

CHAPTER I

“Sit still, will you? I never saw such a boy: **S**wriggling about like a young eel.”

“I can’t help it, David,” said the little fellow so roughly spoken to by a sour-looking serving man; “the horse does jog so, and it’s so slippery. If I didn’t keep moving I should go off.”

“You’ll soon go off if you don’t keep a little quieter,” growled the man angrily, “for I’ll pitch you among the bushes.”

“No, you won’t,” said the boy laughing. “You daren’t do so.”

“What! I’ll let you see, young master. I want to know why they couldn’t let you have a donkey or a mule, instead of hanging you on behind me.”

“Aunt said I should be safer behind you,” said the boy; “but I’m not. It’s so hard to hold on by your belt, because you’re so —”

“Look here. Master Robin, I get enough o’ that from the men. If you say I’m so fat, I’ll pitch you into the first patch o’ brambles we come to.”

“But you are fat,” said the boy; “and you dare not. If you did my father would punish you.”

“He wouldn’t know.”

“Oh! yes he would, David,” said the little fellow, confidently; “the other men would tell him.”

“They wouldn’t know,” said the man with a chuckle. “I say, aren’t you afraid?”

“No,” said the boy. “What of, tumbling off? I could jump.”

“Fraid of going through this great dark forest?”

“No. What is there to be afraid of?”

“Robbers and thieves, and all sorts of horrid things. Why, we might meet Robin Hood and his men.”

“I should like that,” said the boy.

“What?” cried the serving man, and he looked round at the great oak and beech trees through which the faintly marked road lay, and then forward and backward at the dozen mules, laden with packs of cloth, every two

of which were led by an armed man. "You'd like that?"

"Yes," said the boy. "I want to see him."

"Here's a pretty sort of a boy," said the man. "Why, he'd eat you like a radish."

"No, he wouldn't," said the boy, "because I'm not a bit like a radish; and I say, David, do turn your belt round."

"Turn my belt round?" said the man, in astonishment. "What for?"

"So as to put the sword the other side. It does keep on banging my legs so. They're quite bruised."

"It's me that'll be bruised, with you punching and sticking your fisties into my belt. Put your legs on the other side. I can't move my sword. I might want it to fight, you know."

"Who with?" asked the boy.

"Robbers after the bales o' cloth. I shall be precious glad to get 'em safe to the town, and be back home again with whole bones. Sit still, will you! Wriggling again! How am I to get you safe home to your father if you keep sidling off like that? Want me to hand you over to one of the men?"

"Yes, please," said the boy, dolefully.

“What? Don’t want to ride on one of the mules, do you?”

“Yes, I do,” said the boy. “I should be more comfortable sitting on one of the packs. I’m sure aunt would have said I was to sit there, if she had known.”

“Look here, young squire,” said the man, sourly; “you’ve too much tongue, and you know too much what aren’t good for you. Your aunt, my old missus, says to me:

“‘David,’ she says, ‘you are to take young Master Robin behind you on the horse, where he can hold on by your belt, and you’ll never lose sight of him till you give him into his father the Sheriff’s hands, along with the bales of cloth; and you can tell the Sheriff he has been a very good boy during his visit’; and now I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?” said the boy, sharply.

“‘Cause you’re doing nothing but squirming and working about behind my saddle. I shall never get you to the town, if you go on like this.”

The boy puckered up his forehead, and was silent as he wondered whether he could manage to sit still for the two hours which were yet to elapse before they stopped

for the night at a village on the outskirts of Sherwood Forest, ready to go on again the next morning.

“I liked stopping with aunt at Ellton,” said the little fellow to himself, sadly, “and I should like to go again; but I should like to be fetched home next time, for old David is so cross every time I move, and —”

“Look here, young fellow,” growled the man, half turning in his saddle; “if you don’t sit still I’ll get one of the pack ropes and tie you on, like a sack. I never see such a fidgety young elver in my — Oh, look at that!”

The man gave a tug at his horse’s rein; but it was not needed, for the stout cob had cocked its ears forward and stopped short, just as the mules in front whisked themselves round, and the men who drove them began to huddle together in a group.

For all at once the way was barred by about a dozen men in rough weather-stained green jerkins, each with a long bow and a sheaf of arrows at his back, and a long quarter-staff in his hand.

David, confidential servant and head man to Aunt Hester, of the cloth works at Ellton, looked sharply round at the half-dozen

heavily-laden mules behind him; and beyond them he saw another dozen or so of men, and more were coming from among the trees to right and left.

“Hoi! all of you,” cried David to his men. “Swords out! We must fight for the mistress’s cloth.”

As he spoke, he seized the hilt of his sword and began to tug at it; but it would not leave its sheath, and all the while he was kicking at his horse’s ribs with his heels, with the result that the stout cob gave a kick and a plunge, lowered its head, and dashed off at a gallop, with David holding on to the pommel.

Two of the men made a snatch at the reins, but they were too late, and turned to the mule-drivers, who were following their leader’s example and trying to escape amongst the trees, leaving the mules huddled together, squealing and kicking in their fright.

Young Robin just saw two packages roll to the ground as the cob dashed off; then he was holding on with all his might to old David’s belt as the cob galloped away with half-a-dozen of the robbers trying to cut it off.

Then the little fellow felt that he was being jerked and knocked and bruised, as the horse

tore along with David, head and neck stretched out. There was a rush under some low boughs, and another rush over a patch of brambles and tall bracken; then the cob made a bold dash at a dense mass of low growth, when there was a violent jerk as he made a bound, followed by a feeling as if the boy's arms were being torn out at the shoulders, a rush through the air, a heavy blow, and a sensation of tearing, and all was, giddiness and pain.