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PUPPETEER'S APPRENTICE

D. Anne Love



Beyond the auction yard, beneath a fluttering yellow banner, stood a wagon painted with splashes of bright green, crimson, and blue. One side was open to reveal a small stage, and there a crowd had gathered to watch two wooden figures singing and dancing. The little wooden dolls moved as effortlessly as if they were truly human. Behind the stage stood an open trunk brimming with more puppets. Mouse stared at them, at the tangle of wires and strings and rainbow-colored costumes, the jumble of arms and legs and brightly painted faces spilling out.

That is where the puppets live, she thought. Remembering the gloomy, airless corner at Dunston Manor where she had dreamed she might one day be part of the wider world, she imagined the puppets, too, were waiting in the dark of their trunk for something wondrous to happen. She edged closer. “You are like me,” she whispered.

—*from* THE PUPPETEER’S APPRENTICE

*M*ouse works in the scullery at Dunston Manor, peeling onions, stirring the pots, sweeping the floors and doing her best not to get into trouble with the fractious cook. Alone at night in the dark corner she calls home, she wishes for something wondrous to happen and dreams of a better life. But what chance does she have, a girl born with nothing, not even a proper name?

Then Mouse sees a puppet play and knows at once what she must do. Somehow she must learn to make the puppets dance. Somehow she must become the puppeteer's apprentice. But the puppeteer is harboring some uncomfortable secrets, and Mouse doesn't know whether she has the courage it takes to fulfill her dreams.

How Mouse finds her place in the world, and a very special name, is the heart of this thoroughly absorbing and remarkable story set in medieval England.

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For Emma



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An Ending

Long ago and far away, on a morning that was not quite winter and not quite spring, Lord and Lady Dunston bade all who lived at the manor to a gathering in the great hall. The farriers and stableboys, the dairymaids with their pails, the weavers and spinners and serving girls set aside their work and hurried along the stone corridors, gossiping all the way. Mayhap Lord Dunston was off to war again, they whispered. Mayhap his lady soon would bring forth a new child.

When the summons reached the kitchen, Cook dropped his spoons and mopped his shiny red face. “Make haste, Fenn,” he said to the ferret-faced baker, who was at that moment taking a loaf of bread from the fire. “We must not keep them waiting.”

The scullery maid, a skinny, sad-eyed girl in a dirt-brown tunic, gazed longingly at the golden loaf, her belly tight with hunger. But the bread was not meant for the likes of her. She ignored her rumbling stomach and hurriedly tossed the turnips she’d just peeled into the black kettle bubbling in the hearth. In all her years at Dunston Manor, she had caught only fleeting glimpses of the lord and his lady. Her days were spent peeling onions, washing pots, and carrying Fenn’s pastries from hearth to table. At night she slept on the stone floor among the fleas and vermin, surrounded by the odd bits of beauty she had collected in her shadowy and somber life—a scrap of purple ribbon rescued from a branch in the orchard, a blue glass bead found on the path to the privy, a sliver of polished metal that gave back her reflection, large dark eyes in a thin and determined face.

Sometimes, when Cook was too busy to notice her absence, she stole away to her hiding place near the solar. There, with her ear pressed firmly to the damp wall, she listened to snippets of conversations of the serving girls and chambermaids, to the tales of passing visitors, or to the solemn voice of some visiting priest reading from a holy book—wishing she could read such comforting stories for herself, wishing she had someone with whom she could share her secrets, wishing *she* might travel to faraway places. But she was not thinking such thoughts today.

Today, something important was astir, and she longed to be a part of it.

“Not you, Mouse!” Cook cried when he saw the expectant look on her face. “Stay here and tend this pot. And clear those turnip peels off the floor. If Lord Dunston’s news has aught to do with you, you will know soon enough.”

Taking up his flesh hook, he poked the slab of venison simmering in its soup of leeks and cabbage. “So this meat does not burn, else there will be the devil to pay.”

“Drat!” the girl muttered. “Why must I be left behind to sweep and stir?”

“What?” Cook growled, mopping his face again.

“I merely said, ‘Yes, sir.’”

Satisfied, Cook nodded, hung his apron on its peg beside the door, then set off toward the great hall, Fenn trotting like an obedient puppy at his heels.

Mouse intended to obey Cook, but the air of mysterious excitement permeating the very walls of the manor house, and her own considerable curiosity, soon overcame her better judgment. She gave the pot another stir, tossed more wood onto the fire, then scurried up the dark stone steps just in time to see Cook’s ample rump, and Fenn’s skinny one, disappearing down the corridor. Following at a safe distance, she hurried along the hallway, past the weaving room, then up more stairs, till she came to the tall door guarding the great hall. There, she pressed herself into a dark corner.

Above the iron bolt, where the wooden door had split, was a crack just wide enough for Mouse to see everyone who had assembled behind long wooden tables where the morning meal had recently concluded. Mouse spied Cook and Fenn and the rosy-cheeked chambermaids, all whispering together. Lady Dunston and her attendants stood by her side, resplendent in their embroidered gowns and headpieces. Lady Dunston herself wore a gown of blue velvet and a gold circlet on her head.

Lord Dunston tapped his silver-headed cane upon the floor, and the room went still.

"Lady Dunston and I are happy to announce the betrothal of our daughter, Penelope, to Sir Geoffrey of Fairfax," he said. Everyone applauded. From her hiding place in the shadows, Mouse clapped too.

"Where is Penelope?" one of the ladies asked. "Bring her here so that we may give her our good wishes."

"She is so overcome with joy, she has taken to her bed," Lord Dunston replied. "But a day of rest will put her to rights."

"Taken to her bed, is she?" murmured one of the serving girls to her companion. Mouse pressed closer to listen.

"She is overcome, but not with joy, I trow," the other replied. "Wrinkled as a prune, that Geoffrey is. Hair like a haystack. And none too bright, either, from the looks of him."

"But he owns half the land twixt here and the sea, or so they say," returned the first. "And Penelope is getting on in years herself. Twenty-three last summer, if I remember rightly. Lord Dunston is wise to arrange such a match before she is too old to be a wife to anyone."

Lord Dunston tapped his cane again. "The wedding will commence in a fortnight," he said. "You must begin preparations at once. Lady Dunston and I wish it to be the finest celebration in the realm."

A wedding! Such a celebration meant musicians with flutes and lyres and tambourines, or so Fenn said. Jesters there would be, and dancing and merriment and a feast fit for the king himself. Mayhap the lord and his lady would invite even Mouse, the lowest of the low. She would wear her purple ribbon and a flower in her hair. She must learn to curtsy, she thought, and to speak a proper greeting. A delicious shiver traveled down her spine.

Inside the great hall another round of cheering and applause erupted as the lord and his lady bowed their heads and took their leave by the doors at the far end of the hall. Then the door next to Mouse's hiding place opened, and everyone spilled out, laughing and chattering all at once. Mouse crouched in the shadows and waited for them to pass. She dared not show herself and risk Cook's vile temper. More than once he had cursed her, or cuffed her cheeks till her ears rang, for even the smallest of mistakes. If she dropped a bowl upon the floor or forgot to add salt to the bread, he called her an addlebrained clod, a muddleheaded lout, or worse. It was best to wait till the room was empty, then return to the kitchen through the far doors, well ahead of Cook and Fenn.

At last the hall was deserted. Mouse hastened inside, pulling the heavy door closed behind her.

If only she had kept to her plan, everything that happened later would not have happened at all. But soon as she entered the hall, her gaze was fastened to the gleaming tapestries on the walls and she could not move. Colorful birds, angels, and flowers, scenes of knights on horseback and ladies in gardens seemed to spring to life before her eyes. She could almost hear the ladies talking quietly as they bent low over their needlework awaiting the knights' return. She could just imagine the stories the men would tell, stories of adventure and noble deeds performed in the service of the king.

Then on the long tables, amid empty goblets and a forest of candlesticks dripping wax, Mouse saw the remains of the morning meal. Here was a half-eaten meat pie and a bit of peacock, shiny with raisin sauce. There a morsel of fine white bread sticky with honey. Mouse's stomach rumbled, for her breakfast had been nothing more than a crust of stale bread and a bowl of cold cabbage, slick with grease. Almost before she knew it, she gobbled the last of the meat pie and a handful of figs and tucked another pie inside her tunic.

On her way to the doors leading to the courtyard, she spied an apple tart and ate that, too, in three quick bites. ~~She licked her fingers clean, then pushed open the doors and went out.~~

“You there! Stop!” A man carrying a bucket and a sack grabbed her arm and twisted so hard, Mouse yelped. The meat pie she had hidden in her tunic landed with a *plop* on the cobblestones. “Aha! Just as suspected! Stealing from the poor.”

It was the almoner, whose job it was to collect table scraps for the needy. Cook said such charity was one way the lord and his lady kept themselves in the good graces of the villagers.

“Leave me be!” Mouse yelled, struggling with all her might to break free. “I am no thief, but Cook’s own helper.”

Just then Cook appeared, brandishing his flesh hook. “So there you are, you miserable wretch! Did I not tell you to tend the meat? Now it is burned black as tar, and I will get the blame!”

The almoner tightened his grip on Mouse’s arm. “She has stolen food, too. Right off the lord’s own table. Caught her, I did, stuffing herself like a Christmas goose, while the poor in the village have neither bread nor ale to stop their hunger.” He glared at Mouse. “Mayhap I should take her to Lord Dunston. He will know how to deal with the likes of her.”

“Lord Dunston has more important things on his mind,” Cook said. “Leave her to me.”

The almoner flung Mouse onto the hard cobblestones. “Next time I will flog you myself! Thief!”

He stomped into the great hall, his boots ringing on the stone steps.

“Well?” Cook loomed over the cowering Mouse.

“I am sorry.” Mouse’s voice trembled. Her stomach squeezed with fright. “I was hungry.”

Behind her the kitchen door creaked open, and Fenn dumped the ruined venison into a slop pail, where it floated, black and crusty, among rotting turnips, browning apples, and gray meat full of squirming maggots.

“Hungry, are you?” Cook mocked. “And my bread and cabbage are not good enough, I suppose. You may be a mouse, but you have the manners of a pig!”

Before she could reply, he twisted her ear, jerked her to her feet, and propelled her toward the stinking slop pail. “Eat, pig!” he commanded, pushing her face into the pail.

“I will not!” Mouse pulled and squirmed, but try as she might, she could not free herself from Cook’s viselike grasp.

“Oh, yes, you will.” With his meat hook, he speared a slab of maggoty pork and pushed it into her face. “Eat, if you are so hungry. Eat every bite!”

Mouse’s stomach pitched and roiled. Feeling hot and cold all at once, she twisted her head away, but not before spewing vomit over Cook’s white apron and the tops of his shoes. Bits of meat pie clung to his hair, his eyelashes, his wiry black beard.

Bellowing with rage, he raised his meat hook and raked it savagely across Mouse’s cheek. The spoiled meat fell to the ground.

At first she stood there, stunned, while a warm, sticky trickle of blood ran down her face. She wiped her cheek and stared at her bloody hand, too full of shock and fear to feel pain. Cook raised the meat hook again. But before he could land another blow, the wall of fear and loneliness that had been building inside Mouse all her life suddenly broke. And she ran. Across the rain-slick courtyard, then out through the green stone arch and over the newly plowed fields to the road.

“Stop her!” Cook yelled, but the planters did not hear and went on with their sowing and raking.

Mouse ran until the house disappeared from view. Then the pain began, so hot and fierce, it nearly stopped her breath. But she went on until at last her legs buckled, and she stopped beside an icy stream. With the dampened hem of her tunic, she bathed her wound. As the cold water numbed her pain and her breathing

slowed, the full weight of her plight filled her mind.

“Saints in heaven! What have I done now?” she said aloud.

Many times, after one of Cook’s thrashings, she had thought of running away. Once she had actually tried it, but she’d soon been returned to the scullery. And mayhap it was just as well, for where could she go as a girl with nothing? No family. Not even a proper name.

Abandoned as a babe on the steps of Dunston Manor, she had been called Mouse all her life. She could not say how many twelvemonths had passed since her birth. Once, when she had begged Cook to tell her when and why she had come to Dunston Manor, he had said, in his exasperated way, that mayhap she was eleven. Or twelve. As to the reason she had been left to the mercy of strangers, Cook said it was obvious, wasn’t it not? She was not wanted. And no wonder. She was scrawny and ugly and clumsy as a cow. Not the kind of girl anyone was wont to keep. It was only at Lady Dunston’s insistence that she had been taken into the scullery in exchange for her unceasing labor.

At first Mouse had refused to believe him. She imagined she was lost or had been left at Dunston by some horrid mistake that soon would be righted. At night, listening to the scrabbling of the rats in the kitchen, she pictured a beautiful princess with golden hair searching the realm for her lost daughter. But as time passed, each season sliding into the next, she realized such thoughts were useless and accepted her lot. At least she had a roof over her head and a scrap of food each day.

Now she was alone, without any prospects in the world, without a single coin in her pocket, nor anyone to help her. Lying on the ground while the cold wind tore at her thin tunic, Mouse felt exactly like her namesake, small and despised and unimportant. Another girl might have wept at the hopelessness of it, but Mouse had learned tears would not change anything.

“I will not cry,” she said aloud to the shivering trees. With one hand pressed to her wounded cheek, she looked around for shelter from the cold rain that had begun to fall and at last burrowed into a pile of rotting leaves beside the road, where she passed a long, sleepless night.

The next morning the weather was still cold and damp, and Mouse was still hurt and alone. Her cheek throbbed. Her stomach felt as if it had stuck to her backbone, but there was nothing at all to eat. She broke the thin film of ice that had formed on the stream and filled her groaning belly. Then, because she had nothing to do and nowhere to go, she scurried back to her bed of leaves and lay there trying to decide what to do.

Presently an oxcart brimming with straw and cabbages trundled down the road. Mouse watched as the driver halted the cart and led the ox to drink, poking the ice with his staff till it broke with a faint tinkling sound. While he was busy, she stole into the cart and hid beneath the mound of dry straw. Still she had no plan for her future; she knew only that she could not go back to Dunston Manor.

The cart squeaked and shifted beneath the driver’s weight. The ox snorted as the cart lurched along the road. Mouse poked a hole through the straw and breathed in the cold morning air. Beneath her fingers her wounded cheek oozed and burned fiercely, as if she had strayed too close to Cook’s hearth.

She peered out across a field of brown stubble. Beneath a stand of rain-washed trees, two farmers were mending a stone fence. The cart rolled on, past a woman tending her geese, past a goat boy with his herd, past a man on a prancing horse.

Late in the morning Mouse spied in the distance a scattering of thatched roofs and a few stone buildings of a village. Her old life was at an end. A new one was beginning, though she could not yet imagine it.

The Travelers

Mouse clutched the sides of the cart as it climbed toward the village, the wheels creaking and groaning behind the plodding ox. Suddenly hoofbeats drummed on the road, then Mouse heard the startled whinny of a horse. A man shouted a curse.

The cart lurched, then pitched end over end into a deep ravine beside the road. Mouse felt herself flying through the air amid tumbling cabbages, heard the straw rustle beneath her weight as she hit the ground. Then the world went black.

When she revived, the cart and driver were gone, but she was not alone. Voices came to her as she lay in the ravine, eyes closed, her head throbbing.

“She is not dead!” a woman said. “God be praised.”

“Poor thing,” said another woman with a softer voice. “An orphan, I would reckon by the looks of her. Why, she is thin as a rake. And that tunic! I have seen beggars in finer clothes than that.”

“Stand back, ladies!” This voice belonged to a man. Slowly, Mouse opened her eyes. He was tall and reedlike, with moss-green eyes and a mouth that looked as if it had smiled forever.

“Well, now,” he said to Mouse. “You are alive at that! Can you sit up?”

“I think so.” Mouse struggled to right herself, but everything turned upside down in a hot, black swirl, and she lay back on the straw.

“Quickly!” the woman with the louder voice said. “Help her.”

The man lifted Mouse from the ravine and laid her gently beside the road. “Sweet Satan! What happened?” he asked, taking in her matted hair, bloodstained tunic, and dirty feet.

Mouse shook her head, afraid to trust him despite his kindly eyes.

“No matter. Whatever their cause, your wounds must be tended.” He opened a leather pouch, took out a jar, and smoothed something cool and greasy onto her cheek. It smelled worse than the piggery at Dunston Manor, but soon it took the pain away. Mouse sat up, watching as the man stirred some dried leaves into a flask of water.

“Drink this,” he said.

She sniffed it cautiously.

“It will not hurt you. ’Tis only a bit of blessed thistle, the best cure in the world for all our earthly ailments. Drink it, then you shall have something to eat.”

The promise of food was all the encouragement Mouse needed. She drank the bitter concoction, then eyed the bread and apples the man had taken from his pouch.

“Sit here, child.” The loud-voiced woman was nearly as tall as the man, with a sweep of black hair and bare feet coated with tar. She gave Mouse a fat apple and drew her close.

Mouse munched her apple and studied the other woman. Her eyes were a deep clear blue, the color Mouse imagined the sea might be. Her hair was the color of fresh butter, and her hands were dainty and milk-white, like those of the ladies in the cloth pictures at Dunston Manor. Though she smiled, she wore sorrow like a cloak, as if something deep and sad had settled inside her. Just as Mouse was wondering what had happened to trouble her so, the woman spoke.

“Where are you going, child?” she asked in a voice as lovely as her face.

“I cannot say.” Mouse broke off a bit of bread and chewed it slowly.

“You are wise to be wary of strangers on the road,” said the tar-footed woman. “But we mean you no harm.”

harm. Otherwise, we would not have rescued you.”

“Tell us your story,” the man urged. “It will be a hot day in January before you find more sympathetic ears.”

And then, because she was hurt and alone in the world, Mouse told the three travelers everything. How she had been left as a helpless babe on the steps of the manor house, and how Cook had named her Mouse and taught her to fetch and carry, stir and knead, sweep and peel. How she had stolen into the great hall—was it only yesternorn?—and eaten the forbidden food. “So you see,” she finished, “I know not where to go nor what will become of me.”

“Dear me,” the man mused. “Yours is indeed a sad tale and your problem much too big for solving in a single afternoon. Here is what I propose: We three are on our way to York, which is some days’ walk from these parts. Come with us, and by journey’s end mayhap we will have hit upon some plan.”

“Do come,” the two women chorused.

“We dare not leave you on this road alone,” said the one with tarred feet. “Not with robbers about.”

“They would get naught from me,” Mouse declared. “For I have nothing but this tattered tunic and a aching head.”

“All the more reason to join our company,” the man said cheerfully. “Permit me to make the introductions. This,” he said, indicating the dark-haired woman, “is Alice. From Depford. A goose woman by trade, as you can plainly tell from the tar upon her feet. The other is Claire, most recently from Trumpington, but who has decided to seek her fortune in York. And I am Simon Swann. Music maker, juggler, and minstrel. As you wish.”

The two women clapped as Simon swept into a low bow. Then he took out his lute. “I shall make a soothing song whilst you eat,” he said, “and we shall speak no more of your sad plight, for an unquiet meal makes for ill digestion.”

Alice draped a blanket about Mouse’s shoulders. Claire brought water from the stream. Then the three travelers encircled Mouse. Claire and Simon sang while Mouse ate her fill.

When Mouse had eaten all the bread and nibbled the apple right down to the core, Simon stood. “The day grows short, and we must be away,” he said. “Come along, Mouse. You seem a well-spoken child, but I do not care one farthing for your name. Mayhap on this journey we shall choose a new one for you.”

They gathered their bundles and set off down the road. Winter’s bitterness was waning; the sun warmed the air, and a gentle breeze settled softly on Mouse’s face. Here and there, fuzzy green buds sprouted on the trees and a few violets poked their heads above the brown grasses. With her stomach full and the three travelers for company, Mouse began to feel better.

“This day reminds me of an old Maysong,” Simon said. He strummed his lute and sang.

*“When first the leaves are green upon the trees,
And bees in the newborn blossoms buzz,
When the sun shines bright and sweet birdsong fills the wood,
Then does my heart sing for joy.”*

When he finished, everyone clapped, Mouse loudest of all.

“That was lovely, Simon,” Claire said. “Never have I heard a sweeter tune or a more agreeable voice.”

“My thanks, fair lady. Now it is your turn.”

Claire’s laughter was a clear, sweet sound, like chimes. “Oh ho! You know not what you ask, Simon. Pig in the sty sing more sweetly than I.”

“You are too modest,” Simon said. “But all right. Mayhap Alice will favor us with some tune.”

“My song would frighten every creature in the wood,” Alice said. “But I will make you a riddle to speed the day along.”

“A riddle!” Simon exclaimed. “Are you listening, Mouse?”

Still astonished at how quickly her fortune had turned, Mouse could only nod.

“All right,” Alice began. “Here it is. What is the bravest thing in all the world?”

“A knight,” Claire said promptly.

“No!” Alice said, laughing. “Your turn, Mouse.”

“A lion?” Mouse guessed, remembering Fenn’s stories of the fierce beasts that could swallow a man’s head in a single bite.

“A good try, but no,” Alice said. “Simon? What say you?”

“Bravest thing in all the world.” He scratched his head. “The husband of a shrewish wife, no doubt.”

“Wrong!” Alice whooped. “The answer is: a miller’s shirt. For every day it grasps a thief by the throat.”

Her companions howled gleefully, but Mouse frowned with puzzlement. Simon explained. “Everyone in the village must bring his grain to the miller for grinding. Since he is the only one who can do the job, he is free to cheat everyone, and usually does. He is the most unpopular man in the village, and the richest one as well.”

On they walked for some distance before Simon said, “Claire? Since you will not sing for us, tell us another riddle.”

“I know no riddles,” Claire said dolefully.

“What? No riddles? No songs? What manner of woman are you?”

“Leave her be,” Alice said.

But Simon persisted. “It is a long way to York. Tell us anything Claire, a story or a poem. Anything at all to speed this tedious journey.”

“A poem, then,” Claire said, sighing. “A very old one I learned when I was no older than you, Mouse.”

“Upon the dawn-lit plain, knights and chargers are arrayed

Their shields and swords gleaming.

The trumpet sounds.

The battle begins, the vassals go down together.

Maces, helmets, lancers, and chargers scattered

Upon the ground.

While in the castle a maiden waits,

A prayer upon her lips.”

Alice dabbed at her eyes. “A goodly poem, but too sad.”

“Yes,” Claire said. “It always makes me weep.”

Eager to dispel the gloom that had settled over them, Mouse said to Simon, “If you please, sing another song.”

“Indeed,” Alice agreed. “Something to lift our spirits, Simon, if it be not too much trouble.”

“Later,” Simon said. “For now it is Mouse’s turn to entertain us with some tale.”

“Until yestermorn I had seen naught save the fields and forests of Dunston,” Mouse said. “I have no tale to tell.”

“Pish and tosh! If you will think but a moment, I am certain some amusing story will come to mind.”

Mouse chewed her lip and thought. At last she said, “Once I stole a horse, though that was not my intent.”

"You? A thief?" Claire said. "I do not believe it."

"Do tell!" Alice urged.

"Yes," Simon agreed, "for I would learn how one steals a horse without intending to."

"It was near Midsummer's Eve," Mouse said, "when a coach bearing Lady Dunston's cousins turned up the drive and Cook set me to peeling onions for soup."

"An odious task," Alice said.

"Not to me," Mouse said. "I had not eaten since early morning, and the onions seemed sweeter than cake. Before I knew it, I had eaten a whole bowl of them. Cook caught me just as I was swallowing the last bite."

"Dear me," Simon said.

"He beat me with his fist and said he would tell Lady Dunston of my thievery as soon as supper was finished. I was afraid, and as soon as his back was turned, I ran."

"Yes, yes, but what of the horse?" Simon said. "I am nearly faint with curiosity."

"When I reached the courtyard, I saw the peddler's horse standing near the gate. He had a fat pack on his back. I was still hungry, so I climbed onto the stirrup to see if there was food I could take for my journey. Before I could open the pack, the horse bolted. I could not catch the reins, so I held on to his mane."

"You might have been killed!" Claire said.

"I was afraid," Mouse admitted. "He ran and ran and jumped the fence down by the privy. We were tearing through the wood, with me clinging like a burr to his side, one leg in the stirrup and the other sticking up like a flagpole."

The three travelers laughed. Mouse grinned. At the time she had been terrified, but now, with her new friends as an audience, the whole thing seemed more like an adventure than an ordeal.

"Go on," Simon said when he had recovered his breath.

"I looked back, and the peddler was running after me, yelling, 'Stop, thief!' But I could not stop. The horse jumped a stream, and I fell off. He kept going."

"Were you hurt?" Alice asked, wiping her eyes.

"Only some bruises and a lump on my head. I was too afraid to go back to Dunston. I hid in the woods but before I could think of what to do, Fenn found me and took me back. Cook was so busy, he forgot to tell Lady Dunston about the onions and he never knew I had run away."

"You went back to that evil man," Claire said.

"I had nowhere else to go," Mouse said simply.

"But now you are off on a grand adventure!" Simon said. "And I shall sing us another song. A happy song is just what we need. Too much sadness will surely congeal our blood."

And so the first day passed.

When darkness fell, they slept in a hamlet close by the road in a tanner's stall. The air was thick and stale, and the hides covering them were stiff with hair and dried blood, but Mouse slept soundly.

Shortly before sunrise Simon woke them, and they stole onto the road again, not stopping till the sun had climbed above the trees and the village lay far behind. Then he opened his pack and took out bread, honey, and a slab of fresh roasted pork.

"Where did you get all this, pray tell?" Alice asked.

"Here and there," he replied with a wave of his hand.

Mouse did not care where Simon had gotten the food, for she was hungry, right down to the ends of her toes.

"I would have given the shopkeeper a goodly price, had the lazy lout once bestirred himself," Simon declared. "As it was, I left a poem in payment."

"A poem instead of a coin?" Alice scoffed.

"A man's soul must be fed as well as his belly," Simon said. "My poem will do him more good than another tankard of ale." He tore off a hunk of bread, dipped it into the honey, and handed it to Mouse. "How is your wound and your sore head, little Mouse?"

"Better." Eagerly, Mouse bit into the bread.

"And how is your sore heart today, sweet Claire?"

"I know not what you mean," Claire said.

"Oh, you take my meaning well enough," Simon said. "Pretending otherwise will not ease your sorrow."

Tears sprang to Claire's eyes. She stood up and ran down the road.

"Now see what you have done," Alice said angrily. She tossed her bread onto the blanket and ran after Claire.

"What makes Claire so sad?" Mouse asked. She finished her own bread and eyed the piece Alice had left behind.

"It is quite a complicated tale," Simon began. "Not more than a fortnight ago I arrived in Trumpington to sing for the folks thereabouts. They were tired of winter and ready for a diversion, and there I was with my lute and some new songs and a riddle or two. At Lord Boswick's house I met Claire, who was serving as a companion to his daughter, Eleanor."

Mouse nodded. Lord Dunston's daughter, Penelope, had a companion too, an old woman with a face like a rotten apple and a disposition to match. Not one bit like Claire.

Simon went on. "As it happened, I arrived upon the very day Lord Boswick announced Eleanor's betrothal to Rupert Howard." He paused in his tale to lick away the honey that dribbled down his finger. "Rupert is one slimy fellow, Mouse, for he had long ago professed his love for Claire. She thought she would marry as soon as his fortune was settled, but alas! His father died and left the house, all the land and the sheep, everything, to Rupert's younger brother. Unheard of!"

Mouse broke off a bit of Alice's bread, too small a piece to notice. She dipped it into the honey. "Then what happened?"

"An honorable man would have found a way to keep his promise, especially to a girl as lovely as Claire. But not Rupert. Without his inheritance, the only thing standing between him and utter ruin was Eleanor's considerable dowry, so he proposed marriage right away. But the joke will be on him soon enough, for a man who marries for wealth is sure to sell his happiness in the bargain."

"Poor Claire," Mouse said.

"Indeed." Simon looked thoughtful. "It is a bitter thing to look into happiness through another's eyes. It would have been quite impossible for Claire to go on living under the same roof with the one who had stolen all her dreams. So, when I was ready to take my leave, she asked if she might travel along in any direction I happened to fancy, and here we are."

Mouse pulled off another hunk of Alice's bread. "What will she do when we get to York?"

"I cannot say. I promised only to see her safely there. Then I must be away to London to sing at the fair."

"Fenn says London is the finest place in all the world. Mayhap I will go with you."

Simon laughed. "If you were a boy, you would make a goodly companion, for already you have grown on me like an old tune. But the life of a minstrel is no life at all for a maid like you."

Mouse dared not argue, but she determined to change Simon's mind. The sheer, wild freedom of the open road was everything. She liked seeing new places, sleeping in a different town each night. She liked telling stories and singing songs. Mayhap in London she would find a way to make a life of her own in the world.

She pictured the look on Cook's face when he entered the scullery to find she had not come back. She imagined him getting further and further behind in his work because she was not there to help him. She

imagined potatoes and turnips and onions piling up to the ceiling, and dirt lying ankle-deep on the stone floor because she was not there to sweep. It gave her pleasure to think of it.

Alice and Claire returned. Simon handed Claire a piece of bread, dripping with honey. "Forgive me, dearest Claire. I hereby vow to hold my tongue for the rest of this journey, else you may cut it out of my head and roast it for your supper."

Claire smiled, a bit sadly, Mouse thought. "I would not exact so dear a price. You may keep your tongue, Simon."

"My bread!" Alice exclaimed. "I left it right here, and now it is gone."

"Oh!" Mouse gasped at the mound of crumbs littering the blanket, all that remained of Alice's bread. She had not forgotten what had happened the last time she dared to eat her fill. But Alice merely laughed. "It seems a little mouse has stolen a meal. But no matter. I like meat as well as bread."

She dipped a piece of pork in the honey and popped it into her mouth. Then she licked her lips and said to Mouse, "So. You come from Dunston. I imagine all is astir there, now that Penelope is finally to wed."

Mouse was astonished. "How did you know?"

Simon said, "Alice knows everyone and everything that happens hereabouts. Truly, she is a walking history book, or else the most accomplished gossip in all of northern England. Whichever is the truth, if you want to know anything at all, Mouse, you have only to ask Alice."

"I cannot help it," Alice said, swirling another bit of meat into the honey. "Once I hear something, it sticks inside my head like glue, whether I want it to or not."

Simon wiped his hands and put away his pouch. Alice hastily chewed the last of her pork. Soon the travelers were on their way again.

When they stopped in midafternoon to drink from a rushing stream, Claire suddenly said, "Turn your back, Simon. I wish to have a bath."

"In that water? You will turn to a block of ice."

"I am accustomed to it, and besides, it does not feel so cold once you are in it." She smiled at Mouse. "Forgive me, little one, but you could do with a bath as well."

"And so could I," Alice decided. "Come along, Mouse. It will not be so bad. The sun will keep us warm."

"You have taken leave of your senses," Simon said calmly. "But all right. If you wish to waste time, where am I to complain? Mayhap I will go in search of our supper."

Before Mouse could say a word, Alice and Claire disappeared behind a bush, shed their clothes, then plunged, whooping, into the stream. They bobbed side by side, with only their heads and pale shoulders showing above the water.

"Come on in, Mouse!" Claire called. "And bring your tunic. It could do with a washing as well."

Mouse dipped one foot into the icy water. The cold made her toes tingle.

Alice laughed. "It is best to jump in all at once."

But Mouse, who had never before gone swimming, cautiously waded in till the water covered her knees. Her teeth chattered. Suddenly something closed around her ankle. She fell backward into the water and came up shivering and sputtering.

Claire bobbed up beside her, grinning. "Forgive me, Mouse, but you must admit this is much better, is it not?"

And it was true that Mouse soon forgot the cold. What a strange and wondrous feeling it was, drifting on the water like a feather, lazy as a cloud in a bright blue sky. Alice splashed and swam in the shallows. Claire floated, eyes closed against the sun, her hair spread out like a yellow lily pad, her knees sticking up like two small white islands in the green water. The two women seemed to have forgotten all their cares, but Mouse was full of more questions than ever.

"Is it true?" she asked Alice. "Are you a walking history book?"

~~The goose woman wiped water from her eyes. "I hear stories when I am on the road or in the market with my geese. And I have a good memory, true enough."~~

"I am wondering," Mouse said, "how I came to live at Dunston Manor. I want to know how old I am. Do you know about my mother?"

"Ah, child. I wish it were so, but yours is a story I have not heard. You must not dwell on it. The future is more important than the past. Now, give me your tunic."

Mouse lifted her arms, and Alice helped her out of the tunic. From a small pouch around her neck, Alice took a sliver of hard, black soap and gave Mouse's tunic a thorough scrubbing. Claire soaped her own hair, then Mouse's, and when they were clean, they climbed out of the water. Alice spread Mouse's tunic on a bush to dry. Claire tossed Mouse her white linen undergarment. "Wear my chemise till your tunic is dry."

They dressed and sat on the riverbank, drying their hair in the sun. Mouse leaned against Claire's shoulder, listening to the two women's quiet talk. If only this golden afternoon could go on forever, with the three of them at the center of it.

Soon Simon returned, bearing two fat hares for their supper. While Claire and Alice kindled a fire, he skinned the game and set it to roasting on the spit. When they were seated around the fire, he nodded approvingly. "That bath was worth our time after all, for our little Mouse has turned into a queen."

Mouse blushed. "I am naught but a skinny maid with a wounded face."

"Your wound will heal," he said kindly. "In time you will take no more heed of it than your own breath. With that, he unlaced his boot, took off his stocking, and wiggled his toes in the air.

"Simon!" Alice cried. "Whatever are you doing?"

He ignored her. "Look closely, Mouse. Does the sight of my foot offend you?"

"If not the sight, the smell surely will!" Claire teased. "Mayhap you should have a bath, too, Simon."

"I am *speaking* to Mouse."

"Your foot does not offend," Mouse said.

"I did not think so. Yet, once I suffered a wound much worse than yours. It happened long before I came to these parts, when I was visiting the maharaja of India at his palace made of rubies and gold. Have you ever been to India, Mouse? No? Well, believe me, it is a strange and wonderful place. In the mountains lives a race of people called Pygmies, standing no taller than my knee. And any time of day or night you are apt to see elephants wandering the streets and monkeys playing in the trees."

"Elephants?" Mouse asked.

"You have never seen one? Elephants are tall as a hillock, gray as winter rain. Their noses are long, like the branch of a tree, and curved at the end. Their ears are flat and round as river stones."

"Elephants!" Claire scoffed. "Pygmies and gold palaces. I should be ashamed to fill this child's head with such nonsense."

But Simon went on. "I swear it, Mouse. India is a wondrous place, fairly bursting with tall mountains and deep, green rivers. It was just such a river that was the cause of my misfortune.

"One day I decided to go for a swim, for India is surely the hottest place in all the world. No sooner had I gone into the water than a crocodile latched on to my foot and would not let go. Just as I was thinking I would surely die, a passing fisherman fought off the murderous beast and brought me safely to shore. Had my foot been hanging down, as if suspended by a single thread. But the fisherman bound it up with salves and potions, and now I am completely healed, as you can see."

He pulled on his stocking and jammed his foot into his boot. "Cease your worries, little one. In time all will be well. Are you hungry?"

When there was nothing left of their repast but a pile of greasy bones, Simon wiped his hands, tossed more wood onto the fire, and brought out his lute.

Claire patted the ground beside her. "Come sit here, Mouse, and I will braid your hair."

While Alice hummed a nameless tune and the stars came out, shining like new coins, Claire braided Mouse's hair and tied it with a length of ribbon taken from the sleeve of her cloak. Mouse studied the dear faces of her traveling companions. So this was what it was like to have a family.

Simon began a new song:

*"On the road to London town, I met a maiden fair.
She wore a snow-white linen gown, and ribbons in her hair.
Her brown eyes shown like summer rain, oh, ne'er shall I forget.
Because she did not have a name, I called her Vi-o-let."*

He is singing about me! Mouse thought happily.

Simon smiled at her across the flickering campfire. "What about it, Mouse? Would you like that name?"

"It is a pretty name, but I am more thorn than flower," she said ruefully.

"I cannot say I agree with you, but all right. Some brave name, then. Ronalda, perhaps. Or Georgette."

"I am not very brave, either," Mouse said.

"Pish and tosh! You are as brave as you decide to be. Anytime you need a bit of courage, do what I do."

"And what might that be?" Claire asked, amused.

"Why, I stand very tall, close my eyes, and say to myself, 'I am brave and strong.' It has never failed me yet."

Mouse looked doubtful. Simon said, "What shall we name you, then? A serious name, perhaps. Wilhelmina might suit you. Or Esmerelda or Henrietta."

"Oh, no! Not Henrietta!" Alice put in. "I have a pet goose by that name. She is a dear old thing but as dumb as a stone. I should not like to see our little Mouse named Henrietta."

Simon sighed. "This task has proved more difficult than I thought. We shall leave it for another day." Opening his pouch, he took out his potions and knelt at Mouse's side. "Hold still, little one. Let me tend your wound."

When that was done, Claire stood up and held out her hand. "We must rest. Coming, Mouse?"

They passed the night by the side of the road. In the morning they ate the last of the bread and honey and bundled their belongings once more.

"Ah," Simon said as they turned down the sundappled road. "I feel like singing a morning song."

Walking between Alice and Claire, with the sun on her face and the wind at her back, Mouse felt like singing too. She slipped her hands into theirs, and they continued on, just so, until they arrived some days later in York.

The Inn

To Mouse, who had never before ventured beyond the fields and forests at Dunston Manor, the city of York was a wonder. From the center of town, the streets led away in every direction, each of them lined with houses, shops, and inns all standing atop one another like piles of stones. It was market day, and the town was abustle with carts, oxen, horses, and more kinds of people than Mouse had ever known existed in the world. Nuns and priests, shopkeepers and farm folk, jugglers and stilt walkers mingled in the streets, their voices rising and falling like the drone of bees. Mouse let go of Claire's hand and ran ahead, turning this way and that, determined not to miss a single thing.

One street overflowed with wool merchants and candlemakers, the next with ironmongers and leatherworkers, ribbon sellers and fortune-tellers. The air was thick with the smells of baking bread and horseflesh, goose droppings and cheese. And the din! People shouted. Carts rattled. A church bell tolled.

As the travelers pressed through the teeming crowd, Simon said, "Come along, Mouse. Soon it will be dark, and we must find beds for the night."

"If it please you, not yet," Mouse said. "Fenn says the fortune-teller can see your whole future in the blink of an eye. I want to visit one."

"Then you shall be a slave to want," Simon declared firmly. "We must hurry, for the inns will be full. I know an innkeeper not far from here. Perchance he will let us pass the night, if only in his stables."

When they came to a place where three streets met, Alice said, "Here is where I must leave you." Bending down, she pressed a single coin into Mouse's hand. "Take this, little one. For the devil dances in an empty pocket."

Mouse's eyes felt hot. "Stay with us."

"And leave poor Henrietta and the others to fend for themselves?" Alice smiled. "I must go, but mayhap you will visit me in Depford someday. Anyone in the village can tell you where I live. We shall have ale and raisin cakes, and you will tell me of all your great adventures. Promise you will come."

Mouse could only nod. Her throat ached with the effort of holding back her tears.

"Good fortune, dear Mouse," Alice said. "I do hope we will meet again."

Then she disappeared into the crowd.

Claire said, "Hurry, Mouse. Simon's patience grows thin. We must not tarry any longer."

Mouse tucked the coin into her tunic pocket and followed Claire and Simon to a square, gray building with two rows of grimy windows across the front. Beside the door hung a sign with a lion's head painted on it. From inside came a jumble of rattling plates, loud voices, and even louder laughter.

Lifting the door latch, Simon ushered them inside to a room filled with long wooden tables laden with platters of meat, bowls of pudding, tankards of ale. The smells of damp wool, old grease, and sweat made Mouse's nose twitch. Most of the guests seated at the tables were men in rough clothes, but at the end of one table, a well-dressed woman in a blue cloak and a plumed hat perched on her chair prim as a princess. She nodded to Mouse, and Mouse smiled back, glad that her tunic was still clean and her hair still in its new braid.

One of the men looked up. A toothless smile spread across his broad face. "Simon Swann! They said you were hanged for thieving!"

"Not true!" Simon said, his green eyes dancing. "As you can see, I am quite alive and in the company of the most beautiful women in the realm. Where else would I bring them save the Lion's Head Inn?"

"Where else would you dare beg a room and a meal without a single coin in your pocket?"

Simon laughed. ~~"Riches only increase want, my friend, so I make a point of being poor. But you are~~ right. We have made a long journey. My companions need a goodly meal and a soft bed for the night. myself will be quite content to sleep in the stables with the other lowly beasts."

The innkeeper stared at the weary travelers. Mouse thought of the coin in her pocket. Mayhap he would take it in payment for a bed for Claire, whose blue eyes seemed to grow sadder by the day. Accustomed to sleeping on the stone floor at Dunston Manor, Mouse cared little for her own comfort. A mound of sweet-smelling straw in the stable, with Simon close by to watch over her, seemed a fine idea.

But then Simon spoke. "I will sing for our supper and our beds. Three songs and a new poem, composed especially for the occasion."

"What occasion?" the innkeeper inquired, narrowing his eyes.

"It must be one saint's day or another. I will think of something, unless I fall asleep first."

"That has always been your trouble, Swann," the innkeeper said. "Irresponsible to a fault."

"He who is faultless must also be lifeless," Simon declared, grinning. "Four songs, then, if you would drive such a hard bargain."

When the innkeeper hesitated, Claire said wearily, "No matter. What is one more night beneath the open sky? It might be more pleasant than this wretched place."

"You must forgive Claire," Simon said. "Exhaustion brings out her ill temper."

"And what of this child?" The innkeeper peered into Mouse's face. "How did you get that wound, girl? Stealing chickens?"

Before Mouse could make an answer, Simon said, "She is no thief, but a hapless child who met with an accident on the road. She comes from a manor house some distance away and is merely on a short holiday."

"A holiday, you say? In those rags?" He bent so close, Mouse could smell his hot, oniony breath. "Harboring strangers by night is a dangerous business. I mean to know who sleeps beneath my roof."

"She comes from Dunston," Simon said quickly. "Five songs, and that is my final offer. Though if you ask politely enough, I might sing six."

The innkeeper grimaced as if he had swallowed sour milk. Before he could reply, the door opened, and came a young boy in rough boots and a dust-covered cloak. On a cord around his neck hung a slender silver flute.

"Will Gooding!" Simon cried, rushing to clasp the boy's hand. "I looked for you in Marlingford, but they said you had already gone."

"Something came up," the boy said, shaking the dust from his cloak.

"No matter. I am at this moment in the midst of bargaining for our keep. Mayhap you will favor the company with some songs of your own."

"I cannot stay," Will said, setting his leather pouch on the floor. "I only stopped for a drink of water and directions to the abbey. My uncle has arranged for me to study music there."

"You are giving up life on the road?" Simon asked. "I will sorely miss seeing you at the fairs."

The innkeeper turned to the newcomer. "It is too far to travel to the abbey this late. You may as well stay the night, Gooding. That is, if you can pay for it."

"I have a few coins left," the boy said pleasantly.

Simon turned to the innkeeper. "What of our bargain? Six songs in exchange for our supper and a night's lodging for my companions."

"Very well," the innkeeper said wearily. "But you must be gone by the time the cock crows. Tomorrow the fair opens, and many customers there will be with coins aplenty."

"Done!" Simon agreed. "Let us eat first, and then the entertainment shall begin."

Bowls of soup and hunks of bread and cheese were brought for the travelers. Mouse ate until she could not swallow another bite. When Simon had eaten his fill, he wiped his mouth and took out his lute. The room grew quiet. Claire took a chair in the corner and drew Mouse onto her lap. While Simon sang, Claire hummed softly. The sound of it filled Mouse with such bittersweet longing, she feared her heart would break.

So this is what it is like to have a mother, she thought, winding her arms tightly around Claire's neck. Simon finished his first song, and the travelers clapped. Then Will Gooding brought out his flute and played a series of clear, sweet notes that seemed to dance in the air. Mouse struggled to stay awake, but the fire was warm, her belly was full, and she slept till the innkeeper at last took up his candle and led them along a narrow staircase to a sleeping room under the eaves. There, she burrowed into the warm straw mattress beside Claire.

Before dawn Claire woke her.

"Listen, Mouse," she whispered. "I have some news."

Mouse sat up on the straw mattress, rubbing her eyes. By the dim light of the sputtering candle, she saw that Claire was already dressed, her clothes brushed, her hair wound into a neat coil at the back of her neck.

"Remember the woman we saw last night?" Claire whispered. "The one in the blue cloak?"

Mouse nodded, feeling suddenly uneasy.

"Her name is Lady Ashby. She has agreed to take me into her household as companion to her children. Her home is far away, and we are leaving now."

"You cannot leave me!" Mouse cried. "Surely it was fate that brought us together, and Fenn says we must never tempt fate. If you go, something horrid is sure to happen."

"You must not believe everything you hear," Claire said quietly. "In time I am sure we will both find our places in the world." She smoothed Mouse's tangled hair. "Dear child, ever since I learned the truth about the man I loved, I confess there have been moments when I wondered about the very existence of our Lord. But do you not see? That he should have placed me here at the same moment as Lady Ashby, why, it truly is a miracle. If you wish to believe in fate, believe it has brought Lady Ashby to me."

Mouse swallowed hard.

"Simon will look after you," Claire said. "Despite his roguish tongue, he has a good heart."

Mouse grasped Claire's hand. "If it please you, ask the lady if I may come too. I will not be a bit of trouble. I can earn my keep."

"If only you *could* come with me," Claire said. "But I have no influence with the lady. I had to beg to be taken on myself. I dare not ask a favor so soon." Tucking the thin blanket around Mouse's shoulders, she said, "Go back to sleep and try not to worry. The morrow will take care of itself." She kissed Mouse's forehead. "God keep you, little one."

Then she was gone.

Huddled beneath the scratchy blanket, Mouse stared into the darkness, too miserable to sleep. A short while later, when the *clop-clop* of horses' hooves sounded on the cobblestones, she ran to the window and peered out.

Morning was on its way. The stars had faded. A thin line of gray painted the black rooftops. A coach turned through the arched gate, and in the carriage window Mouse caught a glimpse of Claire's yellow hair and Lady Ashby's plumed hat before the coach disappeared into the mist.

"I will not cry," Mouse said in a wobbly voice. "I am brave and strong."

Then the cock announced the new day. Mouse washed her face and smoothed her hair. Her fingers closed over Alice's coin. Mayhap Simon would take it in exchange for seeing her safely to London. There, she would

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