

Chapter 1

ABC

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW how I became so bad, my godmother Grimwig reckons it's because I have no father. If only I had a dad to beat me regular, says she, I might grow into a proper Christian.

But if I don't have a dad, at least I have a name. The day I was born, Father Tom baptized me with his own hands and named me Robin. Though folk have called me many other things.

Mam calls me, "My little sprite."

"Little imp, more like!" says my godmother. (She never liked me much.)

Alfred the Baker has a name for me, too. (But it wasn't *me* who led the weevils to his flour. It was only my whistling did that.)

I've been called Rascal Robin, Prankster Robin, Robin-the-Brat.

Wait-Till-Get-My-Hands-On-That Robin is also my name, or so says William the Bailiff. (He blames it on me. But was it *my* fault his horse bit him on the bum? Not likely!)

"False Foundling," they taunt me. "Fatherless Wretch."

Witch's Boy. Wicked Sprite. Bastard Child. Mischievous Puck. Hobgoblin.

All of these are my names, too.

But if you wish to do me honor, call me a good fellow. Robin Goodfellow. That's who Mam says I am, and she should know, since she is a wise-woman. You can find our cottage where the meadow meets the woods, if ever you need a cure for pox or plague. There Mam tends her little garden and does her healing work, and I help her when I can.

If I *do* have a dad somewhere, I don't know who he is, and gave up asking Mam long ago. For she would only laugh and make a joke of it, and tell me that my father is a king.

"King of the Fairies," she says. "He came in through the key-hole of my door when I was a girl, and he made me dance." Then Mam takes me by the hands and whirls me round and round, singing a merry song in words I don't understand.

"What words are those?" I ask.

She only laughs and whirls me faster, until I fall in a giddy heap on the ground.

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Almost every Sunday, my godmother Grimwig visits our cottage to tutor me in godly ways, and to give Mam her advice.

"You must marry," she tells Mam. "If not for your own sake, then for the boy."

But Mam will not hear of it. "We don't need a man to lord it over us, thank you," says she.

Then Grimwig shakes her head in sorrow for our sins, and crosses herself. For a more godly woman you will not find in all England. Folks say she bathes in hot water every second Saturday, and she never scratches, because no flea or louse would dare come near her, she is that holy. She knows all the saints' names,

and can recite the Ten Commandments backwards, and more besides.

But today it is me whose knowledge will be tested.

Grimwig pulls a stool close to the fire and sits on it, her back straight as a rod of iron, and fixes me with her godly stare. “We will begin with the *Paternoster* and Apostle’s Creed.”

I stand on shaky legs and send a pleading look to Mam—but find no mercy there.

“Go on, Sprite,” she says, smiling encouragement. “Make us proud.”

The fire in the middle of our little room gives a burst of flame. Just like the fires of Hell to which a boy might be damned.

I stand before Grimwig, and say my Our Father, and make it safely to the Amen. But I stumble on the *Ave Maria*, and my tongue ties itself in knots around the Apostle’s Creed. All I can do is sputter and stutter, until my face burns.

Grimwig rolls her eyes and sighs. “It seems you have learned nothing at all. Let’s hope you can do better on the Seven Sacraments.”

Trembling, I thus begin: “Christ’s cross be my speed, and Saint Nicholas! The Seven Sacraments are Baptism, Confirmation, and— and—” I bite my lip, trying to remember. “God-mother, what is that spell that Father Tom casts upon the bread to turn it into Jesus?”

Grimwig’s eyes go wide as a pair of goose eggs. “It’s not a *spell*, boy, but a sacred prayer!”

“But I don’t remember what it’s called.” I look to Mam for help, but she only frowns.

Grimwig lifts her gaze toward the vent-hole in our ceiling,

where the hearth's smoke rises Heavenward to make the angels weep. "What a disappointment you are!" she sighs. "Pray God you can do better on the Seven Virtues, and so redeem yourself."

I swallow down my shame, and cross myself, and try: "Christ's cross be my speed, and Saint Nicholas! The Seven Virtues are..." I bite my lip. I squint my eyes. But I can go no further. For my life, I cannot remember a single one. My poor memory is made even worse by my godmother's scolding eyes, so that my wits are all a-tremble, and I can barely remember my own name.

I'm close to tears, and near despair, when an inkling comes to me. "Please, Godmother, can't I say the Seven Deadly Sins, instead? For the Sins are more interesting than the Virtues, and easier to remember, and I know them backwards and forwards."

My godmother's face goes so darkly purple, and the veins in her neck stick out so, I fear she has swallowed a chicken bone. But now she leaps from her stool and cries, "Wicked child! See where such lax discipline leads?" Then she stalks about the room in a holy temper, searching among the herbs for some cruel rod to put in Mam's hand. Finally she settles on a branch of willow, and declares: "For the good of his soul, you *must!*"

But Mam will do no such thing. She has never laid a hand on me, though half the village has begged her to, at one time or another. Nor has she ever beaten me with birch or strap or rod. Not once.

Now Grimwig starts to wring her hands and weep, and bemoans my lost soul. "It's my fault. I am to blame. I've failed as a godmother!"

She carries on so, and cries so loud, I start to think a beating might not be as bad.

“There, Grimwig,” says Mam, and plies her with tea of chamomile to calm her down. “God knows you’re a saint for trying. But I fear our wild Robin is beyond taming.”

“God have mercy on us!” cries Grimwig, and crosses herself, and sniffles.

Then Mam gives me a stern look. “Sprite, be a good lad, and fetch us some blackberry.”

Now I know it’s time to take my leave. “Christ’s cross be my speed, and Saint Nicholas!” And off I go running, faster than you can sneeze—through pasture, meadow, wood, and stream—and say as I go the names for weeds. There’s Angelica for coughs, Burdock for leprosy, Caraway for farts, Fennel for stinky armpits, Garlic for cancer, Horehound for wheezing, Ivy for sore eyes, Larkspur for lice, Mint for hiccups...

Shall I go on?

Pennyroyal for fleas, Rosemary for dandruff, St. John’s Wort for melancholy, Thyme for worms, Vervain for pimples, Yarrow for sword-wounds, and many more that I could name. But I have come to the end of my ABC and must catch my breath. Amen.

Chapter 2

Sowing

HAWKIN AND I SCARE the crows, that's our job. Hawkin must work for nothing at all, since John Strongarms is his dad, but I will earn my dinner and half a loaf of bread to take home to Mam. Because today is Tuesday before the Feast of Saint Gregory, and the wind has a warm touch. Today we sow barley in the North Field.

Wat Bean stumbles along the furrow, scattering seeds. John Strongarms pulls the horse who pulls the harrow, to cover the seed with earth before the crows can steal it away.

"Wretched crows!" John bellows. "By Saint Gregory's gums, a curse on all crows!"

Crows fall from the sky, a riot of black wings. Hawkin hurls another stone from his sling, but misses.

I turn myself into a dragon and spread my scaly wings. I roar the crows into the air with my breath of flames. But the crows come back as many as before, pecking and clawing and thieving.

"Robin, stop your foolish games!" shouts John, shaking his stick at me. "Pick up a stone. Use your sling."

I fold my scaly dragon-wings and drop my gaze.

One of Hawkin's stones hits its mark, and I hear a squawk. A wounded bird limps away.

Hawkin cheers. "I hit another one!" He dances a jig where he stands.

But I feel a sharp pain where my heart must be.

Give me a post for a target, or an apple in a tree, and I'm as good a shot as any boy with a sling. Why should shooting a crow be different?

"What's wrong with *you*?" says Wat Bean, scowling at me. "You haven't cast a single stone."

"He's afraid of them," says Hawkin, laughing.

Wat laughs, too.

"Here, witch's-boy, try one of these." Hawkin holds a clump of stones in a fold of his tunic. He smiles as if to dare me.

"I'm not afraid," says I. But my hand trembles.

I pick a stone, the smallest, worn smooth by a stream. It seems such a hard thing, for something so small. I look at the squabbling crows.

John goads the horse again with his stick, and glares at me. "Will you stand there like a tree, Robin? Look lively, boy! By Saint Edith's elbows, these crows will eat us alive!"

I take aim at one solitary crow, and start to whirl my sling. But the crow looks back at me with her bright black eye. As if to say, "*Would you hurt me? Truly?*"

You shouldn't listen to crows too much, or you might start to hear things—in place of caws, words. For crows are always talking to each other. And sometimes, worse luck, they talk to *me*.

My whirling sling slows to nothing. The stone falls to the ground.

Hawkin looks at me wide-eyed, then glances sideways at his dad.

But I'm not afraid. "John, wouldn't it be better to ask them in a friendly way?"

"Ask them?" scoffs Wat Bean. "What would you ask a crow?"

Hawkin laughs. "Will you sing them a lullaby, Robin?"

Blood rushes to my face as quick as an answer can fly off my tongue. "No, not a lullaby. I know a better song."

John Strongarms turns purple in the face, like a squeezed pimple about to burst. "Stop these childish games, brat, and pick up a stone! Or I swear by Saint Tatberht's toenails, I will make you sore!"

"But let me sing my song first," says I.

"Why, you little—" Rage pops John's eyes out and strangles his words. He lunges for me across the furrow, stick in hand.

I duck and dodge, and scamper through his legs, and then under the horse, to the other side. Now I'm free to say my song:

*"Seed-bandit, steal instead the wind.
Those farther fields are friendlier to your kind
The plunder plenty there, a praise-winning feast
To rake from the ruined ground a raven-song."*

Widdershins, widdershins, around we go, John stumbling and cursing, and I singing, as the crows rise into a great black cloud. Three times, widdershins, they circle over our heads, then change course for a neighboring field.

John lifts his eyes skyward and drops his stick. Hawkin drops

the stone from his sling. Wat drops his jaw. Then all three turn to look at me and stare.

“Robin,” says John, white-faced, “what have you done?”

I take a step backwards. And then another. “Only as I was told. I sent the crows away, as you asked me.” But my voice is unsteady, for I sense trouble in the air.

“But Robin,” cries John, “you have sent them to the lord’s field!”

Shame scalds my face, but it must be Pride that rises in my heart—stubborn Pride, the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins. “All to the good,” says I. “The lord has more than enough seed, and more of everything to spare.”

And before John can catch me, I speed away—but without the half-loaf of bread I promised Mam.

Chapter 3

Trial by Combat

WHATEVER ELSE they may say about me, I'm not the kind of fellow would let his mother starve. So before I go home empty-handed, there's something else I need to try first.

I run across the common, heading for the safety of the willow trees that shade the stream. But then (worse luck!) who climbs up the stream bank but Kit, lugging a basket of wet laundry. She seems a small girl, under so big a basket.

I pull my hood down over my eyes and quickly turn away. But too late.

"Robin! What are you hiding for?"

"Who's Robin?" says I, making my voice deep.

Kit laughs and pushes back my hood. "You're blushing. I knew you were up to no good!"

"Why, can't a fellow walk by a stream?"

Kit shifts the basket to her other hip and studies me. "I thought you were helping my dad in the fields today."

"I did. That job is done."

Kit narrows her eyes. "You're in trouble, I can tell. What did you do *this* time?"

"Only rid the field of crows as I was told," says me. "But that's not what all the fuss was about."

“Fuss?” Kit wrinkles her brow. “Oh, Robin...”

“The fuss was about where the crows *went*. How was *I* to know it was the lord’s field? All those strips of furrow look the same.”

Kit sets her basket down and sighs. “I don’t suppose they’ll hang you. Not if you’re truly sorry, and say that you were possessed by a demon.”

“*Hang* me?” Already I feel a lump in my throat where the noose would go. “But the lordling wouldn’t hang a fellow, would he? He’s only a boy like me.”

Kit rolls her eyes. “By my faith, Robin, don’t you know *anything*?”

“I know Sir Reginald died,” says I, “and his son is lord now.”

“Not until he’s grown up. The boy was a ward of the King, but now the wardship has been sold. And the boy, and the land, and all the rest of us, sold along with it.”

“Sold to who?”

“To the boy’s guardian, of course. The baron Drogo de Malodeur. *He’s* our lord now, God help us.”

“Oh.”

Over Kit’s shoulder, I see a glimmer in the water. A fish-tail splashes the surface and disappears.

“Never mind,” says Kit, “if they take you to the Manor Court, I’ll testify in your defense, and say that you are simple-minded, and didn’t know any better.”

I watch the fish gliding under the water, a glimmering shadow.

Kit chatters on, “And I’m sure there are others who will say

you are not quite human, but some kind of elf changeling, and a hanging would do you no good at all.”

“Oh. That’s good.” The fish breaks the surface of the water to snatch a fly, and I catch a glimpse of its silvery scales. Oh, it’s a fine fish! A fish I could take home to Mam.

Kit squints her eyes at me and frowns. “Robin, you haven’t heard a word I’ve said, have you?”

“What?”

She makes a fist and thumps me.

“Ow!” I cringe away and rub my arm. “What was that for?”

“For whatever mischief you’re *thinking* about doing,” says she.

“I’m not!”

“Yes, you are. You’ve got that glint in your eye that you always get when you’re about to do something wicked.”

“Why, can’t a fellow look at a fish?”

“If you’re caught stealing the lord’s fish, nobody can help you. Even if you *are* simple-minded.” Kit makes a grumpy sound in her throat and shakes her head. “Just be careful, Robin. The baron is in charge of the manor, now. And they say his steward is a cruel man.”

“This lord or that one. They’re all the same.”

“I pray you’re right,” says Kit.

She hoists the heavy basket to her shoulder and starts slowly down the path. I pull my hood up and turn back to the stream.

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If you’ve ever tried fishing the lord’s stream without a net, you know it’s a dicey business. First you must wander along the bank a ways, whistling, as though a fish were the last thing on

your mind. Follow the gurgling water as it runs through the wild meadow, with the woods on one side, until you're as far from the village as you dare go. Then look around you, left and right, east and west. And if all around you is silence, save for a bird or two and the quiet talking of the stream, then wander a ways further until you come to where the water eddies into a pool.

Now you must shuck off your leggings, strip down to your shirt and breeches, and wade into water cold enough to break your ankles. Be still, and make your legs like the twin trunks of a tree, and let your hands dangle in the water like the branches of a willow dipping down. And you must stay just so, and think only peaceful thoughts, and wait for the fish to come. Wait until you feel a stirring in the water and the brush of a scaly tail against your leg. Until the fish, having nothing to fear, wanders into your hands.

Now grab it!

A flapping mad thing lashes my arms as I splash toward the bank, slipping and sliding in the mud. I wrestle it down and pin it under my knees. And then, reaching for a stone, with a quick prayer to God, and a quicker prayer to the fish, the grisly work is done.

Poor fish. But what a fine fish! A fish to take home to Mam. Breathing hard from my battle, I can't help smiling proud. Until I hear the horse.

A whinny, and hoof-beats.

Worse yet, upon the horse is a boy.

"Stop, thief!" he cries, in a voice that sounds half-French. "Unhand that *feesh!*"

The horse snorts and pounds the muddy grass with its hooves.

I back away, fearful of being trampled. The boy leaps down and draws his sword.

I stare. Such a wonder of a boy I never did see. He's dressed in clean silk leggings, shoes of soft leather, and a jerkin finely sewn. On his golden-haired head sits a velvet cap, with a peacock feather sticking out.

"Did you not hear?" he says. "I command you to drop that feesh!"

"Drop *what?*" For my life, I cannot understand a word of French.

"That *feesh!*" says he, pointing with his sword at my fish. "Have you no *honneur?* Unhand the feesh, or pay with your life."

I look at the fish in my hands. Such a fine fish! A fish to make Mam proud.

"Not likely!" says I.

"You dare to defy me?" The boy's eyes flash with angry pride. "Do you not know who I am?"

My eyes scan the boy again, from his soft leather shoes to his fine velvet hat. "You be the lordling, I guess."

"*My lord* to you, peasant!" He slashes his sword through the air to frighten me, but I can see it's only made of wood. "I am George, son of Sir Reginald, may he rest in peace. And you, *villein*, are poaching on my family's land."

"I'm sorry about your dad," says I. "But this fish is dinner for my mam, and anyway, it's dead, and cannot swim no more."

George, son of Reginald, steps toward me, and places the tip of his wooden sword against my ribs. "That feesh was not yours to catch. It belonged to my father, and I will protect it with my life. As I will protect my family's *honneur* from all poachers and

thieves. So I say to you again, surrender that feesh, or I will see you hanged.”

“But my lord,” says I, polite as I can. For I’m thinking he’s just a boy like me, only a few inches taller. “This is England. You can’t hang a fellow without giving him a fair trial. It’s not the custom.”

The lordling narrows his eyes at me, and says nothing at first, as if he is taking the measure of my words. Then he turns to his horse.

The horse nods its head, and snorts, and stamps its hoof.

The lordling turns his proud eyes to me again. “You speak the truth, villein. It is your right as an Englishman. And so, I grant you a trial... a trial by combat!”

The lordling pulls at his glove, one finger at a time, glaring at me as he does so, and throws the glove to the ground at my feet.

“It shall be a fight to the death, of course,” he says, raising his wooden sword. “*En garde*, villein! Prepare yourself to die!”

I cross myself, and hold my fish before me (the only weapon I have!) shivering in my shirt and breeches. But then the lordling looks at me again, as if to pity me, and shakes his head. “You have no blade,” he says, and lowers his sword.

I lower my fish.

“By the laws of chivalry, I cannot fight an unarmed man.” He swiftly takes his wooden sword by the hilt and jams the blade into the muddy ground. “We shall fight unarmed. We shall wrestle!”

Scowling at me all the while, the lordling takes off his hat with the feather in it, and his jerkin so finely sewn, and his shoes of soft leather, and his silken hose, until he stands like me,

barelegged in breeches and shirt. Then he puts up his arms and takes a ready wrestler's stance.

"*En garde, villain,*" he says once more. "Drop your feesh and fight like a man!"

And what do I do?

I hit him with my fish.

In truth, it must be the fish's doing. For my fish becomes a sword, gleaming silver in the sun like a true blade of steel. With a *whoosh!* and a *slap!* it finds its mark and strikes the lordling down.

God and his saints forgive me! There he lies in the muddy grass, face-down. I have killed him! I drop that devil of a fish and kneel by my fallen lordling's side.

"My lord! My lord!" I cry, shaking his shoulder. "Forgive me. I didn't mean it. The fish bewitched me."

But now he stirs, and staggers to his feet, two white eyes blinking out of a mask of mud. "This is not chivalry! You have no *honneur!*" The lordling grabs his sword.

I grab my fish and run.

"Stay and fight, you coward!" the lordling screams. He stumbles after me, in his muddy shirt and breeches, waving his wooden sword. "Come back, villain! Die like a man!"

And I, laughing, flee with my fish across the fields.