

OLD GRANNY SEARS.

THE HESPERIAN PRIZE STORY.

She was old and ugly and hump-backed. When she went away from home, she always wore a tall black, cone-shaped hat with a stiff, narrow brim; a band of black ribbon was tied around the crown, and hung down behind in two long streamers.

To see her at a distance, reminded one so much of the quaint familiar pictures of "Mother Goose" that one would almost involuntarily look around to see if the "very fine gander" and the "son Jack" were not also around somewhere near. But when she came closer—close enough to give one a glimpse of her face!—well—this is how she looked: her mouth was big; she only had a few teeth, and these were yellow; her puffy cheeks were brown and shiny; her little, piercing eyes were black, and shaded by a heavy growth of eye-brows; her forehead was wrinkled, and her beak-like nose and up-turned chin threatened to meet, sometime, in front of her sunken lips.

So, when she came nearer, the thought of "Mother Goose, with her gander and her son Jack" disappeared, and one could think only of witches, and broom sticks, and weird mischief.

And, yet, Old Granny Sears, for that was what she was called, was not even a relative of Old Mother Goose singing jolly little ditties to the children, nor had she ever been caught dealing in witchcraft.

She was just a human woman, living all by herself, in a little old weather-beaten house, close beside the road, where it turned at the foot of the hill.

The corner of the dingy fence which enclosed her little sodded yard was so close to the road, that passing teams almost pushed against it, and the post, to which the boards were nailed, was well worn in places, where heavy wagon wheels had knocked it.

Here, at this corner, the children used to stand and peek timidly through the fence at the queer old woman of whom they were all afraid.

In summer, her front door was usually open, and they could see her bent, deformed figure stooping over the loom, in which she wove rag carpets. The rude, strang looking machine, with its roll of vari-colored carpets, and the queer little old weaver held a strange fascination for the children. It was such a mystery to them how she could change the balls of red, and white, and yellow rags, so rudely sewed together, into yards of smooth, bright carpet. Perhaps their fear of her was partly due to awe of this superior power of hers.

Sometimes, she would come and stand in the open door, and then how the watchers outside the fence would scatter! It would seem as if they had suddenly remembered speedy errands their mothers had sent them on. It is hard to guess what they thought would happen to them if they stayed to meet her gaze—but is certain that none of them were ever brave enough to try it.

Sometimes they saw her go out into the yard with a dish of corn meal, mixed with water. This she sprinkled about her, on the ground, and coaxingly called, "Chick, chick, chick." Then a hundred or more half grown chickens, white, black, yellow, and speckled, would swarm around her, chirping and greedily picking up the morsels, while she talked to them, and gently scolded them, just as if they could understand.

And then, sometimes, she carried corn out to the open shed, near the alley, and gave it to the solemn-faced red cow, which stood there chewing, all day long. The cow was not afraid of her, any more than the chickens had been, but turned toward her with as much affection as any cow has ever been known to evince; and the old woman would gently stroke her head, and talk to her, calling her by name, just as if she were a person.

The children had noticed these signs of gentleness in the woman, yet still they were afraid of her. In fact, "Granny Sears" was a name that struck terror to all the children in town—even the lion-hearted small boy.