

Friar Tuck ~ Chapter 7

The three ways to know a person:

By their discourse; by their conduct; by their companions.

Triads of Bardism

Early summer of the year 1200 saw life erupting from every bole and hole in Sherwood. The days turned balmy, but the nights held nips of ice well into June.

On Midsummer's day, Tuck was sending up a grateful prayer for his morning's catch of trout when the stream carried a faint tread to his ears.

In a blink, he'd gathered his fishing gear, and leapt into the nearest bush.

A tawny headed huntsman approached from upstream, dressed in worn, finely-fitted leathers. He carried his longbow nocked, and moved gracefully amongst the trees.

Tuck narrowed his eyes, recognizing something familiar about the figure.

The huntsman almost passed Tuck's hiding place, but stopped as if on a whim, and sat down. He pulled off his cockily-cut hat, and ran a slow hand over his crop of thick brown hair. His emerald-green eyes were set like sparks in his youthful face.

Tuck watched with growing ill-humour as the huntsman unstrung his bow, pulled off his boots and lay back with a contented sigh.

Tuck relaxed, thinking he'd be asleep in seconds, but after a moment's silence the intruder reeled out a selection of ribald songs at the top of his voice. His singing was well trained, and truly rude, obviously that of a noble.

Tuck's legs had long gone into cramp from their awkward crouch when the huntsman sat back up.

"I think you've been squatting in that bush long enough, don't you, Friar?" The huntsman spoke facing the rushing stream, causing Tuck to hesitate.

"Come, come, I won't bite you. Or even beat you. And definitely won't eat you!" The huntsman laughed merrily, glancing sidelong at Tuck's hiding place. "You hide well, but late, my friend. Do come out. I'm hungry, and something tells me you and the good Lord have done well with the fish of Sherwood this fine morning."

Tuck emerged, scowling in his unfriendliest manner. A lunch guest had not been in his plan for the day, particularly one given to lewd music.

That his painful wait in the bushes had been a farce was also not best pleasing.

"Perhaps if you gave more thought to the good Lord, and less to corky couplets; He would bless your bow with better aim, and you could catch your own lunch."

"*Oh ho.*" The huntsman sprang to his feet with a happy smile, and placed his hands on his hips. "A forest Friar with a hot welcome! Let me see ... The Lord blesses those who practice, and those who pray. That's why I've no need of my bow today."

Tuck wasn't going to be seduced by the huntsman's playful grin, or outdone by his rhymes.

"This forest Friar is blessed with fish for two, it's true. But however I choose to share God's bounty, I'll wager it won't be with you."

"A sporting Friar to boot!" The huntsman laughed outrageously. "A wager you say? On a Holy day? Very well, my well fed Friarly friend - be warned, I'll play you to the *very* end. What had you in mind?"

The huntsman's mockery again struck a familiar chord, but Tuck couldn't spare the brainpower to think of why. He hadn't meant to offer a wager, but had no

intention of backing down.

This ramping rapscaillon needed a helping of humble pie.

"Alright." Tuck pointed to the tinkling waters. "I'll wager I can walk across that stream without getting my feet wet."

The huntsman gave the stream a lively examination.

The emerald current rushed by at some speed, four yards across and a good two feet deep, with no bridge in sight.

"Unless you're more holy than you look," the huntsman turned to Tuck with an inquisitive eye, "that's the stupidest wager I've ever heard of. You're on!"

"Fine. Come down to the side of the stream, so you have a good view of your trouncing, knave." Tuck kept his expression firm.

The huntsman strutted jauntily to the edge of the waters, and gave Tuck a low bow, fluttering out his hand in courtly invitation.

Tuck leapt onto the huntsman's back before he had time to straighten. In a trice, he'd hooked his arm round the huntsman's neck, and locked his ankles around his waist.

"*By Our Lady!*" The huntsman wheeled and teetered like a drunken pony.

Tuck gave the scoundrel a mighty whack on the rump. "Forward, knave! *On, on, on!* Carry me across like a good Samaritan!"

Tuck's forceful smack drove the huntsman to take a large pace directly into the stream.

Another cracking slap on the arse, and the man was traversing like a stubborn donkey. The water frothed around his knees as he struggled, turning turquoise before it splashed back into its element.

Six long paces and a brace of buttock-boiling blows later saw Tuck dismounting onto dry land. He settled his robe with pointed dignity, then broke into gales of laughter.

The huntsman clutched his lumbar with one hand, the other rubbing his throat as he panted for breath.

"Why, huntsman, where's your smile? We have crossed by walking, and yet my feet are dry."

"Well, my weighty brother," the huntsman stood upright with a groan, "it seems the old adage is true: see fox or Friar 'ere noon, and bad luck is your'n the whole day through."

Tuck was still laughing when the huntsman pressed the tip of his dagger amiably into his gut.

"Now, brother, I left my boots on yonder bank, and am overcome with tiredness. Perhaps you would be kind enough to carry me back?" The huntsman prodded Tuck encouragingly with his knife, grinning.

Tuck gave the huntsman a long, hard look, then turned, ready.

The huntsman bounded onto Tuck's back with an excited yelp, and they set off.

Relying on his dagger to discipline his steed, and revelling in the swift reversal, the huntsman didn't think keep a proper grip.

Halfway across, Tuck planted his feet in the sandy stream-bed and gave a great heave.

The huntsman flipped helplessly into the air and flopped into the water with a terrific splash.

He leapt up almost instantly, water cascading from all over, but Tuck was

already on the far bank, laughing again.

"Pray for wits, not lunch, knave. You will be better served!"

The huntsman waded through the water against the pull of his wet leathers, distinctly not laughing.

Tuck retreated a pace, and picked up his shillelagh.

The huntsman squelched up the bank, hefting his dagger in his left hand.

"Friar, I'll laugh alongside any man-Jack who beats my wits, but you've assaulted my dignity, and for that I'll be having redress."

"Your dagger against my shillelagh? Isn't humiliation enough? Don't make me hurt you as well." Tuck was only partly bluffing.

The longer reach of Tuck's weapon gave him a clear advantage.

"Oh, I won't be using my dagger." The huntsman replied casually as he approached a nearby willow. "But this!" He grasped a thumb thick branch, and snapped it with a kick.

Cleaning the pole with a few swift flicks of his knife, the huntsman now held a serviceable seven foot staff.

Tuck knew his advantage was lost, but the temptation to knock some manners into this jackanapes was just too much. He brought up his shillelagh with a look his Abbot would have been proud of.

The huntsman raced forward, the tip of his staff dancing in deceptive arcs, and launched a fast one-two.

Tuck knocked the first attack downwards, and caught the second cross-wise, but the fresh willow bent around the shillelagh to connect painfully with his ear.

Tuck wrenched his head away, then advanced to return a good clout, but the huntsman batted him back with thrusting jabs and snapping side swipes. Tuck's arms were thoroughly bruised under the assault, but protected him well enough.

The huntsman made a deceptive move and jabbed again, this time catching Tuck square on the nose.

Tuck yelled in pain and snatched at the end of the huntsman's staff with his left hand, miraculously catching hold of it.

Using the staff for leverage, Tuck delivered a solid back handed thump to the huntsman's ribs.

The huntsman yelped an oath, then yanked his staff free and launched a series of strikes onto Tuck's head that ended with a snap as the willow staff broke in two.

The battering counter-attack had sent Tuck reeling, but now he recoiled, rampaging. The huntsman had not expected his staff to break, and careened away in dismay.

In the fury of melee he hadn't noticed his back was to the brook.

Tuck grinned wickedly as he stepped up and gave the knave a strategic poke in the solar plexus. The huntsman doubled over, lurched awkwardly, lost his footing on the muddy bank, and dunked backward into the water.

Tuck had already grabbed his things and was making his escape when the huntsman emerged from his second ducking, laughing merrily.

Tuck paused a few yards away, ready to fly, but curious despite himself.

"Most excellent fighting Friar!" The huntsman's smile lit up the entire scene. "I concede your valiant victory. But all this unhabitual bathing has given me an *unnatural* hunger. Hold a while. Have mercy. Have lunch! You've impressed me, and I'm in need of good counsel."

Tuck was suspicious of another trick, but the huntsman held out his hands to show they were empty.

The flattery was also rare as relics.

"I know you from somewhere." Tuck commented as the pair licked their fingers clean of stone-baked trout.

"Oh damn, we haven't been presented, have we?"

"Er, no."

"That's alright then. I never remember anyone I've been presented to." The huntsman gave a broad smile. "May I offer my broken willow to your service, Friar? My name is Robert Loxley."

"The mad-cap Earl!"

"Well, some folk call me that ... But rarely to my face, it must be said." Loxley gave Tuck an injured look that twisted instantly into amusement. "Your honesty is refreshing good brother, almost as refreshing as that stream."

Both men laughed, and Tuck wondered at the warm feeling in his chest.

Loxley had a way about him that was enthralling. He acted like a younger brother, foolish, rakish and rude, but was so easy in his smile that mischief was just part of the package. Even fighting with him was fun.

Robert regarded Tuck expectantly for several seconds before he realized what was wanted.

"Ah. Um. I am, er, Tuck." He hunched sheepishly. "And I'm not a Friar. I'm a ... A, a vagrant monk." It was the first time Tuck had admitted his status to anyone, and it stuck in his throat. Shame coloured his cheeks and his heart pulled in sorrow.

"Friar is what we called the French brothers on Crusade." Loxley responded, glancing with understanding into Tuck's vulnerable eyes. "And you're unlike any gyrovague I've ever met."

Tuck felt a piece of his heart lift, and fell in love with Robert Loxley at the same moment.

"You said you needed counsel, Robert." Tuck was overcome with emotion, so kept his voice lofty.

Loxley leapt to his feet and began pacing.

"Yes. I'm in trouble, Tuck. Big, big trouble. I need help, help of all kinds. I just don't know what I need help to do. To live as Loxley, and die as a traitor? Or die as Loxley, and live as a coward?"

"Why don't you tell me all about it, Robert?" Tuck sat, powerfully present, creating a space in which the Earl could speak his mind.