

GYFFES LLAW

By Sharon Bailly

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IN THE LITTLE village of Tregaron lived a shoemaker and his three sons. The youngest son cut his leather with fine strokes and sewed his shoes with tight stitches, and so he was called Gyffes Llaw, which means Deft Hand in Welsh.

So great was his skill with knife and needle that no one in the village would buy shoes unless Gyffes made them. The shoemaker told his other sons they must fetch and carry for Gyffes.

“We ought to make shoes while Gyffes fetches and carries,” muttered the brothers. “He is the youngest by far. Let’s sneak to his room this very night, bind him in his own bootlaces, and set him adrift on the River Teifi.”

But that night Gyffes heard them coming. The brothers had cobbled their own shoes, and their shoes always creaked. Gyffes ran away, and the brothers could not find him no matter how they searched and listened, for Gyffes’s boots never creaked.

Gyffes walked many a mile that night and the next, until he came to a walled town. This town had two gates, with a shoemaker at each. Two or three people stood outside the shoemakers’ doors waiting for a turn at trying on shoes. “I shall set up a shop in the center of town,” said Gyffes. “There is work enough for a third shoemaker here.” He set up his shop and he worked so fast and so fine that soon no one in the town would buy shoes except from Gyffes.

The two other shoemakers muttered together. “We were good enough for the folk of this town before Gyffes Llaw arrived and we’ll be good enough again after he’s gone.” That very night, they decided to roll him up in his own sheets of leather and set him adrift on the River Teifi.

But Gyffes heard them coming. The shoemakers had made their own shoes, which pinched their feet and made them groan as they walked: *Ouch, ouch, ouch*. Gyffes ran away, and the shoemakers could not catch him no matter how hard they searched and listened, for Gyffes’s boots never pinched.

Gyffes walked many a mile that night and the next and the next and the next, until he came to a walled city. This city had four gates with a shoemaker at each one. A long line of customers stood outside each shoemaker’s door, waiting for a turn at trying on shoes. “I shall set up a shop in the center of the city,” said Gyffes. “There

is work enough for a fifth shoemaker here.” He set up his shop and he worked so fast and so fine that soon no one in the city would buy shoes except from Gyffes.

The four shoemakers muttered together. “We were good enough for the folk of this city before Gyffes Llaw arrived and we’ll be good enough again after he’s gone.” That very night, they decided to tie him up with his measuring tape and set him adrift on the River Teifi.

Now the shoemakers were quite aware that their own shoes creaked and pinched and made them groan: *Ouch, ouch, ouch*. So that very night, before they snuck into the house of Gyffes Llaw, they slipped off their shoes. Gyffes never heard them. They tied him up with his measuring tape and set him adrift on the River Teifi.

By and by the boat that carried Gyffes Llaw drifted all the way down the river and into the sea. At last it bumped up against a fisherman’s boat. “Help! Help!” called Gyffes Llaw. “If you will free me and take me aboard your boat, I will make you a fine pair of waterproof boots.”

“And who are you?” asked the fisherman.

“Gyffes Llaw.”

“Then welcome aboard,” said the fisherman, “for I have heard of you, and you are the finest shoemaker in Wales.”

While Gyffes Llaw cobbled the fisherman’s waterproof boots, he asked the fisherman where he came from and where he was going.

“I come from a very small village across the sea,” said the fisherman. “When my hold is full, I will sail all the long way to Cardiff and sell my fish to the king.”

“Are there many shoemakers in Cardiff?” asked Gyffes.

“There are six gates to the city,” said the fisherman, “and a shoemaker at each one. All their shoes pinch and creak. Indeed, rather than suffer the pain of their shoes, the king’s daughter goes barefoot all year long.”

“A barefoot princess!” said Gyffes Llaw. “What is she like?”

“She is so clever,” said the fisherman, “that she manages the entire kingdom. Everyone prospers, no one begs, and there is fish upon every table. She is also beautiful, and every man who sees her wants to marry her. She refuses them all. Finally, her father, the king, told her that she must choose a husband. She said, ‘I will marry, but the man I wed must come to me neither on horse nor on foot. He must welcome me neither inside nor out. He must stand above me yet remain beneath.’ I wish that I knew such a man,” said the fisherman. “I would send him to the princess and make his fortune.”

Gyffes thought about the princess while he measured and cut his leather and sewed and fitted the fisherman’s boots. He thought about the princess while he laced the laces and oiled the seams so that never a drop of water could pass through.

On the day he finished the waterproof boots, he said, “Fisherman, your hold is nearly full of bass and mackerel. Will you sail your boat to Cardiff right away? If you do, I will make a pair of sandals for your wife.”

“Done,” said the fisherman, and he sailed to the city straightaway.

When they had anchored the bobbing craft at the pier, Gyffes Llaw said, “Fisherman, will you take this message to the castle for me? If you do, I will make another pair of boots for your son.”

“Done,” said the fisherman.

The fisherman took the message to the castle. It said:

*Beautiful shoes, well priced, won't creak, won't pinch,
Gyffes Llaw at the Fisherman's Boat*

“I shall visit this shoemaker,” said the princess.

The fisherman hurried back to Gyffes Llaw with the news that the princess was coming. He found Gyffes building a trellis over the boat's deck, and under the trellis he had built a wooden seat. “What are you doing?” the fisherman asked angrily.

“Pardon me, please,” said Gyffes. “I will remove this trellis and seat tomorrow. Only let my work stand for one day, and I will make a fine pair of dancing shoes for your daughter.”

“Done,” said the fisherman.

Gyffes covered the trellis with flowers: bluebells, red comfrey, and marigolds. All day long he worked at his bench, measuring and cutting and stitching the most beautiful and softest pair of slippers he had ever made in his entire life. At noon the next day came the princess. She had eyes as blue as the bluebells and hair as red as the red comfrey and a smile that made the marigolds nod their heads in joy.

As soon as Gyffes saw her, he fell in love. He knelt before the princess and nestled her left foot in a beautiful, soft slipper.

“How came you to Cardiff?” the princess asked.

“I came by boat,” he said. “I kneel here before you, having come neither by horse nor by foot.”

The princess looked at Gyffes Llaw and said, “I've never seen such a pretty boat—what a beautiful canopy of flowers.”

“I built it myself,” said Gyffes Llaw. “While it shelters you, you are neither inside nor out.”

Gyffes Llaw nestled her right foot in a beautiful, soft slipper.

The princess looked at Gyffes Llaw and said, “This is a most comfortable bench.”

Gyffes Llaw stood up. “I placed it myself,” he said. “When you are sitting there and I am standing here, I seem to be above you and, yet, I am only a shoemaker, so I am always below.”

“These are very beautiful, soft slippers,” said the princess. “They do not pinch and they do not creak. You are a fine and clever shoemaker, and I will marry you.”

And so they married, Gyffes Llaw and the princess. They lived together in great love and content, and their children never wanted for anything. Especially shoes.