

The Frog King, or Iron Henry

In olden times, when a mere wish would come true, there lived a king whose daughters were all beautiful one more than the other; but the youngest princess was so lovely that even the sun itself, which has seen so many wonders, marveled as it shone upon her face.

Near the royal castle stood a great dark forest, and in that forest, beneath an old lime tree, a well had been dug. On hot days the princess would go into the dark forest and sit by the cool well; and when she grew bored, she would take a golden ball, toss it up and catch it: this was her favorite pastime.

But once it happened that the golden ball tossed by the princess did not land in her outstretched hands, but flew past them, struck the ground, and rolled straight into the water. The princess watched it with her eyes, but alas, the little ball vanished in the well. And the well was so deep, so very deep, that its bottom could not be seen. Then the princess began to weep; she cried and sobbed louder and more sorrowfully, and could not be comforted.

She was weeping and wailing when suddenly she heard a voice: "What is the matter with you, princess? Your weeping would move even a stone to pity." She looked around to see whence the voice came, and saw a little frog who had poked his thick, ugly head out of the water. "Ah, so it is you, old water-splasher!" said the maiden. "I am weeping for my golden ball, which has fallen into the well." "Be calm, do not weep," replied the little frog; "I can help you in your grief; but what will you give me if I fetch your toy for you?" "Anything you wish, dear little frog," answered the princess; "my dresses, my pearls, my precious stones, and even the golden crown which I wear."

And the little frog replied: "I need neither your dresses, nor your pearls, nor your precious stones, nor your golden crown; but if you would love me and I might always accompany you, share your games, sit beside you at your little table, eat from your golden plate, drink from your little cup, sleep in your little bed: if you promise me all this, I am ready to descend into the well and fetch your golden ball from there." "Yes, yes," answered the princess; "I promise you everything you wish, only bring me back my ball."

Yet she thought to herself: "What nonsense the foolish little frog talks! Let him sit in the water with others like himself and croak; how could he ever be a companion to a human being?" Having secured her promise, the little frog disappeared

beneath the water, sank to the bottom, and after a few moments surfaced again, holding the ball in his mouth, and threw it onto the grass. The princess trembled with joy at seeing again her lovely toy, picked it up, and ran off skipping. "Wait, wait!" cried the little frog. "Take me with you. I cannot run as fast as you."

Not a chance! In vain did the little frog croak at the top of his lungs after her: the fugitive did not listen, hurried home, and soon forgot about the poor little frog, who had to return to his well with nothing but his trouble.

The next day, when the princess sat down to table with the king and all the courtiers and began to eat from her golden plate, suddenly slap, slap, slap, slap! someone came slapping up the marble steps of the staircase and, having reached the top, began knocking at the door: "Princess, youngest princess, open to me!"

She jumped up to see who could be knocking there, and, opening the door, saw the little frog. The princess quickly slammed the door, sat down again at the table, and became terribly, terribly frightened.

The king saw that her heart was beating wildly, and said: "My child, what are you afraid of? Is some giant standing behind the door wishing to carry you off?" "Oh, no!" she replied. "Not a giant, but a disgusting little frog!" "What does he want from you?" "Oh, dear father! Yesterday, when I was sitting by the well in the forest playing, my golden ball fell into the water; and because I wept so bitterly, the little frog fetched it out for me; and when he insisted that we should henceforth be inseparable, I promised; but never did I think that he could come out of the water. And now here he is behind the door, wanting to come in."

The little frog knocked a second time and raised his voice:

Princess, princess!

Why do you not open?

Have you forgotten your promises

By the cool waters of the well?

Princess, princess,

Why do you not open?

Then the king said: "What you have promised, that you must fulfill; go and open!" She went and opened the door. The little frog hopped into the room and, following close behind the princess, leaped right up to her chair, sat beside her, and cried: "Lift me up!" The princess kept delaying until finally the king ordered her to do it. As soon as the little frog had been placed on the chair, he wanted to be on the table; they put him on the table, but even that was not enough: "Push your golden plate closer to me," he said, "so that we may eat together!"

What was to be done? The princess complied, though with evident reluctance. The little frog ate heartily, while the young hostess could not swallow a bite.

At last the guest said: "I have eaten my fill, and moreover I am tired. Carry me now to your little room and prepare your downy little bed, and let us lie down to sleep together." The princess burst into tears, and she was frightened of the cold little frog: she was afraid even to touch him, and here he was going to rest on the princess's soft, clean little bed!

But the king grew angry and said: "He who helped you in your distress, him you must not afterward despise."

She took the little frog between two fingers, carried him upstairs, and thrust him into a corner.

But when she had laid herself down in her little bed, the little frog crept up and said: "I am tired; I want to sleep just as you do: lift me up to you, or I shall complain to your father!" Now the princess became exceedingly angry, seized him, and threw him with all her might against the wall. "Now perhaps you will be quiet, you disgusting frog!"

Having fallen to the ground, the little frog turned into a handsome prince with beautiful, gentle eyes. And by the king's will he became the beloved companion and husband of the princess. Then he told her that an evil witch had enchanted him into a frog, that no one in the world except the princess had been able to release him from the well, and that on the morrow they would journey together to his kingdom.

Then they fell asleep, and on the next morning, when the sun awakened them, a coach drawn by eight horses drew up to the porch: the horses were white, with white ostrich feathers on their heads, the harness all of golden chains, and on the rear step stood the young king's servant, his faithful Henry.

When his master had been transformed into a little frog, faithful Henry had grieved so deeply that he had ordered three iron bands to be made and had bound his heart with them, lest it burst asunder from pain and sorrow.

The coach was to convey the young king to his native kingdom; faithful Henry helped the young couple into it, mounted the rear step again, and was overjoyed at his master's deliverance from the enchantment.

They had traveled part of the way when suddenly the prince heard behind him a cracking sound, as though something had broken. He turned around and cried:

What cracked there, Henry? Was it the coach?
No! It is whole, my lord... But this
Is an iron band bursting upon my heart:
It has suffered greatly, my lord, because
You were imprisoned in the cold well
And doomed to remain forever a frog.

Once more, and yet again, something cracked during the journey, and each time the prince likewise thought the coach was breaking; but it was the bands upon faithful Henry's heart that were bursting, because his master was now freed from the enchantment and happy.