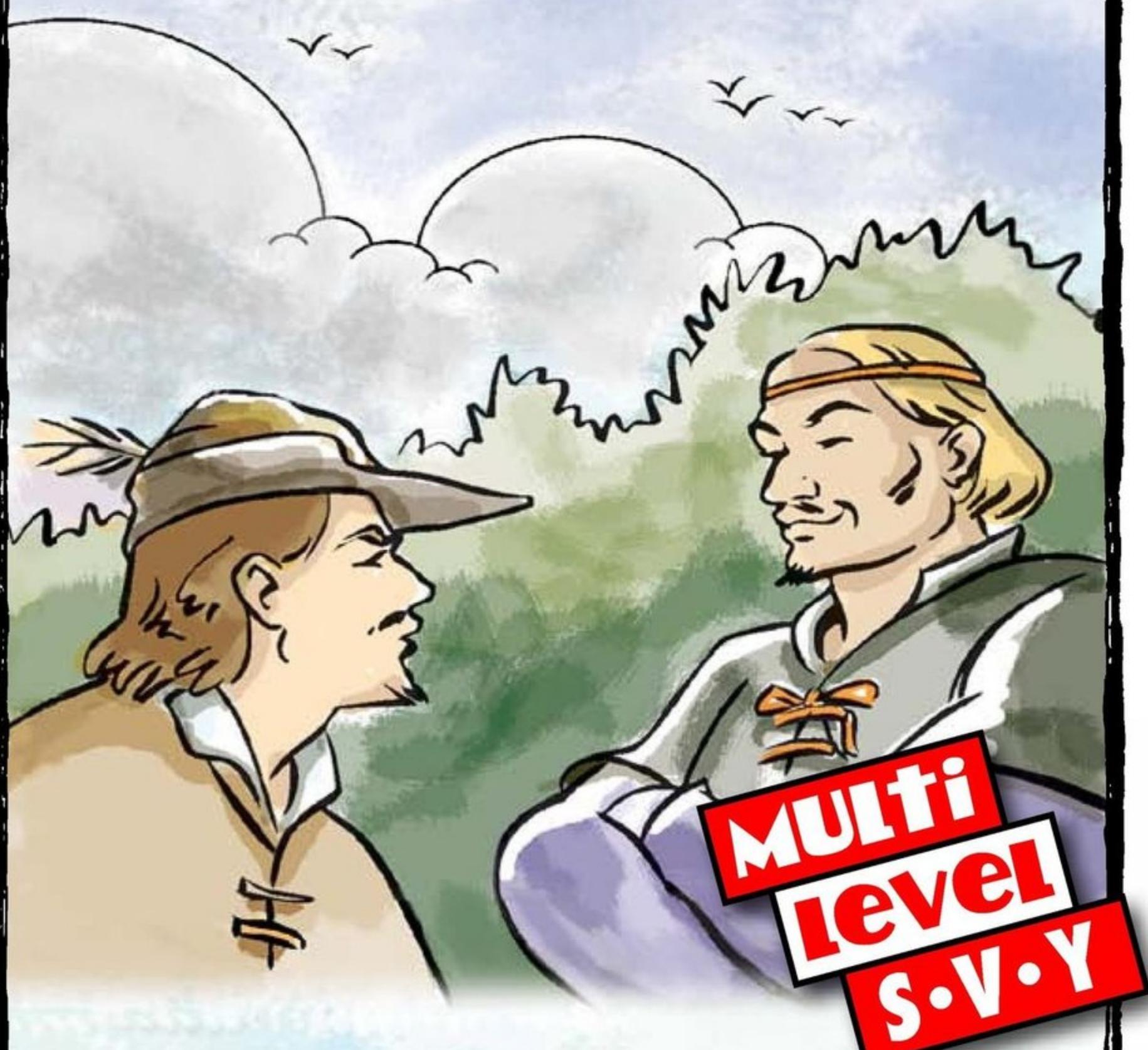


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How Little John Joined Robin Hood



An English Folktale Adapted by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by David Cockcroft

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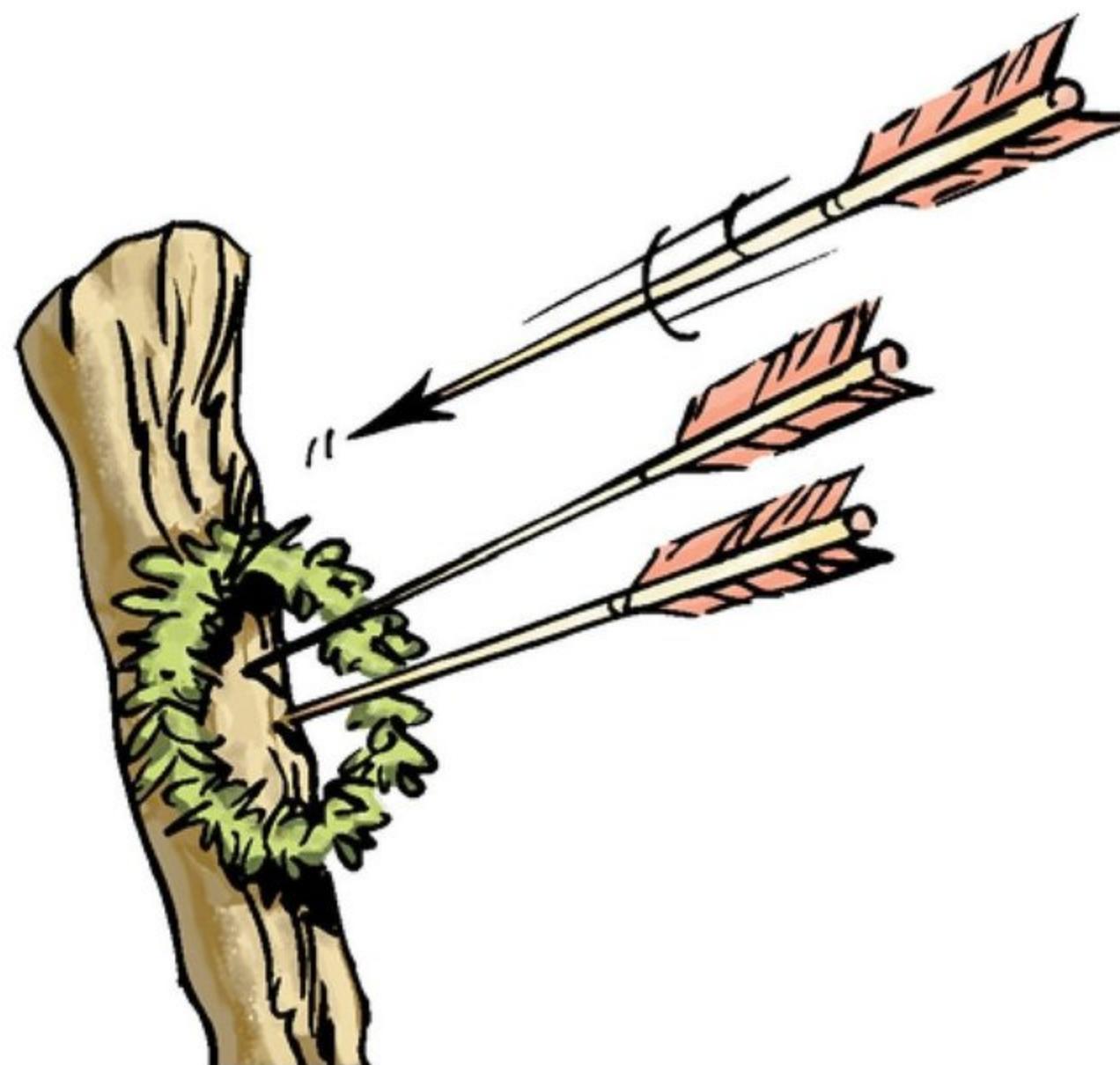


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Introduction

When Robin Hood was a young man in England, he saw how **cruelly** (KROO-uh-lee) the ruling French governors treated the people of his land after conquering it. The English king was away at war and knew nothing of what was happening to the homes and families of the common English people. The greedy French ruled harshly. They taxed families until they starved, then stole the people's land and gave it to **corrupt** friends in the church. Many of Robin's friends had lost everything they had ever owned. Some had even lost their lives.

Robin thought of ways to use his skills as a woodsman to help the people. He was strong, and smart, and he knew the countryside well. He **vowed** to bring justice back to the land. Since the rich stole from the common people, Robin planned to steal from the rich and return the money to the poor. He created a hideout deep inside the thick wood of Sherwood Forest, where he was safe from the lords who hunted him. He was careful to steal only from wealthy travelers who journeyed through the forest and who looked as though they could afford the loss. As his actions became known, he became very famous. English people everywhere loved him and talked about him. People came to the forest to join Robin's cause, and soon a large band of loyal followers lived with him in the wood.

The Merry Men, as they became known, lived entirely outdoors, hunting for their food, cooking over a fire, and sleeping under the stars. They spent their days practicing archery, wrestling, and sword fighting until they were the strongest men in England. But none was stronger or more skilled than Robin Hood—until he met John Little.



John Little

John Little was the tallest and strongest man who ever walked the kingdom. Unlike most men, he was not loyal to anyone, neither to the ruling lords nor to the cause of the outlaws. He was such a brave fighter that he felt safest when he was by himself. But his thinking was about to be challenged. When Robin Hood first saw him, John Little was strolling on the edge of the forest, about to cross a narrow bridge over a stream. The bridge was so narrow that only one person could cross at a time. As it happened, Robin Hood stepped on it from one side just as John Little stepped on it from the other.

“Step off the bridge and let the better man cross first,” called Robin Hood. Robin did not really think he was the better man, but he wanted to see what the tall man would do. He had never seen a man who looked so large and strong yet so **agile** (A-juhl) and skillful.

“Stand back yourself, for I am the better man,” cried the stranger. He was unconcerned, as he had never met anyone who could match his strength and skill.

“Then we have no choice but to fight for it,” said Robin Hood, who loved a good fight better than he loved a good dinner.

“With all my heart,” answered the stranger with a grin.





The Fight

Robin Hood cut two great oak branches to serve as weapons, since it would be unfair to use his bow and arrows when the stranger didn't have any. The branches, stripped cleanly of their leaves and twigs, were solid and strong. "The one who can knock the other off the bridge and into the water is the better man," said Robin. They met as eagerly as two young boys wrestling for fun.

What a great fight it was! They struck each other again and again with their heavy staves, but each man was so strong and skillful in dodging blows that neither could knock down the other.

Each one got hit many times, but neither man thought of stopping. For a whole hour, they fought on that bridge. The smacking and grunting of the battle drew all Robin's men to the edge of the stream to watch. Some yelled loyally when their leader struck a good blow or made a clever dodge. Others, impressed with the agility of the stranger, cheered when he landed a blow. They had never seen a man give their leader such a fight.

At last, Robin gave the stranger a terrible whack that made him stagger and **flail** dizzily. But the stranger recovered and gave Robin a crack on the head that made blood flow. Robin swung back **savagely** (SAV-ij-lee), but the stranger avoided the dangerous blow. The blood ran into Robin's eyes so that he could not see, and the stranger gave Robin a smack in the side that tumbled him right into the water.

Robin lay there looking up and laughing out loud—he never carried a **grudge**. “You are an expert with that stick; I have never been beaten before,” he called out.

But Robin Hood's followers took it less lightly. They suddenly stepped from their hiding places behind the trees and aimed their bows at the man who had knocked their beloved leader into the water. There were nearly forty men, all dressed cleverly in green so that they were utterly invisible behind the bushes.

"What has happened, master?" asked Will Scarlet, the youngest of his men. "We have never seen you beaten before. Is this some kind of trick?"

"No, no trick at all; this sturdy fellow **walloped** me, and I tumbled into the water," Robin Hood said, laughing.

"Then he shall get a dunking and a beating himself," said Will Scarlet. He angrily came forward, followed by half a dozen men eager to carry out his threat. But Robin Hood ordered his men back.

"No," he said, "it was a fair fight, and he won. He is brave and hearty, and I would like to have him in our band. Will you join us?" he asked the confused stranger.

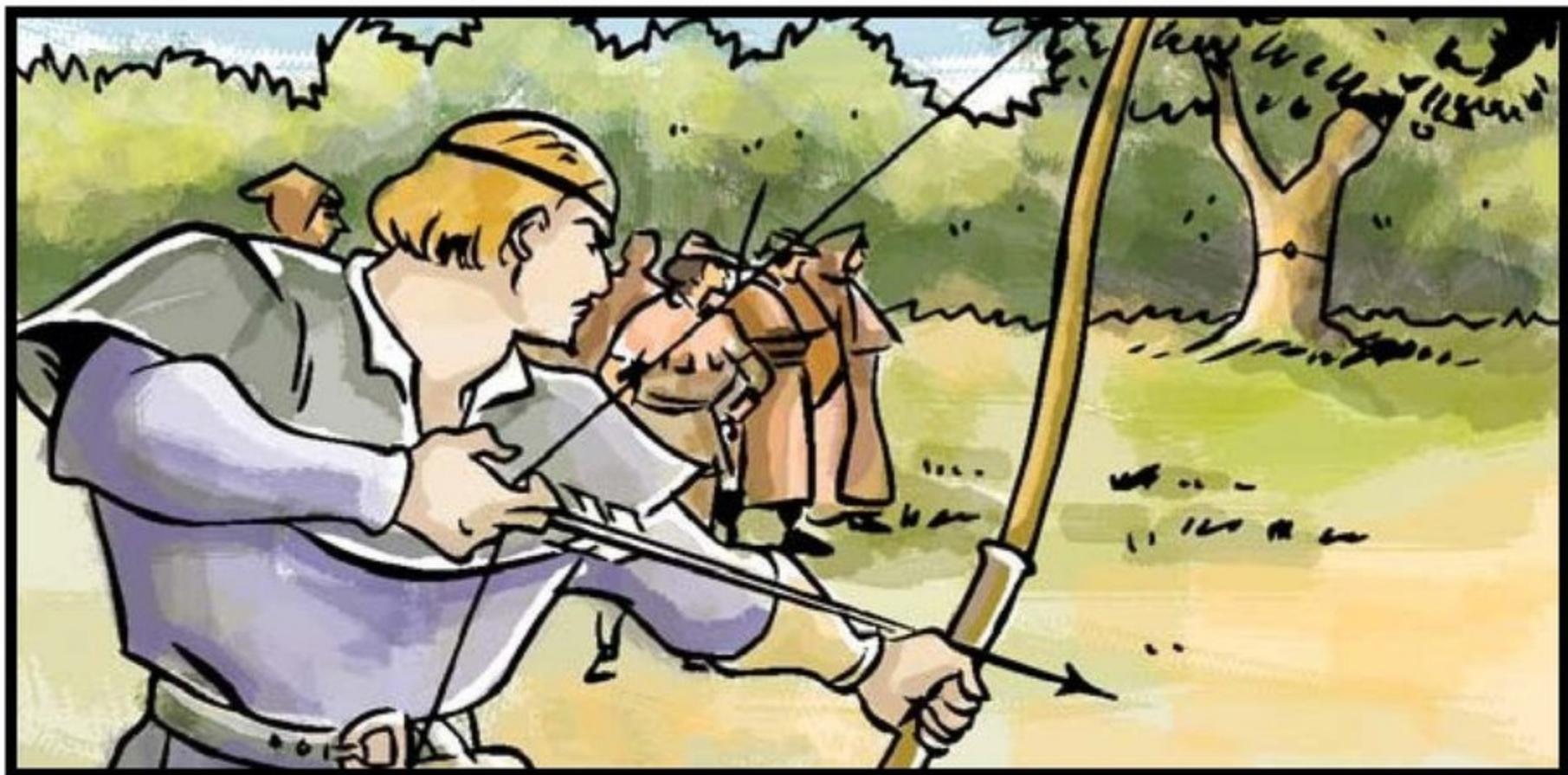


“I am Robin Hood, and my band is the finest in all of England. We steal from the careless rich and give back to the poor so that all will be provided for and justice will be returned to England.”

Most men would have trembled at hearing the name “Robin Hood,” for the lords always described Robin as a cruel and fierce outlaw. But John Little was afraid of no man.

“Why should I join your band as an **underling** if I am a better fighter than the leader? I have no need for people who cannot do better than I can alone. If there is any man among you who can shoot a bow and arrow more accurately than I can, then perhaps I will join,” he said.

“Well, you are obviously an extraordinary man, but I will try,” said Robin.



The Archery Match

Robin Hood sent Will Scarlet to cut a three-inch piece of white bark and tie it to an oak tree that stood a full eighty yards away. The piece of bark looked like a tiny speck in the distance.

"Now choose any of our bows and arrows to shoot with," Robin said.

The stranger chose the largest bow, aimed his arrow carefully, and shot it straight into the center of the white bark. The arrow flew so straight and powerfully and true that only its feathers stuck out beyond the bark. All Robin Hood's followers caught their breath in amazement, for they had seen such shooting only from Robin Hood himself.



"That is a fine shot indeed," said Robin Hood heartily. "No one can top that, but perhaps I can shoot one just as well."

Then Robin Hood drew his own bow and shot an arrow. It flew so straight and swiftly that it struck the stranger's arrow dead-on and splintered it into pieces. Robin Hood's band gave a mighty roar.

"Now, good man, will you join my band?" asked Robin Hood with a smile.

The stranger saw that he had met his match and immediately declared his **allegiance** (ah-LEE-jance). "With all my heart," he answered.



Little John

From the minute John Little saw Robin Hood's amazing skill, he respected him as he would his dearest friend. Since John had never been beaten before, he knew that it took a special man to outdo him.

"What is your name?" asked Will Scarlet.

"John Little," answered the large man. The band of Merry Men roared with laughter.

"I don't like that name," chuckled young Will, "for it doesn't fully describe how small and puny you are! Instead, we shall call you Little John!"

And so they had a big feast to celebrate Little John's entrance into the group. From that day on, Little John was Robin's second-in-command. No one argued with the choice because John was clearly the strongest and best skilled of them all, next to Robin. Little John served Robin's cause faithfully for many years and his love and respect for Robin grew with each passing year.



Glossary

agile (<i>adj.</i>)	able to move one's body quickly and accurately (p. 7)
allegiance (<i>n.</i>)	loyalty; dedication to a person or a group (p. 13)
corrupt (<i>adj.</i>)	dishonest in order to cheat or gain something (p. 4)
cruelly (<i>adv.</i>)	with meanness and spite (p. 4)
flail (<i>v.</i>)	to wave one's body wildly about (p. 9)
grudge (<i>n.</i>)	a feeling of anger toward someone after being wronged or defeated (p. 9)
savagely (<i>adv.</i>)	wildly; fiercely (p. 9)
underling (<i>n.</i>)	one who is not in charge (p. 11)
vowed (<i>v.</i>)	promised (p. 5)
walloped (<i>v.</i>)	beat (p. 10)

This story is an English folktale adapted for Reading A-Z by Katherine Follett from an original retelling by Bertha E. Bush published in 1912.

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