

## CHAPTER I

**I**T would have been idle to inquire into the antecedents, or even the circumstances, of old Mother Beggarlegs. She would never tell ; the children, at all events, were convinced of that ; and it was only the children, perhaps, who had the time and the inclination to speculate. Her occupation was clear ; she presided like a venerable stooping hawk, over a stall in the covered part of the Elgin market-place, where she sold gingerbread horses and large round gingerbread cookies, and brown sticky squares of what was known in all circles in Elgin as taffy. She came, it was understood, with the dawn ; with the night she vanished, spending the interval on a not improbable broomstick. Her gingerbread was better than anybody's ; but there was no comfort in standing, first on one foot and then on the other, while you made up your mind—the horses were spirited, and you could eat them a leg at a time, but there was more in the cookies—she bent such a look on you, so fierce and intolerant of vacillation. She belonged to the group of odd characters,