

ROBIN HOOD

It was in the spring of the second year of his insurrection against the High Sheriff of Nottingham that Robin Hood took a walk in Sherwood Forest. As he walked, he pondered the progress of the campaign, the disposition of his forces, the Sheriff's recent moves, and the options that confronted him.

The revolt against the Sheriff had begun as a personal crusade, erupting out of Robin's conflict with the Sheriff and his administration. However, alone, Robin Hood could do little. He therefore sought allies; men with legitimate grievances and a strong sense of justice. Later, he welcomed all who came, asking few questions and demanding only a willingness to serve. Strength, he believed, lay in numbers.

He spent the first year forging the group into a disciplined band, united in their hatred against the Sheriff, and willing to live outside the law. The band's organization was simple. Robin ruled supreme, making all of the important decisions. He delegated specific tasks to his trusted lieutenants. Will Scarlett was in charge of intelligence and scouting. His main job was to shadow the Sheriff and his men, always alert to their next move. He also collected information on the travel plans of rich merchants and tax collectors. Little John kept discipline among the men and saw to it that their skills in archery were at the high peak that their profession demanded. Scarlock took care of finances, converting loot to cash, paying shares of the take, and finding a suitable hiding place for the surplus. Finally, Munch the Miller's son had the difficult task of provisioning the ever-increasing band of Merry men.

The increasing size of the band was both a source of satisfaction and concern for Robin. The fame of his Merry men was spreading, and the new recruits were pouring in from every corner of England. As the band grew larger, their small bivouac became a major encampment. Between raids the men milled about, talking and playing games. Vigilance was in decline, and discipline was getting harder to enforce. "Why," Robin reflected, "I don't even know half the men I run into these days."

The growing band was also beginning to exceed the food capacity of the forest. Game was getting scarce, and supplies had to be obtained from outlying villages. The cost of buying food was beginning to exceed the band's financial reserves at the very time moment that revenues were in decline. Travelers, especially those with the most to lose were now giving Sherwood Forest a wide berth. This was costly and inconvenient to them, but it was preferable to having all of their goods confiscated. Robin believed that the time had come for the Merry men to change their policy of outright confiscation of

goods to one of a fixed transit fee. His lieutenants strongly resisted the idea. They were proud of the Merryman's famous motto: "Rob from the rich to give to the poor." "The farmers and the townspeople," they argued "are our most important allies." "How can we tax them and still hope for their help in our fight against the evil Sheriff of Nottingham?"

Robin wondered how long the Merryman could keep the ways and methods of their early days. The Sheriff was growing stronger and becoming better organized. He now had the money and the men and was beginning to harass the band, probing for weaknesses. The tide of events was beginning to turn against the Merryman. Robin felt that the campaign must be decisively concluded before the Sheriff had a chance to deliver a mortal blow. "But how," we wondered, "could this be done?"

Robin had often entertained the possibility of killing the Sheriff, but the chances for this seemed increasingly remote. Besides, killing the Sheriff might satisfy his personal thirst for revenge, but would not improve the situation. Robin had hoped that the perpetual state of unrest, and the Sheriff's failure to collect taxes, would lead to his removal from office. Instead, the Sheriff used his political connections to obtain reinforcements. He had powerful friends at court and was well regarded by the regent, Prince John.

Prince John was vicious and volatile. He was consumed by his unpopularity among the people, who wanted the imprisoned King Richard back. He also lived in constant fear of the barons, who had first given him the regency but were now beginning to dispute his claims to the throne. Several of the barons had set out to collect the ransom that would release Richard the Lionhearted from his jail in Austria. Robin was invited to join the conspiracy in return for future amnesty. It was a dangerous proposition. Provincial banditry was one thing; court intrigue quite something else. Prince John had spies everywhere, and he was known for his vindictiveness. If the conspirator's plan failed, the pursuit would be relentless and retributions swift.

The sound of the supper horn startled Robin from his thoughts. There was the sweet smell of Bambi Bourguignon in the air. Nothing was resolved or settled. Robin headed for camp promising himself he would give these matters his utmost attention after tomorrow's raid.