

Alchemy and Meggy Swann,
an excerpt from the uncorrected advance proof,
by Karen Cushman

1573

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

CHAPTER ONE

"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 cabbage 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 this 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 were 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 darkness grew.

Meggy and the carter had arrived in London earlier that day while the summer evening was yet 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 a 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 is 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 grew 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."