

Chapter One

Gold had come to the Greenwood.

In just a few days the colours had changed and the wonderfully deep emerald greens were beginning to fade. There was a definite chill in the air and the ground was crisper underfoot. Late-afternoon sun came slanting through the canopy of beech and oak, and the forest had a golden glimmer.

The man-at-arms swayed unsteadily through the trees, lurching from one rough trunk to another, propping himself up and catching his breath. He was utterly lost by now. For a while he had thought he could find his way back. He was sure of it. Yes. The castle – his home, such as it was – lay this way.

Now he wasn't so sure. Bleeding, wounded, exhausted, he gathered up his scattered wits and plunged deeper into the woodland.

He knew he was taking a chance. This was enemy territory. These woods were the realm of the lawless: the Wolfshead and his men. If they found him, wearing the armour and bearing the insignia of his master, who knew what they'd do

to him. There were dreadful stories about the way these ne'er-do-wells lived, here in the secluded heart of the endless forest.

But there was no use dwelling. He staggered on through the soft, crumbly earth, his breathing ragged, his whole body streaming with feverish sweat.

It was autumn . . . so how long had he been the witch's prisoner? Days? Weeks? Time had ceased to have meaning as he lay there, trussed up in her hovel, beholden to her malign will. How had he let her overpower him? He could hardly remember. Some noxious kind of incense . . . She made him breathe it in deeply, until his senses swam and he hardly knew himself.

She had scrambled his wits and leeches his blood. She had preyed upon him.

Yet he had escaped. This morning she had left her home, grunting and grumbling, and he'd taken the opportunity to finish sawing the last of his leather bonds with a shard of broken crockery he'd managed to hide away.

Freedom had made him panicky, excited, and his limbs were shaky with lack of use. All he could think about was getting away from her filthy den and returning to the castle . . .

But hours had passed. He had crashed through the trees with no real sense of direction. The woods were endless. Each cracking twig made him jump. Had she already discovered he'd gone? Was she coming after him?

Mother Maudlin had warned him: she'd never let him go. She never let any of her playthings go . . .

The Return of Robin Hood

Her hideous, twisted face. Those burning amber eyes. He'd rather die here and now in the middle of nowhere than ever have to see her again.

Another sharp noise. Inside his filthy rags and battered armour, he jumped, his heart racing. But it was just a bird. A large rook alighting on a branch. A foul, gimlet-eyed creature, staring at him. It was oily black, like a piece of darkest night brought to life, and staring at him with amber eyes.

'No . . .' he murmured, feeling a great despair welling in his chest.

Still staring beadily at him, the rook let out a long, raucous cry. A shout of raw triumph.

It was *her*. Suddenly he knew it.

He watched the huge wings unfurl and beat once, twice, three times, upon the golden air . . .

And he turned with horrible slowness, attempting another escape. But it was like wading through blood and guts on the quagmire of a battlefield.

The rook slipped darkly through the air. And then she was upon him.

Mother Maudlin had her plaything back.

The man-at-arm's cries had barely faded before another rude noise shattered the peacefulness of the woods.

It was like the trumpeting of a circus parade: a transdimensional hullabaloo that ripped open a box-shaped gap in the space-time vortex. A flashing light announced the arrival of the TARDIS and, all of a sudden, there it was. The painted wooden sides of the box wavered slightly for a

moment and then the whole thing turned solid, sinking an inch or two into the mulch of golden and orange leaves underfoot.

The doors flew open and out strode the most extraordinary-looking man. Tall and gangly, his eyes were bulging as he glared at his new surroundings. He was swathed in a long rust-coloured coat and yards and yards of an immense multicoloured knitted scarf. His ensemble was topped off by a wide-brimmed hat jammed over masses of curly hair.

‘It isn’t Scotland,’ he called back into the dark recesses of the box. His voice was grand and hectoring. ‘And I believe we’ve drifted back a few centuries, too. So the Brigadier will just have to wait a little longer for the pleasure of our company.’

Presently he was joined by his two travelling companions: a dark-haired girl in green eyeshadow and a blue trouser suit, and a square-jawed military man in a navy blazer and a duffel coat. Their names were Sarah Jane Smith and Harry Sullivan. The pair of them were natives of the twentieth-century British Isles and they had been travelling haphazardly through space and time with the Doctor for some months.

Sarah looked disappointed. ‘Oh, I was looking forward to seeing the Brig again.’

‘Soon will, Sarah.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘The TARDIS will catch up with him eventually. We just have to work out when and where we are, and then we can be on our way.’

‘A bit like getting your bearings at sea, I suppose,’ said Harry. He was a naval man and relatively new to making trips in the Doctor’s space-time machine. The whole thing was still an incredible source of wonder to him.

The Return of Robin Hood

‘Are you sure you haven’t steered us off course on purpose?’ Sarah asked her Time Lord friend. She knew he was resentful of the Brigadier’s instructions: *Present yourselves at Loch Ness forthwith – I need your help, Doctor*. The Doctor loathed being told what to do, by Time Lords, UNIT – anyone, in fact. And yet these people still called on him for his unique brand of help, when all he really wanted to do was wander aimlessly through the cosmos . . .

‘So where do you think we are?’ Sarah asked him, hoping to stave off the sulk she could see was imminent.

‘Oh . . . about eight hundred years too early, I should think.’ The Doctor sighed, as if he couldn’t care less. ‘Somewhere in the middle of England. In the deepest, darkest woods of England, from the looks of things.’

Harry laughed. ‘It isn’t very dark at the moment.’

He had a point. It was late afternoon, and the golden sun was lighting up the foliage wonderfully. Shafts of amber light made the glade around them radiant. ‘Yes, it’s quite nice, I suppose,’ the Doctor muttered. ‘If you like that kind of thing.’

‘Eight hundred years,’ Sarah said, with a shiver. ‘What’s that, the Middle Ages? I didn’t enjoy them much the last time I was there . . .’

The Doctor glanced at her, trying to recall ‘last time’. But for him that had been in a different incarnation, and it tended to give him a slight headache, remembering things that had happened while he was wearing an earlier face. ‘Oh, the Middle Ages aren’t all bad, Sarah,’ he said, with one of his sudden, disarming grins. ‘At least the air’s fresher than what

you're used to. And also – listen to that! Listen to all that lovely quiet!

At that very moment there came a huge burst of violent noise from the undergrowth. Three bearded men in rough, shaggy clothes emerged from their hiding places and started yelling all at once. They rounded on the startled newcomers, brandishing evil-looking daggers. In just a few seconds the Doctor and his friends were surrounded.

'I say,' Harry gasped, at knifepoint, as one of the newcomers singled him out as the biggest threat. 'A medieval mugging!'

Sarah rolled her eyes. Harry was trying, as usual, to make light of the situation.

'Leave the talking to me, Harry,' the Doctor warned him.

Then a fourth figure emerged from the bushes, smartly dressed and carrying a large bow with an arrow nocked ready to fly. He was handsome and bearded and auburn-haired. His eyes twinkled as he smiled at them all.

'Welcome back to Sherwood, Doctor.'

Chapter Two

It had not been a great week for Robin Hood. Only yesterday, Marian had left for Kirklees Priory, taking two horses and Friar Tuck, threatening not to come back again. She had glared at Robin before mounting and taking off into the sunset.

‘I’ll see if I can talk to her,’ Friar Tuck had said, patting Robin on the shoulder.

Then they were gone, and he was left alone with his fellow outlaws, all looking to Robin for direction and a cheery word. Marian’s going had seemed to all of them like an omen of dreadful things to come. Their happy band was breaking up at last, and darker times were coming to Sherwood Forest.

‘Never mind her!’ Robin tried to jolly them along. ‘She’ll be back again. You’ll see!’

But, on the inside, he didn’t feel quite so optimistic. Later, as he took a miserable nocturnal stroll by the river, he was clapped on the back by a concerned-looking Little John. The consoling pat almost winded him, and Robin grinned at his friend. ‘She says I’ve changed. I’m not the same man. She’s

used to me being all devil-may-care and swashbuckling. And then caring and kind in my quieter moments.’

John frowned, trying to work out what he meant. ‘But you are just the same as ever! I’ve known you . . . how many years? You haven’t changed a bit.’

Robin sighed. ‘Marian reckons that I’ve become cynical and disillusioned. It’s like I’ve forgotten what we’ve been fighting for all these years.’

Little John raised his fighting staff and shook it. ‘For the common man! For the little people! For the humble poor! And to liberate England from its oppressors and the pretender King John!’

Robin nodded. ‘Yes, of course. That’s what it’s always been about. But years have gone by, and here we still are. Living in caves and under trees, roasting stolen deer and waylaying unwary travellers.’

John beamed at him. ‘I think it’s a grand life. What could be better?’

Robin didn’t like to say it, but he’d always imagined that they would have somehow triumphed by now. He’d dreamt that their wicked opponents would have been vanquished and swept away. Good King Richard would have returned in triumph from the Crusades abroad and been enthroned in London, ruling wisely and well over his subjects. By now, after all these years of living as an outlaw, Robin would have been able to return to his ancestral home of Locksley Hall. He could marry his beloved Marian properly, and the two of them would be raising a family and living off the land. There would be no more use for bows and arrows, hunting missions,

The Return of Robin Hood

sword fights, desperate escapes or any other hair-raising adventures.

‘I’m getting too old, John,’ he said. ‘That’s what it is. I’m almost forty-five. I thought we’d all be settled down by now.’

It was hard to get through to Little John sometimes. Robin’s trusty right-hand man could be stubbornly slow. He just couldn’t see what was so bad about their lives – to him it was all perfect.

The following day Robin’s predicament haunted him. How to get Marian back? How to convince her that he wasn’t the miserable, disappointed grump she’d accused him of becoming?

The morning saw him and his men patrolling the furthest boundaries of their woodland home, doing a spot of hunting, and muttering among themselves about the increasing presence of the sheriff’s men.

Will Scarlet was his usual suspicious self. He looked hounded and perplexed by the world around him most of the time. ‘It’s been like that since they put in this new Sheriff of Nottingham. They say he’s worse than all the previous ones put together. He’s even worse than the old rotter we blew up all those years ago.’ Will grinned for a brief second at the happy memory before returning to his usual surly self. ‘They say he has weekly hangings and beheadings and flayings just for fun! And he’s got King John’s ear . . .’

Robin took on a hearty tone he didn’t quite feel. ‘We’ll boot him out, same as we did all the others. And if the so-called King John shows his pointed nose in this county again, we’ll scrag him! Take him prisoner!’

His loyal band of men cheered, but it was nothing they hadn't heard before. Robin had been promising a proper revolution for twenty years or more, and even the most steadfast Merries were starting to question his hit rate.

Little John, though – still the most loyal of all – cheered as enthusiastically as ever.

So this particular day passed in the same way as many others in the Greenwood, though there were none of the sheriff's soldiers to batter and no deer to shoot. The only moment of excitement came from Much bagging a couple of lethargic rabbits, and as the afternoon shadows lengthened Robin was starting to think that it was time they returned to their home in the heart of the forest.

But then his men said they'd heard something strange in the glade just ahead. Robin himself caught a faint whisper of that noise: a weird, hurdy-gurdy hallooing noise that he was sure he recognised . . .

But it couldn't be. It simply couldn't be who and what he suspected it might be – *could* it?

Robin's heart started to beat faster. He hurried through the tall ferns and rustling branches. Ahead he could hear his men leaping into action. They yelled and jumped out on poor unsuspecting souls like this almost every day of the year. They robbed and tussled and filled their bags with loot, and it was usually all quite straightforward. Robin mostly left them to it. If he was nearby, he would come sauntering into the scene at the last minute, looking dapper and debonair in Lincoln green. He would

The Return of Robin Hood

introduce himself by name and his captives would look thrilled at the thought of being held-up by the legendary outlaw.

Today, though . . . Today something was different.

For the first time in weeks and weeks he felt excited. And as he swaggered through the undergrowth and into the glen – he even felt hopeful.

His Merries had surrounded the strangers. All three looked outraged or terrified. A dark-haired girl, a brawny man and another man, dressed up like an outlandish travelling player. And they were all staring open-mouthed at Robin.

But Robin's attention was taken up by the solid blue shape of the police box sitting under the shelter of the trees.

Before he knew it, he was grinning and calling out, 'Welcome back to Sherwood, Doctor.'

But *where* was the Doctor?

The three strangers continued to stare at him in astonishment.

None of them was the Doctor. None of them looked even the slightest bit like him.

'Come out, Doctor!' Robin cried challengingly. 'It is I! Your old friend Robin-in-the-Hood! Your sparring partner of old, Robin of Locksley!'

The Merrie Men were gathering round now, advancing towards the strange blue box. Little John looked particularly nervous. He didn't like the way it hummed.

'Now, look here,' the girl snapped. 'Will you put those dangerous things down? You'll do someone a mischief.'

The younger man's eyes were bright with sudden glee. 'I

say! Did I hear you right there, old chap? Did you really call yourself Robin Hood?’

The girl made a loud hooting noise of derision. ‘He’s pulling our leg, Harry, you idiot. There was no such person. Not really. Just a legend.’

‘Oh,’ said the man called Harry, looking as if he felt rather foolish.

Robin grinned at them all and flung down his weapons with a clatter. He threw open his arms and gave a deep bow, shouting, ‘Oh yes, there is indeed such a person! And I am he! Robin Hood, the notorious outlaw of Sherwood Forest, at your service!’ He frowned. ‘Though, judging by your garb, you people are pretty well off. I should probably steal everything you have upon your person if that’s all right? That’s how these things usually go.’

The young girl and the man with the square jaw started staring again. Then the taller, older man in the swathes of multicoloured wool was suddenly darting forward, his face shining with manic glee. Before Robin knew it, he was clasping both of Robin’s hands in his and shaking them warmly. ‘Well, I must say, we’re delighted to meet you, Mr Hood. Now tell me, how is it that you seem to know my name, hmm?’

‘Your name?’ Robin frowned, disconcerted by the man’s strange manner.

‘The Doctor.’ The Doctor grinned.

‘But you’re n-not the Doctor,’ Robin stammered. ‘You’re nothing like him. Though that’s his TARDIS over there . . .’

The three strangers went rigid. ‘Doctor! He recognises the TARDIS!’ the girl hissed.

The Return of Robin Hood

‘I know,’ said the curly-headed man sombrely. ‘Which leads me to think we’ve got a kind of mix-up going on. A mix-up . . . with *time*.’

Now, it was well known that Little John didn’t hold with philosophical discussions like this. As far as he was concerned, there was good robbing to be done. ‘There’s a toll to be paid, for travelling in our woods,’ he said bluffly, brandishing his staff.

Robin chuckled and stepped back to let his men go about their work.

The Merries waved their weapons, and Sarah, the Doctor and Harry were forced to empty their pockets. Sarah had nothing but a lipstick; Harry had nothing at all; but the contents of the Doctor’s endless pockets fascinated everyone. He produced a yo-yo, an apple, a bag of jelly babies, his sonic screwdriver, fourteen conkers, a tennis ball, several unidentifiable electronic gadgets and finally a small sack of something rather heavy.

‘Oh!’ he said, weighing it in his hand and remembering. ‘This is from a rather recent adventure of ours on the planet Voga.’ He tipped a little of the bag’s glistening contents into his palm for them all to see. ‘*Gold*,’ he murmured softly, and the Merrie Men gasped. ‘Will that do to pay our toll for strolling in your woods?’ The Doctor grinned.