

## Gisbourne

“I'd not, were I you. You're not nearly as quiet as you think, and I am not as defenseless as I look.”

The men exchanged stiff glances, not believing this oddly-cloaked man was talking to them, or even knew they were there.

The man in the horse-hide cloak crouched at his fire, stirring his stew, with not so much as a glance at the thicket which he addressed.

“You are hungry, beaten down...turned to robbing whoever comes your way. Maybe once, you were good men,” he paused, as if contemplating that possibility. “You do the work of the same evil men who drive you here.”

A hand moved quickly and the chink from a few copper coins in a deerskin bag sounded from where it landed a hands-length from the bush.

“The choice is yours. Try for more and die for your greed, or take what you did not earn and do some good with it. Or not, as you wish.” There was no denying the finality of this statement.

A filthy hand stretched from beneath the leaves and grasped the bag a moment before vanishing back into the thicket with the prize. The man looked on, still stirring his stew, waiting to see if greed overcame common sense.

At first, nothing. Then, a whispered conversation, escalating to a hissed, “Johnny, no! Let's just be happy with this and take our leave!”

The rebuke was lost in a rustle of branches. Again, a hissed warning, “Look at this man's carriage, his manner. He's not just a wanderer; he carries himself as a man-at-arms. This man knows death.”

This time, the rebuke was heard, “He's half my size, and my stick is much bigger than his. If he can so readily part with one sack of coins, then he certainly has more.”

The last warning was a shout of despair:

“Johnny! No!”

One of the men pushed himself from the bush and rushed forward with a club, little more than a fallen tree branch, polished from use or mistaken pride. The horse-skin cloaked man had more than enough time to rise from the fire to greet him. The staff on which he leaned kicked up from the ground in a blur, the top part reaching out and directing the club towards the ground even before the stocky end of it had started its swing toward its intended victim. The bottom half of the staff continued the arc started by its upper half and then twisted around to the back of the would-be bandit's neck and, as he was already off-balance from the sudden diversion of his club, easily pushed him several more feet forward past the man and the fire.

“This is only folly, “ the man shook his head, at the same time glancing at the bush in the event that the other decided to try to even the odds. “ At this point, we are in danger of ruining a filling meal. In another moment, it may be a life.”

## Gisbourne

Enraged at being ridiculed, the club-wielder turned around, wary now of the reach of the staff, but recognizing that he was likely the stronger of the two. Another rush, but this time, when the staff moved towards him, he viciously knocked it away, and promptly had to step back, but not quick enough, as the staff's opposite end caught him across the cheek. The staff retreated and he wiped the back of his free hand across his face, smearing blood there.

“Last chance. Leave or die, “ the cloaked man had not yet even moved from the fire, standing now between his opponent and his supper.

The club came up and the bloodied man took a step toward the cloaked one. Surprisingly swift, one long stride brought the staff-bearer within easy reach of the club. A rap with the pole's end snapped against knuckles and the club fell to the ground. Another poke hit just below the chest, pushing the wind from the man with an exaggerated ooffff. The end of the staff popped up, straightening the big man by knocking his head back, exposing his throat. The rod pulled back, and paused for an instant, poised for a killing blow, and then shot forward, stopping half a thumbs-width from the bulging adam's apple, at the same time a shout rang out.

“Spare him! Please!” The other man was standing by the bush, his open hands out in front of him, despite wearing a small...pitifully small...knife at his waste, wanting to rush forward to move between the staff and his friend, but recognizing how precarious the situation had become.

The cloaked man moved the staff back a hands-breadth and snapped it forward again, hitting the dazed and winded man low in the forehead, above the bridge of the nose. He fell back onto the ground and curled into a ball.

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Staff laying next to him, the man lazed back on a hassock of grass, eyeing the two brothers, for brothers they most certainly were. Despite the twist in the larger man's nose, and the new dent in his forehead, there was no mistaking the family resemblance. The smaller one, likely the younger, helped his larger sibling to a seated position and steadied his back while the man tried to suck in as much air as he could, great rasping sounds coming forth, as the blood still dripped from his cheek.

Once the rasping subsided, the wiser helped his brother to his feet and turned briefly towards the champion. Reaching into the ragged pocket of his tunic, he pulled out the deerskin bag and offered it towards the reclining figure.

“We should have listened to you,” a glance at his brother stifled the protest slowly moving from his eyes to his lips. “Take back your coins, but please do not bring us in to the authorities. We will move on, and bother you no more.”

The cloaked man looked mildly surprised, but said nothing as the man tossed the bag towards his feet, not quite close enough to retrieve without getting up. He turned, leading his brother away a few steps, when he was interrupted.

“Keep the coins,” the man waited for the younger man to turn before tossing the bag into his midriff. Instinctively, he caught it. “Also...stay. Share my campfire, and the rabbit stew. It might be a bit more gritty now than when we started our conversation, but you look as though you could use a hot meal. I daresay, even just a meal.”

## Gisbourne

The younger man gaped. The smell of the stew was overpowering, and gritty or not, the stranger was right; they had eaten naught but berries and stale bread in the last day, and the closest to a hot meal was more than a week behind them. Thanks to him, they did now have some money to buy food, instead of relying on what they gathered here in the forest, but still, it would be foolish...as foolish as challenging this man after his warning...to turn down a ready-made meal, at no cost but the lump of pride John would have to swallow.

“Come. Sit. We can pretend for a few minutes that nothing has happened. Just three travellers, meeting in the woods, each helping the other out of their current dilemmas,” the man gestured to a nearby rock and a deadwood log that could be pulled into place for more comfortable seating.

The younger man looked at him suspiciously. “How do we know that you won't incapacitate us and bring us into the magistrate for a reward?” As soon as he said it, he knew that this was unlikely, for many reasons, starting with the knuckle-sized lump forming between John's eyebrows.

“Faith goes a long way,” the cloaked man said solemnly. “Although, I'm sure by now that you've reasoned that I could have done that already, and truth be known, I still could, whether or not I manage to lull you into complacency with a hot meal. But, I can also see that you may not trust that my motives are pure.”

“You mentioned helping each other out. So far, you've given us a sack of coins, a lesson in manners, and the offer of a cooked meal”, the young man looked in turn from bag to lump to rabbit stew.

“And a headache”, John winced, still in pain, but chagrin replacing embarrassment.

“And a headache, “ the young man repeated, the hint of the fleet of a smile crossing his lips. “For one of us, anyway. What could we possibly do for you.”

“Company”, asserted the cloaked man. “And a good spar. Perhaps you can give me news of the surrounding area. I am not from around here, and I'd hate to get lost in my travels. You spoke of a local magistrate. I'm as eager to cross paths with him as you are, which is to say, I'm not. You can tell me a little bit about him. Not all sheriffs are evil, I understand. Is he a good man, or another overbearing, money-grabbing thief granted authority over the good people of this land?” He pulled the log in closer to the fire. “Come. Sit.”

The young man thought that this last part about the “good people” was somewhat poetic, almost bardish, but said nothing. He glanced at John, and after a moment's pause and a small nod between them, the men sat down.

“Excellent! I've got some extra pots. More for serving ale than stew, but since I haven't got any ale, it means that we each get our own bowl, and we can leave the mash warming near the fire.” From a satchel behind him, he pulled out three cups and passed two back to the other men.

“Do not stand on my ceremony; dig in,” the cloaked man motioned towards the pot, while he continued to rummage through his satchel, to find utensils.

“What do we call you?” the younger brother asked, suddenly, as he realized that no names had passed

between them.

Interesting, thought the older man. Wise enough to know the difference between a name and an appellation.

“Ah, yes. Quite right. With all that dancing and dust-kicking, we did not exchange names,” the man glanced away for a moment, abashed for forgetting this common courtesy, and passed along two wooden spoons. “I know that my sparring partner here is John. You may call me Hood.”

The young man's eyebrow lifted momentarily. “An odd name, Hood. Sounds more like an occupation.”

“Ha, ha! A bold one, aren't you? Very well. It's not my real name, I'll give you that. You did ask, however, what should you call me. And you? No doubt John is a real name. What shall I call you?”

“Helm. You can call me Helm,” the young man paused for a moment, thinking better of lying to this man. “It is what people call me. It's short for Wilhelm.”

“Very good, Helm!” Hood's arm shot out and grasped first John's, and then Helm's wrists, in a mutual show of camaraderie. “Now that the pleasantries are done, let's eat!”

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John scraped the bottom of the cook pot clean with his spoon, folding the last of the stew into his bowl. He easily had two more helpings than either of the other men, but in his defense, the bowls were small, and he was big.

“This might be the best stew I've had since...well, maybe ever,” John paused before wolfing down the bowl's contents in three quick bites. “Better than mum's, I'd say. Mine or yours, Helm.”

Hood was surprised. Not about the stew, which was very good, and had to taste even better to starving men, but that these men were not brothers, as he had guessed.

“Yes. Very tasty, indeed, “a smile crept to his face. “A recipe from an old book I found in a monastery I stayed in one night, many years ago. I don't think that I was really supposed to be in that part of the library, but the recipes read so tastily that I had to memorize one or two before I left. This one calls for kid, but since I have no lamb, rabbit had to do. I would have liked to meet the chef, if I could, but doubtless this man, a Roman, I surmise, is long dust. It was penned in the Latin, and the front of the book was written “API CAE”, but I do not know if this was a name or if it had some other meaning. It was not in the best of condition.

“What surprises me more is that the two of you are not brothers, apparently. Surely, though, you are related?”

For a moment, Helm's face held a blank expression, but then he nodded. “Oh, yes, certainly. We're cousins, John and me. He's got a good part of a summer on me; he was born in May, and I in August. Not sure where he gets his size, though. The rest of his brood are all scrawny things.”

“Like you,” John grinned and gave him a playful, but not gentle, shove. Helm must have been used to these shows of family affection, because he braced himself enough not to be knocked off the log.

## Gisbourne

“And you? What of your brood? Brothers? Sisters?” Hood was genuinely curious.

“No brothers. All sisters. Two older and 3 younger. Damn lucky I didn't have to share in the pass-me downs.

And what of you, sir...if you aren't above our asking?” This last part was asked with the sincerest respect. It seemed that Helm would accept a vague answer, if that is what came.

Hood looked at the two men for a moment, and then made a decision.

“I am going to be honest with you two. I will tell you my name...my real name, or at least the name to which I can lay claim. I ask that you don't speak of it. I require no oath from you, but if you are honest men, in spite of your current profession, you will respect my request.

My name is Sir Guy of Gisbourne.”

Both men looked on in shock, and even Helm, the more level-headed of the two, laid a hand on his small knife. He was the first to recover his wits.

“Surely, that cannot be, “he said warily. “Sir Guy of Gisbourne was killed twenty-odd years past, by the hero, Robin Hood. Minstrels still sing of Sir Guy's wickedness, and of Robin's bravery.”

“Wickedness, eh?” Hood smiled, and drew his eyebrows down, in mock anger. Helm looked nervous, and put out both hand in a calming motion.

“So the songs go,” he amended.

Hood laughed in amusement. “The songs were quite right. My father was wicked, cruel and ever deserving of the death dealt to him. It has been my life-long goal to not be him, despite inheriting his name, and his title, and little else. You can see how I might be unwilling for people to know my true name. Twenty years is not long enough to erase the evil deeds performed by that man. Look at your own reaction.”

Helm thought about this for a moment. “Yes, but surely you have lands, servants, family, that can attest to your goodness? You should not pay for your father's cruelty.”

Bemused, Hood chuckled again. “Well, I don't think you know me quite well enough to make your own attestations to my goodness, but thank you, nonetheless. As for my lands and servants, I'm afraid that Sir Guy had a nasty run of luck before falling in with the likes of the old Sheriff of Nottingham, as the songs tell it. He lost the family manor and the land on which it sat. He maintained the title, but bartered his soul, becoming a mercenary; selling his sword to whomever would pay him. No task too repulsive.”

Hood's voice trailed off as he stared for a moment into the fire.

“Ah! My head!” This came from John. “Does it really matter your name, or what evil was your father? What matters is now, and what you've become. Even I have this sense.”

This time, it was Helm who smiled. “Ironically, this from the one who tried to take a club to a man an

## Gisbourne

hour ago.”

John shrugged. “Nothing like a hot meal to put things into perspective.”

“Well said, John!” Hood nodded. “And since we are being honest, I'd like to propose something. In my father's time, evil ruled the day and good rose up to conquer it. I think that this time has come again. Just as Robin Hood and his band eked out a living in the Sherwood, we too can find solace and safety in these woods, and help the good folks of this land to take back their dignity and their lives.”

Helm looked on in shock. “Become outlaws? Help folks? We can't even help ourselves against one man, doubtless trained as a true soldier is. We wouldn't last the blink of an eye in our first encounter with the sheriff's men.

Hood shook his head. “Guile and deceit are weapons, too, as are training and discipline. We will grow our number, and we won't take on any task too difficult for us. What say you? You were ready to become outlaws for yourselves. Are you ready to become outlaws for a higher cause? To become heroes?”

A glance between the cousins and an almost imperceptible nod tells Hood that they will do it.

Helm winced at the thought. “Outlaws, I'm sure that we are half-way there anyway. Heroes? We will have to wait and see.”

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