FRANCES BROWNER

GRANNY'S WONDERFUL CHAIR

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Содержание

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STORIES OLD AND NEW

A small chosen library is like a walled garden where a child may safely play. In that charmed seclusion the love of books, like the love of flowers, grows of itself. If the reading habit is to be acquired, the child ought from the first to be given real books, which may be handled with pleasure and kept with pride – books containing literature suited to its own age.

This volume belongs to a series of "Stories Old and New" which has been prepared specially for children. The books have been carefully chosen so as to include, along with many charming stories by the best children's authors of to-day, a due proportion of those older tales which never grow old.

To secure simplicity and right gradation, the text has been prepared to suit the different ages of readers. Care has been given to the illustration, print, and binding of the series, for it is believed that this is the best way to secure from the children that careful handling of the volumes which is the mark of the true book-lover.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTORY

In an old time, long ago, when the fairies were in the world, there lived a little girl so very fair and pleasant of look, that they called her Snowflower. This girl was good as well as pretty. No one had ever seen her frown or heard her say a cross word, and young and old were glad when they saw her coming.

Snowflower had no relation in the world but a very old grandmother, called Dame Frostyface. People did not like her quite so well as her granddaughter, for she was cross enough at times, though always kind to Snowflower. They lived together in a little cottage built of peat and thatched with reeds, on the edge of a great forest. Tall trees sheltered its back from the north wind, and the midday sun made its front warm and cheerful. Swallows built in the eaves, and daisies grew thick at the door.

But there were none in all that country poorer than Snowflower and her grandmother. A cat and two hens were all their live stock. Their bed was dry grass, and the only good piece of furniture in the cottage was a great armchair with wheels on its feet, a black velvet cushion, and many strange carvings of flowers and fairies on its dark oaken back.

On that chair Dame Frostyface sat spinning from morning till night, to keep herself and her granddaughter, while Snowflower

gathered sticks for the fire, looked after the hens and the cat, and did whatever else her grandmother bade her. There was nobody in that part of the country could spin such fine yarn as Dame Frostyface, but she spun very slowly. Her wheel was as old as herself, and far more worn-out. Indeed, the wonder was that it did not fall to pieces. So what the dame earned was very little, and their living was scanty. Snowflower, however, felt no want of good dinners or fine clothes.

Every evening, when the fire was heaped with the sticks she had gathered till it blazed and crackled up the cottage chimney, Dame Frostyface set aside her wheel and told her a new story. Often did the little girl wonder where her grandmother had gathered so many stories, but she soon learned that.

One sunny morning, at the time of the coming of the swallows, the dame rose up, put on the grey hood and cloak in which she carried her yarn to the fairs, and said: "My child, I am going a long journey to visit an aunt of mine, who lives far in the north country. I cannot take you with me, because my aunt is the crossest woman alive, and never liked young people. But the hens will lay eggs for you, and there is barley meal in the barrel. And, as you have been a good girl, I'll tell you what to do when you feel lonely. Lay your head gently down on the cushion of the armchair and say, 'Chair of my grandmother, tell me a story'.

"The chair was made by a clever fairy, who lived in the forest when I was young, and she gave it to me because she knew nobody could keep what they got hold of better than I could.

Remember, you must never ask a story more than once in the day. If there is any need to travel, you have only to seat yourself in it and say, 'Chair of my grandmother, take me such a way'. It will carry you wherever you wish. But mind to oil the wheels before you set out, for I have sat on it these forty years in that same corner."

Having said this, Dame Frostyface set forth to see her aunt in the north country. Snowflower gathered wood for the fire, and looked after the hens and cat, as she had always done. She baked herself a cake or two of the barley meal; but, when the evening came, the cottage looked lonely. Then Snowflower remembered her grandmother's words, and, laying her head gently down, she said: "Chair of my grandmother, tell me a story".

Hardly were the words spoken, when a clear voice from under the velvet cushion began a new and most wonderful tale, which surprised Snowflower so much that she forgot to be afraid. After that the good girl was lonely no more. Every morning she baked a barley cake, and every evening the chair told her a new story. But she could never find out to whom the voice belonged, though Snowflower showed her thanks by keeping bright the oaken back and dusting the velvet cushion, till the chair looked as good as new.

The swallows came and built in the eaves, and the daisies grew thicker than ever at the door, but great troubles fell upon Snowflower. In spite of all her care she forgot to clip the hens' wings, and they flew away one morning to visit their friends the

pheasants, who lived far in the forest. The cat went away to see its friends. The barley meal was eaten up, except two handfuls, and Snowflower had often looked out in hope of seeing the grey cloak, but Dame Frostyface did not come back.

"My grandmother stays long," said Snowflower to herself; "and by and by there will be nothing left to eat. If I could get to her, perhaps she would tell me what to do. Surely there is good need for me to travel."

Next day, at sunrise, Snowflower oiled the wheels of the chair, baked a cake out of the last of the meal, took it in her lap by way of food for the journey, seated herself, and said: "Chair of my grandmother, take me the way she went".

At once the chair gave a creak, and began to move out of the cottage, and into the forest, the very way Dame Frostyface had taken, where it rolled along at the rate of a coach and six. Snowflower was amazed at this way of travelling, but the chair never stopped nor stayed the whole summer day, till as the sun was setting they came upon an open space, where a hundred men were cutting down the tall trees with their axes, a hundred more were splitting them for firewood, and twenty men, with horses and wagons, were carrying the wood away.

"Oh! chair of my grandmother, stop!" said Snowflower, for she was tired, and also wished to know what this might mean. The chair at once stood still, and Snowflower, seeing an old woodcutter, who looked kind, stepped up to him and said: "Good father, tell me why you cut all this wood?"

"Where do you live," replied the man, "that you have not heard of the great feast which King Winwealth means to give on the birthday of his only daughter, Princess Greedalind? It will last for seven days. Everybody will be feasted, and this wood is to roast the oxen and the sheep, the geese and the turkeys, amongst whom there is great sorrow throughout the land."

When Snowflower heard that, she could not help wishing to see, and perhaps to share in, such a noble feast, after living so long on barley cakes. So, seating herself, she said: "Chair of my grandmother, take me quickly to the palace of King Winwealth."

The words were hardly spoken, when off the chair started through the trees and out of the forest, to the great surprise of the woodcutters, who, never having seen such a sight before, threw down their axes, left their wagons, and went after Snowflower to the gates of a great and splendid city, having strong walls and high towers, and standing in the midst of a wide plain covered with cornfields, fruit gardens, and villages.

It was the richest city in all the land. People from every part of the land came there to buy and sell, and there was a saying that they had only to live seven years in it to make their fortunes. Rich as they were, however, Snowflower had never seen so many discontented, greedy faces as looked out from the great shops, grand houses, and fine coaches, when her chair rattled along the streets. Indeed, the people of that city were not much thought of for either good nature or honesty. But it had not been so when King Winwealth was young, and he and his brother, Prince

Wisewit, governed the land. Prince Wisewit knew the whole art of governing, the tempers of men, and the powers of the stars. Moreover, he was a very clever man, and it was said of him that he could never die or grow old.

In his time there was neither discontent nor sickness in the city. Strangers were kindly treated without price or questions. Then no one went to law against his neighbour, and no one locked his door at night. The fairies used to come there at May Day and Michaelmas, for they were Prince Wisewit's friends – all but one, called Fortunetta, a short-sighted but very cunning fairy, who hated everybody wiser than herself, and above all the prince, because she could never cheat him.

There was peace and pleasure for many a year in King Winwealth's city, till one day at midsummer Prince Wisewit went alone to the forest, in search of a strange plant for his garden, but he never came back. Though the King, with all his guards, looked for him far and near, no news was ever heard of him. When his brother was gone, King Winwealth grew lonely in his great palace, so he married a princess called Wantall, and brought her home to be his queen.

This princess was neither handsome nor pleasant. People thought she must have gained the King's love by the charms she worked, for her whole dowry was a desert island, with a huge pit in it that could never be filled, and she was so greedy that the more she got the greedier she grew. In course of time the King and Queen had an only daughter, who was to be the heiress

of all the kingdom. Her name was the Princess Greedalind, and the whole city were at that time preparing to keep her birthday. Not that they cared much for the Princess, who was very like her mother both in looks and temper; but being King Winwealth's only daughter, people came from far and near to the feast, and among them strangers and fairies who had not been there since the day of Prince Wisewit.

There was great stir about the palace, a most noble building, so large that it had a room for every day in the year. All the floors were of beautiful dark wood, and all the roofs of silver; and there was such a large number of golden dishes used by the household, that five hundred men kept guard night and day lest any of them should be stolen.

When these guards saw Snowflower and her chair, they ran one after the other to tell the King, for the like had never been seen nor heard of in his kingdom, and all the Court crowded out to see the little maiden and her chair that came of itself.

When Snowflower saw the lords and ladies in their fine robes and splendid jewels, she began to feel ashamed of her own bare feet and linen gown. But at length taking courage, she answered all their questions, and told them everything about her wonderful chair. The Queen and the Princess cared for nothing that was not gilt. The people of the Court had learned to do the same, and all turned away in great scorn except the old King, who, thinking the chair might amuse him sometimes when he got into low spirits, allowed Snowflower to stay and feast in his worst kitchen.

The poor girl was glad of any place, though nobody made her welcome – even the servants looked down upon her bare feet and linen gown. They would give her chair no room but in a dusty corner behind the back door, where Snowflower was told that she might sleep at night, and eat up the scraps the cook threw away.

That very day the feast began. It was fine to see the great crowds of coaches and people on foot and on horseback who came to the palace, and filled every room according to their rank. Never had Snowflower seen such roasting and boiling. There was wine for the lords and ale for the common people, music and dancing of all kinds, and the best of gay dresses. But with all the good cheer there seemed little joy, and a great deal of ill humour in the palace.

Some of the guests thought they should have been feasted in grander rooms. Others were vexed to see many finer than themselves. All the servants were very displeased because they did not get presents. There was somebody caught every hour stealing the cups, and a great number of people were always at the gates shouting for goods and lands, which Queen Wantall had taken from them. The guards were always driving them away, but they came back again, and could be heard plainly in the highest hall. So it was not wonderful that the old King's spirits were very low that evening after supper. His page, who always stood behind him, seeing this, reminded His Majesty of the little girl and her chair.

"It is a good thought," said King Winwealth. "I have not heard

a story this many a year. Bring the child and the chair at once!"

The page sent someone to the first kitchen, who told the master-cook; the master-cook told the kitchen-maid; the kitchen-maid told the dust-boy, and he told Snowflower to wash her face, rub up her chair, and go to the highest hall, for the great King Winwealth wished to hear a story.

Nobody offered to help her; but when Snowflower had made herself as smart as she could with soap and water, and rubbed the chair till it looked as if dust had never fallen on it, she seated herself and said: "Chair of my grandmother, take me to the highest hall."

At once the chair marched in a grave and courtly manner out of the kitchen, up the grand staircase, and into the highest hall. The chief lords and ladies of the land were feasting there, besides many fairies and noble people from far-off countries. There had never been such company in the palace since the time of Prince Wisewit. Nobody wore less than the finest satin.

King Winwealth sat on his ivory throne in a robe of purple velvet, stiff with flowers of gold. The Queen sat by his side in a robe of silver cloth clasped with pearls. But the Princess Greedalind was finer still, the feast being in her honour. She wore a robe of cloth of gold clasped with diamonds. Two waiting-ladies in white satin stood, one on either side, to hold her fan and handkerchief, and two pages, in gold-lace livery, stood behind her chair. With all that, Princess Greedalind looked ugly and spiteful. She and her mother were angry to see a barefooted girl

and an old chair allowed to enter the highest hall.

The supper table was still covered with golden dishes, and the best of good things, but no one offered Snowflower a morsel. So, having made a humble bow to the King, the Queen, the Princess, and the good company, most of whom hardly noticed her, the poor little girl sat down upon the carpet, laid her head on the velvet cushion, as she used to do in the old cottage, and said: "Chair of my grandmother, tell me a story."

Everybody was greatly surprised, even the angry Queen and the spiteful Princess, when a clear voice from under the cushion said: "Listen to the story of the Christmas Cuckoo."

CHAPTER II
THE CHRISTMAS CUCKOO

Once upon a time there stood in the midst of a bleak moor, in the north country, a certain village. All its people were poor, for their fields were barren, and they had little trade; but the poorest of them all were two brothers called Scrub and Spare. They were cobblers, and had but one stall between them. It was a hut built of clay and wattles. The door was low and always open, for there was no window. The roof did not entirely keep out the rain, and the only thing with any look of comfort about it was a wide hearth, for which the brothers could never find wood enough to make a good fire. There they worked in most brotherly friendship, though the people did not give them very many shoes to make or mend.

The people of that village did not need many shoes, and better cobblers than Scrub and Spare might be found. Spiteful people said there were no shoes so bad that they would not be worse for their mending. Nevertheless Scrub and Spare managed to live by means of their own trade, a small barley field, and a cottage garden, till a new cobbler arrived in the village. He had lived in the chief city of the kingdom, and, by his own account, cobbled for the Queen and the princesses. His awls were sharp and his lasts were new. He set up his stall in a neat cottage with two

windows.

The villagers soon found out that one patch of his would outwear two of the brothers'. In short, all the mending left Scrub and Spare, and went to the new cobbler. The season had been wet and cold, their barley did not ripen well, and the cabbages never half closed in the garden. So the brothers were poor that winter; and when Christmas came, they had nothing to feast on but a barley loaf, a piece of musty bacon, and some small beer of their own brewing.

Worse than that, the snow was very deep, and they could get no firewood. Their hut stood at the end of the village; beyond it spread the bleak moor, now all white and silent. But that moor had once been a forest. Great roots of old trees were still to be found in it, loosened from the soil and laid bare by the winds and rains. One of these, a rough, heavy log, lay close to their door, the half of it above the snow.

Spare said to his brother: "Shall we sit here cold on Christmas Day while the great root lies yonder? Let us chop it up for firewood, the work will make us warm."

"No," said Scrub; "it's not right to chop wood on Christmas. Besides, that root is too hard to be cut with any axe."

"Hard or not, we must have a fire," replied Spare. "Come, brother, help me in with it. Poor as we are, there is nobody in the village will have such a Yule log as ours."

Scrub liked to be a little grand sometimes, and in hopes of having a fine Yule log, both brothers strove with all their

might till, between pulling and pushing, the great old root was safe on the hearth, and soon began to crackle and blaze with the red embers. In high glee, the cobblers sat down to their beer and bacon. The door was shut, for there was nothing but cold moonlight and snow outside. But the hut, strewn with fir branches, and decked with holly, looked cheerful as the ruddy blaze flared up and made their hearts glad.

"Long life and good fortune to ourselves, brother!" said Spare. "I hope you will drink that toast, and may we never have a worse fire on Christmas – but what is that?"

Spare set down the drinking-horn, and the brothers listened in great surprise, for out of the blazing root they heard "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" as plain as ever the spring bird's voice came over the moor on a May morn.

"It is something bad," said Scrub, very much frightened.

"Maybe not," said Spare.

And out of the deep hole at the side which the fire had not reached flew a large grey cuckoo, and alighted on the table before them. Much as the cobblers had been surprised at first, they were still more so when the bird began to speak.

"Good gentlemen," said the cuckoo, "what season is this?"

"It's Christmas," replied Spare.

"Then a merry Christmas to you!" said the cuckoo. "I went to sleep in the hollow of that old root last summer, and never woke till the heat of your fire made me think it was summer again. But now, since you have burned my lodging, let me stay in your

hut till the spring comes round – I only want a hole to sleep in, and when I go on my travels next summer you may be sure I will bring you some gift for your trouble."

"Stay, and welcome," said Spare, while Scrub sat wondering if it were something bad or not. "I'll make you a good warm hole in the thatch. But you must be hungry after that long sleep. There is a slice of barley bread. Come, help us to keep Christmas!"

The cuckoo ate up the slice, drank some water from the brown jug – for it would take no beer – and flew into a snug hole which Spare scooped for it in the thatch of the hut.

Scrub said he was afraid the bird wouldn't be lucky. But as it slept on, and the days passed, he forgot his fears. So the snow melted, the heavy rains came, the cold grew less, and the days became longer; and one sunny morning the brothers were awakened by the cuckoo shouting its own cry to let them know the spring had come.

"Now," said the bird, "I am going on my travels over the world to tell men of the spring. There is no country where trees bud, or flowers bloom, that I will not cry in before the year goes round. Give me another slice of bread to keep me on my journey, and tell me what gift I shall bring you at the end of the twelve months."

Scrub would have been angry with his brother for cutting so large a slice, their store of barley meal being low; but his mind was so taken up with what present it would be best for him to ask. At length a lucky thought struck him.

"Good Master Cuckoo," said he, "if a great traveller who sees

all the world like you, could know of any place where diamonds or pearls were to be found, one of a fairly large size brought in your beak would help such poor men as my brother and me to get something better than barley bread to give you the next time you come."

"I know nothing of diamonds or pearls," said the cuckoo. "They are in the hearts of rocks and the sands of rivers. I know only of that which grows on the earth. But there are two trees close by the well that lies at the end of the world. One of them is called the golden tree, for its leaves are all of beaten gold. Every winter they fall into the well with a sound like that of scattered gold, and I know not what becomes of them. As for the other, it is always green, like a laurel. Some call it the wise, and some the merry tree. Its leaves never fall but they that get one of them keep a cheerful heart in spite of all troubles, and can make themselves as merry in a hut as in a palace."

"Good Master Cuckoo, bring me a leaf off that tree!" cried Spare.

"Now, brother, don't be a fool!" said Scrub. "Think of the leaves of gold. Dear Master Cuckoo, bring me one of them!"

Before another word could be said, the cuckoo had flown out of the open door, and was shouting its spring cry over moor and meadow.

The brothers were poorer than ever that year. Nobody sent them a single shoe to mend. The new cobbler said, in scorn, they should come over and work for him. Scrub and Spare would have

left the village but for their barley field, their cabbage garden, and a maid called Fairfeather, whom both the cobblers had courted for seven years without even knowing whom she meant to favour.

Sometimes Fairfeather seemed to favour Scrub, sometimes she smiled on Spare; but the brothers were always friends and did not quarrel. They sowed their barley, planted their cabbage, and, now that their trade was gone, worked in the fields of some of the rich villagers to make out a scanty living.

So the seasons came and passed. Spring, summer, harvest, and winter followed each other as they have always done. At the end of the winter Scrub and Spare had grown so poor and ragged that Fairfeather thought them beneath her notice. Old neighbours forgot to invite them to wedding feasts or merrymaking. They thought the cuckoo had forgotten them too, when at daybreak, on the first of April, they heard a hard beak knocking at their door and a voice crying:

"Cuckoo! cuckoo! let me in with my gifts."

Spare ran to open the door, and in came the cuckoo, carrying on one side of his bill a golden leaf larger than that of any tree in the north country; and in the other, one like that of the common laurel, only it had a fresher green.

"Here," it said, giving the gold to Scrub and the green to Spare; "it is a long way to carry them from the end of the world. Give me a slice of bread, for I must tell the north country that the spring has come."

Scrub did not grudge the thickness of that slice, though it was

cut from their last loaf. So much gold had never been in the cobbler's hands before, and he could not help exulting over his brother.

"See the wisdom of my choice!" he said, holding up the large leaf of gold. "As for yours, as good might be plucked from any hedge. I wonder such a wise bird would carry the like so far."

"Good Master Cobbler," cried the cuckoo, finishing the slice, "your words are more hasty than kind. If your brother is disappointed this time, I go on the same journey every year, and for your kind treatment will think it no trouble to bring each of you whichever leaf you wish."

"Darling cuckoo!" cried Scrub, "bring me a golden one."

And Spare, looking up from the green leaf on which he gazed as though it were a crown-jewel, said:

"Be sure to bring me one from the merry tree."

And away flew the cuckoo once again.

"This is the Feast of All Fools, and it ought to be your birthday," said Scrub. "Did ever man fling away such a chance of becoming rich! Much good your merry leaves will do when you are so poor!"

So he went on; but Spare laughed at him, and answered with many old proverbs about the cares that come with gold, till Scrub, at length growing angry, vowed his brother was not fit to live with a gentleman like himself. And taking his lasts, his awls, and his golden leaf, he left the wattle hut and went to tell the villagers.

They were surprised at the folly of Spare, and charmed with

Scrub's good sense, more so when he showed them the golden leaf, and told that the cuckoo would bring him one every spring. The new cobbler at once made him a partner. The greatest people sent him their shoes to mend. Fairfeather smiled kindly on him, and in the course of the summer they were married, with a grand wedding feast, at which the whole village danced, except Spare, who was not invited, because the bride said he was low-minded, and his brother thought he was a disgrace to the family.

Indeed, all who heard the story thought that Spare must be mad, and nobody would take up with him but a lame tinker, a beggar boy, and a poor woman, who was looked upon as a witch because she was old and ugly. As for Scrub, he went with Fairfeather to a cottage close by that of the new cobbler, and quite as fine. There he mended shoes so as to please everyone, had a scarlet coat for holidays, and a fat goose for dinner every wedding-day. Fairfeather, too, had a crimson gown and fine blue ribbons. But neither she nor Scrub were content, for to buy all these grand things the golden leaf had to be broken and parted with piece by piece, so the last morsel was gone before the cuckoo came with another.

Spare lived on in the old hut, and worked in the cabbage garden. (Scrub had got the barley field, because he was the elder.) Every day his coat grew more ragged, and the hut more weather-beaten, but the people remarked that he never looked sad nor sour. The wonder was, that from the time they began to keep his company, the tinker grew kinder to the ass with which he

travelled the country, the beggar boy kept out of mischief, and the old woman was never cross to her cat or angry with the children.

Every first of April the cuckoo came tapping at their doors with the golden leaf to Scrub and the green to Spare. Fairfeather would have treated him nobly with wheaten bread and honey, for she had some notion of trying to make him bring two gold leaves instead of one. But the cuckoo flew away to eat barley bread with Spare, saying he was not fit company for fine people, and liked the old hut where he slept so snugly from Christmas to Spring.

Scrub spent the golden leaves, and Spare kept the merry ones; and I know not how many years passed in this manner, when a great lord, who owned that village, came to dwell near. His castle stood on the moor. It was old and strong, with high towers and a deep moat. All the country as far as one could see from the highest turret belonged to this lord; but he had not been there for twenty years, and would not have come then, only he was very sad.

The cause of his grief was that he had been Prime Minister at Court, and in high favour, till somebody told the Crown Prince that he had spoken with great disrespect about the turning out of His Royal Highness's toes, and the King that he did not lay on taxes enough; whereon the north-country lord was turned out of office and sent to his own estate. There he lived for some weeks in very bad temper. The servants said nothing would please him, and the people of the village put on their worst clothes lest

he should raise their rents. But one day, in the harvest time, his lordship chanced to meet Spare gathering watercresses at a meadow stream, and fell into talk with the cobbler.

How it was nobody could tell, but from that hour the great lord cast away his sadness. He forgot his lost office and his Court enemies, the King's taxes and the Crown Prince's toes, and went about with a noble train, hunting, fishing, and making merry in his hall, where all travellers were well treated and all the poor were welcome.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.