

Esther M. Friesner

## Warts And All

### WARTS AND ALL

"You could always mention," replies Ms. Friesner to our inquiry, "that my husband Waiter has an extensive frog collection and is thus partially to blame for this story."

"Live frogs or stuffed!"

"Now THERE is a question you don't expect to see every day," says the witty fantasist. "Or any day, for that matter."

Hats off to Walter and his collection of objets d'frog for inspiring this story that reminds us that boys will be boys and frogs will be frogs.

THE BETROTHAL RECEPTION was going swimmingly until the princess started spouting frogs. The attack came with no warning, at precisely the critical moment in the ceremonies when the archbishop called upon the royal lady to declare her freewill consent to the marriage. Princess Eudosia blushed prettily, gave her barbarian groom-to-be a languishing look from beneath plush black lashes, smiled, and said, "I swear by all holy that I enter into this union willingly."

Her words emerged half-smothered by a stream of brown and green froglings, most no bigger than a child's littlest finger (though one or two did top the scales at the mass of an apricot). The crowd gasped,

the archbishop staggered back, the princess stared and swooned, her silver-powdered wig lurching to an awkward angle as she fell, and even Prince Feodor of the Frozen Wastes, who had once saved his father's entire kingdom by slaying an ice-dragon singlehanded, went pale. Only the princess's younger brother, Prince Goffredo, seemed pleased by this turn of events. He snatched a golden goblet from the waiting banquet table and flung himself forward with an unregal whoop, obviously bent on scooping up as many of the fugitive frogs as possible.

The festivities went to pot in short order: Prince Feodor and his entourage retired to their chambers in confusion, shedding wisps of sable and ermine in their wake; the archbishop alternately thundered and mumbled about the social and ecclesiastical irregularities which the princess's amphibious outburst had occasioned; the nobility buzzed and chattered amongst themselves, sucking every bit of sweetness from this toothsome newborn scandal; the servants shrieked and fled or stood their ground and giggled. To cap it all, in the heat of the hunt Prince Goffredo misjudged his distance and stepped squarely onto one of the frogs, which squished beneath his heel and sent him skidding across the marble floor into the backside of the Lord Chancellor, who promptly fell into a minor apoplexy and had to be given salts.

From her proper place upon the throne of her forefathers, Queen Annunziata sat observing all, frozen into the deathly stillness of a cobra contemplating its next strike. Her lily-white hands, frosted with diamonds, clutched the folds of her blue satin gown with a falcon's grip. Face aflame, she thrust herself to her feet and roared, "Be quiet, all of you! You act as though my daughter spewed up those hideous creatures on purpose! Are you too blind to know an evil spell when you see one? I should have your heads removed from your shoulders for such insolence! By God, I will!"

"Mercy, Your Majesty!" the Archbishop cried, his hand rising to shield his throat from the threat of the executioner's axe. "I never meant to imply --"

"Begone! Out of my sight! You useless boobies, clear this hall now!" The queen snatched up the orb of state and flung it at the heads of the assembled nobility, scattering them like chickens. "Convey the princess to her rooms and see to her comfort. Summon my physicians and my wizard to minister to her. Seal up the palace, that the agent of this perfidious attack may not escape my just and terrible vengeance. And for the love of heaven, Freddie, put down those frogs!"

"But Mummy --" Prince Goffredo began.

"Not another word. Ugh! Horrid, slimy, pop-eyed things. I don't see how you can bear to touch them. Well?" (This last word was addressed to the gorgeously appareled crowd still milling about in the grand salon. I "What are you waiting for? Individual death sentences? That can be arranged.")

Some queens owned reputations for beauty, some for grace, some for the fineness of their needlework. Queen Annunziata's reputation was based solely on the ferocity of her temper and the ghastly fates that had befallen those rash enough to dally in her presence when the fury took her. The prince's governess whisked him away, the princess's ladies-in-waiting waited not, but bore her to her chambers posthaste, leaving her wig behind, and the rest of the hall emptied itself in record time, until only the queen herself and one other person remained.

"My dear?" A mild voice from the second, lesser throne echoed strangely among the crystal chandeliers illuminating the deserted room. "My dear, surely you didn't mean those awful things you said?"

The queen, still breathing hard from her recent eruption, turned slowly to face her beloved consort, King Verran. He was a small man, as delicately made as the queen was strapping, with large, tawny eyes and a wide, expressive mouth that was presently downturned and quivering.

"About the death sentences?" she asked. "I most certainly --"

"No; about the frogs."

"Oh!" The queen's face melted from the stony mask of rage to the tender expression of a lovesick maiden. She flung herself at her husband's feet and clasped his knobby knees. "Forgive me, my beloved, I forgot. You know I never felt that way about you."

King Verran smiled faintly and stroked his wife's cheek. "Of course not, my love; I know. But it does still hurt to hear you speak so of my people."

The queen's contrition vanished like a snuffed flame. "They are not your people," she maintained. "They never were. You know the story as well as any man: You were a prince who was bewitched into frog shape until my kiss freed you, allowing you to resume your proper form."

"Now, now, Nuni," Verran said, invoking the pet name that no man since her father had ever dared use. "Aren't we both a little old for fairy tales?"

Annunziata pressed her lips together until her mouth resembled his. "It's not a fairy tale; it's what really happened! More or less. In all the years of our marriage, has even one of my subjects ever claimed that wasn't the way of it?"

"Yes," said Verran. "Me."

"Faugh! Twenty years, Verran; twenty long years and two children and still you cling to that untenable delusion! Can't you let it die?"

The king's face fell. "Precious lady, how can you still hold fast to a lie, even one of your own making? How, especially now? The day I have so long dreaded is upon us. No delusion, however soothing, can prevent it. Our darling daughter's affliction is but the harbinger of worse to come."

"Stuff and nonsense. Much as I love you, I refuse to cosset your fancies. Next thing you know, all of the old rumors will be flying through the palace again, and then what? It wasn't so bad the first time, after we were newly wed, but now? The children will hear. Worse, Prince Feodor and his party will get wind of it, and they're barbarians: They'll believe anything. If they believe this, they'll pull out of the marriage, which means an end to the alliance, which means our borders will be left as ill-protected as before. These warriors of the Frozen Wastes delight in mayhem and slaughter. They imagine that to die sword-in-hand -- even in a foolish fight -- assures them a place in heaven. They're not just expendable, they're champing at the bit to be expended; perfect border guards! Prince Feodor's bride-price for our daughter includes three legions of his finest men-at-arms for me to deploy as I like. I'm not going to let anything spoil that."

"Not even the truth?" King Verran asked softly.

"They were flowers." The queen spoke as though her husband had not said a word. "Princess Eudisia was so overwhelmed with joy at the thought of wedding Prince Feodor that when the moment came to give her consent to the marriage, her words emerged as flowers. Everyone saw it; we have a multitude of witnesses. We may also have one or two traitors who will swear they saw frogs spring from our child's lips, but we know how to deal with traitors. Yes, that's it: Flowers." She seized her husband by the arm and hauled him away to begin placing her version of the day's events in the proper ears and on the proper tongues.

The wedding day of Princess Eudisia dawned clear and warm, splendid May weather. The princess herself looked even more ravishing than the dawn, a vision in white silk shot with silver, swaths of pink tulle festooning the wide panniers supporting her skirt. With her towering wig of ice-blue hair curiously interwoven with strands of priceless pearls she seemed like an exquisite porcelain doll. (Although one catty duchess remarked that Eudisia more nearly resembled a dinner bell, and that it was a lucky thing that the last giant in her mother's kingdom had perished three generations ago, else he might have picked her up by the neck and shaken her, just to hear her chime.)

The ceremony was to take place in the great cathedral whose rosy stone towers needled the air at the foot of the mountain where the royal palace perched. For a week or more the city streets had bubbled and seethed with a froth of humanity in a hurry: Craftsmen, merchants, cooks, and all the rest of the canny suckerfish that swam in the shadow of the wedding's dignified progress. Seamstresses and their assistants scurried from one aristocratic townhouse to another, butlers fought duels before the doors of a dozen vintners in order to lay claim to the finest wines for their masters' tables, precious cartloads of sugar intended for cakes and sweetmeats were hijacked from the queen's highway, under the very noses of well-bribed guards, and a man could name his own price for marzipan.

Throughout it all, the princess remained shut up in her rooms, her lips tightly sealed. It was no use speaking to her politely, requesting as little as a single word: She was mum, and mum she stayed. Her ladies-in-waiting shrugged off her obstinate silence and resolved to make the best of this unanticipated holiday from Eudisia's former nonstop stream of commands and complaints. Prince Goffredo took full advantage of his sister's self-imposed reticence and haunted her chambers, calling her all sorts of names, until she dealt with the problem by flinging shoes at his head.

By the wedding morn she was quite out of shoes. The prince was nimble, and managed to snatch each missile from midair, spiriting them away in twos and threes. The ladies-in-waiting discovered the end result of this fraternal squabble when they went to the princess's wardrobe and found it empty of all footwear save a single silver slipper, half of the bridal shoes.

Clearly this was an emergency, and after a furious wrangle concerning who should be the unlucky woman sent to fetch the queen, Annunziata was notified. She burst into her daughter's suite still in her negligee, white-streaked auburn tresses tumbled any which way about her shoulders.

"What's all this?" she demanded, sweeping down upon her daughter. The ladies-in-waiting scattered to the four quarters, leaving mother and child alone. "Is it true? You've not said a single word since the betrothal? Not one? Not to a soul?"

Eudisia nodded and rubbed one silk-stockinged foot against the other, a nervous habit left over from a stressful childhood. The unwonted friction caused the fragile fabric to tear, sending a ladder running up the princess's left leg from ankle to knee. Healthy pink flesh showed through the snowy silk like a scar. Eudisia bowed her head and would not meet her mother's eyes.

"Ridiculous," Annunziata spat. "You're afraid of the fro -- of the flowers falling from your mouth again, aren't you?" Once more the princess nodded. "Of all things! You're as bad as your father when it comes to foolish fancies. Where is your backbone?"

Eudisia shrugged. This reply did not satisfy her mother at all. "My daughter, a coward. Who would have thought it possible? Worse than that, an uncounseled coward. Think, girl!" The queen's hand seized Eudisia's little bonbon of a chin and forced her to look up from her lap. "If you don't speak now, when you are safe in the privacy of your own rooms, how can you tell whether or not the spell is still upon you?"

You can't. And in that case, how were you planning to deal with the wedding? You must speak then, to make your vows; there's no escaping it."

Eudisia jerked her chin free of Annunziata's grasp, then reached for the crayon and the dainty, brocade-covered notebook resting on the taboret by her chair. Since the initiation of her silence she had relied upon the written word to express any desires too complex for simple gestures to communicate. Although her ladies-in-waiting did their discreet best to purloin the notebook, lest the bad old days of nonstop royal whim return, the princess always managed to come up with a fresh one.

Now Eudisia set point to paper and wrote: Can't we tell the archbishop that I have laryngitis?

"We could," her mother replied. "And then he would order the wedding postponed until your recovery. My child, the law is clear, and since it is church law, it binds us all: No one may be wed until witnesses have heard consent voluntarily given."

What about when mutes marry? Eudisia scribbled.

"I doubt I could find two people in all my lands stupid enough to believe you have suddenly become a mute. Even so, have you forgotten the stipulations governing your acceptance as Prince Feodor's bride? I doubt it. You went through enough inspections at the hands of countless physicians and midwives before the contract was signed; by now the terms must be embroidered on your brain: None may rule nor wed the ruler of the Frozen Wastes unless unflawed, sound in both mind and body. Claim muteness and kiss your prince good-bye!"

Eudisia frowned and wrote furiously: And I suppose that spewing frogs doesn't count as a physical flaw?

The queen looked grim. "None of your backchat, my girl; we're both on the same side in this battle. Even the barbarians of the Frozen Wastes know an evil enchantment when they see one. Now hark: You're going to go to your wedding and you will give the proper response to the archbishop when the time comes. At best we may discover that your former plight was a passing inconvenience, like a bad case of wind at a state dinner. At worst you will still find a frog or two at your feet when you've done speaking, but you'll also find a husband in your power. Burst into tears at once and throw yourself into Feodor's arms, imploring him, for his honor's sake, to hunt down and discover the fiend responsible for your affliction. For his honor's sake, mind! So public a plea, couched in such terms, will leave him unable to do less than undertake a quest on the spot."

For the first time since the debacle at her betrothal rites, the princess looked hopeful. Venturing a smile, she jotted: If my prince goes on quest, what about the honeymoon?

"You liquorish jade! How can you think of that at a time like this? Do you want to be my death? First we get Prince Feodor's men in place, preventing the invasion of my borders, then we worry about him invading yours." Annunziata gave the princess a box on the ear, but a mild one, so as not to set her wig a-tilt, and dragged her off in search of Prince Goffredo and her other shoe.

Everyone inside the cathedral who was in a position to view the high altar clearly said that the princess was obviously in love with her groom. There was no other way to explain the radiant look that overspread her face -- a passionate blush that invaded the bride's cheeks despite their fashionable layers of powder and paint -- as soon as she spoke the words I do consent to it. Countesses and duchesses alike dabbed at their eyes with wispy lace handkerchiefs to see Romance unveil its presence at what was previously thought a purely political match.

"This reminds me of her mother's wedding," the old Duchess of Belarminio wheezed into her daughter-in-law's ear. "I never again thought to see a highborn couple so besotted with one another as Annunziata and Verran."

"Charming," Lady Petronilla gritted in reply, her bitterness perhaps stemming from thoughts of her own marriage, an alliance of lucre, not love.

"Oh, hush," the duchess snapped, knowing full well whence her daughter-in-law's thoughts tended. She rapped Petronilla's knuckles with her folded fan. "It's not as if he wears the milkmaid's dress to bed every night."

On the altar dais, Queen Annunziata and Princess Eudisia exchanged glowing smiles. The wedding vows had been spoken and not so much as a tadpole had reared its ugly head. The queen was as relieved as her daughter, but her relief was tempered by a nagging doubt: Where had the frogs gone? Despite her assurances to Eudisia, Annunziata was too experienced in the ways of the world to accept this happy turn of events per se. Evil spells were not like a bad cold or a mild abrasion or an unwanted visit from unpleasant relatives: They did not simply go away if given enough time.

We're not out of the woods yet; I feel it in my bones, she thought, watching the exchange of rings and the bridal kiss. Something irksome this way comes.

Though her heart quaked, she kept her smile firmly in place and gratefully drank in the crowd's acclaim when the archbishop presented them with the newly wed couple. Beside her, King Verran tossed court protocol to the winds and embraced his wife with the same joy that had always attended all aspects of their married life.

"It's over," he whispered. "What a burden's been lifted from my shoulders! Oh, I just knew she would relent. After all, it's been some twenty years. Even she couldn't carry a grudge that long without feeling a little silly."

"My dearest, what are you talking about?" the queen asked. She quickly got an answer, though not from him.

A piercing scream rang out beneath the vaulted ceiling of the great cathedral. The priceless glass goblet which had been the archbishop's gift to the newlyweds, and which he had just offered to the princess as a loving cup, lay shattered at the foot of the altar steps, bleeding wine. In the midst of shards and splatters sat a frog.

"It was in the cup!" Princess Eudisia shrieked, pointing at the indifferent creature. "I raised it to my lips and came face-to-face with that -- that -- thing!"

"Fear not, wife." Prince Feodor patted his bride's cheek. "I have slain ice-dragon. This is nothing." Chuckling like a bear in a berry patch, he strode down the steps in a sweep of fur robes and stomped the frog to paste with one blow.

A dramatic crash of thunder shook the cathedral, followed by an anomalous ripple of ethereal music, invisible flutes and harps tuned to such a pitch as to cause the listeners to grit their teeth and shiver while cascades of oversweet notes caused sugar crystals to form in their ears. Prince Feodor retreated to the altar heights, nervously trying to shake away rivulets of daisy petals trickling from his sleeves. The multicolored shafts of sunlight coming in through the stained glass windows all turned the pale pink of

infant rosebuds and a gauze-winged being came drifting up the aisle through the syrupy light.

She was no taller than a child of six and she came richly attired in a gown with the puffed sleeves and gold brocade stomacher of a previous generation. The circlet of diamonds adorning her frosty hair might not have purchased all of Annunziata's kingdom, but it would have been sufficient as a down payment. Her glass-slipped feet hovered a royal yard above the white bridal carpet gracing the aisle as she sailed along. It seemed as though she would fly all the way up to the altar, but she stopped at the foot of the steps. In her right hand she held a wand -- also glass -- from whose tip leaped a fountain of blue sparkles. Its brilliance only served to emphasize the fact that she cast no shadow.

In her left hand she held a frog.

"Good heavens!" King Verran gasped. "It's my wife!"

"What?" The force of Annunziata's exclamation nearly extinguished the fairy's wand.

"You mean you never told her?" The fairy smirked.

Queen Annunziata maintained a private mental list of many things which she did not readily endure. People whose self-satisfaction outstripped her own rode high on it, and that included fairies. Whatever ugly fact lay behind her consort's incriminating utterance was immaterial: She would not be publicly humiliated by anyone, mortal or fey, truth be damned.

"You can wipe that smug look off your whey-face right now, you overblown dragonfly," she snapped. "I've known everything I need to know about my Verran for years, and one thing I am sure of is that he was never fool enough to wed one of the Fey! He was a frog when I found him, an enchanted prince suffering under the spell of a wicked witch. I freed him with a single kiss and we were wed at once: Any pig-boy or goose-girl for seven kingdoms around can tell you that. We were living happily ever after until some people I could mention had the bad manners to appear at our daughter's wedding uninvited. Where were you brought up? Under a mushroom?"

Before the fairy could answer, fresh inspiration struck the queen. "I see it all now: You're the one to blame for my darling Eudisia's unhappy affliction at her betrothal."

"You call it an affliction; we call it fair warnings" the fairy said with a malicious little smile. "Rather like a calling card."

Annunziata snorted. "You're probably also responsible for making dear Verran spew twaddle about having any other wife but me. Lies or frogs, you wand-wigglers can put anything in an innocent body's mouth, can't you? His wife! Oh, that's a rich one!" Her contempt could have leveled cities.

The royal wizard hurried to the foot of the altar steps, placing himself between the fairy and the bridal party. Even if his queen were too carried away by her own wrath to remember caution, he was not. He remembered how ill-advised it always proved for mortals to affront the powers of Faerie. A flourish of his ashwood staff and a luminous cage of warding spells dropped over himself and all members of the royal family. It melted into individual shells of shielding that clung like a second skin to those selected for protection.

His bread-and-butter thus secured, the wizard turned his attention to the fairy. "Puissant lady," he said, bowing low. "Vouchsafe us, I prithee, some cause for this, thy untoward accusations against our revered King Consort, Verran. Whence thine epithalamic pretensions?"

The fairy and the frog in her hand alike blinked slowly at the wizard, one face as empty of comprehension as the other.

"Wizards...", The queen sighed. "He means why are you standing floating there, lying like a tinker about your being Verran's wife?"

"His wife? I?" said the fairy. "As if I would breed with the likes of him! I am the lady Asphodel, highborn of the most pureblood house of Faerie, and I'd sooner mate with a maypole."

"Who wouldn't?" murmured the frog. A great gasp went up from the wedding guests to hear human speech issue from its mouth. "You mistook your consort's words, O queen: When he said 'It's my wife,' he meant me."

The frog leaped from the lady Asphodel's hand. No sooner did she touch the floor than she sprouted up to human size, a transformation accompanied by such an incandescent aura that Annunziata assumed (quite correctly) that the fairy had a hand in it somewhere.

"You knew this day would come, Verran," the frog said, turning her head so that the king's face was mirrored in one of her enormous eyes.

"I knew. Oh yes, I knew!" The king wrung his hands in sorrow. Turning to Annunziata he said, "I tried to tell you, my love. I did my best to warn you, but you refused to listen. You would insist on the story going the way you'd always heard it told."

"Naturally." Regardless of present circumstances, Annunziata retained her self-assurance. "Your version of the tale was too preposterous: A spell that's begun, not broken, by a kiss? A frog who turns into a prince when he never was a prince in the first place? Absurd!"

"The truth is often absurd," the frog said. "However, you may set your mind at ease on one point: Verran always was a prince; a frog-prince in the simplest sense of the word."

"My father ruled the Eldritch Marshes," Verran said miserably. "He was rather hot-tempered, for a cold-blooded creature, and once gave mortal insult to a dark enchantress when I was but a tad. She struck back at him by cursing me on my wedding day."

"Our wedding day," the giant she-frog prompted. "I remember it well. They were just serving the stuffed caterpillars at our nuptial feast when the wizardess appeared, awful in her robes of flame. She aimed her staff of power at my beloved and said, 'O lissome leaper, let your lips now bear the liability for thy royal sire's loose-tongued libels. Frog-prince, you'll tadpole-like transform to human shape if e'er your mouth meets that of any save your bride, nor shall you to your proper form return until your lips touch hers willingly once more.'" She took a deep breath, then added: "There was more, but it was fairly standard stuff, the general guidelines governing such malisons, and all in Latin."

"A quaint curse from a whimsical wizardess, wouldn't you say?" Annunziata remarked. She turned to her husband. "And did you know the full terms of her spell on that April mom when you hailed me from your lily pad, begging for a kiss? Did you deliberately mislead me, Verran?"

The king blushed. "As soon as she pronounced her dreadful malediction, the evil one snatched me up in a whirlwind and bore me far from my kingdom, dropping me on my head in your father's goldfish pond. The first thing I saw when the stars stopped spiraling before my eyes was you. I remember thinking how



lovely you looked. Your beauty drove every other thought from my mind, including the thought of how silly it was for a frog to fall in love at first sight with a human girl. All I knew was that I would die if you didn't kiss me. It was only afterward that my memories returned -- all of them." He gave the frog a sidewise look and bowed his head, abashed. "But I never lied to you, Annunziata. I told you I was a prince under a spell, and so I was."

"He's that and more," the giant frog added. "As my lawful spouse he's likewise co-regnant over my patrimony, the Realm Amphibious. For too long have I sat upon a widowed throne. At last I come to reclaim what is mine. Give me my husband and my king, O ill-counseled mortal woman! Surrender Verran or face the consequences!"

Queen Annunziata was unmoved by these amphibian histrionics. Cool as a mud puppy's posterior, she ambled slowly down from the high altar to where frog and fairy waited. She paced slowly around the giant frog, observing her from every angle before she said: "I first kissed Verran some twenty years ago, Madam Mugwort, and you've only now come to claim him?"

"My name is Esmeralda, Madam Mortal, and I am every inch as much a queen as you," the frog replied coldly.

"Not so many inches, though, when it comes down to cases," Annunziata said with a derisive grin.

Queen Esmeralda waved away her rival's sally with a flick of her webbed forefoot. "If I have tarried long in my arrival, it is because the Eldritch Marshes lie beyond the borders of the Frozen Wastes, and the Realm Amphibious even farther away than that. Do you know how long it takes to traverse so much territory when all you can do is hop?"

"If not for Queen Esmeralda's pact with my own liege lord and lady, she would even now still be on the road," the fairy Asphodel said. "But the royal froggy folk have entered into treaty with the lords of Faerie, they giving us their vassals to pull our walnut-shell coaches, we to fly their rulers wherever they desire. When she reached the borders of the Forest Precarious, on the northern edge of the Frozen Wastes, I intercepted her and brought her hither."

No one had noticed, what with all the to-do before the altar steps, but Prince Goffredo had slipped down the shadowed side of that marble stairway and now sidled up to the hovering fairy. He tugged gently at her butterfly wings and in his treble voice inquired, "If you can fly, why do you need to ride around in frog-drawn coaches?"

Asphodel scowled down at him, her fingers playing over the stem of her wand. Horrid energies of magic coiled around the slender shaft like snakes, ready to leap forth against the impertinent boy. They fizzled away only when she saw the residual glimmer of the wizard's warding spell still clinging to the prince. A false smile replaced her scowl and she replied, "It's protocol, child. You are too young to understand."

"That's what Mummy said when I asked her why Dodo has to marry Prince Feodor," Goffredo told her. "I told her that I didn't like him, that he looked like an old bear and smelled like a herd of goats, but Mummy told me she'd wed Dodo to a bear and a goat together if it were for the good of the kingdom."

A gasp arose from virtually every throat, a gasp followed by a silence deeper than the ocean's icy heart. The delegation from the Frozen Wastes bristled like a nest of porcupines.

"That will be quite enough out of you, Freddie," Queen Annunziata said crisply, her cheeks awash in blushes. She gave the crown prince a brisk slap on the royal throne-warmer to encourage a swift return

to his father's side.

"Prince Feodor, I assure you --" Verran began, his own cheeks colored with chagrin.

"Behold the payment for this, your vile adultery!" the fairy cried, swooping her wand in exultant figure-eights. "Thus always shall doom befall those who affront the allies of the Fey! This insult will bring war between this accursed realm and the Frozen Wastes, and Queen Esmeralda's slighted honor will be avenged."

She might have had more to say on the subject, but her words were blotted out by Prince Feodor's blustery laughter. The barbarian prince, the bare-handed slayer of the ice-dragon, stood doubled over, his burly body shaking with deep, full-chested guffaws.

"Might I inquire what you find so funny?" Asphodel asked, miffed in the extreme.

"You," Prince Feodor replied between diminishing eruptions of snickers. "You think Prince Goffredo says something we don't know, makes trouble, brings war? Princess knows why she marries me: Same reason I wed her! My father's Council makes the match, to get our kingdom seaport gateway to the southlands. For this, they too would wed me to a goat, to a bear --ha! Even to you! You think I throw away rich trade treaty so easy? You think we go to war for a frog?"

The fairy's ivory brow had taken on the aspect of a thunderhead. "Insolence! For this you will suffer, O prince. Nay --" A sly smile lit her eyes. " -- for this you suffer already."

Her wand described a circle in the air above her head. It sizzled with sparks of silver and gold, then filled with a milky curtain of mist. Everyone in the cathedral looked up as the mists parted to disclose a vision.

Prince Feodor and the men of the Frozen Wastes sucked breath between their teeth, transfixed by horror. The glimmering blue and orange onion domes, the opulent palaces, the frozen spiderweb bridges and broad promenades of their kingdom's sumptuous capital were drenched with frogs. Pleasure gardens yielded up bouquets of batrachians, women fled shrieking through the streets, swathed from scalp to soles in spring peepers. Warriors waded through the morass of squirming, croaking, leaping creatures, struggling to maintain their balance as their boots churned up a slick mass of crushed amphibians underfoot that was both dangerous and disgusting. Cleanup crews labored in vain, doing their best to scoop up the slippery invaders in kegs and barrels and bushel baskets. They loaded these into carts, but the plethora of frogs still on the loose spooked the oxen into a stampede, adding to the chaos in the streets.

"Enough!" Prince Feodor cried, averting his gaze just as a whole company of horsemen at the gallop skidded on a thick patch of squashed frogs and went crashing through the doors of the Ministry of Conquest. "Evil spirit, why this happens to my people?"

"Because your people have become her people," the lady Asphodel replied with a wicked little laugh. She pointed her wand at Queen Annunziata as the swirling visions overhead dispersed into clear air. "Those leaping legions you saw are the frog-queen's armies. Their progress is slow, but devastating. I advise you, O stealer of husbands, to reach a peaceable accord with Queen Esmeralda before they get here. You have seen what despoliation they cause in Prince Feodor's realm, only because the Frozen Wastes have the misfortune to lie across their line of march. What damage they effect there is offhand havoc, purely accidental. You don't want to see what they can do when they intend to destroy things."

Queen Annunziata glowered at the fairy. "You misjudge me, Madam," she replied. "Perhaps I do want

to test the mettle of my troops against yon hordes of hopping cannon fodder. Let them come and do their worst, for I vow by this gold betrothal ring which has adorned my finger lo, these twenty years, I shall not give up my husband! Now if you will excuse me, I have a wedding banquet to attend. You are not invited." So saying, she swept out through one of the doors behind the altar.

Most of the royal entourage followed her. The congregation of nobility took the cue to find their own escape routes, streaming from the cathedral with tongues wagging at a furious rate over all that they had witnessed. By the time the rose-and-lavender-scented dust settled, there was no one left before the high altar save the frog, the fairy, and the king.

"I'm very sorry, ladies," said King Verran, looking sheepish. "My Nuni does have a bit of a temper. She doesn't care for ultimatums; they provoke her."

The fairy's lip curled. "Your...Nuni would be better advised to swallow her pride before we swallow her kingdom. Or do you fancy the thought of seeing your adoptive people die of thirst and starvation?"

"She speaks the truth, Verran," Queen Esmeralda said. "Once my armies get here, they will overrun the crops, drink dry the rivers. Fields will yield no harvest but frogs, wells will be choked by squadrons of suicidal polliwogs."

"Your roads too will be rendered useless," Asphodel spoke up again. "Runner and rider both will find no footing. Commerce will cease. Villages will be isolated islands of humanity in a vast, surging, hopping, croaking sea."

"Oh dear," said Verran. He looked upset, but not sufficiently so to satisfy the fairy, who liked watching mortals squirm.

"Is that all you can say?" she demanded. "Oh dear"? Perhaps you imagine your royal wizard has a spell or two that may save the day?"

"Well, I did rather hope that he might," Verran replied. "He's a very good wizard."

"Put it from your mind," the fairy said imperiously. "Magic is mighty, but a cause steeped in justice shatters any spell hurled against it. The blood of Queen Esmeralda's kindred has been shed here this day, and by a member of Annunziata's royal house. It cries for vengeance!"

"Blood? What blood?" Verran asked, bewildered. Then it dawned on him: "Ohhhh." He glanced from the remnants of the shattered goblet at the foot of the altar steps, to the smear which Feodor had made of the unfortunate frogling within it, to Esmeralda. "One of your siblings, my dear?"

"My brother," Queen Esmeralda said, her voice breaking with emotion.

"Well, it's not as if you haven't got more to spare," Verran offered. "It's been twenty years, but as I recall it, our people don't give birth so much as we squirt out multitudes."

The fairy made an impatient sound. "What matters it whether he was only one of an innumerable jellied generation? He was still the queen's brother! The moral principle's the same, and his death gives us the excuse we need to wreak a terrible revenge upon this kingdom."

"Or not," said the frog queen. She gazed at Verran meaningly.

THE QUEEN was seated at the head of the banquet table, feting her daughter's marriage, when one of the archbishop's servants brought her Verran's letter of farewell. She read it, rose to her feet, crushed the closely written pages to her bosom, and flew into a passion of weeping.

This was most awkward. Those members of the nobility highborn enough to merit an invitation to the queen's own table didn't know what to do or even where to look. The princess Eudisia, seated at Annunziata's right hand, threw her arms around her mother's waist and attempted to pull her back into her chair, begging her to disclose the reason for her grief. Prince Goffredo was seated prudently apart from the other feasters at a table peopled by his playmates, little boys all as boisterous and unbiddable as they were blueblooded, but on seeing his mother's anguish he too ran over to embrace her and ask her why she cried.

Thus beset and petitioned, the queen stanchd her tears, shooed Freddie back to the children's table, and revealed the contents of the letter to all present. "Is there no end to the nobility of that man, nor to the perfidy of frogs and fairies?" she demanded. "To spare this kingdom from a plague of those insidious creatures, he sacrifices all! Oh Verran, Verran, my heart is broken! How am I to go on living without you?"

"Could abdicate," Prince Feodor suggested.

Annunziata's tears stopped short. She shot her son-in-law a nasty glare. "No one asked you," she said coldly. "And if I were fool enough to give up my throne, your wife wouldn't be the next in line to get it. Goffredo would be king."

Prince Feodor shrugged philosophically. Annunziata did a silent evaluation of the northern prince's ambition, strength, and ruthlessness versus Freddie's tender years and vulnerability, and made a mental note to double the guards on her boy-child's door.

"Whatever can you do, Mamma?" the princess Eudisia said, trying to be a comfort. "Pappa has left us of his own free will."

"A man does not know what his own free will is until a woman tells him," the queen replied. "You have much to learn, my daughter."

The royal wizard rose from his place at the high table, a linen napkin tucked beneath his chin, a half-eaten roast quail dripping honey-glaze in his hand. "Your Majesty, I hope you are not considering anything so rash as pursuit," he said. "The terms of King Verran's enchantment were clear: If he went willingly with his first wi --" A deadly look from the queen made him hastily revise his choice of words. "-- the recreant liar who falsely claimed to be his first wife, then by now he likewise willingly must have kissed her lips. You know what that means."

A shocked silence descended over the banquet hall as the full import of the wizard's words sank in. The guests at the queen's table had been present at the wedding! They knew as well as she what shape King Verran must be in if he had kissed Queen Esmeralda, but no one dared to say it aloud.

Whispers were another story.

"Your daddy's a frog." Young Count Providenzo took malicious delight in hissing the taunt in Prince Goffredo's ear.

"He is not!" Freddie jumped up, toppling his chair.

"He is so!" The moment for whispers was passed. The heads of the whole court turned as one to the disturbance at the children's table. Count Providenzo was only six, and his tutors had not yet schooled him in courtliness, tact, or how to keep one's head attached to one's shoulders when dealing with royalty. All that young Denny knew was that Freddie always beat him badly at marbles, mumblety-peg, and arm-wrestling, and here was his chance to get back some of his own.

"He was a frog, and now he's turned back into a frog, and he's going to be a frog forever, and he's run away with that big old ugly frog-lady to have lots and lots and lots of frog babies, so he doesn't need you to be his son anymore, and he's never coming back, and --"

The count's mother screeched and swooned, the count's father raced forward to sprawl at Annunziata's feet, gibbering for mercy on his son's behalf. Prince Goffredo leaped across the table with a grace and agility that Queen Esmeralda herself might have envied, and punched Count Providenzo in the nose. The other boys joined in the melee gleefully, and the banquet hall soon reverberated with the sounds of scuffling feet, flailing fists, breaking dishes and glassware, wailing children, and tearing silk-and-satin finery. By the time the queen's guardsmen and the boys' parents pulled them all apart, they were a raggedy, puff-eyed, bloodstained sight to see. Most of them were grinning like foxes.

Princess Eudisia put her head down in her arms and cried.

Queen Annunziata summoned the major domo of the palace to her side and snapped commands. He stuck his little silver gong of office and announced, "Dessert will be served in the Hall of Tapestries immediately, on pain of death." There was a swiftly ebbing rumble of moving feet and in short order the banquet hall stood empty save for the queen and her wizard, whom she had detained with her own hands.

"What is Your Majesty's pleasure?" the wizard inquired rather nervously.

"My pleasure would be to see that frog and her fairy minion thrown into the heart of a burning mountain with weasels attached to their eyes," Annunziata said. "But my will is somewhat more practical."

"And that is -- ?"

"I will have my husband back again, and I will accomplish this no matter what the cost."

The royal wizard was horrorstruck at the queen's adamant declaration. "Majesty, I must counsel prudence, and prudence in this case involves acceptance of the inevitable: You cannot hope to win against this foe by the use of main force. Your armies, even if merged with those of Prince Feodor, would soon be rendered impotent. Assuming that you could transport men and mounts through all the perils that bestrew the way between here and the Realm Amphibious, once there they would be utterly defeated. You saw what devastation the froggy horde achieved in Prince Feodor's capital merely by being there! We have arms and armor, iron-shod warhorses and gallant hearts, but the frog-queen commands numbers -- vast, infinite, mindless numbers that will surely --"

"Oh, shut up," said the queen.

The wizard pursed his mouth. "Very well, Your Majesty," he said. "Have it your way. I suppose that I cannot hope to understand your motivations, being as I am dedicated to celibacy in part-payment for my sorcerous powers. I have heard rumors about the more fleshly joys of connubiality, but I never suspected there were any pleasures of the bedroom worth sacrificing an entire army in a hopeless cause, leaving

your kingdom unprotected."

"You think it's sex behind this?" the queen asked sharply.

"Well --"

"Well, it's not. It's something far more important: It's pride; pride, power, and politics. Today my son confronts another child's teasing over his father's form and fate and it results in a minor tussle, but what of tomorrow? What of when Freddie is king? A monarch's authority must show no chinks, it must stand absolute and inviolable. I will not rest peacefully in the tomb if there is the slightest chance some jumped-up aristo might one day dispute my son's supremacy because his father is a frog."

"But King Verran always was a frog!" The wizard protested with the desperate urgency of one who knows at heart that he protests in vain.

"But if we bring him back among us in human form -- as we must -- and he lives out his days unchanged, then in time the people will forget he ever was associated with that hideous hop-thing. Appearances are ninetenths of the law." She smiled confidently.

"Your Majesty, I fear --" the wizard began.

"What? That he's kissed that green gargoyle? That he's a frog once more? Pish-tush! You can make a man of him again, can't you?"

"I -- I could not promise it. Sometimes a spell is like the cowpox: Once you're over it, it can't touch you a second time."

The queen's right eyebrow lifted dangerously. "Remind me how much I pay you, please," she said. "And why."

The wizard made haste to divert the course of the conversation. "Let us set our minds to first things first, Your Majesty. Whether King Verran is now in frog or human shape, the point is moot unless we can recapture him and bring him home. I have already explicated the problems such a task entails more than once, and I beg you to accede to my counsel that we --"

-- surrender?" The queen laughed. "Oh, my dear wizard, do you know me so very poorly? Surrender is a word solely applied to my enemies. And they will surrender, mark my words, and without my expending so much as a single fighting man in the process."

"Is that so?" The wizard inclined his head and stroked his beard, making himself over into the image of the Sage Counselor. "Your Majesty, I confess that I do not see how that is possible."

Queen Annunziata linked her arm through his. "With love, all things are possible," she told him. "And with magic, even more. Let us retire to your owl-haunted tower and I will describe my plan and what it will require of you. It's quite simple, really, and it's been done already."

"Well, that's a relief, at any rate," the wizard said. "I do prefer working with the classics. I was afraid you were going to ask me to develop an entirely new sort of spell in order to --"

"It's just never been done quite this way before."

FROM THE SMALLEST puddle of the Realm Amphibious to the farthest tussock of the Eldritch Marshes, frogs and tadpoles alike rejoiced to welcome home their rightful king. There was no peal of triumphal bells and no dancing in the streets -- bells and streets alike being inconsistent with the frogs' customary *modus vivendi* -- but the mire throbbled with festal croaking and most citizens could not take two hops without landing in a pile of slaughtered blowflies, the queen's own largesse wherewith her loyal subjects might make merry.

In the gorgeously boggy throneswamp, in the center of the royal pool, King Verran squatted on a golden lily pad with a tiny diadem perched upon his sleek green head, and looked more melancholy than a room full of unpaid public hangmen. Twenty years had passed since his initial transformation, twenty years in which a man's bones might age and the man himself might forget just how uncomfortable a frog's normal posture could be for the out-of-practice. Moreover, the Realm Amphibious was famous for the dampness of its clime. In his happy incumbency as Annunziata's king-consort, Verran had developed a distaste for humidity, for it never failed to infuse a spike of arthritic misery into his bones.

"I thought that when I became a frog I would not still retain so much of my humanity," he grumbled at Esmeralda, who occupied the twin lily pad to his left. "I'm achy and cramped and I can't get used to my eyes being on top of my head and the food does not agree with me at all!"

It was a tiresome variation on the same complaint that Verran had been voicing ever since he'd kissed Esmeralda's lips and broken the spell upon him. The frog-queen drummed the tips of one flipper on her lily pad and sighed. "Verran, my darling, as I keep telling you, you will grow used to it."

"Quite true," the lady Asphodel chimed in. Like the frog-queen, she had reverted to her normal size, namely the diminutive dimensions of a sparrow, and was lolling upon a couch of cattail fluff at the edge of the royal pool, gorging on whortleberries. "Adjustment comes with time." She bit into another whortleberry and smacked her lips. "Stop whining."

"A king does not whine," Queen Esmeralda reproved her winged guest. "It is unseemly." To Verran she said: "Never mind her, my love; you've been under a forgivable strain and have every right to be a little testy. This, too, shall pass. I'm sure that when you first underwent the change it took you a while to grow accustomed to the quirks of life in human form."

"It didn't." Verran snapped out the words with as little ceremony as his courtiers whipped flies from the air with their tongues.

"I am sure you must be mistaken," Queen Esmeralda insisted.

"Well, I'm not. It's been twenty years, but the memory remains undimmed by time: No sooner did Annunziata's lips leave mine and I stood before her manwise but I knew -- I knew, I tell you! -- that that was my proper shape."

"Oh Verran, will you utterly destroy me? Will you torment me with such horrid lies?" Queen Esmeralda moaned. She did so very softly, for the wrangling pair was surrounded by the full constituency of the royal entourage. Though frogs possessed no ears worthy of the name (as humans reckoned ears) they still managed to hear well enough and were just as fanatic rumor-mongers as any of Annunziata's court. Thus Queen Esmeralda voiced her most passionate recriminations in the softest tones, murmuring: "Will you persist in breaking my heart?"

"And what of mine?" Verran countered bitterly. "You tore me from my family, and for what? To salve your pride, nothing more. We were betrothed by our parents, Esmeralda: There was no natural affection

between us when we wed. We were little better than total strangers to one another when I was whisked away from our marriage feast. You had twenty years to work with: Don't tell me you couldn't have found yourself another husband!"

The frog-queen chose to sidestep confrontation. Instead, she assumed a look of maddening complacency and said: "My darling Verran, you will forget this awkward interlude in our marriage before you know it. Soon you will find it so natural to squat at the roots of reeds, to gobble mayflies, to hop, to croak, to love me, that you will look back upon your dreary human life as though it were an evil dream. And if not...it will be the worse for you, not me, because here you are and here you'll stay. You might as well make the best of it."

"No, thank you," Verran replied dully. "I chose this fate -- I admit it. It matters not that I chose it for Annunziata's sake, to save her kingdom, for it does not change the consequences. I am resigned to suffer them, but I never will enjoy them. Neither will I forget nor regret my former life, no, not for the world."

Queen Esmeralda eyed him coldly. "You did say former life?"

"Yes, though the same sentiments apply to my lost love. I will sire you as many tadpoles as you desire, Madam, but I will perform the act as a distasteful necessity."

"As long as you perform," the fairy put in, using a fingertip dipped in berry juice to trace suggestive drawings on the flagstones beside the pool. "The Grand Progress of the Fey begins with the next new moon, and our king and queen will insist upon froglings of royal blood to draw their chariot. It's a long Progress and it will require a lot of royal froglings, so I suggest the two of you get started. Now."

"Really." Queen Esmeralda would have blushed had she the ability. "I stand in your debt for favors received, my lady Asphodel, but my gratitude does not extend to bearing such -- such lewd remarks."

"Oh, let it go, Esmeralda," Verran said. "Drop the mask of wounded propriety back into the mud where you found it. You wanted me for purposes of procreation, so let's not stand on ceremony but breed. Say the word and I'll accommodate you. Well? Go on. Say it."

The frog-queen was fit to be tied. The air-sac beneath her chin swelled with rancor and her eyes rolled wildly in her head, but she said nothing. Vexation had rendered her speechless.

Verran took this as a fine opportunity to disgorge the spleen engendered by his enforced departure from Annunziata's arms. Grinning as only a frog can, he renewed the attack: "What are you waiting for? You aren't getting any younger, you know. I can sense your eggs growing more age-addled by the minute. Do you expect me to woo you ere I bed you? Think again. I said that I'll do what I must, but only upon direct command, though I can't imagine quite how you'll phrase it. 'Ready, aim, fire'? It gets the idea across, but it isn't very ladyli --"

"Silence!" The frog-queen's shout filled the throneswamp with the full freight of her ire, her frustration, and something entirely unexpected:

A boy.

He flew from her mouth riding the final sibilance of that solitary word. He was no bigger than a watermelon pip when he emerged, but he grew to a height and weight suitable to any healthy nine-year-old before his bare feet splashed into the waters of the royal pool. His cotton shirt and canvas breeches were so serviceable, so humble, and so plain that it took King Verran several heartbeats before



he recognized the lad before him.

"Freddie?" he exclaimed. "Freddie, my boy, is it you?"

"Hello, Daddy," Prince Goffredo replied, cheerfully waving at his befrogged father with the large glass jar in his hands.

Queen Esmeralda gasped. "But this is monstrous!" she cried. "Horrible! Untoward! What is the meaning of this unasked invasion? How dare you come into my presence without so much as a by-your-leave? You, the spawn of my worst enemy? Oh, now it will go ill with you, I vow. Guards? Guards? Seize this vile interloper at once and --"

"Shut up?" the lady Asphodel squealed, pounding tiny fists on her cattail couch. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, you fool! Can't you see what you're doing?"

The answer was obvious: No. For had the frog-queen not been in such a heightened and fragile emotional state she would have realized that as each additional word left her lips, it carried in its train another hormunculus which, like the pioneering Prince Goffredo, swiftly attained its natural size. The royal pool was soon chockablock with boys, none younger than six nor older than ten, all barefoot, all dressed to confront the muckiest conditions successfully, all of them armed with great and glittering glass jars.

They wasted little time, those smut-faced warriors. With hoots and howls of glee they pounced upon the trembling multitudes attending Queen Esmeralda and popped them into the jars by the fistful. They did not stay their hands even when it looked as if the glass containers could not hold another frog, but defied the laws of physics and stuffed in more. The results were disappointing as well as deadly to their prisoners, but the boys -- being boys -- paused only long enough to deplore what they had done, upend the goopy contents, and set about refilling their jars with fresh captives.

"My gracious," King Verran muttered, thoroughly bemused. "I do believe that's little Count Providenzo over there, and that's the Lord Beltranillo and his brother Avispo -- the one they're grooming for the Church -- and there's the Duke of Testamonte's little boy Clovio! I thought he was still abed with measles. Yoo-hoo, Clovio, are you feeling well enough to go barefoot in the wet like that?" The ducal heir stuck out his tongue at Verran and went back to scooping frogs.

It was a dreadful spectacle, one that might wring tears of sympathy from a tax-collector. Though Esmeralda at last had grasped the fact that her people's doom sprang from her own mouth, the harm was done. The frog-queen's lips were sealed, too late to save the situation, and her compulsory silence actually made things worse. The frogs were an obedient race, devoted to following the orders of their natural rulers to the point where they were unable to take any independent action at all. So they sat where they were and waited for their queen to tell them what to do. They were still waiting for a word or direction when the boys grabbed them and jammed them into the jars with the rest of their biddable brethren.

The frog-queen watched in horror until she could bear it no more. "Do something, Asphodel!" she screamed, every word only adding to her problems. "Turn them into fro -- I mean, into something?"

She might have saved her breath to cool her porridge. The fairy Asphodel was gone, squashed helplessly between layers of captive frogs in Prince Goffredo's personal jar. She pressed her tiny face to the glass, shrieking spells and maledictions, but the transparent surface glowed with the containment charm that Queen Annunziata's wizard had prudently cast over all the boys' collecting jars before sending them on their way.

Alas for Esmeralda, her courtiers, attendants, and guards were soon all gone, imprisoned, trampled, or mashed. The throneswamp was a desert. Some of the boys were holding up their brimming jars for the admiration of their playmates, some were engaged in heated debate over who had acquired the finest assortment of amphibians, while still others had taken themselves aside to set up impromptu frog-jumping contests which as often as not consisted of the boys jumping on the frogs.

"How can they be so cruel?" the frog-queen groaned, no longer caring that her question brought six fresh despoilers into her kingdom.

"They are not cruel so much as ignorant," Verran replied. "And it doesn't help that they are all children of the aristocracy. Their vision of the universe has but one center, namely their own desires. It isn't pleasant, but it's true. I have tried to correct this flaw in my own children, though judging by young Freddie's deportment...." He shook his head in disappointment over his son's excesses. "I suppose I'd best put a stop to this. Freddie! Freddie, stop that! Put down those frogs this instant!"

At the sound of his father's voice the prince hearkened, but he did not obey. "I'm sorry, Daddy," he said, "but Mummy told us not to stop until we received the -- the -- um, the uncorridual and complete surrender of the queen."

"That's unconditional, my boy," King Verran corrected. "How very like your dear mother." He sighed and turned to the prostrate Esmeralda. "Well?"

"What choice do I have?" the frog-queen sobbed as five more young blue-bloods shot from her mouth and set about harvesting the pitiful few froglings still at liberty. "I give up, I give in, I do hereby surrender and make utter submission to Queen Annunziata. There. Do you think that will satisfy the great she-beast?"

"So it would seem," Verran remarked. "Especially since not a single additional boy fell from your mouth once you cried for quarter -- though I do think that calling my dear Nuni a great she-beast was rude of you."

"Oh, go jump in the lake!" Queen Esmeralda snapped at him, then did so herself, leaping from her golden lily pad and plunging below the surface of the royal pool. Sometime during the silence that followed, Queen Annunziata's wizard engaged the long-distance spell to bring King Verran and all the marauding mannikins home.

There was qualified rejoicing throughout the realm when the conquering army returned.

"What do you mean, you can't change him back?" Queen Annunziata demanded, peering over the mage's shoulder while he worked. They were closeted in the topmost turret of the palace where the wizard had his lair and where the sounds of festival in the streets below sounded as faintly as a spider's clog-dance.

The wizard had King Verran seated in the slippery pan of a bronze tripod. From the instant he'd laid hands on Annunziata's consort he had been chanting words of power over him nonstop as well as showering him with pinches of this herb and that powdered mineral willy-nilly. So far the only change he had been able to produce was a fit of uncontrollable sneezing in the still-enfrogged king.

"Majesty, may I remind you that I foresaw this eventuality before we undertook our rescue mission?" he said, his temper frayed and raveling. "If spells could be cast on and off like cloaks it would lead to

shuttlecock sorcery, a single curse volleying back and forth between two wizards until the poor thing burst and scattered wild magic broadcast over all the land. It simply would not do."

"Bah! The worst incompetents always have the best excuses. Give him here." Without waiting for the wizard to comply, Queen Annunziata snatched her husband from the tripod and pressed him to her bosom. "I made a man of him once and I can do it again." She kissed the frog.

Nothing happened.

"Verran, are you trying to annoy me?" Annunziata asked.

"No, my love," said the frog.

"Then why don't you change back?"

"I would if I could. I don't like this any more than you do."

"I don't believe you! I think you're glad to be a frog! I think you never wanted to be human! I think you're just being stubborn and uncooperative because you don't love me anymore and you're using this as a way to wriggle out of our marriage!" Tears rolled down her cheeks, streaking her rice powder and rouge. "It's my age, isn't it? You want a younger wife, even if she is just a green girl."

King Verran sighed and laid both front flippers on Annunziata's still-firm breasts. "Beloved wife, listen to yourself: It is not that you no longer please me, but that I no longer please you. Not in this shape, at least." He pushed free of her hands and plopped to the floor of the wizard's chamber. He lolloped as far as the doorway, where he paused and proclaimed from the sill: "Farewell, Annunziata! Since the sight of me has grown foul to you, I vow that I will vanish from your kingdom and your ken. I leave you free to find a mate more pleasing to the eye, for it becomes plain to me that the eye alone is the seat of your affection. Be happy."

He turned to bound down the spiral stairs, but he had not taken a single hop before a great glass vessel dropped over him, sealing him within water-clear walls. Queen Annunziata swept him up, glass and all, and hugged him close. "Oh Verran, never leave me!" she exclaimed. "Be frog or man or monster, but be mine, and pardon me for my foolishness. Love is not love which something-something-something about making alterations. You are my king, now and always. I care nothing for what others might make of this. Woe to the wagging tongue that dares to scorn you for your shape where I can hear of it! It will soon lie still within a severed head. Say you will stay! Say you forgive me!"

The frog hauled himself out of the jar and, like some bold explorer, scaled the snowy vastness of Annunziata's impressive promontory. "Of course I will," he said, nestling down happily. "How can I do otherwise? I love you."

"And I you," she replied, "in this or any other form. And love is truly the greatest magic of them all." With that, she tucked her chin as low as it could go and kissed him once more.

This time, something did happen.

IT IS WRITTEN in the annals of Good King Goffredo's reign that the love between his parents conquered an evil spell laid upon his father's head not once, but twice. The records go on to say that soon after King Verran's second disenchantment, he found the strains of court life wearisome and trying, and so retired to the countryside, to enjoy the rest of his days in bucolic serenity, in a modest manor with

an ample lily pond on the premises. His adoring wife, the queen, remained behind to govern her realm only until young Goffredo was of an age and acuity to hold his throne unaided against all comers. Being famed for her virtue and love of seemliness, she spent these last few years of public service in demure seclusion, giving her orders unseen from a veiled throne. Once her son assumed the crown, she joined her husband in his rustic retreat. There they passed many a dulcet day, to the great edification of the local poets, and there in time they died.

So the annals say.

There is a post mortem footnote in the annals remarking in detail upon the miniature size of the coffins that enclosed them and brought them to the capital for interment. There is another concerning the dandiprat daintiness of their tombs.

There is a third concerning the doom of the ill-advised chronicler who inserted those parenthetical observations. (In this, as in many things, Good King Goffredo took after his revered mother.) It is most instructive of many things, but chiefly this:

A closed mouth gathers no frog.