

I Shot the Sheriff
By
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*“Boldly brave Sir Robin; rode forth from Cam . . . wait a minute
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding thru the glen . . .”*

Robin Hood stank of dried sweat and cracked scabs. I wasn't expecting Errol Flynn, but this was ridiculous. The large wart on his nose detracted from his pale green eyes. The swords the Merry Men held at my jugular vein didn't help either.

“If you mean to rob from the rich and give to the poor,” I said, “A government paycheck only goes so far these days.”

“Fine humor from a villain feeling the bite of steel on his throat,” snorted Little John. “Shall we see how the vulture laughs with a good rope 'round his neck?”

“Hold, John,” said Robin. No, he didn't look like a Hollywood leading man. But he was in charge. Hopefully, that would save my hide.

“You are the most hated scoundrel in the Shire,” said Robin, crossing his arms.

“Well, I guess that depends on who you ask.”

“You do the King's bidding in harassing the good folk of these parts,” continued the bandit leader, “and then some.” His squad of men was silent, but I could hear the flies buzzing around their course, matted beards. Little John stuck a massive paw down the front of his weathered trousers, plucked out a flea, and popped it. The stained steel blades remained at my neck.

Robin looked a bit pensive. “I've wondered when this day would come,” he said.

“Hope you aren't disappointed so far.”

A wan smile, yellowed teeth against a face of dirty stubble. “No, the day has gone well, so far,” he said. “Leave me with this villain for a moment,” Robin said to the goons arrayed around me. “Send for Tuck. We'll need a word with him.”

The Merry Men reluctantly obeyed, leaving my neck unscathed. “The bastard will need a word from the Friar, as if that would do his hell-bound soul any good,” was the mildest thing I heard grumbled out the door of the rude thatched hut. Robin looked at me, leaning back against a broad beam holding up the roof. A stiff breeze ruffled the thatching. I heard a peal of distant thunder. Robin stared a moment longer, and then spoke.

“You're American,” Robin said. “I can tell by the cocky innocence. Lift your jaw back up off the ground. I wasn't born in a manger 'round here.”

I'd found whom I was looking for. He'd accurately tabbed me as being from a nation that wouldn't exist for another 600 years.

“If you were the REAL Sheriff of Nottingham, you wouldn't have blundered into that simple ambush,” said Robin. “Be more careful. Any of these men would've slit your throat and

stripped you naked in a heartbeat if I wasn't around." He unsheathed a small, sharp knife from his vest and started cleaning his fingernails with it. "So, what were you sent here to do? "

"Robin Hood" was considered a fake by many scholars; a lame literary hero pulled from the hoary dust of folktales by a bored English publisher. This man looked real enough to me.

Robin rocked forward and put his elbows on the shaky table that separated us. The knife gleamed in the sparse light crowding through the woven shack. "Come on, friend," he said in a low voice. "I need to know."

I recalled my mission parameter briefing. The Agency's computers had deduced the convergence factors in this temporal mistake and determined it worth the effort to right the timeline. So, I was sent back to the famous Sherwood Forest. To find a legend, and tell him...

"You can go back," I said.

His green eyes grew wide. "Bullshit!" he bellowed. "That's bloody bullshit! You can't go back!"

"I have." And it had hurt badly, each time.

"It's the last thing that they tell you!" Robin chewed a split lip. "They say, 'it's a one-way trip... You will be part of the past that never was.'"

"How long have YOU been here?" I asked.

"I'm asking the questions," said Robin. Then he sighed, breath reeking of onions and spoiled meat. "John Major was the PM. Manchester United won the football title." He furrowed his grimy brow. "I think the blonde guy in Wham just came out saying he was a fag?" He paused, looking infinitely sad. "Damn. I can't remember what a hot shower feels like. Or a cup of tea and a cigarette." Robin Hood stared at me. "Now, what the hell is this about 'going back'?"

"Jesus. You've been here...twenty years?"

"I may save yer arse, my irritating Yank friend..."

A stiff wind blew through the hut, and I smelled rain in the air. Booted feet scuffled on the packed earth outside.

"There's been a change at The Agency," I said. "They've ran scenarios on what initial agents – like you - were sent to do." I paused. Management had been somewhat nebulous in its explanations on this subject. "A lot of people didn't know you were..."

"They sent me to Palestine in the midst of the bloody Crusades to keep an eye on Richard," he said. "Didn't think I'd wind up back in England. Not that far from where I was born," Robin Hood smiled wistfully. "Or will be, right?"

"The thing is you, um, aren't really doing anything, well... necessary," I said. "And to have someone, back here..."

"Christ, they sent you to sack me?!" he said.

"You'll be due a generous severance..."

“Mate, let me fill you in on what’s going on ‘round here.” Robin stood up, and peered out the rough-hewed window. “I may look like I’ve gone native, but for where I stand, I’m still on her Majesty’s clock.” He squinted at me. “Elizabeth still’s the Queen?”

“Ah, yeah...”

“Right. You’ve heard of the Magna Carta?”

“Of course,” I said. That was why I was here. The Magna Carta was the founding document of Western Democracy. Its granting of individual rights would lead to the Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution and Gandhi. “A group of English nobles are about to confront King John with their demands, if I am where I should be...right?”

Robin’s back stiffened. “The history we, or at least I learned in school is bullshit, friend,” he said. “Richard the Lionhearted is still the king. ‘King John’ has never existed. How that happened I don’t know, or care. But I do know that the nobles are bloody angry about the changes Richard wants to bring down on their heads.” A shout, far off, and another distant rumble of thunder. Robin’s hand fell to the hilt of his sword as smoothly as if opening his wallet.

“What’s going on?”

“These are troubled times, friend,” said Robin Hood, his face brutal. “It may get very troubling around here soon.”

“I mean, what’s going on with King John, er, Richard?” I asked.

“The nobles are petitioning the King about stupid shit like taking wood from a freeman’s shire or the transfer of goat herds to the eldest son.”

“Well, it’s a start,” I said. “The Magna Carta will be the basis for what evolves into democratic law in a few centuries, right?”

“Richard’s come up with a new way of governing England,” said Robin, peering hard at something outside. “Direct elections by freemen of a House of Commons, an independent justice system, and the “king” will stand for re-election every four years.”

“Huh?”

“Now where do you think he got those ideas?” said Robin, looking at me. “Sound like a political system a semi-literate monarch from the 13th century would come up with?”

More shouts, closer. The crude wood plank door of the hut flew open, and a short, wiry kid burst through, breathing heavily. “Robin,” he huffed. “A large band of men come!” He caught some of his breath. “No doubt following his trail!”

“No doubt,” replied Robin. “Have Tuck gather our supplies to the next safe ground. Little John will provide cover. I’ll attend to the defense in a moment.”

“What about him?” asked the youth. He looked a bit like Billy Idol.

“The Sheriff is my responsibility,” said Robin. “I’ll see we don’t lose our prize.”

“A prize I would like to see roasted on an open spit,” Will replied, “after I gouge his eyes out and pack the sockets with salt.”

“I’m a popular guy around here, aren’t I?” I said. The kid snarled at me.

“Patience, Will Scarlet,” said Robin. “Save your salt for those pursuing us. I’ll need a few more words with him.” Will grudgingly turned away, and then dove out the door shouting for the Friar.

“He’s actually a good kid,” remarked Robin. “Marion says he’s the son I never had.” He looked around the hut. “We’ll have to fire the camp quickly. I’ll round up a couple horses, and we should be able to get away clean. They won’t catch us in the forest. You CAN ride a horse?”

“Yeah, I can ride.”

Robin smiled. “I remember Richard laughing. ‘God’s blood, man, ‘ave you ever seen a horse before?’ Horsemanship wasn’t something I learned in the Coventry projects.”

Robin strode out the hut door. I followed.

The camp was a madhouse. The Merry Men rushed about, some carrying weapons, others pulling donkeys and herding sheep. I saw a few women, long skirts and worn overcoats, looking as tough as the men. A whiff of smoke drifted by. I wondered if the straw buildings would burn before the rains came.

“Stay close by me,” ordered Robin.

“Wait a minute,” I said. Things were happening too fast. “Richard the Lionhearted wants to be elected... president of medieval Britain?”

“Yep. And we’ve got to stop him.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?”

Robin grabbed a scabbarded sword off a running man laden with renaissance fair cutlery and tossed it my way. “You know how to use one of these, as well?”

“I’ve used one.” In another mission, the dim memories which the Agency mind-wipe never fully cleared. Steel flashing under a humid sun, bellowing men clad in sweat-drenched leather and the sweet stench of fresh blood. Shoulders shuddering when my blade dug into an enemy’s chest, like an axe into a rotting log. I was sent back; I did the job, and then I came home. I never remembered exactly what I did while scraping through time. But the images lingered, like ebbing dreams.

“Are you saying ‘we’ have to stop the founding of Western democracy?” I asked.

“I’m saying that if you don’t stick close to me, either one of my men will kill you, or one of theirs will,” said Robin. “You picked a shitty alias to assume.”

A stout man in monk’s clothes hurried our way, leading a pair of thin horses.

“Friar Tuck, the Sheriff,” said Robin, introducing us with mock dignity. “Sheriff of Nottingham, Friar Tuck, our spiritual advisor.”

"I am honored, Sire," said the Friar. "I hope these nags will allow you to evade the band of armed men who fervently wish to re-make your acquaintance."

"Thanks," I said.

"So, another from..." said the Friar, with a bemused smile. "My, this humble man of the cloth finds his faith challenged more each day." He nodded towards the east. "Robin, a brigade or more of footmen approaches us with haste. Best hurry." He winked at me. "I do hope to talk with you again soon, 'Sheriff'." The chunky monk scampered away, surprisingly agile for his bulk.

"Does he...?" I asked, clumsily clambering onto my steed.

"Tuck and I have had many an ale-fueled conversation," replied Robin, already mounted. "He's a man ahead of his time, despite his coarse looks. Everyone needs to unburden himself upon a confidant." Robin's horse snorted. "Tuck keeps a secret."

The camp was thinning out, and most of the huts were smoldering. The line of storm clouds lapped over the edge of the tree line, and thunder rumbled again. I smelled honeysuckle and tried to remember how to steer a horse. Yank on the left rein, knee in the flank, go left...

"You were going to ask why 'we' have to strangle Democracy in its cradle," said Robin.

"I was... getting around to that." The horse's ribs knocked against my knees, and there were lice cavorting in its thin brown mane. It felt like the poor animal wanted to throw me but couldn't summon up the energy.

"It's too soon," said Robin. "Too bloody soon. The nobility of all the piss-pot duchies and fiefdoms in Europe will put aside their differences to stamp out Richard's idea a-borning." More shouts, from off to our right. I thought I heard the distant thok of an arrow into hardwood.

"The Pope's funneling money to a half-dozen different armies, and ships are being commandeered along the Channel to bring them over." Robin turned his horse towards a rough trail that burrowed into the forest's darkness.

"An invasion?"

"Right-o. And when the flower of Europe's knighthood gets here, they won't stop at hanging Good King Richard and the sods they round up with him. England'll be chopped up and occupied for centuries," said Robin. "And the Magna Carta that helps start your American revolution? Never gets written." Robin ducked under a low branch. "Doesn't sound like the world we grew up in, does it?"

No, it didn't. I dodged a dangling limb, as my emaciated nag kept up with Robin's mount. I breathed deep, clutching the worn reins in both hands, while at the same time holding onto the sword Robin had tossed me. It didn't resemble Excalibur. Rust showed through the rotting scabbard, and the blade looked as dull as a butter knife.

Robin tugged his steed's head to the left and I followed, under a canopy of green. "How'd they get you to sign up?" he asked. The path was wide enough for us to ride abreast. Horseflies buzzed.

"It's warmer than I expected," I said, stupidly. "1215, before the Little Ice Age lowers the temperature of Northern Europe down to..."

Robin glared at me. "I didn't ask for a bloody weather report." Men died at the command of those eyes. "How did you get picked for this?"

"I, ah, answered an on-line ad," I stuttered. "I'd been laid off from my last job. They interviewed me, called me back for some tests, and ...they made me part of the Program." A lark chirped, and a squirrel scampered along a stunted oak tree leaning over a tiny pool of muddy water by the trail. The first drops of rain started to dodge the leaves overhead.

"Answered a want ad?!" Robin threw back his head, body shaking with laughter. For all his charisma, Robin looked as disheveled as the rest of his troops. God, life was nasty, brutish and short here. Is that what I'd become in a few years if I didn't go back? Rotting teeth, badly set broken bones? Ringworm?

"Wasn't that way with me," said Robin. "I was a drunken lout on the dole. Got stabbed in a pub fight, and the ambulance took me to hospital. Whatever they were looking for, they found me through the National Health Service. Blood chemistry, skull shape, chromosomes... Hell, I never got the story straight from them." His whiskered jaw was set. "I signed up. Didn't have much else going on, to tell the truth. But Christ, I'd no idea what I was in for."

He paused, the horse's swayback gait gently bouncing his head and shoulders.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Yeah," I replied. Like being shorn of your skin in a saltwater whirlpool. That part you always remember. We trod along, in the soft rain. I wished I had a hat.

"I'm not going back," said Robin.

"Huh?" The forest was quiet, save for the gentle patter of rain on the trees. The Merry Men had scattered in all directions. But I didn't doubt a few of them would be close by, following us through the thick brush.

"I'm staying here. There's heavy shit going down that shouldn't be, friend," said Robin. "I'm not leaving now."

"Ah, that's not an option," I said. "The Agency computers calculated that you're not a pivotal point in history. The danger of affecting the signing of the Magna Carta..."

"Already have, mate," he said. "And so have you. I'm not going back."

"You...have to," I said, sounding like a kid whining for another piece of cake. This wasn't going as planned. Christ, the guy should be happy to get out of this hell hole.

"You and whose army'll make me?" said Robin. Our horses plodded along together, and the cool mist enveloped us.

“But...”

“I was a fuckin’ NOBODY,” he said, almost shouting. “Here... God, here it’s been tough. I’ve seen shit no history book ever printed. But here...” Robin Hood ignored the rainwater flowing off the bleached leather straps covering his tunic. “I know how I can do things right. Me! Stereo-nicking’, joyriding’ dole-scamming’ ME!” That intense gaze fell on me again. “I’m making a difference here, and THAT’S what I’m gonna do.”

I had a hard time believing this man was ever just a brawling pub thug. The Agency file had redacted most of “Robin’s” background. He was one of the first deployed in the infancy of time-hopping...there HAD to be more than just his physical attributes that would have made him such a strong candidate.

A roll of thunder shook the dampening trees, and I could feel the wild energy of the brewing storm. How sheltered 21st century life was. Weather rarely killed you - you just went inside. It was very different here.

“We’ll miss the worst of the storm,” said Robin Hood, turning his attention back to the soaked path ahead.

They hadn’t told me his proper name. Why the hell hadn’t I thought to ask?

“You’ve got a decision to make, friend,” he said.

“I...can’t just...” Thunder peeled again.

“History pivots in strange, subtle ways,” said Robin. “A man gets up in the morning, takes a piss and puts on his clothes. Then the day takes his plans and dreams away. He winds up falling asleep ignorant of what might have changed during the day just past. Or what might have changed him.”

My clothes were getting soaked, coarse fibers burrowing into my skin. I was already saddle-sore. How did people live like this? The wind was turning the damp leaves over. “What changed you?” I asked.

“Heh.” Robin straightened again in his saddle. “Think you were the first bloke sent to look for me?”

Ah, hell.

“We play for keeps ‘back here’,” he said, leaning into the stiff breeze. “And you got a choice to make. Try and take me back.” He turned in his saddle towards me. “Or...stay.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can, mate,” said Robin Hood. “I did.”

“Why?” I asked. “Did you fall in love, or forget the return/drop sequence, or...”

“All of the above...,” Robin chuckled, as his horse plodded along the wet path. Thick clops of mud were being kicked up by our mounts’ hooves. “I imagine they put you through the same conditioning they gave me, in spades probably. ‘DON’T GO NATIVE!’ was the main theme, wasn’t it? ‘Remember where you came from.’ ‘Remember what’s at stake.’ Bloody stupid

eggheads,” snorted Robin. “Mucking about with time and memory and all that shit so their bosses could make another billion. Did they really think they could predict what a man would do, once they set him free?”

The rain lessened slightly, and Robin led us across a narrow stream rising with brown water. My poor nag grudgingly forded it, as the soles of my boots slogged in the small torrent.

“I was bullshittin’ before,” he said. “I knew there was a way to return. Just knew I wasn’t going to take it.”

“What do you want from me?” I asked, carefully.

“Join us, mate.” Robin replied. “Make a difference here that they’d never admit you could. Don’t be a bit player in history. Grab the whole ring. Live, like you never could in a ‘modern’ world.”

“Maybe you’re saying all this to convince yourself,” I said. “Maybe you do want a cup of tea and a hot shower again.”

“Maybe,” Robin smiled. “But I’m not taking you up on it. Besides, think what the Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood teamed up could do here. That’ll be a helluva story for kids to learn about in a couple hundred years. Wouldn’t it?”

And the world they were born into would be a different one than I knew. Could I judge if it were better or worse? Thoughts of home, of iPods and ATMs, of Snickers bars and cold beer bought from glass coolers in convenience stores. The constantly numbing noise of modern society, and time flying by.

All the training the Agency had given me, consciously and subliminally, was barking NO. But Robin was right. How could they know what a man would do, with the freedom of history in his grasp?

“Made up your mind yet?” he said, as we rode slowly through a thicket of wet juniper bushes.

“If I have, what makes you think I would trust you?” I said.

“Because I’m Robin Hood, goddamn it!” he said, with a winning smile. “And you’re going to make the Sheriff of Nottingham a national hero!”

I paused, as my sore old horse slogged wearily along. The rain was easing, and the winds were rustling trees far off in the forest. Tree frogs croaked, and the buzz of crickets began returning. The woods smelled clean, wild, with no lingering scent of civilization to wash away.

“Why not?” I said, leaving the future to another day.

The end

A fan new take on an old tale—apropos for a time-travel tale. Mike, an AR alumnus, scores again with this humorous alternative history. Hey, Mike, Marvel might just have a place for you. If they do, I hope you’ll keep writing for another realm—from your Beverly Hills mansion, of course.

