

HOW LITTLE JOHN JOINED ROBIN HOOD

This is the story of how Robin gained his right hand man and dearest friend, Little John. Little John was one of the tallest and strongest youths that ever walked through a forest. When Robin Hood first saw him, he was walking in the edge of the forest and came to a narrow bridge across a stream. The bridge was so narrow that but one could go across it at once, and it chanced that Robin Hood stepped upon it from one side just as Little John stepped on the other end.

"Go back, and let the better man cross before you," called Robin Hood, not because he cared a bit but rather with a mirthful wish to see what the tall youth would do.

"Stand back yourself. I am the better man," cried the stranger.

"Let us fight for it," said Robin Hood, who loved a good bout more than his dinner.

"With all my heart," answered the stranger.

Then Robin cut him a stick of oak to serve as a quarter-staff, for he would have held it a shame to use his bow and arrows when the other had no such weapon, and they met as joyously as two boys wrestling for sport.

"The one who can knock the other into the water is the better man," said Robin. Then the fight with the staves began. What a fight it was! They struck again and again, but so skilful was each one in warding off blows that neither could knock the other down. Many hard blows each one took, until there were sore bones and bumps, and black and blue spots in plenty, but neither thought of stopping for that. A whole hour they fought there on the bridge, and neither could get the better of the other, then another hour. At last Robin gave the stranger a terrible whack that made him stagger, but the stranger returned with a crack on the crown that made the blood flow. Robin whacked back at him savagely, but the stranger avoided the blow and gave one to Robin that tumbled him fairly into the water.

He lay there looking up and laughing, for Robin Hood never bore any malice.

"You have a right sturdy hand with the cudgel. Never have I been beaten before," he laughed. He splashed ashore and seized the stranger's hand.

"I like you well," he said. "Now watch, and I will show you something."

He put his horn to his lips and blew, and up came two score of Robin Hood's followers, all clothed in Lincoln green, and bearing bows and arrows and swords.

"How is this, master?" said the foremost. "You are all bruised and wet to the skin."

"Yon sturdy fellow has given me a drubbing and tumbled me into the water," he said.

"Then he shall get a ducking and a drubbing himself," said Will Stutely, starting forth angrily, followed by half a dozen, all eager to carry out his threat. But Robin Hood ordered him back.

"No," he said, "it was a fair fight, and he won. I would not have you hurt him for anything. But he is a right brave and lusty youth and I would fain have him in our band. Will you join yourself to my men?" he asked of the wondering stranger. "I am Robin Hood, and my band is the finest in all England."

Hardly a man in the country but would have trembled at the name. But John Little, the strange youth, was afraid of no man.

"If there is any man among you who can shoot a better shaft than I, I will," he said.

"Well, I will try," said Robin. He sent Will Stutely to set up a piece of white bark four fingers in breadth on an oak eighty yards away.

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

The stranger chose the very stoutest bow. Then he aimed his arrow carefully and sent it down the path and it struck the very center of the mark. All Robin Hood's followers caught their breaths in amaze.

"That is a fine shot indeed," said Robin Hood heartily. "No one could better it; but perhaps I may mar it."

Then he shot an arrow; and so true and swift it sped that it struck the stranger's arrow and splintered it into pieces. And all who saw it cried out that there never was such shooting before.

"Now, will you not come into my band?" said Robin Hood with a smile.

"With all my heart," answered the stranger; and from that minute he loved Robin as his dearest friend.

"What is your name?" said Will Stutely, taking out a tablet as though he would enroll it.

"John Little," answered the stranger youth.

"I like not the name," said merry Will. "This fellow is too small to be called John Little. Let us christen him over, Little John."

And so they had a christening and great sport; and from that day Little John was Robin's right hand man and second in command over the band. True and faithfully did he serve Robin for many years and loved him better with every year.