

Matilda & the Red High Heel

Or the story of:

—An upset stomach—

—A miraculous cure—

—& A red high heel—

Once upon a time, there was a young girl who lived with her family, four daughters, one son a mother and a father, in a small, country cottage. Although never very rich, this family always had enough to survive. Generally upbeat and willing to help, the son and four daughters pitched in tirelessly, working each day around the clock. Even so, when the father grew ill, the family finances started to plummet. As the medical bills mounted, demanding more and more of their income, it became harder and harder to make ends meet. No day was long enough. When summer came, no harvest was big enough. And to make matters worse, the doctors were at a complete loss. After endless tests and questions and visits, they were no closer to diagnosing the poor father, much less finding a cure.



You must imagine that our heroine, working tirelessly from dawn until dusk, had little time to herself. But when she did, what joy! Grabbing a bit of lunch, perhaps some bread and a bit of cheese, she would skip to town, anxious to see what she could find.

To be fair, Boxbury was hardly a bustling metropolis. Numbering under a few thousand, it would barely be a town in many places. To young Matilda, however, it was paradise. She would sink onto the damp grass, avidly watching the passerby. What ladies! What gentlemen! What characters! Her eyes would devour the dark waistcoats and flouncy dresses and broad hats, memorizing every detail. For, you see, fashion was her passion. It was an odd pleasure, perhaps one that would have shocked and surprised

her sisters. But the girl never told them, keeping her outings a perfect secret, and they had no way of knowing.

One day, as she sat under her tree, she heard an odd sound. It appeared to be someone weeping. Curious, she followed the noise and found, sure enough, a young woman, crying as though her heart would break.

“What’s the matter?” Matilda asked.

“My husband left me,” the woman replied miserably, blowing her nose on a sodden hankie. “And now n-no one is ever going to l-love me again!” At this, she started to weep some more.

Matilda frowned, sinking onto the ground. “Did it just happen?” she inquired.

The woman shook her head. “A year ago.”

“A year ago!” Matilda exclaimed. “Why, that’s ages ago!”

“Easy for *you* to say,” the woman said bitterly. “Who *are* you, anyway?”

Matilda looked at her. She looked at the red, raw and blotchy skin and the frizzy hair. She looked at the dirty, bedraggled clothing and worn shoes. Then, nodding curtly, she stood up and extended a pink hand. “Someone who’s going to help you.”

“But how?” the woman asked.

Matilda paused, considering the matter carefully. “Do you have any cloth?”

“I’ve got some old curtains.”

The girl nodded. “That’ll do.”

A few hours later, Matilda had cut the curtains and was busily starting to sew. While the woman watched anxiously, Matilda chatted animatedly about her house, their garden and her siblings. She talked about her father’s illness and their attempts to find a cure. And gradually, oh so gradually, the woman loosened up. She made a pot of tea, pouring it into two mugs. And then, as they drank, they talked about Boxbury and the latest trends.

After a while, seeing that the woman’s tears had faded almost completely, Matilda firmly instructed her to bathe and “pretty up” as best she could. Still mystified at the young girl’s presence, as well as her calm, the older woman did as she was bid.

By that evening, Matilda’s companion was cleaner than a whistle. Seeing her, the girl smiled and nodded approvingly. “Well, good! Now you’re ready for the dress.”

“What dress?” the woman asked.

Without answering, Matilda reached down, raised what she had been sewing and—

The woman gasped. “It’s beautiful!” Somehow, the bilious, purple curtains had been transformed into a stunning gown.

As the woman changed, Matilda started on her hair. She combed it smoothly and tied it into a long and silky plait. When she was done, she led the lady to a mirror and—hark! It was a miracle! In no time at all, the crying wretch had been transformed into a beautiful, elegant lady.

Matilda smiled triumphantly. “See? Now how could someone *not* fall in love with you?”

Blushing with surprise and pleasure, the woman instantly turned to Matilda and kissed her. “However can I thank you?” she gushed.

Matilda stepped back, shouldering her rucksack. “You can go out there and meet someone. But be careful!” she warned, flashing a mischievous smile. “Don’t go breaking any hearts.”

The woman grinned. Then she grabbed her purse and confidently, coolly headed to the local pub. Once there, one can only assume that she was wildly successful. After all, looking and *feeling* like a million dollars, what man could resist her charms?

Young Matilda, seeing that her work was done, cheerfully headed home. Tripping down the street, still dwelling on the day’s success, she barely noticed the people and scenery around her. But someone noticed *her*. An old witch, having watched the girl’s kind, selfless project, followed the girl closely. And then, while Matilda stopped to tie her shoe, she hurried ahead.

Straightening up, Matilda was instantly transfixed by what she saw. Not twelve yards before her, there was an old, wrinkled woman, wearing nothing but a ragged dress and a robe. But underneath this robe, poking onto the dusty street, were pair of red high heels.

They were, Matilda was quite sure, the most amazing things that she had ever seen. You can imagine her surprise, then, when one of the shoes just fell off—and the woman simply kept going! Matilda scooped it up instantly, anxiously chasing after the careless traveler. Before she could reach the woman, however, the road reached a bend and the old lady disappeared. In vain, the girl looked left and right and left and right. But when it became clear that the woman was well and truly gone, having vanished quite without a trace, young Matilda finally give up and returned home.

The shoe quickly became her prized possession. Even when the work was long and tiring, leaving her weary and sore to the bone, she would take out the shoe and admire it. It was the source of endless fascination and comfort, something like the strange, sad relic of a distant land that she could never, *would* never know. But oh, just to dream!

In her mind’s eye, Matilda saw dozens of ladies dancing and prancing about, trailing silk and ribbons across marble floors. She saw dignified gentleman, smoking cigars in plush parlors. She saw exquisite gardens, gleaming brightly in the sunlight. And in the middle, fluttering from throng to throng and group to group, was a girl in a red dress. There she was, always dancing and always smiling away, wearing a red the very shoes that Matilda now held.

So time passed. The days grew even longer. The meals grew even smaller. As the father weakened, the eldest of his daughters, proud, righteous things of a harsh and unyielding temperament, gradually exerted greater and greater control. Having lost their mother several years ago, they used their father’s weakness to rule the household quite ruthlessly, brooking little dissent from their brother and young Matilda.

For a long while, things continued just like this. One day, however, an event occurred that changed Matilda's life forever. That is, one of her sisters found the shoe.

"What is this?" she demanded, brandishing the offending item.

Blushing crimson, Matilda futilely tried to grab it back. "It is nothing. Just an old shoe."

By now, the rest of her siblings had arrived. "An old shoe!" repeated another sister shrilly. "It's worth a fortune! Tell me, how is it that *you* could have something like *this*?"

"Yes," chimed in the third, "how is that while *we* pinch and scrape and sell the family china, *you* keep shoes like these? *I* would've sold them ages ago!"

"But how could I?" Matilda protested. "I've only got one!"

"Because you lost the other!" the first sister cried. "Careless! But what did I expect? You've *always* been this way. You've always had your head in the clouds, thinking that you're somehow *better* than us!"

"That's not true!" Matilda cried, stung. Her sisters, however, were beyond reason.

"Yes! Yes! It *is* true!" they raged. "You're always sneaking into town, ogling the lords and ladies there. Well, let me tell you. We're about sick of it!"

"What are you saying?" Matilda asked, feeling somewhat bewildered.

"Maybe it's time that you *did* something for this family. Went off and *made* something of yourself."

"You mean—leave?" Matilda gasped.

"Yes! *Leave*. And until you've learned to do your part, *don't come back!*"

Matilda looked from face to face. Finding no sympathy, she quietly went to her room and packed. Only her brother, looking quite anxious, came to help.

"I'm so sorry," the little boy whispered, blinking back tears. "But maybe it won't be *so* bad. If you go into the world, well, maybe you'll really *be* something. You know? Something big. Someone who *does* things."

At this, tears stung Matilda's eyes. But determined not to cry, she quickly wiped them away. "Yes, maybe you're right," she said bravely, giving her brother a long hug. Then, with a watery smile, she threw her clothing into a bag and headed downstairs. A short while later, armed with nothing but some clothes, a bit of bread and a red high heel, she opened the door, took a final look back and left.

It was still morning, and the sky was filled with small, puffy clouds. A gentle wind ruffled her hair. As Matilda walked, a bit of liveliness returned. Yes, she had no money and no plan. But just *look* at everything! The entire world seemed to be smiling. Who was she not to smile back?

The road to Boxbury was fairly short and dusty, winding through sheep pastures and farms. When she reached the familiar city, however, a sudden inspiration seized her. Why stop here? She would go to the capital!

It was a long and tiring trip. As she walked, the road grew wider and wider. Soon there were wagons and carriages, plodding steadily to the great markets and stores of Northumberland. Her heart beat faster in excitement. That night, she slept under a leafy tree, eating the last of her provisions. Then, near dawn, she traveled the final leg to the capital.

She had never seen anything like it. There were people and animals everywhere, squawking and yelling and selling their wares. Washerwomen tossed pans of dishwater onto the street, occasionally dunking unsuspecting passerby. Pubs crawled with leering, hooting men, getting an early start on the day's activities. Bakeries and restaurants, smelling of yeasty, flaky dough and melting butter, cast wide their doors.

It was to a restaurant that, quite famished with fatigue and hunger, Matilda went first.

"Please, miss," she said, addressing the plump cook who answered her knock. "Might you have any odd jobs that I could do? Washing or peeling or skinning? I'd do just about anything."

The cook shook her head. "We're all full. Can't help." And she slammed the door.

At the next restaurant, Matilda received the same response. At the next one, however, she had a bit of luck. Although the cook had no use for her, he gave her a square meal and a loaf of bread. While she ate, wolfing down the hearty victuals, he proffered some advice.

"Yeh might try the Duke o' Northumberland's place. Seems that they're always lookin' for help over there."

Thanking him profusely, Matilda bounced to her feet and set off again. The cook's counsel proved prescient. At the Duke of Northumberland's, a harried woman with a tall, white hat admitted that they could use a hand.

"Can't give you much. Just a bit of food and a place to sleep."

Matilda agreed instantly. For the hungry, tired girl, miles and miles from home, food and lodging was more than enough.

Over the following days, Matilda became the scullery maid of scullery maids. She was constantly scrubbing floors and peeling potatoes and running errands all over. It was on one of these errands, in fact, that she heard about Lady Bianca and her *unusual* condition. Bianca was the Duke of Northumberland's youngest, sweetest and dearest daughter. Her sixteenth birthday, which was to be her "coming out" to society, was anticipated throughout all of the land. Oh, how lavish it would be! There would be hundreds of ladies and gentlemen, wearing gowns of the finest silks and satins. There would be trays of food and dozens of hanging lights and tinkling fountains. There was, in truth, just one problem. A few days hence, Lady Bianca had contracted some sort of virus. Some sort of *stomach* virus, that is. And now, merely *seven days before her ball*, she was vomiting left and right. And right and left. And then right again. (That one missed the toilet.) Doctor after doctor had been called. Healers and medicine men and nurses had been anxiously summoned. But not all of the medicines in the world were having any effect. With time quickly running out, the Duke and his counselors were growing desperate.

Standing on a stairwell, overhearing a discussion between some counselors, Matilda felt a rush of pity for the sick lass. “Poor thing!” she exclaimed, momentarily forgetting herself. “But who can blame her? I’d be doing the same thing!”

One of the counselors, overhearing her, looked at her sharply. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why, the poor girl is nervous!” Matilda said. “That’s all that it is. No doctor’s going to fix that!”

“Could *you?*” the counselor asked bluntly.

Matilda paused, carefully considering her reply. “Well, I could *try*,” she said slowly. “I mean, it couldn’t *hurt*.”

The counselor’s frown deepened. Then, apparently reaching a decision, he whirled around. “Wait here,” he commanded, and he marched away.

Matilda, fearing that she had transgressed, grew immediately anxious. In her head, she started to formulate apologies and explanations—“I simply forgot myself. It won’t happen again!”

But when the counselor returned, these excuses died on her lips. For, standing at the man’s side, wearing a rich robe of deep plum, was none other than the Duke of Northumberland!

The Duke, known for his directness, did not disappoint now. “My counselor says that you can help my daughter. Is that true?”

Matilda swallowed, sweeping a little courtesy. “I can try, Your Grace.”

He peered at her closely. “Are you a doctor?”

“No.”

“A nurse?”

“No.”

“A witch?”

“No.”

“Then what *are* you?”

“I am a scullery maid, Your Grace.”

At first, the Duke was taken aback. “A scullery maid!” But after a moment, he seemed to reconsider. “Well, you certainly can’t do any *worse* than those buffoons in white. Go on, then. Try your luck.”

So it was that Matilda, a simple girl from a small, country farm, was led to see the Lady Bianca.

Bianca was a thin creature, huddling miserably on an elegant sofa. Although usually quite pretty, boasting alabaster skin and corncob hair, her complexion was presently a pale shade of green.

The counselor cleared his throat. “Matilda of—” he paused.

“Boxbury.”

“Matilda of Boxbury, may I present the Lady Bianca Marguerite Rachelle—”

At this, the blonde girl, who had now resembled cooked broccoli, leapt to her feet and rushed forward. For a moment, Matilda thought that it was a greeting. Surprised and delighted, she extended her hand. What manners! What cordiality! But Lady Bianca, however polite and cordial she might be, had no such intentions now. Without breaking stride, she ran directly *past* Matilda and into the bathroom. An instant later, there came a most horrible, bloodcurdling retching noise.

“—Northumberland, daughter of Lady Rosalyn Harrows of Kingsbury, niece of the Earl of Waitrose and youngest daughter of His Grace the Duke of—”

“Bleeeeeegghhhreeeeek!” came the sound from the bathroom.

“—Northumberland.”

Seconds later, the Lady Bianca emerged, wiping her mouth. “I feel better,” she said hoarsely.

“Right,” said the counselor, looking vaguely pained. And with a final *God help you* look at Matilda, he left the room.

For a minute or two, there was silence. Then, with a reflective air, Matilda began to speak. “When I was eleven, I had the most horrible crush on a boy. His name was Geoff Wiggins, and he was the *cutest* boy around. He was a couple of years older than I was, maybe twelve or thirteen, but I thought that he was the coolest guy on Earth.” At this, Matilda crossed her legs and sighed. “Everything was going fine until, out of the blue, my mum decided to throw a big party. It had been a good year for us, and she wanted to celebrate the harvest. She was always keen on that sort of thing. Naturally, *everyone* was invited. All of our friends. All of our family. And, of course, Geoff Wiggins. Well, I grew positively ill! I couldn’t get out of bed. I couldn’t eat for a *week!* Everyone was so worried.”

Lady Bianca, for whom the idea of “not eating for a week” was sounding pretty attractive, nodded politely. “What was wrong with you?” she inquired.

“I was nervous.”

“Really? That was all?” Lady Bianca asked.

“Sure. I was worried sick about seeing Geoff. I was convinced that I wouldn’t be pretty enough. That he wouldn’t like me. That I’d do something silly. I worried so much that my stomach got all tied into knots. Why, it’s no *wonder* that I got sick!

“Do you think,” Bianca said slowly, “that maybe *I’m* just nervous?”

“Well,” Matilda replied, “you tell me. Have you got any reason to be nervous?”

“It is my first ball.”

Matilda nodded. “That’s something.”

“And—”

“And?”

Bianca turned scarlet.

“Ahhhhhhh,” said Matilda knowingly. “I see.” Then she smiled. “Well, let me continue. On the day of the party, my mother came to see me. She sat on my bed and said, ‘Enough is enough. I’ve had

all that I can take. You sit up, and you get yourself washed.’ Well, my mum was a great woman, a gentle woman. But when she made up her mind, she *always* got her way! So I dragged myself into the bath, I scrubbed myself clean and came out. And when I entered the room, my mum was holding a new dress. It was something that she’d just made for me. I mean *just* for me. You see, she was a wizard with clothing. And once I’d got the dress on, she nodded and said, ‘Alright then. Now let’s do something about that hair.’

“Well, by the time that she was done, I was a new person. I looked into the mirror and I realized that I looked *good*, probably better than I’d ever looked before. And when I knew that I *looked* good, I started to *feel* good. By the time that I got downstairs, in fact, I was on top of the world.”

By this point, Bianca was leaning forward eagerly. “Is that all it took? Really?” she demanded. Then, without waiting for a reply, she asked—“Could you make *me* look that good?”

Matilda nodded. “Certainly. A week isn’t much time, so we’ll have to get to work. But with some help, I can make you the belle of the ball.”

Bianca clapped her hands, looking delighted. “Then what are you waiting for?” she asked. And so she leapt to her feet, losing fresher and pinker than a summer rose.

All of this time, the counselor, the Duke of Northumberland, his wife and many of the servants were waiting outside. Pressed to the door, what was their surprise when they heard a peal of laughter! Their shock grew even greater when, just a few moments later, the girls burst through the door.

“Daddy!” cried Bianca breathlessly, seeing her father. “I must have some money—we’re off to the market. Come on, hurry now! We haven’t much time.”

“What? Money? Market?” the Duke said in some bewilderment. His wife, however, understanding these things better, shook her head quietly.

“Don’t ask questions. Just do it.”

Still looking a bit dazed, the Duke did so, and so the two girls rushed away.

When they returned, they carried armloads of satins and silks. They had gold brocade and shining gems and colorful ribbons and a pair of tiny slippers. Over the next week, they worked tirelessly. While Matilda cut and sewed, the girls chatted and shared secrets.

“Well?” Bianca asked one day. “Whatever ever happened to Geoff?”

“What? Oh, nothing really,” Matilda replied. “You see, while I was at the party, I saw him wiping a booger on the wall. Now that’s just *disgusting*. I’m not dating any nose-pickers. Pah-lease!”

Bianca laughed.

By the night of the ball, Bianca was easily the prettiest girl in seven countries. Not only that, but the strange, mismatched duo had become, of course, the very best of friends.

After that, there was no question that Matilda would leave. She became the official seamstress of the Northumberland manor, making gowns and cloaks for all occasions. She was also Bianca’s companion, accompanying the girl almost everywhere. Most of the time, Matilda was quite happy. She

loved her job, loved her friends and loved to turn expensive fabrics into beautiful, shimmering gowns. Always, however, there was a dark, creeping shadow on her happiness. Although she sent most of her money home, keeping but a small portion for herself, her brother wrote that her father had gotten no better. In fact, if anything at all, he had grown worse. Sick with worry, Matilda was constantly seeking a cure. She visited doctors in the city, relentlessly comparing advice and medications.

It was in this way that, emerging from a doctor's office in central Northumberland, she heard about the Witch of Eastwick.

"Who is the Witch of Eastwick?" she asked curiously.

"She is an old witch, living a few hours away. They say that she can cure anything. Oh! But what an ornery wretch! She charges an arm and a leg."

"It's true," someone else agreed. "And if you can't pay, well, she won't lift a finger."

Deciding that the Witch of Eastwick, however ornery, was her best, perhaps *only*, hope, Matilda resolved to find her. One day, then, she made the long and exhausting journey to the witch's house.

As she walked, passerby shook their heads. Upon hearing her mission, however noble it was, their comment was—"You can go there if you like. But I'll warn you that it won't do you much good. That old hag won't help anyone."

"But I've got money," Matilda protested, brandishing the wages that she had carefully, painstakingly saved. "I can pay."

"It still won't help. It's not money that she's after."

Matilda paused, frowning slightly. "What do you mean?"

The solemn men and women, loading their goods into a large, wooden cart for market, exchanged a glance. Then, with a small sigh, they shrugged. "You'll see."

After a few hours, Matilda reached the cottage that the townspeople had indicated. It was a small, thatched affair, cozily nestled in a thick, black wood. Smoke crept from the chimney, and there was a little garden of herbs out front.

"Hello?" Matilda called, knocking on the door. When she received no answer, she tugged at the latch. To her surprise, it gave way. Moments later, she entered the house.

Due to the bright sunlight outside, it took Matilda's eyes a moment to adjust. When they did, she found a young woman, far, far younger than Matilda had been led to expect, standing at a wood stove.

"You'd better sit down," the witch said, not bothering to turn around. "The tea is almost done."

A few moments later, she poured two mugs and handed one to Matilda. The girl, feeling slightly overawed, took a moment to find her voice. But when she did so, it was low and urgent. In the shortest, most concise way possible, she quickly explained her father's condition and implored the woman's help.

The witch nodded knowingly. "Yes, yes, I could help him. I know just the thing."

Matilda's heart leapt. "Please! Oh, I'll give you anything. Gold—silver—jewels—*anything!*"

The witch shook her head. "I'm not interested in gold."

“Then what *are* you interested in?” Matilda asked desperately. “Tell me what it is and I promise you that, no matter what it takes, I’ll find it!”

The witch looked at her intently. Finally, she shrugged. “Very well then. I promise to help you *if* and *only* if you can find the mate to this shoe.” So saying, she held up a red high heel.

Matilda gasped, instantly recognizing the companion to her prettiest, most expensive and dearest possession, the red high heel that she had found.

“I can! I can!” she cried excitedly. “Just wait here!”

Without finishing her tea, she flew to her feet and raced outside.

Although the journey was two hours each way, Matilda returned in an hour and half. When she reentered the cottage, she triumphantly placed the *other* red high heeled shoe at the witch’s feet.

The witch blinked, appearing somewhat astonished. Then, glancing at Matilda, recognition dawned.

“So can I have the medicine?” Matilda asked eagerly.

“Yes,” the witch said slowly, “I *will* give you the medicine. But you must do one more thing.”

Matilda’s shoulders slumped. “One more thing? But you said that—”

Ignoring her, the witch reached into a wooden drawer and removed an envelope. Trimmed in thin, gold leaf, it bore the royal seal. “Do you see this?” she asked, brandishing the little document.

Matilda nodded, trying to hide her disappointment.

“It is an invitation to the royal ball in two week’s time. Now, at this ball, the royal Prince Jonathan will be in attendance, and it is my goal to win his heart. To do this, however, I must look prettier than any girl there.” She glanced at Matilda. “That’s where *you* come in. Could you sew a dress to match these slippers? A dress that would be a perfect match?”

Hearing this, Matilda brightened considerably. “I could! I could!” she cried eagerly. And without further ado, she set to work.

Over the following week, she worked night and day to make the dress. Using the measurements that the witch gave her, she transformed yards of red silk and brocade into a beautiful, shimmering gown, quite lovelier than the ocean is deep. As she worked, the witch talked about Prince Jonathan. She talked about his handsomeness—the stormy, hazel eyes, sharp features, long eyelashes and deep, tanned skin. She described anecdotes of his kindness and wit. She listed dozens of noble things that he had said and done. So warmly and eloquently did she speak that, by the end of the week, *Matilda* was a bit in love with him, too.

Those days were, so it seemed, the longest of Matilda’s life. At long last, however, the garment was ready to be worn. Matilda held it up, letting it catch the light. For a moment, no one could speak. It was, quite simply, the most delicious, astounding piece of clothing that either had ever seen.

“Have I paid, then?” Matilda asked anxiously, turning to the witch. “Might I have the cure?”

The woman nodded and, walking to her cauldron, brewed a thick, green substance. When it was done, she poured it into a flask and handed it to Matilda. “Go to your father, and bid him drink this. Within an hour, his illness shall be cured.”

Elated, Matilda raced away. With the help of a horse and carriage, the journey of two days took just a few hours. In no time, then, she had arrived home. When she knocked, her sisters were astounded to see her. In their faces, Matilda saw shades of remorse.

“Matilda—” they began, stumbling awkwardly on their words.

Matilda shook her head. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“But it *does*,” they protested. “We were wrong to turn you out. We were just so scared and worried. We never meant to hurt you!” There seemed to be more coming. Before they could finish, however, Matilda’s brother bounded into the room.

“’Tilda!” he yelled excitedly. And with a whoop, he leapt into her arms. As she hugged him tightly, she inquired about their father. The sisters exchanged a glance.

“He does much worse. The cures, if they ever worked, are failing now. The doctors are losing hope.”

Matilda nodded. “Let me see him.”

When she entered the sickroom, her father was too weak to move. When he saw her, though, a smile gladdened his face. “Matilda! You’ve come back!”

Instantly, the girl rushed to his side. As she embraced him, she felt tears against her cheek, though whether hers or his she had no idea.

“Here, father,” she said quietly, withdrawing the green flask. “You must drink this.”

Eyeing the discolored bottle, he smiled wanly. “Is there a potion left that I haven’t tried?” he asked wearily. All the same, he removed the stopper and drained it fully.

“I have a feeling that this one will be different,” Matilda said carefully, watching the liquid disappear. And lo and behold, it was! Within twenty minutes, his color had returned. Within an hour, just as the witch had promised, he was completely revived.

“It’s a miracle!” he cried, leaping to his feet. “You have saved me!”

Hearing the commotion, the entire family rushed upstairs. Seeing their father’s recovery, the siblings laughed and cried and hugged each other. When, finally, the celebrations had subsided, Matilda’s sisters pulled her aside.

“We trust that you’re home now?” they asked urgently. “Home for good?”

Matilda looked from one to the other. Then, slowly, she shook her head. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?” they asked, looking astonished. “But why not?”

“Well,” Matilda said carefully, “because it’s not my home anymore.” With a glance at her brother, she smiled. “Maybe it *wasn’t* so bad that I left. I’ve done what you told me to do. I’ve, well,

made something of myself. I went to the capital, and I made a new set of friends and a new life. And, well, *that's* where I belong now." She paused. "With them."

"But can I come visit?" her brother asked earnestly.

Matilda laughed. "Of course! I expect you to. And I'll come visit here. Don't think that you've seen the last of me!"

At this, her father, who was standing a few feet away, smiled. "I should hope not."

For a moment, her sisters were silent. Then, as one, the younger two looked at the eldest. She cleared her throat. "A package came for you today."

"A package!" cried Matilda. "But that's impossible. I haven't any friends around here. And no one in Northumberland could possibly know this address." She shook her head. "There must have been some mistake."

But when she followed her sisters, she saw that there had been no error. There, sitting on floor of the kitchen, was a large, wooden box with her name across the top. Mystified, Matilda cut open the box. And what should she find but—

"My dress!"

There it was—the red dress that she had worked so hard to make. Just beneath it, she found *both* of the red high heels that she had so long admired. And at the bottom of the box, nearly hidden beneath a fold of the dress, she saw a white envelope with golden trim. She gasped.

"It's a ticket to the royal ball!"

"When is it for?" one sister asked anxiously.

"It's, well—" she faltered, glancing at the clock. "My goodness, it starts in three hours!"

"Three hours!" her family exclaimed together. And the room fell into commotion. Her family quickly helped her to pack, throwing some provisions and the precious items into a bag. Then they swiftly kissed her goodbye, funneling her outside. Once there, she found a coach and paid the grizzled driver a king's ransom (well, so it seemed to Matilda) to go to the capital.

When she arrived at the spacious, sprawling residence that had learned to call home, the Duke of Northumberland and his family were just about to leave. When Bianca saw Matilda, though, she stopped immediately. Matilda quickly related all that had happened, beginning with the red high heel and ending with the invitation.

"It was her all along," Matilda burred excitedly. "The old woman with the red shoes—the Witch of Eastwick—the young woman in the cottage—why, they're *all the same person!* She must've disguised herself!"

Bianca laughed happily and, without a further thought, dismounted the carriage.

"Bianca!" her mother and sisters cried incredulously. "You'll be late!"

Bianca waved dismissively. "It doesn't matter—go without me! I'll be there in a little while." Turning to Matilda, she smiled. "I've got work to do."

Then, racing inside, she helped Matilda to prepare for the ball.

At the royal palace, Matilda was a sensation. Her cool, calm countenance and quiet confidence caused heads to turn. The dress, if it contributed at all, was simply an afterthought. When Prince Jonathan saw her, he was instantly smitten. And Matilda, for her part, was quick to return his affections; half in love before they even met, his charming persona and good humor quickly captured the rest of her heart.

Within a year, the two had been married, and they had moved to a beautiful, picturesque castle in a nearby county. Nestled between sloping mountains and bordering a beautiful, glassy lake, it was a storybook ending to a storybook romance.

Bianca visited quite often, of course, so often that she had a special room and a complete wardrobe of clothing. Matilda's family also visited frequently; although, here, it must be admitted that her father and brother came far more often than the rest. As for Matilda, she had plenty of occasions to make and wear the colorful, shimmering garments that she adored. At long, long last, the world that she had so often dreamed about—the world of dancing ladies and dignified gentleman and silk dresses and beautiful gardens—had become her own. It had become her *home*. No longer a dream that she could never, *would* never touch, this world of fairytales and princes and happy endings had somehow become real.