



PATENT LEATHER SHOES

By Jane R. Snyder
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The midday sun caught my eye as it glinted off the patent leather shoes of a large doll dressed in a white chemise. She had fallen from her pedestal in the window of a vintage toy store in Greenwich Village. No one else seemed to have noticed this calamity so I walked across the crooked, cobblestone street to take a closer look at her.

One pink cheek leaned against the leg of a tall, Steiff giraffe. A straw sun-hat with a red satin band had slipped off her blonde curls and hung from the smokestack of a dark brown, Hornby locomotive. Leaning against a 19th Century storage box for a Parlor Croquet set, her long legs pointed toward the shop's painted tin ceiling. The haphazard tumble had pushed up her skirt and left her lace-trimmed pantaloons in plain view.

I don't know why I was so fascinated by those upside-down Mary Janes with their flat leather soles and tiny silver buckles. For all the awkwardness in the doll's pose, her expression maintained a sweet, secretive smile. Poor thing, I thought, I hope someone realizes her predicament soon. She was far too pretty to remain so shamefully exposed. As I pushed open the shop's ancient door a set of brass chimes tinkled above my head.

"Hello, is there anyone here?" I inquired as the chiming tones diminished.

"I'm coming," yelled a breathless, male voice with a British accent. "Just. One. More. Moment."

I began to look around while I waited for the proprietor to appear. There were cast iron banks, Oriental

hand puppets, Dinky trucks, marionettes, model airplanes, a Marx Toys Popeye, dozens of pairs of hand-carved animals lined up around Noah's ark, well-loved building blocks, and an elaborate, Victorian dollhouse that took my breath away. Inside, its miniature furniture was lit by a crystal chandelier that glittered like diamonds. In the second-floor parlor a wire birdcage held a tiny, yellow canary.

I couldn't believe so many toys, games, and stuffed animals were displayed in such a tiny space. The shop couldn't have been more than three or four yards across, but it seemed to stretch all the way back to the next block, if such a thing was even possible. Despite the clutter, everything looked immaculate. I even detected a hint of lemon oil emanating from a crumpled rag that lay on a shelf beneath an old-fashioned, brass cash register.

"I'm coming, Miss," he said a bit louder, "but my weary bones move like a pram that needs lubrication."

I heard his feet scrape across the uneven wooden floor behind me. When I turned around, I thought I'd been transported to the North Pole. He wasn't very tall, perhaps five-feet-nine, but extremely round. With a full white beard and red suspenders, he looked as if he had stepped out of a Christmas card well worth saving. His footsteps were accented by ancient plaid slippers slapping against the hardwood floor. There wasn't a single reindeer in sight, but the lights decorating his glass display counters seemed to be twinkling.

"Your name isn't Claus, is it, Sir?"

He laughed. "It ought to be, but no, it's Sid. According to my birth certificate, Sidney Arthur Fellows the third, and I own this little wonderland. What can I do for you on such a glorious spring day, *Miss?*"

"Miller, Mr. Fellows. Joy Miller."

He shook my hand with the warmest palm I had ever encountered.

"Well, Miss Joy Miller, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, but you must call me Sid. Everyone does. It's amazing I can even remember the rest of my name. No one has bothered to ask it of me in years," he said with a wide grin. "What brings you to *Antiques at Play?*"

As he sat down on a sturdy, padded stool behind the counter, I pointed toward the street. “Your window.”

“Ah, it does attract an occasional collector. I try to rotate the merchandise each week, to mix things up a bit, but I do have my favorites. They seem to get most of the attention. I always hate it so when one of them gets sold, but a man’s got to make a living. Despite my boyish figure, I don’t eat all that much, but I’m blessed with a Maine Coon cat who’s something of a glutton. His name is Sir Winston.”

“Oh, I’m not a collector, Sid. I was just passing by and saw your doll.”

“That would be Mathilde. She is a pretty one, isn’t she?”

“I came in to tell you she’s fallen down. I just couldn’t bear the thought of her showing off her lingerie to the immediate world.”

He nodded.

“No, that’s not good at all. Not acceptable for a lady of any age to be topsy turvy. Let me see what she’s been up to.” He rose and shuffled toward the bay window. “Frankly, I come in through the rear door each morning and I didn’t notice. It’s a good thing you stopped by to tell me she’s gone and done it again.”

“Done what?”

He picked Mathilde up then he carefully put her hat back on her head. The doll looked quite satisfied once the delinquent millinery was back in place above her sleepy blue eyes.

“Run off again,” he stated matter-of-factly. “She does it fairly often. I’m not sure where she’s headed, but I’m quite sure that girl has something up her sleeve. It’s imperative that I lock the doors each night, because I worry some evening she just might manage to make her escape.” He held the doll in the crook of his arm and winked. “That is, unless you want to offer her a home. Do you feel like making an investment today, Joy?”

“An investment?”

He set one chubby hand on his waist, such as it was. “Mathilde, that’s what I call her, is an Armand Marseille. She’s a very valuable doll with not a scratch on her. Circa

1900 with flawless bisque head and she's even wearing her original clothes. All except for her shoes, of course.

"Patent leather shoes weren't available that early. I suppose, somewhere along the way, her original footwear just disappeared or were chewed up by some careless pup, perhaps." He raised one eyebrow and lowered his fuzzy chin. "You don't have a rambunctious dog, do you?"

"No, no. No pets. I'm much too busy for pets."

"Then a doll would be the perfect companion for you," he said with a glint in his eye.

"Well, I..."

"Seriously, you actually bear some resemblance to each other. Why, way back, you might even be related," he teased. "Mother's side? *Father's*, perhaps?"

I couldn't resist a laugh.

"Why on earth would she have beckoned to you, otherwise?" he added.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Mathilde was beautiful and the green armchair in the corner of my bedroom had always looked somewhat empty. I pictured her sitting there and looked back at the shopkeeper.

"What, exactly, did you mean by *investment*?"

"She'll only increase in value, you know. The best dolls always do."

"How much to take her home with me, Sid?"

He looked at the price tag tied to the doll's wrist. "I could give you a discount," he said as he patted his tummy. "For rescuing her from a most unladylike pose. Say, twenty per cent?"

I reached for the doll and I marveled at the smoothness of her tiny, lifelike hands. As I inspected her from head to toe, Sid waited quietly. He was a man who obviously had his sales technique down to an exact science.

"She is lovely."

"As are you, Miss Miller," he said with a nod. "And I noticed you're both wearing the same shoes."

I looked down and realized he was right. I had only bought the Mary Janes a week earlier on sale at Lord & Taylor, but what an odd coincidence.

I smiled as I lifted my chin to look at him.

“It’s not as if I was looking for a doll.”

He cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind my saying so, it seems to me that she was actually looking for you.”

I hugged Mathilde and pictured her sitting beside the antique desk in my bedroom. “You might be right. Why else would she have jumped off that shelf?”

He nodded. “Why, indeed. Shall I put her in a box for you?”

“Oh, no! I don’t want to hide her pretty face. If you’ll also sell me that pink blanket, I’ll just carry her home in it.”

“Done! I believe Mathilde is going to like living with you, Joy, but I am going to miss her terribly. Will you promise you’ll bring her by to visit me every now and again?”

As I pulled out my wallet, I assured the jolly Englishman that I would.

