

Alchemy and Meggy Swann

Karen Cushman



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Summary: In 1573, the crippled, scorned, and destitute Meggy Swann goes to London, where she meets her father, an impoverished alchemist, and eventually discovers that although her legs are bent and weak, she has many other strengths.

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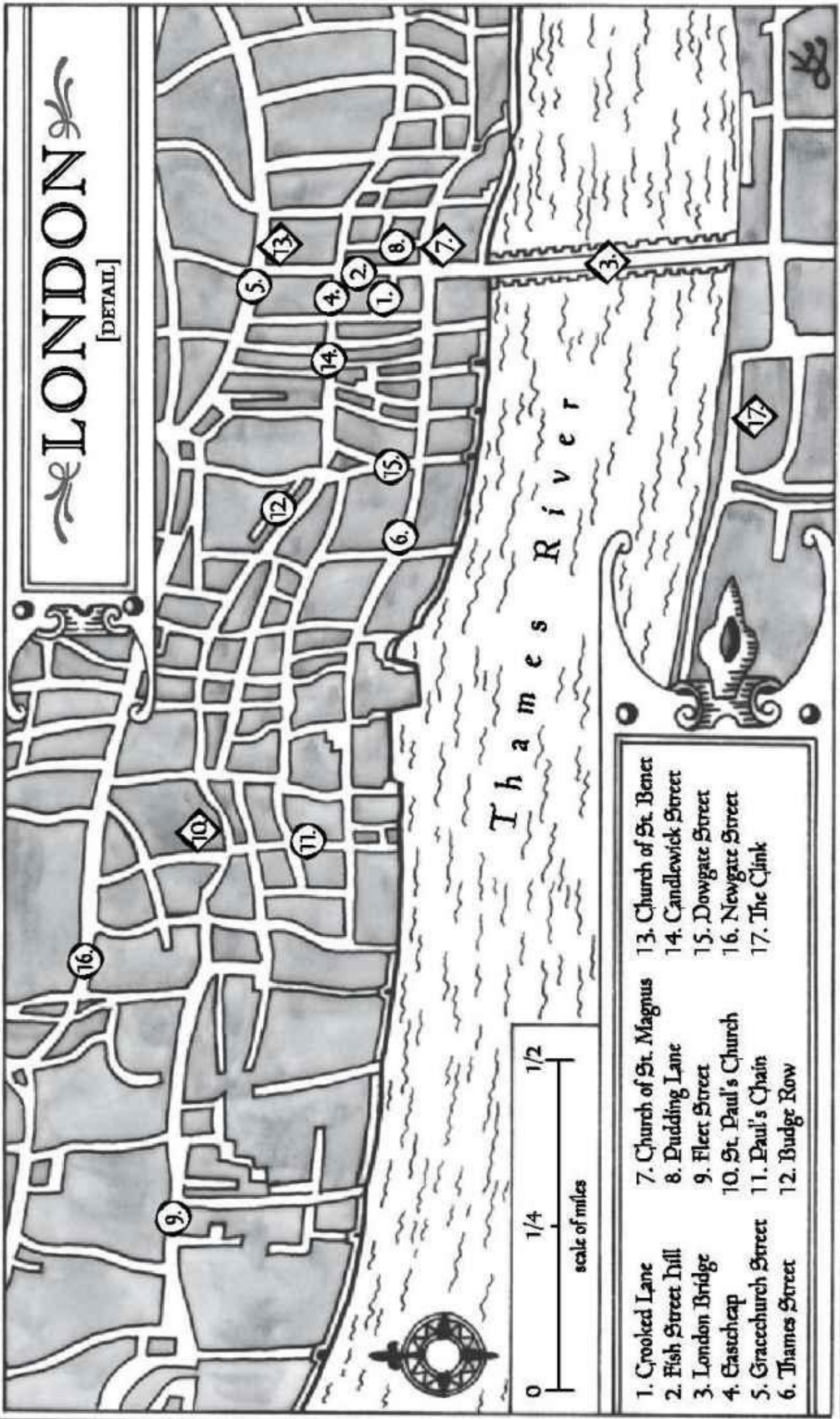
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*For Leah,
for her gentle courage
and her tender heart*

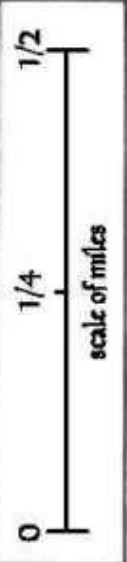
The meeting of two personalities is like
the contact of two chemical substances;
if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

LONDON

[DETAIL]



Thames River



scale of miles

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Crooked Lane | 7. Church of St. Magnus | 13. Church of St. Benet |
| 2. Fish Street Hill | 8. Pudding Lane | 14. Candlewick Street |
| 3. London Bridge | 9. Fleet Street | 15. Dowgate Street |
| 4. Gaschcap | 10. St. Paul's Church | 16. Newgate Street |
| 5. Gracechurch Street | 11. Paul's Chain | 17. The Clink |
| 6. Thames Street | 12. Budge Row | |

1573

*After the accession of Elizabeth I
to the throne of England
but afore London's first theater
and Shakespeare*

"Ye toads and vipers," the girl said, as her granny often had, "ye toads and vipers," and she snuffled a great snuffle that echoed in the empty room. She was alone in the strange, dark, cold, skinny house. The carter who had trundled her to London between baskets of cabbages and sacks of flour had gone home to his porridge and his beer. The flop-haired boy in the brown doublet who had shown her a straw-stuffed pallet to sleep on had left for his own lodgings. And the tall, peevish-looking man who had called her to London but did not want her had wrapped his disappointment around him like a cloak and disappeared up the dark stairway, fie upon him!

Fie upon them all!

She was alone, with no one to sustain and support her. Not even Louise, her true and only friend who had fallen asleep in the back of the cart and been overlooked. Belike Louise was on her way back out of the town with the carter, leaving the girl here frightened and hungry and alone. Ye toads and vipers, what was she to do? She sat shivering on a stool as unsteady as her humor, and tears left shining tracks like spider threads on her cheeks.

Her name was Margret Swann, but her gran had called her Meggy, and she was newly arrived from Millford village, a day's ride away. The bit of London she had seen was all soot and slime, noise and stink, and its streets were narrow and dark. Now she was imprisoned in this strange little house on Crooked Lane. Crooked Lane. How the carter had laughed when he learned their destination.

Darkness comes late in high summer, but come it does. Meggy could see little of the room she sat in. Was there food here? A cooking pot? Wood for a fire? Would the peevish-looking man—Master Peevish, she decided to call him—would he come down and give her a better welcome?

Startled by a sudden banging at the door and in truth a bit fearful, Meggy stood up quickly, grabbed her walking sticks, and made her way into the farthest corner of the room. She moved in a sort of clumsy jig: reach one stick ahead, swing leg wide and drag it forward, move other stick ahead, swing other leg wide and drag it forward, over and over again, stick, swing, drag, stick, swing, drag. Her legs did not sit right in her hips—she had been born so—and as a result she walked with the awkward swinging gait. Wabbling, Meggy called it, and it did get her from one place to another, albeit slowly and with not a little bit of pain.

The banging came again, and then the door swung open and slammed against the wall, revealing the carter who had fetched her to London.

He was not gone! Meggy's spirits rose like yeasty bread, and she wobbled toward the doorway. "Well met, carter," she said. "I wish to go home."

"I were paid sixpence to bring you hither," he said. "Have you another six for the ride back?"

"Nay, but my mother—"

He shook his head. "Your mother was right pleased to see the back of you." He turned, took two steps, and lifted something from the bed of the wagon. Something that wriggled and hissed. Something that leapt from his arms. Something that showed itself to be a large white goose, her wings spread out like an angel's as she made her waddling way over to the girl. Louise. Meggy's goose and friend.

Meggy exhaled in relief and gladness. She bent down and looked into the goose's deep black eyes. "Pray be not angry with me, Louise. In all the hurly-burly of arriving, I grew forgetful." Louise honked loudly and shook herself with such a shake that there was a snowfall of feathers.

When Meggy stood up again, the carter and the wagon had gone. Her eyes filled, but her hands

held tightly to her walking sticks, so she could not dash the tears away. They felt sticky on her lips and salty.

She sat down on the stool again and put one arm around the goose, who stretched her neck and placed her head on Meggy's lap. "You may observe, goosie," the girl said, stroking the soft, white head, "that I be most lumpish, dampnified, and right bestraught. This London is a horrid place, and I know not what will befall us here."

Meggy and Louise rocked for a moment, and Meggy softly sang a misery song she had learned from her gran. *I wail in woe, I plunge in pain, with sorrowing eyes I do complain*, she sang, but the sound of her trembly voice in the empty room was so mournful that she stopped and sat silent while the darkness grew.

Meggy and the carter had arrived in London earlier that day while the summer evening was yet in light. Even so, the streets were gloomy, with tall houses looming on either side, rank with the smell of fish and the sewage in the gutter, slippery with horse droppings, clamorous with church bells and the clatter of cart wheels rumbling on cobbles. London was a gallimaufry of people and carts, horses and coaches, dogs and pigs, and such noise that made Meggy's head, accustomed to the gentle stillness of the country village, ache.

"Good even', mistress," the carter had called to a hairy-chinned woman with a tray of fish hanging from her neck. "Know you where we might find the house at the Sign of the Sun?"

"I cannot seem to recall," the fishwife said, "but belike I'd remember if my palm were crossed with a penny." She stuck out a hand, knobby and begrimed. The carter frowned and grunted but finally took a penny from the purse tied at his waist and flicked it at her.

She plucked it from the air and flashed a gummy smile. "Up Fish Street Hill but a little ways to Crooked Lane," she said. "You will see the Sign of the Sun six or more houses up the lane."

Crooked Lane. Meggy had pulled her skirts tighter around her legs, and the carter had laughed.

As the fishwife had said, six houses up Crooked Lane, below a faded sign of, indeed, the sun, was the narrowest house Meggy had ever seen, hardly wider than a middling-tall man lying edge to edge and three stories high. Its timbers were black with age, and the yellow plaster faded to a soft cream. A bay window on each floor was fitted with small panes of glass, dusty and spotted and, here and there, cracked. The upper floors hung over the street, as was true of all the houses in Crooked Lane, so the street was shadowy and damp. To one side of the house was a shop, shuttered and dark, with a large shoe hanging in front, betokening a cobbler's shop, Meggy thought. There was a bit of garden next to it, although what would grow in that damp gloom Meggy could not say. On the other side was a purveyor of old clothes. "Old cloaks? Have you an old cloak to sell?" the merchant called from the door of his shop. "Or mayhap—"

"Away, fellow," the carter said. "We have business with the master here."

The clothes seller snorted. "Business? With him? Abracadabra more like." And he spat.

Abracadabra? Meggy shivered now, remembering. "What could he have meant?" she asked Louise. But the goose, busily grooming her feathers, did not answer.

"And hearken to me, Louise," Meggy went on. "On London Bridge I beheld heads, people's heads, heads black with rot and mounted on sticks, hair blowing in the summer wind like flags at a fair. Traitors, the carter said, a lesson and a warning." The girl shivered again. Heads. What sort of place was this London?

As darkness grew, Meggy lay down carefully and with some difficulty and undertook to make herself comfortable on the straw pallet, she who had slept on Granny's goose-feather mattress. She did not know what hurt her most—her aching legs or her empty belly or her troubled heart. Pulling her cloak over her and nestling Louise beside her, she breathed in the familiar smell of goose and green

sleepy.

~~Mayhap this was but a bad dream, she thought. The dark, the cold, the strange noises, and the unfriendly man who had judged her, found her wanting, and left her alone—perhaps these were but part of a dream, and she would wake again in the kitchen of the alehouse. "Sleep well, Louise," said Meggy to her goose, "for tomorrow, I pray, we be home."~~

The heads on the bridge were the stuff of nightmares. Here was Louise's head, her black eyes cold and empty. And there Granny's gray hair blew in the wind. And this was Meggy's head, mouth open in a hopeless wail...

Meggy woke with a cry. The night had the quiet stillness of the hours after midnight but before dawn. Over the pounding of her heart, she could hear voices and footsteps upstairs. Was Master Peevish coming down? Was he sorry he had given her so poor a welcome?

He did not appear. Meggy tried to fall asleep again, but her mind returned to her encounter with the man when she had arrived. "I do not allow beggars at my house" was the first thing he said to her. "Begone and clear my doorstep."

"Pray pardon, sir, we are not beggars," the carter had told him. "If you be Master Ambrose, then be your daughter, come at your bidding."

The black-gowned man, tall and narrow like his house, peered down at the girl through eyes as dark as her own, nearly hidden by bushy black eyebrows as if two caterpillars slumbered on his brow. "Daughter?" he asked, frowning. The caterpillars woke and collided over his nose. "I expected a son."

A son. Not her. No more did she want him, this ill-favored, ill-mannered old man in a shabby black gown. Ye toads and vipers, what did she need with a father?

She turned to go, anxious to be elsewhere, but the carter held her arm. "I were told I would be paid sixpence for this delivery," he said, sticking out his hand. "Sixpence."

Master Ambrose pulled pennies from inside his gown and gave them to the carter, who turned for his wagon. Still frowning, Master Ambrose studied Meggy. "What are you called?"

A sudden breeze tugged at the hair that tumbled like storm clouds from her linen cap and tangled in her eyes and mouth. She said naught but only frowned back at the man's long face, the long nose, and those great bushy eyebrows. Her gran had admonished her often, "Do not greet the world with your fists up, sweeting. Give folk a chance." But her gran was dead, and Meggy was here, and her hands on her sticks clenched into fists.

The man and the girl stood in silence until he called to the carter, "God's wounds, is she mute? Or brain cracked?"

The carter shrugged once more as he climbed onto the wagon and tossed Meggy's sack over the side.

"Hold, fellow!" Master Ambrose shouted. "Hold. What use is a daughter to me?" But the carter merely clucked to his horse, which pulled the wagon up the street and away.

They stood for a long moment, the man in the doorway and Meggy on the step. Finally he turned and entered the house, leaving her to follow.

Brain cracked, he had called her. A daughter, not a son. Ye toads and vipers, he would have more disappointments to deal with this day, Meggy thought. She leaned on her walking sticks and, dipping and lurching, moved herself into the house—stick, swing, drag, stick, swing, drag—padding, accompanying her every step.

The man turned and watched her, one caterpillar arching on his brow. Shoving past her, he strode back to the door and shouted after the wagon, "Good sir, hold, I said! The girl be ... she cannot ... want..." But the wagon was disappearing up the darkening lane.

Master Ambrose sighed and closed the door. "I know not what I am to do with you. A son would be of use to me, but a daughter, and such a daughter..." He did not look at her but walked to the

staircase in a corner of the room. "Roger," he called. "Roger, come down."

~~A young fellow a year or two older than Meggy, wearing brown doublet and hose of strawber~~
red, pounded down the stairs. He grinned at Meggy and his hair flopped into his eyes. "Roger," said Master Ambrose, "this be ... err, my ... err, daughter. See to her. I must return to my work."

The boy called Roger nodded as the man started up the stairs. Then the boy picked up Meggy's sack from the doorstep and said, "Go to! So the master has a daughter. I bid you welcome." But his grin faded as he gestured toward her walking sticks. "What means those?"

Meggy had had a long day. She had left her home and been bounced in a wagon over bumpy roads, assailed by smells and mud and noise, and then insulted by a man said to be her father. She was not in the best of humors. And now this boy was vexing her with his big eyes and his annoyous prattling. She pulled her face into a scowl and shook one of her walking sticks at him. "Beware the uggleson crookleg, the foul-featured cripple, the fearful, misshapen creature," she growled, "marked by the Devil himself."

The boy backed up against the wall, but he did not run. In the village where Meggy was born, the children ran. Meggy seldom went among the villagers, but when she did, they jeered or shunned her, cursed and spat, and mothers pulled their toddlers behind their skirts for fear she would bewitch them with the evil eye. This boy did not run or spit or curse.

She narrowed her eyes. "Be you not afeared?" she asked him.

He stared at her solemnly but said nothing. He would come to fear her or taunt her or avoid her as Meggy knew. Everyone did. Everyone but Louise.

"My mother held that my crooked legs are the judgment of God upon me for my sins," Meggy said. "She bade me stay out of sight lest I curse our patrons and make the ale sour. Now be you afeared?"

He cocked his head, and his brown hair fell forward like the long ears of a spaniel pup. "Indeed I know not what to think of you," he said. "But you be my master's daughter, so take some comfort and rest." He moved a stool closer to where Meggy stood. "I cannot offer you a fire. The master will not spare the wood. But for the room at the top of the stairs, the rest of this house is cold as January all the year round."

He pointed to a straw pallet folded into a corner. "You can sleep on that. I found it lumpy and dusty, but it serves. The water bearer will come each sevendnight, for it is clear you cannot fetch water yourself. And there is this." He gestured to the chamber pot beside the pallet and turned for the door.

"Nay, hold!" Meggy called. "You cannot abandon me. What am I to do here? Who will tend to me? And fetch me things to eat?"

"Belike you will fetch it yourself," Roger said. "Up Crooked Lane to Eastcheap you will find taverns, fruit-mongers, and bakers. Where Fish Street Hill changes to Gracechurch there be grocers and butchers. But closest are the cookshops and brewers on Thames Street, down Crooked Lane instead of up and toward the river to where Fish Street Hill meets the church of St. Magnus and—"

"Can you not see, rude sir, that I could ne'er walk all that way?" She waved her walking sticks at him. Because her legs often tormented her, she had to measure the gain of each journey against the pain—would the reward be worth it? Roger, the lack-witted woodsnape, could not understand that.

"Did you not walk and work and such in that village you came from?" he asked.

"I stayed out of the way, is what I did there. And there was ever bread in the alehouse kitchen when I grew hungry." She sighed loudly. "You will have to fetch me food."

The boy laughed. "I will see you anon," he said, "but now I must be off to supper and bed in my new lodgings." Sweeping his hat onto his head, he bade her a good even. He was laughing again as he left.

Now Meggy was alone, hungry and thirsty and frightened in the dark house in the middle of the night. Despair settled over her like the wings of a great dark bird. She pulled her cloak over her head and settled back into her nightmares.

Morning came at last, as it ever does. Ere Meggy opened her eyes, she listened for the familiar sounds of home—cock crow, breezes singing in the tall grass, cows lowing to be milked, the greetings and fare-thee-wells of travelers—but there were none such. Instead she heard church bells clanging, men arguing, the calls of peddlers and the screeching of gulls.

It had not been a dream. She was still in London, in the house of Master Peevish. She frowned. He was her father, did that then make her Mistress Peevish? It suits me, I fear, she thought, and moved her lips in what might have been a tiny smile.

Leaning heavily on her sticks, she pulled herself up off the floor. She found the chamber pot and cursing this little house that had no privy such as the alehouse had, she managed, with a great deal of arranging and rearranging, to use it. Opening the door, she threw the contents into the stinking ditch that flowed past the house and placed the pot back in the corner. She found a bit of wood in the street and used that to clean up after Louise, who had done in the night what geese do, and that, too, Meggy threw into the street. Then she folded the straw mat and put it next to the chamber pot.

Hunger and curiosity both poked at her, and she looked about. This seemed a poor, puny, paltry sort of house. There was but the one small room—no dining chamber, no kitchen, no pantry, no buttery for storage, no cupboard. Dust motes danced in the pale sunlight peeping through the window and settled on a lone wooden table and benches. The empty fireplace held no fire, no andirons, no pothooks or bellows or spit for meat. And nowhere was there aught to eat.

She had missed her supper the night before, although the boy Roger, fie upon him, had gone home to his. What was she to do to quiet her grumbling belly?

She longed for the alehouse where she had lived with her mother and her gran, poor and plain as it had been. She missed the scents of fresh ale and clean rushes and meat turning on the spit. This house stank of dust and mildew and, from somewhere, a foul reek like hen's eggs gone rotten. All in all it did not seem a place where people truly lived.

Meggy sat down at the table and drew an M in the dust on the top. Would Master Peevish come downstairs? Did he even recall that she was there? Would the boy in the brown doublet come back? She had not used him very kindly. He had seemed a friendly sort, but she cared not about being friends. People do not favor me, she thought, nor I them. "I need no friend but you, Louise. You do not mind that sometimes I be Mistress Peevish," she said to the goose. "But what am I to do in this place? I have no food, no one to comfort or help or listen to me. Master Peevish would have an able-bodied son, not a crippled daughter. What am I to do?" Louise, of course, did not answer.

If she could find sixpence for the carter, she could return to the village and the alehouse, perhaps, but she would receive a cold welcome there. As the carter had remarked, her mother—the village alewife, known for her good ale and her bad temper—had not been sorry to see the girl go. "My mother cannot stomach me," Meggy had often said to Louise. "I might as well have two heads, like the calf born on Roland Pigeon's farm."

Once it was apparent that Meggy would be lame, she had been put in the care of her gran, who dwelt in rooms over the alehouse stable. Sweet Granny, with gnarled hands and a face like a pickled herring, had given her love and warmth and kept her mostly out of sight. It was her gran who had found like sticks in the woods and showed the girl how to use them for walking. But Granny had died two winters past, and without her broad back and strong arms to carry the girl up and down the ladder in the stable, Meggy had to return to the alehouse and her mother.

And then yestermorn, just afore dawn, "Your father, master at the Sign of the Sun in London, has

bid you come to him," her mother had said. "You leave this morning."

~~"Nay, 'tis not so," said Meggy. "I have no father." Certes she had a father; everyone has a father.~~ But never in her thirteen years had Meggy heard her mother speak of him. Her gran had merely said, "You have a mother who feeds you and a gran who loves you. What need have you of a father?" Still Meggy had at times wondered and imagined what and where this father was. Was he tall? Lean limbed or swag bellied? Did he smell of wood smoke and horses or of ink and musty books? Did he have black hair like hers? Was he, too, lame?

"Why have you ne'er told me of him?" Meggy had asked her mother yestermorn. "Why has he been so long gone, and why am I to go to him now?"

Her mother shrugged. "Belike you will find out soon enough."

And so Meggy was in London, unwanted by father as well as mother. What was she to do? Y
toads and vipers.

THREE

Meggy lingered there, thinking and fretting, until, with a slam of the big wooden door, Roger bounced into the room.

So he had come back. Meggy thought he looked ever more like a puppy, all friendliness and no brains. She was relieved and annoyed and mightily hungry, but all she said was "Ahh, methought I heard the door open and a mighty wind blow in. What will you, puppy?"

"See what I have brought, fresh from the larder of Mistress Grimm." He unfolded a cloth from around a heel of bread and a hunk of yellow cheese and handed her a bit of each. "I had to draw sword and fight a rat for the cheese, but I vanquished him, and here it be." Not knowing whether he jested or not, Meggy inspected her bit of cheese for marks of rat teeth.

The boy fetched a mug from the windowsill. "You must drink from clay, I fear. The master has melted or sold all the metal in the house." That explained the lack of andirons, pots, and pothooks. Meggy thought, but why would he do so?

The boy poured some of the ale from the tankard he carried into Meggy's mug. "Have you seen him this day?" he asked, sitting across from her at the table.

She shook her head but said naught, her mouth full of bread.

"In sooth 'tis a poor welcome he has given you," the boy said, "but you will grow accustomed to his ways in time. He can be forgetful, his head filled with philosophy and such, and sometimes he is frosty as a winter night, though he will not beat you or berate you overmuch." He stood up suddenly and smacked his head with his hand. "But I forget my manners. Roger Oldham, if it please your mistress," he said with a small bow.

"Old-dumb?"

"No, Old-ham. O-L-D as in old, H-A-M as in, well, ham."

"Or pork. Or pigmeat. Well, Roger Old-pigmeat, I am Margret Swann," said Meggy after swallowing. "And this is Louise," she added, gesturing toward the goose, who waddled up to Roger and nipped him on his knee.

"Hellborn bird!" Roger shouted. "She has bitten me!" He sat down again and rubbed his leg. Louise, with a great fluff of her feathers, settled herself.

"I think she simply be curious about how you taste," said Meggy.

"If she does not leave off my leg, I will be knowing how *she* tastes," he responded.

"I pray you, Master Oldmeat, no roast goose jests where Louise might hear." The girl took another great bite of bread and asked through a mouthful, "Are you servant here?"

Still rubbing his leg, Roger shook his head. "Nay, no longer. I was two years setting fires and sweeping ashes, fetching food from the cookshop and water from the conduit, washing linen and airing clothes, shopping for beakers and bottles, powders and potions, and assisting the master in his work. Now I go elsewhere, so he summons you."

"He wants me to be his servant? That is why he called for me?" Meggy trembled with anger and disappointment. "I cannot be a servant. My legs are crooked and my arms busy with my stick. Walking pains me, and climbing, and standing. I go seldom among strangers, for they spit and curse at me, and this London makes my head ache." She struggled to her feet. "A pox on it. Go and tell your master that I have left his house and will trouble him no more. And he can make a hundred able-bodied sons to serve him—it matters not to me."

"Whither go you?"

"I know not."

"How get you there?"

"I care not." Meggy threw her arms into the air in a careless motion, and her sticks clattered the floor. She sat down again. 'Twas bravely spoken, but in truth she was all unknowing and fearful about what would befall her outside this house at the Sign of the Sun.

Roger handed her the sticks. Meggy frowned at him. "Why are you not afear'd of me?" she asked. "Have you not the wit?"

The boy scowled but spoke mildly. "My father was physician in Cambridge, where men look not to God and demons for explanations but rather to natural principles and bodily causes." He was silent a moment and then added, "In truth, I think you as friendly as a bag of weasels but too small to be dangerous."

Meggy banged a stick against the floor again. "Be not daft, servant boy," she said. "I be more dangerous, a fearsome cripple who delights in affrighting people."

"I have no toddling babe to be marked or cattle to be cursed. I be not overfond of you but I am not afear'd." Roger lifted his tankard from the table and raised it to Meggy. "Does that discomf you?"

It did. It also alarmed and pleased and confounded her. She sought a new topic. "You said you shopped for powders and potions. Be the master a physician?"

"Nay, he deals not with humours and remedies but with matter, with metals, with liquids and vapors."

"Is he a perfumer?"

"Not at all. He is a learned man."

"An apothecary?"

Roger shook his head. "The master does seek to discover the secrets of the universe, of all matter and how its essence can be changed."

"Go to! He is a magician," Meggy said, and shivered at the thought. Abracadabra.

"Nay, he is an alchemist," Roger said, "a master of the art of transformation."

Meggy was relieved to hear there was no magic in the house. "I have heard of such men, who claim to change straw into gold," she told Roger. "Is he then rich? This does not look like a rich man's house."

"'Tis metal, lead and such, that alchemists try to transform into gold, and no, he is not rich. He uses all he earns for his work." Roger put some pennies on the table. "Here is all that is left of the coins he gave me last for food. 'Tis meager indeed, and you will have much ado to get more from him. Easier to get soup from a stone than money from a philosopher."

"Philosopher? You just now said he is an alchemist."

The boy took a large bite of bread and washed it down with another mouthful of ale before speaking. "Alchemy is a hodgepodge enterprise, a good deal philosophy, with a bit of smelting, a little distilling, even boiling and brewing. Also calcination and percolation."

"Enough, puppy. Just what does he *do* in the rooms upstairs?"

"He searches for the *aqua vitae*, the elixir of life that can rid substances of their impurities and make all things perfect." Roger took another bite of bread. "Transformation, he says it is, changing things in their essence."

"And that will turn metal into gold?"

Roger nodded.

"You have seen him do it?" Meggy asked.

"Nay, he still has not the method, although he swears he is close to finding it."

~~Picturing the man's long, peevish face and shabby gown, Meggy shook her head. "Belike 'tis but a pretty dream. I shall not believe until I see him with a handful of gold. And tell me, when *shall* I see him?"~~

Roger shrugged. "The master labors at his Great Work from dawn until dark and from dark until dawn. He rests little and eats seldom. When he wants you, he will call."

Meggy dipped a bit of bread in the mug of ale and threw it to Louise. The ale was cool and weak but not nearly tasty enough to please the daughter of an alewife. "In sooth I cannot be his servant," she said to Roger, "so you must stay and serve us both."

"Nay, not a moment longer than necessary," he said. "I go to a new life, and most glad I am of it."

"That man upstairs does not want me. I will go with you."

"You cannot. I go to be a player in the company of the esteemed Cuthbert Grimm and Dick Merryman."

Meggy knew about players. They often stayed in the rooms above the alehouse. Her mother had cursed their rowdiness and examined their coins carefully lest they try to cheat her. Why would Roger wish to be such a rogue? "I believe players are disreputable and dishonest and should be whipped from the town."

"Nay, Mistress Margret, players are men most like gods. They comfort the sad, amuse the wealthy, inspire the common," he said, gesturing wildly. "We players put poetry onstage, telling stories about men great and ordinary, about their deeds and their misfortunes, revealing their very hearts and souls."

"And you are paid wages for this?"

"Certes we are," he said, looking pleased with himself.

"Belike I could learn to be a player," Meggy said. "My legs are weak but my wits are not."

Roger shook his head. "Nay, mistress."

Her blood grew hot. "Because I am lame?"

"Nay, because you are female. Females cannot be players."

"Why say you that?"

"Because 'tis so."

"Go to! What stories have no females?"

"We younger players take the women's parts. I myself will be Lady Emma when we play *The Tragic Tale of King Ethel-red the Unready*."

Meggy snorted. "You, Roger Oldham, old ham, old meat, ancient pork, you play a woman? With your big feet and your knightly nose?"

Roger smiled. "I do make a somewhat lordly woman." Meggy started to speak, but Roger shook his head again and said, "Nay, Mistress Margret, nay, you cannot come with me."

Meggy felt her lip threaten to tremble. "But what will befall me here alone? Belike I will sink under my afflictions."

Roger stood. "I board in the house of Cuthbert Grimm next to Peter Ragwort the butcher of Pudding Lane. It does stink a fair bit but keeps the rain off. If you have need of me, seek me there."

He was leaving her! He had eaten supper but brought her only old bread and moldy cheese. Pigeon pie he ate, no doubt, and custard. She stiffened with anger. "Fie upon you, Roger Oldmeat! I will seek you when pigs grow wings! A pox on your players and your poetry and your Cuthbert Grimm!" She threw the last bit of her bread at his head, although she would regret its loss later. "Hasten away. Would that I ne'er see your silly grin again."

And, by cock and pie, not saying another word, he left her alone in the house at the Sign of the Sun.

Without Roger the room felt darker and cold. Meggy sought a candle or even a rushlight, hoping to dispel the gloom in the room and in her heart, but found none. The house at the Sign of the Sun was indeed. More like the house at the sign of the gloom, she thought. "Why think you this dark house has the Sign of the Sun?" she asked Louise.

Louise ignored her and began to groom her feathers, fluffy as thistledown and lily white.

"Belike," Meggy continued, "someone wanted to bring a bit of light and heat into this dark dreariness."

She went to the window and tried to see through the grime. Leaning close, she spat and rubbed the glass with the hem of her kirtle. There was gray gloom outside as well as in. Ye toads and vipers, be summer, Meggy thought. Where were the billows of grain, thickets of berries and wild plums, the roses, poppies, and fields of daisies? This London was a poor place, and she longed to go home.

Although it was but midday, she spread the pallet Roger had given her before the fireplace again and lay down. She'd get no warmth from an empty fireplace, she knew, but still it comforted her to be there.

When Meggy woke, it was not yet evening. Roger's cheese was long gone and she was hungry again. She knew of no food in the house but for the dry and dirty lump of bread she had heaved at the boy. You toads and vipers, you could play my belly like a drum, she thought, 'tis that empty.

She had not seen Master Peevish again, although she had heard whispering and footsteps coming and going in the night. Or had she been dreaming?

A rumble from her belly finally sent Meggy reaching for her walking sticks. Might she do it? Could she wobble to a cookshop by the river to spend the pennies Roger had left her? Fie upon it, had he said down Crooked Lane or up? Exactly where was Gracechurch Street? And was she to go past the church of St. Magnus or turn a corner there?

"Stay you here, Louise," she said. "If that man comes down, keep out of sight. I will return with supper. Mayhap I will find something we can share—fresh berries or pear tart or sweet apple cake with nuts." Her mouth watered at the thought.

Meggy emptied her sack of her few belongings—comb, small knife for eating, clean smock, kirtle of Bristol red, a pair of stockings with the toes mended into a bunch, and a bottle of onion, fish and Venice treacle tonic against plague. Her gran had sewn handles on a grain sack so that Meggy could loop it over her arm, leaving her hands free for her sticks. She put the sack to her face and sniffed deeply. Her eyes filled with tears. It smelled of home.

Sighing, Meggy took the sack, tucked the coins into her bodice, and peeked out the door. The warmth of the day surprised her after the chill of the house, and streaks of sunshine found their way even to Crooked Lane. She would sooner have waited for dark, when she would be seen less easily, but she was hungry now.

She looked up the lane and down. The old-cloaks man was arranging the boots and hose and doublets in the stall attached to his shop. Certes he would know where she could buy a sausage pie and a baked apple. But he was a stranger. Dare she speak to him? She cleared her throat and called, "I give you good day, sir."

He turned, looked at Meggy, and spat. "Hellfire and damnation, I say, to cursed cripples, evil and ugly-looking, who defile the streets with their dark arts! Hellfire!" He spat again.

She turned away from him and her eyes grew hot. Would that I were a tool of the Devil, she thought, for belike he could keep people from shouting and cursing at me in the streets.

She wobbled slowly down the lane, passing the shop marked with a shoe. There was no sign of the cobbler. Meggy hoped he would permit Louise to feed on the grass and greens that grew in his garden. Worse than thunder, Meggy thought, worse than biting flies, worse than demons that howl in the night, is a hungry goose.

Crooked Lane was well named. Horrid steep it was, and it curved and curved again. By the time she reached the bottom, Meggy's legs burned and her knees trembled. Oh woeful day, she thought, overflowing with pity for herself, I will ne'er find a food shop but belike will expire here on the street and be mourned by no one. Yet the scent of sizzling sausages from somewhere summoned her on.

At its end, the lane met a large thoroughfare that Meggy recalled from yesterday. Fish Street Hill it was, cobbled instead of muddy but still wet and slick. She zigged and zagged to avoid the slop and puddling in the street and at times raining down from the upper stories of houses on both sides.

Every corner swarmed with people: peddlers and rat catchers, toy merchants and dung collectors, silken-cloaked ladies and children in ragged breeches, all going about their lives, laughing, shouting

arguing, jeering, and jostling. Carts and carriages thundered by, their wheels splashing her skirts.

~~Apprentices pulled her about, urging her to buy this and try that. "Good mistress, follow me~~ said one young fellow, tugging at her. "My master's shop offers the finest cloth, the silkiest ribbon, the sharpest pins."

"Want any ink? Do you want any ink?" asked another.

"Have you any old boots to sell?" clamored a third.

"What do ye lack? What do ye lack?" vendor after vendor called after her until her head was spinning. And when she did not stop, each added, as she always expected, "crookleg" or "monstrous child" or "ill-formed wench."

"Come and buy," a ballad seller called, "a new ballad of Robin Hood." And the man began to sing: *Others may tell you of bold Robin Hood, derry derry down, or else of the barons bold, but I will tell you how he served the bishop when he robbed him of his gold.*

Meggy joined in: *Derry derry, hey! Derry derry down!* for she knew the ballad well.

The ballad seller winked at her as he walked on, singing: *Derry derry derry derry down.*

Meggy walked on also, toward the cookshops on Thames Street, or was it St. Magnus Street, and did Roger not say something about Gracechurch? Meggy thought she had come a very great distance, stumbling now and again when her sack thumped against her knees or tangled with her walking sticks, but still she did not see the river ahead of her. Or behind her. So different was London from her village, where there was but one road in and one road out and no one lost his way.

She turned down a street, narrower and darker, and wobbled past a crowd of children. "Behold Mistress Duck," one of them cried. "Waddle, waddle, Mistress Duck!" Mimicking Meggy's walk, they followed behind her.

"By my faith, freaks!" someone called from a window. "From Bartlemas Fair belike. You there crookleg. Know you the pig woman and the fish-scaled boy?"

Turning to her followers, Meggy gave them the awful face that frightened children in her village and cried, "Curses on you, curses!" She raised a stick to shake at them but slipped and nearly fell in the street. The children only laughed as they stumbled away, shaking their fists and shouting to each other, "Curses! Curses on you!"

Meggy ducked into an alley that proved quieter and less crowded. She leaned against a building to rest her legs. The thought of facing more stares, frowns, and harsh words held her back. Should she return to the house at the Sign of the Sun unfed? Her empty belly rumbled, "No." She tried to recall what Roger had said about Thames Street and the river, but she was well and truly lost.

The narrow passage she had entered was dark and slippery with slime. More gutter than street, it reeked of old fish and new dung. There must be another way. She was turning to go when a voice from a doorway called, "Here, girl, I have perch, or mayhap it is flounder. It be yours for a penny." A man in ragged jerkin and hose held out a fish, its eyes popping, its scales dull, its odor insufferable. "Here 'Tis fresh."

"Nay, 'tis not, but as far from fresh as I am far from home," Meggy said, "and I will not—"

"Are you saying I lie, crooked legs?" he asked, stepping closer. Meggy backed away, up against the wall. "Give me a penny and take this fish."

"Nay. Begone, you—"

"Then I will take me this instead," he said, grabbing at her sack. "And these." Her walking sticks.

"Vile thief! Beastly villain!" Meggy shouted. "Let loose my sticks!" But as she reached for them she slipped and fell aspraddle on the street. Would she die in this dark, reeking alley, unable to get back to the house where Master Peevish did not want her anyway? Would this be her end, a helpless

cripple huddled against a wall?

~~Tears of anger and self-pity slithered down her cheeks. In her dreams she danced and ran, but only in her dreams. In this fetid alley she could not even fight back. It was Roger's fault for making her fetch her own food, she thought. Would he even think to look for her?~~

A strange voice roared, "Begone, you carbuncled toad!" The newcomer grabbed Meggy's walking sticks from the thief and used one to club him on the head. "A pestilence take you, you rump-faced knave, out for thievery." The thief dropped Meggy's sack and skulked away.

"You," the man said, helping Meggy to her feet, "are a piteous spectacle." He handed her the walking sticks. "Be you hurt?"

"Aye, I be hurt indeed," she shouted, more angry than grateful. "I be crippled! Crooked! I could not defend me nor even walk away." She swung round to face her rescuer. He was dark, tall but bent, bony as a herring, with a scar on his face that puckered his cheek, squinting one eye and pulling his mouth into a lopsided sneer.

Ye toads and vipers, Meggy thought, I am delivered from a thief by a monster! She backed away.

The man frowned. "You should not be here," he said. "Mark me, you ask for trouble." He bent down and retrieved her sack. "Go home. Make haste," he said, handing it to her.

Meggy wiped tears from her face. "In truth I would if I knew whither it was."

"I am for Fish Street Hill. Might you find your way from there?"

She nodded.

"Then follow me." He strode off, and Meggy struggled to keep him in sight as she followed. Alleys became streets, and streets became wider and noisier with crowds: country folk in russet and broadcloth, sailors and soldiers in boothose and leather jerkins, young women with French hoods and feathered fans. Hawkers cried every sort of food: apples and pears, carrots and cowcubers, fish, salmon, pigs' trotters, chunks of cheese, and ginger cakes. A pig's head mounted on a stake, eyes bulging and mouth grinning, proclaimed a food stall, fragrant with spices, onions, and roasting meat. Ye toads and vipers! Here were the food vendors Roger had promised. But she feared to ask the ugly man to stop, so she limped on, anxious to be safe in Crooked Lane.

At Fish Street Hill they parted, and Meggy began the climb up Crooked Lane. She was nearly home, dizzy with relief and hunger, and there was Old Cloaks again, closing up his shop. "A pox on you, moldwort," she shouted at the man afore he had a chance to curse or to spit, "and a plague, and a plague, and ... and ... and the pukes!" Her belly might still be empty, but the rest of her felt better for the shouting.

Hearing laughter behind her, Meggy turned. She squinched her eyes and clenched her hands in fists. "Do you think to curse at me as well?" she asked of a yellow-haired man who stood at the door of the shop with the sign of the shoe.

"Not at all, mistress. That was well said. The fellow can be moldwort indeed."

The man was small and freckled, and his hair, Meggy saw, was not yellow but the red of a sunroofed with a layer of sawdust. "Are you the cobbler?" she asked him.

He shook his head, and sawdust flew about him like moths around a torchlight. "The cobbler has been gone since the time of King Richard," he said. "'Tis but his sign that remains. I be, at your service, a cooper. Want you a barrel or a cask, a hogshead, firkin, rundlet, or tun, a bucket or tub or butter churn, I be your man." He looked at Meggy's sticks but said naught. Neither did he spit. "Be you are in need of a cobbler?"

"Nay, Master Cooper," said Meggy. "I am neighborer, new come to lodge with the master there." She pointed to the house at the Sign of the Sun. "Margret Swann, if it please you." Then, surprising

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