

The Midwife's Apprentice

By Karen Cushman

The Dung Heap

When Animal droppings and garbage and spoiled straw are piled up in a great heap, the rotting and moiling give forth heat. Usually no one gets close enough to notice because of the stench. But the girl noticed and, on that frosty night, burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, heedless of the smell. In any event, the dung heap probably smelled little worse than everything else in her life--the food scraps scavenged from kitchen yards, the stables and sties she slept in when she could, and her own unwashed, unnourished, unloved, and unlovely body.

How old she was was hard to say. She was small and pale, with the frightened air of an ill-used child, but her scrawny, underfed body did give off a hint of woman, so perhaps she was twelve or thirteen. No one knew for sure, least of all the girl herself, who knew no home and no mother and no name but Brat and never had. Someone, she assumed, must have borne her and cared for her lest she toddle into the pond and changed her diapers when they reeked, but as long as she could remember, Brat had lived on her own by what means she could--stealing an onion here or helping with the harvest there in exchange for a night on the stable floor. She took what she could from a village and moved on before the villagers, with their rakes and sticks, drove her away. Snug cottages and warm bread and mothers who hugged their babes were beyond her imagining, but dearly would she have loved to eat a turnip without the mud of the field still on it or sleep in a barn fragrant with new hay and not the rank smell of pigs who fart when they eat too much.

Tonight she settled for the warm rotting of a dung heap, where she dreamed of nothing, for she hoped for nothing and expected nothing. It was as cold and dark inside her as out in the frosty night.

Morning brought rain to ease the cold, and the kick of a boot in Brat's belly. Hunger. Brat hated the hunger most. Or was it the cold? She knew only that hunger and cold cursed her life and kept her waking and walking and working for no other reason than to stop the pain.

"Dung beetle! Dung beetle! Smelly old dung beetle sleeping in the dung."

Boys. In every village there were boys, teasing, taunting, pinching, kicking. Always they were the scrawniest or the ugliest or the dirtiest or the stupidest boys, picked on by everyone else, with no one left uglier or stupider than they but her. And so they taunted and tormented her. In every village. Always. She closed her eyes.

"Hey, boys, have off. You're mucking up the path and my new Spanish leather shoes. Away!"

"And you, girl. Are you alive or dead?"

Brat opened one eye. A woman was there, a woman neither old nor young but in between. Neither fat nor thin but in between. An important looking woman, with a sharp nose and a sharp glance and a wimple starched into sharp pleats.

"Good," said the woman. "You're not dead. No need to call the bailiff to cart you off. Now out of that heap and away."

The fierce pain in her stomach made Brat bold. "Please, may I have some'ut to eat first?"

"No beggars in this village. Away."

"Please, mistress, a little to eat?"

"Those who don't work don't eat."

Brat opened her other eye to show her eagerness and energy. "I will work, mistress. I am stronger and smarter than I seem."

"Smart enough to use the heat from the dung heap, I see. What can you do?"

"Anything, mistress. And I don't eat much."

The woman's sharp nose smelled hunger, which she could use to her own greedy purpose. "Get up, then, girl. You do put me in mind of a dung beetle burrowing in that heap. Get up, Beetle, and I may yet find something for you to do."

So Brat, newly christened Beetle, got up, and the sharp lady found some work for her to do and rewarded her with dry bread and half a mug of sour ale, which tasted so sweet to the girl that she slept in the dung heap another night, hoping for more work and more bread on the morrow. And there was more work, sweeping the lady's dirt floor and washing her linen in the stream and carrying her bundles to those cottages where a new baby was expected, for the sharp lady was a midwife. Beetle soon acquired a new name, the midwife's apprentice, and a place to sleep that smelled much better than the dung heap, though it was much less warm.

The Cat

Beetle liked to watch the cat stretching in the sunshine, combing his belly with his tongue, chewing the burrs and stubble out from between his toes. She never dared get dose, for she was afraid, but even from a distance could tell that there was a gleaming patch of white in the dusty orange of his fur, right below his chin; that one ear had a great

bite taken out of it; and that his whiskers were cockeyed, going up on one side and down on the other, giving him a frisky, cheerful look.

Sometimes she left bits of her bread or cheese near the fence post by the river where she first saw him, but not very often, for the midwife was generous only with the work she gave Beetle and stingy with rewards, and the girl was never overfed.

Once she found a nest of baby mice who had frozen in, the cold, and she left them by the fence post for the cat. But her heart ached when she thought of the tiny hairless bodies in those strong jaws, so she buried them deep in the dung heap and left the cat to do his own hunting.