

LANCASTER AND THE PRINCESS BOOSHA

Told by Granddad Brandsberg many years ago

Lancaster was so bored he couldn't even spit. Here he was, the biggest frog in the puddle. But that was no big deal. His puddle—you could call it a pond if you stretched the truth some—was just a wide place in a tiny stream that trickled across the meadow.

Lancaster was so tired of everything. He was tired of sitting in the sun until his green skin got dry. He was tired of plopping into the water when something scared him. He was tired of eating flies all the time.

There had been a time when he was really proud of his skill at catching flies. It would start out with the approach of a dim-witted fly zuzzing along, looking for an easy meal, but not paying much attention.

All at once, **Thwack! Gulp!** It happened so fast you couldn't see what had happened. You couldn't even hear it. In less than a blink of an eye, an airborne fly became no more than a sly smile on Lancaster's thin lips. But eating flies got old, too. It was about as much fun as eating three-day-old popcorn.

Lancaster closed his eyes and tried to doze in the warmth of the summer sun. Suddenly, his eyes popped wide open. Even sleeping was dull and tiresome. *I gotta do something about this*, he told himself. But what? For a long time, he sat thinking as hard as he could. The more he thought, the more he scowled.

Everyone else in the tiny pond asked each other what was wrong with Lancaster. Why was he making such an ugly face?

Why didn't he answer whenever someone spoke to him? The other frogs just didn't get it. Nor did any of the other neighbors. They all talked about Lancaster and his strange problem, but they were all too shy to ask him about it. For one thing, he was a lot bigger than any of them.

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Late in the afternoon, a delicate lacewing with golden eyes flew across the pond and stopped to rest on a cattail

stalk a short distance from the frog. For a moment, she listened to the gossiping neighbors. Then she cleared her tiny throat to get Lancaster's attention. He totally ignored her.

"Lancaster!"

Still he frowned into space, hearing nothing.

Seeing that Lancaster's mind was far away, the fragile lacewing pushed off into the air and moved silently, slowly toward the frog. As gently as the flick of a flea's whisker, she landed on the frog's head, right next to his left eye.

"Lancaster!" Her tiny voice rang out so everyone else heard it. They all turned to look. Everyone but Lancaster.

"Are you in there?" the lacewing asked, lifting the frog's left eyelid and peering into the dark cavern of his skull.

With a blink, Lancaster tried to see who it was. He shifted a little and the insect rose into the air. **Thwack!** Lancaster couldn't believe it. The little lacewing was still floating in the air, inches away. A second time he fired his famous tongue and missed.

"How did you do that?" he demanded, still shocked at her escaping him.

"If I told you it was magic would you believe me?"

"Heck, no," he said. *"That's a bunch of hooey."*

"Well," she said, not the least bit disturbed, *"I can see you have a lot to learn."*

Lancaster looked at her suspiciously but didn't say anything. The idea of such a small bug acting so sassy irritated him.

"I know you're bored," she said. *"You think life is passing you by, that day after day, nothing ever happens, that living here is a terrible drag."*

Now he was curious. How did she know that? He listened.

"If you really want some excitement, I can help you."

"You? A puny little lacewing like you? Be serious!" He closed his eyes and hoped that she would take the hint and leave.

"I am serious. Just watch."

Lancaster simply had to open his eyes again.

“But before we start, I must warn you about one thing: Don’t **EVER** let any girl kiss your lips.”

“*No sweat!* I don’t even know what a kiss is, but with a hissy sound like that, it sure doesn’t sound very good.”

“Just one other thing,” the lacewing said seriously. “A person named Malcolm will help you, if you let him. He will be your gentleman’s gentleman.” Her strange little smile made Lancaster nervous.

He doubted the frail bug could do much. Why, her brain is smaller than a fly speck—what does she know, anyhow? Still, he stared into her golden eyes. Slowly, magically, the tiny eyes seemed to get bigger and bigger until all Lancaster could see was a shimmering golden light. It was like the sun blasting away at him, putting him to sleep.

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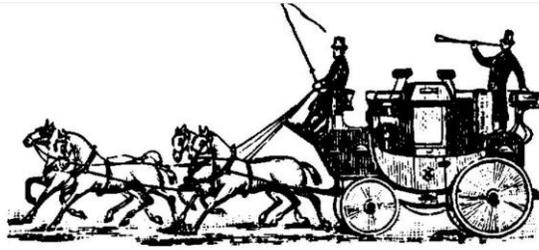
“Sir! Your coach is waiting! Here are your clothes.”

Somehow Lancaster knew this was Malcolm and Malcolm would know exactly what to do. As for himself, Lancaster had no idea what clothes were or how he was supposed to use them.

“Like this,” Malcolm said, showing him how to put one foot into each of the pants legs. Before he knew it, Lancaster had put on a fine velvet suit colored forest green, stockings, boots and a dashing purple hat with a curled white plume on one side. Just before he turned to leave, he saw a frog sitting in the water, staring at him. That frog looks just like me, he thought, a bit puzzled. With his hand, he touched his moustache and found it felt like soft hair.

Lancaster wanted to ask a lot of questions. But he decided he had better wait. So, quietly, he followed Malcolm up the slope, away from the little pond. Moments later, he was seated in a fine coach, rumbling along a stone road. Four white horses pulled the coach along at a fast pace.

Lancaster couldn’t believe he was moving so rapidly. For a long time, he watched out the window as the countryside zipped by.



After a while, he turned to Malcolm, who had been watching him thoughtfully. "We're making very good time," Malcolm smiled.

Lancaster tried to not look puzzled, but the truth was, he didn't know where they were going. And that bothered him.

"No doubt the princess will be most eager to meet you," Malcolm began.

Lancaster swallowed with a gulp.



"You must remember that the princess Boosha is a very special person. As the heir to the throne of the Moola-moola Empire, she is without doubt the richest woman on earth. And equally charming."

"Why-?" Lancaster stopped to clear his throat. "Why would she want to meet me?"

"Because you, my lord, are the crown prince Lancaster, royal liege of Upper Muckety, the greatest nation with the grandest navy and the largest army in the world. Your lineage is the most honorable of all nobility. Malcolm spoke so excitedly and with such pride that Lancaster knew Malcolm must be someone pretty special himself.

Now Lancaster wished he had a quiet pool of water to look into to see a reflection of himself.

"Here, sir," Malcolm said, reaching out with a small looking glass.

For a moment, Lancaster was afraid to look. Squaring his shoulders, he held the mirror in front of him and took a quick peek and looked away.

"Whoa!" he told himself, taking a good look at the glass. What he saw was a handsome face with deep black

eyes, black hair, a teensy black mustache and a nobly shaped nose.

Malcolm was the only other human being Lancaster had ever seen before. And Malcolm was a nice-looking chap, but Lancaster was positively

CAPITAL G GORGEOUS.

Not bad for a puddle-jumping frog, he thought, admiring his own image.

Late in the afternoon, the coach arrived at a huge castle at the top of a mountain. The moment Lancaster and Malcolm stepped down, they were whisked away to the deluxe guest suite, where they had an hour to prepare to be received by the Princess Boosha and her father, King Klutzwald.

By now, Malcolm was making Lancaster very nervous. He kept reminding Lancaster to do this and say that, do that and say this. Besides that, Malcolm kept fussing with Lancaster's clothes, picking imaginary bits of lint off his suit. Finally, a butler knocked and escorted them to the throne room.

"Presenting his eminence Prince Lancaster of Upper Muckety!" a herald announced loudly. Trumpets blared so loud they made Lancaster's ears ring.

Majestically, he marched toward the throne. There he bowed deeply and was received by the king. The court cheered and roared their approval.

At dinner, Lancaster had the place of honor, sitting between the King and the Princess. Just after the seventh course of the meal, the princess leaned over and whispered in Lancaster's ear.

"There's a place I want to show you tomorrow. Will you go riding with me in the morning?"

"I should be delighted to do that," he smiled, surprised that he would say such an elegant thing. For a moment he wondered what it meant to go riding.

"Oh, try some of *these!*" the princess gushed, offering him a silver plate heaped full of some long, narrow pieces of food. "They're delicious."

"What are they?"

"Frog legs."

"No, thanks," Lancaster gulped. Everything he ate at the banquet was delicious, even though he was afraid to ask what each item was.

The next morning, Malcolm helped Lancaster dress for riding. The tall black boots especially pleased him.

"Just remember, if you feel you're losing control of your steed, simply slow him down."

Lancaster didn't want to look dumb, so he didn't ask. *A steed? Oh, well, I'll know soon enough*, he decided.

It was much worse than he expected. Never had he been so far off at ground as when they pushed him up on top of the great black stallion. An instant later, he was flying along, bouncing up and down, trying to keep from falling off. He was terrified. Princess Boosha seemed to be having a wonderful time. Naturally, she was a superior equestrienne. Like a bolt of lightning, she and her horse streaked away, leaving Lancaster and his mount far behind. Recalling Malcolm's advice, Lancaster slowed his horse to a comfortable walk, which he found most pleasant. Now he saw the princess had stopped to wait for him after crossing a long stone bridge.

He urged his horse into a smart trot, which shook his teeth. Just as he and his mount reached the middle of the bridge, three ugly bandits in ragged clothes ran onto the bridge, yelling and waving their arms. Frightened, the horse reared, pawing the air with his front hooves.

The next thing Lancaster knew, he was falling, falling. **Splash!** He landed in the river far below. To Lancaster, the chilly water felt great. With a couple of powerful strokes, he was away from the bridge. A few more kicks and he had reached shore.

"Well, you certainly didn't handle that very well," Princess Boosha sniffed, after riding down to the edge of the river. She reached down and pulled Lancaster up on top of her horse. "Now hang on," she ordered, kicking her horse into a gallop. A short time later, they were back at the castle, where he changed into dry clothes.

"I'm taking you to the royal rose gardens," Princess Boosha told Lancaster. "You **will** enjoy them."

"Yes'm." he said, not so sure about that.

Together, they walked outside the castle to a splendid garden protected by a high stone wall. All the while, the

princess gripped Lancaster's right arm so tightly that it hurt. Whenever he tried to loosen her hold on him, she squeezed all the tighter.

"Aren't these gorgeous?"

Every time Lancaster tried to stop and look at the flowers, maybe even smell one or two, the princess gave his arm a jerk and dragged him off to look at something else. She seemed to have little interest in the flowers and didn't care at all if Lancaster wanted to enjoy them. He was beginning to feel like saying something cross to her. But then he was a guest of honor and it wouldn't do to complain. Malcolm had told him that. When they first arrived at the palace.

Just as they came up to a high hedgerow, the three ugly bandits who had attacked Lancaster earlier jumped out onto the brick walk. The princess screamed, let go of Lancaster and ran for the castle.

Before Lancaster could think of anything to do, one of the bandits ran around behind him, grabbed him by the neck and started choking him. Lancaster struggled to get free, but by that time, the other two were on him, too.

"Where's your purse?" one demanded gruffly.

"Ugh—" Lancaster couldn't answer because he was being choked.

The robber angered and jabbed a knife toward Lancaster's stomach.

"Ouch!" Lancaster yowled, breaking the grip of the bandit who was holding him. "I don't have a purse," he grumbled. "Just leave me alone."

The bandit jabbed the knife again. That hurt. This time it was Lancaster who angered. Besides, a little bright red spot of blood now stained his elegant white shirt with ruffles down the front.

"No purse, eh?" the third robber snorted, pulling a soft leather bag out of Lancaster's waistband.

Lancaster was surprised to see it.

The robber opened the drawstring and poured out a handful of silver and gold coins. "Aha! A nice prize after all!" The robber poured the coins back into the sack and dangled it in Lancaster's face.

"Shame on you for lying to such fine gentlemen like us," he laughed.

Upset, Lancaster shook loose from his captor again, grabbed the bag of coins and broke away from the trio of bandits. Frightened, he scampered as fast as he could for the back door of the castle.

Just then, four royal guards in shining armor came running down the walk and past Lancaster. When the bandits saw the guards flashing huge swords, they turned and ran for their lives.

“You silly prince, you can’t even get robbed properly,” Princess Boosha scolded Lancaster afterwards.

“But, but—”

“Don’t *‘but’* me, Lancaster. I can see I’m going to have to change a lot of things about you. And the sooner the better.”

Lancaster didn’t like the sound of that.

“What things?” he wanted to know.

“For one, the way you walk. You clomp along like an elephant. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that you must walk on tippy-toes in my presence?”

Lancaster didn’t think much of that. As far as he was concerned, the way he walked was just fine.

“What else?”

“Your attitude stinks.”

“It does?” He had never heard anyone say that to him before.

“Certainly. You’re nice to everyone. You don’t seem to realize that you are royalty—you’re supposed to be *haughty*—that means you think you’re better than everyone else.”

“But, but—”

“There you go again! Just be still and listen to me.”

For the next half hour, the princess scolded Lancaster for many faults he never dreamed he had—like feet that were too large, hair that was too shiny, a voice that was too soft and on and on. Before long, Lancaster was thinking of something besides the court. For the first time since leaving his dear puddle, he missed being with his own friends, he missed being at home. And most of all, he missed being a frog. But how could he ever go back? Maybe Malcolm would know.

“You’re not listening to me,” Princess Boosha screeched, shaking her little fist in Lancaster’s face.

“Um—”

“Just don’t forget the *soiree*—there will be a lot of people that you have to impress. I just hope you can dance better than you do other things.”

“*Swah-RAY?* What’s that?”

“Oh, you dummy! It’s an evening party.” The princess shook her head in disgust. “Don’t you know *anything?*”

“Yes, I do,” Lancaster said quietly. “I know when I’m not welcome.”

“*What do you mean?*”

“I think you want me to leave. Why else would you treat me so rudely?”

“*Why of all the nerve!*” she huffed. How dare you say that? You are my choice. You will be my prince consort,” she said with a pout.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re going to marry me, you ninny.”

Boy, oh, boy. Lancaster did not like the sound of that. Right now he wanted to talk to his friend Malcolm.



The Princess Boosha frowned at Lancaster, but he didn’t say anything. He forced a little smile, took her hand, and walked back to the castle.

The party began with an elegant dinner. Before Lancaster knew what was going on, King Klutzwald rose to his feet and started making a speech, telling everyone

what a fine prince Lancaster was. At the end, with a grin so wide it scrunched shut the king's tiny eyes. He said proudly, "It is my grandest pleasure to announce the engagement of this fine specimen of royalty to her eminent highness Princess Boosha."

Lancaster was shocked.

"Kiss me, you fool," the princess hissed.

Lancaster leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Not like that—kiss me on the lips."

Just then Lancaster remembered the lacewing's warning never to kiss a girl on the mouth.

"Well?" She sounded meaner than ever.

"Not in front of so many people," he said, pretending to be embarrassed.

She threw him a quick dirty look and then turned to smile at the people watching her.

Later, when Lancaster had just finished dancing with the bossy princess, a pretty woman in a pale green gown curtsied in front of him and in a tiny voice asked, "Lancaster, tell me now, are you still bored with your life?" He recognized her as the magic golden-eyed lacewing.

He stared at her. She was wearing a golden mask over her eyes.

"I just never knew how lucky I was before," he said unhappily.

"Do you mean you don't want to stay here for the rest of your days?"

Lancaster shook his head slowly. "I just want to be with my friends," he said sadly. "What can I do? How can I escape?"

"You'll think of something," the lady in green smiled. "I have an idea—why not invite the princess to visit the empire of Upper Muckety before the wedding? I'm sure Sir Malcolm can arrange it for you."

Lancaster thanked the lady and said good night to everyone at the soiree, excusing himself for having a headache.

The next day the princess dragged Lancaster to breakfast and quickly began telling him exactly how she wanted the wedding to be.

“Before that, you must meet my mother, Queen Buzza Louisa of Upper Muckety,” he interrupted.

The princess was so surprised she stopped talking and thought about it. “That would be very nice,” she agreed.

“Sir Malcolm will arrange it. We’ll leave early tomorrow morning.”

“Fine, fine,” she said, still too surprised to argue.

Lancaster had a plan now. He could hardly wait to see if it would work.

First thing the next morning, before the sun was up, the coach rumbled out of the castle and down the mountain road. Sir Malcolm accompanied Lancaster and the princess. All morning they traveled across the plains, over hills and down through valleys. Near lunchtime they entered a forest.

Now Lancaster could see he was back in familiar territory. Coming out of the woods, he said, “Up ahead there’s a nice brook with a little pool, a perfect place for a picnic. Let’s stop there, my dear.”

“I’m so tired of bumping and bouncing in this old coach that anything will be better than this,” she complained. “This is such a boring place, and I’m hungry. Get the picnic basket.”

Just then, Malcolm signaled the driver to stop the coach, Lancaster grabbed the lunch basket and jumped down, and offered his hand to help the Princess Boosha down. Beside the brook, in a place where it widened into a tiny pond, Lancaster spread the blanket and motioned for Boosha to sit down.

“Isn’t this a wonderful place?” Lancaster said excitedly.

“*Heavens, no!* It’s terribly dull here. Besides, there are flies and bugs everywhere.”

“*I know,*” Lancaster smiled.

For a while the two ate in silence. The food was nearly all gone when Lancaster turned to the princess.

“I wish you all the happiness in the world, my dear,” he said, leaning toward her. Carefully, he kissed her on the lips.

Instantly, the prince became Lancaster the frog again, who jumped into the tiny pond. At that exact moment, another frog in the little pond became the prince from

Upper Muckety, dressed in the suit Lancaster had been wearing.

In this short time, Princess Boosha had kept her eyes closed and never saw what had happened. When finally she opened them, the new prince was setting next to her. She seemed to be delighted with the kiss.

Lancaster sank into water up to his eyes, again the biggest frog in his puddle. Happily, he watched as the two picnickers gathered their things and walked back to the coach.

As the coach began to pull away, Lancaster saw his friend, Sir Malcolm, lean out the window and wave goodbye.

A fly zuzzed near Lancaster, but he let it pass. He was just too happy being home to move even one muscle.

-The End-

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