

MORAG AND THE PUDDOCK

When her daughter, Nanse, came back from the Well at the World's End empty-handed, Queen Marget was very angry and very disappointed, but she gave a great sigh and turned herself round again on the silken bolster of her great golden bed. She could well understand that her older daughter might not be the best person to fetch her the magic water. She was a proud, proud girl and liked folk to think well of her. And there was no doubt that hardly anybody would think well of a princess who was married to a huge green puddock.

So the Queen called in her second daughter, Eilidh. Eilidh was quieter than her sisters, and some people thought her a strange girl, perhaps because she seldom spoke unless she had something worthwhile to say, a rare quality at the Court at Abernethy. And the lass came in to the Queen's chamber, her long hair black as a corbie's wing, and her eyes as dark as a starless night. Eilidh, who was just as beautiful as her elder sister, listened quietly to everything her mother said, and went off in her turn to Ardnamurchan to fetch water from the Magic Well.

Eilidh was quite certain she could manage the puddock. Her sister, she believed, was far too proud altogether to speak in a kindly way to the creature. It clearly had no idea what kind of thing it was demanding, and she was sure she could make it understand.

Now Eilidh wasn't quite so proud as her sister, Nanse, but she was very particular. Some folk even thought of her as being pernickety. She was rather artistic, and certainly easily disgusted, and when she tried to make the puddock at the Well see sense, he wouldn't listen to her. Also, he was so ugly she felt like retching at the sight of him, and she could not bear the thought of putting a finger on him. So, in the end, Eilidh, too, had to take the long road home with her flask empty.

When she heard that her second daughter had also failed, the Queen was almost frantic, for now there was only Morag, the youngest princess, left. After a while, when the Queen had calmed down, Morag was called in: the little brown princess who never walked when she might run and never ran without singing like a linnet. And she loved her mother well. So away she went with a glad heart on her way to the Well at Ardnamurchan, over the hills and over the crags, and across mosses and moors and through mirk-dark woods, until she came also, to the corner at the End of the World.

There she gathered a sprig of bright red rowan berries from the tree that stood over the Magic Well, put it in her hair, and sat down by the bubbling water and waited. She knew from her two older sisters what to expect. And while she rested and waited, she saw the island of Mull, with its mountains shrouded in mist before her across the water, and started to sing a song:

Whither I wander East or West.
Waking or dreaming, thou art near me,
Joy of my heart, Isle of Moola.

But before she could go on, the huge puddock leaped out before her from behind some bracken.

“Gracious me!” exclaimed the puddock. “Here’s another maid! An even bonnier one than the other two. The Princess Morag herself, if I’m not mistaken.”

To Morag, at first sight, this creature was even more revolting than she had imagined from Nanse’s description, which had certainly not been very complimentary. It pointed over the water towards the Island of Mull with its right hand, or what appeared to be its hand.

“That’s Mull over there you were singing about – an awful place for rain – and MacLeans.

“And what would you be after, little one? Oh, but I know very well myself. But let you be telling me!”

Morag rose politely to her feet and answered him softly.

“A little water from your well, if you please, kind Puddock.”

Although his face was not made for smiling, the frog actually appeared to smile at this reply.

“Kind, is it?” he said. “Maybe yes and maybe no---! There is but one way to draw water from this well, your sisters will have told you.”

“And that is,” said Morag. “I know, but let you be telling me!”

“You must marry me for sure,” said the puddock.

Now Morag had known this before she had set out for the Magic Well and she had been prepared in her mind to marry the puddock if she had to, for her mother’s sake. But the Queen knew nothing of this intention, and now that Morag had come face to face with the frog, her heart nearly failed her. He was so very very ugly. Somehow it seemed unfair that she should have to make such a sacrifice, even for her mother.

“Marry you --- just that?” she said.

Surely such a step had to be considered very carefully? It could not be taken lightly.

“Yes, marry me, just that!” said the frog. “No marriage, no water. It is as simple as that, so it is.”

“Do you really understand what you are asking?” asked Morag, hopefully. “The Queen, my mother, said maybe you didn’t know much about marriage.”

“I know,” said the puddock smugly, “all that I need to know.”

There appeared to be no escape for the poor princess. She looked in silence at the puddock for some time. It was so very difficult to make a decision. At last she said, “Is there no other way? No other way at all?”

“No, no other way,” answered the frog.

“Would a kiss or something not do?” ventured the Morag.

She was innocently unaware that her sister had already failed with this kind of approach.

“No, no fear!” replied the puddock. “You can’t coax me. Did your sister Nanse not tell you?”

Morag made no reply to this. Again she considered the frog in silence, unable to make up her mind.

“I’m in good health,” he said, encouragingly. “Watch this leap!”

And he gave an enormous leap from a squatting position, high into the air. Morag was not much impressed by this remarkable performance, but she finally came to a decision.

“Well, that is what I must do,” she sighed. “I must marry you, Puddock, whether you can jump or not, for I love the Queen my mother dearly. And if she doesn’t get a sip of this water soon, she will surely die. If I cannot get it for her without marrying you, well I must marry you. What else can I do?”

“Well said, lass!” cried the frog, and he gave another great leap in the air. “So let it be! And because this is a magic place, you must never go back on your words. There is no turning back now!”

Morag felt her heart break within her, but she asked: “Do you want me to marry you right away, at this very moment? There is no priest here. The nearest church must be many miles away.”

“Why ever would we want a priest,” exclaimed the puddock. “We can have a common law marriage in Scotland. It will save us the trouble of buying in meat and drink for a crowd of people we never see from one year’s end to another. What do we want with that kind of fuss? It will be much cheaper, too.”

There was, indeed, no turning back. The little princess looked down doubtfully at her ragged clothes, which were certainly in no fit state for a wedding.

But I’m not dressed for a wedding,” she protested. “My clothes are a complete midden from being on the road all week. I’m all covered with dust, so I am!”

She brushed her tattered garments vigorously with her hands and a cloud of dust arose from them,

“Gracious, girl,” said the frog, “you’ll do very well as you are. You wouldn’t want to be too fine for an outside wedding. There will be

nobody here to see you but myself, and from now on it will be me to please. We might as well start the way we intend to go on, and I say, you'll do very well as you are."

"What do we have to do then," asked Morag, adjusting the rowan berries in her hair.

"There's really nothing to it," said the puddock. "Put your right hand in mine and your other hand on my head!"

The princess obeyed him, although she was reluctant to touch the puddock's skin and had to force herself to put her left hand on his head.

"Oh, your head is awfully cold," she exclaimed.

"That is because I'm cold-blooded," said the frog.

"You'll get used with that in time."

"I certainly hope so," muttered Morag

"Now come with me," ordered the puddock. And together they paraded hand in hand round the Well of True Water, until they halted below the rowan tree. And all the time, the princess kept her left hand on the frog's cold head.

"Quiet now!" the frog commanded, although the princess had made no sound.

He then started to chant in a solemn manner: "Do you, Princess Morag, promise to take this puddock to be your Goodman foraye, to fetch and carry for him, and feed, clothe and care for him all the days of your life?"

"Yes, I do!" whispered Morag.

"Do you promise not to oppose him in anything he might want to do, whatever it might be?"

"I do!"

"Will you nurse me when I am unwell and when I'm old and in my dotage without grumbling and making any complaint?"

"I will!"

"And will you always do what you are told with a good grace, and not speak back to me when you are checked or punished?"

“I will!”

“And will you not go into a sulk when I have to beat you?”

“Oh Dear!” said the princess, “I will” She tried hard not to think about this.

“What---?” snapped the puddock.

“Oh Mercy---! I mean I won’t!”

“And will you bury me,” continued the frog, gravely, “in a proper manner in holy ground when I’m dead?”

“I will!” said Morag, in as sad a voice as she could manage, but to herself, she wondered, how long a bullfrog might be expected to live?

“Now, wet thumbs!” he ordered.

“Here, Morag and the puddock licked their right thumbs and hooked them together high in the air, firmly, but briefly. The Princess was already familiar with this ancient Scottish custom, and she knew what it meant. The puddock then held Morag by the hand and intoned flatly:

“If there be anybody here that objects to this puddock and this maid being yoked together in holy matrimony all the days of their life, let him speak out now or hold his peace foraye!”

“But there is nobody here that could object!” Morag protested.

Neither there is!” said the frog cheerfully. “Fine--! Well, that’s that! That’s it! That’s us wed!”

The happy couple then separated and Morag took several steps backwards.

“I can’t say I feel any different, being married,” said the puddock. “I thought I would feel quite different. I feel just the same as I did before.”

“Is that all?” cried Morag, plaintively. Is that my wedding finished? Is that all there is?”

“That’s all I can remember,” said the frog. “That was the important bit, anyway.”

“That’s us married then?” said Morag, rather sharply.

“Yes indeed!” replied the puddock. “Married you are from this day forward on a puddock and a long and happy life to the pair of us, my bonny lass. You may pat me now whenever you like. Would you like to try?”

But Morag already knew what the puddock felt like. She did not want to pat him and turned away from him with obvious distaste. It was clearly necessary that she should be reminded by her Goodman of her new position and what was required of her.

“C’mon, give us a little pat, Wife!” he said, pushing his head forward, invitingly.

Morag held out her hand uncertainly, but withdrew it again.

“C’mon, don’t be shy!” he encouraged.

“Oh, all right!” said Morag and she patted him gingerly, whereupon he responded in what Morag assumed was an affectionate way, pressing his head against her hand.

“I’m not sure I like the feel of you,” she sobbed.

“Your skin feels kind of clammy. It reminds me of a wilted lettuce leaf.” Morag felt this was all too much for her and burst into a flood of tears.

“Now, now,” said the frog, “you mustn’t upset yourself. Just do one thing at a time! There’s no hurry – nothing should be done in haste but gripping fleas. You have your whole life ahead of you to get used with me. “I’ll soon keep you right if I see you going wrong. You can always rely on me for that.”

“I don’t feel very well,” sobbed Morag. “My head’s spinning. I think I’ll sit down for a minute.”

So Morag went and sat down on the wall at the edge of the well and buried her face in her hands. The puddock felt it his duty to reassure her, and he put his hand on her shoulder and patted her gently.

“It’s no wonder you’re excited on your wedding day. This is only to be expected. It is a big day for a maid. Just you have a little rest until you calm down!”

“I don’t feel well at all,” said Morag, with a tear-stained face. “Is this love, do you think?”

“That will come later,” said the frog, confidently. “For many couples, the love comes later!”

“How long will I have to wait,” asked Morag.

The puddock considered this question for some time before answering: "It might come tomorrow morning. It might take forty year. Who can tell? Everybody is different."

"The trouble is," said Morag sadly, "I'm not sure I want it to come." And with these words, she fell into another bout of weeping. However, in a short while she managed to pull herself together again.

"What else do I have to do, G-Goodman?" she asked boldly, through her tears. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Please tell me!"

"I'll think of something after," he answered.

"And now that we're married, Goodman, where are we going to live?"

"I'm glad you asked that question," replied the puddock. "It's certainly time we thought about that. Well, I haven't a house for you, and we certainly can't stay in the Well. That wouldn't suit you at all. I'm not keen on it myself. Far too damp---! There are snails and huge slugs and spiders and woodlice and centipedes and other creepy things down there."

That she might, by any stretch of the imagination, inhabit such a place as the bottom of the Well at the World's End was a possibility that Morag had never considered. But in the world of glamourie all things become possible.

"How do you know such creatures live in the Well?" she enquired

The puddock hopped slowly up to the Well. He then jumped onto the top of the surrounding wall and looked down at the water below.

"That's been my home these last four years. I had to eat such things for want of anything more wholesome. I know all about every creepy-crawly thing that lives down there."

"You poor thing," said the princess. "Was that all you had to eat?"

"I never eat centipedes," replied the frog. "I draw the line at them, but sometimes, if I was lucky, I would find a fat worm or two on the grass after a shower of rain. I had a big black slug for my dinner yesterday."

“Yugh!” exclaimed Morag, making a face. She now found for some reason she did not understand, that she was more concerned with the puddock’s plight than her own dreadful fate.

“I was glad to get it, I can tell you,” he went on. “It was either that or nothing at all. Many’s the day I’ve had to spend with an empty belly. If I’d been too particular about what I ate, I’d have been down to skin and bone by now.”

At this point, he examined his skinny forearm with interest, turned away from the water and leaped down from the wall.

“Anyway,” he said, “you certainly can’t stay in there, so we will just have to set up house in your mother’s palace. That way, I’ll be sure of regular meat. She doesn’t lack room there and I have always had a notion to try the life at Court. Now that I’m your husband, I daresay I’ll be made Prince Consort or the Duke of Forfar, or something of the kind. It will be good to get into some smart clothes. I’ve always fancied a red velvet jacket with lace cuffs. And maybe green silken hosen for my legs, and silver buckles on my shoes. That would look really smart, I think.”

The brown princess listened to this vain speech with astonishment. Here was revealed a new rather disagreeable aspect of the puddock’s character. He was a would-be Dandy and had evidently a pompous streak.

“Gracious me!” she exclaimed.

“I’ll be glad of the diversion,” the creature continued. “The change will do me a world of good. When all is said and done I’ve been here long enough and I could do with some bright company. There’s been none for me here.”

Here, the frog stopped and froze in a squatting position for fully a minute. The princess could detect not the slightest movement in his body, and she began to wonder if he was still alive. However, eventually, he resumed his speech quite suddenly.

“After a while,” he went on, “you get awfully sick of splashing about in the mud all by yourself. At first, leaping about is fine – it gives you

a bit of a lift; but sometimes you say to yourself: ‘What else is there to do?’ You say: ‘Is this all there is? What have I done with my life?’”

By this time, Morag had heard enough of this, and she rose to her feet, purposefully.

“Goodman,” she said. “I’ll have to hurry home now with the water. Mother is very ill, so she is, and she cannot afford to wait much longer for it. Do you want to come home along with me now?”

“No, not yet!” answered the frog. “Your family will not be expecting me. You’d better go home first by yourself and let them know we’re married and that I will follow you later. They will need a little time to prepare a welcome for me. I daresay they will want to throw some kind of party – a reception, perhaps, with wine and shortcake -- for the pair of us. It will give me a chance to meet the Court,

“That will be something to look forward to. I always like to have something to look forward to. Do you know, sometimes I have crouched here on my haunches in the dripping rain for hours on end, racking my brains, trying to think what I had to look forward to, and I haven’t been able to think of a single thing?”.

Although the little princess wondered what kind of life *she* now had to look forward to, she was touched by the frog’s words.

“Puddock, that is very sad,” she said softly. I am vexed to hear that!”

“That’s all right, my girl,” said the puddock, bleakly, his voice breaking a little. “We all have our crosses to bear. Sometimes I have thought to myself: ‘what a dismal life! I might as well never have been born at all as spend my days this way. Day after day, after day, at Ardnamurchan, all by myself, with a sore heart.....at the End of the World.’

“Every day, year after year, I’d be sitting here while the sun came up over the bens and went down over the western sea, and every night I’d still be here alone below the moon and the alien stars.”

“Puddock, you’re breaking my heart,” said Morag, and a fresh tear rolled down one cheek.

“Sometimes, the well would freeze over in the winter time and I couldn’t find shelter or anything to eat,” he wailed. “Everything was hiding from me. There were times when I could have eaten a centipede and broken one of my own rules. It was terrible! The winters were the worst.”

“They must have been,” Morag said, kindly.

“If you hadn’t come along, Princess, I don’t know what I would have done, he sobbed. I don’t think I could have stood it any longer.”

Until this outburst, Morag had believed that the puddock was incapable of human feelings and she suddenly found herself put a comforting arm round his cold shoulder.

“Puddock, is there anything I can do to help,”she asked. “You don’t need to stay here any longer, Puddock. What can I do? Would you like another pat?”

“It’s all right, Princess,” said the frog, pathetically, and he jerked his shoulder rudely away from her. Morag moved to follow him, but the puddock did not want to be touched.

“Just you leave me alone, will you,” he shouted angrily between convulsive sobs. “Leave me alone! I don’t need anybody!”

“Well if that’s what you want, Puddock”--- said Morag. He did not reply to this at once, but in a short while, he said, grumpily: “I’ll recover myself in a minute.”

“Do you know what I think, Puddock?” asked Morag.

“No, I don’t know what you think and I don’t much care,” answered the frog.

“I think.... I think you’re in a sulk! Do you know what I think? I think you should go away by yourself for a wee while and come back to me when you are feeling nicer!”

“Just DON’T YOU SPEAK TO ME!” he ordered, but suddenly, he set out to make a number of great leaps which took him some distance from the well, and then all the way round it, to finish up back at Morag’s feet.

A strange thought then occurred to the princess.”

“Born---!” she exclaimed. “Did I hear you say you were born?” As a new bride, Morag was naturally anxious about her husband’s origins.

By this time, the puddock had recovered at least some of his lost composure. Evidently his exercise had changed his mood.

“Yes, I did say that,” he answered.

“But Puddock,” said Morag, “surely you were never born! “Did you not come out of an egg as a wee tadpole? I have sometimes seen them swimming about at the waterside, before they were ready to change into little wee puddocks.

“No,” said the frog, “it wasn’t like that with me. Me, I was never a tadpole at all, before I turned into a puddock. You’ll maybe have noticed, in some respects, I’m not the same as other frogs. I’m bigger, for a start. You’ll have noticed that.”

“You’re a most unusual frog, indeed!” said the princess.

“Wife,” said the frog, patting her gently on the shoulder, “this is not something it pleases me to speak about at this time.”

Just then there was a distinct roll of thunder and the puddock looked up at the sky. “But I see the rain’s about to start again,” he added. “It’s never very far away here in the Highlands. I doubt we’re in for another downpour. There’s no shelter here at all, neither there is!”

Morag looked up and could see that the blue sky was fast disappearing and that a belt of rain was moving in from Mull.

“You’d better look sharp right enough! I wouldn’t want you to get drenched. It doesn’t really matter for me. I’m not wearing any clothes. The rain just runs off my skin. It’s quite handy here to have a waterproof skin. Here, give me your flask!”

He jumped nimbly onto the side of the well, took the crystal flask from the princess, and filled it with water. And the water in the flask sparkled like the stars, in the sunlight, as he handed it to her.

“There you are!” the frog said. “Go home now, Wife! Give the Queen, your mother, just one sip of the water that is in this flask and all will be well! At once she’ll be as right as rain, and in a day or two

she'll never know she ever had Gregory's Complaint. But you make sure she doesn't drink too much at the one time or she'll maybe start running after anything she sees with pants on! It has that effect sometimes."

Thank you very kindly, Goodman!"

"Off with you, now!" ordered the puddock. "On your way---! I'll be leaping after you soon, and I'll not be far behind you, for I am a fast traveller."

"Oh yes, and remember and tell your mother I don't like toad-in-the-hole! I'm not difficult to please, but I can't stand toad-in-the-hole. She'll be glad to hear I'm not fussy with my meat."

Morag, knowing her mother, doubted whether the Queen would be pleased to play host to the puddock in any circumstances, but she thought it might be unwise to give this opinion. So she simply said: "Are you sure you can manage all that way by yourself? It's a long long way."

"Don't bother your pretty head about me!" said the puddock. "Once I get properly loosened up I can fairly leap. I'll be fine.

"Give me another pat before you go!" he added. "I like it best on the head."

So Morag went up to the puddock and patted him several times on the head, to his obvious enjoyment. And as she patted, he made little sounds of pleasure. Then away back home went the little brown princess as fast as her legs would carry her, all the way home to her mother's palace at Abernethy.

The frog cried after her: "Don't dawdle on the road, now! I'll follow on after you in a few days. The Queen, your mother, will need some time to prepare the reception, but I'll not be long after you."

He then performed a joyous little dance of his own to reel time in a crouching position, and when he had finished this, he hopped slowly round the Well at the World's End.

"Can I not leap?" he exclaimed joyfully, as he jumped several times high into the air.

