

The Frog Princess

Polish Fairy Tales

Polish

Intermediate

16 min read

There was once a king, who was very old; but he had three grown-up sons. So he called them to him, and said:

“My dear sons, I am very old, and the cares of government press heavily upon me. I must therefore give them over to one of you. But as it is the law among us, that no unmarried prince may be King, I wish you all to get married, and whoever chooses the best wife shall be my successor.”

So they determined each to go a different way, and settled it thus. They went to the top of a very high tower, and each one at a given signal shot an arrow in a different direction to the others. Wherever their arrows fell they were to go in search of their future wives.

The eldest prince’s arrow fell on a palace in the city, where lived a senator, who had a beautiful daughter; so he went there, and married her.

The second prince’s arrow struck upon a country-house, where a very pretty young lady, the daughter of a rich gentleman, was sitting; so he went there, and proposed to her, and they were married.

But the youngest prince’s arrow shot through a green wood, and fell into a lake. He saw his arrow floating among the reeds, and a frog sitting thereon, looking fixedly at him.

But the marshy ground was so unsafe that he could not venture upon it; so he sat down in despair.

“What is the matter, prince?” asked the frog.

“What is the matter? Why, I cannot reach that arrow on which you are sitting.”

“Take me for your wife, and I will give it to you.”

“But how can you be my wife, little frog?”

“That is just what has got to be. You know that you shot your arrow from the tower, thinking that where it fell, you would find a loving wife; so you will have her in me.”

“You are very wise, I see, little frog. But tell me, how can I marry you, or introduce you to my father? And what will the world say?”

“Take me home with you, and let nobody see me. Tell them that you have married an Eastern lady, who must not be seen by any man, except her husband, nor even by another woman.”

The prince considered a little. The arrow had now floated to the margin of the lake; he took the arrow from the little frog, put her in his pocket, carried her home, and then went to bed, sighing very deeply.

Next morning the king was told that all his sons had got married; so he called them all together, and said:

“Well children, are you all pleased with your wives?”

“Very pleased indeed, father and king.”

“Well, we shall see who has chosen best. Let each of my daughters-in-law weave me a carpet by to-morrow, and the one whose carpet is the most beautiful shall be queen.”

The elder princes hastened at once to their ladies; but the youngest, when he reached home, was in despair.

“What is the matter, prince?” asked the frog.

“What is the matter? My father has ordered that each of his daughters-in-law shall weave him a carpet, and the one whose carpet proves the most beautiful shall be first in rank. My brothers’ wives are most likely working at their looms already. But you, little frog, although you can give back an arrow, and talk like a human being, will not be able to weave a carpet, as far as I can see.”

“Don’t be afraid,” she said; “go to sleep, and before you wake the carpet shall be ready.”

So he lay down, and went to sleep.

But the little frog stood on her hind-legs in the window and sang:

“Ye breezes that blow, ye winds that sigh, Come hither on airy wing; And all of you straight to my dwelling hie, And various treasures bring. Two fleeces I crave of the finest wool, And of the loveliest flowers a basketful; From the depths of the ocean bring sands of gold, And pearl-drops of lustre manifold; That so I may fashion a carpet bright, Adorned with fair flow’rets and gems of light, And weave it in one short day and night, When my true love’s hands must the treasure hold.”

There was a gentle murmur of the breezes, and from the sunbeams descended seven lovely maidens, who floated into the room, carrying baskets of various coloured wools, pearls, and flowers. They curtsied deeply to the little frog, and in a few minutes they wove a wonderfully beautiful carpet; then they curtsied again, and flew away.

Meanwhile the wives of the other princes bought the most beautifully coloured wools, and the best designs they could find, and worked hard at their looms all the next day.

Then all the princes came before the king, and spread out their carpets before him.

The king looked at the first and the second; but when he came to the third, he exclaimed:

“That’s the carpet for me! I give the first place to my youngest son’s wife; but there must be another trial yet.”

And he ordered that each of his daughters-in-law should make him a cake next day; and the husband of the one whose cake proved the best should be his successor.

The youngest prince came back to his frog wife; he looked very thoughtful, and sighed deeply.

“What is the matter, prince?” she asked.

“My father demands another proof of skill; and I am not so sure that we shall succeed so well as before; for how can you bake a cake?”

“Do not be afraid,” she said: “Lie down, and sleep; and when you wake you will be in a happier frame of mind.”

The prince went to sleep; and the frog sprang up to the window, and sang:

“Ye breezes that blow, ye winds that sigh, Come hither on airy wing; And all of you straight to my dwelling hie, These various gifts to bring. From the sunbeams bright Bring me heat and light; And soft waters distil From the pure flowing rill. From the flowers of the field The sweet odours they yield. From the wheatfields obtain Five full measures of grain, That so I may bake In the night-time a cake, For my true love’s sake.”

The winds began to rise, and the seven beautiful maidens floated down into the room, carrying baskets, with flour, water, sweetmeats, and all sorts of dainties. They curtsied to the little frog, and got the cake ready in a few minutes; curtsied again, and flew away.

The next day the three princes brought their cakes to the king. They were all very good; but when he tasted the one made by his youngest son’s wife, he exclaimed:

“That is the cake for me! light, floury, white, and delicious! I see, my son, you have made the best choice; but we must wait a little longer.”

The two elder sons went away much depressed; but the youngest greatly elated. When he reached home he took up his little frog, stroked and kissed her, and said:

“Tell me, my love, how it was that you, being only a little frog, could weave such a beautiful carpet, or make such a delicious cake?”

“Because, my prince, I am not what I seem. I am a princess, and my mother is the renowned Queen of Light, and a great enchantress. But she has many enemies, who, as they could not injure her, were always seeking to destroy me. To conceal me from them she was obliged to turn me into a frog; and for seven years I have been forced to stay in the marsh where you found me. But under this frog-skin I am really more beautiful than you can imagine; yet until my mother has conquered all her enemies I must wear this disguise; after that takes

place you shall see me as I really am.”

While they were talking two courtiers entered, with the king's orders to the young prince, to come to a banquet at the king's palace, and bring his wife with him, as his brothers were doing by theirs.

He knew not what to do; but the little frog said:

“Do not be afraid, my prince. Go to your father alone; and when he asks for me, it will begin to rain. You must then say that your wife will follow you; but she is now bathing in May-dew. When it lightens say that I am dressing; and when it thunders, that I am coming.”

The prince, trusting to her word, set out for the palace; and the frog jumped up to the window, and standing on her hind-legs, began to sing:

“Ye breezes that blow, ye winds that sigh, Come hither on airy wing; And all of you straight to my dwelling hie, These several gifts to bring. My beauty of yore; And my bright youth once more; All my dresses so fair; And my jewels so rare; And let me delight My dear love by the sight.”

Then the seven beautiful damsels, who were the handmaidens of the princess—when she lived with her mother—floated on the sunbeams into the room. They curtsied, walked three times round her, and pronounced some magical words.

Then the frog-skin fell off her, and she stood among them a miracle of beauty, and the lovely princess she was.

Meanwhile the prince, her husband, had arrived at the royal banquet-hall, which was already full of guests. The old king welcomed him warmly, and asked him:

“Where is your wife, my son?”

Then a light rain began to fall, and the prince said:

“She will not be long; she is now bathing herself in May-dew.”

Then came a flash of lightning, which illuminated all the palace, and he said:

“She is now adorning herself.”

But when it thundered, he ran to the door exclaiming:

“Here she is!”

And the lovely princess came in, seeming to bring the sunshine with her. They all stood amazed at her beauty. The king could not contain his delight; and she seemed to him all the more beautiful, because he thought her the very image of his long-deceased queen. The prince himself was no less astonished and overjoyed to find such loveliness in her, whom he had only as yet seen in the shape of a little frog.

“Tell me, my son,” said the king, “why you did not let me know what a fortunate choice you had made?”

The prince told him everything in a whisper; and the king said:

“Go home then, my son, at once, and pick up that frog-skin of hers; throw it in the fire, and come back here as fast as you can. Then she will have to remain just as she is now.”

The prince did as his father told him, went home, and threw the frog-skin into the fire, where it was at once consumed.

But things did not turn out as they expected; for the lovely princess, on coming home, sought for her frog-skin, and not finding it, began to cry bitterly. When the prince confessed the truth, she shrieked aloud, and taking out a green poppy-head, threw it at him. He went to sleep at once; but she sprang up to the window, sang her songs to the winds; upon which she was changed into a duck, and flew away.

The prince woke up in the morning, and grieved sadly, when he found his beautiful princess gone.

Then he got on horseback, and set out to find her, inquiring everywhere for the kingdom of the Queen of Light—his princess’s mother—to whom he supposed she must have fled.

He rode on for a very, very long time, till one day he came into a wide plain, all covered with poppies in full flower, the odour of which so overpowered him, that he could scarce keep upright in his saddle. Then he saw a queer little house, supported on four crooked legs. There was no door to the house; but knowing what he ought to do, he said:

“Little house, move On your crooked legs free; Turn your back to the wood, And your front door to me.”

The hut with the crooked legs made a creaking noise, and turned round, with its door towards the prince. He went straight in, and found an old fury, whose name was Jandza (pronounced Yen-jar), inside; she was spinning from a distaff, and singing.

“How are you, prince?” she said, “what brings you here?”

So the prince told her, and she said:

“You have done wisely to tell me the truth. I know your bride, the beautiful daughter of the Queen of Light; she flies to my house daily, in the shape of a duck, and this is where she sits. Hide yourself under the table, and watch your opportunity to lay hold of her. Hold her fast, whatever shapes she assumes; when she is tired she will turn into a spindle; you must then break the spindle in two, and you will find that which you are seeking.”

Presently the duck flew in, sat down beside the old fury, and began to preen her feathers with her beak. The prince seized her by the wing. The duck quacked, fluttered, and struggled to get loose. But seeing this was useless she changed herself into a pigeon, then into a hawk, and then into a serpent, which so frightened the prince, that he let her go; on which she became a duck again, quacked aloud, and flew out of the window.

The prince saw his mistake, and the old woman cried aloud:

“What have you done, you careless fellow! you have frightened her away from me for ever. But as she is your bride, I must find some other way to help you. Take this ball of thread, throw it before you, and wherever it goes follow after it; you will then come to my sister’s house, and she will tell you what to do next.”

So the prince went on day and night, following the ball of thread, till he came to another queer little house, like the first, to which he said the same rhyme, and going in, found the second old fury, and told her his story.

“Hide under the bench,” she exclaimed; “your bride is just coming in.”

The duck flew in, as before, and the prince caught her by the wing; she quacked, and tried to get away. Then she changed herself into a turkey, then into a dog, then into a cat, then into an eel, so that she slipped through his hands, and glided out of the window.

The prince was in despair; but the old woman gave him another ball of thread, and he again followed it, determining not to let the princess escape again so easily. So going on after the thread, as it kept unwinding,

he came to a funny little house, like the two first, and said:

“Little house, move On your crooked legs free; Turn your back to the wood, And your front door to me.”

The little house turned round, so that he could go in, and he found a third old fury inside; much older than her sisters, and having white hair. He told her his story, and begged for help.

“Why did you go against the wishes of your clever and sensible wife?” said the old woman. “You see she knew better than you what her frog-skin was good for; but you must needs be in such a hurry to display her beauty, to gain the world’s applause, that you have lost her; and she was forced to fly away from you.”

The prince hid himself under the bench: the duck flew in and sat at the old woman’s feet; on which he caught her by the wings.

She struggled hard; but she felt his strength was too great for her to resist; so she turned herself into a spindle at once. He broke it across his knee.... And lo! and behold! instead of the two halves of the spindle he held the hands of his beautiful princess, who looked at him lovingly with her beautiful eyes, and smiled sweetly.

And she promised him that she would always remain as she was then, for since her mother’s enemies were all dead she had nothing to fear.

They embraced each other, and went out of the old fury’s hut. Then the princess spoke some magical spells; and in the twinkling of an eye there appeared a wonderful bridge, reaching from where they stood hundreds of miles, up to the very gallery of the palace, belonging to the prince’s father. It was all made of crystal, with golden hand-rails, and diamond bosses upon them.

The princess spoke some more magical words, and a golden coach appeared, drawn by eight horses, and a coachman, and two tall footmen, all in golden liveries. And there were four outriders on splendid horses, riding by the side of the coach, and an equerry, riding in front, and blowing a brazen trumpet. And a long procession of followers, in splendid dresses, came after them.

Then the prince and princess got into the golden coach, and drove away, thus accompanied, along the crystal bridge, till they reached home, when the old king came out to meet them, and embraced them both tenderly. He appointed the prince his successor; and such magnificent festivities were held on the occasion, as never were seen or heard of before.

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