

Chapter 17 & Questions: The Midwife's Apprentice

Name _____

Period: _____

Read and complete the discussion questions.

Chapter 17 The Midwife's Apprentice



June burst into bloom - daisies, larkspur, meadowsweet and thyme, foxglove and thimbleberry, purple thistle flowers, and yellow whorls of blooming fennel. Alyce sat in the meadow and thought. The rich merchant and his wife wished to take her back with them to Salisbury to care for their son and mayhap perform more miracles; he spoke temptingly of new shoes and a shrine. Magister Reese was leaving the inn to return to the lodgings in Oxford he shared with his widowed sister and wished to employ Alyce: 'My sister grows older and needs more care than I can give her, and I think mayhap Oxford would please you.' Alyce liked being invited, but Jennet scowled and moped, unwilling to lose a willing worker but even sadder to see the last of the girl herself, and finally offered Alyce a penny every now and then if she would agree to stay.

As she chewed on a grass, Alyce smiled. From someone who had no place in the world, she had suddenly become someone with a surfeit of places. She closed her eyes and continued to chew. What to do? What do I want? she asked herself in the manner she had learned from Magister Reese, who thought it fitting for even an inn girl to want.

In her mind she saw Magister Reese's spotted face and kind eyes, heard Jennet's merry voice, and smelled the rich perfumed robes of the merchant from Salisbury. She felt again the vigorous, squirming, wonderful aliveness of the merchant's son as he wriggled into her hands. She heard the joyful chatter of birds building their nests -in the thatch of the church-saw the triumph on the face of the midwife as she coaxed a reluctant baby into life, remembered the silky feel of Tansy's newborn calves and the sticky softness of the baby called Alyce Little.

'Of course,' she whispered, eyes opening wide. 'Of course.' She was not an inn girl or a nursery maid or a companion to old women. She was a midwife's apprentice with a newborn hope of being someday a midwife herself. She had much still to learn, and she knew a place where she could learn it, cold and difficult and unwelcoming as that place might be. That was her place in this world for right now, and though her belly would likely never be full, her heart was content.

That night she dreamt she gave birth to a baby who gave birth to a baby and so on and so on until morning.

Early in the day she saw the merchant and his family off to Salisbury, bid farewell to Magister Reese and sent her respects to his sister, hugged Jennet, and set off for the village, comb and soap and page from a great and holy book tucked in her bodice and orange cat at her heels.

Not too long after this the inn, which had been known simply as John Dark's place, came to be called The Cat and Cheese, marked by a great hanging sign of an orange cat with a morsel of cheese in his paw. Within a few years no one remembered why, but so it is called to this day.

As she swung along the village road, Alyce, with good feelings tumbling about inside her, hummed and then tra-la-ed and then sang, as loud and clear as a swan. Some of the words were without meaning, others just sounded right, but some words came from deep inside her and told how she felt about life and hope and the road ahead.

'Come summer; come flowers, come sun,' sang Alyce.

'Purr;' sang the cat.

Alyce knocked at the midwife's door, surprised at how the French roses had grown since last she was there.

'Jane, I am back,' she said to the frowning midwife. 'I be a fine midwife's apprentice now. I know about babies and birthing, singing songs and cooking chickens, crying and laughing and reading.'

'Is that all!' asked Jane.

'Are these not excellent things for a mid- wife's apprentice to know?'

'They are indeed, but is that all!'

'That is all and I am here.'

But Jane would not have her. Alyce stood before the cottage, eyes stinging and heart sore. She had not thought about this, had thought no further than knocking on Jane's door and being welcomed. But there it was. Jane would not have her. And before morning turned to afternoon and the morning glories turned their faces from the sun, Alyce, in despair and confusion, turned from the village, fearful that each step would take her once again over that invisible line that separated the village from the rest of the world.

But the cat would not.

'I know you do not wish to leave, cat. Nor do I. But there is no place for me here. I tried to come back but failed. She will not have me.'

Purr laid himself down, tucked his front paws under the white spot on his chest, and looked at her with his gooseberry eyes.

'What then should I do" Alyce sat down and listened to the humming of the bees and the purring of the cat. Suddenly she leapt to her feet. 'Corpus bones, you are right, cat! Jane herself told me what she needed.'

Alyce turned back again for the cottage, gathering comfrey leaves and raspberries and the tiny wild strawberries in her skirt as she went. She marched up to the midwife's door and knocked firmly.

'Jane Sharp! It is I, Alyce, your apprentice. I have come back. And if you do not let me in, I will try again and again. I can do what you tell me and take what you give me, and I know how to try and risk and fail and try again and not give up. I will not go away.'

The door opened. Alyce went in. And the cat went with her.

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1. At the beginning of the chapter, Alyce was given three job choices. Name them and judge which would suit her best.
 2. How did Alyce finally reach a decision about her future?
 3. What happened to Alyce that was unexpected? Was the midwife's reaction justified? Explain.
 4. What lessons have you learned from reading this story that can be applied to your own life?