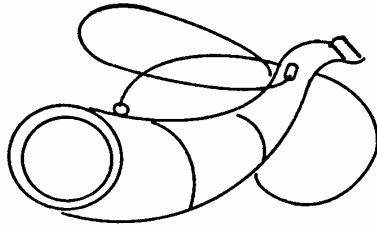


*The Tower  
of Kirklees*



Karen Amrhein

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Summary: Robin Hood and companions vanish from England by the treachery of the  
Prioress of Kirklees, only to be marooned in Central Park, New York in the mid-1930s.

Printed in the United States of America

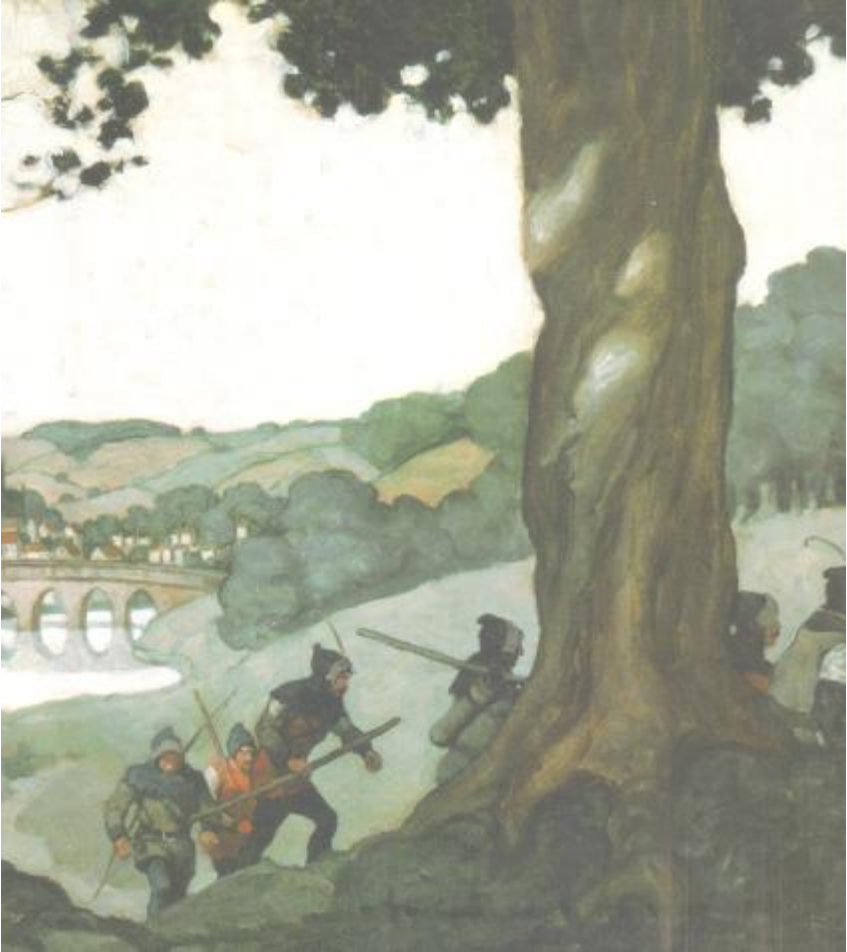
My grateful thanks and love to Stephen  
*for his invaluable services as both editor and husband*

Thank you, Ken Chaya, for your splendid *Central Park Entire*  
illustrated map, with its detailed foliage. It proved a big help.

*[www.centralparknature.com](http://www.centralparknature.com)*

To the memory of Howard Pyle  
for his *Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*





N.C. Wyeth

Bring me my bow of burning gold!

Bring me my arrows of desire!

WILLIAM BLAKE

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## Forward

*The Tower of Kirklees* should be understood as a tribute or sequel of sorts to Howard Pyle's 1883 book *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*. That fine collection of stories — full-abundant with joy and japes, thrills and foolishness, laughter and truth — yet falls into error in its epilogue. The correct account of that which transpired within and beyond the tower of Prioress Sybil is here submitted. To the reader who is unfamiliar with Mr. Pyle's tales of Robin Hood, we extend now a warm commendation to partake of them before venturing into *The Tower of Kirklees*.

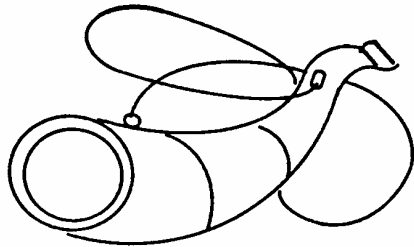
\* \* \*

Robin of Locksley and his companions, living as they did in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (by and large), spoke an English that would sound foreign to our modern ears. The author has preserved the actual words spoken, while rendering them in their modern spellings for the ease and pleasure of the reader. Nevertheless, some of these words are no longer in use. Therefore a Lexicon of Archaicisms has been provided. It follows the final chapter.

\* \* \*

Some may remark an occasional resemblance between moments in the magical 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and incidents in *The Tower of Kirklees*. As the events recorded in the latter occurred several years and centuries before the former was even created, we leave the reader to judge which is the “chicken” and which the “egg”.

*The Tower of Kirklees*  
a Tale of Robin Hood



## Chapter One — Where Led the Wych Elm Door

The Lady Marian laughed.

Beneath her gaze lay her jewel casket of hornbeam, the wood cunningly wrought with inlaid images in silver and gold depicting a hunt; yet within that open box no gems nor glitterers nor baubles of any sort did she see. She saw only a slipper.

It never crossed her mind that a thief had entered her chambers — or rather, not the usual sort of thief. On the instant, she knew her Robin had played another of his silly (if winsome) pranks. Her jewels she would doubtless find filling the cavity of the matching slipper still resting upon the floor of her wardrobe. So Marian laughed — a sparkling trill of gay and joyous and lively notes.

Her laughter had not entirely subsided when a knock came confidently to her door.

“Enter!” she bid invitingly, but her laughter swiftly fell into silence when she observed her visitor. The seneschal himself had called, a small scroll in hand.

A visit from the seneschal ever boded ill, for either he came with tidings of import — and rarely did weighty word bear merry message — else he bore his latest reckonings of the income of the demesne, or household tallies of candles or capons or carrots, or other such minutiae. In short, his call would likely not be.

“My Lady, a lad hath only just brought this — word of His Lordship....”

Marian took the proffered scroll, unfurled it, and read:

*The Earl of Huntington lieth sore wounded from the rending of a boar’s tusk. Here in my tower have I bled him, for he hath taken a flaming fever. Hie you quickly — else mayhap thou shalt find him no more keeping company with the living.*



Marian's heart leapt to her throat and her face turned pale, but the sharp glance of inquiry she made now to the seneschal betrayed no sign of her inward distress.

"The Earl and Master John," replied the major domo, divining her thought, "and with several others, rode before the coming of the dawn to hunt the feral boar that hath made of the woodland a place of peril — or so I gather."

"Whence cometh these tidings?" Marian tapped at the little scroll.

"From the Prioress of Kirklees, My Lady."

"Have Daralis saddled forthwith. I ride for Kirklees."

As said as done — Marian took horse not five minutes later, without having lingered to don riding habit or even to change her costume at all. She simply hiked her skirts and leapt to saddle in gown and surcoat, whereupon her heels pressed hard into the flanks of mare Daralis. That good animal performed good office for her mistress in flying for Kirklees village as if she were not the mare Daralis in truth, but rather Boreas, the swift North Wind.

\* \* \*

"Here fluttereth a likely bird. What say you, Robin?"

"Yea, a likely bird forsooth, Little John.... Here's one with feathers bright enough to blanch thy scarlet plumes to green, Will," Robin grinned, eyes dancing.

They'd spent the early morning roaming the northern tracts of Sherwood nigh to the River Maun in the vicinity of Ollerton. They pursued not wild boar, but instead kept on the lookout for a different sort of game. Their quarry of choice frequented the King's Great Way, the road that stretches from London Town to Nottingham, plunges on through Sherwood to Bilsthorpe on Greet, takes leave of Sherwood at the waters of the Meden, and then continues past Doncaster to Barnsdale Forest and onward to York.

The fowl that had alighted by their net wore hose with the one leg of a canary-yellow and the other of sky-blue, a cloud-white tunic with billowing sleeves, mulberry surcoat sewn with silver threads, and an apple-red cap with a gay green feather. Resplendent even within the shade and shadow of the greenwood, sunshine blazing on the dusty road made of him a refulgent beacon almost overwhelming and most certainly inescapable.

“A preening coxcomb, else I’m our dainty Friar,” Will Scarlet frowned in unfeigned disgust. “Look you how his garish weeds drip from him like so much moss, or a fool’s parti-colored bell cap. Methinks I’ll dust him and his mad trimmings both. To hand, my good staff of ash....”

“Hold, Will. ’Tis mine own privilege first to try of the game that passeth through the greenwood,” Robin rubbed his palms with sweet anticipation.

“A right-fitting task for the noble Earl of Huntington and Master of Locksley Castle,” quoth Friar Tuck with an innocent aversion of the eyes.

“What is’t thou sayest, Tuck? Thinkest thou this is to labor beneath my rank, mayhap? Nay! ’Tis that I would but fain give a *right* and *kindly* welcome to yonder gay bird alighting in these my woods. Doth this displease my curtal friar? Wouldst lever our own Much — an honest miller’s son, as I’m a Christian — take this our herald-office, peradventure?”

“There is little of either *right* or *kind* in your greenwood greetings, I trow,” muttered Tuck, though his merry eyes belied his sentiment. “And withal, if yet the Earl of Huntington’s estates be large enow, e’en *they* fail to encompass the *royal* forest of Sherwood. These are the haunts of the king’s deer — and he who wore the hood, of a season — not the suzerain of Castle Locksley. Pray, do send you our stout Much. He’ll undertake this welcome with less wind and more win!”

Robin laughed heartily at this and, with a generous nod of the head and sweep of the hand, bade Much bring woodland welcome to the piebald-clad man who fast approached along the King's Great Way and now strode not five and twenty paces distant.

Much met the fellow halfway.

"Give you good morrow, friend," intoned the miller's son with sweetest accents.

"God keep you..., friend," replied the other, eyeing his interlocutor from tip to toe. "How may I serve you?"

"My companions and I are charged to make certain the toll is fully paid on all roads through Sherwood."

"This is news now — a King's Way toll..., " the wayfarer tapped a finger on pursed lips, whilst his other slender hand covertly loosened the sword in his scabbard. "'Twas not a turnpike last I trod it. Marry, the sun hath baked thy wits, methinks, for I see no Robin Hood here before me."

At this assertion, Robin and his fellows laughed loudly and gladly, rather to the confusion of the visitor, who wondered at their merriment.

"What 'toll' is this of which thou speakest — sirrah," asked he, quickly reclaiming his composure.

"Why, the toll of bow or bout, club or clout, stave or take-heel-knave!" Much averred, somewhat hotly.

"Shall it be paid but the once, or shall thy brothers eke demand payment?"

"We are not grasping souls. The one payment is like to be ample for all," Much admitted. "Now..., in what coin wouldst thou prefer, cousin?"

"I've a fair sword hand, yet we both bear with us stout quarter staves — how likest thou a sound drubbing?"

"Ah..., but thou mistaketh me entire," Much objected. "'Tis thou who shall *receive* the toll and I who e'en shall pay it!" and to emphasize he spun his oaken staff and whirled and twirled it several times around his waist.

*The Tower of Kirklees*

“My time is short,” noted the wayfarer with a yawn of boredom, “and I needs must be about my business. Yet ’tis *thou* who’ll shortly do the spinning, and soon shall the welkin ring with hollow hum of thy empty head!”

In token of what should follow he gave our Much a very neat poke in the ribs, ere even brave Much could spy the movement of the fellow’s staff.

(“I like well this saucy rogue,”) whispered Robin to his mates. (“His a ready tongue, yet a readier hand, I wager.”)

The bout began in earnest, but ended faster even than it takes the pen to put to page the chronicle of it. Much swung hard at his opponent but purchased only air, whilst with a resounding thwack the other’s rowan staff fell like a thunderclap upon Much’s skull. Cause for gratitude for his thick thatch of brown hair had Much that day, but even so, the wayfarer’s buffet laid him flat in the dust of the highway, with many a piteous groan.

“By my halidom, thou’rt no man, but whirlwind....”

Now came the traveler’s turn to laugh, and laugh he did while resuming his journey. For Robin gave him leave to continue unmolested, doffing his cap in homage to the toll that bright-feathered-bird had paid the miller’s son.

Friar Tuck pronounced a stirring valediction over the deceased, and Alan-a-Dale paid tribute to poor Much with light fingering of his harp and this cheeky stanza:

*The miller’s son once tasted flour,  
Of flour he tasted Much.  
Now trieth he another grain:  
’pon road he licks the dust!*

Much scowled at first, but soon he joined the others in laughter as they helped him to his feet, linking arms and singing the chorus quite as lustily as Alan-a-Dale and Friar Tuck; as Will Scarlet and Little John; and as Robin Hood: exalted earl, and thief no more, but still a merry rogue.

The band reclaimed their horses, these corralled within a glade fenced with huddled birches and twining vines, and repaired then to Locksley Castle for midday meal, where a message from Kirklees greeted them and forthwith soured their appetites.

“Sir Robert...!” his seneschal exclaimed, dumbfounded at the sight of the Earl and his old woodland companions riding through the great gateway and into the castle courtyard. “But Your Lordship is at Kirklees..., wounded...”

“What senseless prattle is this?” laughed Robin. “Hale and hearty am I, and mine hunger withal — a haunch of venison would suit me mightily, with a can of brown ale to wash it down. Why ever should I take me to Kirklees? To beg the sour prioress to join my greenwood fellowship, mayhap?”

The six men all laughed at this, Much observing, “’tis some twenty leagues to Kirklees — if we make free to roam all England now, of a morning, why not sup in York or eke in Durham!” and Will Scarlet appended: “Yea, and if a nun shouldst join our band, why next we’ll link our fortunes with sweet John Lackland!”

This brash and impudent reference to His Majesty the King made them all roar with laughter — saving the honest seneschal, who found little meat for merriment in a most puzzling situation.

“By your leave, Your Lordship, we had messenger from Her Reverence the Prioress, bidding the Lady Marian make all speed for Kirklees, else she should find you dead!”

This stilled their gaiety as swiftly as a cold rain drives picnickers from a field.

“Marian hath ridden for Kirklees?”

“Yea, Master Robin. She hath gone these four hours sped!”

\* \* \*

“Your Reverence!” cried Marian, pounding at the heavy oaken door to Kirklees Tower, “’Tis I, the Lady Marian of Locksley. I have word that my Robin is here!”

Marian had but just leapt from the saddle of her panting and steaming mount, having spent the last several hours riding full-out for the village of Kirklees. Exhausted, had she troubled to notice, the Lady Huntington entertained thoughts only for her Robin, beside which her discomforts amounted to naught.

Momentarily, the door opened to receive her, the tall and regal Prioress herself greeting Marian.

“Oh, my poor dear, come in, come in...!” she ushered her caller hurriedly through the narrow entryway passage, a reassuring arm resting lightly upon Marian’s shoulders. “The Earl hath but just awakened and he asketh for you.”

Yet, rather than lead Marian *up* the spiraling stairwell that ascended the inner perimeter of the tower, as Marian expected, the Prioress took a small silver key from a ring of such at her waist, and, unlocking a short but substantial door of wych elm, commenced to escort Marian *down* ever further along a stair that plunged deep beneath the tower, to the Lady Marian’s wonderment.

“Robin lieth here within the very bowels of the earth?”

“Soon shall he,” the Prioress responded enigmatically.

Marian halted their descent. The play of light from the torches secured at intervals along the walls by rusted iron bands cast the women’s shadows in grotesque if fluttering relief against the dank stones.

“My sweet...,” purred the Prioress. Covertly she pressed the shoulders of her signet ring, before taking and squeezing the right palm of Marian ever so gently.

“Oh...!” Marian recoiled, jerking her hand away.

A prick, as from a thorn, had nipped her flesh, and she rubbed at the little mark for an instant before gazing with widening eyes at the smiling Prioress. She seemed about to speak to the mistress of the tower, but then her eyelids swiftly grew heavy and she let slip her train of thought. For already Marian felt bathed within a haze of disinterested drowsiness that stole over her as a hot breeze and lay upon her like a heavy mantle.

Twisting the embossed face of the envenomed ring, the Prioress carefully retracted the tiny needle protruding from the band. Then she led Marian by the hand deeper and deeper-yet along the endless stair that dove beneath the foundations of the citadel, below the long roots of trees....

\* \* \*

In Barnsdale Forest one road sprouts into three: toward Ferrybridge, to Pontefract, and westward unto Wakefield and then Kirklees. On that latter road thundered Robin and his paladins, caring not if they slew the horses so long as these carried them to the threshold of Kirklees Tower. A foreboding of great moment had impressed each of them with realization of the Prioress's deception. So with hardly a word to one another or the seneschal, they'd leapt back into saddle and spurred toward the woodland lying some five or six leagues north of Sherwood. Crossing the River Don into Barnsdale they soon-enough firmed bridles to the left and tore a westerly track leading past Wakefield to Kirklees, four and twenty hooves flinging divots of sod and scurries of stones, as Restiveness and Regret kept pace.

His steed failing under him, Robin catapulted himself toward the tower's portal. His fists smote upon the oak, the blows resounding throughout the citadel. Then with a lungful of air he winded his horn of silver, the force of the blast near-enough cleaving the instrument.

The echoing horn call might have awakened the dead, yet it failed to bring a soul to the door.

“They answer not!” Robin cried, grasping his head with his hands in his frustration and fury. “Could we but break it down...!” He shot his glance here and there in anguish, desperate for inspiration. His eye alighted on a possibility. “John! Canst uproot yon tree?”

Little John cast a measuring gaze upon a six-year field maple and, in token of reply, strode over to the tree and swung about. Finding a purchase for his feet by planting his heels, he rested his broad back against the trunk and exerted all the impressing force of his powerful thews and sinews. Slowly the roots began to lose their grip and slide from the soil until the maple leaned gradually further and farther and, of a sudden, gave way and fell with a swish of leaves and a deep and resonant thud as the tree struck the ground. John tore the lingering roots from the earth and the other men swiftly came to his side. They hoisted the trunk as a makeshift battering arm and charged the door, falling upon it like a thunderbolt until the latch and hinges failed and the portal lay as a ruinous mass of torn timber and rent and twisted iron upon the floor of the entryway.

The wych elm door that opened unto the subterranean stair remained ajar, so after a cursory circuit through the tower, Robin and his band — saving Tuck, who surpassed the width of the doorframe — followed on the footfalls of the women. Fetching several torches from the iron sconces on the walls, the companions rapidly descended to a vast cavern, the wide floor of which flowed on past them with gurgle and swish — for a broad and impatient river hastened here on its course through an eternal night. Only a narrow ledgeway permitted the hunters means to imitate the dark river’s heedless tide. Watchful and with probing steps they edged along, clinging to the damp cavern walls, their mirrored torch flames skittishly testing the waters.



After endless-seeming minutes of an agonizing progress, Robin, in the fore, glimpsed a ruddy glow tripping upon a billowing small circle of the black flood. About this same time he and the others perceived a gradually crescendoing rumble emanating from the nocturne before them. Then, an alloy of anticipation and bafflement and disquiet drumming upon his heart, Robin discerned that the ruddy glow came from the lamp at the prow of a small boat, bobbing upon the tide and straining the slender line that moored it. What-is-more, a figure sat, unmoving, in the stern of the dory.

“Marian...?!”

The figure stirred somewhat and murmured softly and as if in a dream, “*Ro...bin....*”

Yet even then, having but glimpsed her silhouette and heard her speak his name — within a few paces of laying his fingers upon that mooring line — an unseen hand cut the cord and cast adrift upon the chasing stream the boat that carried his very heart. The poniard that severed that rope might have *rent* the heart, so cruel and poignant did the agony of the slipping line, the anguish of the retreating dory, wound Robin. Without a second thought he plunged into the black waters, striking boldly for the boat, heedless of watery peril or aught else.

Before his companions could voice an opinion on their leader’s impetuous action, or give consideration as to how they should react, the ledge upon which they stood gave way, as by design, the collapsing walkway spilling them all into the onrushing river. Immediately the torches, with a sharp sizzle and crackle, extinguished, throwing them all into a profound darkness mitigated only by the dim light of the dory lantern, and one other source of illumination. For the Prioress stood above the stream, her blazing torch held aloft as she surveyed the disaster she’d wrought, a calamity that gave the perfidious creature profound pleasure.

Being occupied with the sudden and new situation they found themselves in, none had seen the Prioress step onto an intact section of ledge beyond their own buckled one. Emerging from a cleft within-which she orchestrated their undoing by means of cunning cogs and wheels and levers and mechanisms housed inside a chamber known only to her, she laughed at their ruin — laughter without pity.

Yet her laughter echoed only briefly through the dark cavern, for her foot slipped on the damp stones and soon she joined her enemies in the flood, her shriek of surprise pouring into a howl of rage and fright.

Only Alan escaped the torrent. His rearmost position and nimble fingers served to mitigate and to mend his personal upset. He'd but set his forefoot on the buckling portion when the Prioress threw the lever that swung the shelf. Somehow he contrived to grasp at the corner of the sill as spilling into the churning waters. As a ship's prow divides the waves, his nose parted the stream to send it riding over his shoulders. He strove against the force of the onrushing waters until he managed to haul himself onto the solid pathway with his last measure of strength.

Swept along in the cold river, the pale flame from the dory lantern their sole beacon now, the swimmers could do naught but struggle to keep afloat. The rumble they heard earlier had become a roar — the roar of a prodigious waterfall. Robin took hold of the stern rail of the dory just as the prow reached the precipice. Clinging to that rail with all his might, he and Marian and three true companions of Sherwood, with the author of their woe in their wake, flew over the lip of the cataract, the impetus flinging them past the foaming arc of the falls and into the air, whence they plunged down and down and down in darkness, tumbling into a void seemingly without end.

\* \* \*

The policeman had just passed the lake, taking a little detour through a bit of the park as he walked his beat, so he missed a sight that would have given him something to scratch his head over for the rest of his days — if it didn't land him in an asylum for the insane. Had he lingered by the water for a moment or two longer he'd have watched a series of six persons plunging from out of nowhere, falling from some twenty feet in the air to spill into the lake, one after another.

One minute, peace and quiet reigned, and not a body in sight, the next, a pair of flailing feet appeared as if from an invisible aperture in the sky, followed instantly by the ankles, calves, knees and thighs, waist and torso, thrashing hands and arms, twisting shoulders, neck, and head of a person in sore need of some fashion advice. Five more of a similar character arrived in corresponding manner within seconds. Also, a dory-boat came sailing out of the blue to plunge prow-first into the lake whereupon it promptly sank to the bottom.

As it happened, the policeman had still gained much to mull over as a result of his sojourn in the park. Dropping his nightstick, he swung about with a start at the inexplicable sounds of a rapid sequence of prodigious splashes, as from a number of objects falling from a significant height. He simply stared at the half-dozen people floundering and sputtering as they dragged themselves to the lakeshore at various places; they emerged onto dry ground only to wander dazedly off into the night in eight separate directions. He sat right down on the damp grass, shaking his head and muttering incoherently for some time before his brain took pity on him and convinced him that he'd hallucinated.

With shaking hands the police officer collected his billy and staggered out of Central Park to 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, where a pub and a pint awaited in his very near future.