

“Richard is Back!”

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938)

by Herbert H. Stein

For many years, my wife, Diana, was primarily bed-bound due to an advanced case of multiple sclerosis. She spent much of her time watching television, which surprisingly met her interests better than might be expected. She had always been a news hawk and became for me a valuable repository for what was going on in the world, colored brightly with her intense likes and dislikes. She also was able to watch movies, young and old. We maintained subscriptions with the various premium movie channels and for the oldies, she had Turner Classic Movies amongst others.

One Sunday afternoon we were alone at home. I was doing something in the living room, probably working on something on the computer or watching a ball game. Around five o'clock, I took a break and went to the bedroom to see how she was doing and if she needed anything.

As I walked up to the bedroom door, she looked up at me with a bright smile and said, “Richard is back.” I could see she was very pleased. Almost automatically my mind started to go through the various Richards we knew at the time, none of whom were away to my knowledge; but, I knew she kept up with such things by phone better than I did. It occurred to me, though, that no one had called, and this seemed to be very current information. Confused, I asked her “Richard who?”

Brightly, she told me, “King Richard.” This didn't immediately clear up my confusion, but perhaps with a point to the TV above and beyond the foot of her bed, she let me into the source of her instant pleasure.

A glance told me that she was watching *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the iconic 1938 movie starring Errol Flynn as Robin. The film had reached the point at which King Richard the Lionheart, released from imprisonment on the continent, had come to Sherwood Forest in disguise. As he revealed himself to Robin and his band of merry men, they looked up at him, seated on a noble horse, with joy and adulation, then bowed down on

one knee in the presence of their rightful king just returned. Diana was sharing in their joy and responded to my coming into the room like someone on the couch in the throws of transference, assuming for the moment that I would instantly understand.

That is the power of film!

But how did it exert that power? I didn't give it any thought at the time. I was happy for Diana and able to appreciate and share some of her excitement at the moment with no need to question it. Even now, it remains a pleasant memory.

I recently decided to take another look at *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. I probably had not seen it since I was a child, or perhaps a young adult. Fortunately, it is enough of a classic to still show up occasionally on Turner Classic Movies, and I was able to “DVR” a copy.

The opening credits alone are a reminder of what films used to look like. It opens to the Warner Brothers logo, “WB” with “Warner Bros. Pictures Inc.” wrapped across it in smaller letters in a setting that looks like a medieval shield. The music has some of the tone of a marching band with drums and horns and a light uplifting repeating melody. The title and opening credits (Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, Basil Rathbone, Claude Rains) are in a style that suggests the time of chivalry, with first letters in red, the rest in black and a background that shows stylized swords and crossbows.

We see that the screenplay was “Based Upon *Ancient Robin Hood Legends*.” The film begins with a similarly written text designed to allow us to feel that we are in the 12th century reading an official proclamation:

In the year of Our Lord 1191 when Richard, the Lion-Heart set forth to drive the infidels from the Holy Land, he gave the Regency of his Kingdom to his trusted friend, Longchamps, instead of to his treacherous brother, Prince John.

We are given some time to dwell on that (and, I presume for parents to read it to young

children), then continue with another bit of “scroll”:

Bitterly resentful, John hoped for some disaster to befall Richard so that he, with the help of the Norman barons, might seize the throne for himself. And then on a luckless day for the Saxons ...

We are then transported to a medieval square, with red clothed drummers drumming and a man on horseback reading from just such a scroll in fine English.

“News has come from Vienna. Leopold of Austria has seized King Richard on his return from the crusades. Our king is being held prisoner. Nothing further is known. His Highness, Prince John, will make further public pronouncements tomorrow.”

And, so we find ourselves in another time and another state of reality, an ancient world of magic, fable and heraldry in which heroes and villains roamed the earth. I find myself wondering if at the time this film was made for children—which it certainly was—or for adults—which it probably was. Whichever, even now I found myself viewing it with that pleasant sense of childhood innocence.

But we know that childhood is not nearly so innocent as we wish it to be, and that 1938, when the film was made, was not a time of innocence. I imagine, rather, that it was a time, not unlike our own, when many people, young and old, wished to be able to enter a theater and be transported to a more innocent world.

And that is what they got, and what we still get when it appears on the screen. Despite the fact that it deals with some very grim political realities, it maintains a light charming atmosphere, full of hope. As I write about it, I find myself a bit sorry at the thought of exposing and peeling away its defenses against traumatic reality.

The story opens with a scene of conspiracy between evil people in a position of power, Prince John (Claude Rains at his oiliest) and Sir Guy of Gisbourne (Basil Rathbone at his haughtiest).

Prince John: And how are the dear Saxons taking the news, Sir Guy?

Sir Guy: They're even more worried than

Longchamps, Your Highness.

Prince John: They'll be more than worried when I squeeze the fat out of their hides.

Sir Guy: You intend to act on your plans?

Prince John: What better moment than this, Sir Guy? Whoever would have thought my dear brother would be so considerate as to get captured and leave all of England to my tender care?

Sir Guy: He may disapprove when he returns, Your Highness.

Prince John: *If* he returns. And I'll see to it that he doesn't. We must drink to this moment, Sir Guy. Golden days are ahead. I'll assign tax districts to you tomorrow.

Sir Guy: Tomorrow, Your Highness.

We move immediately to a cruel montage that might remind us of current images in our newspapers and on our radios and TV's, images that might have evoked some familiarity in 1938 as well.

In this case, the victims are the native Saxons, whose homeland had been conquered by the Normans 125 years before. We see a Saxon protesting and demanding pay at having his goods taken by soldiers for Prince John's larder. He is told, “Pay, pay, that's all you Saxons think about. Didn't I tell you it was for Prince John, who's just come up from London?” Another man protests at someone being put into shackles. “Stop! Stop! This man is freeborn! He's a landowner. You can't make a slave of him!” He is told, “Didn't he refuse to send his men to work in Guy of Gisbourne's field?” We see men struck down dead as they attempt to resist.

And then we are rescued from another such scene as Robin Hood rescues a poor man, Much, the miller, from Sir Guy and a band of armed men who have caught him killing a deer in Sherwood Forest. Outnumbered by at least four to one, Robin confidently threatens Sir Guy with his bow and arrow, causing him to ride off with his men. I have emphasized the numbers, Robin and Will Scarlett facing Sir Guy and an armed group of at least eight or ten men because it gives a foretaste of the next scene.

We see Prince John and Sir Guy at a feast surrounded by Norman lords and soldiers;

Robin Hood
Stein

but, in this scene, we have the added element of sexual rivalry, brought in by the presence of an attractive young lady. Before Robin enters the scene, the film suggests a possible romantic connection between her and Sir Guy.

"Wasn't it worth coming from London with me to see what stout fellows our Nottingham friends are? Take Sir Guy of Gisbourne, now."

"Must I take him, Your Highness?"

"Why, you like him, don't you?"

"Well, he is a Norman, of course."

"Is that the only reason you like him?"

"Isn't that reason enough for a royal ward who must obey her guardian?"

"Nay, I'd not force you, my lady, but he's our most powerful friend in these shires, he's already in love with you, and if I could promise him marriage to a royal ward, it would help my plans."

Robin is the next topic for discussion as John hears about him from Sir Guy, the sheriff of Nottingham, a somewhat comic figure in this version of the story, and others. After hearing about Robin's rebelliousness, Prince John pronounces that he should be hung. At this point, Robin enters this scene, barging into the banquet bearing the slain deer on his back. He uses it to knock away the guards trying to stop him. He appears calm and confident approaching Prince John's table, making light of the situation.

"You should really teach Gisbourne hospitality. I no sooner enter his castle with a bit of meat than his starving servants try to snatch it from me. You should feed them, they'll work better."

He then throws the deer onto Prince John's table, saying, "With the compliments of your royal brother, King Richard, God bless him!"

Prince John is amused and offers Robin a seat across from him and introduces him.

"This is my ward, the Lady Marian Fitzwalter. I'm leaving her here in Gisbourne's care while I visit the northern shires."

Robin smiles at her, saying, "I hope my lady had a pleasant journey from London?"

She answers, "What you hope can hardly be important."

To which he responds, addressing Prince John, "It's a pity my lady's manners don't

match her looks, Your Highness."

In this moment, Robin and Marian are in that delightful contest that carries sexuality in movies, and Prince John picks up on it, highlighting the rivalry with Gisbourne,

"There's poor Gisbourne so much in love with Marian he daren't say boo, and this saucy fellow gives her better than she sends."

Through all this, Robin is calm and confident, more like a teenage football star crashing a party than an outlaw rebel entering the equivalent of an armed camp. He maintains his Errol Flynn *sangfroid* as he raises the stakes, calling Prince John a traitor. As the men sitting next to him move away, he confidently sits back, even rocks back in his chair, saying,

"What else do you call a man who takes advantage of the king's misfortune to seize his power? And now, with the help of this sweet band of cutthroats, you'll try to grind the ransom for him out of every helpless Saxon, a ransom that soon will be used not to release Richard, but to buy your way to the throne."

After Sir Guy stands up, shouting, "Let me ram those words down his throat your highness," Prince John allows Robin to go on, asking him what he proposes to do.

Robin answers, "I'll organize revolt, exact a death for a death, and never rest until every Saxon in our shire can stand up as free men and strike a blow for Richard and England."

Looking at this scene with my 2018 eyes (and memory), I was struck by something that I don't think bothered me years ago. Seeing Robin entering this heavily fortified castle, surrounded by hostile Norman barons, soldiers and guards, I found myself confidently expecting that Robin Hood had planned this out carefully so that at the point at which Prince John's men descend on him, they would find themselves surrounded from above by Robin's men aiming down at them with their crossbows. I was further convinced of it as I saw Robin noticing the doors being locked. I had no idea how they would have sneaked in to accomplish this, but I was confident that he had a plan.

It didn't happen.

When Prince John finally gives the order to

strike, a dagger or sword is thrown at Robin who seems to duck out of the way as it strikes the back of his chair. The melee that follows is part high adventure, part three stooges slapstick. With Lady Marian watching with interest, Robin uses the chair to fight off the first attackers, then engages in swordplay with two or three attackers at a time, always seeming to know when to turn around. When Sir Guy joins in, Robin knocks him down and they both fall to the floor under a pile of men from which Robin mysteriously escapes with no one seeming to notice until Sir Guy rises from the crowd. Robin leaps up stairs, holding the soldiers off with his bow and arrow, finally making his way outside where Will Scarlett and Much, the miller are waiting with horses.

Robin Hood enters Prince John's party, surrounded by armed men without a plan for escape, then confidently escapes against a virtual army. How do we explain it?

Diana had a stock answer for such questions. "It was in the script."

It was in the script for a reason. This film was not intended to depict history. If it had been, it would have been a miserable failure. The history of the time that comes down to us is quite different from what we see in the film. It was not intended to throw us into a realistic situation. The scene was written and presented to convey the sense that there is no real danger. As we saw in the opening, the filmmakers were depicting a legend. It was designed to create a sense of calm, of light-hearted play, of absolute invincibility amid a plot that portended enormous danger. And it does it extremely well, captivating children and adults alike.

We have a word for this in psychoanalysis. It is called a *defense*. The film throws us into a traumatic nightmare and gives us the psychological fortifications to withstand it.

This particular scenario is repeated several times, first in an even more light-hearted vein, then in a virtual reproduction of this early scene.

I refer to the iconic scenes in which Robin Hood meets Little John and Friar Tuck. Each of them does battle with Robin before joining

the merry band, a sort of rite of passage. Little John and Robin fight with cudgels on a log bridge, with Little John finally knocking Robin off the bridge into the shallow swamp below. With Friar Tuck, Robin Hood engages in swordplay, finally besting the irate Tuck.

In each case, Robin's men—Will Scarlett when Robin fights with Little John and Little John and Will when Robin fights with Friar Tuck—watch from a short distance, laughing and smiling as the fight goes on as if they were watching mud wrestling instead of a battle with deadly weapons. It conveys a sense of child play.

Still later, Robin deliberately walks into a trap, essentially repeating the situation in Sir Guy's castle. Prince John, Sir Guy and the sheriff of Nottingham set up an archery contest, expecting Robin Hood to come and compete and surely win based on his reputation as the greatest archer in the land. Robin and a group of his men do show up at the contest. Prince John knows who he is, a now adoring Marian is terrified as she recognizes him and sees the trap. Nevertheless, he wins the prize, famously slicing his chief challenger's arrow in half. Once again, he single-handedly fights his way out of the trap, riding off with his outnumbered band of men.

And finally, at the end of the film we witness a battle between Robin's men and Prince John's men inside the same castle. This time the slapstick is emphasized even more as Much, the miller, sits above the fray calmly knocking Prince John's soldiers on the head with a club. In that scene no one appears to die or even be seriously injured with the lone exception of Sir Guy, who is killed by Robin in a duel that seems to last an eternity.

All of which brings us to "Richard is back!" The entire film, as we have seen, offers reassurance against fears of recurring trauma. In 1938, it may well have been "designed" to offer such reassurance, consciously or not, over fears about what was happening in the world at that time. The last part of the film adds another dimension to that effort. It gives us an overarching fantasy, the return of the good king, the return of the idealized father who

Robin Hood
Stein

will put everything to right.

Richard returns to England incognito with a small group of followers. We are not told how his escape was arranged, and I will skip over a subplot concerning an attempt to assassinate him. He realizes a need to meet up with Robin Hood and his men and also that the best way to do it was to enter Sherwood disguised as a group of rich friars.

As planned, he is intercepted by Robin himself. At first he maintains his anonymity, presenting himself as the head of a group of pilgrims who are loyal to King Richard. They all soon learn that Richard has returned to England and that Prince John plans to have him assassinated and to have himself crowned as king the next day. Robin realizes that they must find the king and begins to order his men to start a search.

It is at this moment that Richard throws off his hooded cape, revealing himself as King Richard the Lionheart. This was the moment that created Diana's joy. Robin and his men are stunned and in awe. They become quiet and bow down to the returned king.

In the final scene, Richard banishes his brother. He makes Robin a baron, in charge of Sherwood and the surrounding area. He promises to restore to the loyal Saxons all they have lost. Most importantly, he gives the hand of his ward, Lady Marian, to Robin. As the film ends, the two young lovers are leaving arm in arm with carefree joy.

Richard is back! A strong, handsome, wise and loving father has returned to restore the integrity of the family, to protect us all. And that brings us back to the beginning of the story.

I have written on more than occasion that a successful film is the result of a collaboration between the filmmakers and the viewers. When filmmakers give us a story and image that evokes our deepest emotions, everyone is pleased. We can all experience the pleasure of the return of a good father who restores order and allows young lovers to enjoy their happiness. We can all enjoy the awareness that Richard is back. But that collaboration is not simply one between the filmmakers and a

general audience with shared fantasies, fears and desires. It is also a collaboration with each of us, and sometimes there is a special connection.

I have left something out, not deliberately at first. As I have said, I was happy that day when Diana reveled in Richard's return and gave it no further thought for many years.

My late wife, Diana, had a difficult childhood. In a sense she fit the oft heard aphorism, "What doesn't kill you makes you strong." She was strong, strong enough to successfully survive a very difficult time growing up, strong enough to make the most of an extended period of disabling illness and to find joy in little things like the return of Richard.

Her mother showed signs of severe mental illness when Diana was about four years old. In large part motivated by delusions, she left her husband, Diana's father, taking her two children across the continent, essentially out of his reach. Diana grew up under very difficult circumstances, with only vague childhood memories of her father and, as I recall, occasional contact.

It was not until she was in her late teens that Diana had an opportunity to resume a relationship with a father she had for practical purposes lost at an early age. Only now, as I reflect on it, it occurs to me that "Richard is back" may well have touched a special chord for a child who must have many times wished that her father, or someone ready to take that role, would step in to restore order to a struggling family. Like Robin Hood, she was forced to do what she could as a child to maintain some semblance of that order, wishing and waiting for help from someone with a lion heart. Perhaps her joy at that moment when she smilingly told me that Richard is back was an awakening of a long forgotten wish.

I'll never know for sure. She is no longer around, and if she was and I told her this theory, I imagine that she'd smile, shrug her shoulders, and say, "Don't know."