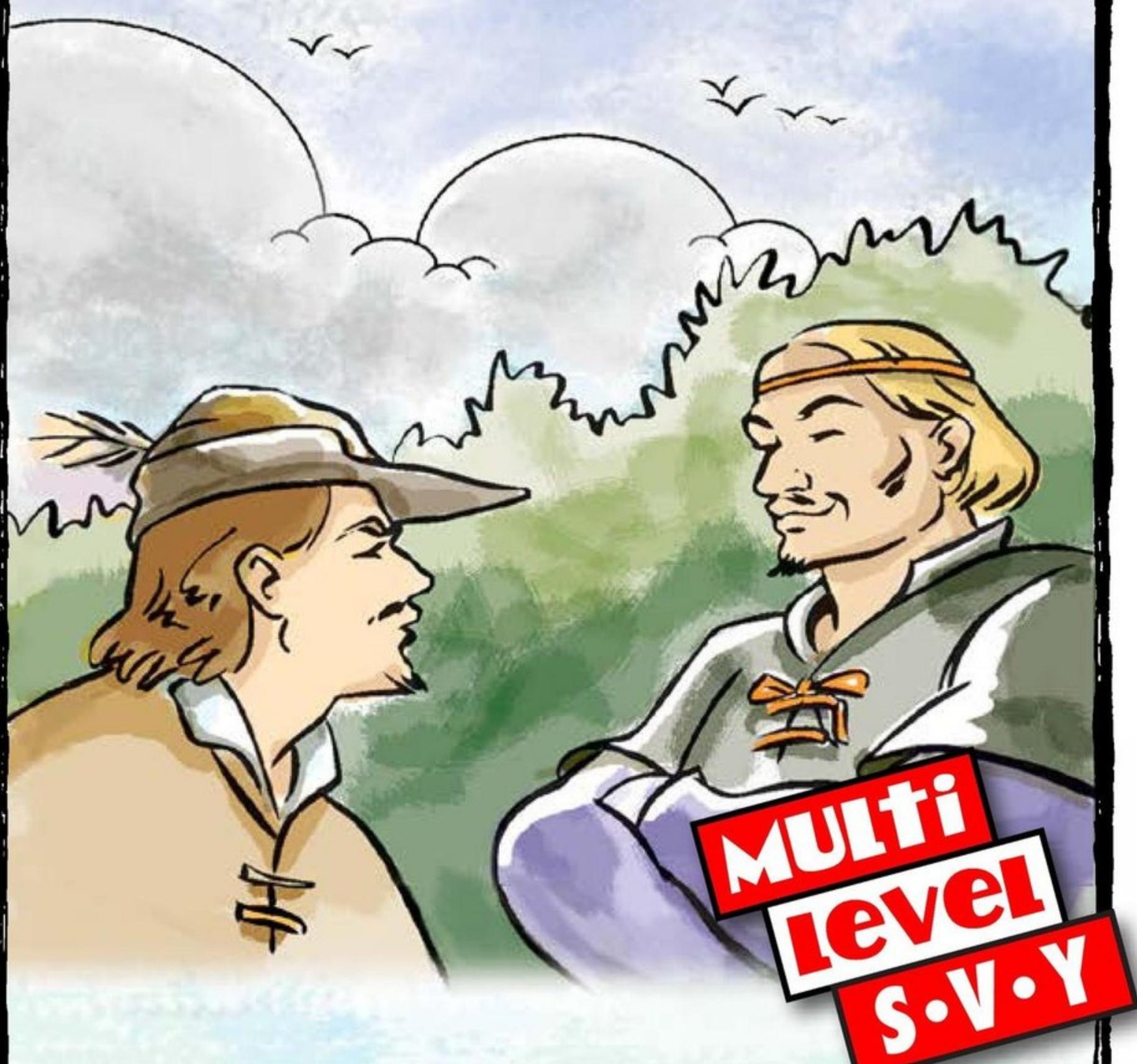


LEVELED BOOK • V

How Little John Joined Robin Hood



An English Folktale Adapted by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by David Cockcroft

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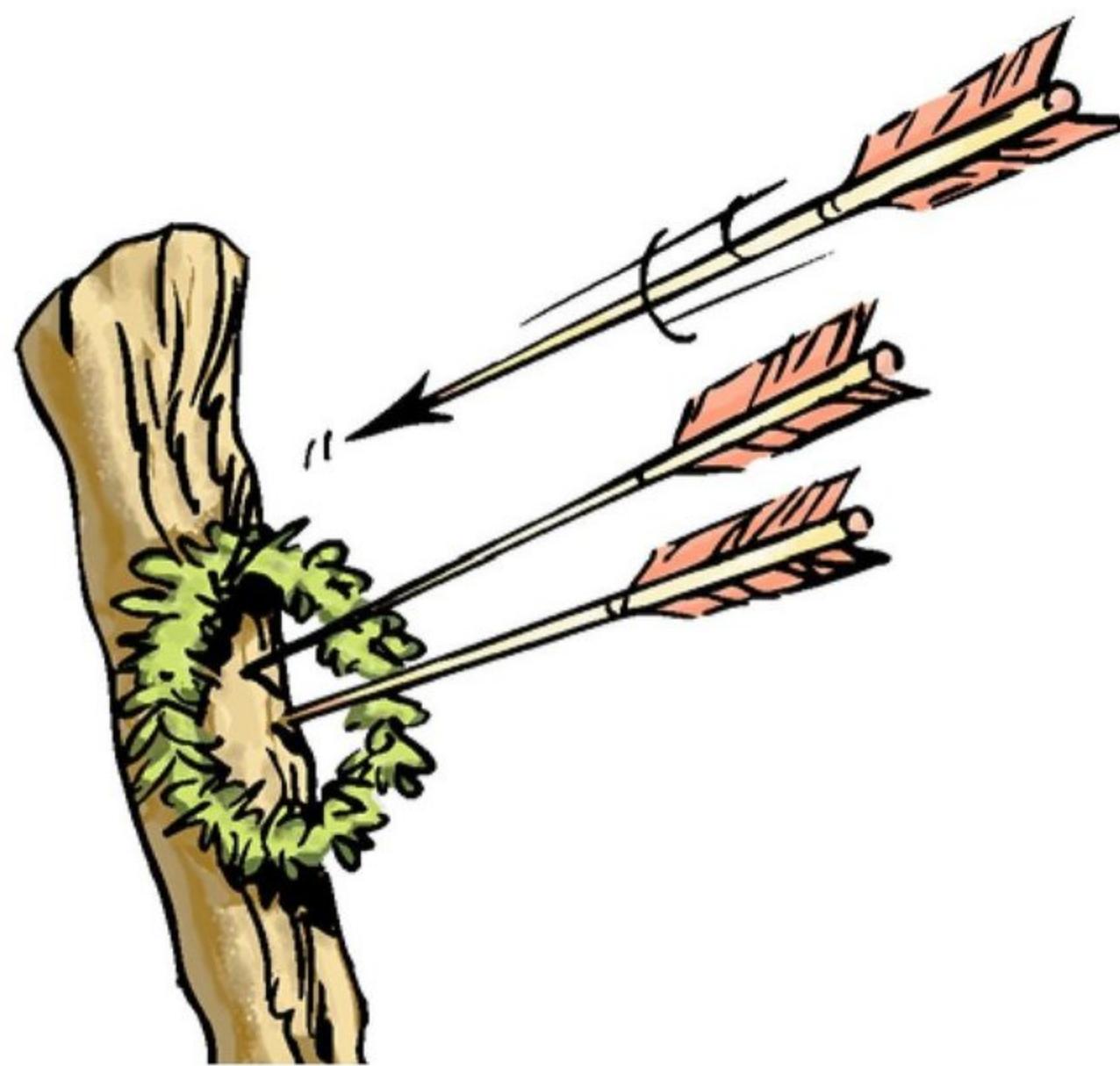


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Introduction

When Robin Hood was a young lad, many of his friends were thrown out of their homes, arrested, or hanged. The French had conquered England, and they ruled over the common people with an iron fist.



Though the English king was still on the throne, he was often at war, and the French ruled in his absence. They taxed families until they starved, then stole the people's land and gave it to **corrupt** friends in the church. As Robin grew older, he saw that his people would not be able to carry the weight of their despair for much longer. He vowed to bring justice—and hope—back to the land.

Since the rich stole from the common people, Robin decided to steal from the rich and return the money to the poor. He cleverly hid himself in Sherwood Forest, where he was safe from the lords who hated him and where he could steal from wealthy people who dared to travel near the wood.

His name quickly became famous, and English people everywhere adored him. Brave men from all over the country decided to join Robin Hood's cause and soon a large band of followers lived with him in the forest—men who had lost everything as well as men who had everything to lose. David of Doncaster, the cobbler; young Will Scarlet; Much, the miller's son; Arthur a Bland, the tanner; Friar Tuck; and many more brave souls cast their lot with the noble outlaw. Robin Hood's men were more loyal to him than they had ever been to their cruel French lords.

The Merry Men, as they became known, lived entirely outdoors, hunting for their food, cooking over a fire, and sleeping with only a blanket of stars upon them. They spent their days practicing archery, wrestling, and sword fighting until they were the strongest and most skilled fighters in England. There were only two types of lawful men left in the land: wealthy men who despised Robin Hood, and honest and virtuous men who envied Robin Hood's bravery and freedom, and who spread the news of his **exploits** far and wide. Tales of Robin's deeds are still told to this day, including the story of how he met Little John, his right-hand man and dearest friend.



John Little

John Little was his real name, the name he was called before he joined Robin Hood's band. He was the tallest and strongest man who ever walked through the kingdom, and unlike most men, he was loyal to no one, neither to the lords nor to the outlaws. He was such a brave fighter that he felt safest when he was by himself.

When Robin Hood first saw him, John Little was strolling along 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 it at a time, and 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 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 and yet so **agile** (A-juhl). Robin knew he wanted the stranger to join his band.

"Fie!" cried the stranger. "Stand back **thyself**, for I am the better man." He had never met anyone who could match his strength and skill, although he was secretly impressed by the smaller man's spirit.

"Aye, no choice have we then but to fight to see who truly is the better man," 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. "He who can knock the other off the bridge and into the water is the better man," said Robin. The stranger nodded, and the two men 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 sticks—*Crack! Crack! Thud! Crack!*—but each man was so strong and skillful in dodging blows that neither could knock the other down. Each one got hit many times, but neither man thought of stopping. For an hour, they fought on that bridge, yet neither one could knock the other into the water. The bridge protested under the stress of the battle, groaning and creaking, but holding strong.

The smacking and grunting of the battle drew 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, but others, impressed with the agility of the stranger, cheered when he landed a blow or whipped his great bulk around gracefully. 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, 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 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. “**Thou art** an expert with that stick, good fellow; **ere** today, no man **hath** beaten me.”

Robin Hood's followers took it less lightly. Even those who had cheered for the stranger suddenly stepped from behind the trees with their bows trained on the man who had knocked their leader into the water.



There were nearly forty men, all dressed cleverly in green so that they would be utterly invisible behind the bushes and amidst the trees. Even with all their yelling, the stranger had not noticed them while he had been concentrating on the fight.

"What happened, master?" asked Will Scarlet. He was beside himself. "Thou art bruised and bloody, and never hath we seen you beaten before. Is this some kind of trick?"

"No, 'tis no trick at all; this sturdy fellow **walloped** me and sent me tumbling into the water," Robin Hood said as he pulled himself up, ignoring the giant drum that seemed to be beating inside his head.

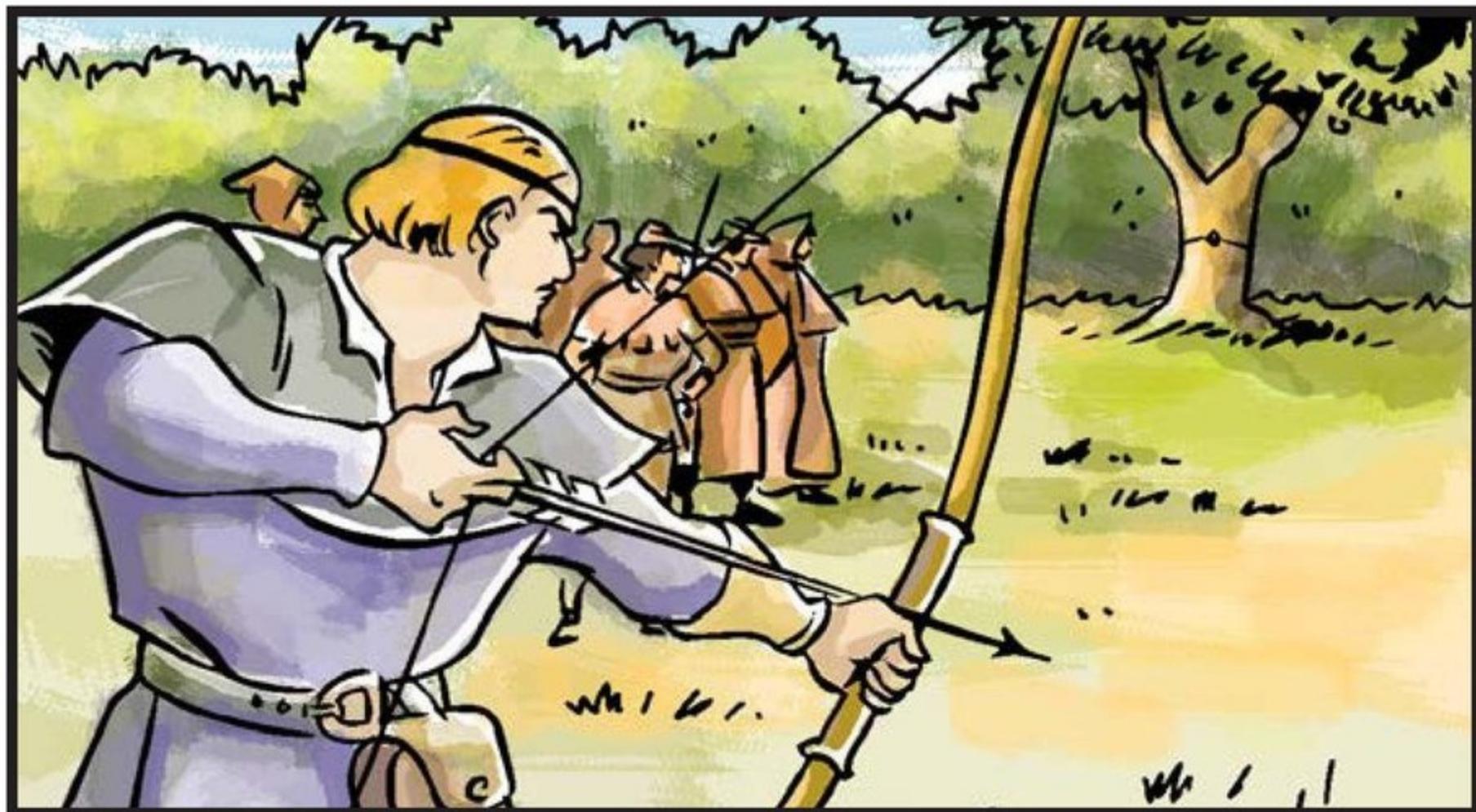
"Then a dunking and a beating he shall have!" said David of Doncaster. He stormed forward, followed by Will Scarlet, Arthur a Bland, and half a dozen men eager to carry out his threat, but Robin Hood ordered his men back.

“Nay,” he said, “**forbear**. ‘Twas a fair fight, and he won. He is brave and hearty, and I would have him in our band. Wilt thou join with us?” he asked the stranger. “I am Robin Hood, and my band is the finest in all of England. We steal from the 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, and besides, he’d always suspected that the lords were exaggerating Robin Hood’s savagery so that they would not appear as foolish after being robbed by him.

“Why should I join thy band as an **underling** if I am a better fighter than the leader? I have no need for those who cannot do better than I can alone. If any man among you can shoot a bow and arrow more accurately than I can, I will join,” he said. He was confident that none of them could, he was a very skillful shot with a bow.

“Well, thou art obviously an extraordinary man, but I shall 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 a full eighty yards away. The piece of bark looked like a tiny speck in the distance.

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

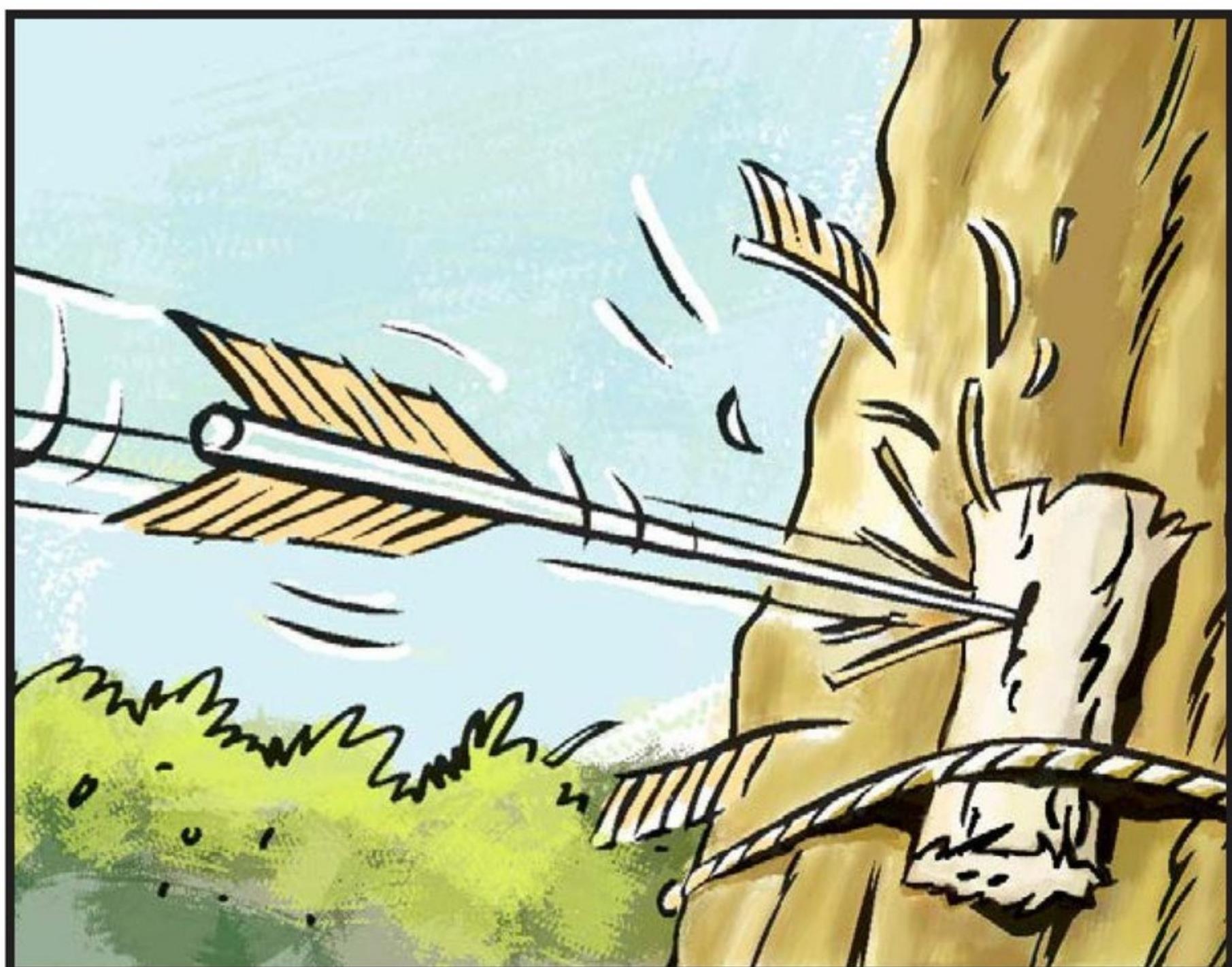
The stranger studied the bows lined up against the trees, looking for the one most suited to someone of his tremendous bulk. John Little finally selected the largest bow, aimed his arrow carefully, and shot it straight into the center of the white bark. The arrow flew so straight and powerfully and true 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 that 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 wilt thou 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 skill, he loved Robin as his dearest friend, and since John had never been beaten before, he was very respectful of the man who was skilled enough to do so.

"What is **thy** name?" asked Will Scarlet, taking out a writing tablet as though to sign the stranger up.

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

"In **sooth**, he jests!" cried Much, the miller's son, slapping his knee.

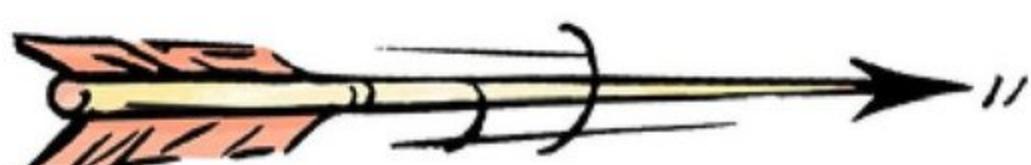
"I do not care for that name," chuckled merry Will, "for it does not fully describe thy puny stature! We shall call **thee** Little John."

And so they had an enormous feast to celebrate Little John's entrance into the group. By the dying light of the fire, with their bellies full, the Merry Men shared their secret signals and passwords with Little John, a sign that they trusted him as much as their leader did. From that day on, Little John was Robin's second-in-command, and no one argued with the choice, because John was clearly the best among them all—next to Robin. Little John served Robin faithfully for many years and loved him better with every 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)
art (<i>v.</i>)	are (p. 9)
corrupt (<i>adj.</i>)	dishonest in order to cheat or gain something (p. 4)
ere (<i>prep.</i>)	before (p. 9)
exploits (<i>n.</i>)	remarkable or heroic deeds (p. 5)
forbear (<i>v.</i>)	hold back (p. 11)
hath (<i>v.</i>)	has or have (p. 9)
savagely (<i>adv.</i>)	wildly; fiercely (p. 9)
sooth (<i>n.</i>)	truth (p. 14)
thee (<i>n.</i>)	you (object of the sentence) (p. 14)
thou (<i>n.</i>)	you (subject of the sentence) (p. 9)
thy (<i>adj.</i>)	your (possessive) (p. 14)
thyself (<i>n.</i>)	yourself (p. 7)
underling (<i>n.</i>)	one who is not in charge (p. 11)
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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