

# Sinful Folk



Ned Hayes

---- ●● ----

## HISTORICAL NOTE

“A curious incident is brought to our attention from the year 1377. In December of that coldest year in the medieval records, the village of Duns in the northeast of England suffered a great tragedy. Five of its young boys were burned to death in a house fire near the center of the village.

As was common with many tragic events in that century, it was supposed the Jews were to blame. Yet all Jews were destroyed, forcibly converted, or expelled from England by order of the Crown, some fifty years earlier, in 1325.

Although most English peasants at that time had never traveled during the course of their lives more than twenty miles from the place of their birth, five men from the village of Duns loaded the charred bodies of their children on a farm cart and journeyed over 200 miles to London. The record of the Court states that the villagers went to present the bodies to the King, and to demand justice against the Jews.

The historical record is clear on these few facts.

History does not record any further details about the incident -- neither the motivations, intentions, nor experiences of those who undertook this arduous journey are noted. Not a single person from the village is identified, not even the guilty party. ”

--- *The Hollow Womb: Child Loss in the Middle Ages*, Miria Hallum

---- ●● ----

## chapter 1

In the end, I listen to the fear that keeps me awake, that resounds through the frantic beating in my breast, the dry terror in my throat, the dread that comes with the pricking of the rat's nervous feet in the darkness.

Christian has not come home all the night long.

I know, for I have lain in this utter darkness for hours now with my eyes stretched as wide as pits in the ground, yearning for my son's return.

Each night he weaves late, I cannot sleep. I am tormented when he is not here – I fear that he will never return. I lie awake, plagued by whispering shadows of loss and loneliness. But so often my fears are for naught.

So, in the early hours of the night, I tell myself that the sound I hear is frost cracking, river ice breaking. I lie to my own heart, as one lies to a frightened child, one who cannot be saved from the conflagration.

I lie.

All the while, I know it is a fire. And I know how near it is.

For at the beginning, there were shouts and cries of alarm, and now there is the sound of rapid running, of men hauling buckets of water and ordering children to help. A house burns.

Yet always I fear to venture forth, for my unreasoning fright grows into a deranged panic that gibbers in the dark. *What if this fire was started to burn me out? What sport would they have, watching a mute moan as she turns on the spit?*

A crackle and hiss in the distance. A heavy thud, then the intruding roar of an inferno. *Where is Christian? I must go, I –*

Scrambling out of the straw, I throw on a rough woolen shift. I rush to the door, and then I remember poor Nell, who died last spring. I do not forget her agony.

I blunder in the darkness then, fumbling for the fireplace soot, and I smear the smooth edge of my jaw, marking with trembling fingers a hint of beard on my soft upper lip and my chin. Always, I must hide my true face.

As my fingers work, I grip hope to me, a small bird quaking in the nest of my heart. Desperately, I long for the words of a prayer from my past at the Abbey.

... *O Alma Redemptoris, redemptoris...*

I have lost the words to it, yet I struggle on, hoping against hope.

This sooty ritual is perhaps my own strange paean to womanhood. Like Theresa of Avignon, that spoiled heiress of the French throne, who shared my vows at Canterbury, the world will see me only as I intend. It is a type of vanity: if I cannot be a woman, I will be as ugly a man as I can muster.

And in this ceremony, my dread subsides, my fingers stop trembling. I can think clearly for a moment. Even now, perhaps Christian is one of those who carry buckets of water to fight the flames, perhaps Christian takes the fearful to safety. He is hale and healthy. He is mine, and I am his. *All will be well.* I repeat it like a rosary. *All will be well.*

Then there are harsh shouting voices outside, men rushing towards the burning building. "Trapped," they shout. "Trapped and burning! Those children will be killed by hellfire!"

The words of the prayer desert me. The Abbey goes from my mind, as well as all my memories of womanhood. I quake with dread, for I am not finished, I should wrap my bosom tightly, bind the feminine shape of my body into that of a eunuch. But I lunge for the door, my bosom unbound, my heart full of fear.

Fear for my son. Fear for my own flesh. Even as my heart belies me, I pray that this fire is nothing. Nothing to do with my life, my secrets.

...

Across the village square, the largest house is consumed: the windows are wreathed in flame, every piece of wood steams as if it is melting. The roof seems supported not by heavy timbers, but by ropy masses of blazing smoke.

It is the home of Benedict, the weaver, and it is the home where my son is apprentice.

The smoke chokes and claws at my nostrils and my throat. The roof catches in a roar of darkness visible. There is no order to the turmoil of the crowd, only the desperation to save their houses, their village, their children.

Not a one of the villagers pays the slightest heed to me.

I am an old man to them, and a broken, mute one at that. Wiry as a starved mule, leathery with long labor. My nose thin as a knife, cheeks high and tarnished by the sun. It is rare that any in this village look beyond the rat's nest of gray hair and wrinkles to the sea-green eyes above my mute and mirthless mouth.

Tonight, I force them to see me. I seize each of their faces with my gaunt hands, turning them, staring quickly into each pair of wild frightened eyes. I find my friend Liam's frightened pale face and red beard. He looks for his son too. Across the way is a boy wrapped in a cloak and hood, but when I meet his eyes, they are black as night. It is only Cole, that orphan lad.

Salvius the blacksmith runs past, throwing water on the flames. Hob the alderman is shouting at the men, ordering them on, as he does. Then I see Tom, who hangs back in the crowd. His wideset bovine face is full of fear. I clutch at him, wanting answers, but he pushes me away. I turn, I pull down another man's hood, and it is bald Benedict, who owns this weaving house. He gives me a dark glance, and pulls away as well, to lift a bucket of water. There is a short man I grasp next, small Geoff the carpenter with the squint.

"Where's my boy?" he shouts in my face. "Where is he?"

That is the question. I turn about again, I seize on every person, look in every face. I search frantically for his blue eyes, I hope for only one boy. My son.

*Christian.*

Slowly it comes to me that I have seen nearly all the living folk of this village. Only a few are not here. The very young, of course. And Jack, whose foot was trampled by the cow. Phoebe, whose swelling ripeness comes to full bloom now. Benedict's wife will be with her this night – for flighty and inconstant Clara is the closest we have now to a midwife, now that Nell is no more.

Desperately, I search each face again and again until they push me away. I wish – not for the first time – that I could use the tongue that lies silent within my mouth.

The people shout their names. “Breton! Matthew! Stephen! Jonathon! Christian – ”

The large boy who belongs to Tom, and the son of Geoff the carpenter. Then the second son of Benedict the weaver, and after that the eldest son of Liam the miller. But there is only that name that echoes in my mind. My son, my only.

*Christian – Christian – Christian –*

The house falls half apart, split wide, a timbered carcass steaming and cracking in the winter frost. Salvius is always brave: he leaps up onto the smoldering threshold, and uses a beam to batter in the smoking door. Then Liam wraps his arms in a soaked cloak and steps into the smoke. A sound goes up from Liam within – he shouts that they died close to the door.

There is a rushing confusion in the crowd, ants scurrying on a broken anthill.

I push my way through the milling villagers to see Liam and Tom, dragging out a charred body. Then another, and another. Five of them, in the end. All the missing accounted for.

My tongue forms his name, a voiceless cry. The flames rise again, the west wind gusts strong across the heath. It is a demon, roaring as it takes the building apart. The crackle is that of hell itself. The men run frantically to cover the neighboring crofts with buckets of water.

The bodies lie on the ground, black as broken shadows. They stink now of death and burning. Roast pig, scorched wool. It is a nauseating stench, yet despite myself, my mouth waters at the smell of meat roasting in the flames. I am always so hungry.

A bit of metal glimmers faintly below one charred head. It is a thin silver chain. *Is that my chain? My boy's neck?*

I am pierced to the root then, all of my veins bathed in a liquor of terror.

## chapter 2

The day is almost upon us. Small houses emerge from the darkness, silhouetted by that faint blue light in the east. The burned croft is a smoking wreck, the embers steaming in the dawn.

The wind dies. The crowd slows its frantic work, the danger of fire spreading now past.

Now I can hear them: the cries of children, sobs of babes in arms. No doubt those cries were all around me for hours in the crowd. Yet I had ears only for one cry, and that never came.

The heap of blackened bodies is surrounded by the stricken families. These youth were our brightest, the highest roll on Fortune's wheel.

I go to each of the bodies, stretched black and penitent on the ground. I cross them with the holy sign. My mouth moves silently in the rhythm of that last rite, although I have not a whit of faith left in me.

If I still believed in such fictions, the souls of these innocents would be trapped in limbo for eternity. A cold God to condemn children to such punishment. And my blessing means nothing: we have no priest in this village, no sacrament of burial, none at all.

The world blurs as my eyes go wet.

A voice calls my name loud. "Andrew!" I turn, blind and terrified, covering my tear-streaked face. Liam's voice is strained and hoarse, he says my use-name now. "Mear, ah Mear, there is no shame in tears. All of us have lost."

Liam is my truest friend in the village. And for years I have wondered if he and his wife Ashlin even see through my soot-stained skin to the woman underneath. But in this, I deceive myself most of all – they would be as shocked as any to know the truth of my life.

The rest of the villagers act as if I am of no more importance than a beast. No one here ever pays me mind. Almost I prefer it that way, for I am invisible to them.

Yet there are three who know I am alive. I would have left long ago except for Salvius and Liam and Nell. Salvius needs me at his bellows and his smithy. Liam makes me laugh. But Nell is gone.

Now Liam puts an arm around my slight shoulders, holding me as I sob. There is no laughter left in him. His pale green eyes are full of water, his red beard trembles.

“Ach, Mear, thank you for blessin’ their souls.” *Who else has seen me bless and cross the bodies?* But Liam does not care that I make the sign reserved to priests and nuns. He grieves over his son, and then he turns, he points me to him. “Here’s your lad, he was the last one I brought out. Furthest from the door.”

Christian is burned to a husk, but I know the chain he wears, as I would know my own flesh. I stare at his neck. The silver chain glimmers faintly in the dawn light, it does not lie.

I fall to my knees. Liam leaves me there, and bends down once more to his first-born son, burned on the ground. A groan comes out of him, a sound to shake the earth.

It was Benedict’s weaving house that burned this night. Now the crowd swells and crests under the whip of a mad grief. Some point at Benedict, some move toward his family.

“Why were the lads here?” shouts Geoff the carpenter. “Why were they burned?”

“I didn’t do it! They gather’d at Vespers, I tell you,” replies Benedict. “They were only here to work on the grand tunics – the ones for Sir Peter of Lincoln!”

“So you say,” replies Liam, choking back a sob. “Where were you? It’s your house – ”

“I was with my wife!” Benedict sweeps his hat from his weathered scalp and throws it on the ground. “I took Clara ‘cross the valley to see to Phoebe’s birth.”

“Ah don’t believe you,” says Geoff shortly, pushing him toward the angry crowd.

“God dammit, I lost my son too!” Benedict shouts. “When I come back at Nocturn hour, t’house was already aflame.”

Hob the alderman affirms what Benedict says. Most times the crowd will listen to Hob. But today they are not stilled. The women scream at Benedict and his family, wanting his blood in payment. Small Geoff rushes at Benedict, to hurt him. My friend Liam shouts accusations.

Then Salvius, with his melodious voice, stands on the cart and declaims. He points at Tom, who sees visions and says he foretold this. But I do not believe Tom, for every time he prophesies, it is only a mis-remembered fragment of some old tale. Salvius sways the crowd though, he speaks floridly of witchcraft, plots, omens of death, portents of fire.

A witch who uses magik to make fire. Pagans who drink blood every dark of the moon. The Star Chamber, the White Tower, evil stories of Old Gods and black Fairies.

So the tide of rage sweeps from Benedict to other accusations. There is no other clear criminal, and it is plain to all the men that this blood cries out for vengeance. Someone will be blamed, why not blame those who are under every plot, those who take every blow given them?

Finally, the shouting crowd settles on the obvious villain. I quail inside, knowing which direction this rage will turn. Hob and Salvius bellow the accusation, their voices husky with wrath.

“The Jews!” they cry. “We seek justice against the Jews – an’ we will take this proof of their crime to the King. The Throne will judge the Jews!”

As any child knows, we suffer now in this world because of the crime against our Lord Jesus Christ. And those who killed him are cursed beyond knowing – the Jews did that crime against him, crucifying him on the tree – and for that crime, we all must pay. The Jews have been cast out from every kingdom then, rejected by every noble, even our great King who sheltered them for years. They are the root of every crime, says the common wisdom, the cause of every

terror. I shiver inside, knowing that they will think this burning of our children to be the same terrible sacrifice those woe-begotten Jews visited on the Christ child.

The blood libel rings in our men now, that clarion call.

“Damn the Jews to hell!” shouts the crowd. “Damn them! Give us justice ‘gainst the Jews!”

No one notices when I rise from the ground. I stagger to that smoking ruin. My mute questions have no answers found in old tales told to children. I know what will tell me the truth. *What power held the door, so the boys could not flee the rising flames?*

With my foot, I stir the warm cinders of the house. The door broken by Salvius lies in pieces, smashed flat. I pick at it, pull out shreds of a rope still stretched taut across the door frame, holding the door tight closed. No fairy tied this knot. No Jew. But I have seen this curious binding once before. *Who tied this?* That strange unlikely knot crumbles to ash at my touch.

“Murder!” Salvius’s deep and lordly voice is a herald’s cry, above the murmur of the crowd. “A Jewish witch did this against the Christ! Now they do it again – they sacrificed our children!” he shouts. “We will take the proof to our King!”

I turn to watch. The men are lifting the bodies from the ground. Gently, they place each body on a farm cart, heaped high with straw.

No one speaks to me. So I push through the gathering crowd. Hob and Salvius boast what they will do to the villains responsible for this horror. “The Jews destroyed him in the flower of his youth. For our saviour, and our Lord, we fight for Justice!”

Tom is inspired. “Miscreant!” Tom’s broad shoulders heave, his wide nostrils flare. “Murder! I am a warrior of Christ – an’ I swear vengeance, by God!”

A bitter laugh rises in my throat – Tom Barker is the last person who should swear on God’s name. His own mother was drowned as a witch, and I know Tom’s sordid exploits too well to think him a warrior of Christ.

I chide myself. He has lost his son: I should allow him a moment of grace. *Yet no grace has been given me, how can I pass it on?*

Now Salvius stands tall upon a farm cart, his handsome face distorted by grief. His hair catches the dawn light, bright as wheat-chaff. His rich voice rings with rage: “Murder! The Jews did this! The Jews! There is a Jew who came here, who now runs ahead on the road!”

The cry is picked up by the crowd once more: “The Jews, the Jews! Against the Jews!”

Hob stands tall and shouts. “We take the bodies to the King to seek justice against them!”

Bene and Hob load the body of Benedict’s son onto the cart. The boy lands with a sodden thump. Geoff pushes past me, muttering. “If I cannot keep them from the road, I will at least go with my son, gods damn them.”

Geoff thrusts a clatter of hoes and shovels in alongside the bodies. Perhaps he means to bury the bodies. The wind blows a hard gust. Some worry about the weather on the road.

Benedict waves away the questions. “Yes, yes, our boys will keep. The world is frozen – it’s mid-winter, by Gods bloody Son!”

There is a muttering argument in the crowd. Geoff still protests. “We should take them to the King, if we go on the road, to the Crown and the Judges.”

“Not the King. Not that,” says Liam with a shudder. “Find the murderer, no need for a Judge.”

“Justice we seek, not vengeance!” cries Geoff.

“Whuts the diff’rence?” shouts Hob, and the crowd roars its approval.

Still, some of the women do not want the bodies to leave the bosoms of their families here. One or two even badger Hob and Salvius with more questions, doubting the truth of this

accusation of this blood libel against the Jews. But Hob brushes them off. In this world and this village, men rule. There is no other voice that counts.

So Salvius and Hob's plan moves forward, quicker than I can grasp. They believe some Jew crept into our village, to kill our boys. I do not know if the rest believe them. But I can only see that they are taking the bodies. It is Benedict's cart. He will travel as well.

Rapidly, there is a count of the men who will travel on the road: Benedict, and Liam, Hob, Tom and Geoff. The five of them bellow loud, they swear on their children's graves, they will go and find the truth.

Hob and Benedict shout themselves hoarse, promising justice to their clans. These men have convinced their families they will chase down the villain. Behind me, Salvius shouts loud, but he has not said he will go yet, or if he will take his young ward Cole.

Geoff still speaks of going to the King.

But I turn away – I cannot keep up with the sounds, the arguments, the moans that shudder from the clangorous crowd. I have lost interest in all their schemes. None of their arguments matter to me.

I look at my son, and my grief grounds me in a slow sinkhole of time. When they come to get Christian, I cling to him and stare at them. I will not let him depart from me, even in this state. I will heal him, I think desperately, I will care for his wounded body until he is well again. I close my eyes, I can hear them all around.

“Why do you hold on, old Mear?”

“Let the body go.”

“He is the father.”

“Show him pity. He canna speak.”

“Can 'e understand what happened?”

Tears leak out of my tight-shut eyes. *I want my boy.* My soul tied to his sweet body, the one stretched out as a tortured penitent. I can feel his burning through my flesh, the choking smoke is in my own lungs. I will burn with him.

But however much I wish it, I cannot take myself out of existence. I open my eyes once more. My body still breathes, my heart pounds ignorantly in my bosom.

The men lift Christian onto the cart, now the five of them will take him away.

It penetrates finally. They are taking him away. There will be nothing left to me. Not a body, not a memory, not a grave.

I lift my face, stained with ash and tears. A baying sob breaks from my throat.

Years have passed, almost a decade, since I spoke loudly or where the villagers could hear me. Now, all turn toward me. Even the men loading the bodies on the cart heed me.

I make a motion. I will come with them, wherever they are taking him. I will go too.

There is further debate. People look away from me, shaking their heads. Few believe that I understand the debate of the morning, the decisions that have been made. No one believes that I can make the journey, least of all myself.

But my gestures are forceful now. In this I have a right to speak. And I do speak, with my hands, my face, with all that is left to me.

*I will go.*

Some vague demon compels me to strive for this. Yet my tongue still cleaves to my teeth. So again, I make a sound as only the mute would make. This time, as loud as I can muster: a keening howl.

This time, they listen. Benedict and Hob doubt my wits, but they do not intrude. Liam talks to Geoff. Salvius wraps an old cloak around my shoulders for the road ahead. The lad Cole

is going with us, he shrugs and walks beside me. These men will allow me to go, wherever they take my son's body. Tom points at me and mumbles some more of his cracked vision. "Mear here, he'll find th' truth, I tell ye. The angels done foretold it."

I stumble back to our tiny cruck croft – wattled and daubed by Christian and myself. I bind my bosom firmly now. I take what little I need. A few loaves of dark bread, dried mutton, and a tarnished silver chain to match the one my son bore. I search, but I cannot find the ring my lover gave me, years ago. It is too late: I must take what I can find. I seize the sheepskins and furs with which we make up our bed, and a small pot of soot, for my face in the night. And that is all.

I do not understand why we are leaving the village. Hob and Salvius say we go to seek retribution against the Jews. Benedict seems afraid, but not because of Tom's vision. Liam and Geoff now say we go for justice to that highest earthly arbitrator. They would go to the King.

The quarrels of the men bring back the chaos of our dying village when I made that last promise I made to my mother. It is the only way of making this right. Yet a fog of pain overwhelms me, the world is turned all wrong.

As I struggle to catch up with the cart, I know that I am going only because my son is going away, and my whole life is contained in that tortured, blackened husk.

*Where else would I go, but with him?*

END OF THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS OF SINFUL FOLK

Enjoy the Beginning?

[CLICK HERE TO GET THE WHOLE E-BOOK](#)

OR

["Like" Sinful Folk on Facebook](#) to be the first to find out the print release date of the book in 2012 !