

Little John – Merry Man of Robin Hood

The first thing to know about Little John is that he is not - little. Some stories say he was over seven feet tall. Often he looks like a wild man with a thick beard and dressed in skins.

The next thing you should know about Little John is that he is Little, -- John Little is his real name. However, some say it is really John Naylor or le Nailor. It's said he comes from Hathersage in Derbyshire, the shire next to Nottinghamshire which was controlled by the same sheriff. His grave can be found in a churchyard in Hathersage.

Little John is Robin Hood's lieutenant, his second-in-command. In the early ballads, he is nearly as important as his master. John has his own adventures. For example, there's the time he entered a Nottingham archery contest. The sheriff liked what he saw and hired Little John. Using the alias Reynold Greenlefe, the outlaw promised to be the worst servant the sheriff ever had. By the story's end, Little John encouraged the sheriff's cook to join Robin's band and they lured the sheriff into the greenwood where he was robbed by Robin Hood. In another ballad, John dresses as a beggar and fights three miserly beggars.



He is an excellent swordsman and archer. In fact, one time Little John beat Robin in a playful archery contest. Robin refused to pay up and John quit his service. Then Robin got captured by a monk's treachery. It was Little John who organized the Merry Men to trick the sheriff and even the king in order to rescue Robin. Once free, Robin Hood apologized and offered to make Little John the leader of the band. John refused. No matter how much they fight, Robin is always the master.

Little John's best-known weapon is the quarterstaff. He was carrying a quarterstaff when he first met Robin Hood. One day Robin Hood was bored. There hadn't been an adventure in weeks. And so he left the Merry Men behind and went in search of excitement. Robin found it when he came across a stream with a long, narrow bridge. He started to cross the bridge. On the other side was a tall stranger who was also crossing the bridge. Neither would not back down.

Robin threatened to shoot the stranger, declaring "I'll show you right Nottingham play!" The stranger called Robin a coward. "Well arm'd with a long bow you stand,/To shoot at my breast, while I, I protest,/ Have nought but a staff in my hand."

Robin lowered his bow and went to carve himself a staff. Then, Robin and the stranger battled each other long and hard. Both were wounded. But finally, the stranger knocked Robin into the brook. The outlaw was "floating away with the tide".

Thus, Robin conceded the battle. He climbed out of the water, and blew his bugle horn. The Merry Men, led by Will Stutely, appeared. Robin's men threatened to fight the stranger. But Robin stopped them. Robin asked the stranger if he'd like to join the Merry Men and wear the Lincoln green clothing of the outlaw band.

The stranger accepted. And he was baptized into the band by Will Stutely. To quote from the ballad,

*This infant was call'd John Little, quoth he,
Which name shall be chang'd anon,
The words we'll transpose, so where-ever he goes,
His name shall be called Little John.*

Then, Little John was dressed in green and took his place in the band. In some movies, John loses the fight on the bridge. In the Kevin Costner movie, John is the original leader of the outlaws, and it's Robin who joins them and assumes control of the Merry Men after he had won the quarterstaff duel.

Some modern stories portray Little John as nothing more than a dumb sidekick, but in the earliest tales, he was as crafty as Robin Hood himself. In fact, an old meaning of the word Little was "tricky" or "clever", not small. In some tales, Little John is a gentle man. In others, he can be downright angry and violent. He beheads a monk in one story and shoots the sheriff in the back in another. And in one modern story, he even killed a woman who spurned him. Thankfully his bad temper is usually not so monstrous. He might grumble or argue, but when push comes to shove, Little John is always there for Bold Robin. You couldn't ask for a more loyal friend.