

PENANCE IN PUMPS

By Sofronia Anne Strong



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PENANCE IN PUMPS

by Sofronia Anne Strong

Chapter 1

My Dearest Henrietta,

Aunt Lucille feels that, under the circumstances, you have been very gracious to send me a card from London. She has suggested that as my apology to you is long overdue, it would be appropriate for me to write you in care of your hotel in Paris and tell you how sorry I am for the inconvenience and embarrassment my childish behavior has caused you. She says that I victimized you viciously and with malice, and even though I am now doing a just and proper penance for my misdeeds, you are entitled to hear my apology. She has been kind enough to tell me what I must say.

I am most sincerely sorry that I took your shoes and disposed of them just before the wedding. I now realize that it ruined your bridesmaid's ensemble and kept you from having the pleasure of appearing in the wedding party. I confess that was my very intention and was mean spirited and malicious. I now realize that my anger with you was over an imagined slight and was uncalled for.

When Mother grounded me for calling you nasty names I was being justly and properly punished, and it was wrong and ill advised of me to blame you for my being kept at home when it was my own fault. In retaliation against you for my punishment I was behaving in a childish and irrational manner. I want you to know that I am abjectly sorry for destroying your beautiful pumps and preventing you from participating in the wedding. When you return from your European tour I will wish to make this apology to you again, in person, on my knees, and hope you can find it in your heart to pardon my dreadful behavior. I am utterly sorry for what I did and for the anguish it caused you.

With love, your penitent brother,

Paul

Aunt Lucille made me make repeated copies of this letter until she was satisfied with its neatness, my penmanship and punctuation. Then she let me crawl into bed, quite literally. I was unable to walk because she had me in my punishment shoes as I wrote the letter. She puts these on me from time to time when she feels I am being insufficiently cooperative. They have slender, tapering heels, seven inches high, and round toes, like balls, and their purpose is precisely to prevent me from walking. When I have them on I have to crawl, of course.

As she buckles the straps around my ankles she always says, "Someone as rotten as you are should be made to crawl. Perhaps on your knees you will think twice about victimizing girls, especially your sister."

I don't want to convey the impression that Aunt Lucille, who is my Father's sister, and Mother's dearest relative, is necessarily mean or cruel. She is merely being diligent in the task she has undertaken of administering my proper penance for my transgressions against Henrietta. Before the summer is out I will have finished that task, I presume.

In some ways I like my Aunt Lucille. She is quite beautiful and the resemblance to my Father is quite noticeable. He is a very handsome man. Lucille is tall and slender and has sharp, riveting features. She is exceedingly stylish. I have always been somewhat in awe of my Aunt Lucille and although she has heretofore always been kind and nice to me, I am now seeing how strong and commanding she really is. Still, she's pretty nice about it, even though she has to keep me under her control.

Lucille married well and was widowed young. She lives graciously in the country home her husband built for her before he was killed on a construction site. The construction company was his and one of the world's largest. Lucille and their daughters, Pamela and Patricia, are more than well-to-do. My cousins are nineteen and eighteen years old and I am sixteen. If Pamela and Patricia weren't cousins I could get very excited about them. They really are gorgeous girls. I am sorry I can't say the same for my sister, Henrietta, however. Oh, she is beautiful enough, that's the trouble. She is so exquisitely lovely that it has gone to her head. Henrietta is the world's worst pill. She is a regular spoiled princess and perfect snot.

I am spending the summer with my aunt and cousins because of the stupid business of Henrietta's shoes.

I could like Henrietta, and wouldn't have got myself into this awful mess, if she weren't so prissy all the time, but she just drives me wild with her itchy-prissy attitude and her grandiose feminine airs. She is forever giggling in corners with her girlfriends. They have pajama parties and scream and giggle and go ga-ga all night and just drive me nuts. They are boy-crazy and the way they treat the guys I know is really terrible. They herd them around like cattle, and jerk them around and drive them wild. Then they laugh and carry on about how clever it is of them to keep all the boys strung out. I mean, I like girls a lot, but it scares me when I see how my sister and her friends treat guys.

Anyway, Henrietta is forever getting me in hot water with Mom and Dad. She cooks up these phony stories about me and she sells them to the folks and I wind up grounded. Or Mother hands me an apron and says, “. . . you're doing dishes for three weeks, young man, for calling Henrietta nasty names around school. . .”

So there I am standing over the kitchen sink every night and scrubbing the floor and counters and all that while Henrietta is upstairs with her dippy girlfriends blasting away on the stereo and Mother says nothing to her. You can understand why I got to the end of my string with her. Henrietta can do no wrong. Henrietta is so lovely. Henrietta is a cheerleader and she is Homecoming Queen. There is no limit to the wonderfulness of Henrietta around our house and I'm just dumb old Paul, the boy in the apron over there at the kitchen sink.

Dad is even worse. He calls her “Princess” and he calls me to mow the lawn or shovel the walk. All this is supposed to be good for my character and all that worship-

ping is supposed to be good for Henrietta's self-image. Henrietta goes to Aunt Lucille's in the summer so that she and Pamela and Patricia can go to all those Yacht Club dances and Country Club dinners and meet all the right boys, while I stay home and get a summer job so I will learn adult responsibility.

If I am dating one of the girls from school Mom says things like “. . . Well, her family are terrible social climbers,” or “. . . They say her Mother drinks. . .” or “do you really think she's pretty, Dear?” Nothing and no one is ever good enough, but Henrietta can do no wrong.

It's just that I sometimes get so mad I could throttle this All-American Princess that lives down the hall, beneath the canopy bed, surrounded by an entire menagerie of stuffed critters. That boudoir down there has enough lace, ruffles, and chintz in it to house the Queen of the Nile, but all there is in there is dumb old Henrietta. The smell of lilies and roses is overpowering, even down in my little dungeon. I hope you are getting some idea of how I lost my cool one day and went slightly nuts trying to think of a way to put Her Highness in her place. It didn't work, and it did. I accomplished what I set out to accomplish, that is, I ruined Henrietta's latest big splash, but it didn't work because I am at Aunt Lucille's paying for it. I really fixed Henrietta good, but I'm not sure it was worth it, after all. Aunt Lucille is pretty relentless and Pamela and Patricia have been pretty awful, but I understand that is what I deserve. Maybe so. . . but when things are really terrible I can take some pleasure in remembering how it was when Henrietta the Princess couldn't do her big show number as Maid of Honor at cousin Trudy's wedding.

In the meantime I'm stuck in these ghastly shoes.

Trudy, that's Mom's sister's girl, got married. We all went, and it was a real show, and a great party afterward, but Henrietta had to just sit in a pew with us. She was supposed to have been the Maid of Honor, parading down the aisle, radiant as the bride, herself, swaying along in yards and yards of shimmering fuchsia colored taffeta, a ton of flowers, a satin hat with a veil and those stiletto heeled pumps, dyed to match the dress. Well, it didn't happen that way. Trudy was a bridesmaid short and I fixed it that way. And Henrietta was just standing there in a pew in a yellow party dress, her gorgeous eyes all red from bawling, swearing under her breath while three other girls did the hesitation step in fuchsia taffeta gowns..

My heart was filled with glee. No one knew how it happened but when it came time for the wedding, Horrible Henrietta had no shoes. Hanky (that's one of the nasty nicknames I got grounded for) couldn't dress for the parade, so Hanky couldn't march.

It was worth all the garbage she had pulled on me for so long just to watch the tantrums she threw when she found out she wasn't going to be in the limelight for a change. My horrid little heart lept up with joy when I saw her slamming her head on the bedstead and listened to her scream with rage. She cried buckets and for a while I thought they were going to have to get her a straight jacket. Henrietta's bridesmaid shoes went missing, and Henrietta went bananas. I loved it.

Things did not calm down at home very easily after that. Henrietta screamed that she just knew I had done it to her. I guess she knew I had plenty of motivation, lots of good reasons, but she couldn't prove it. I figured I was free and clear. Mother agreed

with Henrietta and the two of them swore revenge, but Father forbade it because they had no grounds for hanging me with it. I just kept my mouth shut and insisted I knew nothing. The house was not a placid place. It couldn't be with the Princess Royal in a permanent snit and the Queen in a steady swivet. The King ignored it all and the scullery boy remained silent over his dishes.

Now, to be perfectly honest, it had been pretty simple. We were all staying at Uncle Milt and Aunt Myrtle's for the weekend. They have a big place on the edge of the city and there is a big pool and garden running down the length of the big back yard area. It was at the bridal dinner that this devilish thought came to me. Was there some way, I thought, that Henrietta might not be parading down that aisle in the morning. Easy — Henrietta ain't got no shoes — I thought. And no shoes, no bridesmaid outfit. I had thought of stealing her dress, but realized that was too complicated, too hard to hide, but the shoes; wow, that was a stroke of genius. Even if they found her some other shoes, she'd be out of sync and that would drive her mad. Henrietta is hung up about her appearance. Never a hair out of place, never a chip on her nail enamel, never a lash un-massacred, all smiling in poses and postures — Princess Perfect.

Before we all went to bed I just snuck upstairs, picked up the dyed satin pumps and carried them out through the garden and chucked them into the bushes. The rest you know. Well, you don't, really, but I'll tell you.

The grand era of self-satisfaction lasted about two weeks until Aunt Maude called one evening with the news. The damned dog had showed up at the back door with a fuchsia satin pump in his mouth, wagging his friendly tail and looking as pleased as if he had just retrieved a goose. Investigation located the other one and, you might say my goose was cooked. A couple of days later a box arrived in the mail, containing two water soaked, discolored, fuchsia dyed, slipper satin, lady's pumps which had once matched my sister's expensive, unworn bridesmaid's gown.

With the evidence sitting out on the living room coffee table, and the whole family lined up against me they extracted the whole story of my insane stunt out of me. Tempers boiled. Vengeance was sworn. There was talk of disinherited sons, threats of criminal and civil court actions and observations about my being beaten to within an inch of my life. Mother had to restrain Henrietta to keep her from flaying me alive right there amongst the Queen Anne chairs. When things calmed down Father, rather judiciously, decreed that there would have to be some form of retribution applied and that he would take the matter under careful consideration and decree my punishment. Mother and Henrietta were ordered, in the meantime, to stay away from me, and me from them, and we were dismissed. For the first time I began to regret my clever foolishness. Dad was not a man to be messed with, although he was generally a good Father, steady, fair and fun, but he was a strong and influential attorney and it was not wise to give him cause to get on your case. Fortunately, Mother and Henrietta knew it too, so I sweated out the decision from the bench and awaited sentencing.

Chapter 2

Patricia and Pamela held my shoulders while Aunt Lucille rolled up my pants legs and fitted sheer nylon anklets onto my feet. I had just arrived and been announced by the maid. My lady relatives were waiting for me. I was pounced upon rather uncer-

moniously, parked in a chair in the study, where they were congregated, waiting for me, and my penance began.

Aunt Lucille opened a shoe box, folded back the tissue and lifted out a fuchsia colored pump of slipper satin and showed it to me. It was similar to Henrietta's purloined pumps but it had a terrifying stiletto heel that Aunt Lucille said was five inches in height. It tapered gracefully to a lift which could not have been more than a quarter of an inch across. Unlike Henrietta's shoe, it had a high counter to which was attached an ankle strap with a delicate gold buckle. Attached to the back of the counter was a wide satin bow. Aunt Lucille slipped the terrible looking shoe onto my foot as she held my ankle with her other hand. She dropped my newly shod foot into her lap and spoke as she encircled my ankle with the strap and secured the tiny buckle.

"Your parents have asked me to insure that you will wear these while they and your sister tour Europe this summer. You will wear them! If you take them off I have some more with higher heels for you, and still others with heels so high you won't be able to walk at all." She lifted the other shoe from the box and fitted it onto my other foot. I looked up imploringly at my cousins but they were gazing down at my upturned face with huge grins. They were pinning me to the chair with their hands on my shoulders. They appeared to be on the verge of laughter. I sat staring at the awful devices on my feet in disbelief.

"Henrietta wears high heels so gracefully. Have you ever noticed how attractive she is in heels? We are all agreed that you were simply dreadful at the wedding. Poor Henrietta would have looked so wonderful if you hadn't stolen her shoes. Don't you think it is appropriate for you to wear heels for a while after what you have done?" I couldn't believe I was hearing that, but there were that pair of hideous fuchsia satin spikes strapped to my feet. What did she mean. . . "for a while?" All I could think at the moment was that I wanted to take them off.

"Do I really have to wear those things? I mean. . . how long?"

"Why all summer, Dear. Until the family returns from Europe. You need to beg Henrietta's pardon in them, in person. You are going to wear them until she grants you her pardon."

"But that'll be ten weeks. I can't. . ." Pamela put her nose into it, with Patricia echoing.

"Oh, but you can."

"And you will." My cousins were snickering.

"And all the time. Your heels have just said goodbye to the ground, Paul, my boy. They won't touch it again until the tribe returns. Until then you can prance about in these. You will make quite a spectacle on the summer social scene. Now you will undoubtedly have to learn how to walk all over again. Why don't you just stand up and give us a little promenade."

My cousins began giggling as they released my shoulders and Aunt Lucille dropped my foot on the floor.

I grabbed the arms of the chair and went defiant. "I can't walk in those. I'll break my neck."

"Very possibly, but in that case we can have you treated for a broken neck. If we do, you will still have your new shoes on. Nothing removes them but Henrietta's pardon. If you don't feel like walking you can spend the summer sitting in that chair, but I shouldn't think it would make a very satisfactory summer for you. I advise walking, frankly." Aunt Lucille delivered this speech with a wicked, highly amused grin on her handsome face. The cousins were tittering and sniggering out of control by the time she finished. I gingerly drew up my knees and put the balls of my feet on the floor. The towering heels thrust the back of my feet upward and I realized that I wouldn't be able to stand, much less walk.

"Oh, c'mon, Aunt Lucille. I can't even stand up in these things, much less try to walk. You're kidding, aren't you? Really, you can't expect anyone to wear these shoes, not really. I got the point. I was wrong at the wedding and I don't blame you all for getting mad at me. I'm sorry. You can take them off now, OK? I'll tell Henrietta I'm sorry too."

"Your apology is quite touching, Paul, and it does you credit. I really think you are sorry, but that is not enough. Your family wants you to do a proper penance and your new shoes are it. I really can't let you take them off. Only Henrietta can grant you that and only in person. You might as well reconcile yourself to a summer in high heels, Dear."

"But Aunt Lucille, what am I gonna do? I can't do anything in these shoes. I don't want anyone to see me like this. I'll be a laughing stock. This is ridiculous. I don't deserve this."

"That's all just too bad, Paul, but I am afraid you do. You can do whatever you wish, just so long as you do it in your new shoes. Personally, I think the sooner you get up and walk, the sooner you will be able to walk with confidence. I should think eventually you will want to eat. Perhaps you can make it your goal to navigate as far as your room in order to dress for dinner. As for facing the world in your pumps, that's up to you. My advice is to take it one step at a time. I hope you will join us for dinner. You can ring for Suzy when you are ready and she will show you where your room is. Suzy has some lovely black satin pumps for you to wear with your tuxedo."

Aunt Lucille and my cousins withdrew, smiling. Pamela waggled her fingers at me. "Happy Landings," she said. They could have just as well tied me to this chair, I thought. I couldn't see how I would ever get out of it.

After my confession about Henrietta's shoes Dad had taken the matter under advisement. A few days later, at dinner he pronounced sentence. He said that I would not be allowed to accompany the rest of the family on our planned European tour when school let out. He would remand me into the custody of his sister, Lucille, for the ten weeks they would be gone. He had asked Lucille to keep me busy and I could think about what I had done and what I was missing. That he said, seemed a proper punishment for my childish transgression. Nothing was said about any penance, other than being left behind. Our chauffeur dropped Mom, Dad, and Henrietta off at the airport and drove me out of town to my aunt's. It was a five hour drive and I

sulked in the back seat, pouting about my consignment to a summer with my dumb cousins. I was grumpy and unhappy when I was let off under the port cocherre as the butler picked up my bags and Suzy, the maid asked me to follow her to my fate.

I sat in the chair and sulked, cursing Henrietta and my whole family. Mother and Henrietta had to have arranged this hideous reprisal. I wondered if Dad even knew of this penance portion of the thing. I suspected not. That didn't help any. I didn't even know where Dad was, except somewhere over the Atlantic.

I grasped the arms of the chair a couple of times and raised my rear end just high enough to realize that trying to walk on the polished parquet floor would be suicidal. I sat down and sulked some more. The afternoon wore on and my mind cycled back and forth between rage and fear to despair.. Several times I swore a solemn oath never to walk in these shoes, but make them carry me about. Defiance would soon fail as I got realistic for a moment and realized that sooner or later I would have to stand up and try to walk. I finally spread my legs and gazed down at my feet and tried to get a good look at my predicament. The fuchsia satin bows on the back of the counters mocked me. The stiletto heels tapered toward the floor. My foot was in line with my shins and only my toes were flat on the floor, my whole weight was on the balls of my feet, just behind my toes. I realized for the first time that these shoes not only endangered me, but they were going to be painful to wear. This awareness came upon me as I realized that just sitting in them was wearying my legs. Shocked at this revelation, I suddenly shot my legs out straight and looked again, this time at the satin bows on the toes. These shoes were dangerous, painful and inanely effeminate in their appearance. In contrast with my grey slacks the effect was simply ridiculous. Musing on these things the afternoon wore away until I felt the call of nature and hunger began to gnaw at me.

I was certain that I couldn't stand up, walk to the other side of the room and summon the maid. Desperate, I lowered myself from the chair to the floor, rolled over on my knees and crawled across the room to the bell ring. I was huddled on the floor by the door when Suzy responded. She looked down at me, suppressing a smile.

"You rang, Sir? Can I be of assistance, Sir?" I was certain there was a note of condescension in the servant girl's tone. It infuriated me, but necessity made me be polite.

"I need to go to my room, Suzy. Can you show me where it is, please?" She stared down at me in her crisp black and white uniform and I felt like an absolute idiot.

"Of course, Sir. This way, please." She curtsied and began to go out the door.

"Suzy, please, I. . . uh. . . think I need some help." She stopped and looked at me rather dumbly. "I. . . I don't think I can walk, Suzy. Have you a wheelchair in the house, or something I can. . ."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but Madam has asked me not to provide you with mechanical assistance. I am allowed to give you my arm, though. Shall I help you up?" Aunt Lucille was determined to have me walking. That much was obvious. I swore under my breath as the little maid grasped my elbow in both hands as I struggled to my feet. Taking uncertain, fearful, mincing little steps I struggled across the hall to the staircase as Suzy, holding my elbows, steadied and steered me toward the staircase. I

grasped the banister with both hands and painfully struggled my way to the second floor where she steered me to my room. I saw that my dinner jacket was laid out.

The large bedroom must have been one of my cousin's at one time. The room assigned to me was a delicate lady's boudoir with a canopy bed. The decor was a riot of ruffles, lace, chintz and chiffon. It made Henrietta's delicate lair at home almost masculine by comparison. A skirted vanity was against one wall, and a huge gilt mirror hung from another. I staggered onto the bed and collapsed.

“Will that be all, Sir?” Suzy asked, dropping a curtsy, too deeply, I thought. I excused her and crawled toward the bathroom after she left. Afraid to stand on my own, I sat to relieve myself. Who thought this up, I wondered. It was so insanely ingenious, so bizarre, I still couldn't believe that Aunt Lucille really meant to keep me in shoes like this all summer. I wondered how long it would really go on. I thought maybe the sooner I walked in these shoes the sooner the torment would end. Henrietta had to have thought this one up. Only she had the mind for it.

Chapter 3

It had been a hard day, and it wasn't over. After I crawled back from the bathroom I hoisted myself up on the big fluffy bed, pulled a lace edged pillow underneath my head and felt like escaping my predicament for a while. I did, I dozed off almost immediately. It was the only relief I could think of.

As I dozed off my mind was still spinning with the questions of how I could live for the next ten weeks with my heels five inches above the floor. The last dreadful thought I remember was that I would have to, somehow, prevent anyone from seeing me this way. I had seen myself in the big mirror and the sight of a boy in slacks, tie and tweed jacket with those insane fuchsia satin shoes on his feet was just ridiculous. What would I tell anyone? Everyone would take me for a madman or a pervert.

Suzy woke me up gently by speaking my name. I rolled over, drowsy, and stared at her.

“Will you be going down for dinner, Sir?” My stomach provided a positive answer before I even realized where I was, and I nodded vigorously. “Will you wish to use the shower, Mr. Paul?”

Again I nodded and then was suddenly aware that Suzy was fumbling with the buckle on my ankle. “Madam has asked me to remove your shoes for bathing. She wants me to remind you that you mustn't remove them yourself..” I thanked the girl and sat up on the bed as she carried the fuchsia shoes to the closet.

Curtsying, she backed out of the room. Feeling euphoric, I padded on flat feet into the bathroom and cleaned myself up.

I hardly thought about my dilemma as I climbed into my tuxedo. Our family made a habit of dressing for dinner if we were all together, or it was any kind of an occasion, and always on Saturday, so wearing a dinner jacket was rather second nature for me. I was refreshed from my nap and ablutions, hungry and looking forward to a fine dinner when I realized that among the things that were laid out for me the only hose were a pair of knee high, black, sheer nylons. The sight of them snapped me back to reality. My first thought was that the bright fuchsia pumps would look absurd with my black tuxedo.

With a sigh of resignation I pulled the nylons over my legs and stepped into my pants. Suzy knocked and entered carrying a shoe box.

“Madam has asked me to bring your evening shoes, Mr. Paul. She requires that I put them on your feet, after which you must not remove them.” I nodded, resignedly, sat on the bed and allowed Suzy to slip them on. I now wore sling pumps, with the same narrow, towering five inch heel. These were open-toed, however, the vamp of the shoe came up the side of my foot and tapered into the sling while there was a band of gleaming black satin across my foot at the base of my toes. It was twisted at the center to make a knotted, rolled pleat that gave the shoe its style. A wide sling of black satin across my heel held the evening pump on my foot.

“Very handsome, Sir,” Suzy remarked as I scowled at her. The shoe was minimal. Most of my foot, in its sheer, black nylon, was exposed in contrast to the glistening, brushed satin of the shoe.

“Thank you, Suzy,” I growled, “but the heel doesn't get any shorter, does it?”

“No, Sir, I am afraid it doesn't. Will there be anything else, Sir?”

“Absolutely! I'll need your assistance in getting downstairs and getting around.”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Paul. Madam has asked me not to assist you any further. She says she wants you to learn to walk by yourself.” Suzy suppressed a smile, the twit, bobbed and withdrew. Better rested, activated by hunger, quite comfortable in my dinner clothes I sat on the bed and worked on my attitude. I had had enough time to realize that lady's shoes with five inch heels were going to dictate my lifestyle for a while.

Rationalizing, I told myself it was like football, or Latin conjugations, something that had to be confronted and dealt with in the best way I could devise. I put my feet on the floor, grabbed the bed post and stood up. Two sprained ankles and a bump on my head seemed the most probable outcome. Determined now, I minced toward the door, unsupported, my arms out like wings, taking my first real unassisted lady steps. I leaned on the door jamb for a moment, collected myself and headed down the hall for the staircase, gaining confidence and keeping one hand just inches from the wall as a safety net. As I teetered along I discovered I had been wrong. It was possible to walk in these shoes. It was scary, and balance was a tricky thing, but I discovered that if I kept my fanny thrust back and took very tiny steps with my feet close together I could slowly motivate without necessarily destroying myself.

On the staircase I cheated. I kind of sat on the banister, keeping the downstairs hand on it and slid slowly along the banister, moving my captive feet down one stair at a time.

Suzy passed below in the hall, going from the library to the kitchen, and saw me inching myself sideways down the stairs. Her mouth broke into a smile and a laugh broke across her face as she clapped her hand over her mouth and scurried away.

“Not a word of this, Suzy — not one damn word, you hear me?” I hollered after her, but got no answer.

By the time I reached the library door and caught sight of my elegantly gowned relatives, I was walking fairly well, but pain was arising in the balls of my feet, the back of my calves and my hips. So, I can walk, and maybe not fall or turn an ankle, but these shoes were going to hurt. The ladies were lounging in front of the TV, glasses of sherry in hand, draped in shining evening gowns. The cousins' shoulders were mostly bare. They looked like they were just awaiting a limousine to whisk them away to a ball.

Patricia spotted me first.

“Here's Paul.” The other two turned their heads and flashed big welcoming smiles. Aunt Lucille, slender as a pencil, was wearing a pleated white satin shirtwaist with a deep V-neck, and bloused sleeves. The gown was a wraparound with a wide satin belt

and a long skirt that overlapped in front and curved away to the rear, below her knees. Her hair was coiled and piled in a complex coiffure studded with sparkling stones. She wore glittering chandelier earrings and a delicate diamond necklace.

“Oh, I am so glad you have decided to join us, Paul, dear. You must be starved.” She glided over to the door and embraced me, kissing me warmly on the cheek. “You cut such a fine figure in your dinner jacket.”

I noticed that the heels on her delicate satin, backless shoes were a lot lower than mine. “Do have a glass of sherry, Darling.” I would have killed for whiskey, but the sherry would help, I thought. Pamela rose and walked over to the cocktail table and poured. She was a truly gorgeous girl in her blue satin gown.

It was wonderfully simple, just a smooth bodice straight across her bust, a pair of wide shoulder straps and a narrow silk satin skirt, tapering to her ankles. Her soft brown hair lay in profusion on her shoulders and she wore sapphire earrings matching the soft blue of her gown.

“I see you got here in one piece, silly. I knew you could navigate in heels. After all the rest of us do it all the time.” I took a baccarat crystal flute from her.

“I notice you don't try it in five inch heels, though.” I said it with a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

“Of course not, Silly. Think we want to break our necks?” Patricia put her hand over her mouth, laughing quite noticeably.

“Please girls. Let's be nice. I think Paul looks just grand. His evening shoes are quite lovely, so behave yourselves.”

Both of my cousins sniggered, rather overmuch, I thought.

Aunt Lucille was enjoying my embarrassment.

Patricia was another disturbing display of elegant femininity. She wore a gown with a black velvet bodice and a sweetheart neckline, puffed sleeves and a skirt of green taffeta in gentle folds that drooped from a `V' at the front below her waist. Her yellow hair was swept back into a French roll and she wore plain black suede pumps. She also glittered in an array of expensive gold jewelry.

“I'm sorry, Paul, but those sling pumps sticking out from your pants legs are just so funny looking. Bear with us. This takes a little getting used to, a boy in high heels is, to say the least, unusual. Don't worry, we'll get used to it.”

“You think it takes getting used to. What about me?” I shot back. “Can't we be reasonable here? I think this business is a bit much, you know. Now that you've all had your laugh why don't I just take off these things and we can talk it over?” I plunked myself down on the sofa and shot my legs out straight to get the pressure off. I pulled at my sherry and stared insolently at the three of them. Aunt Lucille slithered onto a chair and placed her legs together to one side.

“I wouldn't advise that, dear. My instructions are to keep you on your toes by whatever means necessary. I am sure you are very uncomfortable and embarrassed, but that is the purpose of a penance. We want you to be constantly aware of your

mistake and to learn to regret it deeply. You are supposed to squirm as you mince about, nephew. If you have to live in high heels you may decide not to steal anymore."

"Penance in pumps! Oh,, that's good. I love it." Patricia said it behind her glove to Pamela, sotto voce, but we all heard it, of course. The two of them spun into a giggling fit. Aunt Lucille ignored them.

"If you remove your shoes, Paul, your heels get higher. I am sure you never dreamed that there were even shoes with higher heels than those you are wearing, but believe me, I have them on hand for you, and if you are not gracious in your humiliation I will have to put them on you."

"God, I didn't think I could walk in these. I sure couldn't walk in anything higher. They'd break my foot. You're kidding, right?"

"I am afraid not, Dear. You're right though, they aren't made for walking. They're made for crawling. Now make up your mind that you are going to walk proudly this summer in your new shoes, and complete your penance and earn your sister's pardon. Don't make me be cruel. Be a good boy, learn to live in your heels. As for the Silliness Twins here, just let them have their fun. If they don't settle down, perhaps you and I can pick up some five inch heels for them." She winked at me as she said it and smiled wickedly at me. My two cousins abruptly stopped their giggling fit and looked at their Mother open-mouthed.

"You wouldn't!" Pamela cried.

"I might," she rejoined. "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, girls. Be nice to Paul, now, or I might just have to let Paul see how you two look in five inch heels. Now let's go in to dinner."

Lucille's speech restored my humor. We walked into the dining room and arrayed ourselves around the rosewood table set with silver, crystal and Spode, beneath the huge chandelier. Suzy and the butler, Olensen, served us the best roast Watertown Goose I have ever eaten.

Chapter 4

After that first insane day at my Aunt's, things settled down a little. At dinner Aunt Lucille explained to my two gorgeous, maddening cousins that they should bear in mind that they had no more right to be cruel and malicious toward me than I had to be so to Henrietta. This little lecture about putting them in stiletto heels if they didn't behave, sobered them

I can't say that they didn't have their fun with me after that, or even that Aunt Lucille didn't connive with them to embarrass me. That seems to have been part of my penance, to be ever embarrassed about my feet, but there were limits to it.

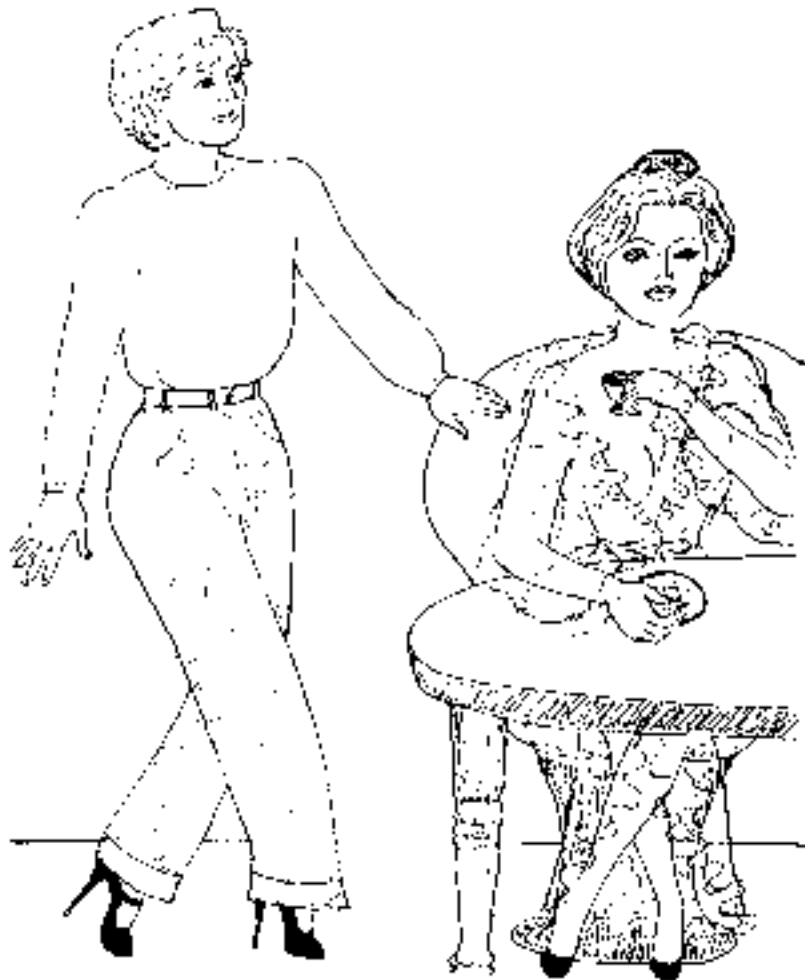
The real limits of my summer long penance turned out to be dictated from afar, by my family, gaily touring Europe. I came to dread the arrival of the mail. Correspondence from my family would contain dreadful surprises. It became apparent that my Mother and Sister were not cooling out about my misdeed, but continued to boil about it and intensify their vengeance.

After that first dinner I realized, with a sense of growing hopelessness, that the terrible shoes were on me to stay. Aunt Lucille had made it clear for a second time in her speech before dinner that I had better cooperate or I would crawl. That frightened me, so I decided to reconcile myself to it.

The next morning, over breakfast in the solarium, where I teetered in wearing a pair of white leather shoes, Aunt Lucille reopened the subject of my summer's activities. She reminded me that I was not a prisoner and that I was free to do pretty much as I pleased so long as I was well behaved and kept my shoes on.

I complained that my shoes seemed to have become my destiny. I told her that I was pretty limited in what I could do so long as my heels were jacked five inches aloft. I also told her emphatically that I was unwilling to have anyone else see me with soaring satin pumps sticking out below my trouser legs.

I somewhat sarcastically asked her what she would recommend that I do with my sum-



mer, unable to move about above a mincing hobble and isolated from all company outside the house.

She smiled as she munched on her toast and washed it down with a sip of tea.

“You have a point there,” she began. “Tennis will be quite impossible, won't it, and sailing is out. Dancing is a possibility. You can learn to dance in those shoes. Women do it all the time, but then if you refuse to be seen by anyone, dancing will be difficult. I think you are making this more difficult than need be, Paul. If you isolate yourself it will certainly be a very dull summer. You can sulk it away all alone if you wish, but I don't think it is a very good idea.”

“Well, that's a fine choice, Ma'am. I can stay home and sulk, as you call it, or I can gad about showing my shoes to your whole world of fancy friends and society people.. To my mind that would be just about unbearable. Pamela and Patricia are bad enough with their sniggering and dumb jokes. I don't need your whole world of society to join them in hazing me.”

“That's what penance is all about, Paul, darling. You make amends by parading your punishment. That way you come to the conclusion that your behavior was unacceptable, and hopefully you won't do anything like that again. Similarly, if you hide away in the house all summer you will be imprisoning yourself but will probably teach yourself the same lesson, your choice.

You should also bear in mind that if you become a recluse your Mother and Sister will be less inclined to grant their pardons. If you don't suitably humiliate yourself they will wait until you do. It's up to you, dear.” I slumped in my chair, angry and disconsolate. “However, you have to do something. You can help me, if you like. I have a lot of correspondence, committee work, telephone calls, etc. I'd like it if you would give me a hand. It will keep you busy.”

I agreed, reluctantly, to that. It was a chance to do something to occupy myself and my mind. I became Aunt Lucille's Private Secretary. She was right. It was kind of interesting. She had a hand in a lot of things. I did persist in my determination not to let anyone see me in my dreadful shoes.

When not helping Aunt Lucille I skulked around the house avoiding everyone, sulking and being bored. I just made up my mind to sweat it out in hiding. I often found myself just staring at my feet contemplating how awful my shoes were.

Pamela and Patricia largely ignored me. They were at the Yacht Club, sailing, at the Country Club, swimming and playing tennis, or shopping with their Mother and limited their ragging to telling me how much fun it all was and telling me what a pity it was I was missing it all. The three of them nattered at the dinner table about what to wear to the Commodore's Ball and said it was a shame I was going to miss it, being the main event of the summer social season. I squirmed, fumed and held my tongue.

It was over cocktails one Saturday evening, the ladies were in frothy summer gowns and I was in my white dinner jacket with a pair of open-toed white satin pumps.

Aunt Lucille and Patricia were cooking up a plan for Pamela to sweep Arnold Lasher off his feet at the ball. It was clear to me that by the time they were through with him, Arnold was going to be helplessly enmeshed with Pamela for at least the rest of the

summer. He was wasn't going to have a chance. Pamela was being ga-ga over Arnold at the time and she would have him panting after her by the time the evening was half over. As this conspiracy session wound down Aunt Lucille leaned forward and looked intently at me, smiling sweetly.

“The Girls are right you know. The Commodore's Ball is just too important to miss. It is getting on for the summer and you will soon miss your opportunity to meet some very nice people and have some fun. Are you sure you won't go?”

“We've been all over that, Ma'am. Look at me! How could I possibly go to a ball dressed this way? Look at these shoes. I make a very presentable gentleman, don't I, with white satin shoes and a dinner jacket? Please, Aunt Lucille. You know I can't do that. Of course, if I could take the shoes off.”

All three of them chuckled and shook their heads. I was sorry I had said anything. Apart from sleeping and bathing I had been tiptoeing every minute for weeks now. My ankles were beginning to hurt when I had my shoes off. Aunt Lucille said it was because my Achilles tendons were shortening up.

“Sometimes, Nephew, a problem will resolve, if you turn it upside down.” Aunt Lucille spoke in a soft, very serious tone. I didn't follow her at all, so I remained quiet. When Aunt Lucille got serious I usually got nervous. “You know that we must not allow you to wear men's shoes, dear, but if you are embarrassed to be seen as a boy in high heels you might solve your problem by turning it around. Why not wear dresses and just be a girl? Then your high heels would be most appropriate.”

My jaw dropped. Pamela and Patricia turned abruptly away from the TV, their eyebrows shooting up abruptly, obviously as surprised as I was.

“Oh, come on, Aunt Lucille. What are you saying? I should masquerade as a girl, just to get out of the house? Forget it!”

“Perhaps we should consider it. Perhaps you would be better off being perceived as a pretty girl in your heels, better off certainly than being persecuted as a boy in them. You could make it work you know, with my help. Anyway, I suggest you think about it. It's up to you, but consider it. It might even turn out to be fun.”

My two idiotically suggestible cousins clapped their hands and instantly started telling each other just what kind of dress I would look best in at the ball. I lost my cool and told them to shut up. In fact I did quite a bit of screaming at them and by the time dinner was served I sincerely regretted it.

Suzy brought the shoe box into the library. I have to admit I hadn't imagined just what my Aunt was describing when she mentioned on two previous occasions that she had still higher heels to put me in. Suzy presented a pair of black leather shoes such as I had never dreamed.

The shoe was constructed on an arched steel plate, covered with leather. The toe was a round ball of black leather which led to a high vamp from which dangled two leather straps with buckles which ran across the tip of the instep. Rising from the rear of the shoe was a high counter with two more straps with buckles. Most amazing was the heel, a gleaming stainless steel stiletto, seven inches in length, that tapered to a narrow point. These heels were at an acute angle to the body of the shoe. It was im-

mediately apparent that standing in them would place me on the points of my toes and align my foot in a straight line with my leg. The round toes, however, completely obviated the possibility of standing in them.

Patricia and Pamela held my shoulders, both of these brats still talking about what kind of dresses I ought to wear as Aunt Lucille buckled them onto my feet.

As Aunt Lucille had promised, I crawled in to dinner. I crawled back to the library too. After I had crawled down to breakfast in the morning, I said my apologies to the three ladies. Even sitting in a chair in those hideous devices, was not easy, with my knees together and the muscle power needed to keep my feet from rolling this way and that.

I crawled to Aunt Lucille's office after breakfast and finally had the temerity to ask how long I was to suffer this way.

“I'm not sure, dear. Your outburst last night suggests that you are still capable of the sort of thing that brought you here. I will have to tell your family in Vienna and see what they think.” My heart sank as I hoisted myself onto my secretarial chair, pulled my imprisoned feet up onto the seven inch heels and tried to stabilize my legs.