

# THE EXALTED GATE

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# *The Exalted Gate*

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# BOOTS

Judith hated her shoes. In fact most of the time, Judith hated all shoes. She loved to feel the fresh grass inbetween her toes. She loved to feel the sand beneath her feet. She loved to paddle barefoot in the sea and admire her newly painted toenails in the sunshine.

She liked walking on carpets without slippers, she liked putting powder on her freshly washed feet and scented oil on her ankles. She would put henna tatoos on the bridge of her feet, and wiggle her toes at her cat. She just hated shoes.

- High heel shoes, one inch heels
- sandals, stilettos
- flat shoes, chappals
- work shoes, hobnail boots
- soft shoes, clogs
- kickers, court shoes
- trainers, wide fitting
- knee high boots, riding boots
- and slippers.

She hated them all. Which was a real problem because she had to wear them. Just as we all do.

She had to wear shoes to the supermarket, in the car, to work, whenever she went out to visit her mother or went out on a date. Every road, pavement

and most of her friends required she wear shoes. Shoes were just everywhere! She even had to wear them when she went to drama school but she was able to take them off when she rehearsed on stage.

Now Judith loved the stage. She liked the lights, the friends, the costumes, the make-up and the plays and the audiences and, uniquely, she even liked directors.

So when they cast her as a tramp in a very strange play by a Polish writer she had never heard of she wasn't concerned. And when she was in the costumes and props room she searched high and low for all the things she needed and after she had put it all together she looked at the effect in a long mirror that went from the floor to the ceiling. The torn coat, old shirt, one glove and bare feet. And then the producer who was also Polish told her she couldn't have bare feet.

She had to wear some old looking boots.

"Why!" She asked him.

"Because even tramps wear shoes," he told her. "It is winter in the play the tramp would die without boots!"

"See," she complained, "even the poorest people have an old battered pair of shoes. You just can't get away from them."

So she went back to the props department but they were out of boots. She looked everywhere

and they looked everywhere and finally found an old pair of boots that looked perfect, stuffed in a cupboard under a pile of old carpeting once used in a production of *Cats, A Story Of the Great Indoors*.

She put them on. They had looked to be too large but to her surprise they fitted her perfectly. Not only that, they were comfortable. Very comfortable. She almost couldn't feel them as she wiggled her toes. But as she turned to go back to the stage for the dress rehearsal she found her feet didn't turn left to go up the stairs but turned right and walked her right out the door.

Onto the streets.

And though she tried to walk back it was no good. The boots knew where they were going, they had been waiting a long, long time for someone to put them on so they could go for a walk. You see magic boots need to be worn to go anywhere. And go they did. Judith found she walked right of her home town into the countryside.

Right out of the countryside onto the next town and still they were walking and she was getting tired. Her poor feet ached. She was hungry. She was hot and what was more, people kept throwing her money for food.

She was also missing the dress rehearsal. Then the boots stopped. They were in front of a large shop and the boots took her in and everyone looked at her because they could see she wasn't a tramp

but dressed for a play. Tramps, you see, rarely wear makeup. The boots took her to the first floor without giving her any time to say good morning to the people in the shop, and on the first floor they took her to a small door marked **PRIVATE** and then through that and they were in an enclosed room with no windows. Except as they arrived so did a large, oak doorway. Embossed with large swirls and lots of different styles of shoes. The boots marched her right up to it so her nose was touching the wood. She opened it.

In front of her were rows and rows of shelves and on all of them were shoes. Thousands and thousands of pairs of shoes. She had never seen so many. They were all shapes and sizes and colours. Tiny little ones only an elf could wear right up to huge ones for giants. There were shoes for bees with bad legs and soft shoes for people visiting pixies (who are known to require people to wear soft shoes in their homes.)

She hated them all on sight!

“Mays I ‘elp you?” asked a tall man looking at her with intense grey eyes. Finestitch then looked at her boots. He thought for a few seconds then looked back at her.

“I dun’t believes I knows you but I recognises my boots,” he said flatly.

“Your boots?” said Judith panting from all the walking she had been doing. She couldn’t think

of anything else to say to the man who was the strangest looking cobbler.

“My works is very specialised . . . uniques you might even say. Finestitch the cobbler is renowns these last six hundreds years! I is good you see. Nows let me look.” He peered at the boots. “Ah they sis Monday boots.”

“Monday?”

“Yes. Monday is the days Finestitch cobbles for royalty.”

He then took out a notebook from his pocket and flicked back the pages. It did not take him long.

“Ah . . . order one pairs worn black boots for the general uses of highly secret, tell no-one.”

“General use?”

“Yes. As situations demand, so the boots responds.”

“And which situation exactly will get them off my feet?”

“You has them on your feets accidental?”

“Very!”

“Ah wells . . . I isn't sure. You'll have to go out and finds out. Meanwhile, if I put some of this oil on them for you they'll be fine for your feet and you cans go about your business.”

“About the boots' business you mean.”

Finestitch the cobbler smiled and nodded. That was the way of it. The boots had only brought her here for a little refreshing oil. Now they wanted to go their own way again. Oh she fought them. She turned west, they turned east. She turned south they turned east she turned north they turned east. She jumped and twisted and they twisted back and landed. She clung to a tree and they pulled her away. She cried at them and they didn't stop. Every so often though they stopped and she sat down to give her a rest.

“Oh well looks like I am going east,” she thought.

They passed shops she knew and roads she recognised until she passed shops she didn't know and down roads she didn't know. She was soon lost. And then came the wood. Birch trees everywhere and still the boots walked. For a whole day. It was the longest day she had ever known. Then they stopped. At first in the dim light she thought it was to give her another rest until she looked down. There by her feet was a sleeping woman you would never have noticed in a hundred years. In fact no one had noticed her in a hundred years. She who woke up bleary eyed and looked at Judith and then at her feet and cried,

“My boots!” Then she looked up at Judith .  
“Who are you?”

“My question exactly,” said Judith finally being

able to take the boots off. She had never felt so light, she almost felt she could fly.

“My boots,” repeated the woman with delight hugging them to her chest.

“If these are your boots how come they were being used by my props department miles and miles away, and how come Finestitch made them for you?”

“Oh *him*” said the woman her fingers tightening around the boots as if they were Finestitch’s neck. “My boyfriend and me, we bought two pairs of boots from old Finestitch. Lovers’ boots, he said they were. And my prince and I really wanted lovers’ boots. But as soon as they were on they wanted to part us. I just had time to kiss Georgie, that’s my lover and prince and boyfriend, and then off his boots go to the west and mine plod off to the east.”

“That must have been galling,” said Judith .

“It was, and what is more I have been here ages and ages waiting for him to find me and do you think he turned up?”

“Men,” said Judith.

“Tell me about it!” Said the woman, “They’re full of promises but buy them a pair of boots and off they go.”

“Why did you take them off?”

“They looked tired.”

“Now you mention it they do,” replied Judith.

“And they vanished merry as you please leaving me here. I must have dozed off.”

“Someone must have taken them from you. They were probably glad to be rid of them though I know I am.”

“Why would someone steal my boots!”

Judith wrinkled up her nose and shrugged,

“How would I know. You’re lucky they didn’t take your rings!”

“You can’t take my rings I was born with them, they grew with me.”

“Well they are Monday boots, “ Judith tried again.

The Princess nodded slowly and raised an eyebrow because in her world that made a lot of sense.

“Maybe you should put them on and if you go east enough and he goes west enough you’ll meet up again.

“Don’t be daft you can’t go round in circles going in straight lines.”

“Oh yes you can. Believe me I am an actress and I spend all day doing just that.”

The princess was not at all sure about her logic but she put the boots on and off they went with her, with Judith walking along for the company

and after a few days, when the countryside was particularly summery and the trees were full of leaves and flowers were everywhere and someone was playing very loud music from their noisy car, there in front of them was the baker the princess had been eloping with. She had thought it a fine idea to marry someone who baked fresh bread everyday.

“I thought you fell in love with a prince?” said Judith.

“So did I” said the princess sighing. “A prince amongst bakers. Oh well never mind at least we have decent shoes.”

“My love!” cried the baker, who was actually a smiling, bright young man. “I haven’t baked a single loaf since I lost you!”

“I think I slept the whole time,” she replied.

The baker and the princess kissed and smiled and their boots kissed and smiled and off they went leaving Judith several days away from her home and she was miffed at not even receiving an invitation to the wedding.

“Probably wasn’t one,” she said haughtily dismissing the couple from her mind.

Which was unfair because when the play finally opened the couple came to see her and at the curtain call they clapped loudly, stamped there feet and cried encore, and shouted to her they had

never seen anyone play a Polish tramp so well. And six elves, two fairies, three goblins and one sorcerer were also in the audience as they always were, in fine new shoes but they didn't tell anyone they were there.

In her dressing room on opening night, Finestitch left her a pair of soft, thin gossamer shoes just for her. And she put them on and it was like being in bare feet but nothing ever hurt her and they never wore out.

“That's the pair of shoes I have wanted all my life,” she said to herself.

And she took to sleeping in them because they were so comfortable and every so often, for no particular reason she could ever think of, they decided to take her for a walk.

And whenever they did she always had a fun adventure.

