

Just Another Princess-Frog Tale

Once upon a time, there were two princesses, Esther and Miranda, who were sisters and the daughters of a king as it seems princesses in fairy tales usually are. And, as is often true, the king wished to marry off his princess daughters but found no suitable candidates for their hands among princes in nearby kingdoms. At ages twenty and nineteen, the princesses were getting a bit long in the tooth for unmarried young ladies of that day; however, they were in no hurry to marry because they had dallied a bit with some of the local louts — er, sons of noblemen — and had found them to be lacking in the qualities a princess desires in a man as a life companion. In fact, most of these men lacked even the qualities these princesses liked in an overnight companion.

Luckily for Esther and Miranda, on the sixteenth birthday of each, their mother, the queen, had taken them to visit *Ye Olde Magickal Pleasure House for Noble Ladies*, where each obtained an enchanted frog. Queen Esmeralda, you see, had experienced half a lifetime with her kingly husband who showed more enthusiasm for hunting stags and boars, watching knights engage in, well, whatever knights engage in, and, truth be known, occasionally expressing his admiration for ankles, bosoms, and other parts of ladies of the court than in providing the love needed by his queenly wife.

In tales, it's the norm that the princess must kiss the frog to turn it into a prince, but, knowing that it's much nicer to kiss the prince after the transformation, Esther's and Miranda's mother got them frogs that had enchantments that allowed magical phrases to turn them into handsome princes and, after at least an hour that could be spent as the princess owner wished, turn them back again into frogs when the princes were no longer needed. They spent most of their lives as frogs because these frog-princes were not the brightest lights in the palace and showed better at night than in the light of day. It's also much easier to catch a few flies for a frog's diet than to prepare the steaks, potatoes, and apple pies needed to maintain a healthy prince, and it must be said that neither Esther nor Miranda were into the culinary arts in a major fashion. While it's true that the palace had cooks and maids in abundance, Esther's and Miranda's mother never allowed them to order the household help around or to abuse them in any way, and there are those who say that there's no fun in being a princess with that kind of mother.

One might conclude from the princesses' failure to be wed at their advanced ages that they were ugly or had some mental defect; however, they were truly beautiful and intelligent, for everyone in this kingdom — at least, everyone who *was* anyone — was good looking, at least an eight on a scale of ten. This was before Wechsler discovered the IQ test, but, had its discovery occurred earlier, the princesses would have scored very high on that scale as well. Of course, that in itself might have been considered a mental defect because most of the citizens of this kingdom, although handsome or beautiful, were not overly bright and were suspicious of intelligence.

Usually, in these tales of the handsome prince finding his true princess, the prince, often disguised as a beggar or troubadour, comes to woo the princess at her father's court, but these princesses were having none of that and informed their father that, if anyone was to enjoy the

travel to foreign countries, they intended to be the ones doing it. They also knew that most of the princes they had met to that point were too stupid to find their way to the correct kingdom even if they were seeking a princess and concluded that most other princes seeking brides would probably be similar in intelligence; thus, as agreed upon by their father and the king of a faraway land, Esther and Miranda set out with a large accompanying party for that kingdom, Groswel, to meet two of the several princes who were sons of the ruler of Groswel.

As did everyone else in the party, the princesses slept out under the stars on clear nights when they camped, and, although one or the other of them sometimes muttered an oath when a sharp rock jabbed her as she turned over, neither would have been bothered by a pea or even pea-sized gravel under the thin pad she used for bedding. They were more concerned with the chill of the night which might have been — but, sad to say, wasn't — eased if each had cuddled for warmth with one of the young grooms in the party.

After a couple of days of boring travel riding in the royal carriage, Esther and Miranda had suffered enough and decided they were far enough from the queen to disregard her admonition on giving orders and took action at their next rest stop.

“Swap,” Esther and Miranda each told a groom. “Give me your breeches, vest, and cap, and take my skirt, petticoats, and frilly hat.” Although the two grooms were embarrassed, they thought they had no choice but to obey their princesses and began stripping off the garments. The princesses started to strip also, and their maids held up a large cloth to shield them from view as they changed clothes, and, being brought up well by their royal parents, the young ladies were too polite to point out to the maids that this also shielded the grooms from their view.

Soon Esther and Miranda were riding a couple of the horses and wearing the grooms' breeches, while the grooms, dressed in the princesses' skirts, rode in the carriage with two of the princesses' maids. Everyone considered it a fair trade because the princesses enjoyed their freedom, and, although the grooms were embarrassed at first and were teased mercilessly by the maids, they soon found that the maids liked to kiss young lads, and, while the teasing didn't stop, the embarrassment did.

When they neared the next town, Esther and Miranda had to re-don their skirts and enter town in the carriage while they let the grooms have the horses to ride again. The princesses each had a room in the town's only inn, and the rest of the royal party settled down in the manner that parties accompanying royalty normally settle down. After their dinner, Esther and Miranda dismissed their maids for the night because they wanted to see if the magical enchantment on their frogs still operated this far from home. After their dismissal, the maids would have preferred to find their groom companions and engage in more kissing and other games, but each had a husband among the party and, reluctantly, chose being a good wife over having fun.

Miranda had a bit, well, more than a bit, of the imp in her and suggested to her older sister that they swap frogs and magical phrases for the night, and Esther, not minding a bit of naughtiness herself, agreed to her sister's plan. When the magical words were said later, the handsome

princes appeared, but neither even seemed to know that he was with the wrong princess, and subsequent events that night proved that their training or conditioning was very similar. In defense of the frog-princes, one must realize that not much intelligence can be crammed into a frog's head and must also consider that most of the intelligence that had been packed in was needed for the programming to perform tasks the sisters deemed essential. Nevertheless, the sisters had no complaints, and, when morning came, each gave back her guest frog to the rightful owner and also treated the other to a wicked smile, with Miranda's being a bit more wicked, which didn't arise from her having had more pleasure the previous night as Esther was to discover later when the remainder of Miranda's mischief came to light.

Once outside the town, the princesses resumed their roles as grooms and found that the real grooms had arranged to swap off with their friends each day so that no one would have to spend too much time riding in the carriage and exchanging kisses with the maids. They learned that the carriage, which must stay on the road, would soon have to pass through a rocky area where travelers were often attacked by bandits; thus, the captain in charge sent a scouting party forward, and, overriding the captain's orders, the princesses became members of that scouting party; however, it shouldn't be thought that the princesses forced their way into the scouting party at a risk to the rest of the party or even merely for the sake of an adventure, although the desire for an adventure certainly spurred them on. They pointed out to the captain that Esther was the best bowman — bowwoman? — in the group, and everyone at court except the king, who was always the last to learn the news, knew that Miranda was by far the best knife fighter in this little contingent and among the best half dozen in the entire kingdom. One should be aware that these young ladies didn't merely play with dolls as they were growing up! The captain didn't like it but decided he could start life over on some distant shore if a dire fate befell one of the princesses.

The scouting party indeed found bandits waiting to attack. Behind rocks at one of the higher points, the eagle-eyed among the scouts could see a bit of a man's body and, if they were even sharper-eyed, part of a bow sticking up, and almost all could also see other men creeping closer to them. All the king's archers expressed doubt about hitting the small target offered by the bandit bowman; however, Esther didn't doubt her ability, although she thought it might take two shots. She estimated the range, the difference in altitude between the two locations, and even the speed of the slight breeze. Then, she let fly with an arrow, and the first hit home, causing the bandit to leap up, exposing himself, and her second arrow went into his heart two seconds later.

While Esther and a couple of the bowmen stood back to provide defense in case there were other archers in the bandit party, the rest of the scouts went into action and rushed the bandits before they could run away. Miranda picked the one who appeared to be the most worthy foe and approached him with her knife held low, and when everyone else on both sides stood watching, all knew this man was apparently the bandit leader. After a couple of passes, Miranda knew her foe wasn't really very good with a knife and offered to let him live if he put down his weapon and surrendered; however, from her high voice, the bandit made a guess that she was a very young boy and attacked her immediately. She played with him for a moment, letting him make a couple of passes at her and evading him easily; then, on the next pass, she sliced his throat and

watched him drop. These princesses were not ones to faint and let some stupid, handsome prince rescue the damsel in distress. After their leader's death, all the other bandits surrendered.

When it was over, the captain asked Miranda, "Princess Miranda, what if your father knew you did that? Or that I let you do that?"

"Captain, what my father doesn't know doesn't hurt me, you, or him. Let's not let him know. That was the first man I ever killed, and, while I had no joy in killing him, I feel no remorse either. Based on my knowledge of the princes I have met so far, I suspect Esther or I may have to be the real ruler in our kingdom regardless of who wears the crown, and a ruler's decision for the good of the kingdom may cost lives, her own included. I accept that." The captain knew that neither princess would ever ask men to shed their blood for her honor while she hid from the fight to await her champion, and he decided at that moment that he would remain in the kingdom's army and serve if either Esther or Miranda sat on the throne. Although it's chronicled in another chapter of the kingdom's history, one may skip ahead to learn that, several years later, this man became general of all the kingdom's army.

After the skirmish, they traveled on and, without further incident, reached Groswel, the kingdom that was their destination. Their party was met at the border by a delegation that included the princesses' target princes and their younger brother, Harry, and, although Igor and Dillon, the older brothers, twenty-one and nineteen, were handsome dullards, Harry, seventeen, was as bright as the princesses. Esther and Miranda had resigned themselves to riding in the carriage from the border to the capital and were delighted that Harry often rode alongside and talked and joked with them.

"You've noticed that there is a bit of difference between me and my brothers, and it's not just these two but my other brothers too. I suspect that my mother, bless her departed soul, dallied with a stable-cleaner to produce me," he told them. His joke could be taken at two levels, and he could always claim he was saying he was less worthy than his brothers because the men who cleaned stables were usually looked down upon in that kingdom and most others; however, the princesses laughed along with Harry because they took his words to mean that even a stable-cleaner was more intelligent than his brothers and, by implication, the king.

Although he was young, Harry had often gone along with his older brothers to take care of details when they visited other kingdoms to interview for princess brides, and it must be admitted that some of the details he took care of were the brothers' intended brides. So far, neither of the princes had found prospective brides or brides' fathers stupid enough to accept them, but that didn't matter to Harry because, to that point, none of the princesses had been women he wanted about him for the long term; however, as he rode along beside the carriage and talked with Esther and Miranda, he knew that the situation had changed. He knew happy-ever-aftering didn't apply to real life, and, even if it did, at seventeen, Harry hadn't been ready to settle down with one woman; however, in spite of all his previous doubt about settling, he could see doing so with either of these princesses, and, of the two, he favored Miranda, perhaps because her mind was

more wicked than that of Esther, maybe even a match to his own. For the first time in his life, Harry was smitten and, for the first time in his life, he was uncertain how to handle the situation.

At the palace, the princesses were given a wing for their party far from the princely brothers' sleeping area; however, young Harry was trusted by the king to carry messages between the princes and their intended partners, and he wondered just what mischief he could get away with. He was not overly shocked when, first, Esther and, then, Miranda hinted that they would like to have his brothers visit their rooms for interviews without the formality of a court party; however, he was, perhaps, more than a bit disappointed that Miranda, at least, didn't ask to get to know him better.

Igor and Dillon could be led into almost anything, and, that night after everyone else had retired, Harry led Igor to Esther's room to meet her and, then, led Dillon to Miranda's room, after which he waited in the hall to keep watch and to be available if needed. Sweet Miranda gave Esther and Igor time to get comfortable and excused herself from Prince Dillon for a moment so that she could slip across the hall to Esther's door, where she said the magical phrase that transformed Esther's frog into a prince. Then, she returned, grinning wickedly, to her room and Dillon, while Harry, who watched her silently from a point in the hallway where she couldn't see him, wondered at what she was doing.

When Esther saw her frog-prince appear after Miranda's speaking the magical phrase, she was not overly worried because, if Igor went along with it, she didn't mind getting acquainted with both princes at the same time and, if Igor didn't like it, she didn't really mind losing him and truly hoped her father didn't insist on her wedding him. What she didn't expect was what happened: the two princes began kissing each other and ignored her as if she were not even there. She had never known that her frog-prince was defective, and, after a moment, she concluded that he wasn't really defective because Igor certainly didn't appear to consider him to be. After watching the two princes for a few moments, she quietly left her room and started for Miranda's door, but Harry, waiting in the hall, stopped her.

"What's wrong?" he questioned her. Without answering, she went back and opened her door to show him the sight of Igor and the frog-prince, who were so bewitched with each other that they didn't even notice that they were being watched. "How . . .?" Harry asked.

Esther knew what he meant. "My enchanted frog-prince. Miranda activated him to play a trick on me as Igor and I, uh, interviewed. I didn't know he was defective."

Harry said the same thing she had thought a few moments before, "Igor doesn't seem to find him defective." They laughed together as they closed the door and went across to Miranda's door.

"I've got lots of good use out of him, but I suppose no more. I should return the favor and activate Miranda's frog," she muttered, unaware that Miranda had already considered this possibility and had locked her frog in the closet.

“She has an enchanted frog-prince too?” Harry asked.

“Yep,” Esther replied in a royal manner. “And I won’t activate hers because I suppose we already have an abundance of princes.” When they knocked on her door, Miranda, who was preparing for bed, came to the door only partially dressed because she expected only Esther. She had believed there was about equal likelihood that Esther would enjoy both princes and appreciate the trick and that something would go wrong, bringing Esther to her door to complain about the trick, and she was prepared to tease Esther about either; however, when she opened the door, Esther pushed past her to enter the room, where Dillon sat, waiting patiently, and, although Harry was momentarily distracted by Miranda’s condition, he soon recovered his wits and entered also.

“Change of plans, Dillon,” he said, thinking rapidly. “Igor decided he doesn’t want to seek Princess Esther as a bride; so, as next-elder brother, you should interview her since she is older than her sister. As your junior, but next in line, I suppose I’ll have to replace Igor, and I should seek the, er, hand of the younger princess, Miranda.” Dillon accepted this without complaint, but Esther wasn’t certain that she was completely satisfied with this outcome; however Harry was soon rushing Miranda out of her room and leaving Esther there with Dillon. Harry paused to whisper in Esther’s ear, “Dillon is perfectly capable of being a prince; just don’t expect anything innovative from him.” Then they were gone, leaving her with Prince Dillon.

Next morning, Harry came to escort Dillon and Igor back to their wing of the palace, with Esther’s frog-prince going along with Igor, of course. When Harry returned with Miranda to Miranda’s room, which Esther was occupying, the three had a royal conference.

“There will be no wedding with Dillon,” Esther proclaimed. “For personality and intelligence, I might as well have been with my frog-prince, well, perhaps not my frog-prince, but your frog-prince, Miranda.”

“I will wed Harry,” Miranda said, “if we can get his father to approve his marrying before Igor and Dillon wed.”

“I’m not sure a prince can marry a frog in this kingdom,” Esther responded with a grin. “Before I step aside to let you precede me in marriage, I must interview your intended to know he is right for you.”

“I suppose that will be acceptable, and I’ll interview Prince Dillon so that I can confirm to our father that your refusal of his hand is the correct decision; however, Esther and Harry, this interview occurs once and once only. You should know, Harry, that I am expert in the use of a knife and can, if necessary, use it to remove certain princely bits and pieces that are of no value,” Miranda said.

The implied threat affected Harry only by causing him to be even more aroused by Miranda, but he wasn’t certain that he liked the part about her interviewing his brother Dillon. Finally, upon further consideration, he concluded that Dillon had such a lack of personality and such low

intelligence that he would make no favorable impression on her and would, thus, present no future problems. “It’s acceptable to me also,” he told them. And, so, it came to pass.

For Esther’s gift of her frog-prince and his magical phrase to Igor, Harry got his princely seal on a document assigning his claim to the crown to him, and a whisper to the king removed any desire to see Igor wed and siring little princes and princesses; however, before Miranda and Harry could wed, suitable partners had to be found for Dillon and Esther, who were their elders. Such partners were found; in fact, a partner was found for Esther over whom she was ecstatic, both day and night, and with whom she could inherit her father’s kingdom, and a partner was found for Dillon with whom he could live, not realizing that his queen ruled with the aid of the court secretary and that the little princes and princesses owed their brilliance to the court secretary, but those are other stories not to be confused with this tale.

Harry kept urging Miranda to ditch her frog-prince even though he knew logically that he should not worry because his intelligence was easily triple that of the frog-prince; however, he also knew fairy tales operate on a different basis of logic, and her frog-prince was very handsome, even more handsome than he. In some of the tales their tutors related to him and his brothers when they were children, the stupid prince got the girl, and, although he thought, perhaps, those tales were told only to make his brothers more confident, he didn’t like taking chances. Better to lose the frog. Finally, after teasing Harry without mercy by threatening to keep her enchanted frog forever so that she could activate him any time Harry wasn’t sufficiently attentive, Miranda relented before their wedding and gave the frog as a present to the daughter of a king who had tried to prevent that princess from eloping with a suitor by keeping her locked in a tower, where she was permitted visits only by other princesses. In reality, neither Harry nor Miranda would have seriously considered doing anything to drive the other away because each had kissed enough frogs, be they bullfrog, common toad, or human, to know that the current partner was many steps above a toad or even a frog in desirability as a companion. Anyhow, Miranda knew that her enchanted frog-prince didn’t age and that even he might be sufficiently aware to notice after a few years that she was no longer a young princess.

And, so, after they were wed, they lived happily — at least for the most part but not every minute of every day, suggesting that they didn’t live full-time in fairy-tale land; however, they had to work hard on the ever-after part because, even though they were completely devoted to each other, up until they met, neither Miranda nor Harry had intended for the ‘forsaking all others’ bit to apply to herself or himself. But apply that bit they did, and, as time passed, it became easier and easier. They parented a daughter and a son, both good-looking, as fairy-tale princesses and princes are supposed to be, and both highly intelligent, as fairy-tale princesses and princes often aren’t. It’s worth noting that Miranda never even had thoughts of using her artistic skills with a knife, as she had promised Harry if certain conditions arose, although she never lost her proficiency and personally taught its use as a weapon to army trainees. For his part, Harry inspected the grounds regularly for several years and noted there weren’t any frogs about the palace except for those in the lily pond until their daughter turned sixteen, when Miranda and Harry agreed that a handsome, stupid, and safe frog-prince would be better for the daughter in learning to kiss and so forth than would boys from the local nobility, most of whom were also

handsome and stupid but not safe. They agreed also that the son, who was expected to become ruler of the kingdom, must find his own princess, and they told him that, if he wanted their support and approval, this princess must be an intelligent, independent woman who could help him lead the kingdom. Privately, Harry gave further advice that, before he made her his princess, he should be sure she released any frogs she might possess.