood scritchd this beard with his thumb.

"Go!"

"Yes, milord." Robin hitched his belt and started for the cave. Oh, well. He'd give them his gold and bolt for the woods if necessary. If he could find the Merry Men, they could maybe hunt the knights down. Or maybe

not. And he could always steal more gold.

Robin chirped as he crept into the cave, but there was no answer. Roger bustled in behind him, leather-and-iron armor creaking and squeaking. The tall Rufus came after and thumped his head on the entrance. But that was all. Wycliff the Quick-Tempered stayed outside, as did old Tomkin. Wycliff said nothing, but Tom carried on about "caves ain't no fit place for men. Devils' territory, that. Y'u'd be mad to venture in there..."

Robin Hood reached for his belt and found his sheath empty. "Borrow your knife?"

Roger squinted in the dark. He'd drawn his sword. "D'ya think I'm a fool?"

Robin didn't answer that. He poked around and found an iron spoon. "Never mind."

He felt with his hand for the spot. There it was, tamped down in the shape of feet in deerhide soles. He dug. The earth seemed looser than it should be. He hadn't been at this chest in weeks...

His spoon scraped hard dirt. The hole was deep now. He stopped. He felt around. He poked the soil on either side of the hole. It was tough, undisturbed.

Robin Hood sat back on his heels. He scritch'd his beard.

Behind him stood Roger and Rufus. Their sword blades shone dimly in the yellow light of the cave mouth.

"So where's this gold?"

"Christ, what a day! Bloody woman."

The Sheriff of Nottingham rode the skirt of Sherwood Forest, going west. He had more taxes, more rents to collect, more business to transact. He smiled at the thought. And if he should meet the robber knights, well and good. His men could capture them, and he'd impound their money. "But it would be just my luck to meet bloody Robin Hood and his bloody Merry bloody Men --"

He heard a *zip* and *thop!* and blinked. An arrow shaft stuck out of his

horse's breast just in front of his foot. How did that --

His horse took another three steps, died, and collapsed. His nose banged the dirt road, his neck twisted, his body slumped at an angle. Nicholas of Nottingham followed, tumbling out of his high Norman saddle. He landed on his back knowing his clothes would be filthy. Then the sky darkened.

A hand came down and caught the sheriff by the doublet. Nicholas was plucked up off his feet as he hadn't been since a child.

Little John propped the sheriff on his feet. The forester was impossibly tall, making Nicholas feel even smaller. He grinned. "Hail and well met, good Sheriff. Master." The giant laughed, then laughed some more. "How your home and your lovely wife? Hired a new cook, or any more servants?"

Nicholas scowled. It was not so long ago that Little John, then unknown, had entered his service, cleaned out his kitchen, and lured away his cook. Later he'd tricked the sheriff into attending a feast in the greenwood. Nicholas had eaten off his own plate, been served his own wine by his own cook, and then been robbed for dessert.

More foresters held bows with arrows nocked and pointed at his soldiers. Nicholas found his temper rising. Here was Robin's cousin, the laughing Will Scarlett, who prowled Nottingham as a cutpurse named Badger. Here was Hard-Hitting Brand, a tall man often mistaken for Little John (by anyone who hadn't seen the real thing). And here was old Will Stutly, whom the sheriff had tried to hang, but whom Robin Hood had snatched from under his nose.

Brand pointed. "No word for Reynold Greenleaf, Sheriff?"

Will Scarlett laughed, "Isn't it Reynold John?"

Little John smirked. "Or Little Greenleaf?"

Will Stutly grinned a gapped grin. He rasped, "And have you reconsidered joining our band?"

The foresters laughed, Brand and John and Simon and the two Wills. Little John finally wiped his eyes. "You ought to teach your men proper archery, Nick. Them crossbows are too slow to engage, and they look so helpless."

The soldier at the forefront burst out, "Only cowards strike from cover!"

Simon darkened. "*Cowards?*"

Little John waved a hand. "Don't be touchy, Simon. They always say that. We're forever killing the sheriff's men, and they're sensitive about it."

Nicholas brushed at his cloak. "Did you have to kill my horse? They cost more than the soldiers, you know."

The giant shrugged. Besides his quiver and bow across his back, he held a quarterstaff taller than himself, thicker than the sheriff's wrist. "All you lot do is complain. Next time we'll knock you out of the saddle and spare the horse."

Nicholas shuddered, then froze as the giant continued. "Now hand over the gold."

"G-gold? What gold?"

"Or silver."

"I, uh, I haven't any --"

Little John shook his head.

Nicholas sighed. "It's in the saddlebags."

Little John waved. "Scarlett, fetch it." Will untied the saddlebags and bounced them on the road. They gave a muted chink. Little John stuck out his hand. The sheriff produced his purse from inside his shirt.

Nicholas asked, "How did you know I had money?"

Scarlett laughed. "You always have money."

Little John added, "And you're not supposed to even be in Sherwood. This ain't sheriff's territory."

"I can ride the roads!"

Will Scarlett slung the saddle bags over his shoulder. "You gonna do like Rob does? He always splits it and gives half back."

"Robin ain't here."

Stutly croaked, "Besides, he lied. He said he didn't have no gold."

"Oh, that's right." Will nodded at the soldiers. "Do we rob them?"

Little John answered. "No. We're too cowardly to go near fighting men. Besides, anyone takes up soldierin' needs money bad." The sheriff's eight men fidgeted in their saddles, but said nothing. He told the sheriff, "That's all. You can go. Oh, did you hear about four knights robbed the widow of Three Oaks? We're hunting for them."

Nicholas grit his teeth. "I heard. I met her. We're hunting too."

"Oh, good."

The sheriff's eyes blazed at the foresters. "One of these days... I'm going to catch you lot and hang you all!"

Simon was stunned. Stutely was smug. Will Scarlett nodded. "Fair enough."

Nicholas, High Sheriff of Nottingham, stalked back to the last man in line. "Get off that animal, you idiot! I need it!" The soldier got down and the sheriff mounted. "Start walking!" Head high, he led his troop down the road. The dismount soldier walked around the outlaws and the dead horse, swinging his arms.

Little John laid his staff down in the road, broke the laces on the saddle bags, and dumped out the money. He whistled at the bushes. "Alphonse! Come here!"

The widow's son crept out of the bush. He looked at the retreating entourage. "Is that always the way you rob people? The sheriff?"

Scarlett stacked coins in piles of ten. "No. Sometimes we make fun of him. Look at this, son. How much did your mother lose?"

Alphonse gulped. "Near to ninety marks, is what she said to say."

"But how much did she lose?"

"Uh..."

Scarlett glanced at Little John. The giant shrugged. "Count out ninety and give it him. Near enough is close enough."

But when it was counted out, there were only eighty marks in gold and its equivalent in silver.

Little John straightened up. "Eighty's almost ninety. Good." He squinted

at the sun, scratched the base of his braid. "Not yet noon and we've recovered most of the widow's money. Robin will be pleased."

Scarlett grinned. "We're one up on Rob."

"This ain't a contest, I tell you. Alphonse, why don't you get along home? Your mother'll be frantic over the loss of that money, and glad to see this. We'll chase after those knights, but they could be anywhere. We'll send word if we get lucky."

"What will you do if you catch 'em?"

Little John kept pulling at his braid where it caught on the bowstring. "Depends what they do. If they surrender, we'll... march 'em into Nottingham for the sheriff, I guess. If they act up, we'll stack 'em by the side of the road for the wolves. You lot ready?"

Scarlett said, "You're the one talking and fussing with your hair."

Little John frowned. "I see what happened. Robin was born first and got all the brains in the family."

Will grinned. "That's right. I got all the looks."

"Must be one ugly family. Let's walk."

Alphonse went west, and they set off south.

Simon asked, "You think Robin's back in camp yet, so we can tell him what we did?"

Little John reached for his braid and turned the gesture into another shrug. "Less he stopped for a nap."

Robin stood up in the dusky cave and brushed off his trousers. Because of the holes in his knees, most of the dirt fell inside his pants legs and down his deerhide boots.

"Well?" demanded Roger. "Where's the gold?"

Robin turned around slowly. "I forgot. I had one of my men fit it into a niche here."

Rufus asked, "What's a niche?"

"Up here." In the gloom Robin walked to a wooden rack suspended

from the ceiling by pegs. As the robbers pressed behind, he caught at something and brought it down. It was long and wrapped in deerhide. Robin tussled with the wrappings, turning around in the process.

Rufus pressed closest. "What is it?"

"This!" Robin spun around and shot his arm. Rufus gave a grunt and dropped his sword.

Roger slapped his shoulder. "What are you doing, you fool? Pick that up!"

Rufus merely clutched his middle. Robin Hood danced backwards and tossed the wrapping aside.

Robin Hood laughed. "Roger, you false pig! Let's see you use that sword!"

In the half-light, the knight could see Robin Hood facing him down a length of steel. He bore a long tapered sword with a wheel pommel and wire-wrapped handle. It was a Norman sword, Robin's father's. Robin Hood shuffled forward and swiped at the knight, who only just jerked out of the way.

"I was trained by Will Stutly, who fought in the wars of Wales and taught King Henry a thing or two." His voice was gravelly from a bellyful of adrenalin. He took another swipe and Roger jumped again. Rufus coughed, face down. The outlaw chief had punched a hole through his midriff. The scent of hot blood, like iron ore smelting, filled the cave. Roger turned and bolted.

He popped out of the cave and pelted for his horse. Dismounted, Wycliff and Tomkin were caught by surprise. "What's happened?" "Where's Rufus?"

Then Robin Hood appeared in the cave mouth waving a bloody sword. "*Yaaaahhhh!!!! Git! Git! Hyaaahhh!*"

Spooked, the two knights snatched at their cantles. Roger and his mount were already entering the forest, going much too fast. Wycliff slammed into the saddle and rammed home his heels. His horse banged Rufus's, who whinnied and shied aside to trot into the woods.

Robin shouted and waved. He had no plans to fight them all. But as the last knight, the old man, finally got mounted and moving, Robin spotted

something. Tied behind his saddle was the leather bag from the Blue Boar. That would be the widow's money.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Robin caught up to the horse before it set its back hooves. He swung the sword wide and cut a back leg to the bone.

The horse screamed and reared. The man screamed too. Robin swung again and chopped the beast's leg below the fetlock. The horse slewed sideways, stumbled, and crashed to the earth. Old Tomkin crashed along with it. He was quick enough to pull his leg clear so the horse didn't pin it.

The horse shrieked and kicked. It chopped the forest loam into powder. Robin Hood skipped to its front and chopped the windpipe, then jumped aside to avoid the spray. The beast thrashed and fell still. The round brown eyeballs glazed over.

Robin Hood stood back and signalled with his thumb at Tom. "Can you get up?"

Tom was shakey but upright. He nodded, his mouth open and dry.

Robin wagged his thumb again. "Then drop your belt and get out."

He was gone in a moment, hobbling off down the trail after his companions.

Robin Hood stood for a while, breathing deep and wiping his forehead. Eventually he cleaned his sword on the dead horse's tail. He unstrapped the saddle and tugged it clear. The leather bag contained gold, right enough, though not more than twenty marks by a quick count.

Robin wondered about that: hadn't they bragged there was sixty-some? Could they have spent some, or hidden it? He thought about carrying the gold into the cave, but he'd had a treasure there and it was gone. He stashed the bag under some bushes instead.

He hauled the dead knight out of the cave and, for lack of a better place, stacked him with the dead horse. "What a waste," he remarked to the air. "Can't eat either."

He fetched out his scabbard and baldric and hung them on. He strung his old bow, found a spare quiver and filled it with arrows. He catfooted after Rufus's horse, crooned and cooed to it. "You're a valuable piece yourself, aren't you, hmmm? That's right. Good fellow. Animals are

smart. They don't chase after money, do they?" After some nose-patting and neck-rubbing, he got mounted and settled.

"And where do we go?" Robin asked his new horse. He yawned. "I thought I wasn't sleepy. Well, let's see what transpires on the road. It can't be any more busy there than it's been here."

"Hello? *Hello?*"

Alphonse had found his way back to the camp largely by luck. Robin Hood's camp was far from the road, but all trails seemed to lead there.

The camp was a riot. The deer he'd partaken of earlier was a scorched heap on the grass. Nearby was the carcass of a horse, slashed in several places, its saddle torn loose. A knight lay dead next to it. Crows picked over both, but flew off at his approach. With his heart pounding to burst, Alphonse came close enough to recognize the man. It was one of the wastrel knights who'd burnt his mother's barn and home.

The boy's hands shook as he opened the saddlebag full of gold. He had carried it first in one hand, then the other, then behind his back, then in front. It worried him terribly to be carrying this much money. It felt obscene. Especially since he didn't deserve it.

Alphonse had a good heart, inherited from his deceased father. The boy knew well his mother hadn't lost "near ninety pounds" but more like thirty. She'd hoped more would somehow find its way home. It might have, except that Robin Hood's men had thought Alphonse dishonest. With a pride that can only come from poverty, he'd prove them wrong.

The widow's son counted out stacks of ten coins each, as he'd seen Will Scarlett do, then piled four stacks back into the saddlebags. His mother would be pleased enough to receive ten extra marks.

The rest of the gold stood stacked on the grass, glittering in the sun. Alphonse hunted for inspiration. The crows circled overhead. Flies thickened. The forest glade was oppressive. Where to hide the money? Not the cave -- caves led to hell.

He spotted the saddle. He scooped up the gold and swept it underneath, covering it completely. Then he grabbed the sheriff's saddlebags and scampered for the woods.

"The rats. The shits. The bastards."

Old Tomkin had run for most of a mile before his breath gave out. He leaned against a giant oak and clutched his chest. Cool air burned his lungs. He tugged off his heavy helmet and threw it in the bushes. A hell of a thing, running. No wonder God invented horses. They'd run off and left him, all of them. He started as a covey of quail raced by on invisible legs. Christ, what a place, this forest. "The dogs. The pigs --"

He squinted at his backtrail. There was no one in sight, but there could be any second. Best to keep moving. That Robin Hood was a killer. Teetering from tree to tree, he stumbled off down the path.

And stopped. Up ahead -- damn! -- was another of Robin Hood's outlaws, dressed like the devil in green. One before, one behind, no way to leave the trail without getting lost...

But that one was carrying something on his shoulder. A chest. A small one for gold.

Tomkin wiped his face and checked his back trail again. No sign of Robin Hood. No sign the fat forester before had heard him. Tom drew his long knife.

Much the Miller's Son rolled down the trail towards the road. He had a walk all his own, like a crippled duck, but he covered ground quickly and never tired. Get to the road, he thought. Find Robin... and then... do something... Robin would know.

A thumping sounded behind him, feet on the forest floor, coming fast, and he stepped out of the way.

Charging like a demon let loose from Hell, knife held high, on his last breath, Tomkin sailed towards the idiot. Much discommoded him by side-stepping, and further so by leaving his foot in the path. Tom stubbed on it and crashed full length on the ground. His knife flew away and slithered under the oak leaves that lay everywhere.

Much the Miller's Son helped him up.

"You hurt?"

Tom was surprised at the idiot's strength. "No, no, I'm not hurt. Uh, are you?"

Much checked himself slowly. "No."

"Oh, good. I was afraid you'd fallen."

"No."

Tom pointed. "Uh, what's in the chest?"

Much turned half-way around peering at it. "Trea-sure."

"T-treasure? Real gold?"

The idiot frowned.

Tom brushed at his clothing. "I, uh, lost my knife. D'ya see it?"

With his free hand, Much drew his own knife and pointed it at Tom.

"Knife like this?"

"Uh..."

Much suddenly jerked the knife sideways, just missing Tom's arm.

"Point that damned thing some-where else!" Then he jerked it back in Tom's direction. "You take mine. Every-one needs knife."

Tom gingerly took the blade away and shoved it in his own empty sheath. "Right. Thanks. That's better. Uh, if that's really treasure -- I mean, uh, Robin's sent me to take that treasure from you -- for you."

"Oh." So Robin had known what to do. Much shoved the chest at the robber, who caught it awkwardly.

Tom grunted. The box was heavier than Much had made it look. It must be chock full of gold. He scouted the trail again, then set the box down. No harm in checking...

He pried back the lid and had to shield his eyes. Even under the green roof of leaves the sun jumped around in the box. Tom grinned so wide his face hurt. "It is! It's gold!" Then he remembered Robin Hood's man.

Much grinned too. "Gold can't buy any-thing 'por-tant."

"What? Never mind. Let's... lighten the load some. No use hauling the box."

He was hot anyway. He shucked off his hauberk and his shirt. He laid the shirt on the leaves, then dumped the coins onto it and pitched the box. He stirred the treasure with his hand. The coins made a lovely

liquid sound, a friendly chuckling noise. He stuffed some into a pouch to spread the load, then gathered the corners of the shirt, made sure there were no leaks, and slung the sack on his back. He staggered as it hit.

Much asked, "I help carry? I strong. Strong as Little John at arm wrestle."

"No." The old man shook his head and staggered again. "No, thanks, lad. I'll manage. You run along back to --" Wait. He couldn't point him towards camp. He'd run right into Robin Hood. "You better come with me for a while, lad. Keep out of trouble. What's your name?"

"Much the Miller's Son. `Sherwood ain't much without Much."

"Much. Good. I'm... Peter. Come along now."

So Tom, or Peter, hunched now and rolling like Much, set off down the trail. The unencumbered idiot followed, happy as a dog after its master.

"If you'd gone *into* the cave we could have killed him there!"

"And if you *hadn't* gone into the cave there'd still be four of us!"

"Afraid of a cave!"

"Stupid enough to be taken in the dark!"

"*Idiot!*"

"*Fool!*"

"*Coward!*"

Wycliff jerked his tired horse to a halt. He grabbed for his sword. "No man calls me coward!"

Roger clutched at his own hilt. He had to drag his horse backwards, for there was no room to swing. The Nottingham road was very narrow here, overgrown at the sides from neglect. "No man calls me *fool!* Defend --"

His horse snorted.

From out of nowhere, Little John said, "You're both fools. *And* loudmouths. Let's call it even."

The giant -- he was the biggest man the knights had ever seen -- filled most of the road. He held a quarterstaff lightly across the horses' throats. He smiled at their discomfort.

Roger was furious at the impertinence, Wycliff blind with anger. They both raised their swords. Roger snarled, "You *scut!* I'll --"

A cord snagged his throat. His Adam's apple was wrenched out of joint as an irresistible force tugged him backwards. The knight tumbled out of the saddle and landed hard on his head and shoulder.

Sprawled in the road, Roger and Wycliff rubbed their throats and gagged curses. Facing them were more outlaws in green. Their bows had been slipped over the knights' heads while the giant distracted them. Will Scarlett examined his bow, then used it to rap Wycliff on the helmet.

Tonk! "You cut my string with your blade."

Snarling, Wycliff dove for the outlaw. Scarlett skipped aside and let him pass. The mad knight plowed into old Will Stutly and both went sprawling.

Will Stutly growled on his own as the knight pummeled him. Will didn't bother to call for help -- he knew better. He tossed his bow and jammed both thumbs into the knight's eyes. Hard-Hitting Brand crashed a fist onto the side of Wycliff's neck and knocked him loose. Brand stamped on the man's back and snatched away his knife. The outlaws tied his hands with the broken bowstring.

Roger felt a rap on his helmet. He looked up, and up.

Little John pointed at the saddles. "Where's the widow's gold?"

Roger swore. "We lost it. One of our men -- old Tom -- ran off with it." He watched Wycliff thrash on the floor like a suckling pig. Why had he taken up thieving with these three: one mad, one stupid, one decrepit? Next time he'd enlist real men-at-arms.

The giant rested his quarterstaff on the ground and rolled it between his hands as if drilling. "Hmmm..."

Scarlett grinned. "This puts us up even more on Robin. We've robbed the sheriff, paid back the widow, and now captured two of the knights."

"This ain't a contest, I tell ya. Where'd the old man get to?"

"I don't know. Away."

"Where's the other one, then? There was supposed to be four of ye."

"He ran off too."

"Is that so? But no widow's gold, eh?"

"No. And I don't care anymore. Damn you all."

"Hmmm..." Little John sped up his drilling. "I don't think I believe you. But this can work out fine. Robin didn't get any gold yet, but we will."

Scarlett laughed. "I thought this wasn't a contest."

"Hush. Let's pack up this baggage. We'll take 'em to Nottingham."

Stutly grunted. "Nottingham? What for?"

"We're going to stuff 'em into a wine press and squeeze out gold."

Scarlett grabbed Roger by the shoulder. "That makes sense."

Roger gasped as his shoulder was wrenched. Wycliff chomped grass. "Are all you bloody outlaws daft? What's wrong with you? What are you talking about?"

"You'll see. Get up. I'm thirsty."

Will Scarlett slammed the knight belly-down across his own saddle.

"See? He's not daft at all."

"Mother! Look what I have!"

Amabilia, the Widow of Three Oaks, poked a maid in the shoulder as the girl stirred an iron pot over a fire. All around stood the burned wreckage of her house. She stopped in mid-poke as the boy held a bag aloft.

Alphonse trotted to a halt. He panted, "Here, mum. Here's the gold. From Robin Hood's men." He thrust the bag into her hands, glad to be rid of it.

The widow blinked at the heft. She set the bag on a fallen timber and counted the coins.

"This isn't our gold. There are no florins. It's someone else's. Though

we'll keep it. Where did they get it? Was it Robin Hood did it?"

Alphonse nodded and wiped his cheeks. "Aye. His Merry Men..." He told her about their intercepting the sheriff.

Amabillia smiled a cold smile. "That's fun. I set the sheriff on the knights' trail, but I knew he'd slough it off and run for Nottingham." She cackled some more, then turned to the cook. "Never mind that. Dump it out. We'll leave now."

For the first time Alphonse noticed the two pack horses hung with sacks and ironware. "Mother, where are we going?"

"Where do you think? Use your head, Alphie." The widow circled the horses and tugged at knots. Three servants watched her with slack hands. "We're going to live with your Aunt Alditha in York. There's nothing for us here. Now that we have the gold."

Alphonse looked about at the ruins of the manor and barn, at the tumbledown cottages, at the weedy fields. He pointed to things at random. "We're leaving? But I've lived here all my life! What about our home? What about the land?"

Amabillia struggled to mount a horse already piled high. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Alphie! Shut up! It's only land! Nobody wants that! It's not worth anything! Now come on!"

She kicked the horse with her skinny heels, and the beast lumbered forward. The servants trailed, leading the other horse.

Alphonse took one more look around, then followed.

"After we get the money, can we spend it on wine and debauchery?"

Little John pointed to the robber knights trussed on the floor. He answered Will Scarlett. "Are you sure you shouldn't be on the floor with those two?"

The Merry Men waited in the dust-speckled dimness of a barn on the outskirts of Nottingham. They ate and rested, lazy with the long day and spring warmth. Barn swallows turned circles that brushed the rafters and skimmed straw from the floor. The knights' horses chewed hay. One kicked his hoof regularly against the outer wall.

Scarlett carved his initials in a post with a wicked knife. "Those two don't know anything about debauchery. I can tell 'em about debauchery. When I go out to debauch, I have a good time. They probably just get drunk and beat up someone small. By the time they get to a whore they'd pass out. Did you ever see two more sour faces?"

From the loft Hard-Hitting Brand called. "Here he comes with the blacksmith."

"Anyone else?" asked Little John.

"Nope. Just a smithy and two apprentices."

"Well, keep an eye out all around. He may have told the sheriff's men to come later, when we're negotiating hot and heavy."

"Right."

Scarlett brushed away shavings to see his handiwork, yellow etched in brown. "You doing the negotiating?"

Little John rumbled, "No. I'm goin' to leave it to Simon here, only because we don't have Much to talk for us." Simon blinked, but the giant waved a hand at him. "Just joking, lad. I'll do the hagglin'."

Scarlett touched up his graffiti. "You sure you don't want me to?"

"I'm sure."

"Fine. You handle it. I'll keep quiet."

Little John snorted.

The owner of the farm, a merchant, knocked at the door and then crept in. With him was the Nottingham blacksmith, a short solid man whose long tunic had burns in the front. He carried an iron box. His two apprentices, a thin boy and an older journeyman, carried steel pokers.

The Merry Men shuffled about in the tight barn to make room. Little John signalled to shut the door, and for the blacksmiths to put down their pokers. "You won't need those. We're not here to rob you." The boy breathed easier. The journeyman seemed disappointed.

The blacksmith set down the box and put one foot on it. "So what have you?"

The giant forester squatted and unfolded a hauberk. On it lay all the

knights' accoutrements. The knights themselves wore only gambesons and rope.

"Two swords, two long knives. Baldrics -- this one ain't got a crack on it anywhere -- scabbards and sheathes. Tooling, here. Their shoes, one pair with double soles. Hauberks, one with copper, one iron squares, good solid rivets. Norman helmets. Some kind of a locket here, must be silver, and a cross of whatever this metal is -- bronze, is it? Someone's been to a shrine, though it din't do him any good. Plus them two nags. And their tack."

The merchant, the owner of the barn, cleared his throat. The giant gave him a gold mark for fetching the blacksmith.

There was a very long space as the blacksmith checked over the booty. He unsheathed the swords and tested their edge. He rapped them together to hear them ring. He picked at the handles to learn what kind of wire wrapped them. He scrutinized everything the same way. Then he checked the horses. He counted their teeth, stared into their eyes, pressed his ear against their chests and bellies, poked their frogs, peered under their tails.

Finally he rocked back on his heels and rubbed his throat. "All of it?"

Little John nodded. "We can't use it."

The smith probed the barn with his eyes. "Forty marks."

"*Forty marks?*" Will Scarlett bounded off the stall railing and landed in front of Little John. "Forty marks? Are you mad? God's fish and teeth, one of those damned helmets *alone* is worth forty marks! Where in the hell did you get a figure like *that?* Forty marks! Christ's sweet tree, it'd take you three months to make *one* of those hauberks, and you'd be glad to charge some idiot fifty marks for it *alone*! Did you hear the ring on those swords? One of 'em's got to be Milanese or Damascan, and *you're* offering us forty marks for it? The *knives* would be worth forty marks even *without* the sheathes! You *Jew!* You Saracen *pirate!* You tax-collecting, wine-nipping, cheese-paring, gold-shaving --"

Little John interjected, "We'll take it."

Red-faced but silent, the blacksmith twirled the barrels on the lock and opened the chest. Shielding it with his body, he extracted forty thin marks and stacked them on the floor. Little John packed them into his

purse. All the while Will Scarlett ranted and raved and waved his arms in the air. "... call *us* thieves! *Simpletons*, maybe! *Fools!* Children wandered to the woods! But *thieves!* You need a *town man* to teach you about *thievin'*...

The blacksmith ordered his apprentices to tie everything onto the saddles of the horses. Then he led them out, not directly towards the town gates, but along some oblique route. He didn't say goodbye.

Will Scarlett wasn't through. "... can't *believe* you let it go at forty marks, John, and *clipped* ones at that! Have you lost your *mind?* We were robbed, plain and simple, same as we hoist the sheriff! We could've shopped around! We could've gotten three smiths here, pitted 'em against one another, gotten a fair price! But *no!* You had to give the stuff away! We could've gotten two *hundred* marks --"

Little John grinned. "It's worth a hundred to see you hop like a frog in a pot."

Scarlett glared. "Forty needs a hundred sixty to make two hundred."

Little John picked up his quarterstaff. "Does it? I never was one for numbers. Get over twenty sheep and it might's well be a thousand and one, and half of them wolves. Get you up, you lot, we're for the woods."

Will Stutely creaked upright. He rubbed the small of his back. "What about them?"

The giant regarded the knights. Through the exchange, as their worldly goods had been auctioned away, they had glared and chomped on their gags. John scratched his jaw in imitation of Robin Hood. "Can't sell 'em. Can't eat 'em. Can't leave 'em here, 'cause that'd get Paul in trouble. Hmmmm..."

A little later the Merry Men approached the tall broad towers that were the gates of Nottingham. Slung from Little John's quarterstaff, between John and Hard-Hitting Brand, were the two knights. With hands and bare feet in the air, their gambesons hung slack. Their rumps shone in the sunshine. Women in the fields pointed and laughed.

The foresters stopped in the road outside crossbow range. The sheriff's guards, in blue gypons and soup-bowl helmets, had already gathered at the gate -- they could spot Lincoln green a mile off. Little John dropped the knights in the road and slid his staff clear. "Hoy! Captain of the

guard!"

The captain cupped his hands around his mouth. "What d'ya want?"

"These here are the false knights robbed the widow of Three Oaks by Derby! Give 'em to the sheriff with our compliments!"

"Compliments of who?"

"Don't be thick!" the giant retorted. He pointed with his thumb at the guards and asked Will Scarlett, "Relations o` yours?"

Robin's cousin snorted. "Maybe. My father went into Nottingham a lot. But none of them -- thick as they are -- would trade away two liveries and horses for forty marks."

Little John shrugged and started down the road towards Sherwood. His quarterstaff on his shoulder stuck out six feet behind him. "I suppose not. Next time, you do the negotiating and I'll be the one to keep quiet."

Old Tomkin sat down by the side of the path to rest. He kept the gold in his lap with one hand on it. He grimaced at Much, who had followed him for miles. "Awful hot today, ain't it?"

Much pointed up. "Sun's out."

"Aye. Makes it hot. But my hands are cold. Funny." Tom wheezed and rubbed his chest. "Can't get my breath neither. Not as young as I used to be. M' ribs feel squashed."

He tried to shift the gold in his lap, but it was too heavy. He shifted himself instead and winced. "You don't need to keep me company, lad. I can fend for m'self. You just run along now. I'm going to just rest here, maybe take a nap... Awful hot. Makes me chest..."

His head sank back and he lay still. Much sat down beside him to wait.

He waited a long time.

Much grew hungry. He poked the old man gently on the leg. He was stiff. The idiot poked the man in the eyeball. He was dead. Much knew what death was.

He scratched his upper lip for a time.

Eventually he picked up the shirt full of money. He started walking towards the Blue Boar.

"Because we still owe the widow ten marks, that's why."

"We don't owe her nothing. You know and I know she lies like a flounder --"

Little John walked fast and everyone struggled to keep up with him. The deep woods were warm and buzzy with late-day heat. Pale green translucent leaves unfolded almost as they watched. Lizards basked in sandy patches. Digger wasps bored by, heavy with eggs. "No, we don't know that. She's supposed to have ninety marks and we only gave her eighty. That leaves ten we owe her, if my countin' is right, and you'll probably tell me it ain't."

Will Stutly croaked, "Slow *down*, John! For Christ's sweet mercy!"

The giant stopped altogether. The five foresters stood in the middle of the road and felt they should have been walking.

Little John explained, "We're giving her ten marks, and that's all there is to it. If you want to argue, take it up with Robin. You know he's funny about honorin' women. Are you going to tell him we shorted a widow in need?"

Scarlett sliced at the iron-red head of a foxglove with his knife. He said nothing.

"Right then. Anyone doesn't want to go with me to Three Oaks can return to camp. Well? Right then. Let's go."

"Slowly," said Stutly.

"Slow it is. I'm easy."

Another two hours' of shortcut brought them to Three Oaks. The ruins stank of damp ashes.

Simon said, "There's no one here."

Will Scarlett said, "No. There isn't."

Brand pointed. "Fresh horse turds here."

Little John scratched his beard. Then stopped.

The Sheriff of Nottingham and his men stood up from behind the wreckage of the hall. Four soldiers covered them with crossbows. The other four were behind.

Nicholas grinned like a wolf. "The tables are turned. I took your advice, *Little John*. Our crossbows are cocked and nocked this time."

Little John frowned. "Where are your horses?"

"Far down the road, west. I didn't bring them anywhere near here. Shall I shoot you now?"

Little John drilled his quarterstaff into the ground. "Shoot as you please, just don't tell Robin we walked into your trap."

Will Scarlett asked, "How did you know we'd come here?"

The sheriff put his hands on his hips and puffed out his chest. "I knew it because -- Stay there, Will Stutely! I like you in a covey. It makes a smaller target. I came here --"

The giant stopped his drilling. He thumped his staff on the ground. "Do you want your purse back?"

"That and my eighty marks. I --"

Little John dragged out his purse and hefted it, making it look heavy. Will Scarlett snatched it away. "Let me give it to him."

Robin's cousin dumped the contents of the purse into his hand. Coins spilled into the blackened grass.

"Here now," called the sheriff, "you fool! Give me that --"

Will Scarlett whipped back his hand and flung the coins. Gold and silver sparkled in the air and pelted the sheriff and his men. The sheriff ducked. His men grabbed at the air with one hand.

Little John spun around and slung his huge quarterstaff by one end. Crossbows *thunked*. The staff hummed through the air and slammed into two soldiers behind.

Will Stutely hopped backwards into Simon, jostling him out of the way. Another crossbowman shot. The bolt sizzled overhead. The other took aim, too late. With arthritic hands Will nocked an arrow, half-drew, and

loosed before the man could pull the trigger. The long arrow caught him in the upper chest. He cried out and folded, dropping his crossbow to clutch the shaft.

Will Scarlett followed his gold-throwing with a knife. He aimed for the one man who'd kept his head. The soldier ducked. By that time Hard-Hitting Brand was over the wreckage and among the soldiers. He slung his fists and bowled men over. He made sure their crossbows went flying.

"*That's it!*" Little John cried. "*Run!*"

The giant grabbed Simon by the shoulder and spun him around towards the road. Scarlett was already there with an arrow nocked. Will Stutly looked for a ready victim. Brand caught at the old man as he ran past. "Come on, Will!"

"Always hurryin'." He pegged his arrow at the most alert soldier and scuttled along.

Ten minutes later and many trees deep into the forest, the outlaws stopped to catch their breath. They were built for walking, and not running.

"Fine thing," Scarlett gasped. "You get robbed selling the knights' tackle -- and then robbed by the sheriff."

"If you hadn't been arguin' about money --" wheezed Little John, "-- we would'a spotted the sheriff hiding."

"If you had listened to me -- we wouldn't have come -- in the first place."

"You came along. I gave you a choice."

"I don't care about the money anyway -- I just like arguin'." He grinned. "You still going to give the widow -- ten marks when you see her?"

Little John huffed. "No, I'm going to give her you. If she's travelling the roads, she'll need an ass. Let's get back to camp. We've done enough today."

"What *have* we done?" Simon asked.

The giant snorted. Lacking his quarterstaff, his hands clasped and unclasped. "We'll figure it out later. Let's go."

Stutly cursed. "Always hurrying."

"If you lot could *shoot* better, we wouldn't have this problem! Damned slippery outlaws. Cowards. Why *didn't* you pot them? We'd be out a few headaches, or I'm a fishmonger."

The sheriff berated his men in a flat uninterested monotone. His soldiers clutched their wounds and grit their teeth and said nothing.

"We'll have more practice, I can assure you that. Up before dawn, now that the days are longer, out there in the sun until you can knock a mosquito off a squirrel's ear. Eighty marks down and only thirty-five back, and -- Who's that up there?"

Much the Miller's Son plodded down the road with a sack of treasure over his shoulder, the same as when he'd carried grain and flour for his father, the same as when he'd met Robin Hood. He waddled along and thought about... about... wherever he was going...

Whiff! Something plunked in the road alongside him. He stooped slowly and picked it up. Was it a snake? A bird? No, it was... a crossbow quarrel. Another slapped the earth nearby and spattered dirt in his eyes. Who was?..

Much saw the sheriff's men thundering towards him. He knew these men. They were bad. What would Robin do? He heard his leader's voice. "Run, Much! Run!"

Much dropped his sack and ran for the deepest, most tangled bushes he could find.

Moments later the sheriff dismounted in the road, exulting. "It was one of Robin Hood's men! Look at this silver! No, get away! I'll get it!" Nicholas scraped the muddy coins together onto the filthy shirt that had carried them. "Well, it's not such a bad day after all! Robin's treasure come home! We might even celebrate when we get to the Boar!"

The sheriff remounted, the money on his lap. "Now, let's --"

There came a *zip!* and *thok!* The sheriff's horse gave a grunt and stumbled, squealed, fell.

Nicholas grabbed at the beast's mane as it collapsed in the road. This time he got clear without tumbling in the mud, but he dropped the money.

"*Sheriff!*" the voice echoed all around.

Nicholas raised his arm. There. Down the dappled leafy tunnel of road sat a lone rider. Long arrows at his back and a long bow held ready marked the silhouette. The sheriff tried to crab behind his men's mounts. His men were already in the bushes. Another arrow thudded into the horse carcass. The arrows were impossibly long, as if hurled by God. "*Hold still!*"

Nicholas stood still, alone. His mount twitched, then sighed with finality. The sheriff sighed too. "Twice in one day."

He brushed back his brocaded sleeves and called down the road. "Who are you?"

A laugh.

"Goddamn him." In the brush his men cranked their crossbows -- those who could. The sheriff cursed some more. Robin Hood was outside crossbow range, but not, obviously, longbow range. "Keep still."

The sheriff cupped his mouth. "What do you want?"

The distant figure bobbed. "Today? Money! I've something to prove!"

"I don't *have* any --"

Ziiiiip! Something snatched at the sheriff's sleeve. He could see the red satin lining of his doublet where there should have been only blue. Sweat broke out on his forehead. But this was gold at stake. He tried once more. "Your men have already robbed me once!"

"I believe you!" Another laugh. "Truly!"

"Then why do you think I have any money now?"

"You always have money!"

The sheriff wanted to cry. "Goddamn you, wolfshead! You've no right!"

"You don't like it, become a shoemaker! Now I've had a long day, Sheriff! Leave your money and go! Your men can keep theirs!"

Nicholas shook his head. He tugged out a purse (Little John's) and set it on the saddlebag. He pointed. "It's all here!"

The archer waved a long bow. "Our Lady thanks you!"

Unable to go forward, Nicholas of Nottingham mounted yet another horse and turned back towards nowhere. It didn't make any difference which way he went today.

Robin Hood dismounted and tied his horse to a branch. He moved away, crouched, and waited for thirty minutes. Finally he walked around wide, back to the road. He watched for soldiers, but they couldn't hide in his woods. He took the purse, the saddlebags, and a shirt full of mostly silver.

He took the saddle as well. "Should be able to sell this to someone."

"Hoy!"

Little John and the rest sat under a tree, just lolling, not talking, when Robin Hood staggered into camp. He came up to them and dropped several loads: saddlebags, a pouch, a shirt full of money, Little John's purse.

Little John frowned. "Where have you been?"

Robin went for a drink at the stream. "Out and about. Adventuring. Where have you been?"

"Nowhere."

"You've sat here all day?" No one answered. "Surely that's not possible. The sheriff told me you robbed him once."

Little John and the others just stared at the pile of loot. Robin Hood went behind some bushes and produced yet another bag to throw on the pile.

The giant said, "Well... we did that."

Robin flopped down on the grass, but grunted and reached into his shirt for more money. "I forgot. I sold a knight's horse and saddle to Ned for forty marks, and threw in the sheriff's saddle." He slapped his friend on the knee. "Now come, John. Tell me what you did. Please."

"Well... we captured them robber knights."

"Oh. Good."

"We delivered them to the sheriff."

Robin plucked up a blade of grass to chew on. "Good."

"And we recovered the widow's money and gave it to her son."

"Good. Very good."

"Is that all you can say? `Good?'"

"No. Tell me the rest."

They did. Robin listened, then said, "You want to hear what I did?"

No one answered, so he told his story. He finished with, "And on the way back, on the Meadow Trail, I found the oldest robber dead. Just fell over, I suppose. He had a purse on his belt. So that's it. I must have been picking up after you all day."

He laughed, alone. Everyone else was quiet. Robin asked, "How much money did you get?"

It stayed quiet.

Little John rocked his makeshift staff to thump the ends on the ground. "I wonder if anyone else is forming an outlaw band in this forest this year."

Robin laughed. "What? What are you talking about?"

Stutly lay on his back with his eyes closed. "I'm hungry. Do we have to eat that horse? The meat'll be bitter."

Robin Hood went on. "You don't have to fret about anything you did, John. Getting the widow's money was wonderful. Selling the knights' tackle in Nottingham was a very clever idea and an apt punishment. And the sheriff robbing us is a great joke. Getting away safe is even better." The way he said it, so jolly and gay, made the Merry Men feel much worse. "By the way, how much did you get for the tackle?"

Will Scarlett piped up. "You won't believe, Robin. This one here only got --" He stopped, shrivelled under a murderous glare from Little John.

"Uh... John got near to a hundred marks for the knights' gear. Just the gear alone. The horses we -- uh -- gave to the boy to give to his poor widowed mother to keep her from the cold."

"Horses to keep her from the cold? What are you babbling about? And hadn't you already sent the boy on his way with the money? No? Well, it doesn't matter anyway..."

Simon called, "Here's Much."

The foresters watched as their idiot friend rolled out of the woods and up the small slope towards them. Much the Miller's Son walked right by the dead horse and knight without blinking. He sat down with a thud. He greeted everyone by turn, as if he hadn't seen them for weeks. "Hul-lo, Rob-in. Nice to see you back."

"Thank you, Much, thank you. It's good to see you and good to be back. But where have you been?"

The idiot pointed towards the woods. "Out."

"What were you doing?"

"Walk-ing."

"Good. Walking is good. But Much, did you dig up our treasure?"

"Trea-sure?"

"Gold?"

"Gold!"

"Yes, Much. Gold. Did you take it?"

Much nodded. "No. Dead man took it. In a skirt."

"What? You mean a shirt? This shirt here?"

Much patted his thighs. "Skirt."

"Who was he?"

"Peter."

"A dead man -- named Peter -- wearing a skirt -- dug up our treasure?"

"Yes."

Simon shuddered. "Maybe he met a saint. Maybe it's a miracle."

Robin grunted. "It'll be a miracle if we figure this out."

They talked some more, but eventually gave up. Robin Hood said, "I'm sure -- fairly sure -- part here is our treasure. I think I recognize this cracked sovereign. And I know some of this is the sheriff's money and some is the knights'. And we've paid back the widow, so that's fine. It's

all fine. But where's the lesson here? What have we learned from all this?"

It was as quiet as it would ever be in the Sherwood glade.

Robin laughed again. "What? So quiet? Will, you're never at a loss for words. Where's the lesson here?"

Will Scarlett stood up. He looked at all that gold and silver, then at his fellow foresters. "The lesson, Rob? The lesson... The lesson is this. That money just isn't important --"

"Good, Will! Finally!"

"-- because it's so damned plentiful in Sherwood it practically grows out of the ground."

The Merry Men laughed.

Robin Hood frowned. "I give up. You lot are hopeless. Let's go get some ale. I'll buy."

Will Stutly let out a groan. "Walk to the bloody Blue Boar? Again? After all the walking we've already done?"

Scarlett told him, "It's for a drink, Will. You won't have to kill any soldiers along the way."

Robin caught Will Stutly by an arthritic hand and hauled him up. "But before we go, let's get that saddle into the cave so the foxes don't chew on it. Later on we'll --"

Simon shouted. Underneath the saddle lay a pile of gold coins that sparkled in the late evening sun.

Robin Hood blinked. "Where did this come from?"

No one knew.

"Aha! Sheriff! Here you are! Drinking in a tavern when you should be on the road!"

Nicholas, High Sheriff of Nottingham, wrapped his hands around his tankard and dropped his head on the grimy table. He knew that voice. It was Amabillia, Widow of Three Oaks, above Derby.

"Is this where you've been all day? Sitting here, a disgrace, while robbers ride the highway free as the air? Haven't you been after them? *Answer me! Talk to me! Where's my money?*"

End