

The Ghost of Sherwood
By Wilson Harp

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*For my brother, thank you for everything.
Without your support, this book would not have been
written.*

Martinmas – The Feast of Saint Martin of Tours is November 11th. It is the traditional day of the celebration of the harvest, of slaughtering animals to cure their meat for the winter, and of renewing contracts.

August of 1199

John Plantagenet had a tenuous hold on the crown of England. Richard the Lionhearted was well-loved as King and Lord of his people, and his death in April still darkened the mood of many Britons as his ill-respected youngest brother took his place.

John faced challenges to his claim of the throne, most prominently from his nephew Arthur of Brittany, who led forces against the King. John was desperate to hold not only the throne, but also the lands of Brittany and Aquitaine in France.

The long years of the third crusade saw heavy taxes and levies applied to commoner and noble alike. It was hoped as Richard made his way home the need for the additional revenue would fade. When Richard died, though, the taxes increased under John. The new king had to defend his throne and required the use of mercenary armies and support from French nobles.

But most Englishmen did not feel inclined to give the untrusted John more money than even his beloved brother required...

Chapter 1

The soldiers marched at a good pace down the road. They were already three miles south of Nottingham on a six days march to London. The morning dew was still heavy on the ground, though the August sun would soon clear the trees of the Sherwood and dry the day. The commander of the small unit turned in his saddle and looked back at the cart. It was being pulled by a single horse led by one of his men. The cart held their provisions, tents, and other supplies along with a heavy wooden box that had a stout iron lock. Three men walked on both sides of the cart and one man walked behind. The soldiers wore red tabards, which marked them as the king's men, and bright steel helmets that were polished to a shine. They each carried a spear in their hand and had a short blade at their belt. The commander looked back to the road and scanned the woods on each side.

In May, the royal taxes from Nottingham never made it to London. The sheriff had reported that bandits from the Sherwood had attacked and killed the king's men and stolen the money. Bandits were always a danger to normal travelers, but it was rare that many would take on armed and armored men. Particularly those who wore the king's colors.

An owl hooted from the trees to the left of the road.

As the commander turned to the sound, the sharp twang of bowstrings broke the early morning silence. The commander hit the ground with enough force to knock the air from his lungs. He tried to stand, but the pain was too great. He saw the long arrow protrude from his chest and saw the blood pool around him. He saw a hooded figure step out of the woods and raise his bow, an arrow nocked.

Twice more the sound of bowstrings reverberated in the morning air and then all was still. A hooded man raised his hand and eight more men, hooded in the same fashion, moved towards the cart and the nervous horses. They slung their bows over their backs and approached the cart, now surrounded by dead men. Their movements were efficient, as was their work with their bows. Nine men total lay dead on the road. A total of twelve arrows fired. Each of the hooded men worked in silence. Two men picked up fallen spears and stabbed each of the guards in the chest; none would survive this ambush. Another looked through the saddlebags of the commander's horse. He littered the contents on the ground. The other five men pulled the heavy wooden box off the back of the cart and dropped it with a thud. One man dragged it into the woods as the rest kept watch along the road in both directions. The heavy box made furrows in the soft ground as he struggled to drag it. When he was inside the tree line, two other men helped him carry it about thirty feet into the forest.

One of the men pulled a hatchet from his belt and chopped the wood around the lock until the box opened. Inside were bags of coins, taxes that the people of Nottingham, and the surrounding farms and hamlets, paid to the crown. The rest of the men joined them and each took a bag or two from the box. They made a quick check of the ground and disappeared into the woods, headed west to Nottingham.

The trees thinned as they approached the town, and the men all handed their hoods to one of their number. He placed the hoods into a large sack and gave his bag of coins to a tall, lean man. The man with the sack of hoods headed off into the town through the south gate. After he had passed through the gate, three more of the

men handed their bags of coins to the others and headed across the main road going into Nottingham and into the woods on the other side. The final five men waited until their companions had disappeared into the heavy trees, and then walked into the town. They nodded to the guards at the gate and continued a short distance down the main street of the town until they reached a squat, stone building on their left. They went into the door and shut it firmly.

“Everything go as planned, Jack?” asked the man sitting at a desk. He did not look up from the ledgers he worked on.

“No problems,” said the one called Jack. He pulled three bags of coins from his satchel and laid them on a side table. The other men placed their bags onto the table as well and left after a nod from Jack.

“I’m sure no one saw us. I don’t like risking a stretched neck, Sheriff.”

The man at the desk looked up at his deputy. “I like it less than you. My neck would be stretched as tightly as anyone’s. And that is after my brother spent a few weeks making me suffer.”

Robert Brewer, the Sheriff of Nottingham, stood from his desk and went over to a box up on a shelf behind him. He fished a key out of a pouch that hung on his belt and opened the heavy lock.

“We only need to risk it one more time, Jack. Just one more. The harvest tax will be the biggest and it will be right before Martinmas. When that day comes, I will be out of my position, and if I can manage it, out of the hands of any who wish to do me harm.”

“Do you really believe that your brother will be replaced?”

“He believes it. He was a favorite of Richard, not John. Now that Richard is dead, the voice of William Brewer no longer has the influence it did under good King Richard.”

Robert started taking the bags of coins and putting them into his box. "My brother isn't the most loved man. He has made his enemies and has turned some against himself. He is hopeful he will retain his place as exchequer, but he believes that John will reward Hugh Bardulf with this position. Bardulf sided with John in the rebellion, and even a sniveling toad like our good King John Lackland rewards loyal dogs."

"Your brother would not find another location for you?" asked Jack as he watched the sheriff move the tax money into the safety of his strong box.

"No, I'm afraid not. My brother and I don't get along in the best of times. If he were to lose his title and position of High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and the Royal Forests, you can be assured that he will find fault with any of the three men he placed to run the offices in his stead. He will probably find fault with all three of us. If I want to have a life of ease, I have to take my own initiative. Take after my brother as it were. He may hold the title of High Sheriff, but I am the sheriff in deed if not in title. And with that fact comes the realization that I need to make the most of the position while I can."

Jack moved to look out the window as the sound of horses in front of the small building broke the quiet of the street outside.

"David's here. Looks like he has some news."

The sheriff smirked at Jack's dry wit as he shut the lock on the box with a loud click. "Go see what he wants."

Jack opened the door to let his fellow deputy into the sheriff's office. "News from your patrol this morning?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," said David as he walked through the door. "It is my sad duty to report that king's men were killed about three miles south of town this morning, Sheriff."

"King's men you say? I don't believe we have had any king's men here in the area for weeks. Unless you

mean the men who gathered the king's taxes yesterday," said Robert as he sat in his seat.

"The very same. The group was set upon by brigands, most likely. The men were ambushed and killed and the strongbox taken from the cart. We searched the area and saw where the bandits had dragged the box into the forest. It was smashed open and the contents gone."

Robert shook his head. "This will never do, Deputy Turner. Send some men into the Sherwood at once to search for these villains. Take a detachment of guards from the town and three wagons to return the bodies of the king's men plus any of their personal effects." Robert lifted a sealed letter from his desk. "Have this taken to my brother in the exchequer. It contains your report of what happened and my surety that this will never happen again. If he presses, tell him that the bandits in the Sherwood will face the gallows when they are caught and the king's taxes reclaimed."

David Turner took the letter and left without another word. Robert knew that he could trust David with the most careful message, just as he could trust Jack to handle the most distasteful task.

When David and his men had ridden out of sight, Robert pulled out two ledgers and motioned for Jack to take a seat.

"Now we determine who has their taxes returned and how much," Robert began. "The miller and the blacksmiths will receive all of their monies back. They are too important to let them suffer under these taxes. Craftsmen in general will get back three pence on every five they paid. Farmers will get back one in five and an extra penny per five if they have fruit or nut trees."

Jack nodded as he memorized what Robert was saying. He could not read or write, but his memory was splendid and he could do rather impressive mathematics in his mind.

“The rest will be split up the way we agreed. You and David should be able to live quite comfortably on what will find its way into your purse.”

Jack had already determined what his share of the box was worth, Robert was sure of that.

“I’ll go tell my men to expect a bonus in their pay this month,” Jack said as he stood to leave the sheriff’s office. “If you will excuse me, Sheriff, there was some bloody business this morning. I need to go see Brother Tuck and seek absolution.”

“Of course, Jack,” said Robert as he turned back to his ledgers.

The morning’s events were all but gone from his mind when the door to his office opened late in the afternoon.

“Sheriff Brewer,” the young man said. “My name is Brother Edwin. Abbott Hubert would like to know if you have a few minutes to hear a concern of his.”

“Of course. Is the good abbot here? Bring him in, I have time for him.”

Robert closed his ledgers and straightened the books. He had nothing out that would be a problem for the abbot to see, but there was no sense in becoming lax with his paperwork.

The abbot entered the office and Robert pulled a chair out for the head of the local abbey.

“I didn’t realize you were in Nottingham, Abbot Hubert. Is there a problem with the abbey?”

“No, Sheriff, no problem at the abbey. The problem is that I heard rumors that the taxes being sent to London were stolen by bandits and the king’s men were killed. Is that true?”

“Yes, Abbot Hubert, I’m afraid it is true. It happened on the south road to London though, so I wouldn’t fear that the bandits will cause problems at the abbey.”

“I am comforted to hear you say that, Sheriff. But the primary concern of mine is that the abbey sent its ecclesiastical tax with the taxes from the town. The

bishop had asked that we send our tax to London as he would be there for business. When I heard that the king's men were coming to Nottingham, I came to see if they would take the bag with them and deliver it to the bishop. Their commander was kind enough to agree and I gave the taxes to him last night. I don't know that we can come up with enough money to pay the bishop before he returns from London after the new year."

"That is horrible news, Abbot Hubert. I will of course put my men to the task of finding your missing tax money as well as finding the miscreants who committed this horrible crime. I am sure that the good Lord will help us in our task, as long as we have the prayers of you and your monks at the abbey."

"You have my prayers every day, Sheriff Brewer. If you will excuse me, I have need to sit and rest a while at the inn. I had to take the wagon into town as I am not as good in the saddle as I once was. Even so, the wagon does tend to toss me about, so I will need to rest some. With bandits in the area, I will want to be safely inside the abbey before nightfall. So if you will excuse me, I must leave."

Robert stood and went to the door. "Blessing upon you, dear abbot," said the sheriff as he opened the door for the elderly holy man.

"The peace of God be upon you, Sheriff," said Abbot Hubert as he rose from the chair and left the office.

Robert muttered curses under his breath as the abbot and his attendant started down the street. He locked the front door and went to the strong box that held the tax money. When he opened it, he found a bag tied with a leather thong rather than the twine that he used to secure the taxes from the town. He had sent eleven bags of coins with the king's men and the bag tied shut with leather was the twelfth in his box.

He placed all of the bags back into the box and relocked it. Robert placed his hat on his head as he left

his office. He made sure that the door was locked and secured before he headed down the street to find Jack.

“Good afternoon, Sheriff. Bad news with the king’s men, eh?” said a scrawny fellow as he approached Robert.

“That it is, Clive. That it is.”

“Maybe the woods around here ain’t as safe as everyone has been led to believe. Murderous bandits killing armed men. Makes me shake to think about it.”

“I’m sure it does, Clive. Maybe you should not make as many trips into the woods as you do.”

“I have business around, Sheriff. Business. And what’s more, I have the right to travel. As long as I ain’t poaching, I can travel the king’s forest.”

Robert kept walking at a brisk gait, forcing Clive Armstrong to keep pace.

“I don’t think it’s right, Sheriff, having murderous folk in the woods.”

Robert stopped and turned to look at Clive. “Do you and William have any goats out near your place? Does Anne have any chickens? Last time I was out that way you told me you didn’t have any livestock, but Earl Locksley said he lost three goats and about five or six chickens a couple of weeks ago. He said a girl that looked like your Anne was around where they went missing. If I go out to your shack in the woods, I won’t see goats and chickens, will I?”

Clive swallowed hard as he listened to the sheriff. “No, I don’t reckon you will. Maybe I should just go back to my place and keep an eye on things. If I see anyone who might be up to trouble, I’ll let you know.”

“You do that, Clive. The last time I rode by your place, I had the feeling that your shack was actually inside the border markings of the king’s lands. If I feel the need, I could take a closer look. I don’t want to have to tear down your shack and throw you, William, and Anne out of the king’s forest. I would hate to do that. The

Sherwood is an inhospitable place without some kind of shelter.”

Clive went pale as Robert spoke. He quickly bowed and ran off down the street when it was clear that the sheriff was done speaking. Robert stared at the petty criminal as he ducked down a side street and ran out of view. He was in no mood for Clive Armstrong today.

The small house that Brother Tuck lived in was just off the market square. Jack said he was going to confess to Tuck, but that was this morning. Robert wasn't sure if Jack had been there yet and if he had, whether he had left. When he arrived at the square, he looked around at the sparse crowds at the vendors; a few goodwives were bargaining for cloth and needles, some men were inspecting the construction of barrels, and one or two people were just walking by ignoring the merchants' calls to see what they had. Robert saw one of the town guards, leaning against a building in the shade.

“Samuel,” called Robert as he approached.

“Good day, Sheriff. Anything the guard can help you with?” replied the guardsman without bothering to straighten up.

“No, just looking for Jack. Have you seen him?”

“Yeah, a little bit ago. He left Tuck's place and headed toward the north gate.”

“Thanks, Samuel,” Robert said as he headed through the square and up to the north gate.

“Sheriff, come look at this.”

Robert smiled in spite of himself. The beautiful voice belonged to the more beautiful Lady Marian. Robert turned to see her and her maid near the cloth vendor's cart.

“What is it, my lady? See something that caught your eye?” he asked as he walked over to where she stood.

“This blue fabric, it's perfect for a dress I want to make, but look at the price.”

The cloth vendor was busy ignoring her. He didn't need this sale today and Marian had already decided that she would rather complain about the price than try to find a fair deal.

"It's outrageous. I won't pay this much no matter where it's from."

"Where is it from?"

The merchant spoke up to defend his wares. "It's from Barcelona. This particular color of blue can be found from nowhere else."

"It's from Lancaster," Marian told Robert. "When I visited my sister last year, she had curtains this exact shade. She told me the fabric was made in the city."

"Lady Marian, I am sure you will be able to come to some solution, I have much faith in your temerity. I have some urgent business, unfortunately, or I would stay and watch you dismember of this fine, honest merchant."

"So be it, Sheriff. Leave a woman in distress. I may be so overwrought that I will not dine with you tomorrow night."

Robert laughed. "Threats to stay away from my table when you know that Earl Locksley will be there? I think not. I will see you tomorrow evening."

Robert bowed deeply to Marian and continued on through the square to the north gate.

When he arrived, Jack was speaking with the two guardsmen on duty.

"Jack, I have some urgent information for you, will you excuse us?" Robert said as he took his deputy by the arm.

"Sheriff, you seem upset. Has something happened?" asked Jack when they were several steps away.

"Act like I am berating you for something, that way your friends won't get the idea that we are speaking of secrets. They will think I am upset at something you did."

"Of course," said Jack as he dropped his head and avoided looking at the sheriff.

“Abbot Hubert had his tax monies going to the bishop in the same box as the king’s taxes.”

Jack kept looking at the ground. “What will we do?”

“Return it to the abbey. I don’t mind taking from the crown, but I won’t steal from God. The problem is how do we return it without pulling suspicion onto us?”

“I have a new man named Donald, he is young and his family is from Leeds. I trust him enough to recommend him. No one at the abbey will know him. I’ll have him dress roughly, like one of the men who live on the edge of the forest, and he can take the bag back to the abbey.”

“Yes, that would work. He can say that the leader of the bandits had a dream that the sack tied with the leather cord was to be taken to the abbey.”

“I’ll take him the bag this evening and he can return it tomorrow morning,” said Jack.

“Excellent. That will work. The abbot will have his money back and the shadow of accusation will not fall on us.”

Chapter 2

The sun was barely up when there was a knock at the gate. Brother Edwin had just returned from Lauds and was surprised to hear someone at the outer gate of the abbey at that hour. He unlatched the small window in the gate door and peered out. There, shrouded in the early morning mists, was a man of slight build, but tall. He wore a dirty red tunic and had a brown hood pulled low over his face. A brown cloak draped over his shoulders and tight leather leggings declared him a man of the wilderness. He held a bag in his hand which he set on the ground when he saw the monk look out.

“My master returns that which should not have been taken. He was told in a dream to take the bag tied with a leather cord to the abbey because it was the Lord’s. It was not our intent to steal from the Lord.”

After he said this, the man turned and ran toward the line of trees in the distance. Brother Edwin blinked his eyes at the strange event. He carefully opened the gate and slipped out to pick up the bag. It was heavier than he suspected and it sounded like coins. He tucked it into his belt before he shut and locked the gate. Abbot Hubert was taking his breakfast when Brother Edwin entered his apartment.

“Abbot Hubert, there was a strange occurrence at the gate.”

“Come in Brother Edwin, have a seat. You seem concerned about this event, tell me about it.”

“I heard a knock at the gate when I was returning to my quarters. When I looked out, there was a woodsman holding a bag. When he saw that I looked out, he set it on the ground and said his master had a dream that he was to bring it to the abbey. He said that they did not

intend to steal from the Lord. Do you know what he could have meant by this?"

The abbot set his knife down and finished chewing the bite he had taken. "Bring me the bag, brother. Let us examine it closely."

Brother Edwin pulled the bag from his belt and took it over to the abbot. When the abbot took it, he gasped and set it on the table. He quickly untied the leather cord that held the bag shut and looked inside.

"Praise be to God," he whispered as he poured the coins out on the table.

Brother Edwin's eyes widened at the number of silver coins that were revealed. He sat in silence as the abbot counted them out.

"It's all here, brother. All of it. The taxes for the bishop that were stolen, they have been returned by the murderers and thieves."

"That is a blessing, Abbot Hubert, the Lord must have visited them in their dreams to make them return the bag undisturbed. Men like that aren't normally devout when it comes to money."

"Maybe brother, but they may have a personal grudge against the king that they don't hold against our Lord. This might be a piece of information the sheriff can use in determining who leads this band of criminals. In fact, with a purse this heavy with coin, I bet it was the master of these criminals himself who brought it back. He would not trust another of his thieves. Tell me, brother, what did this man look like?"

"His face was hidden by a hood pulled low, but he moved as a young man. He was tall and strong and wore clothing suitable for the woods. He wore a red tunic and a dark brown cloak that flapped behind him like a bird's wings when he ran from the abbey."

"A red-breasted bird that flew away, an interesting description," laughed the abbot. "We must tell the sheriff

of this hooded robin who stole and then returned a bag of silver.”

“Do you want me to send a message to Nottingham?”

The abbot placed the coins back into the bag and tied it shut again. He sat back down and resumed eating his breakfast. “Yes, send one of the initiates with the message and then prepare a horse and some traveling provisions. I don’t want to risk this money again. You will leave this afternoon and travel to London. I want this bag placed into the hand of the bishop by you, Brother Edwin.”

“Thank you Abbot Hubert. Could I ask for a day to see my parents while I am in the city.”

“I’m so happy, Brother Edwin, that I will give you three days to see your parents. Yes, yes, have the messenger bring me a pen and paper. I will write the sheriff a description of your robin with a hood and tell him that he is looking for a young, tall, strong man who lives in the woods. Maybe he or one of his woodsmen will know who he is.”

“Thank you for the days, abbot, my parents will be delighted.”

The abbot went back to his breakfast with a laugh as his young assistant left.

“Thank you, brother,” said Robert as he took the message from the young monk. The sheriff and his deputy Jack stood in the yard in front of the sheriff’s office.

The young man bowed and turned his horse back towards the north along the main road. Robert and Jack watched as he rode away before they turned and went into the sheriff’s office.

“Let’s see what the good news from the abbot is.” Robert opened the message and looked at it.

“Is that a falcon?” asked Jack looking at a drawing of a hooded bird at the bottom of the parchment.

“Maybe, let me see what the letter says. The money was returned. He thinks it was the leader of the bandits that brought it. He describes him... He describes him as a robin with a hood. He drew a robin with a hood at the bottom of the page. That man has the oddest sense of humor.”

“Robin Hood. Not a bad name for a villain if you had to have one,” said Jack.

“It does have all of the elements for a good bandit name,” Robert said absently as he re-read the letter. “It looks like your man did a good job of not leaving any clues to be recognized. Good job, Jack.”

“Word will get out about this story, Sheriff. Maybe we should post a notice about these bandits and their leader.”

“True, the story of how the money was returned will reach the ears of most of the town in just a few days. Those who are involved in our little scheme will be able to work the story out, but others might become suspicious that we haven’t let the town know of a bandit group in the Sherwood. Captain Carver will need to have assurances, that’s for certain.”

“Do you think he would set the town guard to watch us?”

“I’m not sure. William Carver isn’t a trusting man. I have been here five years now and he still looks at me like I stole a chicken.”

“I’ll have a notice posted in the square and hire a caller to give the warnings.”

“Call the bandit leader ‘Robin Hood’, Jack. Maybe the abbot’s sense of humor is rubbing off on me, but giving him a name makes him feel more real.”

Jack nodded and smiled at the sheriff as he left the office.

Robert looked at his ledgers and then at the light left in the day. It was only just past noon, but he was looking forward to dinner that evening. Not only would Walter Earl Locksley be his guest, but Lady Marian would be attending as well.

He smiled when he thought about the young woman. She had just turned twenty-two and should have been properly wed by now, but she had sworn to Sir Robert Locksley, the son of the earl, that she would wait for him until he returned from the crusades. That had been eight years ago. The last letter the earl received from his son had put him in Poitiers in the Aquitaine. But that letter had been almost a year ago, and he had made no mention of Marian in the last three letters.

When Robert Brewer had been placed in the office of sheriff five years ago, he had immediately seen the potential in Lady Marian. Her own father had died the previous winter, and her brother was now the Lord of Claremont. He had essentially left Marian on her own, with only a small stipend and a house in Nottingham to support her.

She waited, in vain the sheriff believed, for her Sir Robert Locksley to come and marry her and give her the life she deserved.

The sheriff wished she would see him as an adequate replacement for her longed for nobleman, but it wasn't his place to broach such a delicate subject. The Earl Locksley, on the other hand, was precisely the one to say something to her, and he hoped that this dinner would provide the opportunity for the earl to make his opinion known.

The sheriff shut his ledgers and decided that he needed to go pay Captain Carver a visit. Thinking about Marian made him feel cooped up and restless. He locked the door to his office and started down the street to the town meeting hall. It was there that the town council met and there that the city guard held prisoners

when they had any. It was also where Captain Carver kept himself during the day.

Robert took the steps of the meeting hall two at a time as he felt light on his feet. Just thinking about Marian put him in a good mood. Knowing that he was going to dine with her in a few hours had him fighting a small smile from dominating his face.

The meeting hall was empty except for Captain Carver. He sat behind a small table on the platform at the far end of the long main room. Robert removed his hat and walked the length of the hall, his boots echoing along the polished wood floor. He reached the steps of the platform before Captain Carver looked up to see who had entered.

“Sheriff Brewer, good day to you. What brings you to the meeting hall?” asked the Captain of the Guard as if he were seeing a long missed friend.

“Jack stopped by with the posting on the bandit leader?” Robert asked.

“This ‘Robin Hood’? Yes, we will set the notices and let the town know. Shouldn’t we call him “Robert Hood”? Robin is a childish name. Wouldn’t you think a murdering thief would want to stay away from a familial term for himself?”

The sheriff shrugged. “Every boy named Robert was called Robin by their father, sister, close friend, or cousin. I was called Robin by my father and sisters until I left home and even so, Margaret still called me that when she saw me two years ago. I would wager that even Sir Robert Locksley was called Robin by his father.”

Captain Carver smiled and slapped the table. “That would be a poor wager for me to take. I knew Sir Robert before he left for crusade and even on the day he left, the earl called him Robin in his farewell toast.”

“So we leave it ‘Robin Hood’ to match the drawing that the abbot sent us,” said Robert as he handed the message to Captain Carver.

“That man finds humor in the most banal of absurdities,” muttered the captain. “Very well, let’s keep it ‘Robin Hood’, but the drawing...” He shook his head as he handed the message back to the sheriff.

“Mark this day, William. We agree on something.” The sheriff smiled at the captain and left the meeting hall.

Robert walked quickly through the market square. The smiles and nods he received from the various craftsmen he passed by left no doubt that Jack had been returning some tax money to them today. His head was in a noose if the king ever discovered what he was up to, but they would be standing on the blocks next to him and they knew it. Not for the first time, he wished he had enough money to ride to Dover and catch a boat to the continent so he could disappear to a far off land. He didn’t have the wealth he needed, though, nor did he have Marian with him. He hoped that would change soon and when Martinmas came, he would be ready to go.

Robert wanted to impress Marian at dinner that night so he decided to see Henri the barber. No one else was in the shop when Robert walked in. Henri shaved Robert’s cheeks and throat, and trimmed his beard after combing and oiling his hair. Robert then decided to buy a new shirt for that evening and went to the market square to speak with the tailors. He found a nice blue shirt that Anne Midloe said matched his eyes and only had to wait a few minutes as Mutch Midloe made the needed adjustments to it.

By the time Robert returned to his office, he had burned off most of his anxiety as well as most of the hours of the afternoon. He headed into his sparse bedchamber just off of his office and readied himself for dinner.

A short while later, Robert walked towards the Falwort Inn in his new shirt and his ever present hat set elegantly on his head. He believed that tonight Marian would hear words that she had been in denial over. If anyone but the earl informed her of what she did not wish to believe, she would assault them like an angry badger. But if the earl said them, she would have to listen. She doted on the old man, and he on her. But even Walter had grown weary of seeing Marian waste her life on a girlish hope.

“Sheriff, so good to see you,” said John Falwort opening the door to the inn for Robert. “The room is prepared and your guests have both arrived.”

Robert was a little surprised to hear that Marian was already in the room. She always liked to take her time and arrive a little late. Robert followed the thin innkeeper back to the private dining room he had selected and thanked Falwort as he opened the door.

Marian and the Earl of Locksley were sitting next to each other talking quietly when Robert came into the room. Marian smiled and nodded to the sheriff as the earl stood to welcome their host.

“Robert, thank you so much for asking me to dinner. It is nice to get into town once in a while and you have arranged such lovely company to spend the evening with as well,” he said looking at Marian.

“It’s my pleasure, my lord. I do enjoy clever conversation while in the company of a beautiful woman.” Robert took a seat on the other side of Marian. She gave him a tight smile.

“It really is very kind of you to bring the earl out here, Sheriff. He must be so lonely up at that house by himself.”

“Not so lonely, not so. I have the servants and my attendants. I do miss my dear Constance and of course my Robert,” said the earl as he sat back down.

“Have you heard from your son, my lord?” ask Marian.

The sheriff couldn't believe his luck. He had planted the idea of what Earl Locksley should tell Marian a month ago when he was out at Locksley Manor, but he was unsure of how to bring up news of the earl's son. Now that Marian had brought her beloved Sir Robert to the earl's attention, all that was left was to see how the earl would handle the matter.

“My dear Marian, let's have some dinner first, and then we can speak of other things.”

The door to the room opened and several serving girls came in. They had a lamb stew and a platter of bread that they sat on the table. Two bottles of wine were placed on a low side bench.

“Master Falwort has prepared a goose as you requested, Sheriff. He will bring it when he has finished dressing it,” said the oldest of the servants.

Robert thanked her and sent the servants from the room. When he turned his attention back to his guests, Marian had already served the stew to each of them and had broken the bread. The conversation turned to trivial matters and simple jokes as the three diners enjoyed the simple, yet very well prepared fare. Just as they were finishing the stew, the door to the room opened again and the innkeeper brought in the roasted goose. A light plum sauce was brushed over the goose. Robert was rather pleased with Falwort's efforts this evening.

The dinner passed much too quickly for the three friends as stories were told and retold and gossip was introduced a bit too freely. Finally even the earl pushed his plate into the middle of the table and leaned back with a contented sigh.

“Marian, it is always a pleasure to see you. Maybe you could help me throw a party at Martinmas this year, it would draw people from two days away if you were to plan it,” said the earl.

“I thank you for your consideration, my lord. I will consider what you request. But if I may bring us back to my question at the beginning of dinner, have you heard from your son?”

The earl grunted and cut his eyes over to the sheriff. He looked back at Marian and took her hands in his.

“Marian, it has come to the point where I believe your hopes and wishes for my son have exceeded my own. I do not believe that Robert will return to Locksley until it is time to gather his inheritance from me.”

“Oh, do not say such things, my lord!” protested the young woman.

“Marian, I wish to save you any grief or harm. It saddens me to realize that to save you anguish later I must cause you harm now. My Robert... your Robert... has no intentions towards you and I believe he hasn't for some time. He has bought an estate outside of Poitiers and engages in the life of a scoundrel from everything I have been told. He is a worldly man of 28 now, not an innocent youth of 20 as he was when he left. I fear that war and travel and the temperament of the men he has held company with have turned him from the path of a stable and secure man of the estate into a man of low virtues and high vices. He has not written to me in over a year now, and I sent a man on a mission of trade six months ago who returned two months later with stories that had me lighting candles for my son's soul for a month straight.”

“But surely now that the wars are over he will return...”

“No Marian. The wars have been over for four months. If Robert wanted you, he would have returned for you. He keeps company with two or three young women in Poitiers. Daughters of noblemen in that realm. He is a drunkard and a bully. He is no man for you, not anymore. I pray that you find a good man, Marian. Your brother has treated you deplorably, but I would be willing

to secure you a place and sponsorship in London if you can find no man locally who will take you in."

Tears flowed freely from Marian's eyes. She stood, causing the two men to jump to their feet, and hugged the elderly earl. She met eyes with the sheriff, but then jerked her head aside and fled the room.

Both men stared at the open door. After a few seconds, Robert stepped over and shut it. When he returned to the table, the earl had sat back down.

"That was one of the most unpleasant things I have ever had to do," said the earl as he filled his cup with wine.

"I'm sorry you had to say those thing, my lord."

Earl Locksley drank deep from his cup and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "We're alone Robert, call me Walter. And you know exactly why I had to say it. You planted those words in me last month when you came to visit and gave them time to grow in my mind."

"It's true."

The earl looked in his empty cup and placed it down on the table. "Yes, it's true, and that wears on my soul. I hope when you have children that you never have to see one fall into a life of excess and away from his responsibilities."

"He isn't Earl of Locksley yet, Walter."

"I don't mean the responsibilities of his title, I mean the responsibilities of his birth. His position. He has a responsibility to protect the people of his land, just as those who serve in the Church have the responsibility to protect the souls of those same people."

"And what of the responsibility of the people to those in charge?"

"To provide for them. If the nobles and the clergy are faithful to their responsibilities, then the people will be glad to work and pay their taxes. But my son and those like him believe that they should be supported without upholding their portion of the agreement."

“Do you include the crown in that assessment?”

“Yes, of course. Does it shock you to hear me speak so plainly? My hair is too white to worry about treason against this king in particular. Even after his brother died, he collects taxes as if the wars are still ongoing. The people suffer. They can’t afford to live in the towns and villages where the taxmen are concentrated, so they move to the woods and wilderness to scratch the ground and try to feed their children.”

“That may be Walter, but the people do what they are told and pay what they are made. Those in power do not care for them. It’s always been that way and always will be.”

Earl Locksley nodded as Robert spoke. “I agree, but there are those who care. I like to think that I take my responsibilities seriously and live up to my obligations.”

“No argument from me or any in the area, Walter. Your serfs are cared for and there is never a complaint from any of your tenants.”

“And you, Robert? I know the people complain when you come to take their taxes, but do they offer good words when your men return to lessen the burden?”

Robert froze. He didn’t expect the earl to know of what he had done nor did he expect him to address it in such a straightforward manner.

“Come now, Robert. I may be old, but my mind hasn’t dulled. I know the taxes that the crown has demanded, I can look at the figures. I was anticipating hiring out the miller to mill my grain into flour and then sell the flour to the crown, for a loss I might add, to feed the armies in Brittany. So imagine my surprise when the miller comes to me yesterday with enough silver to buy my harvest for himself. He will make and sell enough flour for the entire shire. And he wouldn’t be so willing to take such a large effort if he wasn’t sure that there would be enough people with coin to buy his flour.

“The smiths just sent out word this evening that they need more iron from York. When every other smithy has to work for the crown to stay on top of their business, the smiths of Nottingham have enough money to expand their work. What a sudden wave of good fortune! And right after the taxes to the crown went missing.”

Robert smiled at the cagey old man and shrugged without a word.

“Maybe I am to believe that a group of bandits in the Sherwood stole the king’s money and then out of the goodness of their hearts gave the money to those who needed it. That would be a good tale, Robert. One told by fires for a long time.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about Walter,” Robert said as he rose from the table. “It is much to late for you to return to Locksley, I’ll have Falwort prepare you a room.”

“Robert,” said the earl. “I’m talking about your responsibility. To yourself and to the town. We will talk again soon. I’ll have Marian out for dinner next Sunday night, you can make a trip out to see me about... well, I’m sure you will think of something.”