

# FRANCES BROWNER

GRANNY'S  
WONDERFUL  
CHAIR

Frances Browner

**Granny's Wonderful Chair**

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# Содержание

PREFACE	5
CHAPTER I	10
CHAPTER II	14
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# Granny's Wonderful Chair / & Its Tales of Fairy Times

## PREFACE

The writer of "Granny's Wonderful Chair" was a poet, and blind. That she was a poet the story tells on every page, but of her blindness it tells not a word. From beginning to end it is filled with pictures; each little tale has its own picturesque setting, its own vividly realised scenery. Her power of visualisation would be easy to understand had she become blind in the later years of her life, when the beauties of the physical world were impressed on her mind; but Frances Browne was blind from infancy. The pictures she gives us in her stories were created, in darkness, from material which came to her only through the words of others. In her work are no blurred lines or uncertainties, her drawing is done with a firm and vigorous hand. It would seem that the completeness of her calamity created, within her, that serenity of spirit which contrives the greatest triumphs in Life and in Art. Her endeavour was to realise the world independently of her own personal emotion and needs. She, who, out of her darkness and poverty, might have touched us so surely with her longing for her birthright of light, for her share of the world's good things, gives help and encouragement to the more fortunate.

In reading the very few details of her life we feel the stimulation as of watching one who, in a desperate fight, wins against great odds.

The odds against Frances Browne were heavy. She was born at Stranorlar, a mountain village in Donegal, on January 16, 1816. Her great-grandfather was a man of considerable property, which he squandered; and the younger generation would seem to have inherited nothing from its ancestor but his irresponsibility. Frances Browne's father was the village post-master, and she, the seventh in a family of twelve children, learning privation and endurance from the cradle. But no soil is the wrong one for genius. Whether or not hers would have developed more richly in more generous surroundings, it is difficult to say. The strong mind that could, in blindness and poverty, secure its own education, and win its way to the company of the best, the thoroughly equipped and well tended, gained a victory which genius alone made possible.

She was one of the elect, had no creative achievement crowned her triumph.

She tells us how she herself learned by heart the lessons which her brothers and sisters said aloud every evening, in readiness for the next day's school; and how she bribed them to read to her by doing their share of the household work.

When the usual bribe failed, she invented stories for them, and, in return for these, books were read to her which, while they seemed dull and uninteresting enough to the readers, built up for the eager listener those enchanted steps by which she was to climb into her intellectual kingdom.

Her habit was to say these lessons aloud at night, when every one else was asleep, to impress untiringly upon her memory the knowledge for which she persistently fought through the day.

There were no book-shops at Stranorlar, or within three counties of it, and had there been one, Frances Browne had no pennies for the luxury of books. But she had friends, and from those who were richer than herself in possession, she borrowed her tools. From the village teacher she learned French, in exchange for those lessons in grammar and geography which, her brothers and sisters had given away to her, in return for numberless wipings and scrubblings in the kitchen. Scott's novels marked an era in her mental life; and of Pope's Iliad – which she heard read when she was about fifteen – she says, "It was like the discovery of a new world, and effected a total change in my ideas and thoughts on the subject of poetry. There was at the time a considerable MS. of my own

production in existence, which of course I regarded with some partiality; but Homer had awakened me, and in a fit of sovereign contempt I committed the whole to the flames. After Homer's the work that produced the greatest impression on my mind was Byron's 'Childe Harold.' The one had induced me to burn my first MS., the other made me resolve against verse-making in future."

Her first poem was written at the age of seven, but, after this resolve of her fifteenth year, she wrote no more for nearly ten years. Then, in 1840, when she was four and twenty, a volume of Irish Songs was read to her, and her own music reawakened. She wrote a poem called "The Songs of our Land." It was published in the "Irish Penny Journal," and can be found still in Duffy's "Ballad Poetry of Ireland." After this her poems grew apace: she wrote lyrics for the "Athenaeum," "Hood's Magazine," and "Lady Blessington's Keepsake." Her work was much appreciated, and her poems were reprinted in many of the contemporary journals.

She published a complete volume of poems in 1844, and a second volume in 1848 which she called "Lyrics and Miscellaneous Poems."

The first use to which she put her literary earnings, was the education of a sister, to be her reader and amanuensis. In Frances Browne's life each step was in the direction of her goal. From its beginning to its end the strong mind pressed unhesitatingly forward to its complete development, seeking the inner light more steadfastly for the absence of external vision.

Her income was a pension of £20, from the Royal Bounty Fund; and with this, for all security, she set out, in 1847, with her sister to Edinburgh, determined to make her own way in the literary world. At leaving her native land she says:

"I go as one that comes no more, yet go without regret;  
The summers other memories store 'twere summer to forget;  
I go without one parting word, one grasp of parting hand,  
As to the wide air goes the bird – yet fare thee well, my land!"

She quickly made friends in Edinburgh, won by her genius and character, in the circle which included Christopher North. Her industry was amazing: she wrote essays, reviews, leaders, lyrics, stories – indeed, she wrote anything she was asked to write, and under the pressure of her work her prose strengthened and developed. But all her energy could not make her rich. "The waters of her lot," she says, "were often troubled, though not by angels." Her own health interfered with her work, and, from the beginning, she out of her own poverty tried to relieve that of her mother.

In 1852 she moved to London, and here, by the gift of £100 from the Marquis of Lansdowne, she was for the time released from the pressure of daily necessity. She concentrated on a more important work than she had yet attempted, and wrote a novel which she called "My Share of the World."

It is written in the form of an autobiography of one Frederick Favoursham, a youthful straggler through journalism and tutorship, who wins nothing better, in the end, than a lonely possession of vast estates. But one realises fully, in this story, the strength of a mind whose endeavour is to probe the heart of things, and whose firm incisive expression translates precisely what the mind discovers.

There are in this work, and it is natural it should be so, one or two touches of self-revelation; the only ones, I think, which she, in all her writing, permitted herself. She makes her hero say of his mother – "Well I remember her old blue gown, her hands hard with rough work, her still girlish figure and small pale face, from which the bloom and the prettiness had gone so early; but the hard hand had, in its kindly pressure, the only genuine love I ever knew; the pale face looks yet on my sleep with a blessing, and the old gown has turned, in my dreams, to the radiant robe of an angel."

And the delicate sensitive character of Lucy, the heroine, reads like the expression of the writer's own personality: into it she has put a touch of romance. In all her work there is never a word of personal complaint, but the words she puts into the mouth of her hero, when Lucy commits suicide,

must have been born of her own suffering: "When the burden outgrows the strength so far that moral as well as physical energies begin to fail, and there is no door but death's that will welcome our weariness, what remains but to creep into that quiet shelter? I think it had come to that with Lucy. Her days were threatened by a calamity, the most terrible in the list of human ills, which the wise Manetho, the last of the Egyptians, with his brave Pagan heart and large philosophy, thought good and sufficient warrant for a man's resigning his place on the earth."

Among other mental qualities, she had, for the fortification of her spirit, a sense of humour. In this same book she writes of "a little man of that peculiar figure which looks as if a not very well filled sack had somehow got legs;" and commenting on a little difficulty of her hero's making, she says, "It is rather an awkward business to meet a family at breakfast whose only son one has kicked overnight."

And how elastic and untarnished must that nature have been which, after years of continuous struggle for bare subsistence, could put her money-wise people on to paper and quietly say of them that "To keep a daily watch over passing pence did not disturb the Fentons – it was a mental exercise suited to their capacities." The turning of that sentence was surely an exquisite pleasure to its author. And "My Share of the World" is full of cleverly-turned sentences – "Hartley cared for nobody, and I believe the corollary of the miller's song was verified in his favour."

But we must not linger longer over her novel, its pages are full of passages which tell of the vigorous quality of her mind.

Frances Browne's poetry is as impersonal as her prose. She belonged to the first order of artists, if there be distinction in our gratitude. The material with which she tried to deal was Life – apart from herself – a perhaps bigger, and, certainly, a harder piece of work than the subjective expression of a single personality.

The subjects of her poems are in many lands and periods. The most ambitious – "The Star of Attéghéi" – is a tale of Circassia, another is of a twelfth-century monk and the philosopher's stone, another of an Arab; and another is of that Cyprus tree which is said to have been planted at the birth of Christ, and to spare which Napoleon deviated from his course when he ordered the making of the road over the Simplon.

"Why came it not, when o'er my life  
A cloud of darkness hung,  
When years were lost in fruitless strife,  
But still my heart was young?  
How hath the shower forgot the spring,  
And fallen on Autumn's withering?"

These lines are from a poem called "The Unknown Crown." The messenger who came to tell Tasso the laureate crown had been decreed him, found him dying in a convent.

Then she has verses on Boston, on Protestant Union in New England, on the Abolition of Slavery in the United States, on the Parliament grant for the improvement of the Shannon. Her mind compelled externals to its use.

A love of nature was in her soul, a perception of the beauty of the world. She, with her poet's spirit, saw all the green and leafy places of the earth, all its flowery ways – while they, may be, were trodden heedlessly by those about her with their gift of sight.

"Sing on by fane and forest old  
By tombs and cottage eaves,  
And tell the waste of coming flowers  
The woods of coming leaves; —  
The same sweet song that o'er the birth

Of earliest blossoms rang,  
And caught its music from the hymn  
The stars of morning sang."

*("The Birds of Spring.")*

"Ye early minstrels of the earth,  
Whose mighty voices woke  
The echoes of its infant woods,  
Ere yet the tempest spoke;  
How is it that ye waken still  
The young heart's happy dreams,  
And shed your light on darkened days  
O bright and blessed streams?"

*("Streams.")*

"Words – words of hope! – oh! long believed,  
As oracles of old,  
When stars of promise have deceived.  
And beacon-fires grown cold!  
Though still, upon time's stormy steeps,  
Such sounds are faint and few,  
Yet oft from cold and stranger lips  
Hath fallen that blessed dew, – That,  
like the rock-kept rain, remained  
When many a sweeter fount was drained."

*("Words.")*

Many and many such verses there are which might be quoted, but her work for children is waiting. – For them she wrote many stories, and in their employ her imagination travelled into many lands. The most popular was "Granny's Wonderful Chair," published in 1856. It was at once a favourite, and quickly out of print, and, strangely enough, was not reprinted until 1880. Then new editions were issued in 1881, '82, '83, '84, '87, and '89. In 1887 Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnet published it, with a preface, under the title "Stories from the Lost Fairy Book," re-told by the child who read them. "The Lost Fairy Book" was "Granny's Wonderful Chair."

One has not far to read to discover the secret of its popularity with children. It is full of word-pictures, of picturesque settings. Her power of visualisation is shown in these fairy-tales more, perhaps, than in any other of her writings. Truly, she was fortunate in having the Irish fairies to lead her into their gossamer-strewn ways, to touch her fancy with their magic, and put upon her the glamour of their land. When the stories are of them she is, perhaps, at her best; but each story in the book makes a complete picture, each has enough and no more of colour and scene. And the little pictures are kept in their places, pinned down to reality, by delightful touches of humour. Of the wonderful chair Dame Frostyface says in the beginning of the story, "It was made by a cunning fairy who lived in the forest when I was young, and she gave it to me because she knew nobody would keep what they got hold of better."

How did a writer who never saw a coach, or a palace, or the picture of a coach or a palace, tell of the palace and the people and the multitudes, of the roasting and boiling, of the spiced ale and the dancing?

Whence came her vision of the old woman who weaved her own hair into grey cloth at a crazy loom; of the fortified city in the plain, with cornfields and villages; of floors of ebony and ceilings of silver; of swallows that built in the eaves while the daisies grew thick at the door?

Had her descriptions been borrowed, the wonder of them would cease. But her words are her own, and they are used sparingly, as by one who sees too vividly what she is describing to add one unnecessary or indistinct touch. She seems as much at home under the sea, among hills of marble and rocks of spa, as with the shepherds on the moorland, or when she tells of the spring and the budding of the topmost boughs.

The enrichment of little Snowflower, by the King's gifts, links these stories together as artistically as the telling of the princess's raiment in that beautiful book "A Digit of the Moon;" and right glad we are when the poorly clad little girl takes her place among the grand courtiers, and is led away to happiness by the Prince.

Frances Browne's list of contributions to children's literature is a long one. In reading these books one is surprised by the size of her imaginative territory; by the diversity of the knowledge she acquired.

One, "The Exile's Trust," is a story of the French Revolution, in which Charlotte Corday is introduced; and in it are descriptions of the scenery of Lower Normandy; another, "The First of the African Diamonds," is a tale of the Dutch and the banks of the Orange River. Then, in "The Young Foresters," she conducts her young heroes to Archangel, to see the fine frost and clear sky, the long winter nights and long summer days, to adventure with wolves in the forest and with pirates by sea.

In "The Dangerous Guest" she is in the time of the Young Pretender, and in "The Eriksons," "The Clever Boy," and "Our Uncle the Traveller," she wanders far and wide.

In reviewing her subjects one realises afresh the richness of the world she created within her own darkness.

A wonderful law of Exchange keeps safe the precious things of Life, and it operates by strange and unexpected means. In this instance it was most beautifully maintained; for Frances Browne, the iron of calamity was transmuted to gold.

Thus it has been, and thus it shall be; so long as the world shall last, circumstance shall not conquer a strong and beautiful spirit.

*D. R.*

*August 1906.*

## **Bibliography**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

In an old time, long ago, when the fairies were in the world, there lived a little girl so uncommonly 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, but always kind to Snowflower; and 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; the mid-day sun made its front warm and cheerful; swallows built in the eaves; 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 arm-chair with wheels on its feet, a black velvet cushion, and many curious carvings of flowers and fawns on its dark oaken back.

On that chair Dame Frostyface sat spinning from morning till night to maintain herself and her granddaughter, while Snowflower gathered sticks for firing, looked after the hens and the cat, and did whatever else her grandmother bade her. There was nobody in the shire could spin such fine yarn as Dame Frostyface, but she spun very slowly. Her wheel was as old as herself, and far the more worn; indeed, the wonder was that it did not fall to pieces. So the dame's earnings were small, and their living meagre. 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 swallows coming, the dame rose up, put on the grey hood and mantle 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 crossiest woman alive, and never liked young people: but the hens will lay eggs for you; 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 arm-chair, and say, 'Chair of my grandmother, tell me a story.' It was made by a cunning 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. Remember, you must never ask a story more than once in the day; and if there be any occasion 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 firing and looked after the hens and cat as usual. She baked herself a cake or two of the barley-meal; but when the evening fell 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."

Scarce were the words spoken, when a clear voice from under the velvet cushion began to tell a new and most wonderful tale, which surprised Snowflower so much that she forgot to be frightened. 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 who owned the voice, though Snowflower showed her gratitude by polishing up the oaken back, and dusting the velvet cushion, till the chair looked as good as new. The swallows came and built in the eaves, the daisies grew thicker than ever

at the door; but great misfortunes fell upon Snowflower. Notwithstanding 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 followed them to see its relations; the barley-meal was eaten up, except a couple of handfuls; and Snowflower had often strained her eyes in hopes of seeing the grey mantle, but there was no appearance of Dame Frostyface.

"My grandmother stays long," said Snowflower to herself; "and by and by there will be nothing to eat. If I could get to her, perhaps she would advise me what to do; and this is a good occasion for travelling."

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

Presently 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 style 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 hewing down the tall trees with their axes, a hundred more were cleaving them for firewood, and twenty waggons, with horses and waggons, 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 immediately stood still, and Snowflower, seeing an old woodcutter, who looked civil, stepped up to him, and said, "Good father, tell me why you cut all this wood?"

"What ignorant country girl are you?" replied the man, "not to have heard of the great feast which our sovereign, King Winwealth, means to give on the birthday of his only daughter, the Princess Greedalind. It will last 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 a great lamentation throughout the land."

When Snowflower heard that she could not help wishing to see, and perhaps 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 amazement of the woodcutters, who, never having seen such a sight before, threw down their axes, left their waggons, and followed Snowflower to the gates of a great and splendid city, fortified with strong walls and high towers, and standing in the midst of a wide plain covered with cornfields, orchards, and villages.

It was the richest city in all the land; merchants from every quarter came there to buy and sell, and there was a saying that people had only to live seven years in it to make their fortunes. Rich as they were, however, Snowflower thought she had never seen so many discontented, covetous faces as looked out from the great shops, grand houses, and fine coaches, when her chair rattled along the streets; indeed, the citizens did not stand high in repute 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 together – Wisewit was a wonderful prince for knowledge and prudence. He knew the whole art of government, the tempers of men, and the powers of the stars; moreover, he was a great magician, 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 hospitably entertained without price or questions. Lawsuits there were none, 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 shortsighted but very cunning fairy, who hated everybody wiser than herself, and the prince especially, because she could never deceive 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 herb for his garden, but he never came back; and though the king, with all his guards, searched 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 certain princess, called Wantall, and brought her home to be his queen. This princess was neither handsome nor agreeable. People thought she must have gained the king's love by enchantment, for her whole dowry was a desert island, with a huge pit in it that never could be filled, and her disposition was so covetous, that the more she got the greedier she grew. In process of time the king and queen had an only daughter, who was to be the heiress of all their dominions. Her name was the Princess Greedalind, and the whole city were making preparations to celebrate her birthday – not that they cared much for the princess, who was remarkably like her mother both in looks and temper, but being King Winwealth's only daughter, people came from far and near to the festival, and among them strangers and fairies who had not been there since the day of Prince Wisewit.

There was surprising bustle about the palace, a most noble building, so spacious that it had a room for every day in the year. All the floors were of ebony, and all the ceilings of silver, and there was such a supply of golden dishes used by the household, that five hundred armed 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 dominions, and the whole court crowded out to see the little maiden and her chair that came of itself.

When Snowflower saw the lords and ladies in their embroidered 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 courtiers had learned the same fashion, and all turned away in high disdain except the old king, who, thinking the chair might amuse him sometimes when he got out of spirits, allowed Snowflower to stay and feast with the scullion in his worst kitchen. The poor little girl was glad of any quarters, though nobody made her welcome – even the servants despised 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 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 multitudes of coaches and people on foot and on horseback who crowded 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 spiced 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 merriment, and a 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 dissatisfied because they did not get presents. There was somebody caught every hour stealing the cups, and a multitude of people were always at the gates clamouring for goods and lands, which Queen Wantall had taken from them. The guards continually drove them away, but they came back again, and could be heard plainly in the highest banquet hall: so it was not wonderful that the old king's spirits got uncommonly low that evening after supper. His favourite page, who always stood behind him, perceiving 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 instantly!"

The favourite page sent a messenger to the first kitchen, who told the master-cook, the master-cook told the kitchen-maid, the kitchen-maid told the chief-scullion, the chief-scullion told the dust-boy, and he told Snowflower to wash her face, rub up her chair, and go to the highest banquet 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 banquet hall."

Instantly the chair marched in a grave and courtly fashion out of the kitchen, up the grand staircase, and into the highest hall. The chief lords and ladies of the land were entertained there,

besides many fairies and notable people from distant countries. There had never been such company in the palace since the time of Prince Wisewit; nobody wore less than embroidered 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 banquet 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 an humble courtesy to the king, the queen, the princess, and the good company, most of whom scarcely 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 astonished, even to 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 inhabitants 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, who followed the cobbler's craft, 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 comfortable about it was a wide hearth, for which the brothers could never find wood enough to make a sufficient fire. There they worked in most brotherly friendship, though with little encouragement.

"The people of that village were not extravagant in 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 between their own trade, a small barley field, and a cottage garden, till one unlucky day when a new cobbler arrived in the village. He had lived in the capital city of the kingdom, and, by his own account, cobbled for the queen and the princesses. His awls were sharp, 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 wear 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 rusty 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, gnarled log, lay hard by their door, the half of it above the snow, and Spare said to his brother —

"Shall we sit here cold on Christmas 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 broken with any hatchet.'

"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 a little grandeur, and in hopes of having a fine yule log, both brothers strained and strove with all their might till, between pulling and pushing, the great old root was safe on the hearth, and beginning 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 boughs, and ornamented with holly, looked cheerful as the ruddy blaze flared up and rejoiced their hearts.

"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 astonished, 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 morning.

"It is something bad,' said Scrub, terribly frightened.

"May be not,' said Spare; and out of the deep hole at the side which the fire had not reached flew a large grey cuckoo, and lit on the table before them. Much as the cobblers had been surprised, they were still more so when it said —

"Good gentlemen, what season is this?'

"It's Christmas,' said Spare.

"Then a merry Christmas to you!' said the cuckoo. 'I went to sleep in the hollow of that old root one evening 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 be assured I will bring you some present 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? – here is a slice of barley bread. Come help us to keep Christmas!'

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

"Scrub said he was afraid it 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, the days lengthened, and one sunny morning the brothers were awake by the cuckoo shouting its own cry to let them know the spring had come.

"Now I'm going on my travels,' said the bird, '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 barley bread to keep me on my journey, and tell me what present I shall bring you at the twelve-month's end.'

"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 occupied with what present would be most prudent 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 tolerable size brought in your beak would help such poor men as my brother and I to provide something better than barley bread for your next entertainment.'

"I know nothing of diamonds or pearls,' said the cuckoo; 'they are in the hearts of rocks and the sands of rivers. My knowledge is only of that which grows on the earth. But there are two trees hard by the well that lies at the world's end – 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 scattered coin, 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 blithe heart in spite of all misfortunes, 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 beaten gold! Dear master cuckoo, bring me one of them!'

"Before another word could be spoken, 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 would send them a single shoe to mend. The new cobbler said, in scorn, they should come to be his apprentices; and Scrub and Spare would have left the village but for their barley field, their cabbage garden, and a certain maid called Fairfeather, whom both the cobblers had courted for seven years without even knowing which she meant to favour.

"Sometimes Fairfeather seemed inclined to Scrub, sometimes she smiled on Spare; but the brothers never disputed for that. They sowed their barley, planted their cabbage, and now that their trade was gone, worked in the rich villagers' fields to make out a scanty living. So the seasons came and passed: spring, summer, harvest, and winter followed each other as they have done from the beginning. At the end of the latter, 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; and 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 presents."

"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 carriage from the world's end. Give me a slice of barley 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 a sensible bird would carry the like so far.'

"Good master cobbler," cried the cuckoo, finishing the slice, 'your conclusions are more hasty than courteous. If your brother be disappointed this time, I go on the same journey every year, and for your hospitable entertainment will think it no trouble to bring each of you whichever leaf you desire.'

"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.

"This is the Feast of All Fools, and it ought to be your birthday," said Scrub. 'Did ever man fling away such an opportunity of getting rich! Much good your merry leaves will do in the midst of rags and poverty!' So he went on, but Spare laughed at him, and answered with quaint old proverbs concerning the cares that come with gold, till Scrub, at length getting angry, vowed his brother was not fit to live with a respectable man; and taking his lasts, his awls, and his golden leaf, he left the wattle hut, and went to tell the villagers.

"They were astonished at the folly of Spare and charmed with Scrub's good sense, particularly when he showed them the golden leaf, and told that the cuckoo would bring him one every spring. The new cobbler immediately took him into partnership; the greatest people sent him their shoes to mend; Fairfeather smiled graciously upon him, and in the course of that summer they were married, with a grand wedding feast, at which the whole village danced, except Spare, who was not invited, because the bride could not bear his low-mindedness, and his brother thought him a disgrace to the family.

"Indeed, all who heard the story concluded that Spare must be mad, and nobody would associate with him but a lame tinker, a beggar-boy, and a poor woman reputed to be a witch because she was old and ugly. As for Scrub, he established himself with Fairfeather in a cottage close by that of the new cobbler, and quite as fine. There he mended shoes to everybody's satisfaction, had a scarlet coat for holidays, and a fat goose for dinner every wedding-day. Fairfeather, too, had a crimson gown and fine blue ribands; but neither she nor Scrub were content, for to buy this grandeur 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 eldest.) Every day his coat grew more ragged, and the hut more weatherbeaten; but people remarked that he never looked sad nor sour; and the wonder was, that from the time they began to keep his company, the tinker grew kinder to the poor 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 entertained him nobly with wheaten bread and honey, for she had some notion of persuading him to 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 till 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 certain great lord, who owned that village came to the neighbourhood. His castle stood on the moor. It was ancient and strong, with high towers and a deep moat. All the country, as far as one could see from the highest turret, belonged to its lord; but he had not been there for twenty years, and would not have come then, only he was melancholy. 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 disrespectfully concerning 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 banished to his own estate. There he lived for some weeks in very bad temper. The servants said nothing would please him, and the villagers 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 water cresses at a meadow stream, and fell into talk with the cobbler.

"How it was nobody could tell, but from the hour of that discourse the great lord cast away his melancholy: 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 entertained and all the poor were welcome. This strange story spread through the north country, and great company came to the cobbler's hut – rich men who had lost their money, poor men who had lost their friends, beauties who had grown old, wits who had gone out of fashion, all came to talk with Spare, and whatever their troubles had been, all went home merry. The rich gave him presents, the poor gave him thanks. Spare's coat ceased to be ragged, he had bacon with his cabbage, and the villagers began to think there was some sense in him.

"By this time his fame had reached the capital city, and even the court. There were a great many discontented people there besides the king, who had lately fallen into ill-humour because a neighbouring princess, with seven islands for her dowry, would not marry his eldest son. So a royal messenger was sent to Spare, with a velvet mantle, a diamond ring, and a command that he should repair to court immediately.

"'To-morrow is the first of April,' said Spare, 'and I will go with you two hours after sunrise.'

"The messenger lodged all night at the castle, and the cuckoo came at sunrise with the merry leaf.

"'Court is a fine place,' he said when the cobbler told him he was going; 'but I cannot come there, they would lay snares and catch me; so be careful of the leaves I have brought you, and give me a farewell slice of barley bread.'

"Spare was sorry to part with the cuckoo, little as he had of his company; but he gave him a slice which would have broken Scrub's heart in former times, it was so thick and large; and having sewed up the leaves in the lining of his leather doublet, he set out with the messenger on his way to court.

"His coming caused great surprise there. Everybody wondered what the king could see in such a common-looking man; but scarce had his majesty conversed with him half an hour, when the princess and her seven islands were forgotten, and orders given that a feast for all comers should be spread in the banquet hall. The princes of the blood, the great lords and ladies, ministers of state, and judges of the land, after that discoursed with Spare, and the more they talked the lighter grew their hearts, so that such changes had never been seen at court. The lords forgot their spites and the ladies their envies, the princes and ministers made friends among themselves, and the judges showed no favour.

"As for Spare, he had a chamber assigned him in the palace, and a seat at the king's table; one sent him rich robes and another costly jewels; but in the midst of all his grandeur he still wore the leathern doublet, which the palace servants thought remarkably mean. One day the king's attention being drawn to it by the chief page, his majesty inquired why Spare didn't give it to a beggar? But the cobbler answered —

"High and mighty monarch, this doublet was with me before silk and velvet came – I find it easier to wear than the court cut; moreover, it serves to keep me humble, by recalling the days when it was my holiday garment.'

"The king thought this a wise speech, and commanded that no one should find fault with the leathern doublet. So things went, till tidings of his brother's good fortune reached Scrub in the moorland cottage on another first of April, when the cuckoo came with two golden leaves, because he had none to carry for Spare.

"Think of that!' said Fairfeather. 'Here we are spending our lives in this humdrum place, and Spare making his fortune at court with two or three paltry green leaves! What would they say to our golden ones? Let us pack up and make our way to the king's palace; I'm sure he will make you a lord and me a lady of honour, not to speak of all the fine clothes and presents we shall have.'

"Scrub thought this excellent reasoning, and their packing up began: but it was soon found that the cottage contained few things fit for carrying to court. Fairfeather could not think of her wooden bowls, spoons, and trenchers being seen there. Scrub considered his lasts and awls better left behind, as without them, he concluded, no one would suspect him of being a cobbler. So putting on their holiday clothes, Fairfeather took her looking-glass and Scrub his drinking horn, which happened to have a very thin rim of silver, and each carrying a golden leaf carefully wrapped up that none might see it till they reached the palace, the pair set out in great expectation.

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