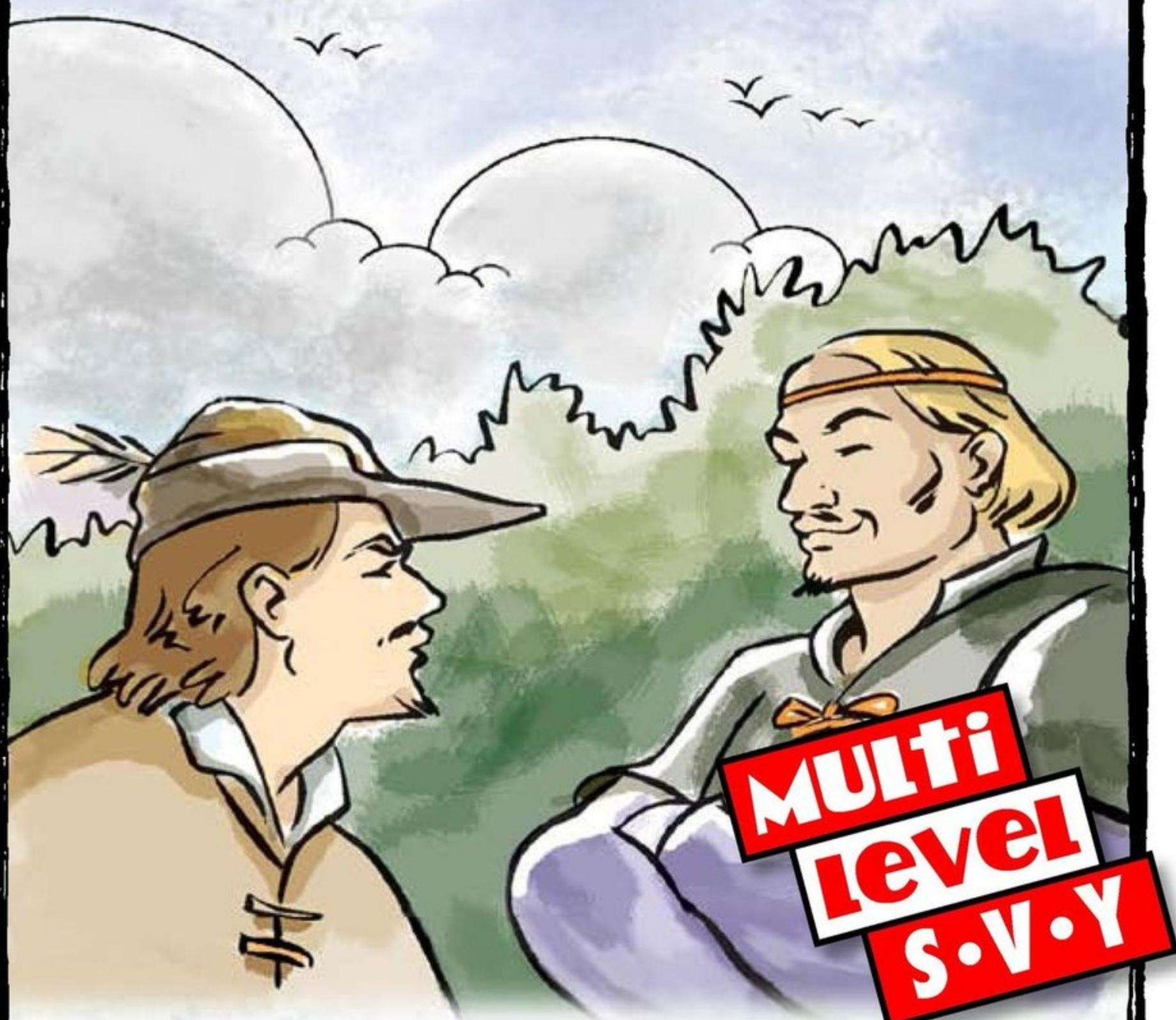


LEVELED BOOK • Y

How Little John Joined Robin Hood



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An English Folktale Adapted by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by David Cockcroft

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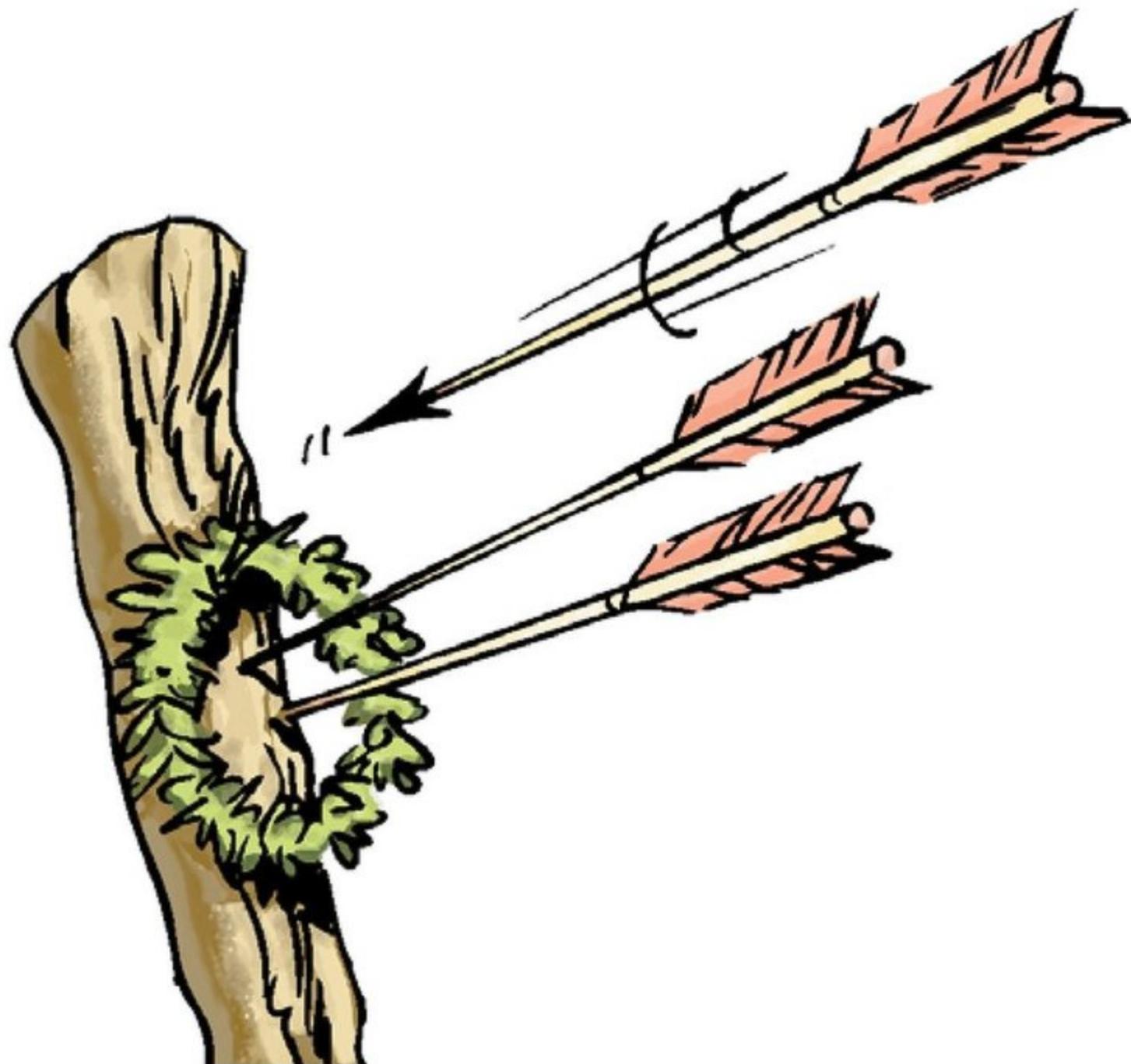


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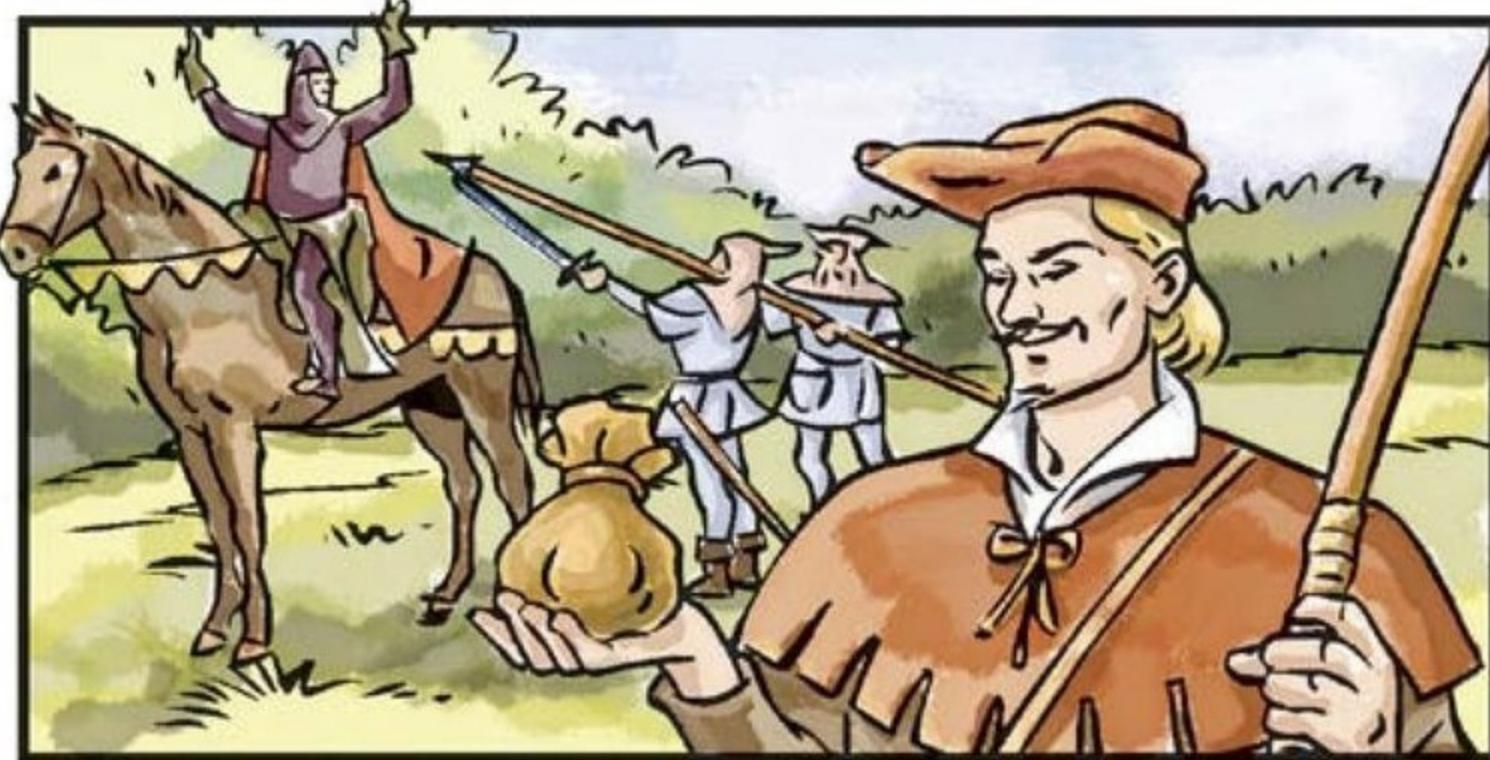
Introduction

When Robin Hood was still very young, he bore helpless witness as his family and friends were driven violently from their lands; farms were confiscated, homes burned, stock animals taken—and neighbors hanged.

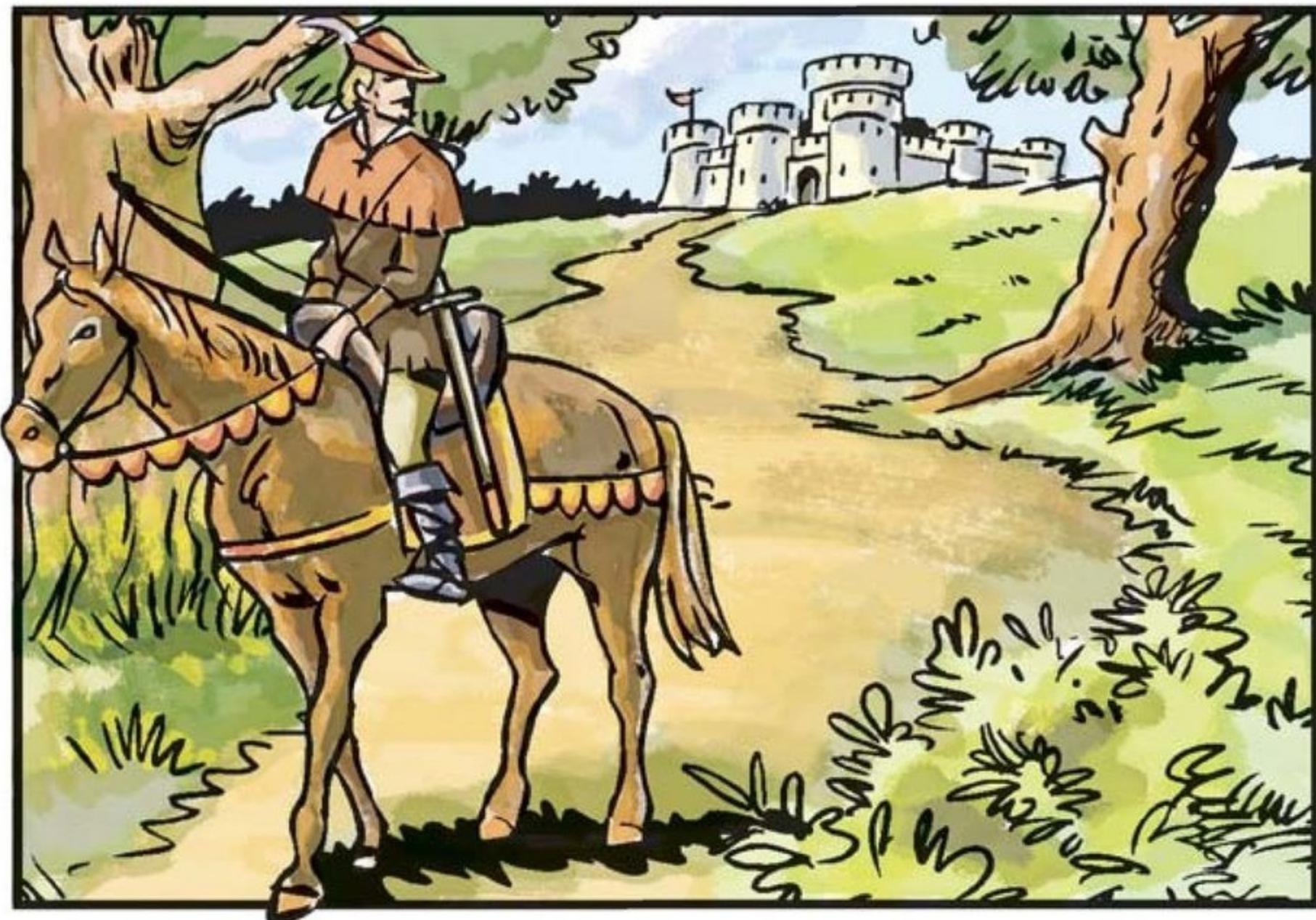
England had been conquered in war, and the victors were ruling with an iron fist. People were overtaxed far beyond their ability to pay. When no further taxes could be wrung out of them, their lands and property were taken in payment and divided up between the ruling French magistrates and their **corrupt** partners in the church.

Although King Richard had been allowed to keep his title, the king had been away from England for many years, fighting in the Crusades, and was unaware of what was happening to his people at home. But young Robin knew, and he **vowed** to right these terrible wrongs when he was old enough to fight back.





Robin grew up to be both strong and quick-witted—and an outlaw. His family lands had been taken and his father murdered, and now Robin Hood had become a painful thorn in the side of the corrupt rulers of his country. An **elusive** and embarrassing opponent, Robin was hunted by both the ruling lords and the Sheriff of Nottingham's forces as he harassed, hounded, and enraged his sworn enemies. A hideout deep inside Sherwood Forest was now his home and served as a vantage point from which to watch for likely targets to rob. For robbery was now both Robin's profession and his revenge. His plan was straightforward: since the corrupt rich had stolen from the people without cause or compassion, he would now steal back from those who had profited—and return the money to the poor. Many an unwary traveler or tax collector, loaded down with gold, left the forest feeling much lighter after a roadside encounter with Robin Hood.



As his bold actions became known, his name became famous, and he became a symbol of hope for the common people. And so, his legend grew throughout all of England—as did the amount offered as a reward for his capture.

Such was his fame that brave men from all over England came to join Robin Hood, and soon a large group of like-minded men lived with him in the forest. They came from all backgrounds; some were men who had lost everything, while others had everything to lose. At his side were David of Doncaster, the cobbler; young Will Scarlet; Much, the miller's son; Arthur a Bland, the tanner; Friar Tuck; and many more **dauntless** souls who had cast their lot with the noble outlaw.



The Merry Men, as the growing band became known, lived a rugged outdoor life. They hunted for their food, cooked their meals over a fire, and slept on deerskins under the stars overhead. Daily, they tested and practiced their skills in archery, wrestling, and sword fighting until they were the strongest and most skilled fighters in all of England. Tales of Robin's adventurous deeds are still told to this day, including the story of how he met Little John, who became his right-hand man and his dearest friend.



John Little

John Little, which was his true given name, had a famous reputation of his own. Everyone said that he was the tallest and strongest man who had ever walked the kingdom—some say he stood over seven feet in height. Others claimed that his legs were each the width of an oak tree and just as strong. And still others swore they had seen him crush a stone into powder with one giant hand. Unlike most men of his time, John Little was loyal to no one but himself; he was not obedient to the tyranny of the ruling lords, nor in sympathetic league with the outlaws of Sherwood. He was such a brave and confident fighter that he felt safest when he was by himself. But his thinking was about to be challenged.

When Robin Hood first saw John Little, John was strolling along the edge of the forest, about to cross a narrow wooden bridge that spanned a stream swollen by rain. The bridge was so narrow that only one person could cross it at a time. As it happened, Robin Hood stepped on it from one side just as John Little stepped on it from the other.

“Nay, there. 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 this huge man would do. He had never seen a man so mighty in appearance, and yet so agile. Robin knew he wanted the impressive stranger to join his band.

“Fie!” cried the stranger, unconcerned. “Stand back thyself, for I am the better man.” John Little laughed, for he had never yet met anyone who could match his strength and skill, although he was secretly impressed by the smaller man’s spirit.

“Aye, then, no choice have we but to fight to see which of us, truly, is the better man,” said Robin Hood, who loved a good fight even better than he loved a good **venison** dinner.

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



The Fight

Robin Hood cut down and stripped two stout oak branches to serve as **cudgels**. He considered it unfair to use his bow and arrows when the stranger didn't have any with him. "He who can knock the other off the bridge and into the water is the better man," said Robin. The stranger nodded in agreement as each man grasped his sturdy oaken staff, and the men faced each other as eagerly as two young boys wrestling for fun.



What a great fight it was! *Crack! Crack! Thud!* *Crack!*—the sounds of the fray rang in the forest air. But each man was so sturdy and so skillful in dodging blows that neither could knock the other down. *Whack! Thump! Whack!*—they spun and parried, thrust and leapt. Each one gave as good as he got, until there were plenty of sore bones and bumps and black-and-blue marks on both. But neither man thought of stopping for such **trivial** concerns as a few bruises and bumps. For a whole hour, they fought on that bridge, yet neither one could knock the other off.

Undaunted, they fought for a second hour while the bridge groaned and creaked. The swollen stream heaved water up onto its planks, making it slick, yet each man held his footing.

Eventually, the sounds of the battle drew many of Robin's men to the edge of the forest to watch in amazement. "Aye. True!" some yelled loyally when their leader struck a hearty blow or made an artful dodge. "Well done!" cheered others, impressed with the agility of the big stranger when he landed a sharp thrust or whipped his great bulk around gracefully. None had ever seen any 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 swiftly gave Robin a crack on the head that brought blood spurting from the wound. Robin swung back in retaliation, but the stranger avoided the bold stroke by inches. Blood ran down into Robin's eyes from his wound, and he did not see the blow that tumbled him right into the cold water!

Robin lay there looking up and laughing out loud—for 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 the defeat less lightly. Even those who had cheered for the stranger suddenly stepped from their hiding places with their bows trained upon John Little. There were nearly forty men there that day, all clad in forest green, which had made them utterly invisible amidst the bushes and the trees.

"What happened, master?" asked Will Scarlet. He was beside himself with shock. "Never hath we seen you beaten before. Is this some kind of trick?"

"No, 'tis no trick at all; this sturdy fellow walloped me fair and sent me tumbling into the water," Robin Hood said as he pulled himself up.

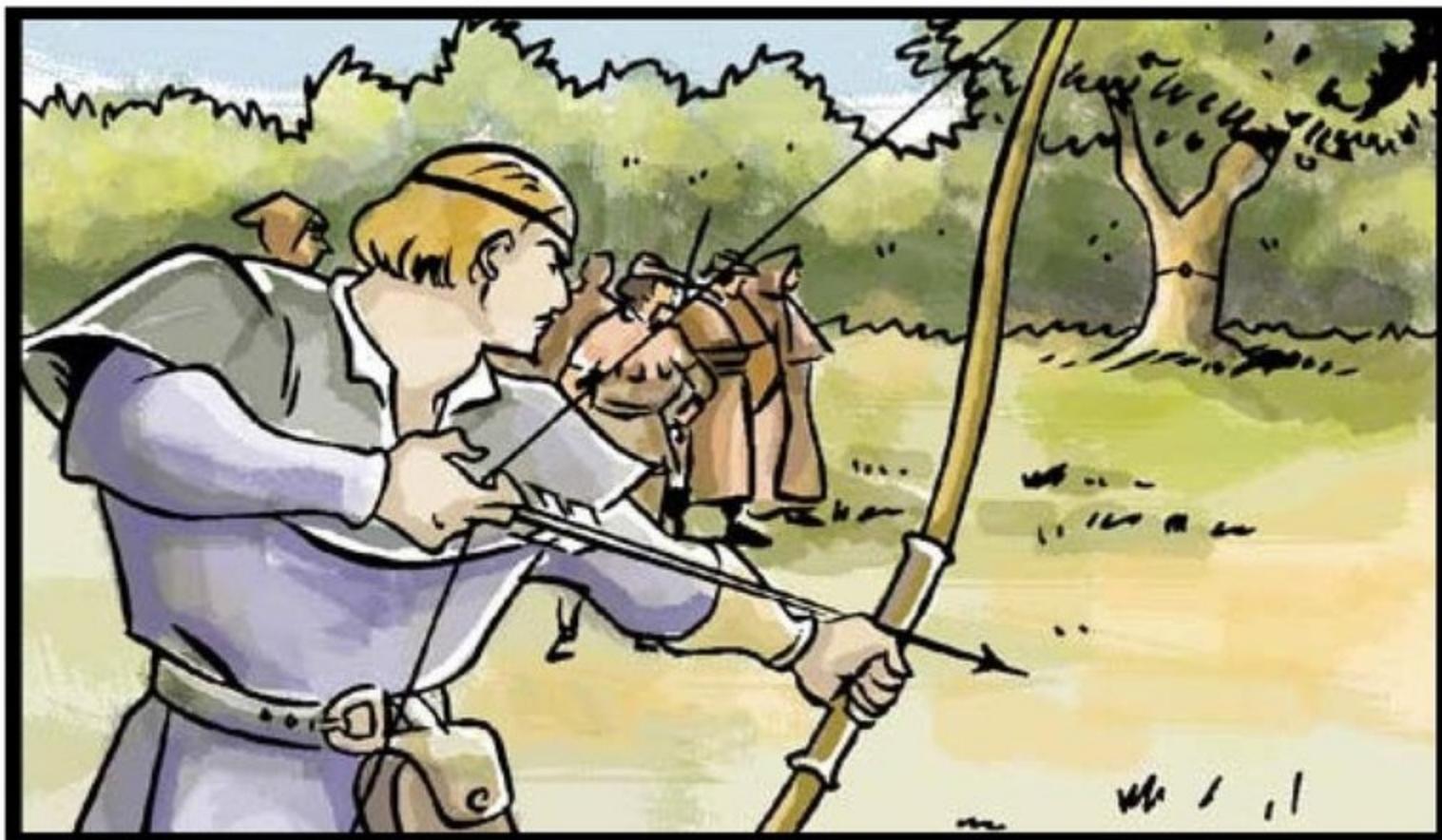
"Then a dunking and a beating he shall have as well!" said David of Doncaster. He stormed forward, followed by Will Scarlet, Arthur a Bland, and half a dozen men eager to carry out his threat, but Robin Hood raised a hand and ordered his men back.

"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 known as Robin Hood, and my band is the strongest and bravest in all of England. We steal from the rich and give back to the poor so that all families will be provided for, and justice will one day 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 savage, a threat to all. But John Little was afraid of no man, and he'd always suspected that the lords exaggerated Robin Hood's reputation so that they did not appear so foolish after being robbed and outwitted by him.

"Why should I join thy band as an **underling** if I have proved to be a better fighter than the leader? I have no need for those who cannot do better than I can do alone. If any man among ye can shoot a bow and arrow more truly than I can, then perhaps I will join," he said.

"Well, thou art obviously an extraordinary man, but I shall try my best," said Robin with a smile, and John Little found himself once again admiring his opponent's **mettle**.

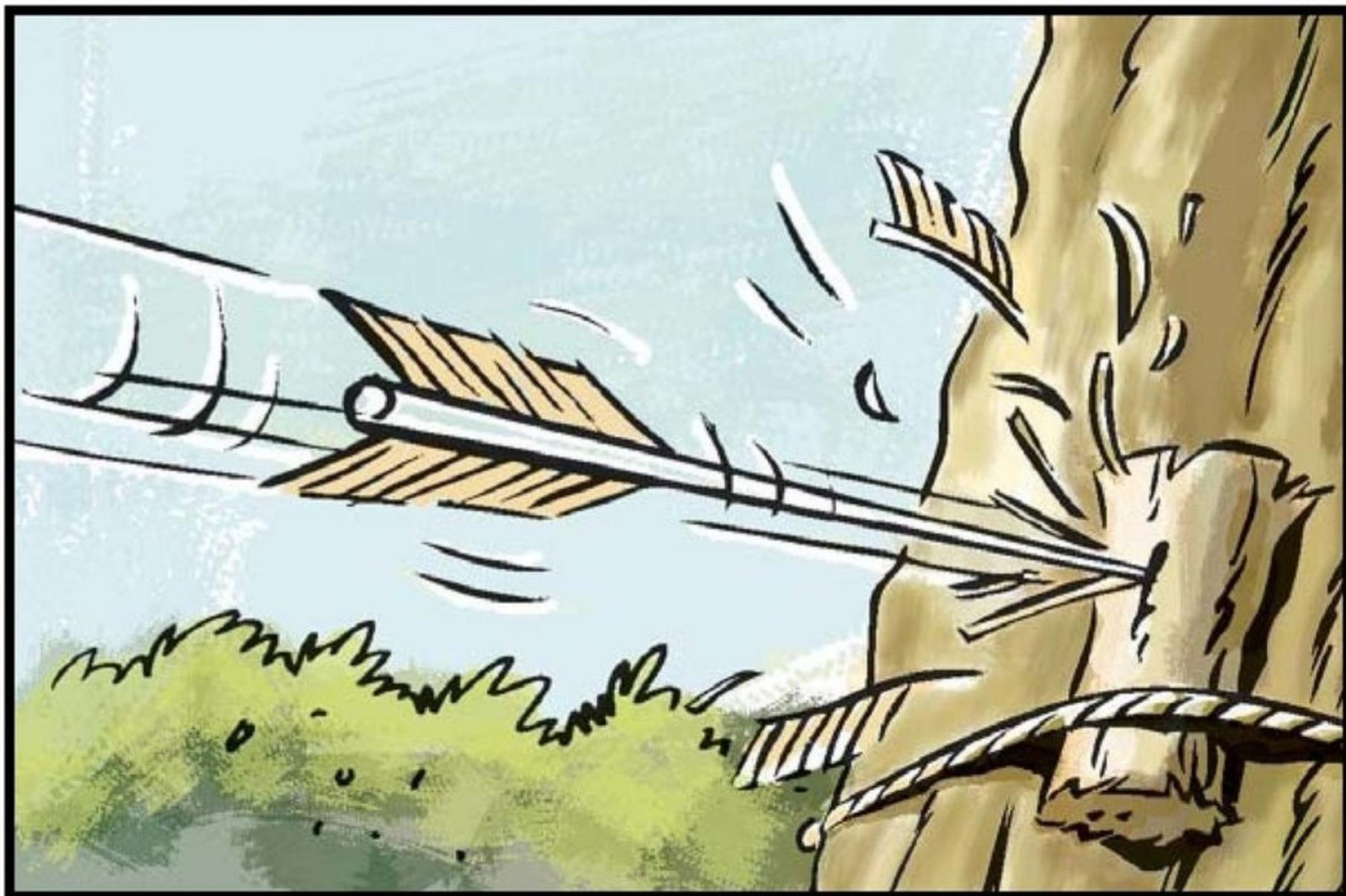


The Archery Match

Robin 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 nothing more than a tiny speck of white at that great distance.

"Now, sir, you may choose any of our bows and arrows to shoot with," Robin said with a sweeping gesture.

The stranger studied the bows lined up against the trees. He finally selected the largest bow, nocked and aimed his arrow carefully, and shot it directly into the center of the white bark. Thwack! The arrow flew so strong 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 swiftly and cleanly that it struck the stranger's arrow dead-on and splintered it into pieces! Robin Hood's band gave a jubilant roar. The giant stranger's skill had inspired Robin to do his finest shooting ever.

"Now, good man, may I ask of you again, wilt thou join my band?" asked Robin Hood with a sly 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 knew this was a man whom he could respect as he would his dearest friend. Since John had never been beaten before, he knew that for someone to do so required many special abilities.

"What is thy name?" asked Will Scarlet, taking out a writing tablet.

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

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

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



“Come. You are with us now.” And so they assembled an enormous feast to celebrate Little John’s entrance into the forest clan. By the dying light of the fire, the well-fed Merry Men shared their secret signals and passwords with Little John, a sign that they trusted him as Robin’s choice. Soon, Little John became Robin’s second-in-command, and no one ever argued with his choice, as John clearly was the strongest and most skilled of them all—next to Robin. And in that role, Little John served Robin’s cause faithfully for many years, his deeds adding to their luster, and his love and respect for Robin growing with each passing year.



Glossary

allegiance (<i>n.</i>)	loyalty, dedication to a person or a group (p. 16)
corrupt (<i>adj.</i>)	dishonest in order to cheat or gain something (p. 4)
cudgels (<i>n.</i>)	clubs (p. 10)
dauntless (<i>adj.</i>)	fearless (p. 6)
elusive (<i>adj.</i>)	difficult to capture (p. 5)
forbear (<i>v.</i>)	hold back (p. 14)
mettle (<i>n.</i>)	courage and stamina (p. 14)
nocked (<i>v.</i>)	fitted an arrow to a bowstring (p. 15)
trivial (<i>adj.</i>)	unimportant (p. 11)
underling (<i>n.</i>)	a person who is not in charge and who has no authority (p. 14)
venison (<i>n.</i>)	deer meat (p. 9)
vowed (<i>v.</i>)	promised; swore an oath (p. 4)



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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Level Y Leveled Book

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