

Joanna's Slippers

a story by
Chris d'Lacey

Introduction

One day, Joanna was reading a book when her mother cried out: "THAT'S IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

Mrs Cartwright was doing the hoovering at the time. She switched off the hoover and glared at Joanna. "Those slippers have got to go," she said. She pointed at Joanna's feet.

Joanna's dad peeked out from behind his paper. "Quite right," he said. "They've got holes in and they smell."

"But I like them!" cried Joanna.

"Too bad," said her mother. "They're leaving BITS on the front room carpet!" And there's really not a lot you can say about that.

So Joanna had to put on her shoes and coat. She had her brown hair brushed. She was made to look tidy.

"We are going to Cloops," said her mother, "to buy *you* a brand new pair of slippers."

"Don't WANT a new pair," Joanna sulked.

"Oh yes you do," her mother assured her, dropping the old pair into the bin. "A flea-bitten dog wouldn't play with those."

Joanna pulled a miserable face. Mrs Cartwright bustled her down the garden path. Her father opened the door of the car. "Your carriage, ladies," he said with a flourish.

"Huh," said Joanna.

"Get in," said her mum.

The Shoe Department

Cloops was the biggest shop in the world (or so it seemed to Joanna, at least). They sold everything in Cloops from a peg to a parrot. They always had a man in uniform outside. He helped some people out of their cars. He never helped Joanna out of hers. Joanna didn't care. She hated Cloops. She would rather be tied to a lamppost in the street than dragged round Cloops, any day of the week.

The shoe department was very busy. Lots of people were sitting on stools with one shoe on and one shoe off. Shop assistants were dashing about, unlacing shoes and opening boxes. As Mrs Cartwright marched Joanna forward, a pretty young girl in a blouse and skirt came hurrying past.

"Oo-oo!" Mrs Cartwright hooted. "I'd like to buy my daughter a pair of slippers."

"Hello," said the girl, smiling at Joanna. She was wearing a badge. Her name was Mandy. "I'm with another customer at the moment, madam. If you'd like to have a look at the slipper display, I'll be over to serve you as soon as I can." She pointed to some shelves on the far side of the room. She winked at Joanna and hurried away.

"Well," said Mrs Cartwright, huffily. "Go and look at the display, indeed! Hardly the service one expects in Cloops."

"I liked her," said Joanna.

"You would," said her mother.

"Dreadful attitude," Mr Cartwright muttered. "It's nearly half past two, can we get on?"

The slipper display was very impressive. There were racks and racks of children's slippers, all colours, all sizes, some trimmed with fur, some with bobbles. The rack Joanna liked best of all was the one labelled: NOVELTY SLIPPERS

Most of these were made to look like animals: tigers, bears, penguins, dinosaurs. There were funny ones, too, shaped like bananas or pirate boats or alien monsters with eyes on stalks. Joanna's toes began to tingle. Suddenly, there was nothing more she wanted in the world than to try on-

"Don't touch," said a horrible gravelly voice.

Joanna swung round. A huge, balloon-shaped woman was towering over her. She looked like Cinderella's ugliest sister. She had a face like powdered Turkish delight and hair as straight as a packet of pencils. On her blouse was a badge: Mrs Peasome, MANAGERESS - FOOTWEAR DEPARTMENT.

"Anything you break you pay for," she sneered.

"You can't break a pair of slippers," said Joanna.

Mrs Peasome twitched. She gave Joanna a beady-eyed stare.

"Ah," said Mrs Cartwright, looming up. "Perhaps you could help us?"

"Certainly modom," Mrs Peasome said, wringing her hands and doing a little dance.

"Have you some of these in a four?" Mrs Cartwright held out a pair of slippers. They were custard yellow and had a diamond pattern in red on the front. They were the most boring slippers Joanna had ever seen.

"I want some of these," Joanna protested, pointing at the rack of novelty slippers.

"Be quiet," said her mother. "You'll wear those out in two minutes flat!"

"Absolutely, modom," Mrs Peasome said. "The ones you've picked are Cloops' own brand. These novelty things are half the quality and *twice* the expense."

Joanna tutted. All seemed lost. But oddly enough the word 'expense' seemed to produce a change in her mother. "Oh," said Mrs Cartwright, straightening her shoulders. "Well, we're not exactly paupers - are we, Roger?"

"No," sighed Mr Cartwright. "Buy her what you like. Buy her two pairs. I want to get to the hardware department."

"Two pairs?" Joanna's face lit up.

"Actually," Mrs Cartwright said, reading a 'special offer' notice on the novelty rack, "I see if we buy two pairs of these we get a third pair free?"

"Three pairs!" shrieked Joanna.

Mrs Peasome winced. "An unbeatable offer," she said rather tiredly.

Mrs Cartwright could only agree. "Right," she said, homing in on Joanna, "pick the ones you want and we can all get on."

And that was when the trouble began.

Joanna simply couldn't decide. It was harder than trying to pick a puppy from the dogs' home.

"Hurry up," said her father, hopping around as if he needed a toilet.

"What about some gorillas?" Mrs Cartwright suggested.

Joanna shook her head.

"Nice pink piggies?" Mrs Peasome grunted.

"Crocodiles?" Mr Cartwright snapped.

Joanna hooked a finger in her bottom lip. Her mother clucked. Mrs Peasome sighed. Mr Cartwright made a noise like water running down a plughole.

Then a bright voice said, "Perhaps the little girl would like to try some on?" Everyone turned. It was Mandy again.

"Yes, PLEASE!" said Joanna, tugging fiercely at her mother's coat.

"Well, WHICH?" said her mother.

Joanna took a moment. "All of them, please."

"ALL OF THEM!?" Mr Cartwright bayed.

Mandy smiled and gave an understanding nod. "If you and your wife would like to look around the store, sir, you could always leave the little girl with us for a while. She'll be quite safe here."

"What?" said Mrs Peasome, going rather pale.

Mr and Mrs Cartwright gasped. "Goodness," Mrs Cartwright exclaimed, "that *is* good service. I should give this young lady a promotion, Mrs Peasome."

"I'll give her something," Mrs Peasome growled.

"Right," said Mrs Cartwright, opening her handbag and stuffing some tissues into Joanna's hand, "make sure you blow your nose if it starts to run and don't get into trouble. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mum," said Joanna, blowing her nose.

"Right, we'll be off," Mrs Cartwright beamed. "Excellent service. What do you say, Roger?"

But Mr Cartwright was heading for the hardware department.

And his wife was soon off shopping for hats.

With Mandy's help, Joanna chose a pair of penguin slippers to try on first. Joanna liked penguins. She had seen them at the zoo sometimes, waddling about with fish in their beaks or zipping through the pool like little black bananas. *I could play at being a penguin in these*, she thought, and kicked off her shoes.

"Not HERE," Mrs Peasome thundered. Joanna quivered. Mandy bit her lip. "We don't want any annoying little sprouts getting under the feet of *proper* customers."

With that, Mrs Peasome sent Mandy to work on the till. Then she clapped her hands on Joanna's shoulders, marched her through the ladies clothing department and into the tiny changing rooms. "Find an empty cubicle - and stay there, preferably." With a hefty push, she launched Joanna down a carpeted aisle. There were cubicles off to either side.

"And no scribbling on the walls!" Mrs Peasome thundered.

Joanna turned and stuck out her tongue. But Mrs Peasome had waddled off into the store.

As it turned out, the only available cubicle was the last one on the left. Joanna went in, drawing the curtain with an angry swish. She was beginning to feel distinctly miffed. When she didn't want slippers, everyone told her she had to have some. Now she did want slippers, everyone just wanted her out of the way! She looked at the penguin slippers she was carrying. They were beautifully soft and very well made. "Grown-ups," she complained to them, stroking their beaks. Then she bent down and put them on.

Almost immediately, something *changed*. No sooner were the penguins on her feet than the air around her began to turn chilly. *Nnnccck!* went a croaky voice close by. Joanna turned to have a look in the cubicle mirror. And that was when she saw it. Quite where it had come from, she never could say. She rubbed her eyes twice, but there was no doubt about it.

She was nose to beak with a real live penguin.

The South Weddell Sea

"Look out!" said the penguin, sounding rather cross.

"Sorry," said Joanna, thinking at first she had bumped into someone else playing penguins. But nobody Joanna knew was quite this good or quite this shape.

Mrs Peasome was fat, but she wasn't shiny, and she certainly didn't have huge clawed toes. Mind you, the penguin *was* very grumpy. It didn't seem to like Joanna much at all.

"Well?" asked the bird, with an irritated flap of its stubby little wings. "Which way are you waddling? I don't mind if it's this way or that. But please waddle one way. I'm in a hurry."

"Sorry," said Joanna, standing aside. And that was when she got her second big shock. All around her now, as far as she could see, were thousands and thousands of waddling penguins. They were shuffling across a vast sheet of ice. All of them were headed in the same direction.

"Excuse me," Joanna shouted, sliding after the penguin she'd just bumped into, "where are we?"

The penguin squinted doubtfully at her. "Where we always are of course - the South Weddell Sea, near the South Pole, South. What sort of a penguin doesn't know that?"

Joanna blushed. "I'm not a penguin at all, really."

"Well, you certainly can't waddle!" the penguin said, as Joanna slipped about on the glistening ice. "Come on-nn, come on-nn, try a bit harder. Feet close together, wings tight by your side, beak - what there is of it - up in the air and ... waddle!"

Joanna copied as best she could. To her delight, once she'd got the hang of it, it was really rather easy to waddle.

"What's your name?" she asked her penguin teacher.

"You do ask some silly questions," said the bird. "My name is Empress, like everyone else."

"Isn't that a bit confusing?" asked Joanna.

"Of course not!" Empress tutted loudly. "Imagine trying to remember a different name for all this lot!"

Just then, the penguins at the leading edge of the group began to call out. Joanna looked up. Some way ahead was another great cluster of birds. They were huddled together like a lot of black milk bottles. They seemed to be waiting for the Empress penguins.

"Who are that lot?" she asked.

"Great blowy blizzards!" Empress exclaimed. "Don't you know *anything*? Those are the Emperors. They've been keeping our eggs warm while we've been

fishing. As soon as I've found *my* Emperor, I'm going to take the egg off him and I'm going to hatch it. Then *he* can go fishing."

"Gosh," said Joanna, terribly impressed. "But how do you know which Emperor is yours?"

Empress let out a gargling sound. "You *call* to him, silly, then he comes!" And she started to call: "Nnnnnnck! Nnnnnnck! Emperor! Emperor!" Now Joanna noticed that all the Empress penguins were doing the same. She tried it herself.

"Emperor! Emperor!" she cried above the din. And to her amazement a grumpy voice replied, "About time too! Where have you been? I'm starving!"

Joanna whipped around. An Emperor penguin was shuffling towards her. He was quite a bit skinnier than the Empress bird, and twice as grumpy by the sound of things. Resting snugly on his black, clawed toes was a good-sized egg. Joanna frowned. It seemed a funny sort of way to carry an egg. The Emperor shuffled closer, until his toes were nearly touching Joanna's. Then, to her astonishment, the Emperor poked the egg with his beak and rolled it off his feet and onto hers.

"Right, I'm going fishing," he declared, and was about to waddle away when the egg rolled off Joanna's slippers and onto the ice.

"Care-FUL," the Emperor tutted in annoyance. He rolled the egg back into place once more.

Joanna giggled. It was just like playing a party game. She tried curling her toes to balance the egg, but it plopped off the side of her feet again and nearly dropped down a crack in the ice.

"Whistling whalebones!" the Emperor screeched, doing a little penguiny jig. "What are you playing at?"

"I can't help it!" Joanna protested. "I've never carried an egg like *this* before. It would be much easier if you did it like this." She picked the egg up and cradled it in her arms.

The Emperor nearly fainted with shock. "Put that back," he demanded at once.

"Why?" said Joanna.

"It's unnatural," said the bird.

"It's unnatural having eggs on your *feet*," Joanna argued.

The Emperor gave a helpless squeak. He flapped his wings and waddled on the spot. By now a little crowd had begun to gather. Some of the Empresses were

pointing at Joanna and muttering about how she was carrying the egg. One bent down to try it for herself and ended up falling flat on her face. There was uproar.

Eventually, a crotchety old Empress pushed her way to the front of the disturbance. "What's going on?" she demanded rudely.

"It's her," said the Emperor, accusing Joanna. "She's holding the egg all wrong."

The Empress gave Joanna a beady stare. "It's those feet," she said. "She's got the wrong feet."

She's got the wrong feet! the penguins burred.

"They're peculiar," said the Empress. "All soft and furry."

"That's just my slippers," Joanna said. "I can take those off."

"Take them off?" the Empress squawked. "You can't do that!"

"I can," said Joanna. "It's easy, look." And she bent down and whipped her slippers straight off. There was a gasp of disbelief from the onlooking penguins.

"There," announced Joanna, waggling her toes inside her socks. "The loveliest feet in the whole wide—"

At that moment, she looked up. The ice and the penguins had all disappeared. All Joanna saw was her confused reflection in the cubicle mirror. But on the floor at her feet was something large and round and white. She leaned forward slowly and picked it up.

It was a penguin's egg.

The Store Detective

"You've been *where*?" said Mandy.

"The South Pole, South," Joanna chattered. "It was brilliant. An Emperor gave me this." She held the egg up. Mandy blinked in astonishment.

"I'm supposed to hatch it," Joanna added.

"Not *here*," Mandy whispered, pointing to Mrs Peasome. Joanna quickly hid the egg inside her coat as the manageress came bustling past. Mrs Peasome was attending to an elegant woman in a white fur coat. She didn't see Joanna or her egg.

"Quick," hissed Mandy, "while she's busy. I'll keep your egg and slippers behind the counter. You go and grab a new pair off the rack."

"All right." Joanna nodded, and hurried away.

This time, Joanna didn't hang about. She chose a pair of jester boots with bright blue laces and bells on the toes. They looked like fun. But she'd hardly taken them an inch off the rack when a gruff voice piped:

"Oh YES? And where do you think YOU'RE going, then?"

A hand grabbed hold of Joanna's collar. In one movement she was lifted off the floor and twisted round on the spot.

Standing in front of her was a tall, thin man in a dark grey uniform. He was wearing a cap with a shiny peak. "You're nicked, you're nabbed, you're NO GOOD!" he said. "You're in TROUBLE, you are, *Miss!*" Somewhat triumphantly he opened his jacket. A badge saying Mr BROOM, STORE DETECTIVE was pinned to his shirt.

"Have I done something wrong?" Joanna asked.

"You've pinched those slippers," the detective hooted.

"I haven't!" Joanna bristled, somewhat offended. "I'm going to the changing rooms to try them on!"

"That's what they ALL say," the man sneered back. "I've met your type before, oh yes. You're a ROBBER. That's what YOU are! A little looter and no mistake. You were hiding something under your coat."

"Well, I didn't want Mrs Peasome to see it."

"There you are!" cried the man, jumping with delight. "There's an admission of guilt, if you like! Not that I couldn't *prove* it, of course. I've had you under SURVEILLANCE, my girl. I've got you on my CAMERA, I have." He pointed to a camera on the wall above the till. Beside it was a tiny television screen. Joanna watched the screen. It didn't seem a very interesting programme: just a lot of snooty people, shopping. That gave her an idea.

"Excuse me," she said, "did you see any penguins on your camera?"

The guard cocked his head.

"Emperors and Empresses," Joanna went on. "One of them looked a bit like Mrs Peasome."

The detective gasped. "Are you saying Mrs Peasome is a FAT OLD BIRD!"

Silence settled on the shoe department. The detective blushed. He adjusted his tie.

"I *BEG YOUR PARDON?*" a sour voice bellowed. Mrs Peasome came striding over. Her face was flooded red with anger. She put her hands on her hips and glowered at Mr Broom.

"It's this child, Mrs Peasome," the detective gibbered. "I've got her on the camera, stealing slippers. She called you a penguin. Honestly, she did."

"She *WHAT?!*" Mrs Peasome screeched.

"Shall I arrest her now?" said Mr Broom. He clapped an iron hand on Joanna's shoulder.

"Help!" cried Joanna.

Fortunately, help was close at hand. "Let go of that girl at once!" cried a voice. Mandy swept forward. She smacked Mr Broom on the hand with a shoe horn.

"Ouch!" he cried, and let Joanna go.

"Mrs Peasome, I must protest," said Mandy. "This child is not a thief."

"She was hiding things under her coat," claimed Mr Broom.

"Only this," said Mandy, showing everyone a cuddly toy penguin. Joanna's mouth fell open in surprise. "It hatched," Mandy said as quietly as she could. "Now you run along and try on those jester slippers. Come and find me when you're finished, all right?"

Mrs Peasome tapped Mandy firmly on the shoulder. "*You'll* be finished if there's any more trouble."

"Yes, Mrs Peasome," Mandy gulped.

Mrs Peasome frowned and glared at Joanna. She gave a mild *hmp!* and waddled away.

The Laughing King

Back inside the changing rooms, Joanna kicked off her shoes once more and eased her feet into the jester slippers. They were a very good fit, but they tickled her toes. They were so ticklish, in fact, that she started to giggle.

For no reason she could possibly imagine, Joanna suddenly shouted out: "I say! I say! I say! What do you call a one-eyed dinosaur!" Several curtains swished aside. Some mystified faces peered out of the cubicles.

"Well, what *do* you call a one-eyed dinosaur?" asked a woman.

"D'youthinkhesaurus!" Joanna shouted. And while everyone was still trying to work it out, she belted down the aisle, ran into her cubicle and found herself...

...outside the gates of a castle.

A very tall castle with twisting spires like ice cream cones. Joanna had seen one exactly like it in a fairytale book her Gran had once bought her. There were dragons in that book as well, she remembered. Fearing there might be a dragon or two about, she knocked on the gates and hoped someone would answer.

The gates swung open with a mighty creak. Two guards peered out. They looked very fierce.

"My name's Joanna Cartwright," said Joanna. "What's green and hairy and goes bump all the time?"

"We knowest not," said the guards.

"A gooseberry in a lift!" Joanna cried, doing a little jestery jig.

The guards didn't laugh. They exchanged a glance. One of them said to the other, "Dost thou see what I see, Bert?"

"Aye, Bert, I doth," the other guard nodded.

"GET HER!" they shouted, and sprang swiftly forward.

Joanna squealed. The guards grabbed an arm each and hoisted her off the ground. "Thou art under arrest!" they shouted.

"What for?" cried Joanna. "Where are you taking me?"

"To Master Broomswell," one Bert said. "Thou art in a deep pickle, Jester."

"But I'm not a jester!" Joanna complained.

"Thou canst say that again," one guard said. "I was at thy last castle show. Thy jokes wouldst make a deaf dog whine! 'Tis a wonder thou darest show thy unfunny face!" He pointed to a parchment on the castle wall. It said:

HAST THOU SEEN THIS JESTER?

Underneath the words was a picture of Joanna. And underneath those words were more. They said:

REWARD

ONE CABBAGE AND A FRESH TOMATO

"I'm worth more than a cabbage and tomato!" cried Joanna.

"Aye," said a Bert, "thou couldst start up a market stall with the number that were thrown at thy last performance."

“Anyway,” said Joanna, as the guards carried her along, “what waves a wand and grants three fishes?”

The guards had a think. “We knowest not,” they said.

“A fairy codmother!” Joanna laughed.

The guards’ faces turned as stony as the castle walls.

“‘Tis no lie,” one of them sighed. “Thou art the most feeble jester in the Kingdom. No wonder thou art headed for the dungeons.”

Much to Joanna’s relief, the castle dungeons were not the first stop. The two Berts trudged down corridor after corridor and climbed stair after winding, twisting stair. Finally, they set her down in front of a huge wooden chair with two scarlet cushions. It looked like a throne.

“Summon Master Broomswell!” one guard boomed.

Immediately, a door swung open. A hoot of laughter louder than a fire alarm swept through the courtroom and rattled the throne. The door closed with a bang and the laughter faded. The two guards stood very stiffly to attention. A tall, thin man stepped out of the shadows.

“By the twitch of a tadpole’s tail,” he sneered. “‘Tis thee! Thou foul and wicked jester!”

“Do you mind,” said Joanna, a bit put out. “I’m fed up of people saying horrible things to me. Anyway, do I know you? I think I’ve seen you somewhere before.”

“I am Broomswell!” snapped the man. “As thou well knowest. And now I have thee in my clutches, Jester, I shall dangle thee from the castle tower by the toes of thy useless jestery slippers!”

“You’d better not!” Joanna stamped. “My dad hasn’t paid for them yet!”

“Hold thy tongue!” Master Broomswell ordered.

“YEUCHH!” went Joanna. “I’m not doing that. But I can touch my nose with my tongue. Shall I show you?”

“Aagghh!” cried Broomswell, as Joanna touched her nose with the tip of her tongue. “Thou art truly a vile and wicked creature. A pox on thee!”

“Is it chicken-pox?” Joanna asked calmly.

“Doth it matter?” said Broomswell.

Joanna nodded. “I’ve had chicken-pox once. I don’t think I can have it again.”

Broomswell's teeth began to grind. "Forsooth, thou art a wily weevil. But thou wilt jest all the way to the dungeons. Take her away!"

"No!" squealed Joanna, as the guards moved forward. "Tell me what I've done!"

"I will tell thee," a gentle voice said.

The guards and Master Broomswell fell to one knee as a young Princess appeared behind the throne. The Princess was dressed in a red, flowing gown. She moved down the room as if she was floating across the floor. "Thou hast cast a laughing spell on my father," she said. She drew a veil away from her face. Joanna recognised the Princess at once.

"Mandy!" she cried.

"'Tis the Princess Mandelina to thee!" snapped Broomswell. "Kneel, thou unworthy wretch!"

Joanna knelt.

"This is a sorry day," sighed the Princess, clasping her dainty hands together. "Why didst thou have to do it, Jester? Thou wast always my father's favourite fool. Why didst thou make him laugh so much that he cannot stop?"

"I didn't!" said Joanna. "Anyway, everybody says my jokes are rubbish!"

"Verily," muttered one of the guards.

"But how canst thou deny it?" the Princess continued. "Thou art the Royal Jester. If it was not thee who cast this wicked spell, then who else?"

Just then, an horrific scream split the air. "Off with that Jester's head!" a voice wailed. "Stick her in the stewpot! Throw her to the crows!"

"Mother," said the Princess.

"Mrs Peasome!" cried Joanna.

"Thou villainous worm! 'Tis the Queen!" said Broomswell.

But Joanna wasn't hanging around for proof of *that*. As several hands reached out to grab her, she scooted for the door that Broomswell had come through.

"Stop her!" cried the Queen. "She is seeking out the King!"

Joanna ran on and burst through a door marked KING'S CHAMBERS. Sitting up in bed was a red-faced man with a straggly beard. Tears of mirth were rolling down his cheeks. When he saw Joanna and everyone chasing her he roared so much his three-pronged crown nearly fell off his head.

"Your Majesty!" yelled Joanna, and in her mind she wanted to say: "Tell them I didn't cast a spell on you, please!"

Instead, she said this:

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! What goes Quick! Quick!"

"I knowest not," laughed the King.

"A duck with hiccoughs!"

To everyone's amazement, the King stopped laughing.

"A duck with *hiccoughs*?" he said rather doubtfully.

"Try this one," said Joanna. "How do you catch a squirrel, sire?"

The King scratched his chin. "Answer," he demanded.

"Climb up a tree and act like a nut!"

The King sniffed wearily. He set his crown straight. "That is truly the worst joke I hath ever heard," he said. "Thou art useless. I could not laugh at thee if thy hat was on fire."

"Father, thou art cured!" the Princess clapped.

"'Tis but another spell!" the Queen cried, jumping up and down and flailing her arms. "Guards, arrest this Jester at once!"

"Nay!" said Broomswell. "Arrest this *Queen*."

Everyone gasped in shock. Broomswell pointed to the floor beside the Queen's feet. In all the excitement, a book had fallen out of the Queen's pocket. It said:

Ye Best Witching Jokes in all the Kingdom

"The Queen is a witch!" Broomswell shouted.

"Aaaghh!" cried the Queen. "A pox on you all!"

And gathering up her skirts she fled for her life.

The guards and Master Broomswell set off in pursuit.

"Well," said the King, when all was quiet, "it seems thou hast saved me from my evil Queen, Jester. How can I repay thee?"

Joanna thought for a moment. "I wouldn't mind that joke book," she said politely.

"Take it," said the Princess, handing it over.

"Aye, thou couldst use a good joke," the King muttered.

Joanna gave a grateful curtsey. "I think I'd better be off now," she said. "I've still got another pair of slippers to try."

“Fare thee well,” said the red-faced King. He held out his hand. Joanna knelt and was about to kiss it when a door burst open and a voice cried out:

“Right! Thou art forrit!”

Joanna jumped in shock. The Queen had shaken off her pursuers. She was sweeping through the courtroom heading for Joanna!

Joanna squealed and started to run.

The Old Man of Cloops

Joanna ran so fast she didn't notice her feet come out of her slippers. It was only when she burst from the changing rooms and skidded to a halt in front of Mr Broom that she knew she was back in Cloops again.

“Oi, watch it!” the detective protested.

“It's the wicked witch Peasome!” Joanna panted, gathering her slippers up off the floor. “She's after me. She wants to chop off my head!”

The detective rested his hands on his hips. “You are completely CRACKERS,” he said. “Mrs Peasome is with a customer. Look.”

Joanna looked. Mr Broom was right. Mrs Peasome was attending to a smartly-dressed woman with four scrawny poodles and a perm like a cauliflower.

“Well, she *was* in the changing rooms,” Joanna insisted. “She was casting spells from this witching book!”

Mr Broom removed his cap and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Go and sit over there,” he growled, pointing to a row of empty chairs. “When Milly Molly Mandy's finished her tea-break, I'll tell her to come and sort you out. Until then, stop telling FIBS and STAY OUT OF TROUBLE!”

Joanna gave a hmph! and turned smartly away. Everyone in Cloops was horrible, she decided. Everyone except her and Mandy, of course. “And I don't tell fibs,” she muttered darkly as she plonked herself down on the row of seats.

“Oof,” said a voice.

Joanna squealed and jumped straight up. To her astonishment, an old man was already sitting on the seat. He had grey wavy hair and a silver-grey moustache. Joanna wondered how on earth she could have missed him.

“Sorry,” she said, “I didn't see you.”

"That's all right," the man said kindly. "Not many people do. See me, I mean. I hope I didn't frighten you. I never *mean* to frighten anyone. It's just that this is my chair. I'm Wilfred Pickins. What's your name?"

"Joanna Cartwright."

"Joanna *can't write*? Don't they teach you at school any more?"

"CART-WRIGHT!" boomed Joanna, still a bit grouchy.

"I'm not deaf," said Wilfred, wiggling a finger in his ear. As if to make the peace he took a hankie from his pocket and dusted the seat beside him. Then he invited Joanna to sit. She did (carefully).

For a moment or two nothing much happened. Joanna swung her feet. Wilfred whistled. Then Joanna asked:

"Wilfred, have you been waiting long?"

"What for?" said Wilfred, scratching his earlobe.

"Some SHOES, of course."

The old man drummed his fingers on his kneecaps. "Shoes ... mmm, I suppose I have."

"Very long?" Joanna prompted, hoping he hadn't.

Wilfred folded his arms and sniffed. "Years," he said.

"YEARS?" cried Joanna, making several heads turn. A pair of spikey-nosed twins on the row of seats opposite tutted and gave her a double-hard stare.

"You get used to it after a while," said Wilfred. "Especially if you've got your own chair."

But Joanna wasn't having any of that. "That's terrible service," she went on hotly, alarmed at the prospect of missing school and telly for who knows how long. "When the next assistant comes past, you call them over. Go 'oo-oo!' like my mum does, really loud."

"Oh, no," said Wilfred, with a worried frown. "There can't be any 'oo-ooing'. They don't like that. It's too much like wailing. They'll throw me out."

"Well, tap one on the shoulder, then," Joanna persisted.

Wilfred's moustache nearly jumped off his face. "Oh, no. They *definitely* don't like being tapped on the shoulder! They get very shivery if you do that to them. I've tried it, it makes their hair stand on end!"

"Well, it serves them right!" Joanna said defiantly. "Making you wait for years and years. If I was you, I'd get up and get my own pair of shoes!"

A strange sort of twinkle entered Wilfred's eyes. "That's not a bad idea," he whispered. "I've never tried that. I'm supposed to be a bit ... mischievous, you know. I suppose I could just float over there and pick a pair off the rack. Tell you what, why don't I get you a pair instead? It was your idea. I'd be happy to oblige."

"All right," agreed Joanna. "I'd like some panda slippers. Watch out for Mr Broom, though, he might try to grab you."

"I'll send a tingle down his spine if he does," said Wilfred. "You stay there. Sha'n't be a tick. Oops, look out, here comes Mrs Peasome."

In the blink of an eye, the old man disappeared. Mrs Peasome loomed up with the spikey-nosed twins. She didn't look terribly happy, as usual.

"That's her," said a twin, pointing at Joanna.

"YOU AGAIN?" Mrs Peasome roared. "You're more trouble than a bucket of fish at a sea-lion party!"

"She was talking to herself," one twin sniped.

"Barmy as butterscotch, she is," said the other.

"Well, you're nuttier than nougat!" Joanna retorted, sticking out her tongue and wagging it.

Just as things looked set to explode, a breezy voice said, "Is everything all right?"

It was Mandy. Joanna blew a sigh of relief.

The twins repeated their story to Mandy.

"But I was talking to the old man!" Joanna protested.

"Old man?" said Mrs Peasome. She gave a nervous shudder.

"Him," said Joanna, pointing across the room. Wilfred was walking slowly towards them. He was carrying a pair of panda slippers.

"See," said Joanna - but nobody seemed to. Nobody but her.

Mrs Peasome screamed. The twins screamed. The poodles barked and tugged at their leads. People were suddenly running in all directions. Mr Broom skidded forward. He took one look at the situation and ran off to hide in the gentlemen's toilets!

"What's the matter with everyone?" Joanna asked Mandy.

Mandy took a breath and placed a hand across her heart. "You must be the only one who can see him," she stuttered, watching the slippers float across the room. "That's Wilfred. He used to work the lifts here years ago. He always used to

come and rest on that chair when his feet got tired. We call him the Old Man of Cloops. He's a ghost!"

Joanna gasped. The panda slippers dropped at her feet.

"Thank you!" she shouted as Wilfred disappeared.

"Thank you-ooo," said a boomy voice that rattled the windows and made the store lights flash. Mandy squeaked like a mouse and bit her nails. A swirling wind swept through the department. Two chairs and a large display stand fell over. In the distance, the lift bell pinged and the doors clapped shut. "Going up," boomed a voice. "First floor only ... hats, cats, mats, cricket bats..." The lift whirred into action and shot off, empty.

And Wilfred, the Old Man of Cloops, was gone.

The Crying Panda

While everyone in the store was recovering from the shock of the ghostly presence, Joanna hurtled down the aisle of the changing rooms, skidding to a halt outside the last cubicle on the left. To her disappointment the curtain was drawn. Just under the curtain a pair of shoeless heels were visible. They were twisting left and twisting right and a voice was muttering, 'Goodness, Mabel, you really have got to stick to that diet...' There was a sigh and the sound of zips being undone. A coat hanger clicked against a peg. It sounded like Joanna might be in for a wait.

While she waited, she put on the panda slippers. They felt like ten pairs of socks on her feet. With a bump she flopped onto the changing room floor, with her back against the wall and her feet splayed out. She began to feel rather slow and dozy. She also had the strangest urge to gnaw on a stick...

Suddenly, the cubicle curtain swished aside. A slightly plump woman came staggering out, fumbling with several knee-length dresses.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she twittered, nearly falling over Joanna's feet. "Oh dear," she fussed, having trouble with the hangers, "don't give you much room in these cubicles, do they? Hardly space for a girl to twizzle."

Joanna gave a yawn and looked inside the cubicle. The woman was right, there wasn't much space. All Joanna could see was a dense, damp forest - and from somewhere deep within it came the sound of gentle sobbing.

Joanna made her way through the tightly-packed trees. The merest hint of sunlight was trickling through the branches. Droplets of water were dripping off the leaves. Soon, Joanna found herself in a small clearing. And there, sitting at the base of a tree, gnawing sadly on a bamboo shoot, was a giant panda.

"Hello," said Joanna.

"Oh!" exclaimed the panda. It squinted at the unexpected visitor. "Oh," it said again. It sounded disappointed. "I'm sorry. You're not who I thought you were." Two glistening tears rolled down the panda's snout, dampening the patches around its eyes.

"Don't be upset," Joanna begged tenderly, feeling brave enough to stroke the panda's neck. "Perhaps I can help. My name's..." Oops, she could feel a sneeze coming on. "Jo ... Jo ... *a-choo!* Sorry."

"Bless you," the panda said politely. "Jo Jo? That's a good name. I'm Bon Bon. You haven't seen Can Can by any chance, have you?" He wiped a paw across his tear-stained patches.

"I don't think so," said Joanna, a bit confused. "Is Can Can another panda, like you?"

"She's my mate," said Bon Bon sadly. "I lost her in the forest and I don't know how to find her."

"Can't you call her?" Joanna suggested.

Bon Bon lowered his head. "I don't think so," he said a bit shyly. "Pandas can't really shout very loud."

"I can can," Joanna said brightly, smiling at her joke. And she opened her mouth and got ready to yell.

"Here, try some bamboo shoots," Bon Bon said quickly, shoving a few branches in Joanna's face to stop her yelling.

"Blurrghh!" she complained, spitting them out. "What's the matter, don't you want me to call Can Can for you?"

Bon Bon nibbled on a stick of bamboo. "Well, yes ... and not yes," he said rather bashfully. "It's just ... I don't want every panda in the forest to know I like her."

"Ah," said Joanna, remembering the time she'd had a crush on Jason Grimley at school. She hadn't wanted anyone to know about that. "But," she said, after a moment's pause, "if we don't call somehow, Can Can's never going to come."

"I know," sniffed Bon Bon. And he began to weep again.

"There, there," said Joanna, patting him on the shoulder.

"Where? Where?" said Bon Bon, looking around.

"No, nowhere," said Joanna, getting a bit tongue-tied. "'There there' is just something you say when people are sad." And she picked up a piece of Bon Bon's bamboo and began to nibble thoughtfully on it.

After a couple of bites she said, "Ugh, this stuff's horrible. I don't know how you can eat it."

Joanna had a good look at the cane. It was straight and hollow and yellowish-coloured. There were a few holes in the outside where her teeth had crunched through. *A few holes.* An interesting thought came into her mind. She put the cane to her lips again. This time, she didn't try to eat the bamboo, she *blew* into it instead. A clear sharp note floated out across the forest.

"Ooh," said Bon Bon, his small ears swivelling up. "That was good. How did you do that?"

"Like this," said Joanna, blowing again. This time she put her fingers on the holes and played a tune.

"Wonderful!" said Bon Bon, bobbing about. "If only Can Can was here. She loves to dance!"

"Does she?" said Joanna, remembering a tune her granddad sometimes whistled. A tune he called the Can-Can Dance, where everyone got up and kicked their feet. Perhaps...? It was a difficult tune, but she was good on the recorder. There was no harm in having a go.

She started to play. After a few notes of the music, Bon Bon got to his feet and began to kick his giant paws about. Joanna laughed loudly and played like she had never played before. The Can-Can tune drifted out across the forest. Suddenly, there was a crashing noise among the bamboo plants and another panda danced into the clearing!

"Can Can!" shouted Bon Bon.

"Bon Bon!" she replied, giving him a hug.

"Hip Hip!" began Joanna, and when the pandas looked over, she finished off, "Hooray!"

Joanna played on, and on, and on. There was a good five minutes of high-kicking dance before everyone flopped down in an exhausted heap.

“Phew!” exclaimed Joanna. “I’m right out of puff!”

“Me, too,” yawned Bon Bon, rolling over and promptly falling fast asleep.

Can Can padded up to Joanna. “Thank you for helping me find him,” she said. “You’re very good on the bamboo flute.”

“Thank you,” said Joanna. “Would you mind if I kept it?”

“Not at all,” said Can Can. “Would you like to stay for tea? It’s only bamboo shoots, I’m afraid.”

“No, thanks,” said Joanna. “I think I’d better go back to Cloops. Erm, do you know the way?”

“Straight through the forest,” Can Can said. Joanna looked around. The forest was everywhere. “Any way will do,” Can Can explained. “But go carefully. Don’t step on any prickly Peasome plants. I’d put your shoes on, if I were you.”

“Prickly Peasomes?” Joanna queried.

“You’ll know one if you see one,” Can Can advised. And Joanna was perfectly sure she would. Waving Can Can goodbye, she crept to the edge of the clearing and peeped through the trees. There was no sign of anything prickly or Peasomey, but Joanna wasn’t going to take any chances. She changed into her shoes as quickly as she could, grabbed her flute and crept stealthily through the forest on tiptoes.

Going Home

She was still creeping on tiptoes when she accidentally knocked Mrs Peasome over! Surprisingly, it didn’t take much of a collision to do it. Mrs Peasome was bending down, trying to tie the laces on a pair of boots, when Joanna crept out from behind a display stand. *Dumph!* It was just like hitting a big bag of flour. Mrs Peasome made a noise like an elephant sneezing and crumpled to the floor. Joanna went “Ow!” and just bounced off.

“I saw that!” cried a man’s voice. “I’ve got it on camera! That child attacked Mrs Peasome - with a stick!”

There were shocked gasps around the shoe department.

Joanna froze in horror. Everyone seemed to be staring at her. “It’s not a stick,” she mumbled, “it’s my panda flute.” And she put the bamboo to her lips and blew.

“Look out, she’s got a blowpipe!” Mr Broom shouted.

People screamed. Some hid behind chairs. Joanna bit her lip. She put up her hands as if to surrender. Mr Broom moved forward and grabbed her by the wrists.

“I’ve got her!” he cried. “I’ve got the culprit. Someone grab the weapon. Grab it, quick!”

And someone did. “Let her go,” snapped Mandy, taking the flute and dropping it into a carrier bag. Inside were Joanna’s joke book and penguin.

“Oi,” said Mr Broom, “you can’t conceal the evidence!”

“I just did,” said Mandy. “And if you don’t release this child at once, I shall kick you in the shins!”

Mr Broom reluctantly let Joanna go.

“You won’t get away with this,” he warned. “The camera doesn’t lie!”

“And we’ve got witnesses,” Mrs Peasome groaned.

“Mrs Peasome, I’m sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for the little girl’s behaviour,” Mandy said. She put her hands on Joanna’s shoulders. “Go on,” she whispered, “you explain.”

So Joanna took a deep breath and told her story. The whole story. About the slippers, the penguins, the castle, and the pandas. Mandy looked rather grim by the end of it, especially when everyone hooted with laughter.

“She’s as daft as a doughnut!” Mr Broom snorted.

“A troublesome tadpole,” Mrs Peasome added.

“She’s just got a good imagination,” Mandy argued hotly.

Then another voice piped up, “Joanna? Joanna? What’s going on?”

It was Mrs Cartwright. She came hurrying through the crowd with a stern look on her face. Joanna rushed to her side.

“Mum! Mum! They want to arrest me!”

“Typical!” Mrs Cartwright barked. “I can’t leave you alone two minutes without you getting into trouble!”

Then somehow all the adults were gabbling at once. There were some furious exchanges before Mrs Cartwright emerged from the fray, carrying a pair of the custard yellow slippers with a diamond pattern in red on the front. They were the ones she’d picked for Joanna in the first place. Joanna’s shoulders fell.

“Here,” said Mrs Cartwright, removing Joanna’s shoes. “Try these on. HERE. NOW. Novelty slippers! They’re more trouble than they’re worth.”

Joanna didn't argue. She pushed her feet reluctantly into the slippers, stood up in them and walked about. To be fair, they were extremely comfy. But there was hardly going to be an adventure in *them*. Joanna looked around hopefully. She was still very much in Cloops.

But then she noticed something odd: everyone was *smiling* at her.

"Aah, isn't she a treasure," Mrs Peasome beamed.

"Everybody says so," Mrs Cartwright simpered.

"The apple of our eye," Mr Cartwright put in.

"Make way, please," Mr Broom said importantly, waving shoppers to one side so that Joanna could move about more freely.

Joanna couldn't believe it. She gaped at the grown-ups. They all went "aah". She skipped along a bit. Everyone laughed. She did a little ballet dance. Everyone clapped. She jumped onto a row of chairs and *stamped* all over them. To her amazement, everyone CHEERED.

"Do you like those slippers?" asked her mother.

"I LOVE THEM!" cried Joanna. "I want these, Mum. These are brilliant!"

"They do suit you," said Mandy, handing Joanna her bag of souvenirs, "but what about the penguins and the pandas and the jesters?"

Joanna shook her head. She'd had some brilliant adventures with the novelty slippers, but she was happy to settle for the bright yellow ones - especially as they had such a strange effect on people. Then again, a pair of slippers couldn't last forever. She looked at the novelty rack again.

Hmm, those pirate boats did look tempting...

Joanna's Slippers © Chris d'Lacey, 2020

All rights reserved to the author. I hope you enjoyed this story, but please do not reproduce it, either in print or on other websites. For further usage or any rights enquiries please contact Ed Wilson at Johnson & Alcock Ltd.