

OUTLAW

A novel presenting an alternative view of an English legend

By

Robin Saint

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Published by Selfishgenie Publishing of, Northamptonshire, England.

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Principle Characters

Adam Pargeter	Soldier, Sergeant at arms to the Sheriff of Nottingham.
Alan a Dale	Outlaw
Brother Tuck	Franciscan Friar, Priest and outlaw.
Erlech	Son of a Saxon Freeman, Outlaw.
Francesca	Merchant's daughter, captive of Robin of Sherwood.
Gudrun	A harlot, beloved of John Little.
John Little	Outlaw, right hand man to Robin of Sherwood.
Joseph of York	Jew, Money Lender.
Lord Matthew Guisborne	Baron, Sheriff of Nottingham, guardian to Marion.
Marion Grunwald	Daughter to the Saxon Earl Grunwald.
Much the Miller's son	Outlaw.
Thomas Porter	Outlaw
Nathan	Servant to the Sheriff of Nottingham
Richard I	King of England, known as Lionheart by his admirers.
Robin of Sherwood	Outlaw and leader of outlaws.
Simon Cartwright	Soldier, a member of the Sheriff's guard.
Sir Hugh de Lacy	Knight, Lord of the Manor of Worksop.
Sir John Fitzwarren	Knight, Lord of the Manor of Retford.
Sister Ursula	Nun, companion to Marion Grunwald.
Will Scatlock	Outlaw.

Prelude

It is the year 1194, and the place is the English shire of Nottingham. Richard I is King of England, Duke of Aquitaine and Poitiers. He has been abroad campaigning in the Third Crusade since 1189. While returning to England he was taken prisoner by Emperor Henry VI of Austria, who is demanding a huge ransom for his release. In the meantime England is governed by the King's brother, Prince John, also known as John Lackland, because of his lack of property. Rumour suggests that John conspired in Richard's captivity, and is doing little to raise the ransom money, leaving this to their mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

In the absence of the King the country has become difficult to govern, and the keepers of the King's peace, the Sheriffs of the shires, find their areas of responsibility coming under more frequent and aggressive attack by fugitives from justice, masterless men and those living outside the law. In the Shire of Nottingham the Sheriff, Lord Matthew Guisborne, has one particularly bold and cunning outlaw to deal with. Outlaws, fearing betrayal, normally remain solitary. Robin of Sherwood, however, has gathered a large band of fugitives around him and now controls most of Sherwood Forest. This deep and trackless forest is provider of both food and shelter for the outlaws, and a secure base for their increasingly daring raids on law abiding citizens.

At their most generous, the outlaws demand only a "tax" from travellers to pass through the forest unmolested. This generosity is infrequent and unpredictable, and it is more likely that travellers will be attacked and killed for their possessions. Wealthy merchants can save their lives in exchange for ransom money, but poorer travellers can think themselves fortunate to escape with their lives. Women, rich or poor, young and old are taken as slaves to serve all their captors needs in the forest.

Merchants and traders will often form themselves into caravans, which they then guard with armed men, but this is frowned upon by the Sheriff as an insult to his authority. Bribes are often paid to the outlaws in advance in the hope of protecting the caravans from attack, and sometimes soldiers are bribed to travel with the caravans as part of their routine patrols of the King's highways. Caravans whose passengers include women are more likely to suffer attack, as the outlaws suffer a lack of female companionship, so those caravans are always the most heavily protected. No one travels alone through Sherwood if it can be avoided. Unfortunately the alternative routes add considerable length to a journey, so there are always some people willing to take a chance by crossing the forest, or travelling close to its fringes.

Robin of Sherwood has gained a certain level of protection provided by the law abiding people of the forest, its villages and farms, by being generous with his loot. In exchange for a small amount of money, accompanied by veiled threats of violence, the outlaw band is relatively safe from betrayal by informers.

So travel now to Nottingham, to meet the keeper of the King's peace, the Sheriff of Nottingham, as he struggles to keep order in his large and sprawling domain.

Chapter 1 - A Marriage Arranged

Lord Matthew Guiseborne frowned over the parchments in front of him, mainly petitions from Nottinghamshire's merchants for the better protection of their goods as they passed across his shire. He was allowed only a small percentage of taxes that he collected to maintain a guard force, and regularly dipped into his own purse to hire soldiers from among the Crusaders returning from the Holy Land. These men were battle scarred veterans whose experience of warfare against the Saracens made them feared opponents, especially for the un-soldierly outlaws of Sherwood. But such men were expensive, and their arrogance often made them a liability as much as an asset.

A servant entered the dimly lit room. "A messenger, My Lord, from Sir Hugh de Lacey."

"Send him in, then." He sighed and stretched, his old bones still feeling the cold of the fading Winter. A message from Sir Hugh could not be good news. Sir Hugh was Lord of the manor of Worksop, an area of the shire made up mainly of the vast forest of Sherwood. News from the forest usually meant fresh atrocities committed by the outlaws who called it their home.

The door opened again and the servant ushered in a travel stained soldier. He bobbed his head in front of the Sheriff, unsure of himself in such an exalted presence.

"Spit it out man" snapped the Sheriff. "I haven't got all day." The Sheriff immediately regretted his short tempered outburst. The aching in his bones and the rampaging outlaws were not the fault of the soldier. He resolved to make it up to the man in some way.

"My Lord, sorry My Lord" stammered the soldier. "Sir Hugh sent me, Sire, we came upon a massacre Sire, worst I've ever seen it was."

"Where?" The Sheriff asked wearily.

"On the Mansfield Road, Sire, South of Worksop, near the manor of Holbeck. We was patrolling the main highway when we came across it Sire. Twelve dead, two of them women Sire. They'd been sore abused, too Sire. Anyway, we reported to Sir Hugh, and he sent me with this message" The soldier extracted a small scroll from beneath his surcoat.

The Sheriff checked the identity proclaimed by the wax seal, then broke it with his thumbnail, unrolled the small sheet of parchment and read the brief report. It added little to what the soldier had already told him, except that Sir Hugh himself was leading a force of men at arms into the forest to search for the perpetrators. It would serve little purpose, the Sheriff knew, and so undoubtedly did Sir Hugh. They could pass within feet of the outlaws and not know they were there, so good was the outlaw's field craft. But the law had to be seen to be doing something, so Sir Hugh would go through the motions.

Such a massacre, while bad, was not unusual in Sherwood. What worried him most was how the outlaws always knew when a caravan was passing through. He had received word only yesterday that an attack had been made on a small party of travellers near Newark. Now Worksop at the other end of the Shire. The outlaws would not have travelled such a distance in such a short space of time without having a pressing reason, which means they must have known the caravan was travelling through the area.

Killing the women was also unusual. The outlaws valued women above gold. Women did not survive long in the outlaw's camp, dying of disease, in childbirth, or of despair. For them

to have been raped was not a surprise, the women who had on occasion escaped the outlaws told tales of horrific treatment at their hands, but it was strange that they had then been killed rather than taken into slavery.

It was possible that the outlaws had split their force, and that the northern band was not under such disciplined command. That would make sense. He doubted a troop of horsemen could traverse the thickly wooded forest in a day, and so outlaws on foot would find it even harder. If his theory was correct then it made the outlaws even less predictable, and much more difficult to capture. It would mean he would have to spread his own forces more thinly, to counter these new tactics.

Sir Mathew instructed his servant to make sure that the soldier was given a good meal and a bed for the night, in a proper room, not the communal barracks of the castle guard. Quickly he penned a reply to Sir Hugh, asking for more information. He instructed that the people in the Holbeck area be questioned about anything they had seen. He then penned a similar message to his Castellan at Newark. If the outlaws had changed tactics it was important to find out quickly. He had little hope of gaining much news, the people of Sherwood lived in greater fear of the outlaws even than the travellers, but it was possible that the spreading of a little silver might loosen some tongues. Loyalty was an expensive luxury for the villeins of the shire, and as such was on sale to the highest bidder.

* * *

Robin sat on the stump of an oak tree while he exchanged news with John Little. John had returned from Newark with a small bag of silver, some cheap jewellery and a young female child. She would serve the outlaws their meals until she became old enough to serve them in other ways. The child sat a few feet away, snivelling in terror at what she had seen done to her parents by these fierce men, who treated her worse than her father had treated his pigs.

Robin himself had fared better on the Mansfield Road. Several cart loads of goods, including some much needed wine. Not much gold but plenty of silver and some fine jewellery. They had also managed to keep one female alive, a fine young woman of sixteen or seventeen years. He regretted the deaths of the other two. They had resisted their captors, one biting Thomas Porter quite severely. In his anger he had slit her throat in retaliation, and had done the same to a second before Robin himself had stepped in to stop him killing the third. It had taken a bone jarring blow to the head to subdue him, but it was too late to save the second woman, the older one, who was probably the mother of the two younger ones.

The death of the women did not bother him in itself, it was their loss to the band that would cause problems. No doubt the presence of the survivor would cause fights over her possession. The fewer the women the more the fighting. He would exert his own rights of course, as leader. The third woman had not been raped, her mother having acted as a shield for her, and as such might still be a virgin; a considerable prize. But once he had tired of her the others would all want her for themselves. The woman, Francesca, now sat a prisoner in the small cave Robin reserved for himself, guarded by Alan a Dale and Will Scatlock, two men who owed their allegiance to Robin of Sherwood and to no other.

Robin had lived in the forest some four years now, and the outdoor life had served him well. The skin on his face was tanned to the colour of leather, from which a pair of clear blue eyes sparkled at the world. He wasn't a tall man, barely more than five feet in height, and he

was thin. However, the thinness of his build hid a wirey strength that had caught many an opponent off guard. His hair was a flaming red colour; had it not been so filthy it might have been reminiscent of an autumn sunset.

Robin knew all his men, their histories, their strengths and their weaknesses. Take John Little, or Little John as he was known. He was Little John because of his lack of height, but not a lack of strength, only reaching 4 feet and 6 inches but as stocky and powerful as a bull mastiff. He had been an acrobat with a travelling show, and because of his muscular stature and pleasant looks had been a darling of the matrons of the towns he visited. With these ladies he supplemented his income by performing more personal tricks in the lady's bed chambers. It had been after such a performance with a widow in Derby that he had encountered her daughter while leaving the house. The daughter had tempted him into a private room where he had once again performed, only to be disturbed by the unexpected return of the woman's husband. The daughter cried rape, her mother echoed the cry, and the husband fled the house shouting for the guards to be summoned. John had run after him and silenced his shouting by killing him with his bare hands. But the uproar had brought out witnesses, and so John had been forced to flee to Sherwood, where news was emerging of an outlaw who welcomed all comers, no questions asked. It had not taken long for John's skills and strength to earn him a special place at Robin of Sherwood's side.

It was Little John who had come up with the idea of operating on several fronts at one time. The band was now large enough to allow several groups of twenty or twenty five to roam the woods, each with its own allotted sector. The information that they bought from spies, beggars, servants and people with grudges, told them where they should be and when. The rest was a matter of surprise and their reputation for ferocious behaviour.

"Thomas Porter will be back soon." Observed Robin. "We got a good tip about a rich Jew travelling alone to Doncaster from York, so I sent Tom and a few others to try and track him down. Its outside the forest, but should be safe enough."

"Jews are always good for ransom." Acknowledged John. "and the Sheriff doesn't worry too much if one or two go astray. Half the country owes money to the Jews, and would like an excuse not to repay the debt." He paused, and spat out a chunk of the hazel nut shell he had been trying to crack with his teeth. "You know," he continued, "We're so rich now we could buy ourselves a shire to live in."

"True, but would we ever be given the peace to live there?" He smiled quietly to himself, enjoying the vision of himself as landlord of all he surveyed, "The Sheriff has increased the reward on me to 30 silver pieces, the same amount Judas was given. On any one of the rest of you the reward is now 10 pieces each. That's a lot of money for a poor serf, or even a freeman, and one day someone will be tempted to claim the money."

"We could live abroad, France, say, or Flanders. All they're interested in over there is our money, and if that runs out we could set ourselves up afresh. Their merchants are as fat and wealthy as ours are. More so even."

"One day, maybe soon." Robin thought for a few moments, then made a decision. "It's not just the money that's important to me. Oh, I want the money right enough, but there's more to it."

“The lads spread rumours. Some said you had a woman stolen by the Sheriff and now you want revenge. Others say that you had your land stolen when you were in Holy Land with the King.” He waited, seeing what response this would bring from Robin.

“The lads are right on one count. It is revenge I’m after, but not for a woman, or for land. The only women I ever had were the type who charge for their services, and the only land I ever knew always belonged to someone high born.” He paused again, unsure how much to say, but decided he had already said too much to stop. “I may as well put an end to the rumours, they serve no purpose except to keep idle mouths flapping.” He paused again, weighing up his decision, but realised he had already committed himself.

“I was a soldier, and a good one. So good that my commanding officer, Earl Grunwald, arranged for me to be promoted and made part of the King’s Bodyguard. The King’s bodyguard were always in the thick of it and the King’s enemies were always making space for new men like me. If I hadn’t done what I did no doubt I would have been knighted in due course, as befits a member of the King’s household.

After we had captured Cyprus we had to wait for the weather to improve before we could sail on to Palestine. The King had us practising our battle skills, but of course you can’t do that all the time, so I went to find myself a little bit of diversion.” He winked knowingly and John grinned back to show he understood. “Anyway, I ran into this little beauty of a Cypriot woman, dark eyed and saucy as a Goose Fare harlot. Well, we no sooner met than we were stark naked and I was at it like a stag with a yearling doe. I thought nothing of what she was doing in the camp, and with access to a well appointed pavilion to boot. Anyway, turns out she was a favourite of My Lord the Earl of Westmoreland, no less, and he had no intention of sharing her with a common soldier like me. He complained to the King, and I was dismissed from the Bodyguard and sent off to serve under some little prick of a Knight, newly dubbed and as green as a sapling. He and I didn’t get on too well, and he had me flogged twice. So, one dark night, when he had slighted me once too often, I slid my dagger between his ribs, packed my sword and some food, and bribed a fisherman to sail me to Greece. I bought a place on a trading boat to France, then home to England. That was when I found out that my departure had been noted and that the King himself had declared me outlawed and put a price on my head.”

“Well, you can’t go around killing knights, however much they may upset you. But it still doesn’t explain how you want revenge on the King” John had a question in his voice, seeking more.

“Ah, well, I wasn’t outlawed just for slicing that pretty boy knight. The knight didn’t even die from the wound. The King was undoubtedly angry about that crime, but not enough to have me pursued all the way back to England. He knew the law would catch up with me eventually. No, to pay the fisherman, and to fund the rest of my journey back to England, I dipped my hand into some of the King’s personal loot. It wasn’t too difficult. All the Bodyguard took turns to guard the treasury so I only had to wait until one of my old pals could be persuaded, at a price, to turn his back for a few minutes. Took myself a nice handful of Cypriot jewellery and some gold. Seems the Lionheart didn’t like sharing his loot any more than Westmorland liked sharing his woman. He was certainly more angry about that than he was about me cutting one of his knights.”

“So, its Westmoreland you want revenge on, is it? Seems a strange way to go about it, robbing people in Sherwood Forest.”

Robin spat in derision. “Westmoreland is a shit, but I wouldn’t waste my piss on him. Sherwood is a Royal forest, and anyone passing through it is entitled to the King’s personal protection. The King, however, isn’t here to give it, and that dolt of a Sheriff can’t give it on his behalf. So I get my revenge on the King for declaring me an outlaw by robbing his subjects, and letting them know that the King can’t protect them. And what’s more I’ll keep doing it until I’m either dead, or the King himself asks me to stop.”

The blare of a hunting horn interrupted them and made them both look towards the East. Someone was approaching the camp, and the single blast of the horn told them it was a friend.

“Thomas Porter, if I’m not mistaken.” Observed Robin. “Let’s go and greet him, and see the size of the prize he has brought us.”

* * *

“You sent for me, My Lord”. The young girl cast a slender shadow across the stone flags of the Sheriff’s personal chamber.

“Ah, Marion my dear,” responded the Sheriff. “There is someone I would have you meet.” He indicated a figure, half hidden by shadows. A figure in a nun’s habit rose from a chair and stepped forward into the candle light.

The nun appraised the young woman before her. No more than sixteen, she guessed, blond haired and blue eyed, like so many of the Saxons. Her face radiated beauty, unmarked by the pox that disfigured so many young people. She was slim, the nun guessed that a man could span her waste with his hands if he chose to. No doubt many would choose to, but would never have the opportunity. Her bearing spoke for her noble birth, her head held high and her nose tilted to give a look of disdain to all those she considered to be beneath her. Sister Ursula felt she had been placed in that category. No matter, humility was the duty of a bride of Christ, and she would pray for the Lady Marion to learn similar humility.

“My Lady Marion, let me introduce you to Sister Ursula, of the order of St Augustine.” The nun bowed her head but did not extend her hand in friendship. The Sheriff hurried on to cover the embarrassment. “His Grace the Bishop of Lincoln has granted the Sisters permission to found a convent at Maltby, and Sr Ursula’s Mother Superior has dispatched her and four others to start the work of establishing the house.”

The Sheriff indicated to the nun that she could return to her seat, and escorted the Lady Marion to a bench in the window niche, where some daylight still filtered in.

“Sr Ursula is to be your companion on your journey to Retford to join your espoused, Sir John Fitzwarren, and will stay with you until after your wedding.” He did not use the word chaperone, but Marion knew that was the nun’s real duty. “Do you look forward to your wedding, my child?”

“Lord Matthew, I have met Sir John only once, but he seems to be a nice man, a good man. If my father were still alive I’m sure he would approve of your choice for me.”

“I’m sure he would as well. When your father departed for Palestine and left you in my care he did me an honour beyond measure. To have to find you a suitable husband is a task for which I am not worthy, but out of love for an old friend I am bound by my honour to fulfil

it.” He paused as old memories flooded back to haunt him. Such close friendships between Saxon and Norman were a rarity, even so long after the Conqueror’s death. That friendship had been born and grown on the battlefields of France, in the service of Richard’s father, the second King Henry.

“Sir John enjoyed the pleasure of the King in return for his services in the Holy Land. The King will, I am sure, bestow further favours on him when he returns. You will be the wife of a man who will be very important, one day.”

“If the King returns, My Lord.” Marion corrected him gently.

“Oh the King will return. Prince John will find the ransom. After all, I guard the taxes that the Shire’s collectors bring in, and I know that he will soon have enough. But let us talk of other things. You will depart soon. Next week perhaps.”

“My lord, this worries me more than my marriage. Retford lies on the other side of Sherwood Forest, how am I to make the journey in safety?”

“I have given the matter much thought. Firstly, I will provide an escort under the command of my own Sergeant at Arms, at least twenty men. They should make sure you travel unmolested. Secondly, you will take a circuitous route, from Nottingham to Matlock, and then to Chesterfield, before turning East to Worksop and Retford. It will take several days, but you will be safe, avoiding most of Sherwood.” Guiseborne prayed silently that he was right in this assumption. “Finally, you will travel with merchants. Casual observers will assume that the soldiers have been bribed to travel with the caravan, and you will attract less attention.”

“I will still be fearful, My Lord.”

“You will have nothing to fear. I have arranged with Sir John and Sir Hugh de Lacy to mount a raid on the forest at the same time. The outlaws will be so busy running from their soldiers and huntsmen that they will have no time to attend to you.” He stood up, indicating that he had said his final word on the subject.

“Now, go and find rooms for Sr Ursula and her sisters, and discuss with her which day you will leave. I suggest Sunday, after morning Mass. That will give you a day to circle the nearest part of the forest while the outlaws take their day of rest. There are few travellers on a Sunday, and therefore poor pickings for the vermin.” Sr Ursula took her cue and came to stand beside Marion.

“Have no fear, child.” she said, “The angels will travel with us to protect us all.”

Marion preferred to put her faith in chain mail, crossbows and swords, but said nothing. She turned to look into the unsmiling eyes of the nun, and knew her companion would not be very entertaining. However, her honour had to be protected on the journey, and who better to protect her than a nun whose habitual expression would sour milk.

Marion would be sorry to leave the castle that had been home to her since her father had left to accompany the King on the crusades. The Sheriff was a kindly man who indulged her small fancies like a doting father. She was secretly pleased with his choice of man to become her husband. Sir John Fitzwarren was a handsome and well built man, whose good looks were given a roguish air by the small scar that a Saracen arrow had left on his cheek. His manors, at Retford and further afield in Lincolnshire, were prosperous ones, and it was expected that his honours would soon swell as the lords of neighbouring manors laid down

their lives in the King's service. Someone had to manage the land and make sure it made its contribution to the King's purse, and who better than Sir John to undertake the task?

Sr Ursula followed behind Marion, muttering prayers to herself. Marion decided to lodge her guests as far from her own quarters as it was possible, without insulting them by placing them below the soldier's barracks. There was a suite of small rooms, not unlike priests' cells, in the North tower of the castle. They would fit the purpose. That would leave Marion to enjoy the company and ribald teasing of her maids without having to bear the disapproval of the nun's stares.

Back in the Sherriff's solar Lord Matthew Guiseborne's mind returned yet again to puzzle over what he might do about the outlaws that plagued his life. The bill for the wages of the soldiers he hired was crippling him, and he could expect no repayment from Prince John. Although he had voiced his loyal support for the Regent to Marion, he had no doubt that Prince John's first loyalty was to Prince John. The lords of the manors within the shire did their best, but they only kept small numbers of men under arms. The cream of the soldiery was in far off Palestine, and the keepers of the King's Peace in England had to make do with the cripples, youths and old men that were left behind. Lord Matthew thanked God every morning that the Welsh and the Scots were not in the mood to take advantage of the King's absence. If he had to send soldiers northwards he might as well throw open the gates of Nottingham Castle and invite the outlaws to walk in and help themselves to whatever they wanted.

Guisborne called for candles to be brought, so that he could continue to work into the gathering evening.

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