



Chapter Five

Nick stumbled over the cobbles, staggering in a kind of hot fog of fever that forced him to slump against a wall while the world spun around him like the blurred spokes of a carriage wheel. He gasped for breath and sense. It was done. Mercy was safe. But what about him? Was he to lie in the filth of the streets and alleyways until somebody noticed? Then he hounded and dragged to the stinking Pest House to die in the company of hundreds of people, all being tortured towards death by the plague? Nick pushed himself upright. He was too scared to stay still and be caught like that. Better to walk and walk while he could, walk until he dropped dead where he fell. Nick put hands under his armpits. No swelling. Just the fever that dizzied and drained him of strength.

By some instinct to head for open air, Nick found himself back at Tower Wharf by midday.

He tipped his aching head back and looked up at the Tower, as strong and sure as Nick was feeble. There were dark specs circling over the Tower that Nick thought to be a trick of his sick eyes, until her recognised them as ravens. One raven flew free of the others and came towards Nick, larger and closer until its wings spread wide and its feet braced in front of it to land at Nick's feet. Nick laughed, unsure whether this was dream or truth.

'Good morning, Sir Devil Raven,' he said. The bird pecked crossly at Nick's shoe, and the sharpness of his beak was real enough.

Nick pulled his foot away. 'I haven't any food for you this time, nor food for myself either.' Nick crouched down and wondered if he would ever be able to get up again. 'Do you know me?' It was the same bird, Nick was sure of it and he was strangely glad of its small gesture of companionship. The bird flapped his big wings, fanning Nick with a small breeze that cooled his fever for a moment. But when Nick opened his eyes, the bird was away, flying up and over the high walls into the Tower. The bird is a guest of His Majesty, thought Nick. Funny that a bird could come and go freely while men were taken into that place in chains to be locked up or killed. Nick laughed a little

madly at the thought, and the laughing made his head throb so that the laugh turned into a groan. A woman passing by put a handkerchief to her mouth and hurried away from him. She sees I have the plague, thought Nick.

But through the hot hurting muddle of his mind there was suddenly an ice-cool clear idea that sliced through it all and made a sudden kind of sense. In his illness, Nick knew that he had a power that he could use for a wonderful revenge. If he could find a way to follow that raven into the Tower, then he could carry the plague into the domain of the King whose war-mongering had killed Father and whose wickedness had brought the wrath of God into London as plague and killed Mother. Those great stone walls were mighty defence against soldiers and guns and swords, but if Nick could take the plague inside those Tower walls, then justice might be done in bringing death to King Charles. Then God could rest from his anger with London, and London's plague would end. How beautifully logical and right, and exciting too! He, Nicholas Truelove, might kill the King and save London's people!

If only I could flap wings and rise up and fly over the walls as the raven does, thought Nick.

He couldn't fly, but maybe he could use a little of the raven's cunning? If he could only appear as ordinary and right in this place as one of those birds, then maybe he could appear invisible to the guards too? But how?

Pushing sweaty black hair from his face, Nick rested in the dark cool shadow of a wall and watched the Tower's guarded gateway. A group of men walked towards the gate. One of the men spoke to the soldiers, and the gates were opened and the soldiers stepped aside to let the men through. Then a grand gentleman with a boy attendant was saluted and they let him through without any hesitation. Following them came two carts rumbling over the cobbles. The men on guard stopped the first cart, lifting its cloth covering to inspect what was underneath, but they were just waving through the second cart, heaped with plump sacks. The sacks must have grain in them because there were pigeons fussing behind the cart, fighting to pick up whatever was dribbling from a hole in one of them just as seagulls will follow a farmer's plough to get the worms turned up in the fresh soil. With the guards distracted, Nick saw his chance. He hurried across to slip in amongst that flurry of birds and tag behind the

cart. He put a hand on the back of one fat sack as if he was helping to steer it through the gateway. 'Here, what are you after?' asked the carter, twisting around in his seat.

'Just shooing the birds from stealing your grain,' said Nick.

'Well, you'll get no payment from me for doing it,' said the carter. One soldier looked up at the commotion. Nick smiled across at him and shrugged. 'He's my uncle,' he said. 'Mean as anything!' The soldier grinned back, and Nick kept walking on and through the gateway, into the Tower. As the cart rumbled into what appeared to be the busy street of a small town, Nick took his hand from the cart and let it go ahead and away.

I've done it, thought Nick. I'm within the King's stronghold! He tried to stop his mouth from grinning in triumph. If only Mercy could know what he had done! Nick suddenly noticed a man scowling at him. Ducking down, Nick pretended to adjust his shoe lacing, then he straightened and set off at a feeble kind of a run, trying to look like a boy in a hurry, on some errand and too busy to be stopped. Don't look back, he told himself. Remember that the trick is to look the part of a boy who belongs in this place.

It took all his slight energy to keep running and keep upright. Panting feverish breath, his legs ready to buckle under him, Nick came to an open space where lines of soldiers with breastplates glinting in the sun stood smartly to attention in front of the White Tower. And, as Nick folded over, clutching his knees and fighting the swirling sickly dizziness that made the world seem to lurch around him, he laughed. Because there in front of the soldiers was his friend, the tuft-headed raven, once more, strutting up and down just as though he was the soldiers' commander. Am I seeing what isn't this because of my fever? wondered Nick. The bird's black wings crossed tips behind his back and his head tipped back to let his blackcurrant eyes inspect the soldiers' gleam.

'Kraack!' he told them in a firm voice, and Nick almost expected the soldiers to obey the command in some way, but ...

'Got you, you young rogue!'

A cool shadow darkened over Nick and a hairy hand clamped tight to the scruff of his shirt, making him choke, turning him to face a big giant of a man, red-faced under a hot grey wig that wobbled with rage.