

SKY-BLUE BOOTS

by Sophie Masson

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There was once a girl named Caitlin who lived with her mother in a little house, not far from a great green wood called Tirnanog. Caitlin and her mother did not have much money, but they lived well enough, growing their own food, and selling eggs, milk and vegetables at the markets.

Caitlin was a cheerful girl, and loved singing and dancing. But her only pair of shoes were full of holes, and she could no longer dance in them. Indeed, she could hardly walk in them! So her mother took some of her hard-earned money, and said, ‘Caitlin, today you will go to town and buy a pair of good shoes. But mind you come back before sunset.’

So Caitlin carefully put the money—three shining silver coins—folded into a red handkerchief, along with some bread and cheese and a bottle of water. And then she set off down the woodland path towards the town.

It was a lovely sunny day, with a clear blue sky. Caitlin looked at that sky and thought how she’d like to have boots of just that colour. And from sheer joy at the thought of them, she began to sing a little song.

Blue boots, sky boots, now they’d be a treat!

Twinkling and dancing at the end of my feet!

Blue boots, sky boots, what a sight they’d be!

The whole world would twinkle and dance with me!’

Caitlin had a good strong sweet voice, and it rang in the quiet greenwood as she walked along. Suddenly, as she came around a bend, she saw a man standing right in her way. He was about her height, and his hair was black as night. He was dressed all in green, and his narrow, laughing eyes were also of the deepest green. His ears were pointed, and in one hand he held a little silver flute. And here was a strange thing indeed;

for there was no shadow attached to that man's feet, even though it was midday, and the shadows dark on the path.

Caitlin's heart beat fast, because she knew then that he must be one of the fairy people of Tirnanog. And the fairy people could be kind, but they could also be cruel. It was best to be polite, and not ask them too many questions. So she curtseyed, and said, 'Good morning, kind sir.'

'And good morning to you, Caitlin,' said the man, lightly.

Caitlin did not wonder that the man knew her name. That was how the fairy people were.

'You were singing a nice song,' went on the fairy man, 'What is it called?'

'It is the Blue Boot Song,' said Caitlin, most politely, 'and I just made it up, kind sir.'

The fairy man's eyes gleamed. 'A new song! Caitlin, will you teach it to me?'

'I will be glad to, kind sir,' Caitlin said, and so she sang. The fairy man listened, then put his flute to his lips, and began to play the tune, most sweetly. Once, twice, three times, she sang, while he played. Then the fairy man sang the song with the words, and he had them all perfectly. Now he was satisfied, and smiled at Caitlin. 'I shall have the best song, the newest song in Tirnanog!'

Caitlin was relieved the fairy man was happy. But she must be on her way. She said, 'If you do not mind, kind sir, I must go, for I am bound for the town to buy a new pair of shoes.'

'What about a pair of those blue boots, to twinkle and dance on your feet?' the fairy man said, looking sideways at her; and Caitlin's heart beat fast.

'Oh, kind sir,' she whispered, 'that I would dearly love indeed.'

The fairy man made a grabbing motion at the air, and all of a sudden, in his hand was a box. A bright blue beribboned box, the right shape and size for...a pair of beautiful boots?

'Because you gave me your song, I am giving you these. Use them well. They will take you far. And then you will see what you will see.' He handed the box to Caitlin, and disappeared before she could even thank him.

Caitlin did not waste time wondering where he'd gone. She quickly undid the ribbon and opened the box. And there, nestled in soft blue paper, was...a pair of the scruffiest,

dirtiest boots she had ever seen in her life. Why, they even made her old shoes look good!

Caitlin could have sat down and cried. But crying was no use at all, for time was running short. She did not dare to leave the boots, in case the fairy man took offence. So she pushed back them back into the box and was about to close it when...One of the boots moved! Yes. There it was again, just where her finger touched the leather, a little movement, like a ripple. Gingerly, she touched it again. This time, it leapt under her hand. Caitlin's heart jolted with fear and excitement. They must be *magic* boots!

Throwing off her old shoes, Caitlin pulled on the boots. They were soft and comfortable, and fitted her as snugly as if they had been made just for her. Caitlin stood up. She clicked her heels together, and said, 'Boots, take me to town, to the best shoemaker's shop in town!'

Nothing. The boots did not move. They, and she, stayed firmly planted on the woodland path. Caitlin tried all sorts of things: jumping up and down, shouting *Abacadabra*; rubbing at the boots while commanding them to take her to town, but the boots stayed stubbornly still.

Caitlin glared at the scruffy old things and cursed the fairy man in her heart. Him and his greed for a new song!

Her own song, too! She hummed, 'Blue boots, sky boots, now they'd be a treat!'

Just then, the boots gave a sly wriggle, and *whoops!* a little jump. Caitlin regained her balance and stared at the boots. An idea had come into her mind. Putting her feet together, she sang the Blue Boot song, just as before, except with these two lines added at the end:

'Take me to the place where such boots I will find

Take me at once, for that would be kind!'

Whoosh! With a sudden rush, the boots took off. *Whee!* said Caitlin, in delight and a little fear, as everything rushed past her—trees and branches and the path and pieces of sky and startled animals. Her feet did not touch the ground; the boots took giant strides in the air. In less time than it takes to tell it, Caitlin was in the town. *But the boots did not stop.* Caitlin was alarmed. She tried shouting, singing, but to no avail. The boots just kept on going. The town flashed past her, the markets, the churches, the startled faces of the

people, and still the boots kept going. Through fields and forests and villages, the boots rushed on and on, as if they would never stop.

Quite suddenly, they were slowing down. They were hovering over a big town—a city—bigger than anything Caitlin had ever imagined. Then, *whoosh, thump!* The boots landed her on the cobbles, near a most elegant-looking shoemaker's shop.

'Cordonnier and Company, Proud Purveyors of the finest shoes to the Duke and the Court,' read the gold-lettered sign on the window. Caitlin caught her breath. Such beautiful shoes were displayed there! Delicate shoes in brocade and satin; slippers so fine and light they looked as if they had been spun from glass; embroidered high-heeled shoes and long soft boots in all kinds of colours and sizes. And there...right at the back, on a little cushion, was a pair of the most beautiful blue ankle boots. They had pointed toes and high insteps, with silk-covered buttons at the side, and they were made of a leather so soft-looking and richly-coloured that it was just as if the shoemaker had cut out a piece of summer sky. 'Oh!' breathed Caitlin. 'How I could twinkle and dance with those!'

But she felt shy. The shop was so grand, and she was the daughter of a poor cottager. How could three shining silver coins be enough to pay for those beautiful boots? She turned to walk away, but the magic boots jumped and wriggled. Step by step, they made her walk up the steps, and right into the shop.

There were many people in the shop, hovering anxiously around a girl sitting on a chair. Piles of shoe boxes and platoons of discarded shoes lay in heaps on the floor around her. Caitlin approached cautiously. The girl was dressed in satins and silks, her golden hair was piled on her head in an extravagant hairdo interwoven with ribbons and laces and jewels. She looked about Caitlin's own age, and she wore the most discontented and bored look Caitlin had ever seen.

Just then, a man saw Caitlin, and came towards her. He was a great red-haired giant of a man, dressed most richly. And he had a most unwelcoming look on his face. This was Master Cordonnier, the owner of the shop.

'What do you want, child?' he said, roughly.

Caitlin swallowed. 'Please, sir...I want to buy a pair of boots.'

The man's eyebrows shot up. 'A pair of boots?'

'Yes, I...the blue boots...'

Caitlin unknotted her red handkerchief. As she had feared, the three silver coins looked mighty small and humble.

The man looked down his nose at her. 'You do not even have a tenth of what those boots cost. Go to a cheap cobbler. That's the place for people like you.'

Caitlin blushed. She put her money away quickly. She tried to run away—but the boots would not let her. They stayed firmly planted.

'Shoo,' said the man, waving a hand at her as if she were a fly. 'Go away, little thief!'

'I am not a thief,' said Caitlin, affronted. 'My mother and I are poor, but we work hard and we are honest.'

'I do not care,' the man sneered. 'Just get away from my shop and don't come back.'

'I would like to do that more than anything else in the world,' cried Caitlin, 'but my boots will not let me.'

'Dirk! Neil!' the man shouted. 'Throw this child out of my shop, for she refuses to leave!'

As two tall apprentices came towards her, Caitlin tried desperately to unstick herself. She tried to pull her feet out of the boots, but the wretched things hung on to her as grimly as if they had been part of her own skin. Dirk and Neil each grabbed one of her arms. But try as they would, they could not move her forwards, backwards or sideways. Now the commotion was attracting the attention of everyone else in the shop, including the girl who had been trying on shoes.

'Master Cordonnier!' she rapped out sharply. 'What is happening?'

'This little pest will not leave my premises, Your Grace,' growled the red-haired man.

'*Why* won't she?' said the girl, jumping up and walking barefoot to them, followed by anxious hangers-on. She stared curiously at Caitlin.

'She says she can't,' said Master Cordonnier, angrily. 'But that is nonsense.'

'It is not!' returned Caitlin. 'These boots are magic boots and they do not always do as they are told.'

'*Magic* boots!' breathed the golden-haired girl. Her face had lost its bored scowl. 'Is that really true?'

'It is true,' said Caitlin, simply. 'Would you like to try?' For there was something about this girl that she liked.

'Oh, yes, please, I would love nothing better than to try!'

The shop-owner tried to say something, but the girl cut him off. 'Be quiet, Master Cordonnier. And tell your apprentices to leave my friend alone.' She turned back to

Caitlin. ‘My name is Felicia. My father is the Duke. What is your name, and what brings you to our city?’

So Caitlin found herself telling Felicia the whole story. When it came to the part about the sky-blue boots, Felicia smiled. ‘Bring them over here to Caitlin,’ she ordered Master Cordonnier.

‘I...’ Caitlin began, but though the man’s face wore a ferocious scowl, he bowed, and did as he was told.

Felicia smiled. ‘He knows better than to argue,’ she declared. Caitlin smiled in her turn, and bent down to her feet. Lo and behold, the magic boots came easily off her feet! She handed them to the other girl. ‘You have to sing to them, before they will get going,’ she explained. Felicia grinned, her face full of mischief and pleasure. ‘Oh, I love singing,’ she said, and bending down, pulled on the magic boots, singing a silly song as she did so.

‘Magic boots, magic boots, show me what you do!’

‘Magic boots, magic boots, do give me a clue!’

The boots wriggled and jiggled. They slid across the floor, with Felicia in them. They danced a jig around the startled apprentices, the open-mouthed courtiers, the furious shoemaker coming reluctantly to Caitlin with the sky-blue boots in his hand. Felicia laughed and laughed, and everyone else apart from the shop owner laughed along with her.

‘Come on, Master Cordonnier, give Caitlin the sky-boots to try on!’ called Felicia, laughing. The man bowed, and handed the boots to Caitlin, while his eyes shot daggers at her.

It was a strange thing. They were so lovely, those boots, the perfect thing, the boots she’d dreamt of, and yet somehow Caitlin had lost her wish for them. They felt like lead in her hand. But she bent down to pull them on.

‘They look wonderful on you, Caitlin!’ sang Felicia, as she capered around in the magic boots. ‘Master Cordonnier, I order you to give them to her. My father will pay you for them.’

‘Very well, Lady Felicia,’ said the man, grudgingly. But Caitlin bent down, unbuttoning the beautiful sky-blue boots. And as she did so, suddenly, she heard a familiar tune, played in the sweet silver voice of a flute.

*Blue boots, sky boots, now they'd be a treat,
Twinkling and dancing at the end of my feet!
Blue boots, sky boots, what a sight they would be,
The whole world will twinkle and dance with me!*

And there was the fairy man from Tirnanog, laughing eyes, green clothes, silver flute and all, in Master Cordonnier's elegant shop.

'Well now, Caitlin,' the fairy man said, ignoring the amazement around him. 'Are you pleased, now, with the sky-blue boots on your feet?'

Caitlin looked at him, into the laughing green eyes, and quite suddenly she wasn't afraid of him any longer. 'If you please, kind sir,' she said, softly, 'I do not know that I care much for them, really. Master Cordonnier does not want me to have them, and though Lady Felicia is kind enough to want to give them to me, I do not think I could dance with them on my feet.'

'Have you tried?' said the fairy man, and he put the flute to his lips and began to play the Blue Boot song again. Caitlin took a deep breath, then took one step, then another, and everyone watched her. At first, she stepped slowly, painfully, for she thought the blue boots pinched, and squashed her toes, but soon she forgot about that in the bright joy of the tune. She took new steps in those sky-blue boots, new dance steps she hadn't thought of before. Felicia watched for an instant, then began to dance too, following Caitlin's steps. The flute gave a little skirl, and a quick trill, and now Dirk the apprentice was joining in, and then Neil, then a courtier, and another, till everyone in that elegant shop was dancing, and dancing, as if they would never stop. Everyone, that is, except for Master Cordonnier who stood staring at them with a frown on his face and an angry set to his shoulders. Not once did he tap his foot, or try to join in, or even to smile. He just looked like a big thundercloud about to burst.

The fairy man from Tirnanog gave a final burst of music on his flute, an eerie little wail of sound, and all at once, the magic boots slithered off Felicia's feet, landing in a heap at the shop-owner's feet. The fairy man gave a strange little smile. 'Put them on,' he said, pointing at Master Cordonnier, and though he spoke softly, everyone shivered a little. Everyone, that is, except Caitlin, who wasn't afraid of the fairy man any longer and never would be again.

‘Put them on,’ repeated the fairy man, and when the shoemaker did not reply, the fairy man snapped his fingers, and *whoosh!* The shoemaker’s own smart buckled shoes left his feet, and double *whoosh!* The magic boots slid on to his feet. He gave a little yell of surprise, and fear, but the fairy man wasn’t finished yet. ‘A little travel always broadens the mind,’ he murmured, and played on his flute. As he did so, the magic boots stamped, wriggled, twirled three times around, and in a trice, the boots, and Master Cordonnier inside them, were off out of the shop, down the street, and out of sight.

‘He might be back, if he learns his lesson,’ the fairy man said, lightly, to the astonished faces around him. Turning to Caitlin, he went on, ‘and now, my dear, didn’t you promise your mother to be back before sunset?’

‘Oh, I did, kind sir,’ said Caitlin, ‘but how am I to get there now the magic boots have gone?’

The fairy man smiled. ‘I believe the Lady Felicia’s father has a very fast carriage, is that not so?’

‘The very thing!’ Felicia exclaimed. ‘I was just going to suggest it.’

‘And if you, kind sir, would only travel with us,’ said Caitlin, ‘then the carriage might go even faster?’

‘That is so,’ said the fairy man, laughing. ‘You learn fast, Caitlin.’

‘And I will go too,’ said Felicia, decidedly, ‘and tell my father I must learn new dance steps, and songs from Caitlin, as well!’

Caitlin smiled, her heart full of warmth. ‘I would like that indeed,’ she began, and then she caught sight of the sky-blue boots, still on her feet. They no longer felt heavy as lead, but light as feathers, and so comfortable, and already she loved them.

‘You have six gold coins in your red handkerchief,’ said the fairy man, watching her. ‘Two of them should be more than enough to pay for the boots, is that not so?’ he asked, turning to Dirk and Neil, who nodded with all their might.

‘But I...’ Caitlin was unknotting the handkerchief, and there indeed were six shining gold coins, bright as if they had been newly-minted. She looked at the fairy man, she looked at Felicia, she looked at the boots. Then she smiled, and handed over two gold coins to the apprentices, and left the shop with Felicia and the fairy man, with the sky-blue boots on her feet.

What a surprise and fluster her mother was in, when, just before sunset, a fine carriage drew up at the door, and from out of it stepped her daughter, with sky-blue boots on her feet, and Felicia at her side! What talk and laughter there was, and what pleasant plans were hatched, long into the night and the next day!

But in a place many, many days' journey from the Duke's city, a red-haired giant of a man in once-elegant clothes, and with not a coin in his pocket, was trying to think of a way in which he might get back home. Barefoot—for the magic boots had left him as soon as he had been dumped in a ditch a long way from home—muddy, wet and miserable, Master Cordonnier was beginning to learn his lesson.