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Opening extract from

Outlaw
The Story of Robin Hood

Written by

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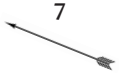
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Chapter 1

The Longest Night

There had never been a storm like it. The wind roared in from the west one evening in early October. No one was expecting it, least of all the forecasters. The ground, already saturated by a week of continuous rain, could not hold the trees in place. They too had been caught unawares. I watched all evening long, face pressed up against my bedroom window. Still top heavy in leaf, the trees were like clippers in full sail caught in a hurricane. They keeled over and could not right themselves. Great branches were torn off like twigs. Roots were



wrenched from the earth, and towering oaks and beeches sent crashing to the ground. Gran called me from downstairs again and again, but I did not want to leave my window. The trees I loved were being massacred before my eyes, but perversely I could not bear to drag myself away. In the end Gran came up to my room to fetch me.

The safest place, she said, was under the stairs. That was where they had always hidden during the war, when the bombs were falling. Now, as then, the electricity was cut. The telephone was cut too. We were on our own and no one could help us. The stair cupboard was a clutter of brooms and hoovers and old tennis rackets, all interlaced with cobwebs. We huddled together, covered ourselves in a musty blanket and watched the guttering candle.

"We have plenty of candles," she told me, "and

plenty of hot tea." She patted a thermos beside her. "We'll be all right. Try and get some sleep now."

But it was to be a sleepless night, and the longest night of my life. The storm lashed the house, rattling doors and shattering windows, shaking the place to its foundations. Both of us very soon gave up any pretence of not being frightened. We clung together as the beast outside roared and raged, doing his worst to destroy the house and us with it. At least, I thought, at least my tree would be safe. It was the biggest in the forest. It took five grown-up people, hands touching, to encircle its massive trunk. No storm in the world could blow it down, not even this one. That thought gave me some comfort through the long night.

When morning came, and the beast had gone, we at last dared to venture out. From the kitchen window, most of which had been blown into the

sink, we looked out on a scene of utter devastation. The lawn was littered with roof tile and branches, and the garden shed had been lifted up bodily and smashed against the wall. Gran sat down slowly at the table and put her hands over her face for a few moments. As she took them away again, I could see she was trying to smile through her tears.

"How about some breakfast?" she said.

"My tree," I told her. "First, I've got to see my tree."

She was not happy for me to go, but I would not be put off. "If you must then," she said, "but don't be long, and take care of falling branches. It's still blowing out there."

So I went off, picking my way across the lawn, through the smashed gate and out into the woods at the back of the house. Most of my twelve years had been spent in this place. Hardly anyone else

ever came here – they preferred the flat grass and the football posts of the Rec. And besides, I liked being on my own. This was my refuge and my private paradise. But as I walked, I saw about me a landscape laid waste. The trees lay like fallen soldiers, mown down in serried ranks. There were a few left upright, but some of those were still standing only because they were propped up by others.

A roe deer was drinking at the stream. He should have sprung away, startled at my approach. Instead he glanced almost casually towards me, considered me for a moment and wandered off in a daze of bewilderment. A squirrel sat not more than a few feet from me, soaked and trembling. I leapt the swollen stream at its narrowest and began to climb the hill the other side, hoping against hope that when I reached the top I would look down and find

my tree still standing, that by some miracle it had survived the holocaust. But as I looked around me now, I knew that neither its size nor its age nor its great strength would have helped it through the night. For the most part it was the young whippy trees that seemed to have outlasted their elders. And when at last I made it up that blasted hillside and stood there on the ridge, I saw my tree stretched out on its side like a slain giant, its massive roots ripped from the ground.

"No! No!" I cried, and a flock of crows lifted off its crippled branches and were blown away by the wind.

A tree just dead feels the same as a live one. I put my arms around it and laid my cheek on its wrinkled bark. I ran my hands along its trunk and climbed in amongst the branches where I had hidden so often, from where I had watched badgers

play in the gathering dusk or foxes pouncing on early worms; where I had been able to sit and look out over the whole forest and feel I was a bird amongst birds.

I clambered down into the vast crater and looked up. I felt the sun on the back of my head and shivered. At that moment a clod of earth parted from the roots above me and came crashing down at my feet where it shattered into pieces. There was something in the debris too solid and too shaped to be just earth. I bent down and picked it up. I was right. I knocked off the earth still clinging to it and rubbed it on my coat. It was sharpened to a point like an arrowhead and appeared to be made of a metal of some kind, silver perhaps. I turned it over in my hand and examined it more closely. It *was* an arrowhead.

I went and sat down on a rock halfway up the

side of the crater. I had to study it, to be quite sure that it was what it seemed to be. I decided it could be nothing else. I sneezed suddenly, violently, and dropped it. When I bent to pick it up, I saw something protruding from the earth, like a torn root, yet too smooth to be a root. I pulled at it and it came away easily. It was a horn, a cow's horn perhaps, blackened by age, and huge. I knocked the earth out of it and found that it was hollow all the way up. I looked around me for more, not knowing at all what to expect, only that I expected to find something. It was then that I noticed, only a few feet away from me, the shape of a head in the earth, a raised ribcage below it, and then an unmistakable foot. I hesitated, fearful of what I would find. If it was what I suspected it to be, then perhaps it should not be disturbed. But I had to know. I brushed away the earth. There were two

feet now, and something else that looked like a long curved stick. I drew it out, wiped it, and laid it on the ground alongside the cow's horn. I dug deeper now, my fingers scooping away at the earth. The skull, if that was what it was, was looking away from me down into the crater. I did not want to pick it up, but I had to be sure. If there were holes for eyes, then I would know for certain. I reached down and lifted it. As I did so the earth fell away and the eyes stared back at me, empty.

I shuddered and dropped it at once. It rolled away from me and came to rest at the bottom of the crater, the eyes still staring, accusing. My legs felt suddenly weak. I went to sit down on the rock from where I considered the grave I had disturbed. I knew then that I had defiled it, that I should have left it alone.

I had fainted in the past, and each time before

breakfast. I felt it coming over me and gripped the arrowhead in my hand as tightly as I could, making it hurt me, anything to keep my head from spinning. I tried to think only of the pain, but then I could not feel it any more. I saw the crows wheeling overhead, buffeted by the wind, and I hoped they would not take me for a dead sheep and peck my eyes out. The rushing clouds rained leaves on me, black leaves that flapped and cawed and covered the sun, so that the world of darkness closed in on me and swirled me away.