



THE DOOR  
IN THE WALL

BY MARGUERITE DE ANGELI



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20

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## INTRODUCTION

As always, Mama was astonished that anyone would think her work superior enough to win the Newbery Medal. To say she was thrilled would be an understatement. Typically, she gave a great deal of credit to an old friend, Harm Robinson, who was the inspiration for *THE DOOR IN THE WALL*, and to her editor at Doubleday, Peggy Lesser (Mrs. Norman Foster).

Her sense of wonder and modesty about her talent were things that lent her work such charm, in both the text and the illustrations, and her love of people, especially children, is evident throughout.

—Ted de Angeli  
1989

**R**OBIN drew the coverlet close about his head and turned his face to the wall. He covered his ears and shut his eyes, for the sound of the bells was deafening. All the bells of London were ringing the hour of Nones. St. Mary le Bow was nearest, St. Swithin's was close by, and not far away stood great St. Paul's. There were half-a-dozen others within sound, each clamoring to be heard. It seemed to Robin as if they were all inside his head screaming to be let out. Tears of vexation started to his eyes, but he held them back, for he remembered that a brave and "gentil" knight does not cry.

Ever since he could remember, Robin had been told what was expected of him as son of his father. Like other sons of noble family, he would be sent away from his mother and father to live in the household of another knight, where he would learn all the ways of knighthood. He would learn how to be of service to his liege lord, how to be courteous and gentle, and, at the same time, strong of heart.

Robin thought of his father and how he had looked on that last day when he rode off to the Scottish wars at the head of the column. Now, remembering, Robin could almost feel the weight of his father's mailed glove on his shoulder as he said good-by. Then he had been straight and strong, standing there in the courtyard as the men rode forth.

"Farewell, my son," his father had said, "forget not to be brave. God knows when we shall meet again. Farewell." He must not cry.

Robin thought of his mother and how she, too, had said farewell, the day after his tenth birthday. She had called him to her side in the solar where she sat weaving.

"Since your father left for the wars, it has been a comfort to have you near," she said, "but you are ten and no longer a child to be looked after by womenfolk. It is time now for you to leave me. John-the-Fletcher will come for you in a few days and will take you to Sir Peter de Lindsay, as we have arranged. There, too, you will be away from danger of the plague, which seems to be spreading. And now it is fitting that I obey the wish of the Queen to be her lady in waiting, for she is in need of my care. Today an escort will be sent for me and I shall go. Jon-the-Cook, Gregory, and Dame Ellen will serve you until John-the-Fletcher arrives. Farewell, my son. Be brave."

She had drawn Robin to her and had turned away so he would not see her tears.

Little did she know how much Robin would need her! For the very next day he had become ill and unable to move his legs. That had been more than a month ago.

He was cold. He wished Ellen would come to mend the fire.

The bells stopped ringing, and Robin heard the boys from the Brothers' School running and shouting along the street. He hoped that William or John, Thomas or Roger would come in to tell him the news, but when their voices grew faint, he knew they had gone on past.

How he wished he were with them. Even the tiresome lessons of singing and reading would be worth doing if only he could run down the street with the other boys.

But he could not run. He couldn't even get out of bed.

Because he was unable to see out of the wind hole (window) Robin had learned to guess at what was going on down in the street. He knew the sound of armor and knightly equipment, for the King's men passed that way going to and from the Tower or Westminster, to joust or tournament, to parade, or on business for the King. A horse was passing now, but Robin was sure it was not of that order. It was probably the shire reeve's horse, for above the slow clatter over the cobbles Robin could hear the grating of runners on a kind of sled the horse was dragging. From the odor that came through the window he could guess that Wat Hokester had been taken again for selling putrid fish in the market stall.

Robin chuckled. He knew that soon Wat would be standing in the stocks near the fish market with his evil-smelling goods hanging from his neck.

Now Robin heard the sound of Dame Ellen's feet shuffling along the passage to his wall chamber.

He turned his head to see what kind of dish she carried, but quickly looked away again when he saw that it was a bowl with steam rising from it. Was it barley soup? Was it a stew of rabbit? He didn't know and didn't care. The thought of it was all mixed with the sickening odor that came up with the raw wind from the street.

Ellen's skirt brushed the bed as she leaned toward Robin. She was near enough so he could hear the creak of her starched linen coif as she peered at him to see whether he was asleep. He shut his eyes so as not to see the great whiskered wart on her chin, and tried to close his ears to the sound of her Cockney speech. She saw by the squinching of his eyes that he was awake.

"Turn over, do, there's a good lad," she said, intend-

ing her voice to be soft, but it was not. It sounded harsh and flat, "as if her mouth had been stretched too wide," thought Robin. He shook his head and closed his mouth tight against the food.

"Wilt not have this good porridge all with honey spread?" Ellen's coaxing voice went on. Robin shuddered, and buried his face in the cushion.

If only his lady mother were here. She would have seen to it that the porridge had been smoothly cooked and salted. She would speak in her gentle way with the pleasant mixture of Norman French and good English words that were becoming the fashion. If only she were here, all would be well. The damp, sweaty feeling would leave his head, his legs would obey him and take him where he wanted to go, racing up and down alleyways or along the high street. He would be running with the boys down Pudding Lane or across London Bridge, playing tag among the shops.

But his legs would not obey him. They were like two long pieces of uncooked dough, he thought, such as Jon-the-Cook rolled out on his molding board.

Ellen tugged gently at the coverlet.

"Sweet lad," she begged, "'twill give thee strength and mend those ailing limbs."

Robin would neither turn nor answer. Let her take the sickening stuff away. Let her throw it into the street on top of that fishmonger who had just gone past.

"Come, my pretty——" But Ellen got no further with her wheedling. Robin gathered all his strength and flung his arm toward the bowl of porridge, sending it flying out of Ellen's hands and spreading its contents all over her. He was ashamed as soon as he had done it, but Ellen did look funny with the mess hanging from her chin.

"Wicked boy!" she cried. "No more will I serve thee.

Scarce able to stand have I been this day, yet have I been faithful. But I am a free woman and can go my way. Just wait and see when more victuals are brought thee! Ungrateful wretch!" She burst into loud weeping and left the room, wiping the porridge off with her apron. Robin turned again to the wall. "She will come back," he thought, "as she has done before, and she had better bring something I like if she wants me to eat it."

But she didn't come back. An hour went by. Then another hour. It grew colder and colder.

Robin examined for the hundredth time the carvings on the hammer beams supporting the roof of the hall. Each one was an angel with feathered wings. He studied one by one the grotesque carvings of dwarfs that decorated the roof bosses, and the corbels finishing the doorway. He wearied of thinking about them and wished that Ellen would come.

Robin's bedchamber was off the main hall or living room of the house, in an embrasure of the thick wall. Like the hall, Robin's room was somewhat chapel-like, for the houses of the time of Edward the III of England were very little different from churches.

Afternoon sounds came into the room: people passing along the street to and from the shops in Cheapside or Poultry Lane; carters carrying goods to the wharves on the Thames, Belinsgate, or Queen Hythe. He heard children playing games, hoodman-blind and hide-and-seek. He wished he could have been among them, because he knew a secret nook where he always hid and where he was seldom discovered. It was down Honey Lane in the angle of a jutting wall near Black Friars entry. It was so small a space that it appeared to be no space at all. It was still his own secret.

Robin tried very hard to get out of bed so he might look



out of the window, but he only fell back again onto the pillow exhausted from the effort. Hunger bit at his empty stomach. He was hungry enough now to have eaten the porridge Ellen had brought him.

He listened, hoping to hear her footsteps in the passage, but the house was strangely silent. No sound of talk or laughter came from the hall, for most of the servants and retainers had gone either with his father, Sir John de Bureford, or with his mother, the Lady Maud. Robin called for Ellen, and when he had no answer, called for Jon-the-Cook, then for old Gregory, the gardener.

He listened again, holding his breath, but he heard no one, and saw not a soul from Nones to Vespers, when the bells began to ring again.

He was alone.

Just as the bells stopped ringing Robin heard a noise as of a door opening. Then someone mounted the stair and came along the passage. Perhaps it was one of the boys; but not likely, for whoever it was walked rather slowly instead of running, as William or Thomas or John would have done.

The footsteps turned toward the chamber. In the doorway stood a monk with a basket. He came toward the bed where Robin lay.

"Good eve, my son," he said. "I am Brother Luke, a wandering friar, newly come to St. Mark's. I have brought thee food, and, cause 'tis Friday, fish."

*Fish!* Robin's stomach took a sudden turn. But a good smell came from the covered basket Brother Luke carried, and he was hungry. So he smiled a welcome, and the friar explained how he had happened to know that Robin needed help.

"A poor widow, who twice a week is fed from our hospice, told me of thy need. She said that Dame Ellen, who