

# Robin Hood and the Merry Little Old Woman

by Eva March Tappan

"Monday I wash and  
Tuesday I iron,  
Wednesday I cook and  
I mend;

Thursday I brew and  
Friday I sweep,  
And baking day brings  
the end."

So sang the merry little old woman as she sat at her wheel and spun; but when she came to the last line she really could not help pushing back the flax-wheel and springing to her feet. Then she held out her skirt and danced a gay little jig as she sang,

"Hey down, down, an a down!"

She curtseyed to one side of the room and then to another, and before she knew it she was curtseying to a man who stood in the open door.

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried the merry little old woman. "Whatever shall I do? An old woman ought to sit and spin and not be dancing like

a young girl. Oh, but it's Master Robin! Glad am I to set eyes on you, Master Robin. Come in, and I'll throw my best cloak over the little stool for a cushion. Don't be long standing on the threshold, Master Robin."

"It'll mayhap come to pass that I'll wish I had something to stand on," said Robin, grimly, "for the proud bishop is in the forest, and he's after me with all his men. It's night and day that he's been following me, and now he's caught me surely. You've no meal chest, have you, and you've no press, and you've no feather-bed that'll hide me? There's but the one wee bit room, and there's not even a mousehole."

The little woman's heart beat fast. What could she do?

"I mind me well of a Saturday night," said she, "when I'd but little firewood and it was bitter cold, that you and your men brought me such fine logs as the great folks at the hall don't have;

and then you came in yourself and gave me a pair of shoon and some brand-new hosen, all soft and fine and wool. I don't believe the king himself has such a pair, Master Robin, I've thought of something. Give me your mantle of green and your fine gray tunic, and do you put on my kirtle and jacket and gown, and tie my red and blue kerchief over your head you gave it to me yourself, you did; it was on Easter Day in the morning and do you sit down at the wheel and spin. See, you put your foot on the treadle so, to turn the wheel, and you twist the flax with your fingers so. Don't you get up, but just turn the wheel and grumble and mumble to yourself."

It was not long before the bishop and all his men came riding up to the little old woman's house. The bishop thrust open the door and called:

"Old woman, what have you done with Robin Hood?" but Robin sat grumbling and mumbling at the wheel and answered never a word to the proud bishop.

"She's mayhap daft," said one of the bishop's men. "We'll soon find him"; and in a minute he had looked up the chimney and behind the dresser and under the wooden bedstead. Then he turned to the corner cupboard.

"You're daft yourself," said the bishop, "to look in that little place for a strong man like Robin." And all the time the spinner at the wheel sat grumbling and mumbling. It was a queer thread that was wound on the spool, but no one thought of that. It was Robin that they wanted, and they cared little what kind of thread an old woman in a cottage was a-spinning.

"He's here, your Reverence," called a man who had opened the lower door of the corner cupboard.

"Bring him out and set him on the horse," ordered the bishop, "and see to it that you treat him like a wax candle in the church. The king's bidden that the thief and outlaw be brought to him, and I well know he'll hang the rogue on a gallows so high that it will show over the whole kingdom; but he has given orders that no one shall have the reward if the rascal has but a bruise on his finger, save that it came in a fair fight."

So the merry little old woman in Robin's tunic and Robin's green cloak was set gently on a milk-white steed. The bishop himself mounted a dapple-gray, and down the road they went.

It was the cheeriest party that one can imagine. The bishop

went laughing all the way for pure delight that he had caught Robin Hood. He told more stories than one could make up in an age of leap-years, and they were all about where he went and what he did in the days before he became bishop. The men were so happy at the thought of having the great reward the king had offered that they laughed at the bishop's stories louder than any one had ever laughed at them before. And as for the merry little old woman, she had the gayest time of all, though she had to keep her face muffled in her hood, and couldn't laugh aloud the least bit, and couldn't jump down from the great white horse and dance the gay little jig that her feet were fairly aching to try.

While the merry little old woman was riding off with the bishop and his men, Robin sat at the flax-wheel and spun and spun till he could no longer hear the beat of the horses' hoofs on the hard ground. No time had he to take off the kirtle and the jacket and the kerchief of red and blue, for no one knew when the proud bishop might find out that he had the wrong prisoner, and would come galloping back to the cottage on the border of the forest.

"If I can only get to my good men and true!" thought Robin;

and he sprang up from the little flax-wheel with the distaff in his hand, and ran out of the open door.

All the long day had Robin been away from his bowmen, and as the twilight time drew near, they were more and more fearful of what might have befallen him. They went to the edge of the forest, and there they sat with troubled faces.

"I've heard that the sheriff was seen but two days ago on the eastern side of the wood," said Much the miller's son.

"And the proud bishop's not in his palace," muttered Will Scarlet. "Where he's gone I know not, but may the saints keep Master Robin from meeting him. He hates us men of the greenwood worse than the sheriff does, and he'd hang any one of us to the nearest oak."

"He'd not hang Master Robin," declared Much the miller's son, "for the bishop likes good red gold, and the king's offered a great reward for him alive and unhurt." The others laughed, but in a moment they were grave again, and peered anxiously through the trees in one way and then in another, while nearer came the twilight.

"There are folks who say the forest is haunted," said Little John. "I never saw anything, but one night when I was close to the

little black pond that lies to the westward, I heard a cry that wasn't from bird or beast; I know that."

"And didn't you see anything?" asked Much the miller's son.

"No," answered Little John, "but where there's a cry, there's something to make the cry, and it wasn't bird or beast; I'm as sure of that as I am that my name is Little John."

"But it isn't," declared Friar Tuck. "You were christened John Little." No one smiled, for they were too much troubled about Robin.

"When I was a youngster," said William Scarlet, "I had an old nurse, and she told me that a first cousin of hers knew a woman whose husband was going through the forest by night, and he saw a witch carry a round bundle under her arm. It was wrapped up in a brown kerchief; and while he looked, the wind blew the kerchief away, and he saw that the round bundle was a man's head. The mouth of it opened and called, 'Help! Help!' He shot an arrow through the old witch, and then he said to the head, 'Where do you want to go? Whose head are you?' The head answered, 'I'm your head, and I want to go on your shoulders.' Then he put up his hand, and, sure enough, his own head was gone, and there it lay on the ground

beside the dead witch with the arrow sticking through her. He took up the head and set it on his shoulders. This was the story that he told when he came back in the morning, but no one knew whether really to believe it all or not. After that night he always carried his head a bit on one side, and some said it was because he hadn't set it back quite straight: but there are some folks that won't believe anything unless they see it themselves, and they said he had had a drink or two more than he should and that he took cold in his neck from sleeping with his head on the wet moss."

"Everybody knows there are witches," said Will Scarlet, "and folks say that wherever they may be through the day, they run to the forest when the sun begins to sink, and while they're running they can't say any magic words to hurt a man if he shoots them."

"What's that?" whispered Much the miller's son softly, and he fitted an arrow to the string.

"Wait; make a cross on it first," said Little John.

Something was flitting over the little moor. The soft gray mist hid the lower part of it, but the men could see what looked like the upper part of a woman's body, scurrying along through the fog in some mysterious fashion. Its arms

were tossing wildly about, and it seemed to be beckoning. The head was covered with what might have been a kerchief, but it was too dusky to see clearly.

"Don't shoot till it's nearer," whispered William Scarlet. "They say if you hurt a witch and don't kill her outright, you'll go mad forever after."

Nearer came the witch, but still Much the miller's son waited with his bow bent and the arrow aimed. The witch ran under the low bough of a tree, the kerchief was caught on a broken limb, and

"Why, it's Master Robin!" shouted Much the miller's son. "It's Master Robin himself"; and so it was. No time had he taken to throw off the gray kirtle and the black jacket and the blue and red kerchief about his head; for as soon as ever he could no longer hear the tramp of the horses' hoofs, he had run with the distaff still in his hand to the shelter of the good greenwood and the help of his own faithful men and true.

Meanwhile the bishop was still telling stories of what he did before he was a bishop, and the men were laughing at them, and the merry little old woman was having the gayest time of all, even though she dared not laugh out loud.

Now that the bishop had caught Robin Hood he had no fear

of the greenwood rangers; and as the forest road was much nearer than the highway, down the forest road the happy company went. The merry little old woman had sometimes sat on a pillion and ridden a farm beast from the plough; but to be on a great horse like this, one that held his head so high and stepped so carefully where it was rough, and galloped so lightly and easily where it was smooth why, she had never even dreamed of such a magnificent ride. Not a word did she speak, not even when the bishop began to tell her that no gallows would be high enough to hang such a wicked outlaw.

"You've stolen gold from the knights," said he, "you've stolen from the sheriff of Nottingham, and you've even stolen from me. Glad am I to see Robin Hood but what's that?" the bishop cried. "Who are those men, and who is their leader? And who are you?" he demanded of the merry little old woman.

Now the little woman had been taught to order herself lowly and reverently to all her betters, so before she answered the bishop she slipped down from the tall white horse and made a deep curtsy to the great man.

"If you please, sir," said she, "I think it's Robin Hood and his men."

"And who are you?" he demanded again.

"Oh, I'm nobody but a little old woman that lives in a cottage alone and spins," and then she sang in a lightsome little chirrup of a voice:

"Monday I wash and Tuesday I iron,  
Wednesday I cook and I mend;  
Thursday I brew and Friday I sweep,  
And baking day brings the end."

I fear that the bishop did not hear the little song, for the arrows were flying thick and fast. The little old woman slipped behind a big tree, and there she danced.

"Hey down, down, an a down!" to her heart's content, while the fighting went on.

It was not long before the great bishop was Robin's prisoner, and ere he could go free, he had to open his strong leather wallet and count out more gold than the moon had shone on in the forest for many and many a night. He laid down the goldpieces one by one, and at every piece he gave a groan that seemed to come from the very bottom of his boots.

"That's for all the world like the cry I heard from the little black pond to the westward," said Little John. "It wasn't like bird and it wasn't like beast, and now I know what it was; it was the soul of a

stingy man, and he had to count over and over the money that he ought to have given away when he was alive."

As for the merry little old woman, she was a prisoner too, and such a time as she had! First there was a bigger feast than she had ever dreamed of before, and every man of Robin's followers was bound that she should eat the bit that he thought was nicest. They made her a little throne of soft green moss, and on it they laid their hunting cloaks. They built a shelter of fresh boughs over her head, and then they sang songs to her. They set up great torches all round about the glade. They wrestled and they vaulted and they climbed. They played every game that could be played by torchlight, and it was all to please the kind little woman who had saved the life of their master.

The merry little woman sat and clapped her hands at all their feats, and she laughed until she cried. Then she wiped her eyes and sang them her one little song.

The men shouted and cheered, and cheered and shouted, and the woods echoed so long and so loud that one would have thought they, too, were trying to shout.

By and by the company all set out together to carry the little old woman to her cottage. She was

put upon their very best and safest horse, and Robin Hood would have none lead it but himself. After the horse came a long line of good bowmen and true. One carried a new cloak of the finest wool. Another bore a whole armful of silken kerchiefs to make up for the one that Robin had worn away. There were "shoon and hosen," and there was cloth of scarlet and of blue, and there were soft, warm blankets for her bed. There were so many things that when they were all piled up in the little cottage, there was no chance for one tenth of the men to get into the room. Those that were outside pushed up to the window and stretched their heads in at the door: and they tried their best to pile up the great heap of things so she could have room to go to bed that night and to cook her breakfast in the morning.

"And tomorrow's sweeping day," cried Robin. "'Thursday I brew and Friday I sweep,' and

how'll she sweep if she has no floor?"

"We'll have to make her a floor," declared Friar Tuck.

"So we will," said Robin.

"There's a good man not far away who can work in wood, and he shall come in the morning and build her another room."

"Oh, oh!" cried the merry little old woman with delight, "I never thought I should have a house with two rooms; but I'll always care for this room the most, for there's just where Master Robin stood when he came in at the door, and there's where he sat when he was spinning the flax. But, Master Robin, Master Robin, did any one ever see such a thread as you've left on the spool!"

It was so funny that the merry little old woman really couldn't help jumping up and dancing.

"Hey down, down, an a down!"

And then the brave men and true all said good-night and went back to the forest.