



Homecoming

by Laura Chevening

Robin walked wearily through the forest. It had been a long, difficult day and every fiber of his being felt it. First there had been the botched ambush of the Sheriff resulting in Tuck's injuries, then the refusal of the villagers to aid the wounded man and, finally, the quarrel with Scarlet. While Robin's spirits were still reeling from the villagers' rejection, Will had hammered upon them with all the sensitivity of a battering ram.

"Why don't you admit it?" the stocky man had shouted, running his hands through his short, bristly hair. "They're serfs and that's all they'll ever be and you're just an outlaw -- that's all." He had then stormed off into the trees, gone, perhaps for good.

When the others had turned to him for reassurance, Robin had found none to give. What if Will were right? Had he been fooling himself, thinking that the people would find heart, that he could find it for them?

In need of answers, he had left the camp, searching for Herne. The spirit of the forest had taken him out of his old life, touched him with a vision of England as she might be. Surely he could give Loxley the reassurance he so badly needed. But Herne, too, had let him down. "Aim higher," he had said. What was that supposed to mean? How was that going to help Tuck and what comfort did it offer to the others who had trusted him with their lives? Feeling even less adequate than he had before, Robin had returned to the camp only to discover that Much was missing.

"He might have gone after Will," suggested Marion, her green eyes dark with concern beneath her fiery hair. "He knew how upset you were."

"So he decides to take off by himself in the middle of the night!" Robin snapped, his patience eroded by the strains of the day.

"You know Much," put in John, "he feels first and thinks later."

"If he thinks at all," muttered Robin. Pushing the dark hair out of his eyes, he looked at the remnants of his band. Tuck, still unconscious, lay to one side. Marion sat next to him, keeping watch. John, the face behind his bushy beard lined with concern, stood stolidly leaning against a tree. Nasir, dark, silent and watchful as ever, waited quietly for Robin's decision.

Why had they entrusted themselves to him? Was he capable of, did he even want to be given the responsibility of leading them? For a moment he felt overwhelmed, but then Marion smiled at him, a simple smile of human warmth and trust. Looking at John and Nasir, he caught the same emotion in their eyes. They cared. Bound together by the powers of light and darkness they had formed a band to fight for the people of Sherwood, but they were bound together by something else as well -- the ties of human affection.

"Nasir, you follow the river; John, go back toward Wickham. I'll go deeper into Sherwood. Marion, look after Tuck and keep Much here if he comes back."

The others had nodded and soon Robin was walking alone through Sherwood. It was a dark night, with a strong wind that pushed numerous clouds rapidly across the sky, obscuring the moon and stirring the treetops into a constant rustling. It was the worst possible time to be searching, the darkness and noise combining to hide sight and sound. He would need every bit of his woodlore and instinct to find Much and he feared that, worn out as he was, they would not be up to the task. Damn Much for his timing! He had always chosen the most inappropriate times to get into trouble -- ever since he had been a child.

As he walked on, Robin thought over Much's history of mishaps from the time when, scarcely one year old, he had fallen into the pigsty and had to be rescued from an angry sow, to the almost fatal confrontation with Gisburne over the poached deer. That incident had started the chain of events that had led Robin to Sherwood, to Herne the Hunter. The Horned One had claimed that he was Robin's destiny, but if it had not been for Much's foolishness, Loxley might have lived out his days as the miller's foster son, grinding corn -- and grinding his teeth at Norman oppression.

No, he was Ailric's son -- and Herne's now as well. He could no more lead the quiet life of a villager than the sun could fail to rise and set. Much had not sent him into the forest, his own nature had. Looking about him, he realized how at home he felt here.

Although branches rattled in the wind, silent shadows slipped eerily just out of sight and unknown sounds teased his ears, he felt no fear of his surroundings. As the breeze ruffled the long hair hanging about his slender frame, he knew that he would never be content with settling down to the life of townsman or villager. He belonged in Sherwood. Perhaps that was what Herne had meant by destiny. Feeling some of the constriction of his chest loosen, he stepped forward with a lighter heart.

Sometime later he glimpsed a faint light in the distance. Since few, if any, men ventured this far into Sherwood, Robin felt sure that it must be Much or Will -- possibly even both. Running easily and silently over the mossy ground, he soon reached the source of the light. The trees thinned out, forming a circle around a small glade with a slight hill at its center. The light source was the moon, shining directly into the glade, casting a silvery glow onto the grass. And there, curled up on the hillside lay Much, fast asleep.

"Much!" called Robin. The curly head did not stir. "Much!" he repeated. Again there was no answer. About to step into the glade, he paused. There was something unnatural about the boy's failure to respond, something unearthly about the quality of the light. Scanning the glade, he took in the luminous look of the grass and plants. Like the air itself, they seemed sharp and crystal clear as if made of glass and likely to break if a mortal stepped upon them. He stepped backwards, breathing to himself, "A faerie ring."

Memories of his foster mother's tales about the fair folk and the rings which were gateways into their worlds passed through his mind, causing him instinctively to make a sign against evil. He had heard of men stepping into the realm of the faeries, passing what seemed to be only a single night and returning to find that ages had passed and all their kind, their very world, had died. If they came back at all, that is. The fair folk had ways of detaining mortals in their world.

And now Much had blundered into one of their rings. Noticing the blissful look on his foster brother's face, Robin wondered what fantasies occupied him and how he would be able to wake him, even if he had a way into and out of the ring.

"Welcome, Robin i' the Hood," said a voice. "We have been waiting for you for a long time."

Robin jumped, startled. He'd heard no one approach, but there, just to the left of Much, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her hair, of a gold so pale as to be almost silver, fell, thick and straight, to the waist of her slim body. Above her straight nose her eyes, as gray and impenetrable as a November sea, gazed at him. Her dress was of the purest white silk, embroidered along the edges with interwoven moons and stars and she carried in her hands a golden goblet which she offered to him.

"Come," she invited. "We have long awaited your arrival. Drink and take your rest."

Robin wanted to. He felt a yearning such as he had never before experienced. He wanted to take the cup, to touch her hair, to be with her. He took a step forward. The woman smiled, opening her arms in welcome and he smiled back, but then the image of Marion took shape in his mind and he paused. What was he doing? This was no woman, but a faerie, a creature from another world, tempting him as she had undoubtedly tempted Much. "No," he said. "I will not drink from your cup. I know what your rest consists of."

A look of pain crossed the maiden's face. "Will you not drink, brother, and join us?" She looked as if she were about to weep.

"I'll not join you," he replied, his voice sharp with his fear. "I'm no brother of yours -- you're not human."

"Neither are you," she whispered. "Can you not feel the bond, my brother?"


As Robin stared at her, startled and bewildered by her assertion, she called out, "Mother, he does not know me. Help me, Mother!"

Before Robin's amazed eyes another form materialized. She was taller and fuller-figured than the first, and her raven hair, frosted with silver, fell in thick plaits to below her waist. She wore a gown of deep red wool, embroidered with black and white patterns of moons and stars against a night sky. Her eyes, deep and brown as the soil in spring, were warm with the promise of growth and nourishment. In her hands she carried a dish from which appetizing aromas drifted. Awed by the aura of power which surrounded her, Robin fell to his knees.

She smiled and in that smile was the love of every mother who had ever lived, of Hulda his foster mother and of the real mother he had never known. "Rise, Robin i' the Hood," she said. "Come to me, my son."

Gazing upward at her, Robin wanted to do nothing more than that, to feel her arms about





him, to find shelter in the love of the Mother. Again, he took a step forward. He was almost within the circle of light when, eyes fixed on the dark-haired woman, he tripped over a hidden root. As he steadied himself, his gaze left the woman and fell upon Much. Much, his brother, whose mother had raised him as her own, cared for his hurts, sung him to sleep, given him the only home he had ever known. "No," he answered, keeping his eyes turned from the women's faces, "you are not my mother. You are not human."

If he had been looking at them, he would have seen renewed pain on the maid's face and a deep sorrow on that of the mother. "Old woman!" she cried. "We have need of you. Come aid us now!"

The grass in the glade trembled as a wind blew across it, for a moment clouds hid the moon and, as the darkness lifted, a third figure stood within the circle. Shorter than the maid and the mother, this one was bent over with age, her scraggly gray hair wild about her wrinkled face. She wore a tattered gown and a cloak of the deepest black linen, and peered out from under its hood with eyes as cold and blue as the sky on a clear winter's day.

"Robin is the Hood," she croaked, "the greatest gift of all is that of knowing oneself and yet you reject it. Why do you hide from the truth?" In one hand she held a distaff from which a tangled piece of dirty wool hung; in the other she held a firm strand of woolen thread, still connected to the raw material from which it had come.

"I am not hiding from the truth," he replied, his voice shaking with fear at the sight of this ferocious old crone. "You come from the otherworld and use lies to tempt men from theirs."

"Not the other world," said the maiden. "Your world, the world of your mother's people."

Robin shifted his gaze to the woman in red. "Yes," she smiled warmly. "I am your true mother. For love of Ailric I chose to live among mortals, but I could not stay. Although it tore my heart, I left you with him as a reminder of our love. He promised to tell you of me, of your heritage, but de Rainault prevented that." The bitterness of her voice was deep and mingled with sorrow.

Robin's mind whirled. The claim was too unexpected, too incredible. He knew that the faeries were capable of any lies to dazzle and ensorcell men, and yet, he felt the truth of it. "The powers of light and darkness have always been with you," Herne had said. He had always known and felt things, things which others had not, things for which he had no explanation. Had he not acknowledged earlier this night his oneness with the forest and the distance between himself and the settled world of town and village? Raising his eyes, he looked fearlessly at his mother. "I believe you, Mother," he said quietly, "but why did you not come to me sooner?"

"I could not," she answered. "I promised Herne, in return for his protection of you, that I would not interfere. You are his as much as you are mine and he had need of you."

"Need of me!" Robin replied bitterly. "Need of me to beat my head against a wall that never gives, to fire my arrows at a target always out of reach, to do what he himself cannot do!"

"You are weary," said the mother, "and that is why were were able to come to you. We saw your need. When you tired of the tasks Herne has set you, we were free to offer you a way out, a way home. Come, leave the world of men and their violent, petty quarrels. Enter your true home." She reached out for him with one arm and with the other pointed behind her. Faintly, on the hilltop, he could see the indistinct outlines of a great hall, glistening with gold and crystal. In the courtyard a fountain played and throughout the faint notes of a harp, struck by a master, could be heard. As much as anything in his life, as much as he had wanted to shelter in the arms of the mother, he wanted to enter that hall, to hear that music, but as he stepped forward, he heard Much mutter in his sleep and he turned to look at him.

"What about Much?" he asked.

"He has entered our world," said the maiden, "now he must stay."

"But it isn't his world," remonstrated Robin. He thought of Much playing beside the millpond, talking to the chickens as he fed them, sleeping in the sunlight on Midsummer's Day. "He belongs to the world of men, to the daylight, to his friends."

"Perhaps he did once," the maiden said coldly, "but now he belongs to us."

"No!" Robin shouted, once more stepping back. "You cannot compel him. He belongs to himself. Only if he freely gives himself can you claim him!"

"You speak wisely, jhulfling," said the crone. "That is indeed the law. We have no



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rightful claim to keep the boy, but as he has trespassed in our realm, we do have the right to detain him -- for a spell."

"How long?" asked Robin.

"As our time goes?" The old woman paused. "Just a few days."

"And in mortal time?" pursued Robin.

"Fifty or so years." She shrugged as if it were of little importance.

"Fifty or so?" Robin stared at the curly-haired boy. In fifty years everyone he knew would be dead: Marion, John, Tuck, Nasir, Will -- they would all be gone. Who would he return to and who would Robin return to if he ventured once again into the mortal world? The thought of never again lying at Marion's side, breathing in her warmth and love, of never again bantering with John or teasing Tuck about his cooking or hunting with Nasir, sharing with the silent Saracen the joy of the chase, of never again quarreling with Will, tempering his idealism against Scarlet's pragmatism, of never seeing Much grow to manhood -- all this suddenly seemed too high a price. They were part of his world and he a part of theirs.

Sadly he looked at the three women, maid, mother and crone. "I'm sorry," he said. "I cannot go with you. I belong to the world of men and still have much to do. Let the boy go, please?"

"I told you," the crone turned to the other two. "I told you the time was not right. The mortal world still binds him."

"We had to try," answered the maid. "We only wanted to spare him the pain of what is to come."

"What is to come is to come," replied the old woman. "It must be his choice and he has made it. Still, there is the matter of the boy. He is ours," she looked at Robin, "unless someone promises to return -- and take his place."

Robin looked steadily into her eyes, then he shifted his gaze to the mother and to the maid before returning to her. "I will take his place, grandmother," he promised. "When I have done what I must do, I will return. I give you my word."

For the first time the old woman smiled. "I accept your word, Robin i' the Hood, and I will be waiting for you."

"And I," said the mother.

"I, too," added the maid.

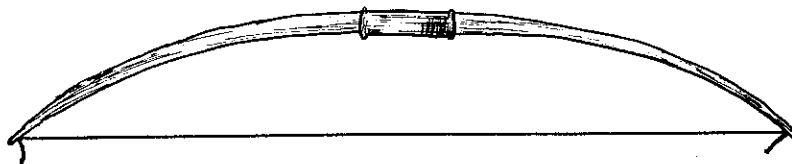
They faded from sight as the echo of their voices faded from his ears. The glade, now bathed in the fading light of the moon, seemed suddenly prosaic. On the grass in front of him Much stirred and sat up.

"Robin," he called out. "Robin! I had the strangest dream. I dreamed I saw a beautiful girl and she ..."

Robin bent over and mussed the boy's hair. How warm and good it felt to touch another human being. "Tell me about it on the way back, Much. Everyone's been worried sick about you."

"Have they?" Contrition filled Much's dark eyes. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to find Will and bring him back."

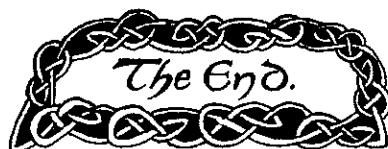
"He'll come back," said Robin confidently. "He's one of us. We belong together and he knows it." Pulling Much up, he gave him a gentle shove toward the trees and followed after him. As he entered the forest, he turned back for a moment, regretful, but at peace. He would return, but not yet.



For a moment the pain was so intense that he felt he could not bear it. He had fired his last arrow over de Rainault's head, inviting the Sheriff to come and end the conflict

once and for all. He had not wanted to die so soon, but now that the moment had arrived, he was ready. As he had deliberately turned his back on the Sheriff's men his last thoughts had been of Marion and Much, safe now on the way back to Sherwood. De Rainault would be content with his death, he would let them go. And as long as they lived, a part of him would live as well. As the arrows hit, he had smiled.

He was still smiling as the pain vanished and he found himself standing in the enchanted glade. As the maiden ran forward to lead him in and the mother opened her arms to embrace him, the crone smiled upon him. "The time is right," she said. "Welcome home, Rohin i' the Hood."



The Sheriff Sulks in Nottingham

*The Sheriff sulks in Nottingham,
in the castle with long black barbican
topped by stone figures of defenders
who grin into the purple dusk.*

*He paces the Great Hall, perplexed
that a simple outlaw, scarce better than serf,
had shamed the pride of Normandy
and claimed a forest for his own.*

*He gnashes his teeth in growing rage;
he's put the highest price on the outlaw's head,
but none seem able to rid him of the man --
his presence haunts the Sheriff, even in his bed.*

-- Janet P. Reedman

