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TWO HEROES FROM THE MIDDLE AGES still stir our imaginations. One is King Arthur, with his knights of the Round Table. The other is Robin Hood, with his band of forest outlaws. King Arthur and his knights live at court. They go into the dark woods when they are after adventure. But forests hold no danger for Robin Hood and his men. Sherwood Forest is their home, and they feel safe there. The King Arthur stories tell of the mighty noblemen who rule. The Robin Hood stories tell of common men who defy their masters and rule themselves.

Was Robin Hood a real person? Probably not. But English records from the Middle Ages do tell of desperate criminals who ran into the woods to hide from the law and lived in bands, robbing those who passed through their gloomy glens.

The Robin Hood stories come to us from ballads popular in the 13th century. A ballad is a song or poem.
that usually tells a story. Ballads have rhyming four-line stanzas, sometimes followed by a chorus. You'll find verses from these old ballads introducing each chapter of our story.

The Robin Hood ballads were also performed as skits. In the 1400s, towns across England held games and plays in Robin Hood's name. In early summer a procession of villagers led by someone dressed as Robin Hood went to a neighboring village, where they performed a skit. Usually it showed how Robin Hood made a daring rescue. They collected money for their performance and spent it on such things as road repair.

Robin Hood became a popular hero because he represented the ordinary person's desire to be treated fairly. Medieval society had three ranks: the nobility, the men of the church and, lastly, common folk. The nobles were responsible for worldly welfare and the churchmen for spiritual welfare. That is, the duty of the nobility was to defend Christian lands with their lives. The duty of the clergy was to shepherd souls toward heaven and plead for God's blessings. The duty of common men was to keep everyone fed.

As the leaders of Christianity, nobles and clergy
should have acted in Christian ways toward the common people. They should have treated them with love, charity and goodness and, of course, according to the law. But what powerful men declare to be the law is not necessarily what either religious faith or fair reasoning would call justice. Thus it often happened that the common people hated their local authorities and grumbled against anyone who enjoyed luxuries. Robin Hood rejects unjust laws, seeing them as the will of wicked and greedy men.

To get away from the power of the sheriff and the bishop, Robin Hood and his outlaws live outdoors in Sherwood Forest. Their warm fellowship is based on equality. The outlaws choose Robin as their chief because his daring wins their admiration and loyalty. They believe they obey a higher law than the sheriff’s law, one that respects the dignity of every person. They feel justified in resisting their rulers because their rulers are not following that higher law. Robin Hood is devoted to the Virgin Mary, for example, but not to the church, because church leaders were not following their own teachings. He honors the idea of his king, but he believes the king’s deer really belong to the hungriest poor folk. He does not object to wealth or rank, but to the wrong use of those
advantages. His remedy for the suffering of the weak is to steal from the rich to give to the poor. Only those whose wealth is unearned need to fear Robin or his outlaws. Even then, rich travelers who tell Robin the truth get to keep some money. Those who lie lose it all.

Proving that many distinctions society makes between the high and the low ranks are false, Robin Hood shows that chivalry, the medieval code of courtesy and courage that guided behavior at King Arthur’s court, can guide a common man’s life as well. Robin Hood holds court in the forest just as King Arthur does at Camelot. Just as chivalry required every knight to defend and respect every woman, Robin Hood forbids any of his outlaws ever to hurt a woman, or any man if a woman is present. He demands loyalty, honesty and courage from each man, just as Arthur expects from his knights. Robin’s word is his bond, even to his enemies, and he is careful never to tell lies, even as he plays tricks. He lives by the rules of honor as much as does Sir Lancelot, the most illustrious knight of King Arthur’s Round Table.

Robin is a natural leader, bold and shrewd, but he is not the best of his band at anything except archery. To the outlaws of Sherwood Forest, skill at archery is
their special badge. Their long bows stood about six feet tall and could send an arrow the length of three football fields. At close range, those arrows could even go through armor. English archers became famous throughout Europe after their long bows won victories against the French at the battles of Crécy and Agincourt in the Hundred Years’ War. English kings understood the value of expert archers and held tournaments to encourage the skill. Robin cannot resist the chance a tournament gives to show his amazing aim, even though to go means he risks hanging. This gallant spirit, equal to any of King Arthur’s knights, and his common-sense fairness have made Robin Hood our favorite outlaw for more than 700 years.

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