

NANCE AND THE PUDDOK

Nanse set out as she had promised, for Ardnamurchan and the Well at the World's End, though it was more that she thought it was the right thing to do, than for the Queen her mother's sake. And wasn't she the proud one? She certainly was that, and away she went on her long dour journey past the peak of Schiehallion: over high hills and crags and across mosses and moors and peat hags and through mirk dark woods. She grew wabbitie and weary, footsore and hungry, but on she went, under the sun and stars and through the wind and rain, till beyond the farthest hill in the land of Ardnamurchan, she came to a tiny well of bubbling silver water, sheltered below green bracken and a rowan tree. Down below her, stretched out the blue western sea, and when she looked back the way she had come, there were the mountains, ben behind ben behind ben, it seemed forever.

Nanse was greatly relieved that she appeared to have reached the Well of True Water at long last. She had greatly regretted ever having undertaken such a difficult journey.

"Am I not tired," she said to herself. "I am quite exhausted, so I am. This must be it! This must surely be the Magic Well at last."

So she sat herself down on a large gray lichen-covered stone by the Well.

"Are my feet not sore," she murmured.

However, there was comfort in sitting, and she took out a mutton sandwich and munched it enthusiastically. Then she demolished the part which remained undamaged of one of her mother's apples. When she had finished, she rose and moved towards the Well to fill her crystal flask. But suddenly, before she reached it, she heard a strange voice.

"Hold on now my bonny princess!" the voice said.

Here a huge green frog appeared on all fours before her and blocked her path. At first, Nanse did not see the puddock clearly, and she looked about her at eye level.

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Look down at your feet, my bonny one, and you shall see what you shall see.”

So Nanse looked down and there was the frog. It was so much bigger than any frog she had ever seen before, she could hardly believe her own eyes, but there it was, right enough. Seeing is believing, she thought to herself.

“Mercy on us,” she exclaimed. “A huge puddock! Was that you I heard speak just now?”

“Yes, me! Who else? Well, did you never hear tell of a speaking puddock?”

The princess shook her head. Indeed she had never heard of such a thing; not that she could remember outside story books.

“Did you never hear of glamourie, my girl?”

Nanse had certainly heard of glamourie. She supposed this must be it, right enough. Still, it was best not to say too much to this strange creature. The princess was not at all pleased that a frog should speak to her in this familiar manner.

“Glamourie---! Maybe I have, and then maybe I haven’t. And maybe I don’t always believe all that I hear. But never mind! I haven’t come all this way to chat with a puddock, to be sure. And such an ugly one, too! Out of my road with you, beast, while I draw some water for my flask!”

But the puddock never budged. Instead, he drew himself to his full height and she was astonished to find he was actually taller than she was. He then deliberately squatted between the princess and the Well.

“No! No!” said the puddock, looking at her with his little bright eyes. “YOU cannot draw water. Not you! *I* guard the Well of True Water, and nobody but me can fill your flask.”

“Do you know who I am?” demanded Nanse, indignantly.

“Yes, I know very well who you are,” replied the puddock. “You are the Princess Nanse herself.”

“Well, you’d better know this as well,” said Nanse haughtily, “nobody speaks to me like that! Nobody---! I’m not used to people -- let alone puddocks – saying ‘No’ to me.”

“You could be the Queen of Sheba, for all I care,” scoffed the puddock. “We all have to grow up, sooner or later.”

This remark infuriated Nanse, perhaps because she felt the frog had seen through her. There was nothing she hated more than to be seen as a little girl.

“You impudent thing,” she spat. I have a good mind to warm your ears for you.”

Nanse raised her hand to strike this insolent creature, but he stood his ground and stared her straight in the eye.

I wouldn't try that, if I were you,” he warned. When it comes to blows, two can play at that game. Anyway, you'd have a hard job to find my ears. I don't have sticking-out ears like you.”

Nanse felt her ears to reassure herself that they did not protrude any more than anyone else's ears.

“Do you see these feet?” continued the puddock, raising a leg. “I can kick with these feet. I could give you a really sore kick with these legs. My legs are very strong with all the leaping I do. “

He gave a demonstration of a powerful kick with one leg and Nanse decided it might be better not to provoke him. At any rate, she lowered her hand.

“I'm thinking,” she said, “you're far too forward for a frog altogether. And just how did you know I was the Princess Nanse, I would like to know?”

“Glamourie again,” answered the puddock. “I have the second sight. My mother was from the Isle of Skye.”

This was a puzzling piece of information, and Nanse did not know what to make of it at all. Could there really be puddocks on the Isle of Skye with the second sight? However, she was not really concerned with this creature's parentage.

“I even know some Gaelic,” he said, proudly, puffing out his chest. Listen: “*Tha e uabhasach fuar an-diugh. Thoir a-staigh an cu!*”

“And what does that mean?” enquired Nanse.

“It means,” replied the frog, “It's very cold today. Bring in the cow!”

“Cows in the house, is it?” sniffed Nanse. “That sound Highland enough. My mother will not thole animals inside the palace. She is not very fond of animals.”

I’ve heard she is a bit funny like that,” said the frog.

“There are some folk in Fife that speak the Gaelic,” said Nanse. I always thought that *an cu* in Gaelic means *the dog*.”

“Whatever,” said the puddok, “we won’t argue about that. I’m sure it means some kind of beast.”

“Well, Puddock,” she said. “If you have the second sight, you will know that the Queen, my mother, is at Death’s door with Gregory’s Complaint, and that she has a notion that a drop of water from this well will make her well again.”

“It’s no notion,” said the frog. “This water will cure any ill from pimples to the Black Death.”

“Will it cure Gregory’s Complaint?” asked the princess, hopefully.

“It is ideal for Gregory’s Complaint. One sip would be enough for that,” answered the puddock.

“It is very difficult to believe that,” said Nanse. “Are you sure it will cure anything?”

“Headaches, hoarse throats, running noses, racking coughs, bronchitis, festering ears, weeping fits, hanging paunches, the black bile, the green bile, deformed feet, anything that ails you, this water will cure in a jiffy. Anything at all---!

These were wide claims and Nanse wondered whether they could possibly be true. But if puddocks could talk, what might not be true?

“Oh, I do wish I could believe you!” said Nanse.

I once saw a deaf man throw away his trumpet after swallowing one mouthful of this water,” said the frog. “For the first time in his life he could hear the birds chirpin and the long grass sighing in the wind. I saw a lame man – Cripple Dick they called him – I saw a lame man leap over a drystone dyke after doing no more than moisten his lips. It will cure anything, I tell you.”

The puddock spoke with such conviction that Nanse found herself actually believing what he said, but she was a practical girl and a lingering doubt remained in her mind.

“That’s what my mother seems to think,” she said. I rather think it’s old wives’ tales myself. However, she thinks the water will do her good, so you will surely oblige me by filling my flask for me, if you won’t let me fill it myself.”

The princess held out her flask to the puddock, but he made no move to accept it.

“Ah, but there is more to it than that!” he said, gravely. “A lot more! In this world, there is always a price to be paid for everything. Surely you know that!”

I know that that’s the way that some people think, ” replied Nanse. “That road goes straight to Hell, where I doubt you belong.”

“If I belong there, I’ll never want for good company,” said the puddock. “Surely you did not believe for a moment you were going to help yourself to this extraordinary water for nothing. If I was to let everybody help themselves, all the doctors in Scotland would have to put up the shutters.”

“A small loss that would be,” said Nanse.

It was becoming increasingly clear to her that this frog was going to be difficult and that she might have to change her tactics. She longed to strike the creature, but she could see that the puddock would probably return any blow with interest. It was also clear that he could not easily be ordered about, and she was not sure that she was carrying enough money with her to pay the puddock’s price for magic water. She took out her silken handkerchief.

“You should think shame of yourself to try to bargain with me, and my mother lying dying,” she sobbed.

Between sobs, she studied the puddock discreetly, to see if she was having any effect on his sympathies, but he did not appear to be paying any attention.

“But I see there’s no shame in you,” she followed.

“You’re shameless! You’re just trash!”

“Insults will get you nowhere,” said the puddock. “Sticks and stones will break my bones---!”

If I had a stick, I’d take it to your back,” said Nanse.

“Threats now---!” said the puddock.

It was obvious that insults and threats were also chickens that would not fight, with this creature. Nanse was beginning to run out of lines of approach. She sighed deeply.

“Here Puddock, I don’t want to fight with you! Would you like an apple? I have some fine apples I haven’t eaten. “

She took one of her mother’s apples out of her apron pocket, polished it and offered it to the frog. He took it, looked at it scornfully and threw it over his shoulder into the bracken.

“I never eat apples,” he said. “I can’t chew them properly.”

“What is your fee then, for a little water?” asked Nanse. Perhaps he would be satisfied with the last gold piece she was carrying.

“It’s a fair fee, my girl....”

“I’m not your girl!” snapped Nanse.

“It’s a fair fee,” the puddock continued, “though perhaps you won’t think so when you hear what it is.”

“Never mind what I think!” said Nanse, curtly. “Just stop beating about the bush and tell me what your fee is!”

“If I give you the water.....” Said the puddock. “If I give you the water, will you marry me?”

The princess could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“Marry you---? ME, marry YOU?”

“Marry me. Just that,” said the frog.

Despite the shock of hearing these insolent words the princess was quick to recover. The proposition was so absurd there was no point in wasting time considering it.

“No fear!” she said. “Whoever heard the like? A princess doesn’t marry with a puddock! What could we do together? You would want me to do something rude, very likely! What do you think I am? You’re surely a bit simple? It is bad enough that you are ugly, but to be a simpleton as well. I’m really sorry for you.”

“Spare me your pity!” said the frog. “You don’t fancy me then?”

“FANCY YOU,” shrieked Nanse. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I can’t say I even fancy you as a puddock, let alone my goodman.”

The princess was not really sure whether the frog had feelings. She thought perhaps not, since she knew he was a cold-blooded creature – an amphibian. That probably meant he couldn’t feel pain – perhaps he wouldn’t be able to feel much in the way of pleasure as well. Ever since she had encountered him he had stared at her with cold expressionless eyes. She had no intention of touching him, but she was sure his skin would be cold. How was it possible to deal with a creature which evidently had no warm feelings? It appeared she could neither hurt its feelings nor appeal to them.

At last the puddock spoke again. “So you won’t marry me!”

“Certainly not,” said Nanse. “Not likely---! I wouldn’t even touch you.”

“Then you get no water from me, my proud girl,” said the frog. “Take yourself home again as quickly as ever you like!”

“Rubbish!” said Nanse. “I’ve had more than enough of your nonsense. Who do you think you are? Are you going to get out of my way?”

Nanse had no intention of abandoning her mission, nor was it thinkable that she could marry the puddock. She has reached an impasse and she didn’t quite know what to do, though it was clear that some drastic action was necessary.

“WILL-YOU-GET-OUT-OF-MY-ROAD?” she shouted.

But her shouting had no effect on the puddock. She clenched her fists, she screamed, she beat her feet on the ground in a tantrum of rage, all to no effect. She then tried to scare him off.

“Boo!” had no effect. “Shoo!” had no effect and neither had “Hop it!” Then she tried, “Go away back to your midden!”

“It’s toads that live in middens,” said the frog. “I’m a puddock.”

“What’s the difference?” said Nanse. “You’re disgusting, whatever you are.”

She now tried three times to charge past the frog, but every time, he succeeded in heading her off. He was quite remarkably agile for a creature of his size.

“Oh you brute that you are!” she gasped. “Oh you scoundrel!”

But always the puddock squatted immovable before her.

“So you refuse to get out of my way?” demanded Nanse, with hands on hips.

“Unless you marry me, your Highness,” said the puddock, “you’ll draw no water here. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Have some sense, Puddock!” pleaded Nanse. “How could I ever marry the likes of you? Have you seen yourself?”

The frog glanced briefly at his reflection in the water in the Well of True Water.

“Huh---!” he said. “No marriage, no water!”

“You’re a cross-grained brute, so you are,” said Nanse. “What ails you at lady puddocks? There are surely plenty of them about?”

“Plenty---! Plenty of them, indeed---!” he replied, but he did not offer to explain why he could not marry any of them.

“Surely,” persisted Nanse, “one of them would take to you! What is wrong with you that you don’t want to marry your own kind? You’re not natural. Where did you get such uppity ideas?”

“I think,” said the puddock, “that you ask far too many questions. However, I will say this: a lady puddock would never do for what I have in mind.”

Although Nanse was not a highly imaginative girl, her mind boggled at this statement.

“Ooooh!” she exclaimed. I’m sure I don’t like the sound of that at all. Anyway, I don’t know what you mean.”

However, a rather startling idea occurred to her and she said nervously: “Here Puddock, I-I can’t marry you, b-but would you give me a little water if I was to do something rude with you?”

The Puddock appeared to consider this proposal for a moment.

“Just what did you have in mind, Princess?” he enquired.

“I-I could let.....I could let you see my knickers!” she suggested.

There, it was out! The skies had not fallen, and the frog had given no sign he had heard her say anything improper. However, he spoke eventually.

“I’m going to pretend I never heard that,” he said. “I wonder at you, Princess. Don’t affront me! No marriage, no water!”

At this reply, Nanse felt utterly defeated and mortified and she instantly began to wish she had never thought of this shameful proposal. How could she have been so unladylike? She was overwhelmed with a desire to escape from this awful well with its horrid guardian.

“I’ll waste no more time with you and your nonsense,” Nanse declared bitterly. “I don’t suppose the water would do my mother any good anyway. This whole ploy is just another of her silly notions. I was a fool ever to listen to her.”

“You are a fool not to listen to me,” said the frog. “This is a mishap you’ll regret for the rest of your days. When you are an old woman nodding alone by the fireside, you’ll look back on this day and you’ll be sorry you turned me down.”

What nonsense was this? Nanse had no desire whatsoever to marry the puddock, so this prediction struck her as completely absurd.

“Huh!” she grunted. “When I’m an old woman, I can just see myself weeping because I didn’t marry a frog: my whole life ruined because I preferred to marry a human being---! A likely story----!

The sooner I win home away from here the better.”

“Remember well what I say,” warned the puddock. “You’ll be vexed afterwards.”

“Away, you disgust me!” cried Nanse as she turned from the Well to start her long weary journey home. A smirr of rain started to drift in from the Western sea, and she suddenly felt cold and depressed. She was actually quite glad there were still two apples left in the bag her mother had given her for they were a link with home. But it had all been for nothing, and as she commenced her trek back towards Strontian and Schiehallian, and distant Abernethy, she could hear the puddock shouting behind her: “You’ll be sorry! You’ll be sorry,

Princess!” And although they were nonsensical, the words stuck in her mind.

And as she trudged along wearily she muttered and thought to herself: What a waste of time this has been---to come all this way on a fool’s errand! Sometimes I think my mother is a really stupid woman. Why do I ever listen to her silly notions? Good Heavens! Magic Water----! Marry a puddock! I never heard the like. It would be laughable if it wasn’t so pathetic.

“Mother will have to think of some other way I can help her, for surely she wouldn’t want a frog for her eldest son-in-law. One day I shall be Queen myself and I couldn’t stand a puddock sitting next to me on the throne. I couldn’t abide that at all. Mother will surely see that that would be far too high a price to pay for a little cold water.

“Whatever would people think? Maybe Morag will be able to bring herself to marry the creature---she’s always been fond of animals---but not me! Not likely! Gracious me! Marry a puddock! Marry a frog for a drop of water! It would be absolutely disgraceful. I would never be able to hold up my head again. I have never heard of such a thing.”

And after a few minutes, the princess really began to believe that her mother would understand why she had failed in her quest to bring back any of the Magic Water.