

No.2

If the Shoe Fits

By Judith Finch

The courtroom was lined with dark wood and, like a giant sauna, it was even hotter inside than the street. Dust specks twinkled in the few sunbeams that won the fight through the grubby windows, shut despite the heat. I sat next to my husband, Chas, on a bench made for someone half my width, and half his height. They'd had to turn people away from the packed public gallery- by the time this was all over, we'd be choking on a miasma of unwashed bodies and unbrushed teeth. It had better be worth it.

Sweat had turned my greying curls from 'pepper-and salt' to 'pan scrubber', and they were sticking to my forehead. Chas flicked away a lock of black, lustrous hair and gawped at a blonde girl in the jury as she tried to salvage her melting make-up. Just his type. I don't see the point of smearing greasy muck round your face, just to attract some man.

I hadn't wanted to get married, particularly to someone with better hair than mine. I was happy managing our family contract cleaning business, but Ella, the youngest, drew the evening shift on the night of the dance. Mags and I didn't fancy swapping and we went without her. Early next day Chas was at the door with that shoe, but my idle slappers of sisters wouldn't get up so I had to try it on. Perfect fit.

Chas leaned back, stretched his arms above his head and yawned loudly on a descending scale. In the gallery, people giggled. What was I supposed to do – give him a colouring book and some

crayons? He might be young enough to be my son, but that didn't make me his mother.

The judge looked the sort who trimmed his moustache with the aid of a ruler. He called me and, unpeeling my legs from the bench, I squeezed out.

'Mind my foot, lard arse!' Chas sneered. Shame he couldn't come up with something more original.

I pushed myself into the witness box and took the oath. 'I am Princess Griselda,' I said. 'Prince Charming and I are not living happily ever after. And it's all *her* fault.'

I poked a finger across the court towards a dumpy middle-aged woman, with wisps of mouse-coloured hair dragged into an untidy bun, peering at me through a lorgnette. The fairy godmother.

She gasped and mouthed '*Me?*' placing one hand on the other at the base of her throat. I bet you're good at charades, you old witch, I thought. Except a witch wouldn't cast a spell involving shoes and sisters with the same sized feet.

'You're married to a handsome prince! Who could ask for more?' she said.

'Anyone who didn't want to live like a pauper,' I replied, wiggling my finger at the jury through a hole in my sleeve.

'Royals aren't allowed to work so I've had to leave my business. And *he*,' I jerked my thumb towards Chas, 'hasn't got a light; since the civil list was cut his allowance is tiny. And this,' I added, turning to

look down my nose at him, 'is yet another situation where - I'm afraid - size matters.' More sniggers from the gallery.

'Why don't you divorce?' the fairy asked, in tones of someone who wished they could add the phrase 'you idiot' to the end of the sentence.

'Any proper fairy would know that spells involving shoes can't be undone. That's why people tie them to the back of newlyweds' carriages. So I'm stuck with this lanky waste of a skin, just because that shoe fitted my foot. Charming? More like Clueless. All he thinks about is old girlfriends, he never shuts up about them. Rapunzel did this, Goldilocks said that -'

'-can you can hear me above the noise you make munching the food you trough all day, then, you ruminant?' Chas interrupted. 'If you knew what I was *really* thinking, you'd put a bag over your head. A plastic one.'

I staggered, held myself up with one hand, pushed the back of the other one against my forehead and gasped.

'I am ... disempowered!' The first word that came into my head slapped round the jury's ears like the lash of a wet plaice. 'She must compensate me for my ruined life...' I let my voice choke to silence and my eyes fill with tears - good.

'Not until my bill gets paid!' shouted the godmother. She'd be lucky- Ella had charged it to the business and, at least on parchment, Cinders & Co. was running at a loss.

I told the judge I had nothing to add, my face crumpled like the tissue I dabbed at my eyes. I returned to my seat.

Chas stood up and crossed the floor to the witness box. The jury's heads turned to follow his path, like spectators at a tennis match with only one player.

'Thanks to *her*, it'll take magic if our royal dynasty's to continue,' he said.

'I wanted children, but even if I could force myself to, er, you know, Princess Porker's past it. See Exhibit A: Ella Hardup.'

Outside, a lark erupted into song and the court filled with the scent of roses as a shaft of light burst through the window onto a girl with hair as pale as moonlight that fell like pure water in a heavy cascade to her firm uplifted buttocks. Her ivory skin and wide blue eyes with long, curling black lashes gave her the face of an angel who might act like a devil, if you knew the spell. Her waist seemed even smaller than I remembered, and yet again I wondered how she managed to fit all her internal organs in. My sister.

'This is the girl I should have married, if that so-called fairy had got it right,' said Chas.

'Look at her. Has she fragrance? Is she radiant? What man wouldn't rather be married to her, than to...*that?*'

'And what have you to say, my dear?' the judge asked Ella, taking a gulp of water.

'Well, Charming and I had a few dances, and then I had to go. In the morning there was a lot of noise outside and I was like, omigod,

allow coming round so early, I'm still bevvied from last night. And now he's only gone and married my sister, I am gutted?'

'I don't know, are you? Oh, er, quite so, thank you,' the judge said, running his finger round the inside of his collar.

Chas went on. 'The spell can't be undone, but with enough compensation we can build a wall down the middle of the castle and lead separate lives.'

The judge looked at the fairy.

'What magical qualifications do you have?'

'I never bothered – I'm a natural. But, I have attended the University of Life. Surely royalty can rise above little difficulties like this and attend to their duty, which should, after all, over-ride personal considerations and wishes? I put it to the jury that I have, in fact, benefitted the kingdom in that their Highnesses will now concentrate on their obligations and not on each other. That's all I have to say – I've done everyone a favour, now make them pay my bill.'

The judge sent the jury out. After less than an hour, they found in our favour.

'Before I pass sentence,' the judge said, 'is anything else known about the Defendant?'

A policeman cleared his throat.

'There's Princess Aurora: instead of undoing Carabosse's spell, the Defendant sent her to sleep for 100 years. Old Mother Sipsies asked the Defendant a child: she got one two inches tall and a toad

ran off with her. Princess Fortunata asked for more ‘up top’ and now has to wear a six-cup bra-’

‘I have heard enough,’ the judge said.

‘I might have some respect for you if you displayed more than an execrable grasp of magic, but I have never encountered such incompetence. You have traduced their Royal Highnesses by daring to suggest that they might shirk their responsibilities. I am passing the severest sentence permitted: I ban you from magical activity for life and you will pay ten sacks of gold to the plaintiffs, from your own stores.’

Assuming the expression of someone who wet themselves last week but only found out yesterday, the godmother pulled a wand out of her bag. The gold appeared on the floor in front of us – lucky we’d brought our own bags.

‘Confiscate that implement, officer,’ said the judge ‘and let the record show that I lay the blame for this sorry case on the lack of regulation of magical practice. I will be drawing it to His Majesty’s attention.’

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The heath was deserted, except for the few scrubby plants that managed to outdo the blast of the sun. Our carriage bumped towards the horizon, where our castle shimmied like a belly dancer in the evening heat haze.

‘That should keep the Big Bad Wolf from the door.’ Chas said.
‘Sorry I had to be such a prick towards you, Zel.’

'I'm sorry for my stuff, too. But I nearly believed you, you're good.'

'No, WE'RE good. I'd have liked to be an actor, though, if I was allowed a job...' Chas gazed into the distance, as though looking at an unseen, cheering audience.

'Never mind, babes,' I said, 'Now we've got enough money to build you your very own theatre.'

He yawned. 'D'you fancy an early night? I happen to know that there's a mirror on the ceiling of a bedroom in the North Tower.'

'You mean you put it there, bad boy! Wait till we get home, I'm going to pass the severest sentence permitted!'

'Guilty as charged! Just make sure you wear those glass slippers.'

'You bet. And this time, there'll be no stopping at midnight!'

The End