

The Red Shoes

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There was once a little girl, so pretty and delicate you couldn't help but love her. But she was terribly poor, and in the summer she had to run around barefoot because she had no shoes at all. In the winter, she wore clumsy wooden clogs that rubbed her ankles raw and red. It looked dreadfully painful.

In the middle of the village lived an old shoemaker's widow—Dame Shoemaker, everyone called her. She sat one day sewing together a little pair of shoes from old scraps of red cloth. They were clumsy things, really, but they were made with a kind heart. She meant them for the little girl, whose name was Karen.

On the very day Karen's mother was buried, she received those red shoes and wore them for the first time. They weren't proper mourning shoes, of course—not black at all—but she had nothing else. So she followed her mother's poor straw coffin with bare legs and red shoes, walking through the churchyard.

Just then, a large old carriage drove up, and inside sat a large old lady. She saw the little girl and her heart went out to her. She said to the clergyman:

"Give me that child. I will adopt her."

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Karen thought all this happened because of her beautiful red shoes. But the old lady found them absolutely horrible and had them burned on the spot. Karen herself was washed and dressed in clean, nice clothes. She learned to read and to sew. Everyone said she was such a sweet little thing. But the mirror said: "You're more than sweet. You are beautiful."

One day, the Queen traveled through the land with her little daughter, the Princess. People crowded everywhere to see them, and Karen was there too. The little Princess stood at a castle window in her fine white dress, letting everyone stare at her. She wore no train and no golden crown—but on her feet were splendid red morocco leather shoes. They were far handsomer than anything Dame Shoemaker could have made. And Karen thought to herself: nothing in the world could compare with red shoes.

Time passed. Karen was old enough to be confirmed. She had new clothes, and needed new shoes. The shoemaker in the city measured her little foot in his workshop, where glass cases stood filled with elegant shoes and shiny boots. Everything looked so charming. The old lady couldn't see very well, so she took no pleasure in looking but saw everything. And there, in the middle of them all, stood a pair of red shoes. Exactly

like the ones the Princess had worn. How beautiful they were! The shoemaker said they'd been made for a count's daughter, but they didn't fit her.

"Those must be patent leather," said the old lady. "They shine so much!"

"Yes, they shine," said Karen. And they fit her perfectly, so they were bought.

The old lady had no idea they were red. If she had known, she would never have allowed Karen to wear them to her confirmation. But she didn't know.

Everyone at church stared at Karen's feet. When she walked up the aisle, it seemed to her that the old carved figures on the tombs—those portraits of long-dead preachers and their wives in stiff ruffs and black dresses—fixed their eyes on her red shoes. She thought of nothing else. Even when the clergyman laid his hand on her head and spoke of holy baptism and her covenant with God, even when the organ pealed solemnly and the children's choir sang sweetly, Karen thought only of her red shoes.

That afternoon, the old lady heard from everyone that the shoes had been red. She told Karen it was very wrong, not at all proper, and that from now on Karen must wear only black shoes to church.

The next Sunday was communion. Karen looked at her black shoes. Then she looked at the red ones. She looked again at the black. And she put on the red.

The sun shone gloriously. Karen and the old lady walked through the cornfields, along a dusty path toward church. At the door stood an old soldier with a crutch and a wonderfully long beard, more red than white. He bowed low and asked the old lady if he might dust her shoes. Karen stretched out her little foot.

"Look at those beautiful dancing shoes!" said the soldier. "Sit tight when you dance!" And he tapped the soles with his hand.

The old lady gave him a coin and went inside with Karen.

Everyone in church looked at Karen's red shoes. All the painted figures on the walls seemed to look too. When Karen knelt at the altar and raised the cup to her lips, she

thought only of the red shoes—they seemed to swim before her eyes. She forgot to sing her psalm. She forgot to pray "Our Father."

When the service ended, the old lady climbed into her carriage. Karen lifted her foot to follow, and the soldier called out:

"Look at those beautiful dancing shoes!"

And Karen couldn't help herself. She danced a step. Then another. Once she started, her feet wouldn't stop. It was as if the shoes had power over her. She danced around the church corner, unable to stop. The coachman had to run after her and catch her, lifting her into the carriage. But her feet kept dancing even there, kicking the poor old lady dreadfully. Finally, she tore the shoes off, and her legs were still.

The shoes went into a cupboard at home. But Karen couldn't stop looking at them.

Then the old lady fell sick. She was not expected to recover. Someone needed to nurse her and care for her, and no one had a greater duty than Karen. But a great ball was announced in the city, and Karen was invited.

She looked at the old lady, who could not recover. She looked at the red shoes. She told herself there could be no harm in it. She put them on. Surely that was all right. But then she went to the ball and began to dance.

When she wanted to dance to the right, the shoes danced to the left. When she wanted to dance up the room, they danced her back again—down the steps, into the street, and out through the city gate. She danced and danced, and she could not stop. She danced straight into the dark forest.

Then something glimmered among the trees. She thought it must be the moon, for there was a face. But it was the old soldier with the red beard. He sat there, nodding, and said: "Look at those beautiful dancing shoes!"

She was terrified. She tried to tear them off, but they clung fast. She pulled at her stockings, but the shoes seemed to have grown to her feet. And she danced on—over fields and meadows, in rain and sunshine, by day and by night. Night was the most terrible.

She danced across the churchyard, but the dead did not dance. They had better things to do. She longed to rest on a poor man's grave where bitter tansy grew, but there was no peace for her. And when she danced toward the open church door, she saw an angel standing there. He wore long white robes, and wings that swept from his shoulders to the ground. His face was stern and grave, and in his hand he held a broad, glittering sword. "You shall dance," he said, "in your red shoes until you are pale and cold, until your skin shrivels and you are a skeleton. You shall dance from door to door, and wherever proud, vain children live, you shall knock so they may hear you and tremble. You shall dance—always dance!"

"Mercy!" screamed Karen.

But she never heard the angel's reply, for the shoes carried her through the gate and into the fields, across roads and bridges, dancing, always dancing.

One morning she danced past a familiar door. Inside, she heard a psalm, and saw a coffin decked with flowers being carried out. Then she knew—the old lady was dead. She was utterly alone, abandoned by everyone, condemned by the angel of God.

She danced on, forced to dance through the gloomy night. The shoes carried her over thorns and stones until she bled. She danced across the heath to a little house she knew. The executioner lived there. She tapped at his window.

"Come out!" she cried. "I cannot come in—I am forced to dance!"

The executioner opened his door. "Do you know who I am? I cut off the heads of wicked people. Hear my axe ring?"

"Do not cut off my head!" said Karen. "Then I could not repent! But cut off my feet—cut off the red shoes!"

And she confessed her whole sin. The executioner struck off her feet in the red shoes. The shoes danced away across the field and into the deep forest, carrying her little feet with them.

He carved wooden feet for her and gave her crutches. He taught her the psalm that criminals sing. She kissed the hand that had held the axe and went away across the heath.

"Now I have suffered enough for those red shoes," she said. "Now I will go to church so people can see me."

She hurried toward the church door. But when she drew near, the red shoes danced before her on the path. Terrified, she turned back.

All week she was unhappy and wept bitter tears. But when Sunday came, she thought: "Surely I have suffered and struggled enough. I believe I am as good as many who sit in church holding their heads high."

She set out boldly. But before she reached the churchyard gate, there were the red shoes, dancing before her. Frightened, she turned back again. And this time, she truly repented of her sin from her heart.

She went to the parsonage and begged them to take her into service. She would work hard, she promised, do everything she could. She didn't care about wages—she only wanted a home, to live with good people. The clergyman's wife felt sorry for her and took her in.

Karen was industrious and thoughtful. In the evenings, she sat quietly and listened while the clergyman read from the Bible. All the children loved her dearly. But when they talked about dresses and finery and beauty, she would only shake her head.

The next Sunday, the family prepared for church. They asked if she would come with them. She looked sorrowfully at her crutches, tears in her eyes, and shook her head.

They went to hear God's word. She went alone to her tiny room, where there was barely space for a bed and a chair. She sat down with her prayer book and read with a pious heart. Through the window, the wind carried the sound of the organ toward her. She lifted her tear-streaked face and said "Oh, God, help me!"

There the sun shone and before her stood an angel of God in white robes—the same angel she saw that night at the church door. But now he didn't carry a sharp sword. Instead, he held a beautiful green branch covered in roses. He touched the ceiling with the branch, and it rose high, high above her. Where he touched, a golden star gleamed. He touched the walls, and they widened. She saw the organ playing, she saw the old paintings of preachers and their wives. The congregation sat in cushioned pews,

singing from their prayer books. The church itself had come to the poor girl in her narrow room—or else she had somehow come to the church.

She sat in the pew with the clergyman's family. When they finished their psalm and looked up, they nodded and said, "It is right that you came."

"It was through mercy," she said.

The organ pealed. The children's voices in the choir sounded so sweet and soft. The clear sunshine streamed warmly through the window onto the pew where Karen sat. Her heart filled so full of sunshine, of peace, of joy, that it broke. Her soul flew on a sunbeam to God. And there, no one asked about the red shoes.