

The Red Shoes

Hans Christian Andersen

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Intermediate
12 min read

There was once a pretty, delicate little girl, who was so poor that she had to go barefoot in summer and wear coarse wooden shoes in winter, which made her little instep quite red.

In the center of the village there lived an old shoemaker's wife. One day this good woman made, as well as she could, a little pair of shoes out of some strips of old red cloth. The shoes were clumsy enough, to be sure, but they fitted the little girl tolerably well, and anyway the woman's intention was kind. The little girl's name was Karen.

On the very day that Karen received the shoes, her mother was to be buried. They were not at all suitable for mourning, but she had no others, so she put them on her little bare feet and followed the poor plain coffin to its last resting place.

Just at that time a large, old-fashioned carriage happened to pass by, and the old lady who sat in it saw the little girl and pitied her.

"Give me the little girl," she said to the clergyman, "and I will take care of her."

Karen supposed that all this happened because of the red shoes, but the old lady thought them frightful and ordered them to be burned. Karen was then dressed in neat, well-fitting clothes and taught to read and sew. People told her she was pretty, but the mirror said, "You are much more than pretty—you are beautiful."

It happened not long afterwards that the queen and her little daughter, the princess, traveled through the land. All the people, Karen among the rest, flocked toward the palace and crowded around it, while the little princess, dressed in white, stood at the window for every one to see. She wore neither a train nor a golden crown, but on her feet were beautiful red morocco shoes, which, it must be admitted, were prettier than those the shoemaker's wife had given to little Karen. Surely nothing in the world could be compared to those red shoes.

Now that Karen was old enough to be confirmed, she of course had to have a new frock and new shoes. The rich shoemaker in the town took the measure of her little feet in his own house, in a room where stood great glass cases filled with all sorts of fine shoes and elegant, shining boots. It was a pretty sight, but the old lady could not see well and naturally did not take so much pleasure in it as Karen. Among the shoes were a pair of red ones, just like those worn by the little princess. Oh, how gay they were! The shoemaker said they had been made for the child of a count, but had not fitted well.

"Are they of polished leather, that they shine so?" asked the old lady.

"Yes, indeed, they do shine," replied Karen. And since they fitted her, they were bought. But the old lady had no idea that they were red, or she would never in the world have allowed Karen to go to confirmation in them, as she now did. Every one, of course, looked at Karen's shoes; and when she walked up the nave to the chancel it seemed to her that even the antique figures on the monuments, the portraits of clergymen and their wives, with their stiff ruffs and long black robes, were fixing their eyes on her red shoes. Even when the bishop laid his hand upon her head and spoke of her covenant with God and how she must now begin to be a full-grown Christian, and when the organ pealed forth solemnly and the children's fresh, sweet voices joined with those of the choir—still Karen thought of nothing but her shoes.

In the afternoon, when the old lady heard every one speak of the red shoes, she said it was very shocking and improper and that, in the future, when Karen went to church it must always be in black shoes, even if they were old.

The next Sunday was Karen's first Communion day. She looked at her black shoes, and then at her red ones, then again at the black and at the red—and the red ones were put on.

The sun shone very brightly, and Karen and the old lady walked to church through the cornfields, for the road was very dusty.

At the door of the church stood an old soldier, who leaned upon a crutch and had a marvelously long beard that was not white but red. He bowed almost to the ground and asked the old lady if he might dust her shoes. Karen, in her turn, put out her little foot.

“Oh, look, what smart little dancing pumps!” said the old soldier. “Mind you do not let them slip off when you dance,” and he passed his hands over them. The old lady gave the soldier a half-penny and went with Karen into the church.

As before, every one saw Karen's red shoes, and all the carved figures too bent their gaze upon them. When Karen knelt at the chancel she thought only of the shoes; they floated before her eyes, and she forgot to say her prayer or sing her psalm.

At last all the people left the church, and the old lady got into her carriage. As Karen lifted her foot to step in, the old soldier said, “See what pretty dancing shoes!” And Karen, in spite of herself, made a few dancing steps. When she had once begun, her feet went on of themselves; it was as though the shoes had received power over her. She danced round the church corner,—she could not help it,—and the coachman had to run behind and catch her to put her into the carriage. Still her feet went on dancing, so, that she trod upon the good lady's toes. It was not until the shoes were taken from her feet that she had rest.

The shoes were put away in a closet, but Karen could not resist going to look at them every now and then.

Soon after this the old lady lay ill in bed, and it was said that she could not recover. She had to be nursed and waited on, and this, of course, was no one's duty so much as it was Karen's, as Karen herself well knew. But there happened to be a great ball in the town, and Karen was invited. She looked at the old lady, who was very ill, and she looked at the red shoes. She put them on, for she thought there could not be any sin in that, and of course there was not—but she went next to the ball and began to dance.

Strange to say, when she wanted to move to the right the shoes bore her to the left; and when she wished to dance up the room the shoes persisted in going down the room. Down the stairs they carried her at last, into the street, and out through the town gate. On and on she danced, for dance she must, straight out into the gloomy wood. Up among the trees something glistened. She thought it was the round, red moon, for she saw a face; but no, it was the old soldier with the red beard, who sat and nodded, saying, "See what pretty dancing shoes!"

She was dreadfully frightened and tried to throw away the red shoes, but they clung fast and she could not unclasp them. They seemed to have grown fast to her feet. So dance she must, and dance she did, over field and meadow, in rain and in sunshine, by night and by day—and by night it was by far more dreadful.

She danced out into the open churchyard, but the dead there did not dance; they were at rest and had much better things to do. She would have liked to sit down on the poor man's grave, where the bitter tansy grew, but for her there was no rest.

She danced past the open church door, and there she saw an angel in long white robes and with wings that reached from his shoulders to the earth. His look was stern and grave, and in his hand he held a broad, glittering sword.

"Thou shalt dance," he said, "in thy red shoes, till thou art pale and cold, and till thy body is wasted like a skeleton. Thou shalt dance from door to door, and wherever proud, haughty children dwell thou shalt knock, that, hearing thee, they may take warning. Dance thou shalt—dance on!"

"Mercy!" cried Karen; but she did not hear the answer of the angel, for the shoes carried her past the door and on into the fields.

One morning she danced past a well-known door. Within was the sound of a psalm, and presently a coffin strewn with flowers was borne out. She knew that her friend, the old lady, was dead, and in her heart she felt that she was abandoned by all on earth and condemned by God's angel in heaven.

Still on she danced—for she could not stop—through thorns and briars, while her feet bled. Finally, she danced to a lonely little house where she knew that the executioner dwelt, and she tapped at the window, saying, “Come out, come out! I cannot come in, for I must dance.”

The man said, “Do you know who I am and what I do?”

“Yes,” said Karen; “but do not strike off my head, for then I could not live to repent of my sin. Strike off my feet, that I may be rid of my red shoes.”

Then she confessed her sin, and the executioner struck off the red shoes, which danced away over the fields and into the deep wood. To Karen it seemed that the feet had gone with the shoes, for she had almost lost the power of walking.

“Now I have suffered enough for the red shoes,” she said; “I will go to the church, that people may see me.” But no sooner had she hobbled to the church door than the shoes danced before her and frightened her back.

All that week she endured the keenest sorrow and shed many bitter tears. When Sunday came, she said: “I am sure I must have suffered and striven enough by this time. I am quite as good, I dare say, as many who are holding their heads high in the church.” So she took courage and went again. But before she reached the churchyard gate the red shoes were dancing there, and she turned back again in terror, more deeply sorrowful than ever for her sin.

She then went to the pastor's house and begged as a favor to be taken into the family's service, promising to be diligent and faithful. She did not want wages, she said, only a home with good people. The clergyman's wife pitied her and granted her request, and she proved industrious and very thoughtful.

Earnestly she listened when at evening the preacher read aloud the Holy Scriptures. All the children came to love her, but when they spoke of beauty and finery, she would shake her head and turn away.

On Sunday, when they all went to church, they asked her if she would not go, too, but she looked sad and bade them go without her. Then she went to her own little room, and as she sat with the psalm book in her hand, reading its pages with a gentle, pious mind, the wind brought to her the notes of the organ. She raised her tearful eyes and said, "O God, do thou help me!"

Then the sun shone brightly, and before her stood the white angel that she had seen at the church door. He no longer bore the glittering sword, but in his hand was a beautiful branch of roses. He touched the ceiling with it, and the ceiling rose, and at each place where the branch touched it there shone a star. He touched the walls, and they widened so that Karen could see the organ that was being played at the church. She saw, too, the old pictures and statues on the walls, and the congregation sitting in the seats and singing psalms, for the church itself had come to the poor girl in her narrow room, or she in her chamber had come to it. She sat in the seat with the rest of the clergyman's household, and when the psalm was ended, they nodded and said, "Thou didst well to come, Karen!"

"This is mercy," said she. "It is the grace of God."

The organ pealed, and the chorus of children's voices mingled sweetly with it. The bright sunshine shed its warm light, through the windows, over the pew in which Karen sat. Her heart was so filled with sunshine, peace, and joy that it broke, and her soul was borne by a sunbeam up to God, where there was nobody to ask about the red shoes.

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