

SPINNING- WHEEL STORIES

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649103669

Spinning-wheel stories by Louisa M. Alcott

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LOUISA M. ALCOTT

**SPINNING-
WHEEL STORIES**



"It is too bad to have our jolly vacation spoiled by this provoking storm. Did n't mind it yesterday, because we could eat all the time; but here we are cooped up for a week, perhaps, and I'd like to know what we are to do," growled Geoff, as he stood at the window looking gloomily at the bleak scene without. It certainly was discouraging; for the north wind howled, the air was dark with falling snow, and drifts were rising over fences, roads, and fields, as if to barricade the Christmas party in the great country house.

"We can bear it pleasantly, since it can't be helped," said gentle sister Mary, with a kind hand on his shoulder, and a face full of sympathy for his disappointment. "I'm sorry for the coasting, skating, and sleighing frolics we have lost; but if we must be shut up, I'm sure we could n't have a pleasanter prison or a kinder jailer. Don't let grandma hear us complain, for she has made great exertions to have our visit a merry one, and it will trouble her if we are not gay and contented."

"That's easy for a parcel of girls, who only want to mull over the fire, and chatter, and drink tea; but it's rough on us fellows, who come for the outside fun. House is well enough; but when you've seen it once, there's an end. Eating is jolly, but you can't stuff forever. We might dig, or snowball, if it did n't blow a gale. Never saw such a beast of a storm!"—and Geoff flattened his nose against the window-pane and scowled at the elements.

A laugh made him turn around, and forget his woes to stare at the quaint little figure that stood curtsying in the door-way of the keeping-room, where a dozen young people were penned while the maids cleared up the remains of yesterday's feast in the kitchen, the mothers were busy with the babies upstairs, and the fathers read papers in the best parlor; for this was a family gathering under the roof of the old homestead.

A rosy, dark-eyed face looked out from the faded green calash, a gayly flowered gown was looped up over a blue quilted petticoat, and a red camlet cloak hung down behind. A big reticule and a funny umbrella were held in either hand, and red hose and very high-heeled, pointed shoes covered a trim pair of feet.

"God bless you, merry gentlemen!
May nothing you dismay;
Here's your ancient granny come
To call, this Christmas day,"

sang Minnie, the lively member of the flock, as she bobbed little curtsys and smiled so infectiously that even cross Geoff cheered up.

"Where did you get that rigging?" "Isn't it becoming?" "What queer stuff!" "Did grandma ever look so, I wonder?"

These and many other questions rained upon the wearer of the old costume, and she answered them as fast as she could.

"I went rummaging up garret for something to read, and found two chests of old duds. Thought I'd dress up and see how you liked me. Grandma said I might, and told me I looked like her when she was young. She was a beauty, you know; so I feel as proud as a peacock." And Min danced away to stand before the portrait of a blooming girl in a short-waisted, white-satin gown and a pearl necklace, which hung opposite the companion portrait of an officer in an old-fashioned uniform.

"So you do. Wonder if I should look like grandpa if I got into his old toggery!" said Geoff, looking up at the handsome man with the queue and the high coat-collar.

"Go and try; the uniform is in the chest, and not much moth-eaten. Let's have a jolly rummage, and see what we can find. We didn't eat ourselves sick, so we will amuse these lazy invalids;" and Min glanced pityingly at several cousins who lay about on sofas or in easy chairs, pretending to read, but evidently suffering from too great devotion to the bountiful dinner and evening feast of yesterday.

Away went Min and Lotty, Geoff and Walt, glad of anything to beguile the stormy afternoon. Grandma smiled as she heard the tramp of feet overhead, the

peals of laughter, and the bang of chest-lids, well knowing that a scene of dire confusion awaited her when the noisy frolic was done, but thankful for the stores of ancient finery which would keep the restless children happy for a day.

It was truly a noble garret, for it extended the whole length of the great square house, with windows at either end, and divided in the middle by a solid chimney. All around stood rows of chests, dilapidated furniture, and wardrobes full of old relics, while the walls were hung with many things for which modern tongues can find no names. In one corner was a book-case full of musty books and papers; in another, kitchen utensils and rusty weapons; the third was devoted to quilts hung on lines, and in the fourth stood a loom with a spinning-wheel beside it, both seemingly well cared for, as the dust lay lightly on them, and flax was still upon the distaff.

A glorious rummage followed the irruption of the Goths and Vandals into this quiet spot, and soon Geoff quite forgot the storm as he pranced about in the buff-and-blue coat, with a cocked hat on his head, and grandfather's sword at his side. Lotty arrayed herself in a pumpkin hood and quilted cloak for warmth, while Walt, the book-worm, went straight to the ancient library, and became absorbed in faded souvenirs, yellow newspapers, and almanacs of a century ago.

Having displayed themselves below and romped all over the house, the masqueraders grew tired at last, and early twilight warned them to leave before ghostly shadows began to haunt the garret.

"I mean to take this down and ask grandma to show me how it's done. I've heard her tell about spinning and weaving when she was a girl, and I know I can learn," said Minnie, who had fallen in love with the little wheel, and vainly tried to twist the flax into as smooth a thread as the one hanging from the distaff, as if shadowy fingers had lately spun it.

"Queen Victoria set the fashion in England, and we might do it here. Would n't it be fun to have a wheel in the parlor at home, and really use it; not keep it tied up with blue ribbons, as the other girls do!" cried Lotty, charmed with the new idea.

"Come, Geoff, take it down for us. You ought to do it out of gratitude for my cheering you up so nicely," said Min, leading the way.

"So I will. Here, Walt, give it a hoist, and come behind to pick up the pieces, for the old machine must be about a hundred, I guess."

Shouldering the wheel, Geoff carried it down; but no bits fell by the way, for the stout little wheel was all in order, kept so by loving hands that for more than eighty years had been spinning the mingled thread of a long and useful life.

Glorious fires were roaring up the wide chimneys in parlor and keeping-room, and old and young were gathering around them, while the storm beat on the window-panes, and the wintry wind howled as if angry at being shut out.

"See what we've stolen, grandma," cried Min, as the procession came in, rosy, dusty, gay, and eager.

"Bless the child! What possessed you to lug that

old thing down?" asked Madam Shirley, much amused as the prize was placed before her, where she sat in her high-backed chair, — a right splendid old lady in her stately cap, black silk gown, and muslin apron, with a bunch of keys at her side, like a model housekeeper, as she was.

"You don't mind our playing with it, do you? And will you teach me to spin? I think it's such a pretty little thing, and I want to be like you in all ways, grandma dear," answered Min, sitting on the arm of the great chair, with her fresh cheek close to the wrinkled one where winter roses still bloomed.

"You wheedling gypsy! I'll teach you with all my heart, for it is pretty work, and I often wonder ladies don't keep it up. I did till I was too busy, and now I often take a tarn at it when I'm tired of knitting. The ham is very soothing, and the thread much stronger than any we get nowadays."

As she spoke, the old lady dusted the wheel, and gave it a skilful turn or two, till the soft whir made pleasant music in the room.

"Is it really a hundred years old?" asked Geoff, drawing nearer with the others to watch the new work.

"Just about. It was one of my mother's wedding presents, and she gave it to me when I was fifteen. Deary me, how well I remember that day!" and grandma seemed to fall a-dreaming as her eyes rested on the letters E. R. M. radely cut in the wood, and below these were three others with something meant for a true lover's knot between.

"Whose initials are these?" asked Min, scenting a romance with girlish quickness, for grandma was smiling as if her eyes read the title to some little story in those worn letters.

"Elizabeth Rachel Morgan, and Joel Manlius Shirley. Your blessed grandfather cut our names there the day I was sixteen, and put the flourish between to show what he wanted," added the old lady, laughing as she made the wheel hum again.

"Tell about it, please do," begged Min, remembering that grandma had been a beauty and a belle.

"It's a long tale, my darling, and I couldn't tell it now. Sometime when I'm teaching you to spin I'll do it, maybe."

But the girl was determined to have her story; and after tea, when the little ones were in bed, the elders playing whist in the parlor, and the young folks deciding what game to begin, Minnie sat down and tried to spin, sure that the familiar sound would lure grandma to give the lesson and tell the tale.

She was right, for the wheel had not gone around many times, when the tap of the cane was heard, and the old lady came rustling in, quite ready for a chat, now that three cups of her own good tea and a nap in the chimney corner had refreshed her.

"No, dear, that's not the way; you need a dish of water to wet your fingers in, and you must draw the flax out slow and steady, else it runs to waste, and makes a poor thread. Fetch me that chair, and I'll show you how, since you are bent on learning."