

The Skipping Shoes

Louisa May Alcott

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ONCE there was a little girl, named Kitty, who never wanted to do what people asked her. She said "I won't" and "I can't," and did not run at once pleasantly, as obliging children do.

One day her mother gave her a pair of new shoes; and after a fuss about putting them on, Kitty said, as she lay kicking on the floor, —

"I wish these were seven-leagued boots, like Jack the Giant Killer's; then it would be easy to run errands all the time. Now, I hate to keep trotting, and I don't like new shoes, and I won't stir a step."

Just as she said that, the shoes gave a skip, and set her on her feet so suddenly that it scared all the naughtiness out of her. She stood looking at these curious shoes; and the bright buttons on them seemed to wink at her like eyes, while the heels tapped on the floor a sort of tune. Before she dared to stir, her mother called from the next room,—

"Kitty, run and tell the cook to make a pie for dinner; I forgot it."

"I don't want to," began Kitty, with a whine as usual.

But the words were hardly out of her mouth when the shoes gave one jump, and took her downstairs, through the hall, and landed her at the kitchen door. Her breath was nearly gone; but she gave the message, and turned round, trying to see if the shoes would let her walk at all. They went nicely till she wanted to turn into the china-closet where the cake was. She was forbidden to touch it, but loved to fake a bit when she could. Now she found that her feet were fixed fast to the floor, and could not be moved till her father said, as he passed the window close by,—

"You will have time to go to the post-office before school, and get my letters."

"I can't," began Kitty; but for away went the shoes, out of the house at one bound, and trotted down the street so fast that the maid who ran after her with her hat could not catch her.

"I can't stop!" cried Kitty; and she did not till the shoes took her straight into the office.

"What's the hurry to-day?" asked the man, as he saw her without any hat, all rosy and breathless, and her face puckered up as if she did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

"I won't tell any one about these dreadful shoes, and I'll take them off as soon as I get home. I hope they will go back slowly, or people will think I'm crazy," said Kitty to herself, as she took the letters and went away.

The shoes walked nicely along till she came to the bridge; and there she wanted to stop and watch some boys in a boat, forgetting school and her father's letters. But the shoes wouldn't stop, though she tried to make them, and held on to the railing as hard as she could. Her feet went on; and when she sat down, they still dragged her along so steadily that she had to go, and she got up feeling that there was something very strange about these shoes. The minute she gave up, all went smoothly, and she got home in good time.

"I won't wear these horrid things another minute," said Kitty, sitting on the doorstep and trying to unbutton the shoes.

But not a button could she stir, though she got red and angry struggling to do it.

"Time for school; run away, little girl," called mamma from upstairs, as the clock struck nine.

"I won't!" said Kitty, crossly.

But she did; for those magic shoes danced her off, and landed her at her desk in five minutes.

"Well, I'm not late; that's one comfort," she thought, wishing she had come pleasantly, and not been whisked away without any luncheon.

Her legs were so tired with the long skips that she was glad to sit still; and that pleased the teacher, for generally she was fussing about all lesson time. But at recess she got into trouble again; for one of the children knocked down the house of corn-cobs she had built, and made her angry.

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"Now, I'll kick yours down, and see how you like it, Dolly."

Up went her foot, but it didn't come down; it stayed in the air, and there she stood looking as if she were going to dance. The children laughed to see her, and she could do nothing till she said to Dolly in a great hurry,—

"Never mind; if you didn't mean to, I'll forgive you."

Then the foot went down, and Kitty felt so glad about it that she tried to be pleasant, fearing some new caper of those dreadful shoes. She began to see how they worked, and thought she would try if she had any power over them. So, when one of the children wanted his ball, which had bounced over the hedge, she said kindly,—

"Perhaps I can get it for you, Willy."

And over she jumped as lightly as if she too were an India-rubber ball.

"How could you do it!" cried the boys, much surprised; for not one of them dared try such a high leap.

Kitty laughed, and began to dance, feeling pleased and proud to find there was a good side to the shoes after all. Such twirlings and skipplings as she made, such pretty steps and airy little bounds it was pretty to see; for it seemed as if her feet were bewitched, and went of themselves. The little girls were charmed, and tried to imitate her; but no one could, and they stood in a circle watching her dance till the bell rang; then all rushed in to tell about it.

Kitty said it was her new shoes, and never told how queerly they acted, hoping to have good times now. But she was mistaken.

On the way home she wanted to stop and see her friend Bell's new doll; but at the gate her feet stuck fast, and she had to give up her wishes and go straight on, as mamma had told her always to do.

"Run and pick a nice little dish of strawberries for dinner," said her sister, as she went in.

"I'm too ti — " There was no time to finish, for the shoes landed her in the middle of the strawberry bed at one jump.

"I might as well be a grasshopper if I'm to skip round like this," she said, forgetting to feel tired out there in the pleasant garden, with the robins picking berries close by, and a cool wind lifting the leaves to show where the reddest and ripest ones hid.

The little dish was soon filled, and she wanted to stay and eat a few, warm and sweet from the vines; but the bell rang, and away she went, over the wood-pile, across the piazza, and into the dining room before the berry in her mouth was half eaten.

"How this child does rush about today!" said her mother. "It is so delightful to have such a quick little errand-girl that I shall get her to carry some bundles to my poor people this afternoon."

"Oh, dear me! I do hate to lug those old clothes and bottles and baskets of cold victuals round. Must I do it?" sighed Kitty, dismally, while the shoes tapped on the floor under the table, as if to remind her that she must, whether she liked it or not.

"It would be right and kind, and would please me very much. But you may do as you choose about it. I am very tired, and some one must go; for the little Bryan baby is sick and needs what I send," said mamma, looking disappointed.

Kitty sat very still and sober for some time, and no one spoke to her. She was making up her mind whether she would go pleasantly or be whisked about like a grasshopper against her will. When dinner was over, she said in a cheerful voice,—

"I'll go, mamma; and when all the errands are done, may I come back through Fairyland, as we call the little grove where the tall ferns grow?"

"Yes, dear; when you oblige me, I am happy to please you."

"I'm glad I decided to be good; now I shall have a lovely time," said Kitty to herself, as she trotted away with a basket in one hand, a bundle in the other, and some money in her pocket for a poor old woman who needed help.

The shoes went quietly along, and seemed to know just where to stop. The sick baby's mother thanked her for the soft little nightgowns; the lame girl smiled when she saw the books; the hungry children gathered round the basket of food, like young birds eager to be fed; and the old woman gave her a beautiful pink shell that her sailor son brought home from sea.

When all the errands were done, Kitty skipped away to Fairyland, feeling very happy, as people always do when they have done kind things. It was a lovely place; for the ferns made green arches tall enough for little girls

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to sit under, and the ground was covered with pretty green moss and wood flowers. Birds flew about in the pines, squirrels chattered in the oaks, butterflies floated here and there, and from the pond near by came the croak of frogs sunning their green backs on the mossy stones.

"I wonder if the shoes will let me stop and rest; it is so cool here, and I'm so tired," said Kitty, as she came to a cozy nook at the foot of a tree.

The words were hardly out of her mouth when her feet folded under her, and there she sat on a cushion of moss, like the queen of the wood on her throne. Something lighted with a bump close by her; and looking down she saw a large black cricket with a stiff tail, staring at her curiously.

"Bless my heart! I thought you were some relation of my cousin Grasshopper's. You came down the hill with long leaps just like him; so I stopped to say, How d' ye do," said the cricket in its creaky voice.

"I'm not a grasshopper; but I have on fairy shoes to-day, and so do many things that I never did before," answered Kitty, much surprised to be able to understand what the cricket said.

"It is midsummer day, and fairies can play whatever pranks they like. If you didn't have those shoes on, you couldn't understand what I say. Hark, and hear those squirrels talk, and the birds, and the ants down here. Make the most of this chance; for at sunset your shoes will stop skipping, and the fun all be over."

While the cricket talked, Kitty did hear all sorts of little voices, singing, laughing, chatting in the gayest way, and understood every word they said. The squirrels called to one another as they raced

"Here's a nut, there's a nut;
Hide it quick away,
In a hole, under leaves,
To eat some winter day
Acorns sweet are plenty,
We will have them all:
Skip and scamper lively
Till the last ones fall."

The birds were singing softly, —

"Rock a bye, babies,
Your cradle bangs high;
Soft down your pillow,
Your curtain the sky.
Father will feed you,
While mother will sing,
And shelter our darlings
With her warm wing."

Ants were saying to one another as they hurried in and out of their little houses, —

"Work, neighbor, work!
Do not stop to play;
Wander far and wide,
Gather all you may.
We are never like
Idle butterflies,
But like the busy bees,
Industrious and wise."

"Ants always were dreadfully good, but butterflies are ever so much prettier," said Kitty, listen little voices with wonder and pleasure.

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"Hollo! hollo!
Come down below,
It's lovely and cool
Out here in the pool;
On a lily-pad float
For a nice green boat.
Here we sit and sing
In a pleasant ring;
Or leap-frog play,
In the jolliest way.
Our games have begun,
Come join in the fun."

"Dear me! what could I do over there in the mud with the queer green frogs?" laughed Kitty, as this song was croaked at her.

"No, no, come and fly
Through the sunny sky,
Or honey sip
From the rose's lip,
Or dance in the air,
Like spirits fair.
Come away, come away;
'T is our holiday."

A cloud of lovely yellow butterflies flew up from a wild-rose bush, and went dancing away higher and higher, till they vanished in the light beyond the wood.

"That is better than leap-frog. I wish my skipping shoes would let me fly up somewhere, instead of carrying me on errands and where I ought to go all the time," said Kitty, watching the pretty things glitter as they flew.

Just at that minute a clock struck, and away went the shoes over the pool, the hill, the road, till they pranced in at the gate as the tea-bell rang. Kitty amused the family by telling what she had done and seen; but no one believed the Fairyland part, and her father said, laughing, —

"Go on, my dear, making up little stories, and by and by you may be as famous as Hans Christian Andersen, whose books you like so well."

"The sun will soon set, and then my fun will be over; so I must skip while I can," thought Kitty, and went waltzing round the lawn so prettily that all the family came to see her.

"She dances so well that she shall go to dancing school," said her mother, pleased with the pretty antics of her little girl.

Kitty was delighted to hear that; for she had longed to go, and went on skipping as hard as she could, that she might learn some of the graceful steps the shoes took before the day was done.

"Come, dear, stop now, and run up to your bath and bed. It has been a long hot day, and you are tired; so get to sleep early, for Nursey wants to go out," said her mother, as the sun went down behind the hills with a last bright glimmer, like the wink of a great sleepy eye.

"Oh, please, a few minutes more," began Kitty, but was off like a flash; for the shoes trotted her upstairs so fast that she ran against old Nursey, and down she went, splashing the water all over the floor, and scolding in such a funny way that it made Kitty laugh so that she could hardly pick her up again.

By the time she was ready to undress the sun was quite gone, and the shoes she took off were common ones again, for midsummer day was over. But Kitty never forgot the little lessons she had learned: she tried to run willingly when spoken to; she remembered the pretty steps and danced like a fairy; and best of all, she always loved the innocent and interesting little creatures in the woods and fields, and whenever she was told she might go to play with them, she hurried away almost as quickly as if she still wore the skipping shoes.

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