



The Crone's Sore Feet

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Humor, Kids, Magic

Grandmother's stories always began this way:

"In a faraway land a long time ago..."

This story begins that way, too. But now that I am quite old and a grandmother myself, I may remember the story a little differently from the way my grandmother told it to me.

The way Grandmother could tell stories just so, with such detail, made me think they were real when I was your age. But of course, that was silly of me, wasn't it?

Well, my dear, pay attention to this story and decide for yourself.

Listen:

In a faraway land a long time ago, many, many ages ago, in fact, in an age so old that is not even named, is not even known to have existed in the fields of science and archeology, our mother earth was brimming with magic and wonder. So we, you and I, the story's teller and the story's listener, may, if we choose, and we do, call this age The Age of Magic and Wonder.

In The Age of Magic and Wonder a spectacular assortment of plants and animals lived, some of which would look, at a glance, familiar to us as animals we know today. But there are those whose likenesses have only been approximately preserved in the silliest (according to adults) of childrens' books of fiction.

Think of the silliest animal pictures in the silliest of books that you have ever seen. In The Age of Magic and

Wonder those animals were real.

Oh that was a grand age to be alive in. All that was needed was to open one's doors and windows, or even better, to open the door and cross the threshold. Then one stepped right out into The Age of Magic and Wonder to witness close-up sights and sounds to thrill the heart and mind.

But there were perils too in The Age of Magic and Wonder, for man and woman, boy and girl. There have always been perils. No age is free from them. This brings us neatly, my dear, to Grandmother's story about a young lady who lived near the northern mountains of the dragons in a thriving village there perched on a plateau overlooking The Great Cold Sea.

The girl was named Grace Goodangel.

Every morning and afternoon Grace was charged with caring for her elderly grandmother. Grace loved her grandmother, as she should, but her grandmother was mean to her. In fact she treated anyone who came near her with poisonous vitriol, young and old alike, even Grace's parents, who didn't force Grace to care for her grandmother, but were glad she did so they didn't have to.

Every morning from the day she was twelve years old, even on school days, Grace rose before sunrise in order to make the half-hour walk to the far side of the village, near the White Cliffs, to care for her grandmother, whose name was Gertrude Crone.

On this day, the day of our story, a cool but bright and sunny spring morning, Grace Goodangel turned seventeen years old without fanfare or even notice.

And she had overslept, causing her to have to run all the way through her village to her grandmother's cottage, a wooden structure overlooking The Great Cold Sea. On the sea side of the house, only a low, wooden, white fence separated visitors from falling to their deaths on the craggy rocks five hundred feet below.

When Grace arrived in the yard, breathless and with a stitch in her side, Grace checked the magical sundial inside her grandmother's yard and saw that only a sliver of light remained before the shadow touched her required arrival time. Her grandmother would know, magically, if it touched before she knocked on the front door; so Grace sprinted the final yards to the door and rapped with her knuckles the coded knock her grandmother had instructed her to perform on her very first morning of service those five long years ago.

And as trained, on that day, she waited for her grandmother's signal of approval to come inside.

While waiting to come in the house Grace heard the pigs rooting and grunting from their enclosure in the back yard. She hoped she never had to de-worm those horrible creatures again, as she had once had to do as punishment for being late once before. The pigs were large, spoiled, and bit hard whenever given the opportunity.

Then her grandmother's reply, three short, sharp retorts on a brass horn sounded and Grace lifted the lock lever to let herself inside the dark, foreboding cottage that smelled of cat urine and stale chewing tobacco spit. There were windows in there but they were shut tight and covered with ancient, heavy, red drapes that filtered all light except for red, which bathed everything in a bloody tint.

Grandmother Crone refused to allow Grace to open the windows, which made Grace's work of cleaning the house all the more difficult, that and the twenty or more cats, the only animals her grandmother allowed in the house. The cats had the run of the house, coming and going from the outside world by way of a small, hinged panel in the back door.

Grace braced herself as she entered the cottage. There were many a night that she had cried herself to sleep not wanting to come to her grandmother's the next morning. But by the light of the day she would chastise herself for feeling sorry for herself and always arose to do what she considered to be her duty.

But as Grace closed the door it came, what she had feared the most: her grandmother's wrath!

"You're late!" Came a high, wretched voice from inside the dark crimson of the cottage.

"Beg your pardon," Grace said, her eyes adjusting quickly to the dim, red light, "but the magical sundial clock outside..."

"Don't dispute me!" the voice interrupted. "I know what time it is better than that sun dial and you're late!"

Well, my dear, there she was: Grace's Grandmother, Gertrude Crone, the most hated, vile woman in the village, who was rumored to have nagged at least six husbands to death and possibly to have fed them to her cats and pigs. She appeared in the living room from the shadows of her bedroom, robed, stooped, slippers and frowning, holding the brass horn. She spat tobacco juice on the floor from a crispy cracked sphincter of mouse lips and shouted, "Clean that up!"

Grace bowed respectfully. "Yes, Grandmother," she said, and hurried to the basement to retrieve her cleaning supplies.

In the basement, one of the cats, who Grace suspected may have been spawned somewhere in the vicinity of hell's core rather than in someone's soft hay loft, hissed at her from the shelf that held her mop bucket. Grace ignored the cat, grabbed the bucket and the mop from its peg on the stone wall, filled the bucket with soapy water, and climbed the basement stairs as quickly as she could.

"You hurry-up with that now, girl. I've got a special chore for you today," Grandmother Crone said, fairly cackling as she did and forced a tight, unnatural smile down at Grace as she scrubbed. Stiff, dagger-like hairs protruded from Grandmother Crone's cheek warts as she grinned a malicious, black-toothed grin and hissed, "It's a special chore in honor of your seventeenth birthday, girlie."

Grace looked up in surprise at her grandmother.

"Oh, don't think I went and forgot your special day. Maybe everyone else did, but not me. Oh no. I have something very special in mind for you!"

Grace did not know what to say in response to this. Knowing her grandmother as she did, she knew it was highly unlikely that her grandmother had anything pleasant in mind. But being the good girl that she was, Grace said, "Thank you, grandmother. I'm looking forward to it."

Her grandmother simply glowered at her, porcupine wart hairs quivering with a mind of their own. Then she commanded, "Come find me when you are finished with your usual chores." And her grandmother returned to her bedroom.

Grace attempted to do her work faster than usual as it was a Saturday and she wanted to go home and relax

with her favorite book before her late afternoon journey back to her grandmother's. Grace knew that whatever her grandmother had in store it would be very unpleasant and time consuming. Never had anything her grandmother termed "a special chore" turned out to be anything other than an awful one.

Grace swept and mopped the filthy floors, emptied and freshened the caustic cat litter boxes, dusted the dirty furniture and sticky statuary, polished the salivated signal horn. Then she fed and watered those very same caterwauling cats, emptied and polished the tobacco-stained spittoons, beat the ravaged rugs, polished the cracked crystal, slopped the hellish hogs, and, finally, made her grandmother breakfast in bed with coffee.

Finally, her chores finished after washing the breakfast dishes, Grace found her grandmother napping in bed with all the nasty cats curled next to her. She woke her grandmother in the usual fashion by gently tapping her on the shoulder and saying, "Everything's finished, Grandmother," while piously offering her a fresh cup of coffee as she sat up.

"Get that out of my face!" Gertrude Crone screeched, slapping away the cup and splashing most of the stinging hot coffee on Grace, who gasped and bit her tongue to keep from screaming. The cats coughed and snickered at her in a devilish manner.

"I've been thinking about something I need for you to do," her grandmother said as she stood. "My slippers don't fit properly anymore, and I think it's because you've been neglecting my feet. The calluses have grown too big to fit in the slippers. What have you got to say about that?"

"I'm sorry," said Grace. "I'll try to do better. I don't remember you asking me to care for your feet before."

"That doesn't matter. You should have offered," Grandmother Crone snapped, her brow furrowing and wart hair daggers quivering.

"Yes Grandmother. What is it exactly that you want me to do?"

"What is it exactly that you want me to do?" her grandmother said, mocking her. "I'll tell you what I want you to do. I'm going to sit over there on the couch and I want you to tend to my feet, to pedicure them."

"Yes, Grandmother. It will be my pleasure."

"But first, I want coffee. Make me another cup and clean up this mess. Then meet me at the couch."

Grace did as she was told without complaint. When she handed her grandmother the coffee she flinched a little and that made her grandmother, a slender, veiny old piece of jerky, cackle so hard that the snakelike vein on her left temple bulged in impossibly purple, undulating relief.

“What’s the matter, Gracie?” she asked. “Don’t want any more coffee on you?”

Grace knew better than to answer. Instead she said as she began to clean-up the last cup of coffee spilled in the bedroom, “Grandmother, why do you think that your feet have calluses? I’ve never seen you without your slippers on.”

“How should I know!” her grandmother yelled. “I never think about my feet! Now hurry up!”

Grace really had never seen her grandmother’s feet; in fact, she had never seen her in any shoes other than the red slippers she had always worn. Or were they red because of the light filtered through the red curtains? Still, Grace, being the good-hearted granddaughter that she was, felt that she should have noticed the calluses by now. But the house was always dark, and she was certain her grandmother had never mentioned that her feet were sore before now.

When Grace finished with the spilled coffee in the bedroom she approached her grandmother seated on the living room couch.

“Let’s get this over with, girl,” croaked her grandmother. “My cats and I are missing out on our naps because of you.”

“Yes, grandmother,” Grace said. She kneeled down onto the floor. Her grandmother’s ankles looked brittle and ashy and swollen, nearly ready to pop. The slippers appeared to be more a part of her feet rather than an article of clothing. Grace gently placed her hands on one of the slippers and gave it a gentle tug. It didn’t budge. She gave it a stronger tug. Again, the slipper held fast to her grandmother’s feet. Grace tried the other one with the same result.

“What’s the matter, dear?” her grandmother asked sarcastically. “The slippers getting the better of you?”

“Yes, grandmother. I’ll try harder, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“They already hurt, thanks to you! Remove them!”

Grace, determined now to remove at least one of the slippers, placed her hands on one again, and this time she used the full, considerable strength in her arms and back gained from years of toiling for her demanding grandmother, to give the slipper a mighty tug.

This time the slipper gave way and Grace fell backwards with the slipper in hand. Before she could regain an upright position and her composure, an awful, rotting stench of decaying flesh nearly made Grace lose her breakfast.

Grace dropped the slipper and held her arm over her nose. She pushed herself to her knees with her free arm and what she saw repulsed her. A mass of rotting, maggoty flesh topped by a growth of what appeared to be green toe nail, green even in the dark red light, existed at the end of her grandmother’s left ankle rather than the normal foot that should have been there. Grace was horrified and confused and barely kept from retching. What was she expected to do with that?

Momentarily Grace gathered herself enough to say, “Oh, I’m so sorry, Grandmother. You need to see a healer right away. I know of a wonderful healer, a GREAT ORANGUTAN he is, who lives a short carriage ride from here. He would be better to help your feet than I.”

“Nonsense!” screamed her grandmother. “I hate healers. And why would I listen to your advice? You’re the reason my feet hurt. It was you who neglected them. They’re your responsibility.”

Grace remained on the floor. At this point she realized her free time for the day, on her birthday, was going to be used doctoring her grandmother’s feet. Yet still she did not complain. There was hope. In a moment she put together a plan.

With some tugging and wrenching, Grace managed to free the other malignant foot from its slipper. She was really close to gagging now from the odor. She excused herself and left to toss the wretched shoes into the outside garbage pail. They hit the bottom with a clunk. The swine in their enclosure grunted at her in a way that Grace swore sounded like laughter.

Grace returned to the house, filled a tin wash tub with warm water and the only cleansing medicine, or only thing close to medicine she could find, a bottle of liquor from her grandmother’s basement stash. She carried

the tub to her grandmother's side.

"What are you doing, girl?" her grandmother snarled.

"I have to wash your feet, grandmother. They are rotting and filled with maggots. I'll use tweezers to pluck out the worms, and then I will use scissors to remove the growths." This last part Grace said knowing the nail removal would be a tricky, even dangerous, process. She didn't know if she would be able to accomplish it without vomiting, or, even worse, losing consciousness.

Grace soaked her grandmother's feet for ten minutes. Gertrude Crone's twenty cats circled in a disapproving manner. Apparently, Grace thought, they preferred the feet as they were.

At least the soaking helped the smell enough so that Grace felt she could handle her grandmother's feet without losing her stomach. Grace propped her grandmother's feet on an ottoman and with tweezers in hand plucked out forty two fat maggots from each foot, tossing them all in a small metal pot.

With that horrible task completed, Grace used a pair of sharpened scissors to begin trimming away at her grandmother's overgrown toenails that were the real reason for her slippers not fitting and not calluses as her grandmother had said.

Grace surprised herself by handling the smaller nails with relative ease, but the nails of the large toes were heaped up inches thick and curved under the feet. The skin tissue under the nails was black with necrosis. In order to remove these nails without causing further damage to her grandmother's feet Grace knew she needed more light. This task was going to be even harder than plucking out the maggots.

She stood up and began drawing back the heavy, dark red curtain laced with golden thread that hung behind her grandmother.

At the first bit of outdoor light all the cats scrambled away, hissing and hiding under furniture and anything else they could find.

"What are you doing?" Screeched the grandmother before the curtain was hardly open a sliver of a crack. "No one opens those curtains!"

"Grandmother, I need more light to finish tending to your nails. Without better light I could hurt you or miss something that will make you very sick."

"I cannot have light in here. You know it bothers my cats' eyes. They are sensitive and need the dark.

Grace hesitated. For the first time in the five years she had toiled in care for her grandmother she felt a strong desire to disobey her commands. Her grandmother did not know what was best for herself and Grace was really beginning to dislike the influence the vile cats had on her.

Reluctantly, Grace closed the curtain all the way and returned to her grandmother's feet. The cats, looking smug, slinked out from their hiding places. With scissors in hand she gave removing the last of the malformed growths a go, which required her to operate close to the tender flesh.

"Ouch, girl! You're hurting me!" her grandmother complained.

"Grandmother, please let me open the curtains. I can't see well at all in this stale darkness."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped her grandmother. "The cats don't like the light and neither do I!"

Grace composed herself, determined to steady her hand and try once more to remove the remaining stubs of nails.

"Ouch!" cried the grandmother.

That, my dear, is when something inside of Grace Goodangel snapped.

"That's it!" Grace said, surprising herself as much as her grandmother and her cats. "If you want to prevent these nasty feet of yours from killing you, I'm going to have to open those curtains."

"No you will not!" Her grandmother said and grabbed one of the cats and threw it at Grace.

Grace ducked and the flailing cat flew screaming and clawing over her head and crashed into a coffee table lamp. Grace snatched a curtain all the way open and for the first time that she could remember, untainted daylight broke the darkness of that house.

"No!" screamed her grandmother, sounding very much like her thrown cat. Then the old grandmother leapt to her feet with surprising speed, flailing at Grace to stop her. She was no match, however, for the strong young girl. Grace dodged her grandmother and raced around the house drawing open the curtains.

“The villagers are right. You are a terrible old crone!” Grace yelled. “But I’m not going to let you die,”

Grace pulled back another curtain. “I need light to treat your disgusting feet that you let get this way. It’s not my fault, but I’m going to take care of it.”

“Stop, Grace, you don’t understand. I need the dark.” Now her grandmother was beseeching instead of commanding, begging instead of ordering. “You don’t know what will happen to me.”

It wasn’t until Grace opened the last of the curtains and began retracing her steps to open the window sashes to allow in fresh air that she took notice of changes taking place around her.

At first Grace thought the house was melting, the walls dripping. A few seconds longer and she saw that wasn’t true. The house was molting, becoming something else, changing form, from a drab dwelling occupied by a light-shunning monster into a beautiful, light filled palace, with shining marble floors, golden candles, and a fern sprayed spiral staircase.

Meanwhile, Gertrude Crone was clearly going mad. She was running in circles saying, “My beautiful world, my world, my world. What have you done?”

“Grandmother, I only opened the windows. I don’t understand. What’s happening?”

Grace received no answer from her grandmother. In a fit of anger and rage, her mouth foaming so that flecks were flying through the air, Gertrude Crone ran as fast as she could on her bare, rotten feet through the palace, out the new, magnificent, open doors, and down the steps onto the green lawn.

Followed closely by all the foul cats, Gertrude Crone crossed the narrow gap between the transformed palace and the white, wooden gate at the edge of the cliff and crashed through it at top speed out into the air over the rocky crags below.

From the doorway, Grace screamed and turned away as her grandmother fell, wind milling furiously, out of sight and sound, with the cats falling with her.

For a moment Grace stood in silence trying to collect her thoughts. A gentle, salty warm breeze caressed her skin. A strand of hair played at her cheek.

Grace realized her grandmother, for whom she had labored for five long years, was gone. As mean and disagreeable as she had been, as vile and demanding, Gertrude Crone had been her grandmother and Grace

began to shed silent tears of mourning.

When Grace recovered her composure and walked farther out upon the lawn, she gave her grandmother's home a review from the outside, her eyes focusing from the whole to the specific in turns.

The Village was a magical place but this was magic beyond compare to anything she had seen before. Even the hog enclosure had changed. Now, instead of dirty pigs, there were galloping stallions. The shed had become a fine livery.

As Grace admired the small but elegant spired castle and grounds, she felt a tickling around her body. She gasped. Her rough clothing was suddenly gone, and now, instead of a drab dress, she wore a silky gown, golden yellow and cool, with matching slippers. On her head rested a diamond tiara, in her hand a silvery wand. As Grace attempted to understand what was happening she heard a gentle woman's voice...

"Thank you, Grace."

Grace jumped. The voice came from behind her, from towards the sea. Grace turned on her spot. Before her stood her grandmother, appearing much younger, cheerful, happy, and smiling.

As for herself, Grace felt dizzy and nearly passed out.

"But, but, how?" Grace managed to get out.

"You have freed me from the curses of my own doing," her grandmother said, smiling even more broadly at Grace. She too wore different clothes now, a milky white dress, unadorned and elegant. Gone, too, were the anger lines at her eyes and mouth. Her grandmother's skin was fresh and smooth, her feet, no longer cankerous, shod in elegant, open slippers.

"Grandmother, what has happened?"

"Many decades before you were born my own daughter was killed in an accident when she was twelve. She had been destined to wear the crown that now rests on your head. As queen, I was very bitter and decided that since I had no son or daughter, our land would go without rule until a boy or girl worthy of my own daughter, a beautiful, kind and wise child beyond her years, could be found.

"From the beginning I thought you were the one but you had to reach adulthood and be tested cruelly, having

to endure my abuse for five terrible years without becoming bitter yourself before the spell would break. Until this happened I was bound by my own spells and had to continue the charade as your horrible grandmother. Today's special chore was the final test, and you passed it splendidly, Grace Goodangel."

"But what about my parents?" Grace asked. "What did they know?"

"They were under the spell, too. As was the entire village. They all had no choice. With every passing generation, any child with potential was enveloped by the spells I cast decades ago. Not only would the child believe I was her grandmother, but the parents would as well. It was really cruel of me to test children, and their parents, as I did, and thus my cronish appearance grew worse and worse with each generation of children who failed the impossibly difficult tests of the curse.

"I hated what I had done but was unable to reverse the spells. I believe that I was very close to being Gertrude Crone forever. I think if I had not found you I would have become her and continued to live this vile existence until the end of time with no child, no matter how special, able to help me. You really saved me, dear Grace. And now that the spell is broken, your parents and your real grandmothers will want to see you. They have been sent for. Don't worry, although you have not seen your grandmothers for five years, you will recognize them as your true grandmothers when they arrive."

"But I, I don't know how to rule as queen. How do I..."

"Behave in the same way as you did with me. Be compassionate and wise, but firm. And you won't be alone. You will soon be joined inside the castle by my faithful servants. They too were cursed all these years but will now return to serve their new queen."

"The cats!" Grace said.

"Yes, the cats. But not cats now, people, good, kind, faithful people, grateful and waiting to help you in any way they may."

The queen sighed and said, "I must be going now. Soon your subjects will begin arriving to see their new, young queen." Then the old queen began to shimmer, becoming translucent, growing less in substance.

“I have overstayed my time on this earth. Now I can leave happy. Thank you, Queen Grace. Long live Queen Grace Goodangel!”

These were the old queen’s last words. And true to what Gertrude Crone said, Grace heard whispers at first and then loud, happy voices from within the castle and without. The spells were broken. The servants had arrived and the villagers were coming. This was real. It was time to begin a new chapter.

Queen Grace turned to greet her guests.

The End

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