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*The Frog
And The
Princess*

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Once, there was a boy who was so little that He looked as if He were four years old when He was really eight. Because of this, and because He loved swimming so much, His friends called Him Frog. His family was as large as He was small, because five cousins and one uncle lived with Him, His sister, and His parents. Three of these cousins were orphans – Their parents had been killed when They tried to stop some soldiers from stealing the family's cow. This cow gave lots of good milk, but the soldiers wanted to eat her, so They did. And if the cow's owners wanted to stop Them, They'd just have to be killed. So They were, leaving three young children without any parents. So They went to live with Frog's family. Frog's other uncle and His two children came to live there too, because His wife, Their mother, had gone to the king, to tell Him about what the soldiers had done. And the king had thrown Her in prison. So seven children and three adults lived together in one house.

They were quite poor, and would have been even poorer if it hadn't been for Frog. Frog's parents wove cane baskets, and His uncle made jam, when there was fruit to pick. They sold the baskets and the jam in the markets of five different villages. Early in the morning, five days a week, They'd load up the family cart with baskets and pots of jam. Then two of the adults would drive the cart to whichever village had its market that day, and one would stay home to look after the children and prepare the evening meal. They took it in turns. And Frog? Frog would sometimes go with the cart to market and sometimes stay in Their own village, which was by the walls of the king's palace. He'd go up near the palace gates with His sister Lucy, who was seven years old, but looked older than Frog. She'd pretend to be looking after Him, so that no grown-ups would worry about such a young child wandering about on His own. That would've caused problems.

But, usually, nobody noticed Him at all – He was so small, so quick, and blended into the background so well, in the clothes His mother had made for Him. Clothes as brown as the ground so that they were hard to see, and with especially deep pockets to hold the things that He would steal.

Didn't His parents get upset that Their naughty little boy stole, You might ask? No, indeed. Remember that it was His mother who made His pockets so big. She used to say: "Only the poor are called thieves when They steal." Frog's family was used to people stealing from Them. Laughing ladies and gentlemen from the princess who stopped at Their market stall and playfully opened pots of jam to taste them. "Not sweet enough," They'd say, and refuse to pay. Another pot of jam that couldn't be sold. Or soldiers with Their heavy boots would step on a cane basket and laugh: "Not very strong, is it?" They'd say, and slap each other on the back, laughing down the street, stealing fruit and pies from other stalls. Nobody said anything. They all knew what had happened to Frog's aunts and uncle.

Frog's parents were glad of what His stealing would buy for the family. They only laid down two rules for Him: that He only steal from people rich enough to not need what was stolen, or from soldiers; and that He not get caught. And Frog wasn't that naughty: He obeyed these two rules.

But Frog didn't go out stealing every day. There are other things in life. And one of Frog's favourite things, as I think I've already said, was swimming. Swimming in ponds and streams: anywhere where there was water. Sometimes



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He'd go swimming with His whole family or with friends. Sometimes He went on His own.

And it was one time when He was on His own that He met the princess. Frog was lying sunning Himself on a large rock by a pool in a meadow near the palace walls, when the princess came down to the meadow to play, accompanied by Her ladies-in-waiting (and a bodyguard of soldiers, to be sure). The princess began playing with Her favourite toy – a ball of solid gold. A fairly silly thing to make a ball out of, You might say, but there You go: the princess wouldn't have played with any other kind. She liked to remind Herself that the ball She was rolling in Her hands, throwing into the air and catching, was worth more than the village outside the palace gates. More than three villages. More than the ladies-in-waiting's finery and the soldiers' armour. More than the ladies or the soldiers Themselves. Silly thoughts to be running through the head of a young woman, but there You go again: the princess hardly had thoughts of any other kind.

She ran along, threw the ball into the air, and caught it. Threw the ball into the air, and caught it. Tripped over a stone. Threw the ball into the air, and Herself onto the ground. When She looked up, She saw Her lovely golden ball, worth more than three villages, fall into the pond, with a splash that was worth a couple of houses.

"Somebody get Our ball for Us!" She cried. (You see, the princess thought She was worth more than ordinary people, so She called Herself "We", as if She were more than one person.) "Somebody get Our ball for Us!" She'd cried, and the ladies-in-waiting looked nervous. The soldiers looked nervous. Water was wet and finery was fine. Armour was heavy and here was a naked little boy whom They hadn't noticed (Frog knew not to be noticed, and all this time He'd been watching and listening, as still as a frog just before the fly disappears.) Here, then, was this naked little boy, standing in front of the princess, piping up: "Please, Yer Lady, I'll get Yer ball for You if. if You'll take Me to see the palace."

"Yes, yes: anything! Quick – before it gets any wetter!"

So Frog dived in and swam out to where the ball had disappeared. ("He swims like a frog!" said one of the ladies-in-waiting, and everybody laughed.) Then Frog disappeared too. After a full minute, He came to the surface again, a little closer to the edge of the pond. He took a breath and dived again. Another minute and He reappeared, closer still.

"What are You doing?!" shouted the princess, "Can't You find it?"

But He was already under water again. Half a minute later, He surfaced again, even closer, and started walking slowly towards the edge. "Too heavy to swim with," He explained, "had to carry it along the bottom." He came out of the water, and gave the princess Her ball. She snatched it away from Him, and, without a word of thanks, turned away. "Come!" She said to Her ladies-in-waiting, and started off towards the palace.

"Please, Yer Lady, I've just got to put My clothes on, if You'll wait a bit," said Frog. And the princess turned around.

"Wait for You?!" She snorted. "Why should We wait for You?"

"Please, Yer Lady, You promised to take me to the palace."

"We don't keep promises to... to frogs!" She sneered. "And especially not to frogs who don't know enough to address Us as 'Your Highness.'" And with that, She strode off, followed by laughing ladies-in-waiting (and the soldiers, to be sure.)

After about two minutes, there was another follower, just behind the last soldiers, too small and too quiet to be noticed. And He wasn't noticed until They were all through the palace gates, in the palace gardens, with the king striding forward to greet His daughter with some news.

Now, the news that the king had for the princess was this: another prince had come to ask Her to marry Him. To tell the truth, the king was a little fed up with the princess, because, for every prince who came wanting to marry Her, She had one answer – no. The king had said again and again that He'd like to see the princess happily married. What He really meant, of course, was that He'd be happy when She married, whether She was happy or not. But the princess laughed at each prince who came, so that They all changed Their minds and went away again, quite insulted. So now, the king had decided to tell the princess that She must marry this one and make the best of it. But He was a bit worried because He knew that the princess would make a big fuss.

However, as He was approaching Her, there was a bit of another fuss. Frog had finally been discovered, and a soldier was holding Him by the ear.

"Ugh!" said the princess, "It's that horrible frog creature!"

"What's this?! A frog?" asked the king.

"He swims like a frog, and He looks like a frog," said the princess. "He refused to rescue Our ball from the water unless We brought Him to the palace. We thought We'd escaped Him."

"How's that? Rescued Your golden ball?" asked the king, and insisted on being told the whole story. By the time the story had been told, He'd thought up a cunning plan. Here was a way to get the princess married without quite so much of a fuss. "A promise is a promise," said the king, "and a royal promise is a royal promise!" (The king was always breaking His own promises, but He said nothing about that just now) "Young, er, um, frog. You have rescued the princess' golden ball from the pond, and not only may You see the palace: today You shall be the guest of honour! And You, my Dear," (to the princess) "You must treat this, erm, frog with the grace and the thanks that He deserves. Why, that ball is worth more than three villages!" (We see here where the princess got some of Her silly ways of thinking) "You should be more careful!" He turned to address all those around: "This young, ah, frog is to be treated with all respect today." Then He hurried off, to tell a certain guest not to show up for dinner. The princess looked quite disgusted, and flounced off to Her rooms, leaving instructions that She was not to be disturbed.

So Frog wandered around the palace, with royal consent, and (without royal consent) began to put things in His pockets. Many things He saw weren't worth taking, as His family wouldn't be able to sell them without making everybody suspicious, and weren't worth keeping to use at home. What good is a golden toothpick set with diamonds, when a wooden toothpick picks teeth just as well? But He did manage, during that afternoon, to pocket quite a lot.

At dinner, the king announced that Frog was to sit next to the princess. She protested, but the king insisted, and added: "And, what is more, We've decided that this young lad will make the perfect husband for You. He's young now, We admit, but You've been quite willing to wait so far without marrying. No doubt You won't mind waiting a little longer. We have decided."

The princess burst into angry tears, and asked to be excused from the table, but the king wouldn't let Her leave until the dinner was over, even though She didn't touch a crumb, and sat there crying the whole time. The king pretended several times to be angry and told Her to be quiet, but really He was enjoying the evening. His plan was going well.

Frog was worrying about what His family'd think if He stayed away much longer, but couldn't see any chance to escape unnoticed while the dining hall was filled with servants and soldiers, and He and the princess were the centre of attention.

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Finally, the king turned to the princess and said: "You may now retire for the night. We have ordered a small bed to be put in Your bedroom for this young frog. He will sleep there, as He is Your guest."

Again the princess protested, and again the king was firm. The princess and Frog were escorted to Her rooms, and the door was locked from the outside. The king hurried off to give more instructions to the secret guest.

After beating against the locked door with no result, the princess threw Herself down on Her bed, and cried Herself to sleep.

As soon as He was sure She was really asleep, Frog crept quietly over to the window, climbed out, and down to the ground below. Staying as much in the shadows as possible, He slipped around the palace walls 'til He came to the gates. At the gates, He got up all His courage and walked boldly towards the guards, ready to run for it if necessary. But the guards had heard of the king's instructions to treat the young boy with respect, and let Him pass. As soon as He was out of sight of the guards at the gates, Frog ran home, and out of Our story.

Shortly before dawn, but while still dark, a strange group moved around the palace walls to just underneath the princess' window. One soldier carried a ladder. Another carried a strip of cloth, a length of rope, and a canvas sack. The king and the visiting prince carried the king's plan in Their heads. The ladder was leant against the wall. "Make sure You tie Him up tight and gag Him well," whispered the king to the prince, who took the sack, the cloth, and the rope, and climbed up the ladder, entering the princess' rooms through the window. A few minutes later, He was back at the window, hissing: "He's not here. And the bed's not been slept in."

"Lucky for Him!" hissed back the king. "Well, no matter: He's served His purpose. We don't need the sack and things then. Throw them down." Sack, rope, and cloth were thrown down, and the ladder was removed. Three figures crept through the dark around the palace walls, and the scene was left to the dark.

Later that morning, the princess awoke to find a tall young man sitting in the armchair by Her bed. He was dressed in gold and scarlet, and on His head was a crown of fine gold.

"Who are You? How did You get in here?" cried the princess.

"We came in here with You last night," answered the princely young man. "We were that frog that rescued Your golden ball from the lake. A wicked witch had put a spell on Us, changing Us into that frog You saw. Only by spending the night in the room of a beautiful princess could We be returned to Our true shape. You have saved Us from that horrible life."

When the king heard the news, He congratulated the princess on Her wonderfully good luck: "Not only a prince," He exclaimed "but an enchanted prince!"

And, although the prince didn't seem that special to the princess, at least being married to Him would be preferable (so She thought) to being married to a frog, and She was so relieved that She didn't protest quite as much as She would have normally.

In fact, She hardly protested at all, and so They were married in a very big, very beautiful ceremony, and They lived together to the end of Their lives.

But far from happily.