

# Robin Hood and Rowan Tree

*based on the books by Nancy Springer*

Once upon a time, long ago and far away on the mist Isle of England, there lived a seemingly ordinary boy named Robin. He lived with his family who were wealthy Saxon nobles. He grew up in abundance, wanting for nothing. In nearby France, the Norman people also had fine lands and much wealth. But it was not enough for them; as is true of many who have enough, they were greedy for more. So they invaded England, bullied and killed the Saxons and stole their lands and wealth.

Robin grew up during this turbulent time. While he was away in school (in France) the Normans unjustly killed his father and took his land. When Robin returned, he was dismayed to find his family, land and wealth all gone. When the Normans proclaimed that Robin was now an outlaw, and promised a reward to his future murderer, the stunned, grieving Robin fled deep into the forest.

Others also sought the safety of the forest. They joined together, forming outlaw bands. To disguise themselves, they wore hooded cloaks of brown and green cloth, and they learned the ways of the forest. Robin, now called Robin Hood, became the group's leader. He challenged new arrivals to determine their skills with long staffs and hunting bows, to ensure that they were strong, and loyal and would survive the harsh life of outlaws. They swore loyalty to Robin, and to the forest and lived in balance with the plants and animals. When greedy Normans entered the forest, they robbed them, and shared the wealth with hungry, struggling folks living in nearby villages.

Years went by. Robin came to feel old, and weary, and could barely recall his prior, privileged life. He heard of a woman called Celendine, a healer who could speak with animals and trees, and always find water. Many fearfully whispered that she was half fey. As a protector of the forest and the fairies, Robin vowed to meet this kindred spirit. Risking his life, he journeyed to her secret cabin with a hopeful heart.

He came upon a clearing at last. But alas! Celendine's cabin was empty. He paused, then dared to enter. Surprisingly, there was a welcoming fire in the hearth, and fresh cool water to drink, and a sweet, gentle breeze beckoning him to a deep, cushioned chair. Robin sighed, and sat, and soon fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed of a breathtakingly beautiful woman with yellow flowers entwined in her hair, who warmly embraced and made love with him. When he awakened, the cabin was still empty. Feeling refreshed and renewed, he returned to the forest and the ongoing fight for justice.

Meanwhile, in and around her secret clearing, Celendine the healer gathered herbs and flowers and freely offered help to all who came. Before a full turn of the wheel of the year, she bore a daughter, Rosemary. Rosemary grew up happy and carefree in her forest home, except for one thing: unlike Celendine, she couldn't magically find water, or converse with plants, animals or fairies, or melt invisibly into the earth. Although her mother seemed unconcerned, Rosemary yearned for these abilities. One day, shortly after her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, while gathering violet leaves in the forest, Rosemary felt her mother's spell of protection upon her, and instinctively froze in place. Then, suddenly –too suddenly- her mother's energetic embrace was gone. She felt alone and afraid. Something was terribly wrong. Trembling, she realized that she smelled smoke... and it was coming from the direction of the village.

She ran home, gasping and choking, only to find her cabin burned to the ground, her mother's dead body among the still smoking remains. Sobbing, Rosemary removed her mother's many-stranded silver ring, before returning Celendine's body to the earth.

Rosemary understood it had been the greedy Norman nobles who had kicked her mother, as they feared and resented the magical healing powers she'd shared so freely. Where to go? What to do? Become a greedy Norman's servant or wife? Leave her beloved forest? She recalled her mother's tales about Rosemary's father, an outlaw living with other notorious men, somewhere deep in the distant forest. Why had he never sought her out, or even sent word to her? Trusting her own inner voice, Rosemary cut her hair short, clothed herself in boyish breeches, and crafted her own bow and arrows. "Henceforth," she proclaimed to the sweet spring, "I am to be known as Rowan Tree, strong and brave." And she entered the darkening forest, to seek out the father she'd never known.

She walked and walked, climbed and stumbled through this unfamiliar forest. Weary, alone, she sorrowed for her mother and could not eat. The nights were long and cold. Rosemary grew weak. Finally, she forced herself to kill and cook a rabbit. She heard a crashing noise, and heart-pounding, spied a huge shaggy wolf leaping towards her and bravely drew her bow. Amazingly, the animal caught the speeding arrow mid-air in his mouth. He proudly laid it at Rowan's feet, smiled, and wagged his tail. Glad for his companionship, she petted him and shared the meat, and named him Tykell, "the arrow."

Feeling full, warm and protected, she curled up with Tykell and fell into a deep sleep. She dreamed of a full moon shining silvery light down into an orange fire, which was circled by faeries, and five outcast children. One faerie said: "Welcome, Rowan, daughter of Celendine, daughter of the forest and the Fey. Join us." And so Rowan joined the faeries around the fire and sang with them of the wisdom of the trees and the healing of the waters, and the beauty and connection of all. The silence following the timeless song was broken by another faerie who granted Rowan a wish. "I wish," she requested humbly, "for better hunting skills, so that I may eat and be strong and continue this journey." Laughing, the faerie said "And so it shall be." The moon began to set and the fey gestured that it was time to depart. "Remember," they called, as they began to melt back into the forest, "Remember your mother's gifts!"

Rowan awakened bathed in golden sunlight, surrounded by five children. Next to her hand was a bow, and a quiver of arrows, made of bright fey metal, each sharper than a knife. The children introduced themselves, telling their stories of servitude and beatings, lands taken, parents killed. They agreed to travel along with Rowan and Tykell. Weeks passed as they made their way through the forest and taught one another how to find herbs and plants, and hunt for only what they needed. Every morning, Rowan gave thanks, making offerings to the fire that warmed them, the woods that sheltered them, and the plants and animals that fed them. Rowan found that she did, indeed, remember her mother's gifts. And, more and more, she grew to trust her own inner voice, which told her what was safe to eat, where it was safe to sleep, and other forest wisdom.

One night, sitting around the camp fire, the children realized they had become more than traveling companions –they were friends, family, an outlaw band of their own. One proposed that Rowan be their leader, but she refused, reminding them that they all had gifts and talents, and that they could all lead together. Reaching into her pocket, Rowan pulled out her mother's treasured multi-stranded ring. Separating the strands, she gave one to each child and they pledged themselves to one another, like a grove of interconnected trees, no one more important, all with special gifts.

One day, they found themselves looking down upon a lovely green valley, with a clear-running spring and a rowan grove. They were surprised to hear voices and the cracking of wood on wood.

They heard voices and the cracking of wood on wood. Looking down, they saw a large band of men, dressed in green and brown, surrounding two who fought with staves. As they watched, one knocked the other to the ground and yelled in triumph. The other raised himself up and then bowed deeply, saying "I am sworn to follow and obey you, Robin Hood." They then picked up bows and began an archery contest. Robin sent the first arrow flying at a far tree. At that moment, Tykell barked, ran down the hill, and leapt up and caught the arrow. The children broke out in laughter, and the band of men looked up and saw them. There was nothing for Rowan and the others to do but go down and join them. They were welcomed, fed and invited to sleep by the fire. None questioned that Rowan was a boy leading a band of children.

Over the next few days, all became a part of the camp, practicing gathering food, fighting and archery. But Rowan never told Robin who she was, or why she had come. One day, Robin Hood came to Rowan and said "To stay you must become a part of the band. You must fight me, and then promise to obey me." She looked at him for a long time, and then said "I respect you and your knowledge, but I too have knowledge, knowledge I was born with, knowledge passed to be by my mother, Celendine. I think there is another way to be together, with all having a voice." Robin, looking surprised, told her of his visit to Celendine's house, his dreaming of (though never meeting) the healer. Rowan, realizing what must have happened, told him of her shapeshifting mother's ability to become earth, water and fire. "...and that is what must have happened with you..." she concluded, "...and dreams, magic and this reality met as you did, for she birthed me nine months later, your daughter."

Robin was astounded, never suspecting that Rowan was a girl, never mind his own daughter! Crying, they embraced, and talked long into the day. Finally Robin said that it must be time for dinner, and of course Rowan would stay without fighting him. But Rowan said no, that she felt the call to return to the edge of the forest, to help those in the village by teaching them healing. She would see what her band thought best. And the band agreed, that help was needed both closer to the village, as well as deep in the woods. That night, their last night together, they all had a wild feast and dance. And deeper in the forest, you could have spied small figures singing joyously and dancing to the human music.

The next morning, the sun rose pink and orange. The young band gathered and hugged the older outlaws, all with tears in their eyes. Robin and Rowan hugged longest. Then, with a final bark, Tykell bounded into the forest, Rowan and the others following back the way they had come.