

# The Alchemist's Apprentice

Kate Thompson

*Random House Children's Publishers UK*

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## About the Book

*Jack is on the run. Alone in the world with nowhere to turn, he finds a strange object floating on the rising tide of the Thames. In trying to assess the value of the relic Jack meets Barnstable, an alchemist who only adds to the boy's perplexity by his enigmatic ways. Dramatic events escalate and Jack's fortunes change beyond all expectation. But the mystery surrounding the alchemist won't go away. Has he really discovered the secret of making gold?*

In this gripping novel, Kate Thompson, master storyteller, describes the extraordinary adventures of a boy trying to understand what really matters in the world.

THE  
ALCHEMIST'S  
APPRENTICE



KATE THOMPSON

RHCP DIGITAL

For Jacob



## *Chapter One*

---

IN THE TINY yard behind the forge, the cock crowed. Jack was on his feet before he was awake; before William could get to him and drag him out of bed. He bent beneath the dusty rafters of the loft, pulling himself up from ugly dreams which kept trying to drag him back down among his blankets. He swayed on his feet, then stretched and yawned and opened his eyes. It was still dark, but he didn't need to see to know that William wasn't there.

He remembered now. William had hurt his back shoeing a horse the day before and Tom, the farrier they were both apprenticed to, had sent him home for a few days to recover. It meant that Jack would have one less bully to worry about.

It also meant that there would be twice as much work.

The cock crowed again. From the street outside, Jack heard the first clatter of buckets and the wheezy voice of the pump handle as the neighbourhood's earliest risers began the day. Propping himself against the slope of the roof, he shook the spiders out of his clothes and pulled them on.

Treading carefully to avoid the crunch of cockroaches beneath his bare feet, Jack crossed the rough wooden timbers of the floor and climbed down the ladder into the forge. Tom was always the last to arrive, but Jack had never been in the forge without William there, bossing and boasting. He stopped for a moment, looking into the silent darkness, breathing in the familiar smells of smoke and burnt hooves. It was a rare, peaceful moment, but he couldn't allow it to last for long. There was too much work to be done.

The bolt on the back door was stiff. It grated and dug into Jack's hand, but eventually slid across. In the little yard behind it, the farrier's pony whickered gently, anxious for his breakfast.

Jack laughed. 'Coming, Dobbs,' he said.

The morning was dry and clear. The stars were still shining, though dawn was dimming them fast. Cocks were crowing now from every direction and, as he walked across the dew-damp cobbles, Jack could hear the noises of the town as it woke. From behind the thin doors and shutters of the houses around the forge, people coughed and hawked or called to each other or grumbled. Jack gathered an armful of hay from the shelter in the corner of the yard and stood at the door of the tiny stall where Dobbs spent most of his days. The pony grabbed a mouthful, and Jack stood and rubbed his neck while he ate it. Though Dobbs rarely showed any sign of interest in anything other than food, Jack felt a special affinity with him. They were the underdogs at the forge, the ones who couldn't answer back. Sometimes it seemed that they were both there for no other purpose than to bear the brunt of Tom's bad temper, and William's, too. Yet there was nothing they could do about it. There was nowhere else for either of them to go.

Reluctantly, Jack threw the rest of the hay over the door and returned to the forge. With difficulty he pulled back the heavy bolts and opened up the double doors at the front of the building. Outside them, a little way up the street, a queue had formed at the pump. Jack had known most of the people there all his life and exchanged greetings with them as he bolted the doors open. He knew, however, that despite their friendly acceptance of him, he was seen as a bit of a joke; the puniest apprentice ever taken on by a blacksmith in London.

He went back inside and turned his attention to the fire. Sometimes, when the smith had been busy late into the evening, there were still embers glowing in it, but this



morning it was quite cold. Jack raked out the ashes carefully, then gathered tinder and kindling and lit them with a spark from a flint. In the dry, summer conditions they burned fiercely, and Jack had to move quickly, piling up charcoal around them before they burnt out. Then, relieved to have got a good start on the work, he began to sweep the floor.

By the time Tom arrived, yawning and stretching, still bleary-eyed from the previous night's ale, the fire had heated up well and Jack was standing proudly above a heap of dusty nail-ends and hoof-parings. The last of the darkness had been washed from the sky and the queue at the pump had dwindled.

Tom peered into the furnace and nodded approvingly. 'Boost her up, now, lad,' he said. 'Nicholson's cob has to be done first thing, and I still haven't finished that gate for old Martin.'

He began to sort through some pieces of iron leaning against the opposite wall and Jack watched him, fascinated by his strength.

'Jack will grow on.' It was a neighbour, Peg, who had brought him to Tom, after his mother died. 'He just had a bad start, that's all. He'll catch up.'

Tom had stared at him in astonishment, then looked at Peg as though she were out of her mind.

'Someone has to take him,' she had said. 'He has no one now.'

Jack still couldn't understand why he had been accepted. If Tom had pity in his heart it was buried very deep beneath his drunkenness and ill humour. He could only assume that Peg, who had been his mother's best friend, had some mysterious influence over Tom or had called upon some favour that was owed. Because as he watched the blacksmith's broad shoulders and muscular arms, Jack knew that what she had said was not true. He would never grow

into anything like Tom. His legs were bowed with rickets and his narrow ribcage showed clearly through his skin, above a belly that seemed always to be empty. Beside the bulk of the blacksmith he felt like a puppet or a rag doll, with bony shoulders and tiny, skinny arms. As a blacksmith's apprentice he was a dead loss and he knew it. He was learning to trim hooves and knock down clenches after the shoes were nailed on, but he doubted if he would ever have the strength to shoe a horse from beginning to end. His one advantage, however, was his feeling for horses. Even Tom had grudgingly admitted that he had a knack. Horses seemed to like him.

And he liked them. There were times, climbing into the loft at night, when he felt that every bone in his body had been bruised by the rigours of the day's work, but there was never a morning after when he didn't feel like getting up. The horses made up for all the cuffs and insults he received from Tom and William. Even if he didn't get to touch one of them all day, he loved being near them; loved their sweet smell and their gentle patience.

A stray dog trotted in from the road and began to snuffle around inside the door. Jack tossed him a moon-shaped hoof-trimming, then shoved the rest of his sweepings up against the coal heap. Tom was sorting through a stack of iron rods, filling the confined space with clattering and ringing. The dog took to its heels. Jack added another shovel of charcoal to the fire and began to work the bellows. He had seen Tom do it with one hand, but it took him all his strength to open them and all his weight bearing down to close them. Like a great beast breathing, they drew in air and whooshed it out again, reddening the coals and causing them to spring into flames. A dozen times Jack heaved them open and squashed them closed and then, panting and sweating but satisfied with the fire, he sat down to take a breather.

'Water, lad. Hop it!'

Jack jumped up and gathered a pair of buckets. He fetched and carried from the pump until he had filled the barrel where the steel was tempered when it had been heated and shaped. Soon afterwards, Nicholson arrived with his smart cob, and Tom set Jack to making nails.

The morning wore on. The sun rose above the line of the buildings opposite and cast bright light through the wide doors of the forge, adding to the heat already spreading from the furnace. Tom's temper began to deteriorate. A pair of carriage horses came in to be shod, and after them came a heavy dray horse with feet the size of dinner plates. Tom sweated and cursed, and began, as usual, to take out his irritation on Jack. He gave him one order after another, to tend the forge, to hand him a hammer, to finish off the clenches. Jack ran from one side of the smithy to the other and Tom scolded him for being slow, and then for not finishing the job he had just pulled him away from. It seemed to Jack that he could do nothing right. He began to get nervous and his nervousness made him clumsy. He spilled a shovelful of charcoal, then spilled it again when he had swept it up. Tom slapped him for it, and made him drop a heavy rasp on to his toe. When he yelled in pain, Tom gave him another slap for alarming the horse he was shoeing. The day that had begun so well was becoming a nightmare.

At noon Tom closed the double doors and sent Jack for bread and herrings for their lunch. They ate in tense silence for a while, then Tom nodded towards the dwindling pile of charcoal.

'You'll have to go for a load,' he said.

'By myself?' said Jack. He had been with William before, down to the docks where the charcoal was brought by boat from the forests upstream, but he had never been allowed to take the reins.

'All you have to do is steer,' said Tom. 'Old Dobbs knows his job. You're not likely to get into any trouble. You know

the way, don't you?'

Jack nodded, and slowly his anxiety gave way to delight at the thought of spending the afternoon sitting on a cart, out of the way of Tom and his temper.

'Tack him up, then, lad, and get on the road.' Tom nodded at the charcoal pile again. 'We might even need it before the day's out.'

In the stable at the side of the yard, the old pony stood dozing, oblivious to the clouds of flies which buzzed around his eyes. Jack dragged out the collar and harness and tried to fit them on the pony. It looked so simple when William did it but now, faced with a dozen different straps and buckles, Jack realised that he had no idea how it all worked. He was afraid to ask Tom for help, but the harder he tried to fit the harness, the more bewildered he became. When Tom came out to see what was taking so long, he flew into a rage. He shoved Jack so hard against the stable wall that the wind was knocked out of him. It hurt, but it hurt more to see Tom taking out his anger on the patient old pony. He flung the harness on to him, yanking at the straps with all his brutal strength. Dobbs threw up his head and grunted, then followed the blacksmith at a trot out into the yard, where he was rammed backwards between the shafts of the cart.

Jack ran through the smithy to open the doors, then climbed up on to the seat and picked up the reins. Tom thrust a shilling into his hand. 'And mind you don't take all day, you hear? Or I'll show you what real trouble means!'

Dobbs trotted along nervously for the first few minutes, driven by the memory of the blacksmith's fury. But when, after a while, he realised that he was safe, he slowed to a jog, then a walk. The empty cart rattled along the rutted cobbles. Around them, the streets were busy with people; life going on outside now that the weather was so fine. Small children carried smaller ones on their hips while their mothers did what work could be done outside. Doors and shutters stood open, the interiors behind them cast into

deep gloom by the brilliance of the summer light. Washing hung from every available hook and ledge. A thousand smells, some good, some bad, rose from the city streets and met and mingled in the air. Jack was proud to be riding through it all in charge of a pony and cart, even if they were both a bit wobbly and worn.

Dobbs, recognising that Jack had no authority, had slowed to an idle, dawdling pace. He took interest in very little that happened, though he would occasionally raise his head in curiosity if they passed another horse. Jack made a few futile attempts to hurry him along, then gave up. It didn't seem fair, somehow. The pony was old; slack and bony. His bay coat was dull, and his soft, brown eyes were hollow with endurance. Jack knew that he wasn't the first apprentice to have served time behind Dobbs' slow-swinging rump, but he suspected that he might be the last. A sudden fear sprang up that the pony might just fold up between the shafts and not rise again. He had seen it once before with a cart-horse not far from his home. He remembered the light fading out of the old eyes as the horse died, and was afraid of it happening again, and of seeing Dobbs reproach him.

But he wouldn't, if he understood. In many ways Jack's life had been even harder than the pony's. He shook the reins, feeling suddenly restless. He didn't like thinking about things that made him uncomfortable. It was one of the reasons he loved the smithy so much, despite Tom's temper. He was always busy with one thing or another. There was never any empty time to sit around and reflect upon the series of misfortunes that constituted his existence, or to contemplate what possible future a boy like himself might expect.



## *Chapter Two*

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WHEN JACK ARRIVED at the quayside where he and William had previously collected charcoal, there was nothing to be seen but a large area of black dust on the flagstones. He pulled Dobbs to a halt and looked around. He remembered the river wall to be a busy place, with boats drawing in regularly to load or unload, but now it was remarkably quiet.

Dobbs swished his short tail listlessly and rested a hind leg. Jack looped the reins around the front rail of the cart and slipped down on to the ground. The river smelled foul in the afternoon heat and it was with a slight feeling of distaste that Jack approached the quay. Two men were sitting on a pile of sacks, but there was no activity. There didn't even seem to be any boats.

'Looking for something?' one of the men called.

'Charcoal,' said Jack.

'It's there all right,' said the man. 'Over there, see?'

Jack followed his pointing finger to a small boat, at anchor in the middle of the river, and now he saw what the problem was. The tide, which backed up the river from the sea, was right out. A long spell of dry weather had left the water level low and there was no way that any boat could unload until the tide lifted it up nearer to the level of the docks.

'Will it be long?' he asked.

'No. Not too long.'

Jack sat down on the warm stone of the river wall and dangled his legs over the side. The water was so low that a pair of swans near the opposite bank were grazing the river-bed, dipping their long necks and emerging with mouths full of slimy green weed. Beneath him, a little further upstream,

another boat was sitting on its keel, listing over away from the wall. Jack sighed and settled down to wait.

He had no way of knowing how fast or how slowly the afternoon was passing. The two men settled themselves down on their bulging sacks and went to sleep, but Jack could find no release from the gruelling pressure of wasted time. The swans finished their meal and swam on, out of sight. Occasionally a fish jumped and broke the murky surface of the water. Most of the time there was nothing.

Jack's anxiety increased with every minute that passed. It didn't matter that he wasn't to blame for the delay. He was going to be in trouble with Tom, and the longer he was away, the worse the trouble would be. By the time he thought of going back to the forge, he had already left it too late and the tide was beginning to come in. But it was slow, much slower than he had expected. The sun dipped behind the houses on the opposite bank and an evening feel crept into the air. The two men were joined by two more, who woke them up. Their boat was rising up the side of the wall now, and after a leisurely conversation, they shortened the painter and began to lower the sacks into the hold.

Still the charcoal boat did not come in. Jack was joined by another cart and a handful of women and children with buckets and baskets, all waiting in cheerful companionship. Jack wished he felt half as cheerful. He could feel Tom's anger already.

Eventually the boat lifted anchor and was punted across the current and tied up. It was still a good deal lower than the top of the wall but the crew seemed to have decided that the water level was about as high as it would get. The coals were shovelled into large, soft baskets, which were hauled up on to the quayside. The number of waiting customers seemed to double with the arrival of the boat, and they joined in, hurrying the work along. Jack moved forward to help, trying to get his cart loaded and away, but he hadn't a chance. Everyone else seemed bigger and

stronger than he was. He was shouldered out of the way time after time, with the result that instead of being first, he was one of the last to get his load. By that time, most of the others had gone. He brought the patient Dobbs up close to the dock, but he couldn't lift the baskets up to the height of the cart and had to empty them on to the ground and shovel up the charcoal from there.

It was back-breaking work. The little cart seemed to be bottomless, the shovel both too small and too heavy. Further along the wall, the men finished loading their sacks and went home. The crew set full sails and the boat drifted languidly upriver before a light breeze. Jack wished he was on it. He had never been out of London. Up the river, he knew, were fields and farms and open countryside. His mother had been born among them somewhere, but he could only guess what they looked like.

When, at last, the coals began to roll back down from the top of the heap in the cart, Jack stopped and slung the shovel underneath the driver's bench. He paid the boatmen, climbed up behind Dobbs' scrawny rump and shook the reins.

The pony set off willingly, eager to get home. He knew the way better than Jack did and took each turn without any prompting. The streets were quieter now, smelling of smoke and cooking, making Jack hungry. He was hot from his work, and he took off his shirt. He was tired, too. Very tired.

'Whoa! Whoa there in the cart!'

The shout jolted him awake, but it was too late. Dobbs seemed to be asleep as well, ambling along between the shafts. His head was lolling on a level with his knees, and no matter how hard Jack hauled on the reins he would neither stop nor turn back on to his own side of the street. There was nothing that anyone could do.

It was not a dramatic accident. The speed of Dobbs' progress was minimal and the horse pulling the other cart



was more attentive and had already stopped. There was a grinding crunch as the two wheel-hubs encountered each other. Dobbs, eager to get home, leant into the battered collar of his harness despite Jack's opposition and turned a minor delay into a disaster. Jack's wheel hub rolled up over the other. The weight of the charcoal caused its rusted iron cover to shear and bite deeply into the bare wood of the bigger, newer wheel, locking the two together. Dobbs admitted defeat and relaxed. Jack dropped the reins and covered his face with his hands as the cart driver jumped down and came round to examine the problem.

People began to drift out of the nearby houses to see what was happening. A young man on his way home from work with a bag of tools slipped in between the carts and looked on, scratching his breast-bone. Dobbs stood four square, leaning into his collar slightly as though he was trying to take the weight off his feet. Jack looked up, just in time to see a couple of boys of about his own age filching pieces of charcoal from his load. He yelled at them and they backed away, giggling.

The other driver walked up beside Jack. He was a tall man and heavy set, with a slight squint which made Jack uncertain about where exactly he was looking.

'Back up,' he said. There was an underlying threat in his voice which reminded Jack of Tom, and the nightmare still to be faced. He gathered the reins and hauled on them. Dobbs put his head up and opened his mouth, but continued to lean towards home and the armful of sweet hay that would be waiting there.

'I said pull him back!'

Jack heaved again. 'I'm trying!' he said. 'He won't come.'

The man gritted his teeth and shook his head. He kicked the iron rim of the near wheel. 'Who does this contraption belong to?'

'Tom Bradley,' said Jack, still pulling fruitlessly at the reins. The young workman stepped forward and took hold of the

bridle.

'Go back,' he said, pushing hard on the pony's nose. But Dobbs just dropped his dusty old forehead against the newcomer's chest as though seeking refuge from the confusion.

'I'll give that Tom Bradley something to think about if I catch him,' said the other driver, moving back towards the pony's head. 'What does he think he's up to, sending children on his errands?'

'I'm not a child! I'm fourteen!' Jack's voice was high, strangled with emotion.

'And a liar as well!' The workman stepped back as the bigger man snatched the reins from him and clouted Dobbs squarely on the nose. Dobbs recoiled into the traces and began to back up.

'Get off him!' Jack stood up, ready to jump down to the pony's defence. There was a grinding sound as the cartwheels scrunched across the cobbles, both vehicles swivelling around the axis of the joined hubs.

'Whoa, whoa!' called one of the onlookers. 'It's no good!'

The men left Dobbs alone and went to look. If anything, the effort had made things worse. Some other solution would have to be found.

The young workman turned out to be a carpenter. He spent some time with his tool bag, trying to prise the hubs apart, but nothing came of it. After that, a few men from the growing crowd joined in, and there were several attempts to lift Jack's cart off the other one. At every failed attempt, the big man let fly a new hail of abuse at Jack and his carelessness, until Jack became immune to it and turned a deaf ear. Someone suggested that the charcoal be off-loaded, but Jack pleaded for sympathy and the idea was forgotten. There was renewed discussion among the huddle of men around the wheels, with a great deal of nodding and shaking of heads. Everyone took it in turns to bend down close and inspect the situation. Then someone made a