

# Preamble

## I

**M**ark, friends! for I've a tale to tell. 'tis one you've heard before, I'll warrant, and one you think you've known since the beloved days of infancy. And so you will seek no doubt to outpace me at every step, as I reckon, and to anticipate me in every word. Yet who am I to wish otherwise! I say, that is the better for the telling: for thus all things under this sun are born anew.

Hail and harken, then, my deep-eared, clear-eyed friends! I've a tale to tell that is sung and writ for such as you. We have a legend to speak on, if *you* be for it. And I say—what is legend? Legend is the great iconoclasm: legend is the recreation of the past in the name of the future. We bear back through dark time a burning image, not of what we are, but of what we should like to be, of what we were and so must be again, of what we *will* be, with *will* girded round in the glow of symbols and seals. And in bearing backward this image, we shatter the image before us, that paltry image which is but our own sham present and most meager actuality. Legend is a resurrection, and resurrection is the joint twixt the eternity behind us and that ahead. The symbol of legend in absolute is the great flaming bird, child of the sun itself, that consumes its own being unto ashes and from its ashes resprings to being. And that, too, is life, the living wellsprings from which we all of us have our birth and continuation. Though the legend would seem to be a thing of the past, this is but

half its heart. For though the dead have no legends, they are well enough in possession of a past, and have been robbed only of their tomorrow. Then we, who look backwards now and grope back through the fog of our history to put our hands on some almost palpable thing—we are not looking *backward* at all—

I say, I say again—all things under this sun are born anew. Ho! I have a name for you that you will know; a name, one might say, that sings for delight among the ash of all these somber centuries: *Robin Hood* is the name that I would sing. A name not so distant as to be unreachable or unseasonable; nor one so near as to be falsifiable or vulnerable to frivolous dispute. And it must be admitted: it is a particular delight, to see how the historians flock round it in vain, like buzzards about a desert sojourner who will not, but will not die. *Not* because we would mock at the poor historians, who are in the end an honorable bunch and deserve only our tenderest praise! But rather because history is the first human science in the old sense that failed to become a science in the new; and because thus life reveal itself insusceptible of grosser calculation.

Then hail, I say! What the reader holds in his competent hands is first and foremost, *not* a history. What use, after all, should we have of *the* Robin Hood, who lived and breathed and had his name and his trade and his human peculiarities? If we saw such a man in the flesh, what should we do with him but stand abay, and perchance laugh and shake our marveling heads? Could we gain of his sight aught but some satisfaction of a pauper's curiosity? "Ah," we could say to ourselves then—"so *here* is Robyn Hode, good man that he was—and reeks to boot of being too long in the wilds and clothed too many days in the same unwashed garb. Does his Maid Marian not take womanly care of him? Ill-shaved he is, and cruder of his speech than we had been led to believe—and much shorter, by my troth, and somewhat stouter. Ho, *that* is the laugh of Robyn Hode? Say, was that sign of mirth, or was it but a drunken hiccough, or the bray of a beery ass? For I swear it, he drinks his share of ale, does good Robyn Hode, and goes his way merry indeed, and stinking to the skies for it. Goodness, and how he fumbles with his bow! And what an unbecoming smile he wears as he does it, as though he knew all eyes were on him, and he only the bawler and

backtown charlatan of all regards! And perchance it is true in the end that ‘truth is more interesting than fiction,’ for our Robyn Hode here is a petty gambler and cheater of the state, and in flight of debts and in attempt to win him liberty of his own license, became an outlaw, and was named Hobbehod by the people and derided for it, and now is a silly saucy fellow who gets himself into brawls a-many and loses them to a one—”

So *here’s* the truth, then—we might confide to ourselves, shaking our heads again, after we have scraped away the crust of time, and scratched out the lines delineating this “historical figure”—*here’s* the truth: that Robin Hood was a man as any other! And so we might sleep the more contented for knowing that nothing *special* did wear this name.

But I say, friends. Friends—is it not so? We, who do not build this work of envy, nor worse yet of the desire to lay all facts to grave; we, who are no paladins of clarity, but who war nonetheless against the shades—we, I say, have us other quarry to poach...

## II

ell, here then is point enough for departure: the name, the time, the place—these simple facts that have confounded our honorable historians, and which yet form as it were the entire *body* of our work, its palpating skin and its beating heart; or the meat and nut of the seed. And so, to well begin, *Robin Hood*: where and when was the man that bore such a name, and what *was* the name he bore, or that bore him?

Let us train our minds a little. What is *Robin*, if it is not diminutive for *Robert*? Then let us seek us a Robert—a Robert Hood. Indeed, some have even deemed, with that back-and-forth logic of legends which is the only proper way to reason about human things in general, that the very “Robin” we have taken as the diminutive name of this man, is quite superfluous, insofar as one can rest quite content with “Rob.” Thence we have us “Rob-in-hood,” which surely became

Robin Hood by force of use. And so far so well. But this leads us to the next most natural question: what means then this "Hood"? Is that a surname—as was common in those days, for example, amongst the makers of hoods, who, as many of the common folk, called themselves by their proper trade? Then perhaps our Robert Hood was a tradesman after all, the crafter of useful headgear. Or perhaps he was but descended of such. Or perhaps he was really only Rob-in-Hood—that is, one chap named Rob, who had habit of wearing cowed cloaks, so that, contrary our commonlaw Robin Hood with his feathered cap and his sunny disposition, we must vision instead a lurking sulky fellow who in eternal shade goes about his mirthless business.

Or perchance we abandon these notions altogether, as being unpalatable and unoriginal, and note ourselves the fact that this *Hood* might in dialect of the day have meant simply *Wood*—so that we treat here of a man of the wilderness, a woodsman or one who lived in the forest. But that does not get us far, insofar as we be historical: for where in our registers may we seek out a Robert, who dwelt worlds away from those places our registers are meant to register? Perhaps then we delve deeper still, and find us in this *Wood* a profounder meaning. Perchance this Robert Wood was a bosky sprite, a spirit dweller of the greens, the very personification of spring itself—for who ever heard of Robin Hood's winters!—a figuration and personification of forces and powers that lead us back to an elder witchcraft and to the very pagan roots of the northern countries, the taproot of our pallid, hale, Northern ways—

Ho! That is deep and heady stuff—liqueur for our intellectual man. And far be it for us to deny the draught of it. For to stop up the undercurrents and crack the fundament-meanings of any legend, is akin to declaring that the world on which we ramble be but a shell. Yet, contrariwise, to insist too *much* upon these deep, elusive matters, is to strip the skin off the world, and insist that we bed hot on the core of things. And we are neither "scientific" enough nor devilish enough for either of these philosophies, being but human beings, and so—find ourselves in a pretty tangle!

Thus I fear that the true Robin Hood evades us yet. For was he not even so a man in flesh and blood, and did he not truly find himself in the Sheriff's ledgers for robbing the Bishop's purse, and

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did he not once knock good John Little a good bump upon his crown, and split an arrow in twain by the true flight of his dart? And if he did not do all this, and it is but allegory, or worse yet, vulgar entertainment, then where is the substance of it such as we might sink our teeth into? And if he *did* do all of this, then what good does it do *us*, to dream that he was instead a touchless sprite?—And if he was the one, was he perforce *not* the other?—And if he could have been *both*—?

But ho! We are in a merry mess indeed! Then back, back, and back a ways the more—back to the root. Our records are threadbare. Let us doubt them. Let us doubt even our own logic, tempered and conditioned as it has been by science and history; aye, let us doubt our own logic, in the very name of reason. Let us employ an other, the very logic mentioned above, the logic of life itself. Let us question the name that leads us to such a brink of chaos. Perchance it was no name at all. Aye, let us suppose—it was not a name, but an epithet: for it is known that Robehod and Rabunhod and such were but monikers lent to criminals. Then our Robin Hood—why, that is but an ennobling title of a bad profession, and our Robin Hood was but a common thief.

No—not very far have we gotten, in the end, if in our driving backward, we have discovered only so much as any schoolchild knows. And another problem presents itself, even beyond the inconsequentiality of our supposition: such etymologies almost certainly upset the order of things, mistaking effect for explanation. For Robehod, or Robehood, or what you will, far from being origin of the name of our man, is in fact surely but derived from the same. Put elsewise, Robin Hood is surely no ennobling of Robehod, but Robehod rather the corruption of Robin Hood. And so this title “Robehod,” which was in free use already by the opening of the fourteenth century, is so far the only really valid clue we have found: for it proves this much alone, that the original name Robin Hood was invested in the popular conscience already by the year of our Lord 1300, so that our hero did antedate that year. But—what the dickens was he, then, that lived before the year 1300, and was called Robin Hood, and got up to such mischief as he has been passed

down by tongues and quills abundant, to find himself still alive in this very late day, and evidently as well and healthy as ever, and standing smiling moreover before our very eyes, as it were?

There is need here of a little dexterity, friends—is there not? A little devil's dancing round or straight *through* such a prickly point? 'tis taken for granted that the name we ascribe to our hero was his given name—that Robin Hood was a Robin, a Robyn, a Rob or a Robert. We imagine that we should call a man only as he was named, or at most by a name that he chose for himself, and that to call a man "Thomas" when he and all the world called him "Simon" would be contrary of all sense. But we do not adequately consider the state of things in, say, 1200 *Anno Dominorum*. Names were not in 1200 what they are today, nay my friends, nay; nor the world what it seems to *us*. Which is to say, names were not some various repository of our various identities, selected by our parents with meaning intent, imprinted by the state with bureaucratic stamp, and left generally untouched by kith and kin. We do not consider that much better than half the population of the commoners had in those days one of a meager handful of names, so that to shout "John!" in the street might bear the turning of a fifth of masculine heads thereupon.

And therefore, a man christened "John" should never be called such simply, but instead would be John Lackland, say, or John-a-Dickens, or what have you. Or perhaps—and here is much to our point—perhaps he would not be John at all, nor Jack nor Johnny; but perhaps they might call him, for instance, Twain, for he speaks with a forked tongue, does good John, all in ambiguity and equivocation, and one can never be sure what he means to tell us.

Now, Robin Hood, we submit, was born no Robin at all. Nay: nor Robyn, nor Rob nor Robert nor anything of a kind. That name was given to him, and given, in the way of all true names, by the nature of the man: which is to say, his right activity and habits. And if our hypothesis be valid, the which is suggested by the right muddle our histories get themselves into searching out an historic and true "Robin Hood," then already by the name itself we are deceived, as is indeed only fitting if one considers the protean wile of the character in question. Indeed, let us assert here the full rights of our newfound

logic of life, and opine readily: this is the proof that Robin Hood was not Robin Hood: that his being called such throughout the centuries, has resulted in just such a jest as should have tickled him and made him sneeze with laughter!

### III

**B**ut hie! After this, a moment's somber consideration! For if we cannot pursue us a Robin Hood who was born to that name, so that we may trace him out in the records of the day, then already the way to *history* is closed. So we stumble upon a discovery which should serve us in any human investigation: that at any point in the recorded past, be it near or far, *history* is but a skin that is worn by *prehistory*: that any visible moment in the past is underlain by a bedrock of prehistory, and that the life of the moment itself is to be found only in that prehistory... And thus so soon we find ourselves—lost to wildernesses, lost in Sherwood...

And speak of! There is another tidy riddle, against which many heads have bucked in vain! Everyone knows that Robin Hood had his way of Sherwood Forest, and menaced the roads that passed therethrough. And this Sherwood is just north of Nottinghamshire, where had his post the great nemesis of Robin Hood, namely, the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, whose jurisdiction fell as well over the wood at his town's borders.

There are problems rife that debouch from this simple enunciation of the facts. Here, for instance, is a spiny one indeed: the earliest tales of our Robin Hood have him living in Barnsdale, some fifty miles north of Nottinghamshire, in Yorkshire, country that had its own and diverse sheriff. But it is an unlikely tale, that a single outlaw, even one so courageous and resourceful as Robin Hood, menaced a road that in his time would have taken two days travel simply to reach from his residency, only so as to goad the sheriff of a county different to his own! Then, to further complicate all, there is also *Loxley*—is there not? That *Loxley* which later was said to be the home and birthplace of the true Robin

Hood, though Loxley is neither York nor Nottingham, to say nothing at all of Barnsdale...

Then there be the smaller inconsistencies, which are easily dismissed as being the consequences of Robin Hood's divers imaginers and writers and raconteurs (though this, as we shall see, is done in willful misunderstanding of the nature of legend)—for example, the fact that Robin Hood was originally figured as wearing garb of red, but has come down to us in our day as donning his greencloth. Or confusion about the true King of the day, be he Richard or Edward. Or the absence of the Maid Marian in those early tales, who figures so centrally in the later, and the presence instead of a country lass, or even another maid, let us say even, the prototypical maid, of a name not much diverse from Marian's. And what was the Sheriff—an insatiate masochist bent on riches, a sycophant to the throne and adorer of raw power, or a high-minded lover of the law? And was our Robin a cheerful ne'er-do-well, a jack of the greenwood, as spry as he was lackadaisical? Or was he gloomy and a dreamer, intent on venging his father's wrongful death? Or was he violent and proud and overweened of his superiority, and got he into his outlawship by murder itself?

Ho! A nice and Gordian knot we have tied for ourselves, or been tied in. And it will take some finesse finer than that of an Alexander to cut us loose again. For here is the secret we have reserved 'til now, which makes matters so much richer and more complex and so much the more ticklish that they shall have us sneezing in delight: that all that has been said about Robin Hood with voice clarion, and forthright confidence in right, has been the *very truth itself*...

*That* is a riddle. That is *the* riddle, if you will, of legend. And we are riddle givers, and riddle righters, and writers too of riddles—and lo, dear readers, you must have patience and heed me! For it needs a book now, to speak the truth that has just been uttered.

## IV

ut before we rightly begin, a few necessary words, my dear readers, regarding style and precedent.

Let us state it flat: the dialogues herein will not aim to be anything like must have been heard in *those* days. Apart from the obvious fact that in those days one spoke a language ancestral to our own, which we could not parse nor for the life of us discern the sense of, there are other and more pressing matters at heart here. We have already discussed, have already seen, that as we stab backward through time, we proceed not as some mere floating objective eye born back into the past, but rather as the living torch itself, that does shed the light its own flame produces; that as we gaze upon these events and contemplate them, we ourselves become character to them, even if only in the person of spectator. But when we lay our eye on one thing, we perforce do *not* lay it on another; and already in that selection we prove ourselves the children of humanity, and not mere devices of registry for the Anagrapher and Censusman.

Oh, the past is as fine a Schroedingerian box as ever were fashioned, and the question that we must pose regarding our past is even identical to that posed about the box: does the beast within it live, or has it died after all?—But then these men and these women shall speak, not as they *did* speak, nor as we ourselves *would* speak were we wearing their skins: not the first because we cannot know such things and in the end it is none of our business; nor the second because legend as such demands new use of old materials, and a new spirit of construction upon this rubble of bones and stones that we call our history. The words that we shall put to our characters' mouths—the words, rather, that we shall find ready upon their strangely fluent tongues, and shall but bring to pen, and set in indelible black upon this so versatile candid page—these words shall not be the words as they were spoken, but still less, a thousand times less, the words that we would say, were we they. For if our Robin

Hood must, to become contemporary, speak as Sam the electrician does, or politician Tom, then let it suffice for us to gaze glaze-eyed at our televisions, permitting our imaginations to lay idle or fallow as a winter field. Nay, but we are tasked with aught else, a difficult task indeed, and may the Goddess-Muse aid us! For we are tasked with granting a new tongue to bones that by now have corroded back to dust.

A final doubt needs must be resolved, one as it were extrinsic to the tale, yet for that none the less essential. And it is better if the author of this work, though he be only the humble vessel of the voice of ages, stand forth and deliver, declaring the matter as straight as he can.

The tale of Robin Hood, as all know, is English in its origin, and it is a matter of right that the English before all may have their say on it. Yet the author must claim a different heritage, or a different branch of the same heritage, being, as he is, a New Worldsman. And well it could be asked: does a New Worldsman of the great western Mid- or South-West, really have any right at all to go poking his nose into the affairs of Nottinghamshire? Why does he not stick to the tales of pioneers or cowmen, of Bill and Jenny, which are, in the end, right of his own ancestry, and leave this other legend to those whose ancestry it rightly *is*?

I shall furnish two defenses: one, as it were, "cultural," and the other of wider import. And hope that they shall suffice, for I mean to go ahead here whether the devil should cackle, or strike his tail out to stumble me.

In the first place, the New World without the Old was but a geographical anomaly and a monstrous stain on a map. The New World was born of the Old, as a daughter to her sire; the New World has carried much of the Old to fertile ground, and has been but the more radical development and unfolding of the Old. The New World, then, has the right to the better part of what lies in the Old, and cannot be neatly cut off from it, under pretense that the New World should have her "culture" and the Old its own, and that these two "cultures" should have only remotely to do with each other, even as the material intercourse of the New World and the Old is

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divided by an ocean. And so I say moreover, and do not blush at the claiming of it—we Americans are more spiritual kin to Robin Hood as he has been known, than any other people that has ever been. We are in our way the right heirs of the traditional Robin Hood. And for that, it is ours more than anyone's to speak on him, and to root about the bole of this tree.

It should not be strange to us that elements of this legend, true as they were in history, burst forth from the dark only hundreds of years afterward, as though invented by the mind of this or that individual man who in the end had nothing to do with them; for that is the special nature of legend, that it is a seed bed and forcing bed, and contains in itself many truths that only with the right care from the right hand may come to light. I say, the New World is a wilderness, or was once in some happy day: and this Robin Hood was a man of Sherwood, which was once the wilderness gateway to the untamed North. I say, the New World was the first to do away with "class," and Robin Hood was for all we know of him a yeoman and commoner, who dared yet, and fabulously, "rob from the rich," thus making a kind of equality of classes the foundation of his work. I say, the New World has about it the spirit, that vivacious and mirthful and withal darkling spirit, of youth, and Robin Hood himself was a figure of the spring and the rebirth of the world. Reason there is to call him *our* Patron Saint!

And beyond that, I say—and hear me well the tone upon my tongue—all the world today's America, for better or for worse. Robin Hood comes down to us all, Englishman or Spaniard or Chinaman or Eskimo as we be—and to us all is a kind of heritage. But if it is true that he is as well the forefather of America, then he might have something to remind to his daughter, or to teach her, as the elder alone can teach the very young. And through her, perchance he has something to teach to all the world—

## V



So I shall receive with equanimity all just reproach. As: look! This man writes of Robin Hood, hero of *English* lore, and yet dares spell *honorable* without its most *honorable* “u”! Surely we may call it foul of him? In the face of such reprovery, I shall say, friends—you are a thousand times right, and righter indeed than you can even know. For just as you claim to know your precise lineage better than I, so I know *mine* better than *you*, and can tell you with surety what knowledge you needs must lack: this New World which speaks through me, is a doubtful and equivocal thing, a dubious and troubling and worrisome thing, and brings this author no end of suffering, precisely for the ways in which it *lives* in him. Yet a man may suffer of his heritage, and yet still and for that very reason embrace it. And perchance in the telling of this tale it shall come out, that Robin Hood was precisely *this* sort of man—Hey, now, what is that? This Robin Hood was an equivocator—or what?—

Well it is, friends, that we have before us questions abounding with which to begin, else things should be badly with us, and we lack material sufficient to our task. We have us a Robin Hood, of that there is no doubt: but what sort of man was he, and how christened, and when, and where; and what, in the end, should anyone care? And to enter these questions, another and and precedent doubt must also be addressed: how did he ever come so sure to the public light?

And let that suffice, as surely and abundantly it shall do, to furnish us a start.