

Christmas Shoes

December 2018

By Sharon Charles

Chapter One

"You stupid, stupid clumsy boy! Look what you've done!" Isabella jumped to her feet, as bright red punch soaked her sequined gown. "You've ruined my dress! Get out of here! Now!" For 14 years old, Isabella could be a very demanding and intimidating child. But the object of her wrath, a lowly cook's helper, seemed calm.

"Very sorry, My lady." The young man bowed politely. He set down the pitcher of drink, now almost completely emptied of its contents, and tried to blot up the spilled drink with the cloth he carried over his arm.

"Don't touch me, you fool! You shouldn't even be up here in the Nobleman's Hall... Get back to the castle scullery where you belong!" The whole room was focused on the angry girl and the culprit, standing head down, beside her.

A black-bearded man rose quickly from his table and strode across the room. He was dressed in a bold-colored tunic, decorated with a fine woven dragon emblem on his chest. A gleaming sword hung by his side. The knight reached Isabella's table and took her firmly by the elbow.

"There, there, Isabella... You have many other gowns. You mustn't get so worked up. I have a great surprise for you tomorrow. It is Advent... only two days until Christmas... this is time for feasting and merry-making. You must calm yourself!" Then he whirled and glared at the guilty boy who had caused such a ruckus. "You heard the maiden... you are a lowly, bumbling oaf! Get back to the kitchen... I'll deal with you later!"

Without a word, the servant bowed low again, turned and walked from the room. Then, squeezing Isabella's elbow even tighter, the knight escorted her to the door.

"Sir Drake, you're hurting my arm," Isabella complained.

"Stop making a scene, Child," he hissed in her ear. "Go to your room and change... your attendant will find you another gown. I want you to look your best tonight... and you certainly want to dance some more... I know you love dancing!"

Reluctantly Isabella headed to her chamber at the other side of the great fortress. She was still finding her way around the enormous structure, having only recently arrived at Chillingham. She was grateful for the man who had rescued her that terrible night just a few weeks ago. He was stern, but

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Christmas... Christ came in human form! What a joyful season of worship, song and meaningful family times!

It's been a wonderful year! We praise the Lord and also thank YOU as we, in September, celebrated ALM's 40th year. One of our favorite scriptures is Hebrews 13:8 - Jesus is the same... yesterday, today, and forever! Yes, He is! In 2018, we continued seeing lives changed by Jesus' touch. Marriages were reconciled (and some are in progress right now), relationships were restored, past grievances were forgiven, fresh starts were made! What a delight to see!

We thank YOU because you pray for us and you give of your finances, helping *Abundant Living* move into its next decade of ministry with faith, hope, and the anticipation of God's continued touch! I mention finances particularly in this December newsletter, as I invite you to consider a special 2018 year-end gift to ALM. We were especially blessed by the 38 of you who participated with the ExtraOrdinaryGive program on November 16, contributing a total of \$13,330 dollars, which will be forwarded to ALM mid-January of next year.



Enjoy Sharon's Christmas story... an allegorical yuletide tale, set in merry old England!

Have a joyous Christmas!

John (for Sharon and the rest at ALM)

P.S. If you want a gift to be recorded in 2018, the check must be dated AND the envelope must be postmarked by 12/31/18. Hand-delivered gifts must also take place by 12/31/18. If you prefer using your credit card, please call our office (717) 626-9575 to process your gift with VISA, MasterCard, or Discover. And, you can always give via PayPal, on our website. Just go to AbundantLivingMinistries.org and click on "Donations".

he had showered her with all kinds of expensive clothing and trinkets. Still, she missed her parents deeply!

As Isabella walked the long stone passageways, she reviewed the events of that awful evening. Asleep in her bed, she had been suddenly awakened by a gloved hand clapped over her mouth. A dark figure loomed over her.



"Isabella... the castle is under siege... your parents have been killed. But I promised your father I would get you to safety! Trust me, Child!" Then, wrapping a blanket around her and picking her up like a peasant's bundle, he had carried her through the long halls that had always been her playground. Now they were black and foreboding. Terrified and confused, she did as she was told and kept quiet.

All night and all the next day, she had ridden with Sir Drake, until finally they arrived at Chillingham. The castle was enormous, not as beautiful as her own dear Skipton Castle, but when Isabella saw the imposing tower and fortified walls, she knew she would be safe.

"You will be my child now," Drake crooned. "I can never replace your own parents, but I will be a good father to you."

And so far, he had kept his word. Anything Isabella wanted, she got!

Isabella arrived at her quarters and, with the help of her elderly attendant, changed into a gorgeous holly green silk gown, trimmed with lace and intricate beadwork. She selected an ornate headpiece which looked stunning on her neatly braided and beautifully coiffed chestnut hair. Then, feeling suddenly rather chilled, she added a fur-trimmed satin cloak over her shoulders. Isabella looked down at her fancy embroidered leather shoes. "Thank goodness they didn't get any punch on them," Isabella thought, because Isabella loved showing off fancy shoes and these were the showiest she had ever owned. "Not the best for walking," She had to admit to herself because their ridiculously-long pointed toes had to be stuffed with cloth to keep them straight and prevent the toes from folding under and sending the wearer sprawling.

Dismissing the servant, Isabella stepped over to her dressing table. She picked up a piece of polished brass, framed with gold filigree. Holding it in front of her, she surveyed her reflection and smiled with satisfaction. "Maybe that stupid boy did me a favor," she thought. "I look even more beautiful now than I did before." Laying the rectangular mirror back on the table, she turned to leave the room and head back to the party. But, pausing at the door, she returned to the table, picked up the mirror and slid it into the pocket of her cape. "Never

know when this might come in handy to keep me looking wonderful," she said to herself and closed the heavy wooden door of her room behind her.

The young woman began to retrace her steps to the Great Hall but, as she turned the corner of the dimly-lit corridor, she was grabbed from behind. A muscular arm wrapped itself around her waist and a gloved hand clamped over her mouth! A male voice whispered in her ear, "Don't say a word!"

Isabella opened her mouth and lunged forward, managing to bite the finger of her assailant.

"Ouch! You little tiger!" the voice muttered, but his hand tightened over her lips. He threw a hood over her head, then pushed her against the wall, whipped a cloth from his pocket and stuffed it into her mouth.

"Sorry, Isabella... but I can't risk your screams bringing the whole castle after us." Trying to dodge the pointed toes that were kicking him in his shins, her assailant bound her wrists with a leather cord and hoisted her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Another sack hung on his other shoulder but neither load seemed to slow him down. He hurried in the opposite direction from the Great Hall, through a maze of hallways and finally out into the freezing cold December night.

Kicking and struggling, Isabella determined to not lose her new life and Sir Drake's generosity without a fight. She beat her captor's back with her fists, but the arms that held her just wouldn't let go. For the second time in just a few short weeks, she found herself being carried away!

Chapter Two

Isabella's attacker plodded through the snow with his wriggling load for at least a couple of hours. When he finally set his cargo down, he was breathing heavily. They were now well into the forest, and only a shaft of moonlight illuminated the blackness. The villain lifted Isabella's hood. She blinked, trying to focus on her surroundings. Her gaze came to rest on the face in front of her. Her eyes widened in surprise and then flashed like daggers at her kidnapper.

"Isabella, I would be happy to take the gag from your mouth, but you have to promise that you won't start screaming. I really don't like screaming... and besides, there's no one around to hear you anyway... just me and the forest critters."

Isabella, eyes still glaring, nodded slowly and her captor gently removed the wadded up piece of muslin.

"You! You stupid, stupid boy! How dare you think that you can get away with this! You belong in a dungeon!"

"Well, well, I do believe I heard similar words earlier this evening. You really should develop a larger vocabulary!"

There, sitting cross-legged in front of Isabella, grinning mischievously, was the cook's helper who had doused her with punch just a few hours earlier.

"By the way... my name's Benny. Glad to finally meet you properly, Lady Isabella. Nice party hat!"

She jerked her hands away from his. "You... you Kidnapper you!" Isabella hissed. "You can't keep me here. I order you to take me back to Chillingham!"

"Don't want to take you back," the servant replied.

"Sir Drake will come after me. He will rescue me! You're just a boy... you're no match for a strong knight like him!"

"True, I'm only 17 years old and your dear Sir Drake is a cunning warrior. But you don't want to go back to him!"

"Yes I do, and I am going to leave right now!" The feisty girl stood to her feet and looked around her.

"So... which path are you going to take?" The girl took a step to her right, then stopped and looked to her left.

"Pretty dangerous for a pretty little thing like yourself to be wandering around in the woods on a frigid night."

Isabella realized how very cold she was and that she was in a helpless predicament. She really had no choice but to go along with this foolish fellow... at least until daybreak, or until she had a reasonable chance of escape.

"All right... but it won't be long until Sir Drake sends his hounds after you and then you'll be dead as a fox!"

"Well, actually... as far as the hounds... they're all enjoying the roasts I borrowed from the butler's pantry and doused with Drake's own sleeping powder. I don't think they'll be chasing any foxes for awhile."

"Who in the world is this crazy young man?" Isabella wondered. "And what does he want with me?" A kidnapping seemed like a rather steep revenge for the tongue lashing she had given him earlier. She surveyed his ragged clothes, worn boots, and uncombed hair. She had never associated with servants before. They were far beneath her in importance!

"Come on, Isabella... I want to put some more distance between us and Chillingham by daybreak. You can stay here and take your chances with a bear... but if you ask me, the safest place in this woods is right beside me!" Benny reached out and untied her leather cuffs. Taking her by the hand, he helped her to her feet. "Follow me!"

Chapter Three

"Where was this Benny taking her? Was he part of a band of thieves? Was he planning to use her as bait for a hefty ransom? She knew Sir Drake would pay any price to get her back. Shivering, she was glad she had grabbed her cape as an afterthought... she would have been frozen solid without it... and the sharp-edged mirror, still hidden in her pocket might very well serve as a handy weapon at some point.

The fashionable shoes she had admired earlier made walking extremely difficult. Isabella felt blisters developing. She had planned to dance the night away at the Advent Ball... now she was trudging through the forest with this insane youth.

Finally Benny stopped and pointed ahead. Isabella strained to see what he was pointing at. "We can rest in that cave for a few hours. I know you're getting weary."

Isabella didn't relish spending any time alone in a cave with this stranger, but she was exhausted and couldn't wait to get off her sore feet. As she entered the dark cavern, Benny set down the pack he had carried all night and removed from it a small bundle of kindling. He began rubbing two twigs together. In a few minutes he had started a fire... definitely not a huge blaze, but enough of a flame to warm their hands. Isabella kicked off her shoes and massaged her aching feet. Then removing her ornate "party hat," as Benny had called it, she rolled it into a ball for a make-shift pillow. Though she was determined not to fall asleep with this villain beside her, she was soon drifting off.

Benny leaned his head against the wall of the cave, but kept watch all night.

When rays of sunlight finally reached the opening of the

cave, Benny shook the sleeping girl.

"Wake up Isabella. We need to get going."

"Where am ...?" Then she remembered with a shudder the events of the previous evening. "You're not going to get away with this, you idiot!"

Benny just smiled. Once again he reached into his pack and pulled out another bundle... not wood this time... but cloth. "Your clothes aren't much good for hiking," he said. "Change into these... I'll step outside."

"And what if I refuse?" Isabella retorted.

"Then you can keep catching that satiny gown on briars and nettles and tripping over it every few steps. This stuff will make a march through the glade a lot easier. Do what you want!" He walked to the mouth of the cave and turned his back to the girl.

Isabella looked at the rough woolen skirt and heavy tunic. She knew they made a lot more sense than her lavish gown and cape. Not used to dressing or undressing unassisted, she struggled to unhook the many buttons and clasps of her outfit, but finally managed to get into the new attire. Checking to make sure Benny was still looking away, she pulled the mirror from her cape and scrutinized her image. Her hair was in tousled disarray from hours on the cavern floor. She unfastened her jeweled hair pins and let her hair fall to her shoulders. A smudge of soot streaked her cheek. She tried to wipe it away but only succeeded at adding more dirt to her face. She frowned disgustedly as she took stock of her raiment. The clothes were clothes of a pauper... dull, plain and stained... she had never worn such rags in her life. But she had to admit they were definitely warmer than the silks she had changed out of. Her pointed-toe shoes looked ridiculous with such an outfit... but Benny's fashion taste evidently hadn't included footwear. Isabella sighed, folded her expensive garments into a bundle and brought them to the door of the cave.

"Put these in your pack," Isabella ordered. "I'm not getting rid of them!"

"Then I guess you will have to carry them," Benny replied matter-of-factly... because I don't intend to carry around your old clothes." He slung his pack over his shoulder, took her hand and half led, half dragged her from the cave.

All morning, Isabella whined and complained about her clothes, her shoes, the snow, Benny's singing... *that* really irritated her! She told him he sang like a crow!

"You whine too much, Isabella." Benny grinned. "Personally, I like to think I have the voice of a dove!" Isabella laughed disdainfully at that one as the two kept walking.

By the time the sun had long passed overhead, Isabella was tired and also extremely hungry. She hadn't eaten anything since the ball the night before and that had been rudely interrupted by Benny's clumsiness. She complained to him that he was starving her to death. The pair had just come to a clearing at the crest of a hill and, looking into the valley, they could see a small village.

"I'm sure we can find some food there," Benny stated.

"How do you expect to get food?" Isabella asked. "I'm sure you have no money!"

"I'll figure something out," Benny promised.

As they approached the outskirts of the town, a farmer was coming towards them with a cart of turnips and potatoes.

"How much for four potatoes?" Benny asked.

"Two half-pennies," the farmer answered.

"Would you take this instead?" and before Isabella knew what was happening, Benny had grabbed her bundle of fancy clothes and held it out to the farmer.

The peasant gave a whistle. "Well, I'll even throw in a couple of turnips for that. Won't my missus think she's died and gone to the gates of Paradise, when she sees finery like this!"

"Wait!" Isabella protested, but Benny had already popped four potatoes and two turnips into his bag and was pulling her toward the town.

Benny led her to the village church, an imposing stone structure easily spotted at the end of a dirt street. Entering through the carved archway, Isabella looked around the lovely sanctuary. An amazing stained glass Jesus looked down from the front of the nave. Abundant pine boughs and holly graced the altar table. Benny led her to a wooden pew. "We can rest here a bit," he announced... "and eat our potatoes too."

"Raw potatoes?" Isabella fumed.

"What's wrong with that?" Benny asked. "Just be thankful you have something to eat."

"I'm not thankful for anything right now," Isabella complained. "I'll only be thankful when Sir Drake rescues me!"

"Why do you keep believing that he will come for you?"

"Because he cares for me. He rescued me from being slaughtered like my parents when our castle was attacked. Sir Drake took me to Chillingham and gave me wonderful gifts! In fact, he vowed to give me a great surprise today!"

"Yes, well, about that surprise... it was going to be a surprise all right. But not the kind you were expecting. I overheard Drake bargaining with a despicable warrior from Scotland... a cruel, evil scoundrel of a man. Your great knight was going to sell you for a bag of gold shillings! The deal was set to happen today!"

"You're lying!" Isabella shouted.

"I don't lie," Benny responded. "And definitely not in church! You thought Drake was your deliverer... but he was really about to destroy your life forever."

"I don't believe you!" Isabella insisted.

"Fine," Benny replied. "But truth will surface like oil on water. You'll see!"

Chapter Four

"Time to move on," Benny announced to Isabella when she had finally managed to choke down a good portion of the potato he had peeled for her. "I want to put more distance between us and that fiend of a knight," Benny told her.

"I can't walk another ten steps in these shoes," Isabella fussed. "They're killing me!"

"I always wondered why women and girls wear such foolish things on their feet," Benny commented. "You can barely walk in them... I can't imagine that you can dance in them!"

"What would you know about dancing?" Isabella retorted. "You're just a slave... I bet you've never been to a proper dance in your life! And when Sir Drake finds us... your days will be over... no dancing ever for you! You'll be dead for sure!"

"Actually, I'm as good of a dancer as I am a singer!" He chuckled, leaped in the air, clicking his heels together, and began singing a rousing Yuletide carol.

"Oh, be quiet! We're in church!" Isabella scolded. But her voice wasn't so sharp and she had to look away from Benny to

hide the upturned corners of her mouth.

The two took to the road once again. The forest now behind them, they had easier going on the rutted roads. But the afternoon sun was beginning to dip, the air was growing colder and snowflakes had begun to fall.

By dusk, they were approaching a tiny hamlet. As they grew closer, sounds of music and laughter greeted them.

"What's going on?" Isabella wondered.

"Well, it is Christmas Eve," Benny reminded her. "Peace on earth. Good will toward men. And all that nice stuff! You do know about that don't you?"

"Of course I do! I'm not a heathen!"

"Could have fooled me," Benny quipped.

In the courtyard right in the center of town, dozens of peasant folk danced and sang. Benny spied a girl about Isabella's age dancing a rollicking jig on the edge of the crowd. He made a beeline towards her, pulling Isabella with him.

"Excuse me Miss... but would you be willing to trade your



footgear for these fine specimens my dear sister is wearing?"

Startled, the young girl stared down at the long pointy toes of Isabella's shoes. In a flash, she had removed her scuffed and dirty boots and was holding them out to Isabella.

Benny tipped his head in the direction of Isabella's feet as if to say, "Get a move on, girl!" Rolling her eyes at Benny, Isabella stooped over, pulled the tortuous shoes from her feet and exchanged them for the cowhide boots.

"How do they fit?" Benny asked. "How do they feel?"

"They fit perfectly and they feel even better than perfect, after those horribly uncomfortable clods I've been wearing! Thank you Benny! I think!"

"You're very welcome, lovely Isabella... and would you care to dance? Remember, I dance just as well as I sing!" Benny held out his hand towards her with a dramatic bow.

Isabella's feet had never felt so light. She looked at the simple folk, laughing, singing, and dancing around her. She had never witnessed such joy at the most lavish balls she had attended. She wondered at the good time she was having with this Bennie... but it was Christmas, and why not indulge in a bit of gaiety? She could be angry with him again tomorrow.

The music gradually softened and, at one point, a villager stepped from the doorway of a simple cottage. He walked confidently across the courtyard and climbed up on a wagon in the center of the festivities. Spying him, a bystander gave a shrill whistle, silencing the crowd. "We're listening to you, Parson!" he shouted. "Go ahead!"

The man on the wagon lifted a lantern high and began,

"And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night..." In a voice more compelling than any castle cleric, he quoted the gripping narrative of Saint Luke.

Isabella and Benny stood hushed with the rest of the humble people from the little town, all of them savoring the reverent moment. Isabella looked at Benny and smiled. She felt herself almost trusting this lowly cook's helper.

But the perfect moment was suddenly shattered by the sound of pounding horses' hooves. Benny grabbed Isabella and, in a flash, pulled her into the parson's "cottage."

Sshhh!" Benny commanded. The horses thundered into the courtyard. Isabella and Benny scrunched down by a window and peered cautiously over its sill. The riders were dressed in full armor, deadly swords by their sides. The leader dismounted and approached the vicar who had just recited the glorious Biblical account.

Benny and Isabella couldn't hear their conversation. The knight drew his sword and placed the tip menacingly in the center of the poor man's chest. More words were spoken, as the villager waved his hands and shook his head from side to side. Finally, the dark knight slid his sword back into its sheath and turned back to remount his black stallion.

Isabella gasped, then clapped her hand over her mouth. In a thin slice of moonlight, she had caught a glimpse of the golden dragon on his shield. "Sir Drake!"

Still squatting beside her, Benny pivoted to face her. Looking her straight in the eye, he whispered, "Isabella... you may leave if you want. It's your choice. Call out to him if you want. But I am warning you... you will find nothing good with him!"

Isabella's heart quarreled within her. She knew it came down to a matter of trust... Which one was telling the truth?

Benny held her gaze for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, the young woman's eyes filled with tears. "I choose you, Benny!" she whispered. "I'm still not sure what I'm getting myself into... but I choose you!"

Benny grinned that impish grin of his. "You won't be sorry! I promise!" And somehow Isabella knew that this promise was different than Sir Drake's. The pair remained crouched by the window until the battalion of soldiers rode away.

As they turned and rose from their hiding place, they saw that this wasn't a dwelling at all... but rather a charming little chapel... no stained glass like the church in the bigger town... just a small plain wooden altar table, on which was displayed an amazing nativity scene. Isabella couldn't help but run her fingers over the beautiful carved figures.

"Now this is my kind of church!" Benny whispered.

Then, leaving the hallowed place of worship and keeping in the shadows, the two made their way down narrow alleys toward the edge of the village. At the end of a narrow side-street, Benny discovered a deserted shed. Entering cautiously, the two surveyed their one-room ramshackle hideout. It was filthy, cobwebs everywhere. A couple of rats scurried into the dark corners. Some old barrels smelled of stale whiskey and mold. Isabella shivered. "Not exactly a castle," she thought to herself.

Aloud she said, "This will do just fine, Benny! Actually, it's probably better than baby Jesus had on Christmas Eve!" She laughed and swept her arm dramatically around the room. Inwardly she was amazed at the change in her attitude... Less

than 48 hours before, she would have shrieked at such a place! Now, it just didn't seem to matter very much.

The two used a couple of old boards to sweep together little bits of straw and brush that were scattered on the dirt floor. Then Benny pulled out another little bundle of twigs and worked his magic to produce a wee little fire. Isabella stepped to the open window and gazed up at the stars.

Isabella still wasn't totally sure she had made the right decision staying with Benny. She fingered the mirror in her pocket... it could still become a handy weapon if needed. But when she looked towards Benny, he grinned at her in the fire-light and she smiled back.

"Blessed Christmas Eve, Isabella! Now, get some sleep!"

Isabella lay down once again by the fire but, unlike last night, tonight she would sleep in peace.

Chapter Five

Christmas Day dawned crisp and cold. Snow drifts were piled up along the side of their shack.

"Come on Isabella! Today, we reach our destination!"

"You haven't told me where we're going!"

"Nope, not yet, but you are about to find out! It will be a very nice Christmas gift, I assure you!"

Isabella glanced around the run-down shed. She almost hated to leave it. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything I can give you for Christmas, Benny." Her fingers touched the expensive mirror in her pocket. "No, that wouldn't do... boys didn't care about mirrors!" But it gave her an idea.

"Benny, could we make a stop on our way out of town?"

"Sure, but where? What's your idea?"

"You'll see!" This time, Isabella led the way back to the center of town. She was thankful that, being Christmas Day, folks were not out on the streets, but most likely celebrating in their homes with their families. A wave of sadness swept over her, as she recalled the many lavish Christmases she had enjoyed with her parents at Skipton. But those days were gone forever. What lay ahead she didn't know, but she resolved that she would not get stuck, mourning a lost past. She motioned Benny to follow her into the tiny little chapel that had been their hiding spot the night before.

Entering the hushed chamber, Isabella removed the valuable mirror from her pocket. It glistened in a ray of sunlight, penetrating the darkened room. Then, walking to the altar, she placed the costly polished brass with its intricate gold filigree in front of the carved nativity scene. "Jesus will know how to put this to good use," she stated confidently. "Now, Benny, what's my surprise? Where are we going?"

Benny grabbed her by the hand. Isabella felt like the shepherds must have felt on their way to Bethlehem... looking for something, someone, someplace... not exactly sure what they would find! Her excitement was mounting.



They trudged through the snow for a couple of hours. The crisp winter air filled their lungs. Isabella joined Benny in singing every Christmas carol they knew. Half-way through a last chorus of "Glo...o...o...o...ria," they came over the knob of a hill and Benny pointed to a gray speck on the horizon.

"There's your Christmas surprise!" he announced.

Isabella shaded her eyes with her hand and squinted. Then an amazed gasp! "Skipton Castle! It's my home! But wait! It was destroyed that night weeks ago. It will be in ruins... and my parents won't be there!" Her excitement crashed dismally, just as quickly as it had been aroused.

"Didn't I tell you Drake is a liar?" Benny chided. "Come on... your Skipton Castle is just fine!"

Running, slipping, sliding, and laughing, the two covered the distance to the castle faster than jack rabbits. In no time at all, the gates had been lifted and two crying parents were running, arms opened wide, to welcome their daughter home!

Chapter Six

So finally Isabella heard the truth... there had been no attack on the castle. Her parents had not been murdered. It was Sir Drake's evil plot all along to kidnap the girl and sell her for a hefty sum.

Isabella watched her parents bow before the peasant boy in gratitude. But he pulled them to their feet. "Thank you is good enough!" he said. "And maybe a bit of a party!"

What a Christmas it was! There was feasting and dancing and celebrating the rest of the day! Isabella and Benny in their peasant garb and her parents and all the lords and ladies in their finery... but no one seemed to notice the difference.

When evening came, Isabella realized that she was completely exhausted and bid a quick goodnight to her parents. But before she headed for her room, she had to see Benny.

"How can I ever thank you, Benny?" she asked. "I didn't want to trust you! I fought you! But you saved my life! With all my heart, I thank you Benny!"

"Gratitude becomes you!" Benny beamed... "I'm just glad I could help! Good night Isabella! And Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Benny!"

Isabella slept soundly and long in her very own soft bed. Awakening only when the sun shone brightly into her room, she found her mother and father downstairs. She gave them big hugs. "It is so good to be home!" she exclaimed. Then suddenly remembering her friend, "I wonder what Benny and I can find to do today? Where is he?"

Her mother put her arm on Isabella's shoulder. "Actually, Benny left late last night, dear."

"What? How could you let him leave? He just got here. Just because he was only a commoner, you didn't need to kick him out! Actually, you should have knighted him and given him the highest position in the castle! How could you send him away!"

"We didn't make him go," her father spoke gently. "And we couldn't make him a knight, even if we wanted to."

"Why not? Just because he was a poor servant?" Isabella accused loudly, angry tears now running down her face.

"We couldn't make him a knight, because Benny is already a Prince... Prince Benedictus, son of the King."

"What?" Isabella blinked tearfully. "Benny is royalty?"

"Yes, he is. When you were found missing that terrible

night, your father sent a message to the king, pleading for help. His Highness devised the daring rescue plan and his son volunteered to carry it out. We will be forever thankful for the prince's bravery! But my dear, before he left, Prince Benedictus left you a Christmas gift." Her mother pointed to a burlap-wrapped box on the table across the room.

Isabella hurriedly untied the leather cords. Eagerly lifting the lid from the box, she peered inside. There lay a pair of



shoes... simple, doeskin slippers, delicate, light as feathers, with the slightest bit of a point on the toes. Isabella couldn't help but grin as she picked them up tenderly and caressed the soft leather. As she did, she heard a rustle of paper.

Reaching into one of the shoes, she withdrew an envelope addressed with her name. Trembling, she turned it over, and caught her breath as she saw the wax insignia of the monarchy.

Gingerly breaking the seal, Isabella unfolded the note and read the brief but to-the-point message, written by her rescuer, her servant Prince...

Dear Isabella... Sorry I had to leave. I have some kingdom business to attend to. But don't worry! I'll be back. And when I come, we'll dance again! Yes! We will dance!

*Love always,
Benny*

P.S. Merry Christmas and Welcome Home!



**Merry Christmas
from all of us at ALM**

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