



Chapter 1

Pip took a deep breath and tried to ignore Cedric's jeering. "Miss the shot already, Baby Robin," Cedric said.

Pip gritted his teeth and took aim. He wasn't ashamed to be compared to Robin Hood, the greatest archer in England.

"You said you could hit a target from twenty paces. Let's see it."

Pip lowered the bow. "I will if you would just shut your mouth."

"I'm sorry, Baby Robin. Please, go ahead," Cedric said with exaggerated politeness. His friends laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Come on, Pip. You can do it."

"You've made this shot lots of times ... just go easy on the release."

Lucy and Harold were loyal. They believed in him. Did Robin Hood fail his Merry Men? Never!

Pip raised the bow and pulled the string, slowly letting the air out of his chest. Everyone was quiet now, leaning forward in anticipation. The forest hummed with the sound of the breeze ruffling the leaves and the birds chirping in the

treetops. He took one more breath, pulled back a little harder on the string, and let fly.

“You always fool me,” Cedric shrieked, doubled over in laughter. “I keep thinking you might hit the target — but you never do.”

Pip took off his green felt hat and ran his fingertips over the feather stuck in the side. He’d missed completely. But he couldn’t cry. They’d call him Baby Robin forever. He lifted his head and shrugged.

“Your bow is no good. If I had mine, I’d hit that target from fifty paces,” Pip said.

“You couldn’t hit the side of a barn from ten paces,” Cedric said. He snatched the bow from Pip and picked up an arrow lying on the ground. “My bow is no good? Let’s see. How’s this? I’ll take a shot, and I have to hit a bull’s eye to win. But all you have to do is hit the target. That’s it. You hit the target, you win. I’ll bet you a penny.” Cedric winked at his friends and flexed the bow.

“We have to get home soon,” Harold said.

“I have an idea,” Lucy said. “Why not switch it up and let Harold shoot?”

Cedric snorted. “He’s the one pretending to be Robin Hood all the time. I’m tired of it. Is it a bet?”

Pip hesitated. Cedric and his friends lived in the country, and they were always hunting for game in the woods. Pip lived in town and practiced only when his tutor let him. He felt the penny in the pouch he wore under his shirt. His father had given it to him to buy bread for dinner. He’d be

furious if Pip came home empty-handed.

“It’s getting late,” Harold said softly.

“Your cousin is right,” Cedric said. “Run home to your daddy.”

Robin Hood never backed down from a challenge.

“It’s a bet,” Pip said.

Cedric replied with a cold smile. He raised the bow, steadied himself, pulled the string back, and shot.

“A bull’s eye!” one of his friends cried.

Cedric handed Pip the bow. “No problem for the great Robin Hood. All you have to do is hit the target. That’s it.” He turned to his friends. “I’m obviously going to lose. What idiot couldn’t hit that target from so close?”

“Robin Hood?” another friend said.

They all had a good laugh at that.

Pip practically shook with rage. No one made fun of Robin Hood and his Band of Merry Men in front of him.

Pip picked up an arrow and popped the string into the notch. Suddenly, the target looked so small.

“Watch him be as useless as Robin Hood,” Cedric said.

Pip glanced quickly at his cousins. Lucy was twirling her hair, and Harold was chewing his bottom lip. That’s what they did when they were nervous — both bad signs.

Robin Hood was at his best under pressure, Pip reminded himself. So was he. Pip put his hat back on and pressed the feather firmly into place, slowly raised his bow, and began to pull back. The arrow popped out of the notch. Cedric and his friends roared with laughter — again.

“Easy shot, Pipper,” Lucy said.

“Take your time,” Harold whispered.

Pip pulled back again.

“Bull’s eye coming up,” Pip announced, then he shot.

The country kids began to clap, and Cedric let out some loud whistles.

“Nice shooting, Baby Robin — as usual,” Cedric sputtered.

Pip dropped the bow to the ground. He’d missed completely — again.

“I’ll get the arrow,” Harold said.

Pip looked up into the bright blue sky. No matter how much he practiced, he didn’t get better.

“You owe me a penny,” Cedric said. “Hand it over.”

A bet was a bet. If nothing else, Pip would keep his word.

Pip envied the country kids. They could roam freely in the forest and breathe the beautiful fresh air and hunt, while he was cooped up in town with his tutor and forced to learn Latin and numbers and history. No wonder he couldn’t shoot straight. His life was a torture — except maybe for the occasional shooting and fencing lessons, and the rare times when his tutor, against the express wishes of his father, told him stories about Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

“My father says that Robin Hood is hiding in Sherwood Forest because he’s too afraid to fight the Sheriff of Nottingham,” said Cedric. “And I bet Robin Hood couldn’t hit that target in a hundred shots. I hear Robin Hood is so stupid —”

“Shh,” Pip said to Cedric. “Did you hear that?”

Swish. Thwack.

Pip heard it again, and then a cry of pain.

A small boy emerged from the trees and continued, head down, along a narrow path. He was very thin, and his face was covered in dirt. He carried a small shovel over his shoulder. Behind him came four more kids, also thin and dirty, and then six adults. They all carried some kind of digging tool, except for the last man, who had a huge bag slung over his right shoulder. He struggled to keep up. Pip figured they were peasants, probably belonging to the Baron Geoffrey. He owned most of the land to the south of Nottinghamshire. His peasants didn't usually come around here, but they must have had some work to do.

Thwack.

The man carrying the bag staggered forward. Another man had hit him with a long, flexible stick — almost like a whip. He was short, but broad-shouldered and stocky, and his face was lined, pock-marked, and very thin, as was his patchy brown hair.

“Catch up with the others,” he ordered.

“Aye, Master Johnson,” the man gasped.

The other adults stopped.

“Keep going,” Johnson thundered. “We have a long way to go.” He whipped them across the shoulders.

Pip clenched his fists and took a step toward them.

Harold grabbed his arm. “It's too dangerous,” he whispered.

“He's right,” Lucy added.

Robin Hood wouldn't just watch. He would help. Pip shook them off and kept going.

“These people look tired and ... and thirsty,” Pip said to Johnson. “There’s a stream not two hundred paces from here, where they can have a drink and refresh themselves. Then they will be able to walk faster.”

Johnson stared at Pip, mouth half open and eyes bugged out, as if he did not understand. Suddenly, his expression softened, and he looked very sad.

“I am so sorry, my dear sir. Forgive me. I forgot myself entirely,” Johnson said. He looked at the whip in his hand. “I have a terrible temper. You are right.”

“I ... okay. I can show you the way to the stream, if you’d like. It’s this way,” Pip said.

He couldn’t save these peasants from having to work so hard, but at least they wouldn’t go thirsty.

“Thank you ever so much,” Johnson said.

“It’s hard to walk quickly without water. It’s hot today,” Pip said.

“Indeed.”

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

Johnson pushed Pip to the ground and began whipping him on his back and legs.

“Beg for mercy or this continues until I get too tired to raise my arm. But be warned. My arm is very, very strong,” Johnson said.

The pain was unbearable. His body felt like it was on fire. “Mercy. I’m sorry,” he managed.

“Do not dare speak to me again, churlish knave,” Johnson thundered. “The only need I have of a stream is to drown

these worthless, lazy peasants.” He raised his whip high overhead.

“Please, sir. He didn’t mean anything by it,” Lucy said, her voice quivering. She held out her hands, palms together in prayer, head bent. “Please don’t beat him, good sir. He only wants to help.”

Harold slipped beside Lucy, his knees shaking, holding the arrow Pip had shot.

“His father is Aldwin of Nottinghamshire,” Lucy continued. “He’s our uncle. My father is Moreland, and Harold’s father is Vincent, also of Nottinghamshire. They are brothers ... merchants ... they sell wool blankets. Do you know them?”

Johnson lowered his whip slowly. He looked over at the country kids. “Go to your homes,” he shouted.

Cedric and the others ran off.

Johnson’s eyes narrowed. “Aldwin ... I have heard of him and his two brothers. Sellers of wool blankets ... Aye, I know of them.” He stepped back and rubbed his chin with his hand. “Aldwin ... of Nottinghamshire. The three brothers ...”

He whirled and struck the man carrying the bag. “Hurry up. You are walking slowly — we shall have to sleep outside tonight. And if that happens you will feel the kiss of my whip most painfully.”

He hit a few others, but not as hard, and they continued their pitiful march. Pip watched them go, tears in his eyes, helpless with rage.

“Pip?” Lucy began.

Pip got up. “Robin Hood will make him pay.” Pip wiped

his tears away angrily. The humiliation of begging for mercy in front of his cousins and the country kids stung far more than Johnson's whip. "When I'm older I will join the Merry Men and —"

"You're not old enough yet," Lucy interrupted. "Our fathers sell wool blankets, and we live in Nottinghamshire, not Sherwood Forest, or Nottingham for that matter. You're not a famous outlaw trying to overthrow Prince John, and you don't do battle against the Sheriff of Nottingham's soldiers."

"Is that all I can be, a seller of blankets, like my father?" Pip said.

"Is that so bad?" Harold said.

Pip craved adventure — anything other than studying and playing with the country kids after their lessons.

"We're twelve years old, Pip," Lucy said. "I know you love stories about Robin Hood, and you wear a hat like him ..."

"You pretend to be Merlin the Magician," Pip said.

"That's just for fun. I'm not so ... serious about it ..." Lucy's voice trailed off.

"It is serious, and Robin Hood is the greatest hero in England," Pip thundered. "Prince John is trying to steal the throne from his very own brother, from the true king of England, Richard the Lionheart, and when King Richard comes back he will toss Prince John into jail forever. Prince John is a terrible ruler. His soldiers are mean to everyone. You've seen them. And you've heard the same things I have, that Prince John has raised taxes so high that the peasants barely have enough to eat, and if people don't give Prince

John their money he puts them into jail, or worse, he hangs them for treason. Robin Hood and the Merry Men are the only ones in the kingdom loyal to King Richard, the only ones with the courage to fight to end Prince John's rule."

"Prince John might not agree," Lucy said, laughing, "and King Richard is far away fighting in the war — and who knows if he's even alive?"

"He is," Pip cried. "Richard the Lionheart is invincible."

"Pip, those are just stories," Lucy said. "It's okay to have a hero," she added quietly. "Just ... it's dangerous to talk about him all the time and to dress like him ... and to think you can shoot like him."

She flicked her eyebrows a few times, looked into his eyes, and then flicked them again. Pip had to laugh — and maybe she had a point. He could definitely do without the Baby Robin jokes, and he really was a lousy shot. Robin Hood was a legend. Who was Pip compared to him?

Pip took his hat off and put his right hand to his chest. "I promise, no more Robin Hood. That's over. From now on I'm Pip Draper, son of Aldwin of Nottinghamshire, a seller of wool blankets. And what the baron does to his peasants is none of my business."

"It would make things ... easier," Harold said.

"You worry about things too much, Pippin," Lucy said.

"You're right. Let's go home," Pip said. He didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"We really have to hurry now. Your father invited us over for supper," Lucy said.

“I know,” Pip said.

“What about Cedric’s bow and these arrows?” Harold said.

Pip shrugged. “Leave them,” he said. “It’s a useless bow anyway. I think it’s crooked.”

“Okay,” Harold said. “Let me take one last shot.”

Harold took aim and, without hesitation, let go of the string.

Thud.

Pip felt a pang in his chest and set off down the path.

“Nice shooting, Harold,” Lucy said. “Pipper, you should’ve let Harold take the shot like I said. You’d be a penny richer.”

Pip walked on ahead, gripping his hat tightly. He wouldn’t talk about Robin Hood anymore or wear this hat, but he’d never give up his dream of becoming one of the Merry Men.

And one day he’d make Johnson pay for that beating.



Chapter 2

Pip walked between the stone columns that led into town. He opened his eyes wide to adjust to the darkness. The outlines of the soldiers sitting in the guardroom were barely visible, their heads leaning against the wall. They were snoring away, as usual. He wondered why the baron bothered with guards. Who cared about a little town like Nottinghamshire, where nothing important ever happened?

He kicked at a clump of dirt and sent it rolling across the cobblestones. When they were younger, he and his cousins used to pretend this passageway led to a great castle. He felt too old for such silly games now.

He continued to his house in the town's main square. His relatives had been one of the first families to settle here when it was little more than a few cottages. Back then, the king had given the baron who lived nearby control over the surrounding area in return for supporting him in a war. The baron's family had ruled Nottinghamshire ever since. Pip's father had told him the Drapers had lived in their house for three centuries. It had been built in 890 A.D. His great-great-great-grand-parents had been wool merchants, which is

why their last name was Draper. *Drapier* was a French word for wool seller or wool maker.

The town square was fairly deserted. A servant pumped water into a bucket. A few townsmen stood below an archway opposite his house.

“Greetings, Little Pip,” a man with an enormous pot-belly said to him. Two men came over to join him, each with short swords dangling from their belts. The big man gave him a squinty-eyed sneer. “Is your good father off to the Bradford Fair?”

Pip hated Hugh. He was the Baron Geoffrey’s bailiff, which meant he collected the taxes — and put people in prison if they didn’t pay.

“Not yet. He leaves tomorrow.”

Every year his father went to the Bradford Fair to sell blankets. Every year Pip begged to come along, and every year his father said no.

“Are you going to the fair this year, Little Pip?” Hugh said in a teasing tone.

“I have my studies,” Pip said.

“No matter. It is a dull affair — so very, very dull,” Hugh said. “I have been there. Other than the jousting, the carnival, the food markets, the jesters, the musicians, and the parades, there’s really nothing to do.”

His two friends slapped Hugh’s back, laughing.

Pip’s heart skipped a beat. To see an actual joust ...

“Studies are important,” Hugh continued, “especially for a Draper. You have to count how many blankets you have

sold. That sounds very difficult, right, Little Pip?”

Hugh winked elaborately, and the two men snickered.

Pip couldn't ignore the insult. “My father and my uncles sell their wool blankets all over the kingdom. You're the type of person Robin Hood hates. You steal from honest people and give to horrible people like ... like ... the baron.”

There. He'd said it. And it felt good.

Hugh's eyes narrowed. He tapped the ground with his wooden staff. “I am forgetting to whom I speak: Little Pip Draper, the son of the great and magnificent Aldwin Draper, seller of wool blankets, son of Goodwin Draper, seller of wool blankets, son of Ulric Draper, seller of wool blankets, son of Derrick Draper, seller of wool blankets — and on and on and on.” He tossed his head dismissively. “It's late. Go inside to sup, Little Pip. Do not speak ill of great and powerful men. Learn from your father. He respects his betters.” Without warning, Hugh swung his staff and gave Pip's bottom a good whack. “And mind your manners, or I'll teach them to you.”

The staff stung, and Pip stifled a tear.

“You couldn't teach a rock to stay still,” Pip shot back.

“Why, I'll teach you to ...” Hugh swung his staff again, harder this time, only Pip was ready, and he hopped back. Hugh missed completely, and his momentum made him spin on one foot — and then fall to the ground.

Hugh's friends burst out laughing. Pip had suffered at the hand of Hugh's temper many times, and he had no desire to give him another chance with that staff. Pip took off and ran to his home, locking the door behind him. His father

was seated in the main room reading some papers spread out on a table. He put his plume down and gave Pip a questioning look.

“You have good timing, Pip. Roxanna is almost finished preparing supper,” Aldwin said.

Hugh began pounding on the door. “I know you’re in there, rascal. Open the door immediately. Do not dare disobey me.”

Aldwin pursed his lips. “Any idea why Hugh wants to knock down our door?” he said.

“Maybe he wants to borrow some eggs?” Pip said.

Hugh pounded on the door again.

Aldwin made a sour face. “I suppose I need to answer. He’s not the type to give up.”

“Aldwin, I have had enough of that boy of yours — and his bad manners,” Hugh roared when the door opened. “He is disrespectful. He insulted the baron. He is intolerably rude and ... and ... disrespectful.”

“Thank you, Hugh. I shall speak to him. This rudeness ... and being disrespectful ... it is a problem,” Aldwin said.

Hugh huffed and puffed a few times. “Well ... precisely. And what shall be done about it?” he said, his eyes bulging.

“I will speak to Pip presently.”

“Let me say that I have never been —”

“Good day, Hugh, and best regards to your father.”

Aldwin shut the door.

Pip couldn’t hold it in, and he burst out laughing. His father’s lips curled in the briefest of smiles.

“That’s enough, Pip,” he said. “He’ll hear you, and besides, we most certainly do not need any trouble from him, his father, or Baron Geoffrey.” Aldwin became more serious. “We have talked about this before. You must be respectful. Hugh can make life difficult for us, not to mention the baron.”

“Hugh is disrespectful, not me,” Pip shot back. “He insulted the Draper name. He said all we’ve ever done is sell wool blankets and —”

“Pip, that is what we do,” Aldwin said. “How is that an insult?”

Pip wanted to scream. His father was afraid of anyone who worked for the baron, and he was terrified of the Sheriff of Nottingham’s soldiers. He was even afraid of saying King Richard’s name out loud — or Robin Hood’s. “Hugh made it sound bad. He insulted us because ...” He struggled for the words. “We’re not just blanket sellers.”

“That’s enough for me,” Aldwin began. “You must appreciate —”

“I don’t appreciate being laughed at by all the country kids and insulted by all the townspeople,” Pip said. “You should be angry, too. They laugh at us — and our stupid blankets.”

“Those blankets keep you warm at night,” Aldwin said, his voice rising slightly. “And the money we make from those blankets puts food on our table and a roof over our heads.”

“I’d rather be cold and sleep outside than be a coward,” Pip said. A bitter taste rose in his mouth. “Robin Hood wouldn’t let himself be insulted by an ugly, stupid man like

Hugh — or Baron Geoffrey. Nobody tells Robin Hood what to do, not even Prince John!”

He pictured Robin Hood beating Johnson with his own whip. Aldwin closed his eyes for a moment, and when they opened his expression was calm and relaxed. “Okay, Little Pip. Perhaps we should talk about this another time.”

“I’m not afraid of Hugh,” Pip said. He couldn’t help himself. “And Robin Hood’s not afraid, either.”

Aldwin collected the papers into a single pile. “I suppose. Now let’s get ready for dinner. Lucy and Harold are coming.”

“I know,” Pip snapped.

“I thought it would be a nice way to thank your uncles and aunts for taking care of you when I’m in Bradford.”

“I don’t see why I can’t come to the fair. I’m not a little boy,” Pip said.

Aldwin sighed and got up. “We’ve been over this many times. I’ll be very busy, and I won’t have time to take care of you. It will be fun.”

“It will be boring,” Pip said.

He loved his cousins. They were his best friends. He just hated the idea of being left home when there was adventure to be had. Harold was afraid of his own shadow — he’d be happy to stay in Nottinghamshire for the rest of his life. Lucy was more courageous, but she usually did what her parents asked and didn’t like to cause trouble.

“Did you pick up the bread?” Aldwin said in an even tone.

Pip couldn’t tell him what had happened. “Sorry — I lost the penny playing in the forest.”

Aldwin looked up at the ceiling. “Sometimes, Pip ...” His voice trailed off. “No matter. I believe Roxanna baked a loaf. We’ll make do with one tonight. Please go wash up before we sup. Hurry along. You’re dusty from head to toe like a peasant after a day cutting the baron’s hay.”

“I don’t need to ...”

A chubby-faced older woman with graying hair and a stooped back came into the room holding a big wooden spoon.

“Wash up,” Roxanna ordered.

She’d been his family’s servant since before he was born — more like a second mother, really. Pip shook his head angrily and marched to the back room. He paused at the door just out of view to listen.

“He is so young, and it’s only been three years,” Roxanna said in a hushed tone.

“You need not remind me of that,” Aldwin said.

“Of course. I’m just saying we mustn’t be too harsh with him.”

“He has his Great-Grandpa Ulric’s temper, that’s for sure,” Aldwin said. “I do worry about our dear Little Pip. We live in such difficult times — and men have been put in jail for far less than insulting the baron.”

“He must learn to respect dangerous men and be more like you,” Roxanna said. “His youth will not protect him forever, and he grows bolder, it seems, every day. So much trouble in our little town lately, especially with those Merry Men and that Robin Hood. Why do they keep stealing

money from the landowners and attacking the Sheriff of Nottingham's soldiers? It only makes Prince John and the sheriff cross."

Aldwin shrugged. "I sell wool blankets. I am not concerned with Prince John, or whether we should call him King John, and neither am I concerned with his brother Richard the Lionheart — or Robin Hood, for that matter. I suppose Robin Hood and his Merry Men believe their cause is just. I just wish to be left in peace."

"I told you no good would come of Pip pretending to be Robin Hood," Roxanna said. "It is now against the law to even mention his name. Pip must be careful. And that hat? You must stop him, or he might be arrested." She let out a sob.

"Aye, you're right, Roxanna. Perhaps I have been too ... indulgent," Aldwin said. "It's all nonsense, this 'steal from the rich and give to the poor.'"

"I was told the other day that Robin Hood keeps the money he steals from the landowners and the tax collectors for himself and never gives a penny to the poor," Roxanna said. "That makes him nothing but a common thief."

"I imagine you're right," Aldwin said.

Pip was so mad it took all his self-control not to run back in and tell his father and Roxanna off. He'd explain how Robin Hood only took money from bad people who got rich by stealing from the poor. He stomped into the kitchen and dipped a cloth into a water cistern. The cool water felt good as he wiped his face and hands.

Roxanna came in. "Did you have a fun day?"

“Yeah, I guess,” he mumbled.

Roxanna gave Pip a close look.

“Have we gotten into some mischief, Little Pip? You seem upset,” Roxanna said.

He’d been called Little Pip by his family ever since he could remember. Lately, he’d begun to hate it.

“It was a dull day is all,” Pip said quietly.

Roxanna placed a platter in his hands, with stewed rabbit and carrots, turnips, and dried fish. “Take this to the table, please,” she said.

He carried it back with a heavy heart. Pip wasn’t going to waste his life selling wool blankets. He would do so much more. He would join Robin Hood and his Merry Men and fight Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. He would help Richard the Lionheart regain his rightful place as king of England. He would have adventures and be famous.

He would do it, too.

Because he wasn’t a coward like his father.