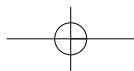


Prologue





On a winter's day in 1413, just before Christmas, Nicholas Hook decided to commit murder.

It was a cold day. There had been a hard frost overnight and the midday sun had failed to melt the white from the grass. There was no wind so the whole world was pale, frozen and still when Hook saw Tom Perrill in the sunken lane that led from the high woods to the mill pastures.

Nick Hook, nineteen years old, moved like a ghost. He was a forester and even on a day when the slightest foot-fall could sound like cracking ice he moved silently. Now he went upwind of the sunken lane where Perrill had one of Lord Slayton's draught horses harnessed to the felled trunk of an elm. Perrill was dragging the tree to the mill so he could make new blades for the water wheel. He was alone and that was unusual because Tom Perrill rarely went far from home without his brother or some other companion, and Hook had never seen Tom Perrill this far from the village without his bow slung on his shoulder.

Nick Hook stopped at the edge of the trees in a place where holly bushes hid him. He was one hundred paces from Perrill, who was cursing because the ruts in the lane

had frozen hard and the great elm trunk kept catching on the jagged track and the horse was baulking. Perrill had beaten the animal bloody, but the whipping had not helped and Perrill was just standing now, switch in hand, swearing at the unhappy beast.

Hook took an arrow from the bag hanging at his side and checked that it was the one he wanted. It was a broadhead, deep-tanged, with a blade designed to cut through a deer's body, an arrow made to slash open arteries so that the animal would bleed to death if Hook missed the heart, though he rarely did miss. At eighteen years old he had won the three counties' match, beating older archers famed across half England, and at one hundred paces he never missed.

He laid the arrow across the bowstave. He was watching Perrill because he did not need to look at the arrow or the bow. His left thumb trapped the arrow, and his right hand slightly stretched the cord so that it engaged in the small horn-reinforced nock at the arrow's feathered end. He raised the stave, his eyes still on the miller's eldest son.

He hauled back the cord with no apparent effort though most men who were not archers could not have pulled the bowstring halfway. He drew the cord all the way to his right ear.

Perrill had turned to stare across the mill pastures where the river was a winding streak of silver under the winter-bare willows. He was wearing boots, breeches, a jerkin and a deerskin coat and he had no idea that his death was a few heartbeats away.

Hook released. It was a smooth release, the hemp cord leaving his thumb and two fingers without so much as a tremor.

The arrow flew true. Hook tracked the grey feathers, watching as the steel-tipped tapered ash shaft sped towards Perrill's heart. He had sharpened the wedge-shaped blade and knew it would slice through deerskin as if it were cobweb.

Nick Hook hated the Perrill family, just as the Perrills hated the Hooks. The feud went back two generations, to when Tom Perrill's grandfather had killed Hook's grandfather in the village tavern by stabbing him through the eye with a poker. The old Lord Slayton had declared it a fair fight and refused to punish the miller, and ever since the Hooks had tried to get revenge.

They never had. Hook's father had been kicked to death in the yearly football match and no one had ever discovered who had killed him, though everyone knew it must have been the Perrills. The ball had been kicked into the rushes beyond the manor orchard and a dozen men had chased after it, but only eleven came out. The new Lord Slayton had laughed at the idea of calling the death murder. 'If you hanged a man for killing in a game of football,' he had said, 'then you'll hang half England!'

Hook's father had been a shepherd. He left a pregnant widow and two sons, and the widow died within two months of her husband's death as she gave birth to a stillborn daughter. She died on the feast day of Saint Nicholas, which was Nick Hook's thirteenth birthday, and his grandmother said the coincidence proved that Nick was cursed. She tried to lift the curse with her own magic. She stabbed him with an arrow, driving the point deep into his thigh, then told him to kill a deer with the arrow and the curse would go away. Hook had poached one of Lord Slayton's hinds, killing it with the bloodstained arrow, but the curse had remained. The Perrills lived and the feud went on. A fine apple tree in the garden of Hook's grandmother had died, and she insisted it had been old mother Perrill who had blighted the fruit. 'The Perrills always have been putrid turd-sucking bastards,' his grandmother said. She put the evil eye on Tom Perrill and on his younger brother, Robert, but old mother Perrill must have used a counter-spell because neither fell ill. The

two goats that Hook kept on the common disappeared, and the village reckoned it had to be wolves, but Hook knew it was the Perrills. He killed their cow in revenge, but it was not the same as killing them. 'It's your job to kill them,' his grandmother insisted to Nick, but he had never found the opportunity. 'May the devil make you spit shit,' she cursed him, 'and then take you to hell.' She threw him from her home when he was sixteen. 'Go and starve, you bastard,' she snarled. She was going mad by then and there was no arguing with her, so Nick Hook left home and might well have starved except that was the year he came first in the six villages' competition, putting arrow after arrow into the distant mark.

Lord Slayton made Nick a forester, which meant he had to keep his lordship's table heavy with venison. 'Better you kill them legally,' Lord Slayton had remarked, 'than be hanged for poaching.'

Now, on Saint Winebald's Day, just before Christmas, Nick Hook watched his arrow fly towards Tom Perrill.

It would kill, he knew it.

The arrow flew true, dipping slightly between the high, frost-bright hedges. Tom Perrill had no idea it was coming. Nick Hook smiled.

Then the arrow fluttered.

A fledging had come loose, its glue and binding must have given way and the arrow veered leftwards to slice down the horse's flank and lodge in its shoulder. The horse whinnied, reared and lunged forward, jerking the great elm trunk loose from the frozen ruts.

Tom Perrill turned and stared up at the high wood, then understood a second arrow could follow the first and so turned again and ran after the horse.

Nick Hook had failed again. He was cursed.

* * *

Lord Slayton slumped in his chair. He was in his forties, a bitter man who had been crippled at Shrewsbury by a sword thrust in the spine and so would never fight another battle. He stared sourly at Nick Hook. 'Where were you on Saint Winebald's Day?'

'When was that, my lord?' Hook asked with apparent innocence.

'Bastard,' Lord Slayton spat, and the steward struck Hook from behind with the bone handle of a horsewhip.

'Don't know which day that was, my lord,' Hook said stubbornly.

'Two days ago,' Sir Martin said. He was Lord Slayton's brother-in-law and priest to the manor and village. He was no more a knight than Hook was, but Lord Slayton insisted he was called 'Sir' Martin in recognition of his high birth.

'Oh!' Hook pretended a sudden enlightenment. 'I was coppicing the ash under Beggar's Hill, my lord.'

'Liar,' Lord Slayton said flatly. William Snoball, steward and chief archer to his lordship, struck Hook again, slashing the whip's butt hard across the back of the forester's skull. Blood trickled down Hook's scalp.

'On my honour, lord,' Hook lied earnestly.

'The honour of the Hook family,' Lord Slayton said drily before looking at Hook's younger brother, Michael, who was seventeen. 'Where were you?'

'I was thatching the church porch, my lord,' Michael said.

'He was,' Sir Martin confirmed. The priest, lanky and gangling in his stained black robe, bestowed a grimace that was supposed to be a smile on Nick Hook's younger brother. Everyone liked Michael. Even the Perrills seemed to exempt him from the hatred they felt for the rest of the Hook tribe. Michael was fair while his brother was dark, and his disposition was sunny while Nick Hook was saturnine.

The Perrill brothers stood next to the Hook brothers.

Thomas and Robert were tall, thin and loose-jointed with deep sunk eyes, long noses and jutting chins. Their resemblance to Sir Martin the priest was unmistakable and the village, with the deference due to a gently-born churchman, accepted the pretence that they were the miller's sons while still treating them with respect. The Perrill family had unspoken privileges because everyone understood that the brothers could call on Sir Martin's help whenever they felt threatened.

And Tom Perrill had not just been threatened, he had almost been killed. The grey-fledged arrow had missed him by a hand's breadth and that arrow now lay on the table in the manor hall. Lord Slayton pointed at the arrow and nodded to his steward who crossed to the table. 'It's not one of ours, my lord,' William Snoball said after examining the arrow.

'The grey feathers, you mean?' Lord Slayton asked.

'No one near here uses grey-goose,' Snoball said reluctantly, with a churlish glance at Nick Hook, 'not for fledging. Not for anything!'

Lord Slayton gazed at Nick Hook. He knew the truth. Everyone in the hall knew the truth, except perhaps Michael who was a trusting soul. 'Whip him,' Sir Martin suggested.

Hook stared at the tapestry hanging beneath the hall's gallery. It showed a hunter thrusting a spear into a boar's guts. A woman, wearing nothing but a wisp of translucent cloth, was watching the hunter, who was dressed in a loin-cloth and a helmet. The oak beams supporting the gallery had been turned black by a hundred years of smoke.

'Whip him,' the priest said again, 'or cut off his ears.'

Hook lowered his eyes to look at Lord Slayton and wondered, for the thousandth time, whether he was looking at his own father. Hook had the strong-boned Slayton face, the same heavy forehead, the same wide mouth, the same

black hair and the same dark eyes. He had the same height, the same bodily strength that had been his lordship's before the rebel sword had twisted in his back and forced him to use the leather-padded crutches leaning on his chair. His lordship returned the gaze, betraying nothing. 'This feud will end,' he finally said, still staring at Hook. 'You understand me? There will be no more killing.' He pointed at Hook. 'If any of the Perrill family dies, Hook, then I will kill you and your brother. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'And if a Hook dies,' his lordship turned his gaze on Tom Perrill, 'then you and your brother will hang from the oak.'

'Yes, my lord,' Perrill said.

'Murder would need to be proven,' Sir Martin interjected. He spoke suddenly, his voice indignant. The gangling priest often seemed to be living in another world, his thoughts far away, then he would jerk his attention back to wherever he was and his words would blurt out as if catching up with lost time. 'Proven,' he said again, 'proven.'

'No!' Lord Slayton contradicted his brother-in-law, and to emphasise it he slapped the wooden arm of his chair. 'If any one of you four dies I'll hang the rest of you! I don't care! If one of you slips into the mill's leet and drowns I'll call it murder. You understand me? I will not have this feud one moment longer!'

'There'll be no murder, my lord,' Tom Perrill said humbly.

Lord Slayton looked back to Hook, waiting for the same assurance, but Nick Hook said nothing. 'A whipping will teach him obedience, my lord,' Snoball suggested.

'He's been whipped!' Lord Slayton said. 'When was the last time, Hook?'

'Last Michaelmas, my lord.'

'And what did you learn from that?'

'That Master Snoball's arm is weakening, lord,' Hook said.

A stifled snigger made Hook look upwards to see her ladyship was watching from the shadows of the gallery. She was childless. Her brother, the priest, whelped one bastard after another, while Lady Slayton was bitter and barren. Hook knew she had secretly visited his grandmother in search of a remedy, but for once the old woman's sorcery had failed to produce a baby.

Snoball had growled angrily at Hook's impudence, but Lord Slayton had betrayed his amusement with a sudden grin. 'Out!' he commanded now, 'all of you! Get out, except for you, Hook. You stay.'

Lady Slayton watched as the men left the hall, then turned and vanished into whatever chamber lay beyond the gallery. Her husband stared at Nick Hook without speaking until, at last, he gestured at the grey-feathered arrow on the oak table. 'Where did you get it, Hook?'

'Never seen it before, my lord.'

'You're a liar, Hook. You're a liar, a thief, a rogue and a bastard, and I've no doubt you're a murderer too. Snoball's right. I should whip you till your bones are bare. Or maybe I should just hang you. That would make the world a better place, a Hookless world.'

Hook said nothing. He just looked at Lord Slayton. A log cracked in the fire, showering sparks.

'But you're also the best goddamned archer I've ever seen,' Lord Slayton went on grudgingly. 'Give me the arrow.'

Hook fetched the grey-fledged arrow and gave it to his lordship. 'The fledging came loose in flight?' Lord Slayton asked.

'Looks like it, my lord.'

'You're not an arrow-maker, are you, Hook?'

'Well I make them, lord, but not as well as I should. I can't get the shafts to taper properly.'

'You need a good drawknife for that,' Lord Slayton said,

tugging at the fledging. 'So where did you get the arrow,' he asked, 'from a poacher?'

'I killed one last week, lord,' Hook said carefully.

'You're not supposed to kill them, Hook, you're supposed to bring them to the manor court so I can kill them.'

'Bastard had shot a hind in the Thrush Wood,' Hook explained, 'and he ran away so I put a broadhead in his back and buried him up beyond Cassell's Hill.'

'Who was he?'

'A vagabond, my lord. I reckon he was just wandering through, and he didn't have anything on him except his bow.'

'A bow and a bag filled with grey-fledged arrows,' his lordship said. 'You're lucky the horse didn't die. I'd have hung you for that.'

'Caesar was barely scratched, my lord,' Hook said dismissively, 'nothing but a tear in his hide.'

'And how would you know if you weren't there?'

'I hear things in the village, my lord,' Hook said.

'I hear things too, Hook,' Lord Slayton said, 'and you're to leave the Perrills alone! You hear me? Leave them alone!'

Hook did not believe in much, but he had somehow persuaded himself that the curse that lay on his life would be lifted if only he could kill the Perrills. He was not quite sure what the curse was, unless it was the uncomfortable suspicion that life must hold more than the manor offered. Yet when he thought of escaping Lord Slayton's service he was assailed by a gloomy foreboding that some unseen and incomprehensible disaster awaited him. That was the tenuous shape of the curse and he did not know how to lift it other than by murder, but nevertheless he nodded obediently. 'I hear you, my lord.'

'You hear and you obey,' his lordship said. He tossed the arrow onto the fire where it lay for a moment, then burst

into bright flame. A waste of a good broadhead, Hook thought. 'Sir Martin doesn't like you, Hook,' Lord Slayton said in a lower voice. He rolled his eyes upward and Hook understood that his lordship was asking whether his wife was still in the gallery. Hook gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. 'You know why he hates you?' his lordship asked.

'Not sure he likes many people, lord,' Hook answered evasively.

Lord Slayton stared at Hook broodingly. 'And you're right about Will Snoball,' he finally said, 'he's weakening. We all get old, Hook, and I'll be needing a new centenar. You understand me?'

A centenar was the man who commanded a company of archers and William Snoball had held the job for as long as Hook remembered. Snoball was also the manor's steward, and the two offices had made him the richest of all Lord Slayton's men. Hook nodded. 'I understand, lord,' he muttered.

'Sir Martin believes Tom Perrill should be my next centenar. And he fears I'll appoint you, Hook. I can't imagine why he would think that, can you?'

Hook looked into his lordship's face. He was tempted to ask about his mother and how well his lordship had known her, but he resisted. 'No, lord,' he said humbly instead.

'So when you go to London, Hook, tread carefully. Sir Martin will accompany you.'

'London!'

'I have a summons,' Lord Slayton explained. 'I'm required to send my archers to London. Ever been to London?'

'No, my lord.'

'Well, you're going. I don't know why, the summons doesn't say. But my archers are going because the king commands it. And maybe it's war? I don't know. But if it is

war, Hook, then I don't want my men killing each other. For God's sake, Hook, don't make me hang you.'

'I'll try not, my lord.'

'Now go. Tell Snoball to come in. Go.'

Hook went.

It was a January day. It was still cold. The sky was low and twilight dark, though it was only mid-morning. At dawn there had been flurries of snow, but it had not settled. There was frost on the thatched roofs and skins of cat ice on the few puddles that had not been trampled into mud. Nick Hook, long-legged and broad-chested and dark-haired and scowling, sat outside the tavern with seven companions, including his brother and the two Perrill brothers. Hook wore knee-high boots with spurs, two pairs of breeches to keep out the cold, a woollen shirt, a padded leather jerkin and a short linen tunic, which was blazoned with Lord Slayton's golden crescent moon and three golden stars. All eight men wore leather belts with pouches, long daggers and swords, and all wore the same livery, though a stranger would need to look hard to discern the moon and stars because the colours had faded and the tunics were dirty.

No one did look hard, because armed men in livery meant trouble. And these eight men were archers. They carried neither bows nor arrow bags, but the breadth of their chests showed these were men who could draw the cord of a war bow a full yard back and make it look easy. They were bowmen, and they were one cause of the fear that pervaded London's streets. The fear was as pungent as the stench of sewage, as prevalent as the smell of woodsmoke. House doors were closed. Even the beggars had vanished, and the few folk who walked the city were among those who had provoked the fear, yet even they chose to pass on the farther side of the street from the eight archers.

'Sweet Jesus Christ,' Nick Hook broke the silence.
'Go to church if you want to say prayers, you bastard,'
Tom Perrill said.

'I'll shit in your mother's face first,' Hook snarled.

'Quiet, you two,' William Snoball intervened.

'We shouldn't be here,' Hook growled. 'London's not our
place!'

'Well, you are here,' Snoball said, 'so stop bleating.'

The tavern stood on a corner where a narrow street led
into a wide market square. The inn's sign, a carved and painted
model of a bull, hung from a massive beam that was anchored
in the tavern's gable and reached out to a stout post sunk in
the marketplace. Other archers were visible around the
square, men in different liveries, all fetched to London by
their lords, though where those lords were no one knew.
Two priests carrying bundles of parchments hurried by on
the street's far side. Somewhere deeper in the city a bell
started to toll. One of the priests glanced at the archers wearing
the moon and stars, then almost tripped as Tom Perrill spat.

'What in Christ's name are we doing here?' Robert Perrill
asked.

'Christ is not telling us,' Snoball answered sourly, 'but I
am assured we do His work.'

Christ's work consisted of guarding the corner where the
street joined the marketplace, and the archers had been
ordered to let no man or woman pass them by, either into
the market square or out of it. That command did not apply
to priests, nor to mounted gentry, but only to the common
folk, and those common folk possessed the wisdom to stay
indoors. Seven hand-drawn carts had come down the street,
pulled by ragged men and loaded with firewood, barrels,
stones and long timbers, but the carts had been accompanied
by mounted men-at-arms who wore the royal livery and the
archers had stayed still and silent while they passed.

A plump girl with a scarred face brought a jug of ale from the tavern. She filled the archers' pots and her face showed nothing as Snoball groped beneath her heavy skirts. She waited till he had finished, then held out a hand.

'No, no, darling,' Snoball said, 'I did you a favour so you should reward me.' The girl turned and went indoors. Michael, Hook's younger brother, stared at the table and Tom Perrill sneered at the young man's embarrassment, but said nothing. There was little joy to be had in provoking Michael, who was too good-hearted to take offence.

Hook watched the royal men-at-arms who had stopped the handcarts in the centre of the marketplace where two long stakes were stood upright in two big barrels. The stakes were being fixed in place by packing the barrels with stones and gravel. A man-at-arms tested one of the stakes, trying to tip or dislodge it, but the work had evidently been well done, for he could not shift the tall timber. He jumped down and the labourers began stacking bundles of firewood around the twin barrels.

'Royal firewood,' Snoball said, 'burns brighter.'

'Does it really?' Michael Hook asked. He tended to believe everything he was told and waited eagerly for an answer, but the other archers ignored his question.

'At last,' Tom Perrill said instead, and Hook saw a small crowd emerging from a church at the far side of the marketplace. The crowd was composed of ordinary-looking folk, but it was surrounded by soldiers, monks and priests, and one of those priests now headed towards the tavern called the Bull.

'Here's Sir Martin,' Snoball said, as if his companions would not recognise the priest who, as he drew nearer, grinned. Hook felt a tremor of hatred as he saw the eel-thin Sir Martin with his loping stride, lopsided face and his strange, intense eyes that some thought looked beyond this world to

the next, though opinion varied whether Sir Martin gazed at hell or heaven. Hook's grandmother had no doubts. 'He was bitten by the devil's dog,' she liked to say, 'and if he hadn't been born gentry he'd have been hanged by now.'

The archers stood with grudging respect as the priest drew near. 'God's work waits on you, boys,' Sir Martin greeted them. His dark hair was grey at the sides and thin on top. He had not shaved for some days and his long chin was covered in white stubble that reminded Hook of frost. 'We need a ladder,' Sir Martin said, 'and Sir Edward's bringing the ropes. Nice to see the gentry working, isn't it? We need a long ladder. There has to be one somewhere.'

'A ladder,' Will Snoball said, as if he had never heard of such a thing.

'A long one,' Sir Martin said, 'long enough to reach that beam.' He jerked his head at the sign of the bull over their heads. 'Long, long.' He said the last words distractedly, as if he were already forgetting what business he was about.

'Look for a ladder,' Will Snoball told two of the archers, 'a long one.'

'No short ladders for God's work,' Sir Martin said, snapping his attention back to the archers. He rubbed his thin hands together and grimaced at Hook. 'You look ill, Hook,' he added happily, as if hoping Nick Hook were dying.

'The ale tastes funny,' Hook said.

'That's because it's Friday,' the priest said, 'and you should abstain from ale on Wednesdays and Fridays. Your namesaint, the blessed Nicholas, rejected his mother's teats on Wednesdays and Fridays, and there's a lesson in that! There can be no pleasures for you, Hook, on Wednesdays and Fridays. No ale, no joy and no tits, that is your fate for ever. And why, Hook, why?' Sir Martin paused and his long face twisted in a malevolent grin, 'Because you have supped on the sagging tits of evil! I will not have mercy on her children,

the scriptures say, because their mother hath played the harlot!’

Tom Perrill sniggered. ‘What are we doing, father?’ Will Snoball asked tiredly.

‘God’s work, Master Snoball, God’s holy work. Go to it.’

A ladder was found as Sir Edward Derwent crossed the market square with four ropes looped about his broad shoulders. Sir Edward was a man-at-arms and wore the same livery as the archers, though his jupon was cleaner and its colours were brighter. He was a squat, thick-chested man with a face disfigured at the battle of Shrewsbury where a poleaxe had ripped open his helmet, crushed a cheekbone and sliced off an ear. ‘Bell ropes,’ he explained, tossing the heavy coils onto the ground. ‘Need them tied to the beam, and I’m not climbing any ladder.’ Sir Edward commanded Lord Slayton’s men-at-arms and he was as respected as he was feared. ‘Hook, you do it,’ Sir Edward ordered.

Hook climbed the ladder and tied the bell ropes to the beam. He used the knot with which he would have looped a hempen cord about a bowstave’s nock, though the ropes, being thicker, were much harder to manipulate. When he was done he shinned down the last rope to show that it was tied securely.

‘Let’s get this done and over,’ Sir Edward said sourly, ‘and then maybe we can leave this goddamned place. Whose ale is this?’

‘Mine, Sir Edward,’ Robert Perrill said.

‘Mine now,’ Sir Edward said, and drained the pot. He was dressed in a mail coat over a leather jerkin, all of it covered with the starry jupon. A sword hung at his waist. There was nothing elaborate about the weapon. The blade, Hook knew, was undecorated, the hilt was plain steel, and the handle was two grips of walnut bolted to the tang. The sword was a tool of Sir Edward’s trade, and he had used it

to batter down the rebel whose poleaxe had taken half his face.

The small crowd had been herded by soldiers and priests into the centre of the marketplace where most of them knelt and prayed. There were maybe sixty of them, men and women, young and old. 'Can't burn them all,' Sir Martin said regretfully, 'so we're sending most to hell at the rope's end.'

'If they're heretics,' Sir Edward grumbled, 'they should all be burned.'

'If God wished that,' Sir Martin said with some asperity, 'then God would have provided sufficient firewood.'

More people were appearing now. Fear still pervaded the city, but folk somehow sensed that the greatest moment of danger was over, and so they came to the marketplace and Sir Martin ordered the archers to let them pass. 'They should see this for themselves,' the priest explained. There was a sullenness in the gathering crowd, their sympathies plainly aligned with the prisoners and not the guards, though here and there a priest or friar preached an extemporary sermon to justify the day's events. The doomed, the preachers explained, were enemies of Christ. They were weeds among the righteous wheat. They had been given a chance to repent, but had refused that mercy and so must face their eternal fate.

'Who are they anyway?' Hook asked.

'Lollards,' Sir Edward said.

'What's a Lollard?'

'A heretic, you piece of slime,' Snoball said happily, 'and the bastards were supposed to gather here and start a rebellion against our gracious king, but instead they're going to hell.'

'They don't look like rebels,' Hook said. Most of the prisoners were middle-aged, some were old, while a handful was very young. There were women and girls among them.

‘Doesn’t matter what they look like,’ Snoball said, ‘they’re heretics and they have to die.’

‘It’s God’s will,’ Sir Martin snarled.

‘But what makes them heretics?’ Hook asked.

‘Oh, we are curious today,’ Sir Martin said sourly.

‘I’d like to know that too,’ Michael said.

‘Because the church says they’re heretics,’ Sir Martin snapped, then appeared to relent of his tone. ‘Do you believe, Michael Hook, that when I raise the host it turns into the most holy and beloved and mystical flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ?’

‘Yes, father, of course!’

‘Well, they don’t believe that,’ the priest said, jerking his head at the Lollards kneeling in the mud, ‘they believe the bread stays bread, which makes them turds-for-brains piss-shits. And do you believe that our blessed father the Pope is God’s vicar on earth?’

‘Yes, father,’ Michael said.

‘Thank Christ for that, or else I’d have to burn you.’

‘I thought there were two popes?’ Snoball put in.

Sir Martin ignored that. ‘Ever seen a sinner burn, Michael Hook?’ he asked.

‘No, father.’

Sir Martin grinned lasciviously. ‘They scream, young Hook, like a boar being gelded. They do scream so!’ He turned suddenly and thrust a long bony finger into Nick Hook’s chest. ‘And you should listen to those screams, Nicholas Hook, for they are the liturgy of hell. And you,’ he prodded Hook’s chest again, ‘are hell-bound.’ The priest whirled around, arms suddenly outspread, so that he reminded Hook of a great dark-winged bird. ‘Avoid hell, boys!’ he called enthusiastically, ‘avoid it! No tits on Wednesdays and Fridays, and do God’s work diligently every day!’

More ropes had been slung from other signposts about

the marketplace, and now soldiers roughly divided the prisoners into groups that were pushed towards the makeshift gallows. One man began shouting to his friends, telling them to have faith in God and that they would all meet in heaven before this day was over, and he went on shouting till a soldier in royal livery broke his jaw with a mail-shod fist. The broken-jawed man was one of the two selected for the fires and Hook, standing apart from his comrades, watched as the man was hoisted onto the stone- and gravel-filled barrel and tied to the stake. More firewood was piled around his feet.

‘Come on, Hook, don’t dream,’ Snoball grumbled.

The growing crowd was still sullen. There were a few folk who seemed pleased, but most watched resentfully, ignoring the priests who preached at them and turning their backs on a group of brown-robed monks who chanted a song of praise for the day’s happy events.

‘Hoist the old man up,’ Snoball said to Hook. ‘We’ve got ten to kill, so let’s get the work done!’

One of the empty handcarts that had brought the firewood was parked beneath the beam and Hook was needed to lift a man onto the cart’s bed. The other six prisoners, four men and two women, waited. One of the women clung to her husband, while the second had her back turned and was on her knees, praying. All four prisoners on the cart were men, one of them old enough to be Hook’s grandfather. ‘I forgive you, son,’ the old man said as Hook twisted the thick rope around his neck. ‘You’re an archer, aren’t you?’ the Lollard asked and still Hook did not answer. ‘I was on the hill at Homildon,’ Hook’s victim said, looking up at the grey clouds as Hook tightened the rope, ‘where I shot a bow for my king. I sent shaft after shaft, boy, deep into the Scots. I drew long and I loosed sharp, and God forgive me, but I was good that day.’ He looked into Hook’s eyes. ‘I was an archer.’

Hook held few things dear beyond his brother and whatever affection he felt for whichever girl was in his arms, yet archers were special. Archers were Hook's heroes. England, for Hook, was not protected by men in shining armour, mounted on trapper-decked horses, but by archers. By ordinary men who built and ploughed and made, and who could draw the yew war bow and send an arrow two hundred paces to strike a mark the size of a man's hand. So Hook looked into the old man's eyes and he saw, not a heretic, but the pride and strength of an archer. He saw himself. He suddenly knew he would like this old man and that realisation checked his hands.

'Nothing you can do about it, boy,' the man said gently. 'I fought for the old king and his son wants me dead, so draw the rope tight, boy, draw it tight. And when I'm gone, boy, do something for me.'

Hook gave the curtest of nods. It could either have been an acknowledgement that he had heard the request, or perhaps it was an agreement to do whatever favour the man might request.

'You see the girl praying?' the old man asked. 'She's my granddaughter. Sarah, she's called, Sarah. Take her away for me. She doesn't deserve heaven yet, so take her away. You're young, boy, you're strong, you can take her away for me.'

How? Hook thought, and he savagely pulled the rope's bitter end so that the loop constricted about the old man's neck, and then he jumped off the cart and half slipped in the mud. Snoball and Robert Perrill, who had tied the other nooses, were already off the cart.

'Simple folk, they are,' Sir Martin was saying, 'just simple folk, but they think they know better than Mother Church, and so a lesson must be taught so that other simple folk don't follow them into error. Have no pity for them, because

it's God's mercy we're administering! God's unbounded mercy!

God's unbounded mercy was administered by pulling the cart sharply out from under the four men's feet. They dropped slightly, then jerked and twisted. Hook watched the old man, seeing the broad barrel chest of an archer. The man was choking as his legs drew up, as they trembled and straightened then drew up again, but even in his dying agony he looked with bulging eyes at Hook as though expecting the younger man to snatch his Sarah out of the marketplace. 'Do we wait for them to die,' Will Snoball asked Sir Edward, 'or pull on their ankles?' Sir Edward seemed not to hear the question. He was distracted again, his eyes unfocused, though he appeared to be staring fixedly at the nearest man tied to the stake. A priest was haranguing the broken-jawed Lollard while a man-at-arms, his face deep shadowed by a helmet, held a flaming torch ready. 'I'll let them swing then, sir,' Snoball said and still got no answer.

'Oh my,' Sir Martin appeared to wake up suddenly and his voice was reverent, the same tone he used in the parish church when he said the mass, 'oh my, oh my, oh my. Oh my, just look at that little beauty.' The priest was gazing at Sarah, who had risen from her knees and was staring with a horrified expression at her grandfather's struggles. 'Oh my, God is good,' the priest said reverently.

Nicholas Hook had often wondered what angels looked like. There was a painting of angels on the wall of the village church, but it was a clumsy picture because the angels had blobs for faces and their robes and wings had become yellowed and streaked by the damp that seeped through the nave's plaster, yet nevertheless Hook understood that angels were creatures of unearthly beauty. He thought their wings must be like a heron's wings, only much larger, and made

of feathers that would shine like the sun glowing through the morning mist. He suspected angels had golden hair and long, very clean robes of the whitest linen. He knew they were special creatures, holy beings, but in his dreams they were also beautiful girls that could haunt a boy's thoughts. They were loveliness on gleaming wings, they were angels.

And this Lollard girl was as beautiful as Hook's imagined angels. She had no wings, of course, and her smock was muddied and her face was distorted into a rictus by the horror she watched and by the knowledge that she too must hang, but she was still lovely. She was blue-eyed and fair-haired, had high cheekbones and a skin untouched by the pox. She was a girl to haunt a boy's dreams, or a priest's thoughts for that matter. 'See that gate, Michael Hook?' Sir Martin asked flatly. The priest had looked for the Perrill brothers to do his bidding, but they were out of earshot and so he chose the nearest archer. 'Take her through the gate and keep her in the stable there.'

Nick Hook's younger brother looked puzzled. 'Take her?' he asked.

'Not take her! Not you, you cloth-brained shit-puddling idiot! Just take that girl to the tavern stables! I want to pray with her.'

'Oh! You want to pray!' Michael said, smiling.

'You want to pray with her, father?' Snoball asked with a snide chuckle.

'If she repents,' Sir Martin said piously, 'she can live.' The priest was shivering and Hook did not think it was the cold. 'Christ in His loving mercy allows that,' Sir Martin said, his eyes darting from the girl to Snoball, 'so let us see if we can make her repent? Sir Edward?'

'Father?'

'I shall pray with the girl!' Sir Martin called, and Sir Edward did not answer. He was still gazing at the nearest

unlit pyre where the Lollard leader was ignoring the priest's words and looking up at the sky.

'Take her, young Hook,' Sir Martin ordered.

Nick Hook watched his brother take the girl's elbow. Michael was almost as strong as Nick, yet he had a gentleness and a sincerity that reached past the girl's terror. 'Come on, lass,' he said softly, 'the good father wants to pray with you. So let me take you. No one's going to hurt you.'

Snoball sniggered as Michael led the unresisting girl through the yard gate and into the stable where the archers' horses were tethered. The space was cold, dusty and smelt of straw and dung. Nick Hook followed the pair. He told himself he followed so he could protect his brother, but in truth he had been prompted by the dying archer's words, and when he reached the stable door he looked up to see a window in the far gable and suddenly, out of nowhere, a voice sounded in his head. 'Take her away,' the voice said. It was a man's voice, but not one that Nick Hook recognised. 'Take her away,' the voice said again, 'and heaven will be yours.'

'Heaven?' Nick Hook said aloud.

'Nick?' Michael, still holding the girl's elbow, turned to his elder brother, but Nick Hook was gazing at that high bright window.

'Just save the girl,' the voice said, and there was no one in the stable except the brothers and Sarah, but the voice was real, and Hook was shaking. If he could just save the girl. If he could take her away. He had never felt anything like this before. He had always thought himself cursed, hated even by his own name-saint, but suddenly he knew that if he could save this girl then God would love him and God would forgive whatever had made Saint Nicholas hate him. Hook was being offered salvation. It was there, beyond the window, and it promised him a new life. No more of being

the cursed Nick Hook. He knew it, yet he did not know how to take it.

'What in God's name are you doing here?' Sir Martin snarled at Hook.

He did not answer. He was staring at the clouds beyond the window. His horse, a grey, stirred and thumped a hoof. Whose voice had he heard?

Sir Martin pushed past Nick Hook to stare at the girl. The priest smiled. 'Hello, little lady,' he said, his voice hoarse, then he turned to Michael. 'Strip her,' he ordered curtly.

'Strip her?' Michael asked, frowning.

'She must appear naked before her God,' the priest explained, 'so our Lord and Saviour can judge her as she truly is. In nakedness is truth. That's what the scripture says, in nakedness is our truth.' Nowhere did the scriptures say that, but Sir Martin had often found the invented quote useful.

'But . . .' Michael was still frowning. Nick's younger brother was notoriously slow in understanding, but even he knew that something was wrong in the winter stable.

'Do it!' the priest snarled at him.

'It's not right,' Michael said stubbornly.

'Oh, for Christ's sake,' Sir Martin said angrily and he pushed Michael out of the way and grabbed the girl's collar. She gave a short, desperate yelp that was not quite a scream, and she tried to pull away. Michael was just watching, horrified, but the echo of a mysterious voice and a vision of heaven were still in Nick Hook's head and so he stepped one quick pace forward and drove his fist into the priest's belly with such strength that Sir Martin folded over with a sound of half pain and half surprise.

'Nick!' Michael said, aghast at what his brother had done.

Hook had taken the girl's elbow and half turned towards that far window. 'Help!' Sir Martin shouted, his voice rasping

from breathlessness and pain, 'help!' Hook turned back to silence him, but Michael stepped between him and the priest.

'Nick!' Michael said again, and just then both the Perrill brothers came running.

'He hit me!' Father Martin said, sounding astonished. Tom Perrill grinned, while his younger brother Robert looked as confused as Michael. 'Hold him!' the priest demanded, straightening with a look of pain on his long face, 'just hold the bastard!' His voice was a half-strangled croak as he struggled for breath. 'Take him outside!' he panted, 'and hold him.'

Hook let himself be led into the stable yard. His brother followed and stood unhappily staring at the hanged men just beyond the open gate where a thin cold rain had begun to slant across the sky. Nick Hook was suddenly drained. He had hit a priest, a well-born priest, a man of the gentry, Lord Slayton's own kin. The Perrill brothers were mocking him, but Hook did not hear their words, instead he heard Sarah's smock being torn and heard her scream and heard the scream stifled and he heard the rustling of straw and he heard Sir Martin grunting and Sarah whimpering, and Hook gazed at the low clouds and at the woodsmoke that lay over the city as thick as any cloud and he knew that he was failing God. All his life Nick Hook had been told he was cursed and then, in a place of death, God had asked him to do just one thing and he had failed. He heard a great sigh go up from the marketplace and he guessed that one of the fires had been lit to usher a heretic down to the greater fires of hell, and he feared he would be going to hell himself because he had done nothing to rescue a blue-eyed angel from a black-souled priest, but then he told himself the girl was a heretic and he wondered if it had been the devil who spoke in his head. The girl was gasping now, and the gasps turned to sobs and Hook raised his face to the wind and the spitting rain.

Sir Martin, grinning like a fed stoat, came out of the stable.

He had tucked his robe high about his waist, but now let it fall. 'There,' he said, 'that didn't take long. You want her, Tom?' he spoke to the older Perrill brother, 'she's yours if you want her. Juicy little thing she is, too! Just slit her throat when you're done.'

'Not hang her, father?' Tom Perrill asked.

'Just kill the bitch,' the priest said. 'I'd do it myself, but the church doesn't kill people. We hand them over to the lay power, and that's you, Tom. So go and hump the heretic bitch then open her throat. And you, Robert, you hold Hook. Michael, go away! You've nothing to do with this, go!'

Michael hesitated. 'Go,' Nick Hook told his brother wearily, 'just go.'

Robert Perrill held Hook's arms behind his back. Hook could have pulled away easily enough, but he was still shaken by the voice he had heard and by his stupidity in striking Sir Martin. That was a hanging offence, yet Sir Martin wanted more than just his death and, as Robert Perrill held Hook, Sir Martin began hitting him. The priest was not strong, he did not have the great muscles of an archer, but he possessed spite and he had sharp bony knuckles that he drove viciously into Hook's face. 'You piece of bitch-spawned shit,' Sir Martin spat, and hit again, trying to pulp Hook's eyes. 'You're a dead man, Hook,' the priest shouted. 'I'll have you looking like that!' Sir Martin pointed at the nearest fire. Smoke was thick around the stake, but flames were bright at the pile's base and, through the grey smoke, a figure could be seen straining like a bent bow. 'You bastard!' Sir Martin said, hitting Hook again, 'your mother was an open-legged whore and she shat you like the whore she was.' He hit Hook again and then a flare of fire streaked in the pyre's smoke and a scream sounded in the marketplace like the squeal of a boar being gelded.

'What in God's name is happening?' Sir Edward had heard

the priest's anger and had come into the stable yard to discover its cause.

The priest shuddered. His knuckles were bloody. He had managed to cut Hook's lips and start blood from Hook's nose, but little else. His eyes were wide open, full of anger and indignation, but Hook thought he saw the devil-madness deep inside them. 'Hook hit me,' Sir Martin explained, 'and he's to be killed.'

Sir Edward looked from the snarling priest to the bloodied archer. 'That's for Lord Slayton to decide,' Sir Edward said.

'Then he'll decide to hang him, won't he?' Sir Martin snapped.

'Did you hit Sir Martin?' Sir Edward asked Hook.

Hook just nodded. Was it God who had spoken to him in the stable, he wondered, or the devil?

'He hit me,' Sir Martin said and then, with a sudden spasm, he ripped Hook's jupon clean down its centre, parting the moon from the stars. 'He's not worthy of that badge,' the priest said, throwing the torn surcoat into the mud. 'Find some rope,' he ordered Robert Perrill, 'rope or bowcord, then tie his hands! And take his sword!'

'I'll take it,' Sir Edward said. He pulled Hook's sword that belonged to Lord Slayton from its scabbard. 'Give him to me, Perrill,' he ordered, then drew Hook into the yard's gateway. 'What happened?'

'He was going to rape the girl, Sir Edward,' Hook said, 'he did rape her!'

'Well of course he raped her,' Sir Edward said impatiently, 'it's what the reverend Sir Martin does.'

'And God spoke to me,' Hook blurted out.

'He what?' Sir Edward stared at Hook as if the archer had just claimed that the sky had turned to buttermilk.

'God spoke to me,' Hook said miserably. He did not sound at all convincing.

Sir Edward said nothing. He stared at Hook a brief while longer, then turned to gaze at the marketplace where the burning man had stopped screaming. Instead he hung from the stake and his hair flared sudden and bright. The ropes that held him burned through and the body collapsed in a gout of flame. Two men-at-arms used pitchforks to thrust the sizzling corpse back into the heart of the fire.

'I heard a voice,' Hook said stubbornly.

Sir Edward nodded dismissively, as though acknowledging he had heard Hook's words, but wanted to hear no more. 'Where's your bow?' he asked suddenly, still looking at the burning figure in the smoke.

'In the tavern taproom, Sir Edward, with the others.'

Sir Edward turned to the inn yard's gate where Tom Perrill, grinning and with one hand stained with blood, had just appeared. 'I'm sending you to the taproom,' Sir Edward said quietly, 'and you'll wait there. You'll wait there so we can tie your wrists and take you home and arraign you in the manor court and then hang you from the oak outside the smithy.'

'Yes, Sir Edward,' Hook said in sullen obedience.

'What you will not do,' Sir Edward said, still in a soft voice, but more forcefully, 'is walk out of the tavern's front door. You will not walk into the heart of the city, Hook, and you will not find a street called Cheapside or look for an inn called the Two Cranes. And you will not go into the Two Cranes and enquire after a man called Henry of Calais. Are you listening to me, Hook?'

'Yes, Sir Edward.'

'Henry of Calais is recruiting archers,' Sir Edward said. A man in royal livery was carrying a burning log towards the second pyre where the other Lollard leader was tied to the tall stake. 'They need archers in Picardy,' Sir Edward said, 'and they pay good money.'

'Picardy,' Hook repeated the name dully. He thought it must be a town somewhere else in England.

'Earn yourself some money in Picardy, Hook,' Sir Edward said, 'because God knows you'll need it.'

Hook hesitated. 'I'm an outlaw?' he asked nervously.

'You're a dead man, Hook,' Sir Edward said, 'and dead men are outside the law. You're a dead man because my orders are that you're to wait in the tavern and then be taken back to the judgment of the manor court, and Lord Slayton will have no choice but to hang you. So go and do what I just said.'

But before Hook could obey there was a shout from the next corner. 'Hats off!' men called abruptly, 'hats off!' The shout and a clatter of hooves announced the arrival of a score of horsemen who swept into the wide square where their horses fanned out, pranced, and then stood with breath smoking from their nostrils, and hooves pawing the mud. Men and women were clawing off their hats and kneeling in the mud.

'Down, boy,' Sir Edward said to Hook.

The leading horseman was young, not much older than Hook, but his long-nosed face showed a serene certainty as he swept his cold gaze across the marketplace. His face was narrow, his eyes were dark and his mouth thin-lipped and grim. He was clean-shaven, and the razor seemed to have abraded his skin so that it looked raw-scraped. He rode a black horse that was richly bridled with polished leather and glittering silver. He had black boots, black breeches, a black tunic and a fleece-lined cloak of dark purple cloth. His hat was black velvet and sported a black feather, while at his side hung a black-scabbarded sword. He looked all around the marketplace, then urged the horse forward to watch the one woman and three men who now jerked and twisted from the bell ropes hanging from the Bull's beam. A vagary

of wind gusted spark-laden smoke at his stallion, which whinnied and shied away. The rider soothed it by patting its neck with a black-gloved hand, and Hook saw that the man wore jewelled rings over his gloves. 'They were given a chance to repent?' the horseman demanded.

'Many chances, sire,' Sir Martin answered unctuously. The priest had hurried out of the tavern yard and was down on one knee. He made the sign of the cross and his haggard face looked almost saintly, as though he suffered for his Lord God. He could appear that way, his devil-dog-bitten eyes suddenly full of pain and tenderness and compassion.

'Then their deaths,' the young man said harshly, 'are pleasing to God and they are pleasing to me. England will be rid of heresy!' His eyes, brown and intelligent, rested briefly on Nick Hook, who immediately dropped his gaze and stared at the mud until the black-dressed horseman spurred away towards the second fire, which had just been lit. But, in the moment before Hook had looked away, he had seen the scar on the young man's face. It was a battle scar, showing where an arrow had slashed into the corner between nose and eye. It should have killed, yet God had decreed that the man should live.

'You know who that is, Hook?' Sir Edward asked quietly.

Hook did not know for sure, but nor was it hard to guess that he was seeing, for the first time in his life, the Earl of Chester, the Duke of Aquitaine and the Lord of Ireland. He was seeing Henry, by the grace of God, the King of England.

And, according to all who claimed to understand the tangled webs of royal ancestry, the King of France too.

The flames reached the second man and he screamed. Henry, the fifth King of England to carry that name, calmly watched the Lollard's soul go to hell.

'Go, Hook,' Sir Edward said quietly.

'Why, Sir Edward?' Hook asked.

‘Because Lord Slayton doesn’t want you dead,’ Sir Edward said, ‘and perhaps God did speak to you, and because we all need His grace. Especially today. So just go.’
And Nicholas Hook, archer and outlaw, went.