

William E. Aytoun (1813-65)

4 *Little John and the Red Friar*

A Lay of Sherwood.

FYTTE THE FIRST.

The deer may leap within the glade;
The fawns may follow free—
For Robin is dead, and his bones are laid
Beneath the greenwood tree.

And broken are his merry, merry men, 5
That goodly companie:
There's some have ta'en the northern road
With Jem of Netherbee.

The best and bravest of the band
With Derby Ned are gone; 10
But Earlie Grey and Charlie Wood,
They stay'd with Little John.

Now Little John was an outlaw proud,
A prouder ye never saw;
Through Nottingham and Leicester shires 15
He thought his word was law,
And he strutted through the greenwood wide,
Like a pestilent jack-daw.

He swore that none, but with leave of him,
Should set foot on the turf so free: 20
And he thought to spread his cutter's rule,
All over the south countrie.
"There's never a knave in the land," he said,
"But shall pay his toll to me!"

And Charlie Wood was a taxman good 25
 As ever stepp'd the ground,
 He levied mail, like a sturdy thief,
 From all the yeomen round.
 "Nay, stand!" quoth he, "thou shalt pay to me,
 Seven pence from every pound!" 30

Now word has come to Little John,
 As he lay upon the grass,
 That a Friar red was in merry Sherwood
 Without his leave to pass.

"Come hither, come hither, my little foot-page! 35
 Ben Hawes, come tell to me,
 What manner of man is this burly frere
 Who walks the woods so free?"

"My master good!" the little page said,
 "His name I wot not well, 40
 But he wears on his head a hat so red,
 With a monstrous scallop-shell.

"He says he is prior of Copmanshurst,
 And Bishop of London town,
 And he comes with a rope from our father the Pope 45
 To put the outlaws down.

"I saw him ride but yester-tide
 With his jolly chaplains three;
 And he swears that he has an open pass
 From Jem of Netherbee!" 50

Little John has ta'en an arrow so broad,
 And broke it o'er his knee;
 "Now may I never strike doe again,
 But this wrong avenged shall be!

“And has he dared, this greasy frere, 55
To trespass in my bound,
Nor ask’d for leave from Little John
To range with hawk and hound?

“And has he dared to take a pass
From Jem of Netherbee, 60
Forgetting that the Sherwood shaws
Pertain of right to me?

“O were he but a simple man,
And not a slip-shod frere!
I’d hang him up by his own waist-robe 65
Above yon tangled brere.

“O did he come alone from Jem,
And not from our father the Pope,
I’d bring him in to Copmanshurst,
With the noose of a hempen rope! 70

“But since he has come from our father the Pope,
And sail’d across the sea,
And since he has power to bind and loose,
His life is safe for me;
But a heavy penance he shall do 75
Beneath the greenwood tree!”

“O tarry yet,” quoth Charlie Wood,
“O tarry, master mine!
It’s ill to shear a yearling hog,
Or twist the wool of swine! 80

“It’s ill to make a bonny silk purse,
From the ear of a bristly boar;
It’s ill to provoke a shaveling’s curse,
When the way lies him before.

“I’ve walked the forest for twenty years, 85
 In wet weather and dry,
 And never stopp’d a good fellowe,
 Who had no coin to buy.

“What boots it to search a beggarman’s bags, 90
 When no silver groat he has?
 So, master mine, I rede you well,
 E’en let the Friar pass!”

“Now cease thy prate,” quoth Little John,
 “Thou japest but in vain;
 An he have not a groat within his pouch, 95
 We may find a silver chain.

“But were he as bare as a new-flay’d buck,
 As truly he may be,
 He shall not tread the Sherwood shaws
 Without the leave of me!” 100

Little John has taken his arrows and bow,
 His sword and buckler strong,
 And lifted up his quarter-staff,
 Was full three cloth yards long.

And he has left his merry men 105
 At the trysting-tree behind,
 And gone into the gay greenwood,
 This burly frere to find.

O’er holt and hill, through brake and brere
 He took his way alone— 110
 Now, Lordlings, list and you shall hear
 This geste of Little John.

FYTTE THE SECOND.

'Tis merry, 'tis merry in gay greenwood,
When the little birds are singing,
When the buck is belling in the fern,
And the hare from the thicket springing!

'Tis merry to hear the waters clear, 5
As they splash in the pebbly fall;
And the ouzel whistling to his mate,
As he lights on the stones so small.

But small pleasaunce took Little John
In all he heard and saw; 10
Till he reach'd the cave of a hermit old
Who wonn'd within the shaw.

"*Ora pro nobis!*" quoth Little John—
His Latin was somewhat rude—
"Now, holy Father, hast thou seen 15
A frere within the wood?"

"By his scarlet hose, and his ruddy nose,
I guess you may know him well;
And he wears on his head a hat so red,
And a monstrous scallop-shell." 20

"I have served Saint Pancras," the hermit said,
"In this cell for thirty year,
Yet never saw I, in the forest bounds,
The face of such a frere!"

"An if ye find him, master mine, 25
E'en take an old man's advice,
An raddle him well, till he roar again,
Lest ye fail to meet him twice!"

“Trust me for that!” quoth Little John—
 “Trust me for that!” quoth he with a laugh, 30
“There never was man of woman born,
 That ask’d twice for the taste of my quarter-staff!”

Then Little John, he strutted on,
 ’Till he came to an open bound,
And he was aware of a Red Friar, 35
 Was sitting upon the ground.

His shoulders they were broad and strong,
 And large was he of limb;
Few yeomen in the north countrie
 Would care to mell with him. 40

He heard the rustling of the boughs,
 As Little John drew near;
But never a single word he spoke,
 Of welcome or of cheer;
Less stir he made than a pedlar would 45
 For a small gnat in his ear!

I like not his looks! thought Little John,
 Nor his staff of the oaken tree.
Now may our Lady be my help,
 Else beaten I well may be! 50

“What dost thou here, thou strong Friar,
 In Sherwood’s merry round,
Without the leave of Little John,
 To range with hawk and hound?”

“Small thought have I,” quoth the Red Friar, 55
 “Of any leave, I trow,
That Little John is an outlaw’d thief,
 And so, I ween, art thou!

“Know, I am Prior of Copmanshurst,
And Bishop of London town, 60
And I bring a rope from our father the Pope,
To put the outlaws down.”

Then out spoke Little John in wrath,
“I tell thee, burly frere,
The Pope may do as he likes at home, 65
But he sends no Bishops here!

“Up, and away, Red Friar!” he said,
“Up, and away, right speedilie;
An it were not for that cowl of thine,
Avenged on thy body I would be!” 70

“Nay, heed not that,” said the Red Friar,
“And let my cowl no hindrance be;
I warrant that I can give as good,
As ever I think to take from thee!”

Little John he raised his quarter-staff, 75
And so did the burly priest,
And they fought beneath the greenwood tree,
A stricken hour at least.

But Little John was weak of fence,
And his strength began to fail; 80
Whilst the Friar’s blows came thundering down,
Like the strokes of a threshing flail.

“Now, hold thy hand, thou stalwart Friar,
Now rest beneath the thorn,
Until I gather breath enow, 85
For a blast at my bugle-horn!”

“I’ll hold my hand,” the Friar said,
“Since that is your propine,

But, an you sound your bugle-horn,
I'll even blow on mine!" 90

Little John he wound a blast so shrill
That it rung o'er rock and linn,
And Charlie Wood and his merry men all
Came lightly bounding in.

The Friar he wound a blast so strong, 95
That it shook both bush and tree,
And to his side came Witless Will,
And Jem of Netherbee;
With all the worst of Robin's band,
And many a Rapparee! 100

Little John he wist not what to do,
When he saw the others come;
So he twisted his quarter-staff between
His fingers and his thumb.

"There's some mistake, good Friar!" he said, 105
"There's some mistake 'twixt thee and me;
I know thou art Prior of Copmanshurst,
But not beneath the greenwood tree.

"And if you will take some other name,
You shall have ample leave to bide; 110
With pasture also for your Bulls,
And power to range the forest wide."

"There's no mistake!" the Friar said,
"I'll call myself just what I please.
My doctrine is that chalk is chalk, 115
And cheese is nothing else than cheese."

"So be it, then!" quoth Little John;
"But surely you will not object,

If I and all my merry men
Should treat you with reserved respect? 120

“We can’t call you Prior of Copmanshurst,
Nor Bishop of London town,
Nor on the grass, as you chance to pass,
Can we very well kneel down.

“But you’ll send the Pope my compliments, 125
And say, as a further hint,
That, within the Sherwood bounds, you saw
Little John, who is the son-in-law
Of his friend, old Mat-o’-the-Mint!”

So ends this geste of Little John— 130
God save our noble Queen!
But, Lordlings, say—Is Sherwood now
What Sherwood once hath been?

1849

(From *The Book of Ballads*. Ed. Bon Gaultier. 1845. 6th.
ed. Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1859)