*THE GESTE OF ROBIN HOOD*

Verse Translation by   
Robert Landis Frank

**The First Fit**

Stop and listen, everybody,

This story's pretty good.

It's all about a bold outlaw,

His name was Robin Hood.

Robin was a wise outlaw.

While he walked on ground,

So courteous an outlaw

Was seldom ever found.

Robin stood in the greenwood

And leaned against a tree,

And by him stood Little John,

A good yeoman was he.

And also did good Scarlett,

And Much, the miller's son.

Every inch of his body

Was worthy of a man.

Then spoke Little John

All unto Robin Hood,

"Master, if you would dine soon

It would do ye a lot of good."

Then spoke good Robin,

"To dine I have no wish,

Til I have some bold baron

Or some unknown guest.

"Til I have some wealthy abbot

That can pay for the best,

Or some knight or some squire

That lives here in the west."

Good habits then had Robin

In the land where he stayed.

Everyday before he ate

Three prayers would he say.

...

"Master," then said Little John,

"If we're to spread the board,

Tell us where we shall go

And what we can afford.

"Where we shall take, where we shall leave,

Where we shall stay behind.

Where we shall rob, where we shall kill,

Where we shall beat and bind."

"Not so much force," said Robin.

"We'll get enough somehow.

But see that ye do no husband harm

That tills with his plough.

"Nor any good yeoman

That walks by greenwood hollow.

Nor any knight or squire

That will be a good fellow.

"These bishops and these archbishops,

Them shall ye beat and bind.

The high sheriff of Nottingham,

Him hold ye in your mind."

"This word shall hold," said Little John,

"And this lesson we shall remember.

It is late in the day, God send us a guest

So we can get to our dinner."

"Take thy good bow in thy hand," said Robin.

"Let Much go with thee.

And also William Scarlett,

And no man stay with me.

"And walk up to the Saylis

And down to Watling Street,

And wait for some unknown guest

That you may chance to meet.

"And be he earl or baron,

Abbot or knight or squire,

Bring him to me at the greenwood tree.

His dinner shall be on the fire."

They went up to the Saylis,

These yeomen all three.

They looked east, they looked west,

No man did they see.

But as they looked into the greenwood,

By a dark street,

There came a knight riding.

Him they soon did meet.

All dreary was his countenance,

And little was his pride.

His one foot in the stirrup stood,

The other hung beside.

His hood hung over his eyes.

He rode in simple array.

A sorrier man than he was

Rode never on summer day.

Little John was full courteous

And got down on his knee.

"Welcome be ye, gentle knight,

Welcome are ye to me.

...

"Who is thy master?" said the knight.

John said, "Robin Hood."

"He is a good yeoman," said the knight.

"Of him I have heard much good.

"I grant," said he, "to go with you,

My brothers, all together.

Though I had planned to dine today

At Blythe or Duncaster."

Forth then went this gentle knight

In a sorrowful state.

The tears ran out of his eyes

And fell down by his face.

They brought him to the greenwood door.

When Robin he did see,

Full courteously he took off his hood

And got down on his knee.

"Welcome, sir knight," said Robin.

"Welcome art thou to me.

I have waited for you fasting, sir,

All these hours three."

Then answered the gentle knight

With words fair and free,

"God save thee, good Robin,

And all thy merry company."

They washed together and wiped off

And sat down to their dinner.

Bread and wine they had plenty of,

And the best parts of the deer.

Swans and pheasants they had full good

And fowls of the river.

They didn't leave out any little bird

That ever was bred on briar.

"Eat up, sir knight," said Robin.

"Thank you, sir," said he.

"I haven't had such a dinner

In all these weeks three.

"If I ever come again, Robin,

Here by this country,

As good a dinner I'll make for thee

As thou hast made for me."

"Thank you, knight," said Robin,

"For my dinner, whenever I have it.

I was never so greedy, by dear worthy God.

Food, I can take it or leave it.

"But pay ere ye go," said Robin.

"I think it is good and right.

It was never the manner, by dear worthy God,

A yeoman to pay for a knight."

"I have nothing in my trunk," said the knight,

"That I may offer, for shame."

"Little John, go look," said Robin.

"And don't leave out anything."

"Tell me the truth," said Robin,

"So God will have pity on thee."

"I have no more than ten shillings," said the knight.

"So God have pity on me."

"If thou hast no more," said Robin,

"I will not touch one penny.

And if you have need of any more,

More shall I lend thee.

"Go forth now, Little John,

And bring the truth to me.

If there be no more than ten shillings,

Not a penny shall I see."

Little John spread his mantle out

Full fair upon the ground,

And there he found in the knight's trunk

Only half a pound.

Little John let it lie full still

And went to his master low.

"What tidings, John?" said Robin.

"Sir, the knight is true enough."

"Pour out the best wine," said Robin.

"The knight shall begin.

No wonder, it seems to me,

Thy clothing is so thin.

"Tell me one word," said Robin.

"It will go no further than me.

I think you were made a knight of nothing,

Or else of yeomanry.

"Or else you have been a sorry husband

And lived in trouble and strife.

A usurer or a lecher," said Robin.

With wrong you've led your life."

"I am none of those, by God that made me,"

Said this gentle knight.

"A hundred winters here before

My ancestors have been knights.

"But often it has happened, Robin,

A man had been disgraced.

But God that sits in Heaven above

May amend his state.

"Within these two years, Robin," he said,

"My neighbors know it well,

Four hundred pounds of good money I spent,

Not all of it on myself.

"Now I have no goods," said the knight.

"God has so arranged it.

Just my children and my wife,

Til God decides to change it."

...

"My lands I mortgaged, Robin,

Until a certain day,

To a rich abbot who lives near here

In Saint Mary's Abbey."

"What is the sum?" said Robin.

"How much do you owe?"

"Sir," he said, "four hundred pounds.

The abbot wants his loan."

"And if you lose your land," said Robin,

"What will happen to thee?"

"Hastily I will take me," said the knight,

"Over the salty sea,

"And see where Christ lived and died

On the mount of Calvary.

Farewell, friend, and have a good day.

It may no better be."

Tears fell out of his eyes,

He would have gone his way.

"Farewell, friend, and have a good day,

I have no more to pay."

"Where are your friends?" said Robin.

"Sir, not one of them knows me now.

When I was rich enough at home,

Great boasts to me they'd vow.

"And now they run away from me

Like beasts in a row.

They take no more heed of me,

As if they didn't know."

...

"Hast thou any friend," said Robin,

"That would thy sponsor be?"

"I have none," then said the knight,

"But God that died on a tree."

"Do away with thy jokes," said Robin.

"There I'll find me none.

Who should I have God borrow it from,

Peter, Paul, or John?

...

"Come forth now, Little John,

And go to my treasure

And bring me four hundred pounds.

And see that it's well-measured."

Forth then went Little John,

And Scarlett went before.

He counted out four hundred pounds,

About eight and twenty score.

...

"Master," then said Little John,

"His clothing is very thin.

You must give the knight some good clothes

To wrap his body in.

"For you have scarlet and green, master,

And many a rich array.

There is no merchant in merry England

So rich, I dare well say."

"Take him three yards of every color,

And see that you measure it true."

Little John took no other measure

But his long bow of yew.

...

"Master," then said Little John

To gentle Robin Hood,

"You must give the knight a horse

To carry home these goods."

"Take him that grey packhorse," said Robin,

"And a saddle new.

He is Our Lady's messenger,

God grant that he be true."

"And a good war horse," said Much,

"To maintain him in his right."

"And a pair of boots," said Scarlett,

"For he is a gentle knight."   
...

"When shall my day be?" said the knight.

"Sir, thy will shall be."

"This day, twelve months from now," said Robin,

"Under this greenwood tree.

"It would be a great shame," said Robin,

"A knight alone to ride

Without squire, yeoman or page

To walk by his side.

"I shall lend thee Little John, my man,

And he shall be thy knave.

In a yeoman's stead he may thee stand

If ever you have great need."

***The Second Fit*** *follows the knight as he goes to the abbot to pay his debts. He does so with the help of Robin Hood’s loan and chastises the abbot for being greedy and not showing mercy.*

**The Third Fit**

Stay and listen, everyone,

All that still are here.

Of Little John, the knight's man,

Good mirth ye shall hear.

It was on a merry day

That young men would go shoot,

Little John strung his bow

And said he would go too.

Three times Little John shot about,

And each time he slit the wood.

The proud sheriff of Nottingham

By the target stood.

The sheriff swore a full great oath,

"By Him that died on a tree,

This man is the best archer

That ever I did see.

"Tell me now, strong young man,

What is thy name,

In what country were you born,

And where is your dwelling place?"

"In Holderness, sir, I was born.

That's where I live still.

Men call me Reynold Greenleaf

When I am in those hills."

"Tell me, Reynold Greenleaf,

Will you live with me?

And every year I will give you

Twenty marks for your fee."

"I have a master," said Little John,

"A courteous knight is he.

If you get leave of him,

The better may it be."

The sheriff got Little John

For twelve months from the knight,

And right away he gave him

A good strong horse to ride.

Now Little John is the sheriff's man,

God help us all.

But always thought Little John

To square the old account.

"Now God help me," said Little John,

"By my true loyalty,

I shall be the worst servant to him

That ever yet had he."

It fell upon a Wednesday,

The sheriff a'hunting was gone,

And Little John lay in his bed

And was forgotten at home.

There he was fasting

Til it was past the noon.

"Good sir steward, I pray thee,

Give me my dinner soon.

"It is long for Greenleaf

Fasting for to be.

Therefore, I pray thee, sir steward,

My dinner give to me."

"You will never eat nor drink," said the steward,

"Til my lord has come to town."

"I make my vow to God," said John,

"I'll sooner crack your crown."

...

Little John ate and Little John drank

As much as he could hold.

The sheriff had in his kitchen a cook,

A stout man and bold.

"I make my vow to God," said the cook,

"You aren't worth a piss

To live in any house

And eat like this."

There he lent Little John

Good strokes three.

"I make my vow to God," said John,

"Those strokes really liked me.

"You are a bold, hearty man,

So it seems to me,

And before I leave this place

Better tried shall you be."

Little John drew a good long sword.

The cook took another in hand.

They did not think a thought to flee,

But stiffly for to stand.

There they fought together

Two miles across the floor.

Neither one could hurt the other

For at least an hour or more.

"I make my vow to God," said Little John,

"By my true loyalty,

You are one of the best swordsmen

That ever I yet did see.

"If you can shoot a bow as well,

You should come with me to the woods,

And two times a year there

You can change your clothes.

"And every year, Robin Hood

Will give you twenty marks for your fee."

"Put up thy sword," said the cook,

"And fellows we will be."

Then he fed Little John

The best parts of the doe.

Good bread and full good wine

They ate and drank also.

...

They went to the treasure house

As fast as they could have gone.

The locks that were of full good steel,

They broke them everyone.

They took away the silver vessel

And all that they could get.

Cups, goblets, and spoons --

Nothing did they forget.

They also took the good money,

Three hundred pounds and more,

And went straight to Robin Hood,

Up to the greenwood door.

"God save thee, my dear master,

And Christ save thee, too."

And then said Robin to Little John,

"It's good to see thee, too.

"And also that stout yeoman

Ye've brought along with thee.

What tidings now from Nottingham,

Little John, tell me."

"Well, the proud sheriff is weeping

And sent these here by me:

His cook and all his silverware,

And three hundred pounds and three."

...

Little John then and there

Thought of a shrewd plan.

He gathered all his will,

And five miles into the forest he ran.

Then he met the proud sheriff

Hunting with hounds and horn.

Little John was full courteous

And knelt down before him.

"God save thee, my dear master,

And Christ save thee, too."

"Reynold Greenleaf," said the sheriff.

"What have you been up to?"

"I have been in this forest.

A fair sight I did see.

It was one of the fairest sights

That ever appeared to me.

"Yonder I saw a right fair hart,

His color is of green.

Seven score of deer in a herd

Follow where he leads.

"Their antlers are so sharp, master,

At least sixty or more,

That I dare not shoot at them

For fear I might be gored."

"I make my vow to God," said the sheriff,

"That sight I'd like to see."

"Get moving, my dear master,

Right now, and come with me."

The sheriff rode, and Little John,

On foot he was full smart.

And when they came before Robin,

"Lo, sir, here is the master hart."

Still stood the proud sheriff.

A sorry man was he.

"You aren't worth much, Reynold Greenleaf.

You have betrayed me."

...

"Cheer up," said Robin Hood,

"Sheriff, for charity

And for the love of Little John,

Thy life I grant to thee."

When they had eaten well,

The day was all but gone.

"Take off the sheriff's shoes and socks,"

Said Robin to Little John.

His shirt and his fur coat

They took from the sheriff then

And gave him a green mantle

To wrap his body in.

Robin commanded his strong young men

Under the greenwood tree

That they should sleep in the same clothes

So the sheriff could see.

All night lay the proud sheriff

In his undershirt.

No wonder it was in the greenwood

His sides began to hurt.

"Cheer up, sheriff," said Robin,

"For by God's charity,

This how we live

Under the greenwood tree."

"This is a harder way to live," said the sheriff,

"Than any hermit or friar.

For all the gold in merry England

I wouldn't stay in these briars."

"For the next twelve months," said Robin,

"You shall dwell here with me.

I shall teach you, proud sheriff,

An outlaw how to be."

...

"Let me go," then said the sheriff,

"For saints' charity,

And I will be the best friend

You ever did see."

"You shall swear me an oath," said Robin,

"On my bright sword,

You will never wait to waylay me

By land nor by water.

"And if you find any of my men

By day or by night,

Upon thy oath, ye shall swear

To help them all you might."

Now the sheriff has sworn his oath

And homeward made his speed.

He was as full of the greenwood

As a berry is of seed.

***The Forth Fit*** *describes the way in which Robin Hood robs two greedy monks who lie to him. From the monks, Robin acquires 800 pounds and believes the debt owed by the knight in Fit 1 to be paid. When he sees the knight, Sir Richard, Richard attempts to pay his debts, but Robin refuses. To sweeten the deal, Robin divides his profits from the monks and gives half to Sir Richard when he hears that Richard rescued a yeoman from a pack of unruly knights.*

**The Fifth Fit**

Now the knight has said goodbye

And gone along his way.

Robin Hood and his merry men

Lived there many a day.

Stay and listen, everyone,

And pay attention to what I say,

How the proud sheriff of Nottingham

Called for a day of play.

That all the best archers of the north

Should come on a certain day,

And he that shoots the best

Shall bear the prize away.

He that shoots the best,

The furthest and the truest,

At a pair of good targets

Under the greenwood forest,

A right good arrow he shall have,

The shaft of white silver,

The head and feathers of rich red gold,

In England there is none finer.

Then good Robin heard about this

Under his greenwood tree.

"Get ye ready, my strong young men,

That shooting I will see.

"Come on, my merry young men.

You shall all go, too.

And I will test the sheriff's faith

And see if he is true."

...

When they came to Nottingham

The targets were good and long.

Many a bold archer was there

Whose bow was good and strong.

"Six of you shoot with me,

The others keep us covered,

And stand with good bows strung

In case we are discovered."

The fourth outlaw bent his bow,

And that was Robin Hood.

And the proud sheriff saw it all

As by the target he stood.

Three times Robin shot about,

And each time he slit the wand.

And so did good Gilbert

With the white hand.

Little John and good Scarlett

Were archers of the best.

Little Much and good Reynold

Were better than the rest.

When they had shot about,

These archers fair and good,

Every time the best one,

Indeed, was Robin Hood.

He was given the good arrow

For the worthiest was he.

He took the gift so courteously,

He would go to the greenwood tree.

They cried out on Robin Hood

And great horns began to blow.

"Woe to you, Treason," said Robin.

"Full evil are you to know.

"And woe to you, you proud sheriff,

Thus to have your jest.

You promised me differently

Back in the wild forest.

"But if I had you in the greenwood

Under my greenwood tree,

You would leave me a better pledge

Than your true loyalty."

Full many a bow there was bent

And arrows they let glide.

Many a jacket there was rent

And hurt many a side.

The outlaws' shot was so strong

No man could drive them off.

And the proud sheriff's men,

They fled away like chaff.

If Robin had known about this ambush,

In the greenwood he would be.

Many an arrow there was shot

Among that company.

Little John was hurt full sore

With an arrow through his knee.

That he could neither walk nor ride

Was a great pity to see.

"Master," then said Little John,

"If you ever loved me,

And for that same Lord's sake

That died upon a tree,

"And for all the good service

I gave you everyday,

Don't let the proud sheriff

Find me alive this way.

"But take out your bright sword

And cut off my head

And give me wounds deep and wide

And leave me here dead."

"I don't want that," said Robin,

"John, to have you slain.

Not for all the gold in merry England,

Though here in a pile it lay."

...

Then there was a fair castle

A little ways in the woods,

Double-ditched all about

And walled by the road.

And there lived that gentle knight,

Sir Richard at the Lea,

That Robin had lent his goods

Under the greenwood tree.

He took good Robin in

And all his company.

"Welcome, Robin Hood.

You're welcome here to me.

"And I want to thank you for your comfort

And for your courtesy

And for your great kindness

Under the greenwood tree.

"I love no man in all the world

So much as I do thee.

For all the proud sheriff of Nottingham,

Right here you shall be.

"Shut the gates and draw the bridge

And let no man come in.

And arm ye well and make ye ready

And to the walls ye win.”

...

***The Sixth Fit*** *describes the sheriff’s anger at being bested by Robin Hood. He gathers an army, seizes Sir Richard’s lands, captures Sir Richard, and goes in search of Robin Hood. Robin reminds the sheriff of his oath he swore at the end of Fit 3, but the sheriff will not give the oath any regard. Without other options, Robin Hood slays the sheriff and decapitates him. He then rescues Sir Richard.*

***The Seventh Fit*** *explains that King Richard comes to town and wishes to meet Robin Hood. He disguises himself as a monk and goes to the forest where Robin and his men engage in an archery contest. For each target his men miss, Robin gives them a blow on the head. For each target Robin misses, his guest (the king disguised as the monk) will give him a blow. After Robin receives his first blow, King Richard reveals his true identity and the two have a merry time together.*

**The Eighth Fit**

"Have you any green cloth," said the king,

"That you will sell to me?"

"Yes, for God," said Robin,

"Thirty yards and three."

"Robin," said the king,

"Now I ask of thee,

Sell me some of that cloth

For my men and me."

"Yes, for God," then said Robin,

"Or else I were a fool.

Another day ye will me clothe,

I trust, against the yule."

The king cast off his cowl then,

A green garment he put on.

And every knight, also,

Got a new green robe.

When they were clothed in Lincoln green

They cast away their grey.

"Now we shall go to Nottingham,"

Thus the king did say.

They strung their bows and forth they went,

Shooting side by side.

Towards the town of Nottingham

Like outlaws they did ride.

The king and Robin rode together

On that pleasant day,

And they traded blows whenever they missed

As they went by the way.

And many a blow the king won

Off Robin Hood that day,

And Robin never spared himself

To give the king his pay.

"So help me, God," said the king,

"I've learned this game right here.

I should not get the best of you

Though I shoot all this year."

All the people of Nottingham,

They stood and beheld.

They saw nothing but mantles of green

That covered all the field.

...

Full hastily they began to flee,

Yeomen, knaves, and merchants,

And old wives that could barely go,

They hopped on their crutches.

The king laughed heartily

And commanded them again.

When they saw the comely king,

Indeed, they were glad it was him.

They ate and drank and made them glad

And sang with notes of glee.

Then spoke the comely king

To Sir Richard at the Lea.

He gave him back his land again,

A good man he bid him be.

Robin thanked the comely king

And got down on his knee.

Robin had dwelled in the king's court

But twelve months and three,

And he had spent a hundred pounds

And all his men's fee.

...

"Alas," then said good Robin,

"Alas, and God help me.

If I dwell any longer with the king,

Sorrow will kill me."

Forth then went Robin Hood

Til he came to the king.

"My lord, the king of England,

Grant me this one thing.

"I made a chapel in the greenwood

That beautiful is to see.

It is of Mary Magdeline,

And there I long to be.”

...

"If it be so," then said the king,

"It may no better be.

Seven nights and no longer

I give thee leave of me."

"Thank you, lord," then said Robin

And got down on his knee.

He took his leave full courteously,

To the greenwood then went he.

When he came to the greenwood,

On a merry morning,

He heard the small notes

Of birds' merry singing.

...

Robin dwelled in the greenwood

Two and twenty years.

For all the dread of the king

He wouldn't go back there.

Yet he was beguiled, indeed,

Through a wicked woman's sin --

The prioress of Kirksley

That was not of his kin.

For the love of a knight,

Sir Roger of Duncaster

That was her own special --

In evil they met together.

They took together their counsel

Robin Hood for to slay,

And how they best might do that deed

And murder him that day.

Then said good Robin

In the place where he stood,

"Tomorrow I must to Kirksley

To be letting my blood."

Sir Roger of Duncaster,

By the prioress he lay,

And there they betrayed good Robin Hood

Through their false play.

Christ that died on the cross,

Have mercy on Robin Hood,

For he was a brave outlaw

And did poor men much good.