

it was that we ended up sitting out of doors on the step, looking into the lane that ran behind the house. We sat with the kitchen door held open so that we might dash within if a cutthroat should come suddenly upon us. This was my own precaution. Hester was careless of such matters, and said I ought to have been named Prudence instead of Margaret. But I am no Puritan to bear such a name as that, and am satisfied to be called instead after saints and noblewomen. Margaret is my name, and I am called Meg.

"My father is not himself," I said to Hester as we sat peering into the darkness. "What bothers him, do you think?"

"Why, nothing bothers him. Think how cheerful he was over the counter this morning, when Mrs. Beckwith and her daughter came in."

"That means nothing. 'Tis part of his job, to laugh with those who buy his books."

"He has been in fine humor," Hester observed.

"Too fine. He is almost foolish. He is trying to make up his mind about something, and seeks to hide from me while he does it."

"About whether to publish Mr. Coles's Latin and English dictionary, that is all."

"Nay, it is something bigger."

"You make too much of little things. Are your feelings hurt, that he chose not to answer a girl's prying questions when bedtime was long past?"

She meant to affront me, for the fun of it, so I stayed

sulky and silent to please her. We both gazed at the night. It was full dark, for the moon had set, or had not yet risen, and we had no lantern in our street. I counted three candles in the windows across the street from us. I heard the rattle of a laundry tub from the house of Mr. Grove, who lived next door, for the laundress was beginning her night work. Soon after I heard the bell of the watchman as he made his rounds. There was the smell of rosemary nearby—Cook grew it under the window.

"With whom did he sup?" I wondered aloud after a little, but Hester spoke at the same moment.

"Why, look at that, Meg," she said, and pointed upward with her long arm.

I gazed up so mightily it made my eyes sting, and there saw a star with a fiery wake, as though a chariot had flown through the dark heavens and parted them behind. "'Tis a comet," I said.

"Surely not."

"I'm certain of it. Sir Henry has described them to me, he saw one five years ago."

"God protect us," Hester said in a grave voice. "What can it foretell for us?"

I shook my head doubtfully.

"Perhaps another great fire will consume the City," she said.

"Perhaps the Plague will return," I offered.

"Or the Dutch will sail up the Thames once more and will murder us in our beds."