



# Saving Mississippi



## From The Chicken House

Cornelia told me about her horse one afternoon. Then we walked up through the woods together to visit her beautiful 'friend'. That was when she (Cornelia, not the horse – although nothing surprises me about Cornelia's world!) told me about this wonderfully exciting story she wrote some time ago. We rushed to get a copy from the high stacked shelves in her house, and had it quickly translated in time for our Chicken House 10th Birthday, as a special present for her fans.

Thanks, Cornelia!

Barry Cunningham  
Publisher



# Saving Mississippi

**Cornelia Funke**

**Translated from the German  
by Anthea Bell**

**Chicken  
House**

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
[www.doublecluck.com](http://www.doublecluck.com)



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*For Tina, Lena and Inga*



**A**s Emma got off the bus, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Oh yes! This was how it ought to smell. Of manure, petrol and damp earth.

Of summer holidays with Dolly.

Emma happily turned off her mobile phone; blissfully there had never been any mobile reception in this village! She flung her rucksack on to her back and hopped across the road. She spat in the village pond, jumped into two puddles, and then she was at her grandmother's garden gate. Everything was the same as ever.

The paint was peeling off the old house, and instead

of geraniums there was lettuce growing in Dolly's window boxes. The car had another dent in it, and Emma hadn't met the black cat sitting on the dustbin before. But the wobbly garden table under the walnut tree was laid to welcome her, just as usual. Chickens were stalking around on the grass, and Dolly's old dogs Tom and Jerry lay asleep outside the open front door. They didn't even lift their noses when Emma pushed open the gate and ran towards the house. Only when she was right in front of them did they wag their tails sleepily and put their muddy paws on her shoes.

'Hi, you super-watchdogs!' Emma tickled them both behind the ears and gave them a few dog biscuits. She always took care to stuff her pockets with those when she was going to see her grandmother.

A burning smell drifted out of the house.

Emma grinned. Dolly must have been trying to do some baking again. She was probably the only grandmother in the world who couldn't manage to bake a cake. She couldn't cook very well either. She did none of the things that Emma's friends' grannies liked doing. Dolly didn't crochet, she didn't knit, she didn't read stories aloud, and every year she forgot Emma's birthday. Her grey hair was cut as short as matchsticks, she usually wore men's clothes, and she repaired her car herself.

But Emma wouldn't have swapped her for any other

grandmother. 'Hi!' she called into the smoke-filled kitchen. 'I'm back!'

An enormous dog shot out barking from under the kitchen table, jumped up at Emma and licked her face.

'Hello, sweetheart.' Dolly was crouching in front of the oven, looking quite unhappy. She took her cake out and slammed it onto the kitchen table. 'Just look at that! Too brown. Again! I can't understand it. I even got myself one of those stupid kitchen timers.'

The enormous dog left Emma alone and sniffed the burnt cake.

'Good thing I bought some shop cake, just to be on the safe side.' Dolly wiped her floury hands on her trousers and gave Emma a kiss. 'So nice that you're back! I hope you missed me!'

'You bet.' Emma took her rucksack off and held a few dog biscuits in front of the new dog's muzzle. 'And where did this one come from?'

'Shaggy?' Dolly took a large packet of cake out of the kitchen cupboard and went outside with Emma in tow. 'Mr Knapp, the vet, found him on the motorway slip road. You know how dogs like that always end up with me.'

Emma smiled.

She certainly did know! Hens that didn't lay eggs, pregnant cats, dogs who chewed up rugs – her grandmother took them all in. She even had an old gelding

in the paddock behind the house. His name was Aldo. Dolly had saved him from the knacker's yard four years ago, and taught Emma how to ride him.

'How's Aldo?' Emma asked.

Dolly sat down on the garden seat that Emma's grandpa had made many years ago, and poured her a mug of cocoa. 'Aldo? He's fine. A bit of trouble with his teeth, but he still tries to eat me out of house and home.'

'What else?' Emma took a piece of cake. A chicken disappeared under the table and pecked at her shoelace.

'You can hear what else.'

The sound of a spluttering engine came from Mr Procter's car repair shop next door, and Dolly's other neighbour, Lizzie Dockfoot, was sweeping the path in front of her garden wall to the soundtrack of her radio.

'Hey, Lizzie!' called Dolly. 'Could you turn your radio down a bit? All that racket's making my coffee spill over.'

Muttering to herself, Lizzie shuffled to the garden wall, turned off the radio and came over to Dolly's fence.

'Here.' She threw an empty cigarette packet and two lolly sticks over. 'I found these on my side of your fence.'

'Oh, you're welcome to keep them,' said Dolly.

'Like a coffee, Lizzie?'

'No, thank you.' Lizzie Dockfoot nodded to Emma. 'Hello, Emma, I thought you'd gone home.'

'I did.' Emma suppressed a giggle. 'But that was three months ago, Mrs Dockfoot. It's the summer holidays now.'

'Yes?' Lizzie Dockfoot bent down and pulled out a couple of weeds growing by Dolly's fence. 'Dandelions, horrid stuff. Enjoy your cake, you two, some of us have work to do.'

Making a sour face, she reached for her broom, cranked up the radio again, and went on sweeping.

Dolly sighed, but Emma couldn't help grinning. 'Everything's just the same,' she said. 'Wonderful!'

At home, everything was changing yet again. While Emma was staying with Dolly her parents were moving into their new flat. New flat, new town, new school. Emma didn't want to think about it.

'Just the same?' Dolly shook her head. 'Not quite, sweetheart. Old Clipperbush died last week.'

'Oh dear!' Emma looked at her grandmother in shock. 'He wasn't *that* old.'

Dolly shook her head. 'Not much older than me. But I'm sure you're going to hear all about it any moment now,' she added, pointing to the gate. 'Look who's here. Word that you're back gets around pretty fast.'

Two boys came running around the village pond. Leo and Max were the sons of the baker opposite. They raced each other to Dolly's garden gate. Max vaulted over it first, as usual. He put his tongue out at his brother and sprinted for the empty chair beside Emma. Leo, looking annoyed, followed him. 'You pushed me!' he hissed at his brother. 'Just to show off to Emma!'

'Now, now, you two!' Dolly lifted up her cup. 'You almost spilt my coffee with all your pushing and shoving. Want something to drink? Or a piece of cake?'

'Did you bake it yourself?' asked Max suspiciously.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'If you didn't, then yes please.'

'The cheek!' said Dolly, standing up. 'But I'll get you both some juice anyway.'

She went back to the house, followed by Shaggy.

'Hi, Emma,' Leo murmured.

'Hey, did you hear what happened?' Max pushed his brother out of the way. 'Old Mr Clipperbush fell down dead outside our shop. Just like that. Slam! – and there he was, flat on his back. You remember old Clipperbush, don't you?'

Emma nodded. She remembered him very well. Every Sunday he would ride through the village on his mare, Mississippi. He would weave coloured ribbons into her mane, with little bells on them. Clipperbush

himself always wore a real Stetson cowboy hat, and every time he rode past Dolly he used to take it off and wave it to her.

'Dead as a headless chicken, he was,' said Max.

Leo helped himself to a piece of cake, sat down where Dolly had been sitting and drank some of her milky coffee.

'Did you – I mean,' said Emma, looking at the two of them uncomfortably, 'did you see it happen?'

'You bet we did,' said Max. 'Well, I did. This one here,' he added, nudging his brother, 'went straight round behind the house and puked.'

'I did not,' said Leo.

'You did so,' said Max, almost shoving his brother off his chair. 'I wanted to hold a mirror in front of Clipperbush's mouth, like they always do in films, but Mum wouldn't let me. His horse got terribly upset. As if she knew what had happened. No one but Mr Knapp could calm her down.'

Emma knew Mr Knapp the vet as well. He was a regular visitor to Dolly's house. Something was always wrong with one or other of her animals.

'Well,' said Dolly, coming back with a bottle of juice, 'I suppose these two have told you all about poor Clipperbush's passing?'

'So what if we did?' muttered Max. 'I mean, you don't see a person fall down dead every day.'

‘Luckily,’ said Dolly. ‘I’m going to miss Clipperbush. But he had a good death.’

‘Dad says he was crazy,’ remarked Max.

‘I dare say.’ Dolly put a piece of cake on her saucer and handed it to him. ‘Your father thinks half the village is crazy. Me too, I’m sure.’

‘But what happened to his mare?’ asked Emma.

The boys shrugged.

‘That horse is definitely crazy,’ Max observed with his mouth full.

Thoughtfully, Dolly smoothed out the tablecloth. ‘Knapp is looking after her for now. But Clipperbush’s nephew will probably inherit everything, and no doubt he’ll sell the mare.’

‘What a pity,’ murmured Emma.

Mr Clipperbush used to smarten Mississippi up in a slightly different way every time he went out riding on her. Emma and Dolly had sometimes laid bets on whether the mare would have flowers behind her ears today or little bells on her reins. Every Sunday they used to sit in suspense under the walnut tree, waiting to see who had won the bet.

And when Clipperbush did ride by, he used to wave his hat and call, ‘Good morning, ladies.’

Yes, Emma would miss him too.

She certainly would.



## CHAPTER

**W**hen Emma’s alarm clock went off at six the next morning Dolly was already out. She delivered newspapers five days a week, riding her bike around her own village and two others nearby.

Emma splashed her face with cold water, ate a slice of toast and marmalade without sitting down – and got to work herself.

Seven cats rubbed round her legs, and the dogs were creating quite a racket, impatiently pushing their food bowls about on the flagstones. When Dolly was on her own, she fed all the animals before starting on her newspaper round.

‘Bad luck, you lot,’ said Emma, looking for the can opener in the cutlery drawer. ‘For the next six weeks