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Outlaw

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Extract

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Chapter One

A thin, sour rain is falling on the orchard outside my window, but I thank God for it. In these lean times, it is enough to warrant a fire in my chamber, a small blaze to warm my bones as I scratch out these lines in the grey light of a chill November day. My daughter-in-law Marie, who governs this household, is mean with firewood. The manor is mine, and there would be a decent, if not lavish living to be had for us on these lands if there were a young man or two to work them. But since my son Rob died last year of the bloody flux, a kind of weariness has settled upon me, robbing me of purpose. Though I am still hale and strong, thank the Lord, each morning it is a struggle to rise from my bed and begin the daily tasks. And since Rob's death, Marie has become bitter, silent and thrifty. So, she has decreed, no chamber fires in daylight, unless it rains; meat but once a week; and daily prayers for his soul, morning and night. In my melancholy state, I cannot find the will to oppose her.

On Sundays, Marie doesn't speak at all, just sits praying

and contemplating the sufferings of Our Lord in the big, cold hall all day and then I rouse myself and take my grandson, my namesake Alan, out to the woods on the far edge of my land where he plays at being an outlaw and I sit and sing to him and tell him the stories of my youth: of my own carefree days outside the law, when I feared no King's man, no sheriff nor forester, when I did as I pleased, took what I wanted, and followed the rule of none but my outlaw master: Robert Odo, the Lord of Sherwood.

I feel the cold now, at nearly three score years, more than I ever did as that young man, and the damp; and now my old wounds ache for most of the winter. As I watch the grey rain drifting down on to my fruit trees, I clutch my fur-lined robe tighter against the chill air and my left hand drifts up the sleeve, over the corded swordsman's muscles and finds its way to a long, deep scar high on my right forearm. And stroking the tough, smooth furrow, I remember the terrible battle where I earned that mark.

I was on my back in a morass of blood and churned earth, half-blinded by sweat and my helmet, which had been knocked forward, my sword held pointing up at the sky in a hopeless gesture of defence as I gasped breathless on the ground. Above me, the huge, grey-mailed swordsman was slashing at my right arm. Time slowed to a crawl, I could see the slow sweep of his blade, I could see the bitter rage on his face, I could feel the bite of the metal through the padding of my sleeve into the flesh of my right arm, and then, out of nowhere, came Robin's blocking sword-stroke, almost too late, but stopping the blade from slicing too deeply.

And, later, I recall Robin bandaging the wound himself, sweat-grimed, his own wounded face bleeding, and grinning

at me as I winced in pain. He said, and I will remember his words until my death: 'It seems that God really wants this hand, Alan. But I have denied it to him three times – and He shall never take it while I have strength.'

It was my right hand, my quill hand that he saved, and with this hand I plan to repay my debt to him. With this instrument, the Lord willing, I will write his story, and my story, and set before the world the truth about the vicious outlaw and master thief, the murderer, the mutilator and tender lover, the victorious Earl and commander of an army, and, ultimately, the great magnate who brought a King of England to a table at Runnymede and made him submit to the will of the people of the land; the story of a man I knew simply as Robin Hood.

Everyone in our village knew Robin was coming. Since the lord of the manor's death last winter, the village had an almost perpetual holiday atmosphere: there was no authority to force them to work on the lord's demesne and, after tending their own strips of land, the villagers had time on their hands. The alewife's house was full all day and buzzing with talk of Robin's exploits, adventures and atrocities. But very little truth was spoken and news was scant: merely that he would be arriving at dusk and he would see anyone who had business with him at the church that night, where he would hold his court.

I was above all this noise and nuisance, quite literally, as I was hiding in the hayloft above the stable at the back of my mother's crumbling cottage in a den I'd built in the hay. I was thirteen summers old, I had a throbbing knot the size of a walnut on my forehead, a bloody nose, a bad cut on my cheek, and I was treating the terror that I felt with a large dose of absolute boredom. I'd been there since

mid-afternoon when I had stumbled into our home, breathless, cut and bruised, having escaped the rough hands of the law and run the dozen miles from Nottingham across the fields all the way home.

We were poor, almost destitute and, after seeing my mother weeping with exhaustion one too many times after a day scratching a meagre living gathering and selling firewood to her neighbours, I had decided to become a thief, more precisely a cut-purse: I cut the leather straps that secured men's purses to their belts with a small knife that I kept as keen as a razor. Nine times out of ten, they never noticed until I was twenty yards away and lost in the thick crowds of Nottingham's market place. When I returned home with a handful of silver pennies and placed them before my mother, she never asked where they had come from, but smiled and kissed me and hurried out to buy food. Though it had been necessity that drove me to take my daily bread from others, I found, God forgive me, that I was good at it, and liked it. In fact, I loved the thrill of the hunt; following a fat merchant as he waded through the market-day crowds, silent as his shadow, then the rough jostle, as if by accident, a quick slice and away before the man knew his purse was gone.

That day, however, I'd been stupid and I'd tried to steal a pie – a rich, golden-crusted beef pie, as big as my two fists – from a stall. I was hungry, as always, but overconfident too.

It was a ruse I had used before: I stood behind a blowsy alewife who was poking the wares on the stall and grumbling about their price; surreptitiously lobbed a small stone at the next stallholder along – a cheesemonger, if I remember rightly – hitting him full on the ear; and in the ensuing recriminations between stallholders, I swept

the pie off the board and into my open satchel and sauntered away.

But the pieman's apprentice, who'd been taking a piss behind their cart, came out just as I was scooping up my dinner and shouted: 'Hi!' And everybody turned. So then it was 'Stop thief!' and 'Catch him, somebody!' as I squirmed like a maddened eel through the press of townsfolk until – crack! – I was knocked down by a cudgel to the forehead from some yokel and then grabbed round the neck by a passing man-at-arms. He punched me twice full in the face with his great mailed fist and my legs went limp.

When I came round, moments later, I was lying on the ground at the centre of a jabbering crowd. Standing over me was the soldier, who wore the black surcoat with red chevrons of Sir Ralph Murdac, by the wrath of God, High Sheriff of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and the Royal Forests. And suddenly I was seized rigid with terror.

The soldier hauled me to my feet by my hair and I stood dazed and trembling while the scarlet-faced apprentice yammered out the tale of the stolen pie. My satchel was torn open and the circle of onlookers craned to see the incriminating object steaming gently, deliciously, at my waist. I still get jets of saliva in my mouth when I remember its glorious aroma.

Then, a wave of jostling and shouting, and the crowd parted, swept aside by the spears of a dozen men-at-arms, and into the space stepped a nobleman, dressed entirely in black, who seemed to move in his own personal circle of awe.

Though I had never seen him before, I knew immediately that this was Sir Ralph Murdac himself: the magnate who held Nottingham castle for the King and who also

held the power of life and death over all the people in a huge swathe of central England. The crowd fell silent and I gawped at him, terrified, as he gazed calmly up and down my thin body, taking in my dirty blond hair, muddy face and ragged clothes. He was a slight man, not tall but handsome, with an athletic body clad in black silk tunic and hose, and a pitch-dark cloak, fixed with a golden clasp at his throat. In his right hand he held a riding whip; a yard-long black leather-covered rod tapering from an inch thick at the butt to the width of a bootlace. At his left side hung a silver-handled sword in a black leather scabbard. His face was clean-shaven, finely carved and framed with pure black hair, cut and curled neatly into a bowl shape. I caught a whiff of his perfume: lavender, and something musky. The palest blue eyes I had ever seen, cold and inhuman, seemed to glitter like frost beneath dark eyebrows. He pursed his red lips as he considered me. And suddenly all my fear receded, like a wave pulling back from the shingle of the beach . . . and I discovered that I hated him. I was filled with a cold stony loathing: I hated what he and his kind had done to me and my family. I hated his wealth, I hated his expensive clothes, his good looks, his perfumed perfection, and the arrogance that he was born to. I hated his power over me, his assumption of superiority, the truth of his superiority. I focused my hate in my stare. And I think he must have recognised my animosity. For an instant our eyes locked and then, with a jerk of his perfectly square chin, he looked away. At that moment, I sneezed, a colossal nasal bark so loud and sudden that it shocked everyone. Sir Ralph started, and glared at me in astonishment. I could feel snot and blood mingling in my battered nose. It began to run down the side of my mouth and on to my chin. I resisted the

urge to lick at it. Murdac was silent, staring at me with utter contempt. Then he spoke very quietly: 'Take this . . . filth . . . to the castle,' he said in English, but in a lisping French-accented whisper. And then, almost as an afterthought, he said directly to me: 'Tomorrow, you disgusting fellow, we shall slice off that thieving hand.'

I sneezed again and a plump gobbet of bloody phlegm shot out and splattered on to his immaculate black cloak. He looked down in horror at the red-yellow mess, then, quick as a striking adder, he lashed me full in the face with his riding whip. The blow knocked me to my knees, and blood started to pour from a two-inch cut on my cheek. Through eyes misty with rage and pain, I looked up at Sir Ralph Murdac. He stared back at me for a second, his blue eyes strangely blank, then he dropped the riding whip in the mud, as if it had been contaminated with plague, turned smoothly away, hitched his cloak to a more comfortable position and swept through the surrounding rabble of townsfolk, who parted before him like the Red Sea before Moses.

As the man-at-arms started to drag me away by my wrist, I heard a woman cry: 'That's Alan, the widow Dale's son. Have pity on him, he's only a fatherless boy!' And the man paused, turning to speak to her, with my arm gripped in only one of his fists. And, as he turned, I focused my hatred, my anger, and I twisted my wrist against his grip, ripped it free, squirmed through a pair of legs and took to my heels. A fury of bellowing erupted behind me: men-at-arms shoving and cursing the people obstructing their path. I jinked right and left, sliding through the crowd, shoving past stout yeomen, dodging around the goodwives and their baskets. I created a tornado of confusion as the people reacted angrily to my passing. Men and

women turned fast, furious at being shoved so roughly. Carts were knocked flying; pottery crashed to the ground; the hurdles containing a herd of sheep were smashed and the animals let loose to add their bleating to the tumult; and I was away and racing down a side alley, bursting through a blacksmith's forge and out the other side, up a narrow street, squeezing between two big townhouses, and turning left down another street until the noise subsided behind me. I stopped in the doorway of a church by the town wall and recovered my wind. There appeared to be no pursuit. Then, fighting to calm my hammering heart, I walked as coolly as I could, my hood pulled forward, a hand held casually over my cut and bruised face, out of the town gate, past the dozing watchman, and on to the winding road that led into the thick woodland. Once out of sight, I ran. I ran like the wind, despite my pounding head, and a sick feeling churning my guts. I gave it my all till our village came into sight around a bend in the road. As I paused to catch my breath, I found I was clutching my right wrist tightly. I still had my arm, praise God, I still had my light fingers. I still had the pie, too.

As I lay in the hayloft, nursing my cut and bruised face, I ran images of the day again in my head. There had been no pursuit on the road out of Nottingham, as far as I could tell, but the woman in the market had known me and so it wouldn't be long, I realised – probably the next morning – before the sheriff's men came for me at my mother's cottage.

So that night, my mother took me to see Robin.

The village was dark, except for a ring of torches around the old church at the northern end of the village. Our church was not grand – it was not much bigger than a

village house, but built of thick stone with a thatched roof. We had no priest as the village was too poor to support his living – it was scarcely more than a hamlet, truth be told. But on holy festivals, Easter, Michaelmas, Christmas and the like, a junior cleric would come from Nottingham and hold a Mass. And, sure as man is born to die, after the harvest, the Bishop's man would come to collect our tithes.

As it was the largest, most solid building in the village, we also used it for meetings and, in the recent Anarchy between King Stephen and the Empress Maud, it had sheltered the villagers from roving bands of warriors intent on slaughter and pillage. In those dark days, a wise man, the saying went, kept his coin buried, his dress plain and his daughters inside.

Since King Henry came to the throne, thirty-four years ago, England had known a kind of peace. We no longer had to contend with marauding bands of rebel soldiers, but we did have to bow our heads to Sir Ralph Murdac's men-at-arms. And they could be just as rapacious, especially now that the King was abroad, fighting against his son Duke Richard of Aquitaine and Philip Augustus, the King of France. Our Henry had appointed Ranulf de Glanville to rule as Justiciar and England, many a villager muttered, was no longer well governed. Ranulf, it was said, loved silver and gold and would appoint anyone – even the Devil himself – to the post of sheriff if he could pay, and continue paying handsomely for the office. He had been a sheriff himself and he knew exactly how much tax silver could be squeezed from a county. And so we were squeezed until the pips squeaked. Certainly Ralph Murdac, who had been appointed by Glanville, was said to be making a goodly fortune for the Justiciar, and for himself.

On that spring night, a throng of villagers had gathered outside the church and a few at a time were going inside as others came out. My mother pushed through the crowd, dragging me in her wake. And as we approached the great door of the church, I saw that it was guarded by a giant. He didn't speak but held out one vast hand, palm facing us. And we stopped as if we had run into an invisible wall.

The doorkeeper was a truly enormous man, yellow-haired, with a quarterstaff in one great paw and a long dagger, almost a sword, at his belt. He looked down on us, nodded and, with a half-smile, said: 'Mistress, what brings you here – what business have you with him?'

My mother answered: 'It's my son, Alan.' She gestured at me. 'They are coming for him, John.'

The giant nodded again: 'Wait over there,' he rumbled, and indicated a group of twenty or so, men and women, some children too, waiting by the side of the church.

We stood with the others and my mother spat on to a scrap of cloth and began to dab at my face trying to clean off some of the dirt and caked blood. I lived pretty wild then – rarely returning home unless I had a little silver or food to bring my mother, sleeping rough in ill-lit corners of Nottingham town or in country hayricks and barns. Since my father Harry died, four years ago, hanged by Murdac's soldiers, I had rarely bothered with ablutions and, to be honest, I was filthy. My father had been an odd man, learned and musical, wise and courteous, and strangely fastidious about having clean nails and hair. But when I was nine years old, they had hanged him as a common thief.

The soldiers had burst through the door of our cottage just before dawn and grabbed my father, ripping him from

the big straw mattress on which the whole family slept, and bundling him out on to the street. Without the slightest formality, they tied his hands behind his back and strung him up by the neck on the big spreading oak tree in the centre of the village, next to the ale house, as an example to the rest of us. He took many minutes to die and he soiled himself – piss dripping from his kicking bare heels – as he swung twitching from the rope in the half-light. My father tried to keep eye contact with me as he died, but, God forgive me, I turned away from his hideous swollen face and bulging eyes and hid my face in my hands. May the Lord have mercy on his soul. And mine.

When the soldiers had gone, we cut him down and buried him and I don't believe I ever saw my mother happy again after that day. She told me many stories about him, an effort, I think, to keep his memory alive in his children. He had travelled the world, my mother said, and been well educated; at one time he had been a cleric in France, a singer in the great new cathedral of Notre Dame that they are building in Paris. Before he died, my father had made efforts to teach me to read and write in English, French and Latin. He had beaten me on many occasions, though never hard, to get the words to take root in my head but, at the end of many, many hours I was still more interested in running free in the countryside than slaving over a slate. I will always remember his music, though, even as his face grows hazy after so many years, and how his singing filled the house with joy. I remember how we would sing, the whole family, by the fire of an evening; my mother and father so happy together.

As she pawed at my dirty face with her spit-dampened cloth, I saw that the tears were once again running down

my mother's face. I was the last of her family: my father dead; my younger sisters Aelfgifu and Coelwyn both died within weeks of each other two summers ago after a short, agonising illness in which they had vomited blood and voided a black stinking liquid. And now I, her only surviving child, might be taken by the law tomorrow and have my hand hacked off. Or worse: hanged like my father as a thief.

I must confess that, at that moment, outside the church with my weeping mother, I felt not fear of the sheriff's men, nor sorrow at the deaths of my father and sisters – the uppermost emotion in my heart was excitement. Robert, Lord of Sherwood, was here; Robin Hood: that great and terrible man, feared by Norman lords and English villagers alike. He was a man who preyed on the rich, stealing their silver and killing their servants as they passed through his realm; a man who, scorning Sir Ralph Murdac, did as he pleased in the great Royal Forest of Nottingham, who was, in fact, its true ruler. And in a short while, I would be before him.

As I looked up at the church door, I noticed something amiss. A dark lump had been affixed above the lintel. In the flickering light of the torches, I could just make out what it was. It was the severed head of a young wolf, eyes still open and glittering madly in the torchlight. A huge nail had been hammered through its forehead, transfixing it to the wood. Either side of the head and on the doorposts, black blood had been smeared. I felt a sense of almost unbearable excitement, a euphoria soaring up through my lungs and into my head. He had dared to desecrate the church with the body of an animal, to make it, for one night, his own. He dared to risk his immortal soul with a pagan symbol

in the sacred precincts of our Mother Church. This was a fearless man indeed.

At last, after what seemed several hours, the giant beckoned us and pushed open the doors of the church. My excitement had reached a fever pitch and, although my bruised head was throbbing, I held it high as we walked inside.

Scores of thick tallow candles had been lit and, after the darkness outside, it was surprisingly bright in the church, which was half-filled with villagers and a sprinkling of grim-looking strangers, with hoods pulled forward over their faces, some standing, some seated on wooden benches around the walls. A clerk, a middle-aged man of thirty or so, sat at a small table to one side of the church, scribbling on a roll of parchment. And a great wooden chair had been set immediately below the altar.

In the chair sat an ordinary-looking young man, slim, in his early twenties, with nondescript brown hair, and dressed in a badly dyed, patched dark green tunic and hose and partially wrapped in a grey cloak. His clothes were no different to any man in our village – they were, perhaps, even more drab. It was a shock. Where was the great man? Where was the Lord of the Wood? He wore no sword, no gold, no rings, no signs at all of his status and power, except that behind him stood two tall, hooded men each with a long-sword and six-foot bow. I was deeply unimpressed; this was no outlaw lord; he looked like a villein, like me. An image of Sir Ralph Murdac leapt into my mind: his costly black silks, his lavender scent, his air of superiority. And then I looked again at the ordinary man in front of me.

He was leaning forward, eyes closed, elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin cupped in his hand, fingers wrapped

around his cheek, listening to a short, very broad man with reddish brown hair, in the coarse robes of a monk, who was speaking quietly and earnestly into his ear. The monk finished speaking and came over to us. Robin sat back, sighed, and opened his eyes. He looked directly at me and I saw that his eyes were as grey as his cloak, almost silver in the candlelight. Then he closed his eyes again and fell back into contemplation.

'My name is Tuck,' said the monk in a strange, sing-song accent, which I took to be Welsh. 'How can I be of service to you?'

My mother held out her hand to the monk: in it was a single hen's egg. 'It's my son,' she said, all in a rush. 'The sheriff's men are coming for him; and they'll cut his hand off or hang him for sure. Take him with you, Brother. Keep him safe under the protection of the Lord of the Wood. Sanctuary, Brother. For the love of God, give him sanctuary in the forest.'

I looked into the Welsh monk's eyes: they were mellow, light brown, the colour of hazelnuts, sad and kind. He took the egg and slipped it into an open pouch on his belt, not bothering to buckle it shut.

'Why are they coming for you?' he asked me.

My mother began gabbling: 'It's all a misunderstanding; a mistake; he's a good boy, naughty sometimes, yes . . .'

Brother Tuck ignored her. He asked again: 'Why are they coming for you, boy?'

I looked him straight in the eye: 'I stole a pie, sir,' I said as calmly as I could, my heart beating like a Moorish drum.

'Do you know that stealing is a sin?' he asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'And yet you stole anyway – why?'

'I was hungry and, and . . . it's what I do – thieving. It's what I do best. Better than almost anyone.'

Tuck snorted, amused. 'Better than almost anyone, eh? I very much doubt that. You were caught, weren't you? Well, there must be penance. All sins must be paid for.'

'Yes, sir.'

Tuck took me by the arm, not unkindly, and led me forward to Robin's chair. The Lord of the Wood opened his eyes and looked at me again. And I completely forgot his drab exterior, his homespun villein's garb. His eyes were extraordinarily bright: it was like staring at the full moon, two silver full moons. The rest of the world dissolved, time stood still, and it was just me and Robin in a dark universe lit only by his eyes; he seemed to be drinking me in through his stare, discovering me, understanding my sins and my strengths.

When he spoke it was in a musical voice, light but strong: 'They tell me you chanced your arm for a pie?'

I nodded. He said: 'And you wish to serve me? You wish me to take you under my protection?' I was mute; I made the barest tilt of my head.

'Why?'

I was taken aback by his question: he must know that I needed to escape the law, that I needed sanctuary, and yet I sensed that he wanted a less obvious answer. I looked into his silver eyes and decided to tell the truth, as I had to Tuck. 'I am a thief, sir,' I said, 'and I would serve under the greatest thief of all, the better to learn my trade.'

There was a sharp intake of breath, all around the church. It occurred to me belatedly that perhaps Robin did not care to regard himself as a common felon. One of the hooded men behind Robin half-drew his sword but stopped when Robin raised a pacifying hand.

'You flatter me,' said the Lord of the Wood. His voice had grown cold, his extraordinary eyes now blazed like naked steel. 'But that was not what I meant by my question. I did not mean why would *you* wish to serve *me*. I meant why should *I* take *you* on; why should I burden myself with another hungry mouth?'

I could think of no reason. So I hung my head and said nothing. He continued, his voice as chill as a grave: 'Can you fight like a knight, clad in hard steel, dealing death to my enemies from the back of a great horse?'

I remained silent.

'Can you draw a war bow to full stretch, and kill a man with one arrow at two hundred paces?'

He knew that I could not; few grown men could achieve such a feat, and I was then a slight boy.

'So what can you offer me, little thief?' The mockery dripped from his voice.

I lifted my chin and stared back at him, little spots of anger on my cheeks. 'I will give you my skill as a cutpurse, my willingness to fight for you as best I may, and my absolute loyalty until death,' I said, far too loudly for the confines of the small church.

'Loyalty until death?' said Robin. 'That truly is a rare and valuable thing.' His voice seemed to have lost its scorn. He considered me for a few heartbeats. 'That was a good answer, thief. What is your name?'

'I am Alan Dale, sir,' I said.

He looked surprised. 'Is your father's name Henry?' he said. 'The singer?' I nodded. I couldn't bring myself to tell Robin that my father was dead. He was silent for a while, regarding me with those great silver eyes. Then he said: 'He's a good man. You have his resemblance.' Suddenly, he smiled – as shocking as a blast of a trumpet – white

teeth gleaming in the dim church. His coldness slid away like the shedding of a cloak, and he was transformed. I knew by his sudden warmth that he would take me and I felt my heart bound with joy.

'And by the way, young Alan, I am not a thief,' said Robin, still smiling. 'I merely take what is my rightful due.' There was a murmur of gentle laughter around the church.

Tuck lightly touched my elbow, guiding me away from the great chair: 'Say God-be-with-you to your mother, boy, you're with us now.'

As we walked back to my mother by the church door, I found my legs had become weak and shaky beneath me and I stumbled against Tuck's side before he caught me and held me upright. Then I kissed my mother, hugged her, muttered goodbye, and watched as she walked outside into the dark and out of my life for ever.

As the church door closed behind her, Tuck said: 'Not bad, little thief. But I'll have that egg back now, boy, if you please.' And, as he held out his open palm, he was smiling.

I waited at the side of the church on a bench next to the clerk and his table of parchments. On the far side of the table was a heap of produce from local farms, tribute offered to Robin: several cheeses; loaves of bread; a basket of eggs; two barrels of ale; a honeycomb in a wooden bowl; two chickens, tied together at the legs; numerous sacks of fruit and even a purse of silver pennies; a kid was tied to the table leg and it kept trying to nibble the parchment – at which the clerk would slap at its muzzle without raising his head. He was a thin man, balding, and his long fingers were covered in ink spots. Then he looked up from his

scribbling: 'I'm Hugh Odo,' he said, smiling kindly at me. 'Robert's brother. Wait quietly here until our business is concluded.'

I looked to my right and noticed a human form on the floor in the corner of the church and a tall hooded man next to him, armed with long sword and a great bow, standing guard. The man on the floor was bound tightly, hands and legs. I noticed that he was actually shaking with fear. He was moaning inaudibly through a cloth gag. His wild staring gaze caught mine for a few moments and I looked away, embarrassed and a little frightened by his naked terror.

The rest of the night, I waited, sitting there in silence at the side of the church, watching Robin hold his court. A steady stream of villagers came in, spoke respectfully to Robin, received his judgement and paid their fines to Hugh. It was a shadowy night-time version of the manorial court in which, before his death, our local lord had dispensed justice. One woman's herd of pigs had damaged a neighbour's crops; she was ordered to pay a fine to the neighbour, four piglets, and to pay Robin a piglet for his justice. She agreed to pay without question. The man who had seduced his best friend's wife had to pay him a milk cow in compensation, and a fresh cheese to Robin. Again there was no argument.

As Robin dispensed petty justice all that long night, the mound of produce became larger: some, as poor as my mother, paid only an egg or two; one man, who had accidentally killed another in an ale house fight, led a bull calf over to the table and tied it next to the goat. I eyed the purse of silver; it was lying on the table near to where I was sitting. Hugh the clerk was busy in his parchment roll and I could have had it easily. But some instinct stayed

my arm. Finally there were no more supplicants and Robin rose from his chair and came over to the table to look down on the bound man.

'Take him outside; do it there in front of everyone,' he said to the hooded man-at-arms, his voice flat. And then he turned aside to talk to Hugh, who began showing him the parchment roll. The bound man was lifted on to his feet by two men; at first he was docile and then he began struggling wildly, writhing, twisting his body like a man possessed, as he realised he was about to meet his fate. One of the hooded men punched him in the stomach, a blow that knocked him breathless to the floor, and then he was dragged outside.

Tuck came over and took me by the arm; he led me out of the door and round the corner of the church. There, as I looked on, Robin's men forced the bound wretch to his knees. He was sobbing and choking on the cloth that had been shoved into his mouth and tied there with a long strip of leather.

'You must watch this,' said Brother Tuck. 'This is your penance.' A small crowd had formed to observe. The man's eyes, huge with terror, rolled in his head. John the giant came over to the man. He pulled the sodden gag out of his mouth and wedged a thin iron bar, crossways, at the back of his mouth, over his tongue, hard up against the hinge of his teeth. One of the men-at-arms strapped the bar in place, with the leather strip that had been used to gag him. The victim was moaning loudly, half-choking and writhing his body, eyes closed, mouth grotesquely forced open by the iron bar. He might have been laughing. The two men behind the wretch steadied his head, and held it still with the iron bar. John produced a pair of iron tongs from his pouch and seized the man's tongue

by the tip. In his other hand he held a short knife, razor sharp.

I knew what was coming and a wave of nausea burned my stomach. In my mind, my own right arm was on a block in Nottingham castle, an axeman standing over me, the axe swinging high and . . . I turned my head away from the victim before me, choking back bile . . . Then I felt two strong hands grasp my own jaws and force my head back towards the scene in front of me. The victim's eyes opened and he stared at me for an instant. He was grotesque, like a stone demon on the side of a church: huge gaping mouth and his tongue pulled out by the tongs. 'This is your penance,' repeated Tuck quietly, keeping his powerful hands round my face, forcing me to look. 'See how Robin serves those who inform on him to the sheriff. Watch and take heed!' And John the giant sliced through the thick root of the tongue, with one sweep, and then dodged quickly as a fountain of blood roared from the man's mouth. The man was screaming, a bubbling liquid howl of livid pain and, released by his captors, he fell to the ground, still tightly trussed, bellowing and jetting gore from the bloody cave of his gaping mouth.

I wrenched my head away from Tuck's hands and staggered to the wall of the church where, my head reeling with disgust and horror, I retched and puked, and brought up the remains of the beef pie that had brought me to this present situation. After a while, when there was nothing more in my stomach, I leaned my forehead on the cool stone of the church wall and gulped down the cold night air.

As my head cleared, I realised fully for the first time what I had promised when I swore loyalty until death to

Robin. I was now bound for life to a monster, a devil who mutilated others for merely speaking to the sheriff's men. I knew then that I had left the world of ordinary men.

I had become an outlaw.