

STORM IN THE PALACE

“Mother,” said Nanse, you must try to take more of this good broth. C’mon try and finish it before it gets cold!”

Good Queen Marget sat in a chair by her great golden bed in her chamber in her palace at Abernethy. She was attended by Princess Nanse, and her mood was fretful, which was perhaps not surprising, since she had been confined to an inactive life in bed ever since the visit of master Rintoul. She would never, of course, have dreamed of disregarding the orders of her medical adviser.

Nearly a week had passed since the little brown princess had started her long journey home with the magic water from the End of the World, and the Queen was no better. She was, if anything, rather worse. She was very pale and wasted and did not look well at all. She suffered from time to time from the vomiting turns described as one of the characteristic signs of Gregory’s ailment, and she was convinced that the disease was now moving inevitably towards its final stage. She began to wonder whether her daughter Morag would ever return.

It was the afternoon, and the Queen had not felt well all morning, after a restless night. However, Nanse was now trying to persuade her to take some nourishing soup from an invalid cup.

“Morag should be home today,” she said, “and I want to get this chamber tidied up. It is disgraceful. It’s like a muck midden. I have lots of things to do today and I can’t get started until I get you fed.”

Queen Marget made an unpleasant face and pushed the cup away with the palm of her hand.

“I don’t feel like any more,” she said. “I’m not well again today. I haven’t seen any sign of Eilidh today. Maybe she could help you with the work?”

“She’s gone away to Perth on the pony,” answered Nanse. “I don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“Huh,” exclaimed the Queen. “She’s never to be seen when there’s work to be done.”

“Just try a little more!” coaxed Nanse. “It will put color in your cheeks.”

“No doubt, no doubt!” said the Queen doubtfully.

“C’mon Mother, it will stick to your ribs!”

“Huh!” said the Queen, indignantly. “My ribs have always been well enough covered.”

“C’mon now!” insisted Nanse. “No more of your nonsense---!”

Nanse then practically forced the spout of the cup into her mother’s mouth. The Queen bravely tried to take more soup through the spout but soon failed with a gurgle.

“This contraption is not sucking properly,” she complained, pushing the cup away and sticking her pinkie finger up the spout. “I doubt there’s a pea stuck in the spout.”

The Queen tried unsuccessfully to clear the spout, and then handed the invalid cup back to Nanse.

”Hyuh!” she grunted.

Nanse deliberately place the soup-soiled cup on the chest of drawers by the bedside. The Queen reached out and pulled the bell rope vigorously. Ringan had now learnt his lesson well enough to respond smartly to the bell. On this occasion, he appeared after a second or two, but entered nervously. He was relieved to see that Queen Marget appeared more tired and depressed than angry.

He stood respectfully at the door of the chamber.

“Yes, your Highness!”

“Ringan, my boy!” said the Queen sweetly, “Will you take this drop of soup away and give it to the dogs?”

Ringan dutifully took the cup and made to leave, muttering, “Give it to the dogs!” to himself as he went. However, the Queen suddenly had a notion and held out her arm.

“Hold on a minute, Ringan!” she commanded, imperiously.

Ringan turned round just as he had reached the door and looked at the Queen anxiously. What on earth had he done now?

“Your Highness---? I haven’t been near the pony.”

“Never heed the pony. Eilidh’s away with the pony. How long have you been with me now Ringan?” she enquired.

“Two year come this Lammas, your Highness.”

At this point, Nanse remembered she had more important things to do than listen to this particular chat and quietly slipped out of the chamber.

“If I remember rightly, “ the Queen went on, “you were taken on about the time they were burning that old witch, Belle Hislop, in the Market Square. Oh, I think I hear her screeching yet when the flames started to roast her skin. My, that must have fairly been sore! What an uproar that was.!”

Ringan started to wonder if the Queen would somehow find him responsible for a disturbance that had taken place over a year ago. He couldn’t see how he could be blamed for that, but he felt that the Queen was capable of blaming him for anything aand everything.

“Maybe I am too soft-hearted, but I’ve never enjoyed seeing people burned alive. It is in my mind that I should never have allowed the priests to burn her, but everybody was set on it. It seemed the right thing to do at the time. Maybe she wasn’t a real witch at all. I doubt I am too easily persuaded by the men sometimes. My mother warned me about that. I have often been sorry when I didn’t take her advice.”

Ringan looked at her with astonishment.

“But I see you’re getting to be a great big lad now,” she went on. “I don’t know --- these days the days fly by like bees.

“Ringan, I’m not well at all and I doubt I’m not long for this world....”.

“I’m very sorry to hear you say that, your Highness,” said Ringan. “I didn’t know you were so ill....”

“Did I say you could speak?” demanded the Queen sharply.

Ringan shook his head and looked down.

“Did I say you could speak,” she repeated, although Ringan had certainly heard her the first time.

“As I was saying, before you rudely spoke back to me (How many times do I have to tell you about that?), I doubt I’m not long for this world and I’m not ready for the next. There is something I must say to you, Ringan, while there is still time.

“Sometimes you may think I’m too hard on you, but you’re still just a lad, and any time I have thrashed you, it’s been for your own good. I want you to remember that when you are a man and think back on this time. Ringan, when that time comes, I doubt I will not be here to correct you.”

A note of sadness came into her voice as she spoke these last word, but Ringan did not feel that her absence in the days of his manhood would be any great cause for regret. However, the Queen was quite unaware of how Ringan felt.

“Ringan,” she went on, “I wouldn’t like to leave this world behind, with you thinking to yourself I’ve been a hard mistress to you. I’m not a hard woman. I’m maybe not soft, but I’m not hard either.”

It was certainly news to Ringan that the Queen had a soft side and he began to wonder vaguely what it might be like. He did not have long to wait.

“Ringan,” she beckoned. “Come over here, boy!”

Ringan obeyed her in a state of mental conflict. The Queen pointed to her pallid cheek.

“Here, Son,” she invited. “Would you not like to give me a kiss here?”

However, Ringan hesitated. He did not quite know what to do with the invalid cup which he was still holding awkwardly in his hand.

“I must be an awful jade,” said the Queen, reproachfully, “when a big lad like you won’t kiss me!”

However, she did not appear at all angry, so Ringan, still carrying the invalid cup, stepped up and kissed her awkwardly on the specified place. At this, to his astonishment, Queen Marget suddenly pulled him onto her knee and kissed him passionately on the lips.

“There’s a fine fellow!” she exclaimed. “You have to start somewhere, eh? Is there anything else I can do for you, Ringan!”

Ringan wondered exactly what she had in mind. He had a vague idea that it might be a capital offence to accept certain favors from the Queen. Perhaps he was already guilty of some such offence? He decided it would be safest to make a modest request.

“Could I have a plum, your Highness?” he said. “I would like a plum.” He had asked for plums before without success, but no great ill had befallen him.

“A plum, eh--?” said the Queen. “If I was well, I could do better than that. I could show you a thing or two, Ringan. You’d soon forget all about plums, I can tell you! You’d soon forget about plums!”

It was not quite clear to Ringan whether the Queen’s words amounted to a threat or a promise. However, he was never to know, because it was now obvious to good Queen Marget that Ringan was too young to respond to her advances.

“But never heed!” she sighed, pushing Ringan impatiently off her knees, so that he fell roughly to the floor.

“All right, Son,” she sighed. “You go down to the kitchen and tell Bessie I said you were to have two plums! And you may pat the pony sometimes too – but not too often, remember! Now what do you say to that?”

At this point, Nanse returned to attend to her mother, having finished her important business.

“Thank you kindly, your Highness,” said Ringan. “I always liked you, a wee bit. The plums are awful good.”

“That will just do, Ringan!” snapped the Queen. “Run away and eat your plums! Away with you---!”

Her Highness waved dismissively and Ringan bowed and left, grateful to escape unscathed.

“It’s a good job,” said the Queen to Nanse, “that children are easily pleased. That boy is always after plums. I think he must have a tapeworm or something.”

Here, she pounded her bolster with her fists and adjusted it behind her.

“What a night I put in last night! I heard a knock that can’t be mistaken on my door in the small hours.”

“Whatever do you mean, Mother?” asked Nanse, who was beginning to lose patience with her.

“Death came knocking at my door last night,” said the Queen, “though it turned out to be no more than a warning. The next time he calls it will be to make me his own.”

For many weeks now, Queen Marget had been subject to sudden changes of mood, and Nanse had tried her best to endure these patiently. But the Queen was not an easy invalid and there were times when the patience of Job might have been tested by her tantrums.

“Come Mother, it’s not that bad, surely,” encouraged Nanse. “You’re perhaps no better, but you’re no worse either.”

“It’s no thanks to you I’m not dead yet,” replied the Queen, bitterly.

Nanse had heard this reproach more times than she could remember, and every time it was like hot coals on her head.

“Mother,” she said, coldly, “I’ve told you more than once I’m sorry I didn’t succeed in bringing you water from the Magic Well. How many times do I have to tell you? I was just about to fill my flask for you when up jumped this great nasty frog from behind some bracken and stood in my way! It didn’t matter what I said to him – he wouldn’t let me fill the flask unless I would promise to marry him.”

“Yes, I hear you,” said the Queen. “I must be growing old, right enough! Things like this just didn’t happen when I was a young girl. Speaking puddocks---! Maybe it’s time I was gone for good.”

“You sound as if you don’t believe me,” said Nanse. “Don’t speak to me like that, Mother! That’s what happened.”

Queen Marget had certainly had some difficulty in believing the story Nanse had told her about her experience at the Well at the World’s End, and she still had her doubts.

“A big speaking puddock got in your way and wanted you to marry him!” she exclaimed. “A puddock that chases after girls! A romantic

puddock---! I never heard the like! In all my born days, I never heard the like!” Such antics were certainly outside the Queen’s experience.

“It’s God’s honest truth, Mother. I could do nothing with him He wouldn’t shift out of my way with his huge flabby body. I’m not making it up, Mother. It’s God’s honest truth! Eilidh must have told you the same thing?”

“Eilidh said very little to me,” said the Queen. “She never does. She just said she was sorry she couldn’t get any water for me and mumbled something about a frog getting in the way. Anyway I was too upset to listen to Eilidh’s excuses when she came home empty-handed.”

Queen Marget suddenly felt very tired. Maybe Nanse *was* telling the truth. The world had changed so much since she had been a girl, and she had felt so different then. Every day she had felt glad to be alive.

“All right,” she said wearily. “I suppose it must be true --- I believe you. I don’t know who else would.”

Suddenly, a wave of anger came over her. “Well you hussy,” she added, “could you not have made the frog move? You could have pushed it out of your way, surely?”

“He was far too heavy, Mother,” answered Nanse. “He was bigger than me.”

“He was bigger than you?”

Nanse nodded. The Queen was astonished, but tried to take this in.

“Some puddock!” she said.

“Anyway,” she added, “you might have thought of trying to coax it for my sake. Did you never think of trying to suck up to it? You were always good at that.”

“He wouldn’t be coaxed, Mother,” said Nanse. He was a very stubborn puddock.”

“Do you know what I think?” said the Queen, scornfully. “I’m thinking that Master Rintoul said that only a true loving heart could bring me water from the Magic Well. You thought you loved me, but

seemingly, you didn't love me enough. I must be an awful jade that not even my own daughter cares about me."

Nanse had already apologised several times for her failure to deliver the magic water. How many more times, she wondered, would she have to do so? It was so unfair, when she had really had no other choice in the matter.

"Mother, I'm really sorry at the way things have turned out," she said. "Do you think I really wanted to go all that way and come back with nothing? I did my best – nobody can do more -- but the puddock was so big and ugly, he disgusted me. The very sight of him with his podgy body was enough to make me sick."

"Oh yes, is that not typical of you?" the Queen said bitterly. "What a pity it would be if you were disgusted! I was disgusted many a time with what I had to do for you when you were a baby. Do you know this? You were the filthiest infant child I ever saw. Don't you speak to me about being disgusted! I might have known you would put yourself first. Me! Me! Me! All the time---! What a horrible ugly thing selfishness is! I am glad I've never been selfish. Here am I at Death's door and you wouldn't do one little thing to save me."

After this little speech, the Queen took out her cambric handkerchief and sobbed into it. At least she could be thankful she was not selfish. Whatever happened to her now, she had led an unselfish life. That was some relief, whatever.

"Mother," said Nanse, "well you know that that isn't fair. You surely would not have wanted me to marry such a creature!"

"Don't be stupid!" replied the Queen, tearfully. "You could have persuaded him. Marry a frog---? Don't be ridiculous!"

Nanse was relieved that the Queen had never considered marrying the puddock as a possibility. However, when she looked at her mother, she began to wonder whether she had made a mistake. The Queen now looked old and haggard and had black circles around her eyes.

“I tell you what it is,” said the Queen wistfully, “you bring children into this world and you get precious little thanks for it in the end, after all you do. I often think the more you do the less you’re thought of.”

The best times, she sobbed, “were when you were tiny children running about the garden like so many butterflies, and I didn’t know what was before me.”

“Stop it Mother!” Cried Nanse, who could see that her mother was whipping herself up into a frenzy of self-pity.

“If I’d known what was ahead of me,” wailed the Queen, “if I’d known what I know now, I’d have drowned myself in Loch Leven long ago, but I was always too afraid of the water. I used to be afraid of being dead – what a fear of death I had – but I’m not afraid now –

I WISH I WAS DEAD!”

“Shush!” said Nanse, who was now seriously alarmed by the noise her mother was making.

“I DO! I DO! I DO! I WISH I WAS DEAD AND IN MY GRAVE ON THE BRIERIELAW!” shouted the Queen, and she stamped hysterically round the chamber. Suddenly she appeared to possess extraordinary energy for someone so ill.

“Quiet, for the love of Goodness!” said Nanse, and to her relief, her mother stopped shouting and stamping. However, she continued to sob pathetically.

“That’s where I belong now – in the graveyard below the green grass! I’ve done my best, but nobody cares a button for me. You’ll be sorry some day, Nanse. When I look back, I wish I had been kinder sometimes to my own mother. She was a kind gentle soul – she really was – and I wasn’t always as kind to her as I should have been.”

At this point, the Queen’s sobbing became more hysterical. “SHE WAS KINDER THAN ME! SHE WAS KINDER THAN ME! I wish I could take back some of the cruel things I said to her, but it’s too late now. Everything is too late!”

“Somebody will hear you,” warned Nanse. “Hold your foolish tongue for any sake! Will you stop this hullabaloo?”

But the Queen hardly seemed to notice Nanse's presence. She continued relentlessly:

"Down below the green grass with the alien stars twinkling for thousands and thousands of years from the far side of Eternity. What a long time we are all dead: all the time before we're born and all the time after we die. It doesn't bear thinking about.

"Do you know, there's an old man in Paisley makes out that hundreds of thousands of years ago, long before we were born, the world was full of great lizards bigger than elephants: huge puddock-like creatures with big sharp teeth, leaping about biting each other all over the place. He says he has seen their bones in the ground.

"Where were we all then, I wonder? We were dead, but we didn't know we were dead!"

"Mother, everybody knows that that man in Paisley is crazy," cried Nanse. "He's daft in the head! They had to lock him up in a dungeon to keep him quiet. We don't want that to happen to you.. I think you've gotten puddocks on the brain, so you have."

"Puddocks on the brain, have I," said the Queen, angrily. "Don't you dare speak to me like that!" You are the one that has puddocks on the brain. I never thought a thing about them until you told me about that creature at Ardnamurchan."

At this point, the Queen's mood suddenly changed again.

"Nanse," she said, plaintively, "when I'm dead, promise me you will come and put a little posy of flowers on my grave, once in a while! Even a few forget-me-nots would do. You'll not forget me altogether? You'll try to remember the good things about me?"

Nanse shook her head, breathed heavily and drew up a chair purposefully to her mother. Somehow she would have to take control of the situation.

"Mother," she said sternly, "you are making a fool of yourself. Try to settle down!"

She peered anxiously at her mother's face.

“Your face is all begrimed with tears,” she added. “Now that I have a good look at you, I can see you are no better. I don’t like the look of you at all.”

“Don’t you dare speak to me!” bridled the Queen. “It’s all your fault I’m like this.”

Nanse could see that her mother’s behaviour was beyond the pale, even for her. But what did you do with hysterical people? You were supposed to hit them in the face. Perhaps this would do herself some good as well as her mother. However, she simply put her hand on the Queen’s shoulder, and said: “Mother---! It’s nobody’s fault, Mother.”

“Do you know, Nanse,” said the Queen, wistfully, “Each day I see myself in the looking glass, I see my face turning older. I can see my skin starting to wrinkle and my lips starting to wither away. I’m turning into an old crone, Nanse. When I was a lass I used to say to myself: ‘I’m too good to waste! *I’ll* never be old – I’ll just always stay the way I am now!’

“I don’t like myself any more, Nanse. Sometimes I see myself like that old witch they burnt in the Market Square, howling and screeching with her old rags blazing all about her. I think to myself that maybe she was once a bonny young thing with no harm in her. Now that I think of it, maybe I should have stopped them from doing that. I didn’t think of it until it was too late. Everything is always too late!”

“Nanse,” she sobbed, “my whole life has turned into a horrible dream. You never get another chance, Nanse! That’s the trouble. You never get another chance!”

Here Nanse laid her hand on the Queen’s forehead. It certainly felt hot, as if she was running a fever.

“You mustn’t let yourself get excited like this, Mother. It’s not good for you.”

She handed the Queen a clean linen handkerchief, and she she blew her nose on it vigorously.

“I know, I know I’m a silly thing. Maybe if I could have a really good cry, I would feel the better for it? I just can’t get my cry right out.”

“C’mon back to bed, Mother!” ordered Nanse.

“I’ll get Ringan to help.”

Queen Marget nodded weakly and Nanse pulled the bell rope.

“You’re all worked up for no good reason,” said Nanse. “You’re afraid of things that will never happen. I think it’s more than time you were having another rest.”

Ringan now entered hurriedly. Nanse beckoned to him and she and Ringan helped the Queen into the bed, but in the process, Ringan accidentally touched the Queen’s bosom. As soon as she was in her bed, she sat up and pointed furiously at Ringan.

“You’re too free with your hands, you! What do you think you are doing? What are you up to?”

“N-N-Nothing, your Highness!” cried the bewildered Ringan. I didn’t do nothing.

“You wretch that you are,” the Queen went on. “You keep your vulgar hands to yourself.! I felt your impudent fingers on my breast just now. You must not interfere with the royal person. People have lost their heads for no more than you did just now.”

She then glared at Ringan, who backed away anxiously.

I was just trying to help you, your Highness, he wailed.

The Queen then imperiously motioned Ringan to leave the room.

“OUT---!” she screamed.

Nanse then joined in, raised her hand to strike him, and aimed a kick at him. Ringan retired in confusion, bowing and trying awkwardly to run backwards. The Queen composed herself.

“That knave will be the death of me. The nerve of him---! Who does he think he is? I don’t know---! Thrashings seem to do him no good!

“But how would YOU like all YOUR teeth and all YOUR hair to fall out? A bonny sight you would look: a woman with no hair and no teeth! A bonny sight YOU would look!”

Nanse could make no sense of this. She became alarmed again. Perhaps her mother was really going insane? Perhaps she already was insane?

“I think you’re quite delirious, Mother,” she said. “What, in Heaven’s name, are you talking about?”

“That’s what happens to people with Gregory’s Ill,” explained the Queen. “Their teeth and hair fall out before they die. Some hair came out on my comb this morning,” she added, pathetically.

“So that’s what’s bothering you!” said Nanse, relieved that there was some reason for her mother’s remarks.

“Master Rintoul told me,” the Queen added. “I’m frightened whenever I think about it.”

“There’s been hair on your comb every time you’ve done your hair for as long as I can remember,” said Nanse. “I’ll be all right, Mother. Morag will fetch the magic water. I’m sure she’ll get round this awful frog one way or another.”

“I hope so. Oh, I do hope so!” said the Queen.

“I’m sure she won’t be long now,” said Nanse.

Knowing the difficulties of the long journey from Ardnamurchan to Abernethy, Nanse was far from sure when Morag would arrive, but she felt she should say something encouraging. However, her words failed to have the desired effect.

“Where is she anyway?” said the Queen with a start. “She should have been home before this time. Something has happened to her. I’m sure of it.”

“Nothing will have happened to her,” said Nanse.

“Morag has more charm than you and she should get on better with the puddock,” said the Queen, pleasantly. Nanse shook her head sadly at this remark.

“Mother---!” she protested.

“I think that maybe the puddock would like Morag better than you,” said the Queen. “I hope he’s not keeping her tied up like a prisoner, or something, at Ardnamurchan.”

“It is in my mind,” she continued relentlessly, “that maybe you were too proud altogether to speak in a kindly way to the creature. No doubt you will have been tactless and put his back up. You were always tactless, Nanse. You don’t take after me at all.”

“My own mother, bless her, always used to say to me, ‘Meg,’ she would say, “a true princess doesn’t look down her nose at anybody or anything.’ I’ve never forgotten her saying that.”

“I tried to speak nicely to him, Mother, but he was such a boor,” said Nanse.

“Maybe,” said the Queen, “if Morag explains to the creature just what it is asking, it will see sense. It may be that he doesn’t know much about the fleshly side of marriage.”

“Our Morag doesn’t know much about it herself.” Said Nanse. She got a wet sappy kiss once from cousin Geordie. I think that’s about all she’s had in her whole life.”

“Really,” said the Queen, “that was when they were only children! The trouble with you, Nanse, is that you take after your father.

“A real useless pudding he was, if there ever was one. Many’s the sore heart I had with him. To be married to a puddock couldn’t be any worse than being yoked to the likes of him. If there’s one thing that keeps me going, it’s knowing I’ll never have to share a bed with that again.”

“Mother, I wish you wouldn’t speak about Father like that,” protested Nanse. “You must have been friendly with him sometimes, or Morag and I would never have been born.”

“Friendliness,” replied the Queen, “had nothing to do with it.”

At this point, there was a commotion in the courtyard below and Nanse moved to look out of the window.

“Gracious me,” exclaimed Nanse, “here’s Morag back again. ! She’s down in the courtyard and she’s running like some bogey man were after her. I didn’t expect to see her quite so soon.”

Hope sprang once more in the breast of Queen Marget. It was as if an enormous burden of anxiety had been taken from her.

“The Lord be praised!” she cried joyfully. “She’ll have brought the magic water with her?”

“I don’t know,” said Nanse, “but she’s carrying the flask in her hand. She’s looking rather upset about something.”

“Don’t say she’s come home with an empty flask! O please don’t tell me that!” implored the Queen.

At this moment, Morag entered, running, carrying the silver flask with the water, in her hand.

“Mother, I have done it!” she cried triumphantly. “See---magic water---!”

“Give me that flask at once!” said the Queen. “My life’s not done yet!”

The Queen snatched the flask from Morag’s hands, took out the stopper and drank deeply from it.

“Mother, gently,” said Morag, you were just to take the one sip!”

The Queen then waited expectantly for a few seconds for some result. Nothing appeared to be happening.

“Huh!” she scoffed. “I don’t know any difference! It’s a cheat! That’s what comes of pinning your hopes on puddocks.”

However, the expression on Queen Marget’s face turned to amazement as she began to experience the inner effects of the water. Suddenly, she took a deep breath and exhaled deeply.

“Ha-ah-ah!” She gasped. “I’m telling a lie! I think I do feel a bit better already. I can feel it working away in my insides. It’s not unlike a tickle.”

She then took a number of very deep breaths, and as her daughters watched, the color came back to her cheeks and the lines seemed to dissolve away from her face.

“I can scarcely believe it,” cried Nanse, “but you *are* looking more like yourself.....indeed you are!”

“Who was I like before, I wonder?” said the Queen.

“I’m better all right! I haven’t felt like this since I was a young girl. Hand me my dressing gown, Nanse! I’m going to get up out of this bed.”

Nanse, however, thought it was rather too soon for the Queen to think of getting up, so she made no move to obey.

“Mother,” she cautioned, “do you think that’s wise?”

“Hand me that gown you hussy that you are!” the Queen snapped at her.

However, Morag was more confident than her sister that the magic water had the power to cure her mother’s illness permanently. She did not want to see a scene develop on her return home, so she quickly handed the robe to the Queen. Queen Marget then rose majestically and donned the robe and slippers.

“Do you know,” she said, “I feel a lot better than ever I did before I fell sick? Well Morag, I knew you wouldn’t let me down. Is this not just marvellous? I’m as light as a feather on my feet.

“See---!” she cried delightedly. “Just look at this!” and the good Queen Marget danced lightly around the chamber laughing and uttering little cries of pleasure as she went.

“I think we will maybe have a little dance in the hall tonight,” she exclaimed. “This is quite a miracle! But Morag, my child, how did you manage to get round this extraordinary puddock?”

Just at this time, a knock came to the door and Ringan entered breathlessly.

“Your Highness,” gasped Ringan. “Master Rintoul is outside asking for to see you.”

“Master Rintoul---! What’s he doing here?”

“I sent for him first thing this morning, Mother,” said Nanse, “when I saw you were in such bad fettle.”

“Oh you did, did you?” said the Queen. “I didn’t know that.” She turned to Ringan, who was glad to see quite a benevolent expression on her countenance.

“Well then, my boy, show him in at once!”

Ringan lost no time in making his exit.

“Mercy, I’ve no time to speak to him just now!” said the Queen. “He must have ridden all the way from Cupar this morning when he heard I was worse. But I could have done without this.”

In a moment, Ringan returned with Rintoul, who was carrying a well-worn leather satchel slung round his neck. He bowed low to the Queen.

“Your Grace,” he said, respectfully, “I rode here as quickly as I could when I heard I was needed.”

“It’s an awful day to bring you so far, Master Rintoul,” replied the Queen, rather distantly.

“I’ve ridden here straight from the killing-house at Cupar,” said Rintoul, “but I didn’t grudge the travel, your Grace. I have brought something with me that will maybe do some good, though I fear there is little that can be done.”

He then opened his satchel and brought out a bulky bloodstained paper parcel. When he pulled back the paper from its content, it appeared to be the brains of some large animal. The Queen and her daughters fell back from this sight, retching in disgust .

“What the living Harry is that?” exclaimed the Queen.

“It’s a poultice, your Grace,” replied Rintoul, “for your head.”

“For my head---?” exclaimed the Queen, in astonishment.

“It’s a special poultice,” explained Rintoul, eagerly, “that’s made with the brains of a sheep that’s not long dead. If it’s put on hot it sometimes brings some easement to the headache that comes with Gregory’s Ill. The sheep’s brains are for drawing out the agony that comes at the end, not long before you give up the ghost.”

“Master Rintoul,” said the Queen deliberately, “this is very good of you, but I am glad to say I’ll not be needing your poultice, so you can put it away. Put it away out of my sight! I don’t like the look of it.”

Rintoul put his poultice back into his satchel reluctantly. He had gone to a great deal of trouble to obtain it at the shambles and bring it to the Palace. He felt he belonged to a thankless profession. However, the Queen went on:

“The Princess Morag, bless her, has just come back from the Well at the World’s End and brought me some Magic Water, and I’m right as rain again, thanks to your wise counsel, Master Rintoul.”

Rintoul was comforted by these words and brightened up. He had already thought of another way in which the sheep’s brains could be

put to good use. Allowance could also be made for this visit in his bill, so his journey would not be wasted.

“I wondered what you were doing out of bed, your Grace. Indeed you are looking a good deal better, and you haven’t lost your hair, I see. That is a good sign.. I’m really glad to hear this wonderful news, your Grace--- really delighted --- but you’d better be careful not to try to do too much at first. Do everything gently, that’s the thing! Take your time! No excitement!”

“Of course, of course---!” agreed the Queen.

“Master Rintoul,” she went on kindly, “we’re greatly in your debt, but we *are* very busy today. I really don’t know whether I’m on my head or my heels! Could you come back and see us in, say, a month’s time, and we’ll see that you’re well rewarded for your trouble.”

The Queen then motioned Ringan to see Rintoul out, and Rintoul took his leave.

“I’ll come back and see you, your Grace, about this time a month today then. My, I never saw such a turn for the better! What a blessing this has been! What a blessing---!”

Rintoul retired ceremoniously with Ringan, walking backwards and bowing. “Your Grace---!” he said.

“I’ll see you’re well rewarded, Master Rintoul! We’re greatly beholden to you,” cried the Queen as he made his exit.

“Did you ever see the like of that poultice,” said the Queen. “Here, I’m glad I didn’t have to put that on my head!” she laughed, jovially .

“There was a while there, I thought I was going to be sick,” said Nanse. “Imagine bringing a thing like that into the palace!”

* * * * *

In the meantime, word had been spread around inside the palace that the Princess Morag had gone all the way to Ardnamurchan to fetch magic water to cure her mother, and that good Queen Marget was well again. Everybody came running, and soon, riders galloped out frantically in every direction on fast horses to spread the glad tidings

throughout the land of Alba, and everywhere there was great rejoicing. And the folk sang and danced loyally, and praised the little brown princess. But of course, they didn't know the whole story any more than you do.

* * * * *

“Where was I?” said the Queen. “Oh yes, I was asking, Morag, how you managed to get round this puddock?”

Morag's face fell at this. “M-M-Mother, I have something to tell you. I didn't get round him.”

“What---!” exclaimed the Queen.

“What do you mean you didn't get round him?” demanded Nanse.

“How did you get the water then?”

“He got round me,” said Morag. “He was too stubborn for me and I had to marry him.”

At first an awesome silence greeted this admission, but this was followed by consternation, as the Queen and Nanse considered the implications of Morag's action.

“WHAT---!” shouted the Queen. “YOU HAD TO WHAT?” You had to marry him! In the name of all that's good---! Nobody marries puddocks. I never heard---“

“What's more,” added Morag, “he'll maybe be coming here in a few days, and we'll be setting up house together in the palace. I hope that's all right with you, Mother? He said he was going to leap all the way here from the Magic Well.”

“He's coming here in a few days – a FROG!” exclaimed the Queen. “I can't credit my own ears. You don't mean to tell me that he intends to live here – among us? You are expecting ME to give this puddock house room?”

Morag's deadful secret was now out, so she made up her mind to put a brave face on it.

“Yes Mother,” she said boldly, “and he said I was to tell you to start preparing a reception for him, and to be sure and let you know that he doesn’t like toad-in-the-hole.”

The news that she was expected to prepare a reception for a frog and to entertain it as a house guest was a fresh blow to Queen Marget. Her face darkened.

“So it wants a reception, does it? It will get a reception all right from me. He doesn’t like toad-in-the-hole,” said she grimly. “You expect ME to see to his meat as well. I’LL GIVE HIM TOAD-IN-THE-HOLE! HE’LL GET TOAD-IN-THE-HOLE OVER THE HEAD IF HE COMES NEAR ME! I’LL CLASH HIM OVER THE HEAD WITH IT, SO I WILL!”

Queen Marget became quite red in the face and looked as if she might choke with rage.

“Oh Mother!” said Morag. She felt it was best not to say very much until her mother came to terms with the new situation.

“Have you no sense at all, you stupid creature?” screamed Nanse. “How could you go and marry a frog?” Mercy on us! Whatever will people think? Whatever will they say? And whoever will want to marry ME with a huge green puddock for a brother-in-law? You must go and tell the creature you have changed your mind.”

The Queen joined in, more quietly now.

“Nanse is surely right, Morag. We can’t have a frog for a close relative. Everybody would just laugh at us. We have a position to uphold, and that would not be possible with a puddock boasting and proclaiming himself a friend of ours at Court. You had better tell the beast you have changed your mind!”

And Nanse and the Queen stormed at Morag until she thought they were never going to stop. Then Eilidh came hurrying in to the chamber and she joined in as well. She had been told the splendid news of Queen Marget’s recovery on her return from Perth, and she had hastened to the Queen’s chamber.

She was astonished at the uproar she found there, and when she heard that she had gained a frog for a goodbrother, she was certainly a

bit put out, and she said as much. However, she was less proud than Nanse, so she wasn't quite so angry.

Morag would not listen to any of them. She had made a bargain and that was that!

"Tell the creature," said the Queen, "that you didn't know what you were doing!"

"But I did know what I was doing," said Morag, stubbornly.

The Queen was touched by this and her anger ebbed away. After all, now that she was cured of Gregory's Ailment, nothing really mattered very much except her daughter's happiness.

"Just think, child, you have your whole life before you!" she said kindly. "I didn't bring you up, Morag, to marry a puddock. You don't want to spend the rest of your days shackled to such a creature, though I daresay many is the woman who has to make do with little better. After seventeen year living with your father, nobody knows that better than me. You tell your puddock you're not properly married at all, because there was no priest present, and get quit of him once and for all! Tell him---!"

"Mother," insisted Morag. "That would not be honest! We were properly married. We had a ceremony." Morag was a princess who had always been true to her word.

"Ceremony my foot---!" Snapped Nanse. "Humbug---! It's against the law of Scotland to marry a frog. It's called 'beastiality.' It would be a rude thing to do."

This remark was too much for Eilidh, who was disgusted by the very sight of the puddock.

"I am glad you're well again, Mother. I will say that, but I don't think I want to hear any more of this," she declared, and edged out of the room.

But nobody paid much attention to Eilidh.

"Are YOU going to tell him or are you not?" screamed Nanse.

The Queen, who was a stickler for the due observance of the law, saw a possible way out.

“There were no witnesses, were there” she enquired. “The marriage was never consummated, was it?”

Morag looked rather puzzled. “He made me touch his body,” she said portentously.

“He made you touch his body!” exclaimed the Queen.

“In Heaven’s name, what does that matter? I’ve touched frogs many a time. It didn’t mean I was married to them.

“CONSUMMATED – you know what I’m speaking about?”

Morag nodded. She did have some idea.

“God preserve us!” exclaimed the Queen. What am I saying? It couldn’t have been---! Morag, you’ll rue it for the rest of your life if you remain married to this puddock. But whatever you do, don’t let him set foot over the house door. From the sound of him, once he made his way in here, he would be difficult to shift. We might never get quit of him.”

Morag could see that what her mother was saying was only too true, and paced up and down for some moments wringing her hands. However, she had made her decision.

“You can say what you like,” she said. “I’m married to the puddock. I must hold to my promise. A promise must always be kept. That was what you taught me when I was wee. You know that very well; and you are well again, Mother. You won’t die now, will you, Mother?”

“Eh?” said the Queen. “Not just now---I don’t expect—not for a while yet, anyway.”

“To hold to my promise is a small price to pay for that, surely?”

This was an idea which had considerable appeal to Queen Marget. “Bless you, Morag,” she said. “There’s something in what you say. I didn’t think of it in that way..... but I doubt you are too good for this world. You’re so different from your sisters. I’m sure I don’t know who you take after at all. It certainly can’t be your father.”

On hearing her mother say this, Nanse suddenly felt physically sick. For once, words failed her, so she made an ugly face accompanied by loud sucking noises at her sister. Morag succeeded in ignoring this.

“It’s droll,” she said to her mother, “the way things turn out. I never thought when I was wee that I’d end up married to a frog. He’s not what I had in mind for a husband, but I daresay I’ll grow to like him better when I know him better, when I know him well----!”

Nanse now felt she was losing her mother’s support. The Queen was clearly deserting her camp and Nanse felt she could not endure much more of this.

“I think I hear everybody laughing at us already,” she said. “I’ll never be able to hold up my head again if that ugly brute comes to stay here. Mother, if you saw him---he’s yuchie!”

However, this appeal came too late. Queen Marget had already altered her position. She was now impressed by the great sacrifice Morag had been prepared to make for her sake.

“Nanse, Nanse,” she said reproachfully, “I think you should think shame to go on at Morag like this when she was only thinking about her poor sick mother. Morag brought me the magic water. What did YOU do for me? Nothing---! Nothing at all!”

“Mother, he was yuchie,” Nanse went on. “He had a dirty bum.”

“He had WHAT?” EXCLAIMED the Queen.

“He had a dirty bottom---a filthy bum,” added Nanse, with satisfaction. “When I saw him, his haunches were all smeared with brown stuff.”

“MORAG,” bellowed the Queen, “you are surely never going to tell me this puddock is not house trained? Who would clean up after him?”

“That would be Morag’s job,” said Nanse, nastily. “Who else but perfect Morag? She could follow him about with a floor cloth.”

This was a problem the Queen had certainly not anticipated. She was very ‘palace proud’ and liked everything to be clean and tidy. She

firmly believed there should be a place for everything and that everything should be in its place. She was quite sure that the proper place for the puddock was outside the palace, although she felt so indebted to Morag, she might be prepared to stretch a point for her sake. But there was a limit to what she was prepared to endure.

“If he’s not house trained,” she insisted, “He’ll have to stay outside in the yard in a kennel. I’m not having puddocks with dirty bums jumping about fouling my clean floors. I won’t put up with that in the Palace and that’s final. He’ll have to be chained up in a kennel. I’m telling you straight---that’s my last word.”

At this point, Morag rounded sharply on her sister. “Sometimes you have a really nasty tongue in your head, Nanse. I think you should go and wash out your mouth.”

Then she turned to her mother. “Don’t listen to her nonsense, Mother! The puddock’s bottom is sometimes soiled from jumping about in the peat bogs at Ardnamurchan. It’s a very muddy place. But it’s clean dirt, Mother. All he needs is a good wash down at the pump.”

“Well that’s something to be thankful for, at least,” said the Queen. “We have more than enough dirt here with these great dogs slouching about the place.” The Queen then turned angrily on Nanse.

“Nanse, you hussy, YOU’VE tried to mislead me. I have a good mind to warm your ears for you, and if you were younger, I would do it. I know what’s bothering YOU. You are annoyed in case the frog shows you up in a bad light, but when all is said and done, he is your good-brother. What’s done is done. You’d better get used to the idea, and the sooner the better.

“I don’t think I can stand this---!” said Nanse, who was now livid with rage. She tore at her hair, beat a tantrum tattoo on the floor with her feet, then stormed out of the chamber.

The Queen was accustomed to this kind of display from Nanse, and quite indifferent to it.

“Little one, never you heed her!” she said to her younger daughter. “She thinks on nobody but herself. Be patient! Things are not always what they seem. We haven’t seen the end of this affair yet---not by a long chalk!”

At this point, Morag burst into tears.

I just can’t get used with the idea, Mother,” she sobbed. “Being married to a puddock.”

The Queen’s heart melted at this and she moved to put her arm round her daughter.

“Now, now, then,” she comforted. “I know it must be disappointing for you, Morag, but we must keep our chins up here! We can’t have everything we would like! We must remember who we are, eh?”

The Queen pouted. “Here, give your Mammy a kiss!” Morag kissed her proffered mouth and the Queen took her on her knee, as if she had been a little girl. “A cuddle---?” she suggested, and Morag embraced her mother eagerly.

“Mother,” she sobbed, “I’ll have to give up all my happy plans now. I had so many happy plans and now I’ll have to forget them all.”

“I know, I know,” said the Queen. We all have to give up our happy plans.”

“Did you have happy plans, Mother,” asked Morag, tearfully.

“I am sure I did, but I’ve almost forgotten now I ever had any.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t know.”

“Morag,” said Queen Marget, I dare say, in time – in three or four years – we’ll maybe get used to this puddock. We’ll just have to learn to regard him as a member of the Royal Family --- as one of ourselves. I think that’s what we’ll just have to do. Some members of the family have been nothing to be proud of, so maybe a lot of people will hardly notice the difference.”

Morag clung to her mother and sobbed agreement.

“Mother,” she sobbed, “please don’t say you’ll have to chain my goodman up in a kennel! I would like to try and make him happy. Please, Mammy---!”

The Queen patted her daughter’s back comfortingly.

“No, No, I don’t think it will come to that. We’ll maybe not need to chain him anyway. There, there, Mammy knows best!

“Just try not to think any more about it tonight! You’re quite worn out, lass, after all your travel. I tell you what, I’m feeling frisky and I’m going down to have a dance in the Hall. I took another wee drop of that water and I want to have a word with the Thane of Fife. I won’t be back here tonight --- not if I can help it!”

“But where will you be sleeping, Mother?” asked Morag.

“Never you mind about that!” muttered the Queen, rising to leave the chamber. “I’ll be fine. Your own bed is never made up yet, so just you sleep here tonight, and you can go back to your own chamber tomorrow morning.”

“All right, Mother, if you think that’s best!”

“Goodnight then, Morag!” said the Queen. “Go straight to your bed and have a good sleep. Things will maybe seem better tomorrow. They often do.”

This was sage advice, and Queen Marget’s state of mind had evidently improved greatly as a result of taking the magic water. Morag was glad she could take credit for that, and dried her tears on her handkerchief.

“I think I will have a bit read first,” she said briskly. “It’s too early yet to go to sleep. Goodnight, Mammy!”

The Queen kissed her tenderly and left the chamber purposefully. Morag then undressed for bed. A clock in the courtyard stuck nine dolefully. She took a nightgown out of a drawer and put it on. She then chose a favorite book from the bookcase, about great giants with Celtic names that had lived in Alba in ancient times, and climbed into bed. She tried to read, but after a short while, the words blurred before her eyes, and she put the book down and started to sob, “What’ll I do? What’ll I do? Oh Mercy, what’ll I do?”

She then lay down and sobbed herself into a dreaming sleep. In the distance, there was the faint sound of a pibroch. In her dream, she sat up in bed and saw the image of the puddock wearing a red velvet

jacket, green stockings and a coronet, by the bedside, standing looking at her, intently. And the frog spoke.

“That’s us yoked,!” he declared triumphantly. “Married you are from this very moment to a puddock, and a long and happy life to the pair of us, my bonny lass.”

“What will I do?” wailed Morag.

“Will you nurse me when I’m old and dodderly, and wipe the slavers from my dribbling mouth without grumbling and making any complaint?” demanded the puddock.

“No! No! No! I can’t do it! I can’t!” pleaded Morag

“Will you not go into a huff when I have to thrash you soundly?” he said.

“Please---!” pleaded Morag, wringing her hands.

“And a long and happy life to the pair of us, my bonny lass – till Death do us part!” said the puddock, and with that, he hopped slowly out of the dream into the far distance. As he disappeared, a dream image of the Queen appeared.

“I can’t credit my own ears,” the Queen said. “Nobody marries puddocks!”

“What will I do?” wailed Morag, and the image of the Queen was joined by the figure of Nanse.

“It’s against the law of Scotland to marry with a puddock, rasped Nanse. “It’s called ‘bestiality’ and it’s ever so rude.”

“Please, God, what will I do?” pleaded Morag,

“His haunches were all smeared with filth. He had a dirty bum,” continued Nanse.

“I doubt your Goodman will have to be chained up in a kennel!” said the Queen.

“Perfect Morag will follow him around with a cloth,” sneered Nanse. “She can wipe up after him.”

Morag moaned in her sleep in anguish at these remarks.

Then she heard the Queen’s voice declaring: “You don’t want to spend the rest of your days yoked to a puddock....the rest of your days

yoked to a puddock.....yoked to a puddock.....to a puddock.....puddock!”

Her voice was at first loud and dominating, but it gradually faded, evidently into a great distance, and at the same time the images of Queen Marget and Nanse gradually became transparent and disappeared altogether. Morag was now awake and sitting bolt upright, and she heard herself groaning:

“Oh No! What will I do? Mercy, what will I do?”

However, she now felt much calmer and lay down again. Her dream was gone and at least it would be a day or two before the real puddock arrived at the palace. With this comforting thought, she soon fell into a deep peaceful sleep.

* * * * *

By this time, inside the palace, the news of the Princess Morag’s strange marriage had spread and Queen Marget’s miraculous cure had become yesterday’s news. There was great confusion. Heads were being put together, counsel was being given, voices were raised in anger and nobody knew what best to do. Princess Eilidh locked herself in her room in a tid, and Princess Nanse strode about with a face like thunder, screaming at the servants --- she had a face on her that would sour milk, some said. It was just as well for the Princess Morag that she was fast asleep and blissfully unaware of what was going on.

It was also just as well that she did not know that her Goodman was closer behind her than she believed. Although it had been the puddock’s intention to wait a few days before following her, after she had left the Well of True Water, he had been so excited at the prospect of leaving Ardnamurchan and starting his new life at Court as a Prince Consort, or at least as a Duke, that he could wait no longer than a few hours. He was weary of his life at the Well at the World’s End. The prospect of regular meals and the vision of himself bedecked in a red

velvet jacket with lace cuffs beckoned him on, and he had another secret hope that we must not talk about here. So he took a last look at the Well, where he had lived so many years, and started to hop the long, long journey to the Royal Palace at Abernethy.

Although his legs were strong for leaping, he was not accustomed to travelling very far from the Well and he found the going hard. Hop, hop, hop, over hills and crags, and across mosses and moors and through mirk dark forests; there was no end to it, at all, at all. His feet were sore and his legs were stiff by the time he reached Loch Linnhe. However, he swam across the Loch at Corran and struggled on, on the other side.

Day after day, after day, he hopped under the sun and rain, and through mists, and through brambly places, until one evening he reached the western end of Loch Rannoch. By this time, the soles of his feet were red and raw, his skin was torn with thorns and he felt he could go no further: that he would die by the lochside among these dark mountains, and never see the Royal Palace at Abernethy . One last leap, though, took him into the shallow water at the shore of Loch Rannoch, and there he lay motionless for many hours, his sore tired body bathed in the cool clear water. And after a while, he felt restored, though he could hop no further. He discovered, however, that he could still swim with ease.

So he set out to swim the length of Loch Rannoch, and with every stroke, he felt better. He swam with an easy breast stroke on the surface of the loch and he swam deep down in its waters, and when he was on the surface, below the squeaking, swooping bats, he could see Schiehallion, Alba's magic mountain, in the distance before him. Inside, Finn and the ancient Celtic warriors slept on, awaiting Scotland's hour of need. The mountain was bathed in moonlight and it was so very, very beautiful that when he looked at it, the puddock lost all sense of himself and his poor torn body.

At last he reached the eastern end of the loch, made over land for Loch Tummel, where he plunged in and swam to the eastern end of that. And when he reached it, he felt refreshed enough to continue his long hop down into the Lowlands.

* * * * *

As the little brown princess slumbered in the palace, she little knew that the puddock was already approaching the City of Perth, and was only a few hours hopping away. And as she slept, the forenoon slipped away into a cloudless night. A million stars twinkled from before the time of history, and the bright moon shone over the land of Alba, where, outside the palace, everybody was still hooching and rejoicing at Queen Marget's recovery. They were as yet unaware of the prospect of an unwelcome addition of a new Prince to the Royal Family. But inside the palace, folk went sadly to their sleeping beds.