

PROFESSOR FROG'S LECTURE

Bobby was not quite sure that he was awake, but when he opened his eyes there was the blue sky, with the soft, white clouds drifting across it, the big pine waving its spicy branches over his head, and beyond, the glint of sunshine on the waters of the pond. Presently Bobby heard voices talking softly.

"This is a good specimen," said one voice. "See how stout and strong he looks!"

"I wonder who that is, and what he has found," thought Bobby. "I wish it wasn't such hard work to keep my eyes open." He made a great effort, however, and raised his heavy lids. At first he could see nothing. Then he caught a glimpse of a mossy log, with a row of frogs and toads sitting upon it. They were looking solemnly at him. Bobby felt a little uncomfortable under that steady gaze.

"The toads are making their spring visit to the pond to lay their eggs," thought the boy. "I forgot that they were due this week."

"He must have done a good deal of mischief in his day," said an old bull-frog, gravely. A chill crept over Bobby. "In his day."—What did that mean?

A toad hopped out from the line and came so close to Bobby that he could have touched her but for the strange spell which held him fast.

"Yes," said she; "this is one of the species. We are very fortunate to have caught him. Now we shall be ready to listen to Professor Rana's remarks."

Still Bobby could not move. What were they going to do? In a moment there was a rustling among the dry leaves and dozens of frogs and toads were seen hurrying towards the pine tree. Among them was a ponderous frog, carrying a roll of manuscript under his arm. He wore huge goggles, and looked so wise that Bobby did not dare to laugh.

"I am very sleepy," murmured a portly toad near Bobby's left ear. "I laid over eight thousand eggs last night, and I have a long journey before me. But I must stay to hear this. We may never have such a chance again."

"Ladies and gentlemen," began the professor, in a sonorous tone that was easily heard for several feet, "this is a specimen of the creature known to us as the human tadpole. You will kindly observe his long legs. They were doubtless given to him for the purpose of protection. Being possessed of a most mischievous and reckless spirit, the species is always getting into difficulties, and would probably become extinct if it had not the power to run away."

"Nonsense!" said Bobby under his breath. There was a murmur of interest and curiosity among the crowd. Bobby felt his legs twitch nervously, but his power over them was gone.

"Otherwise," went on the lecturer, "he is not at all adapted to his surroundings. Observe how carefully we are dressed. The frogs have the green and brown tints of their homes by the water-side. The toads look like lumps of dirt, so that they may not be too readily snapped up by birds of prey. But the Boy—to call him by his scientific name—has no such protection. Look at this red shirt and these white trousers, and this hat as big as a trout pool! Could anything be more ridiculous? Even a giraffe does not look so absurd as this."

A red flush mounted to Bobby's freckled cheeks, but this time he did not try to speak.

"Now," said the professor, "as far as we have been able to learn, the human tadpole is absolutely useless. We are, therefore, doing no harm in experimenting upon this specimen. There are plenty of them, and this one will not be a serious loss."

"Stop!" said Bobby, so unexpectedly that everybody jumped. "What are you going to do with me?"

"You will be so kind as to lie still," said the professor severely. "At present you are only a specimen."

There was no help for it. Bobby found it impossible to move hand or foot. He could wriggle a little,—but that was all.

"Not only is the Boy entirely useless," went on the professor, "but he is often what might be called a pest, even to his own kind. He is endured in the world for what he may become when he is full-grown, and even then he is sometimes disappointing. You are familiar with many of his objectionable ways towards the animal world, but I am sure you would be surprised if you knew what a care and trouble he frequently is to his own people. He can be trusted to do few kinds of work. It is difficult to keep him clean. He doesn't know how to get his own dinner. He has a genius for making weaker things miserable. He likes fishing, and he longs for a gun; he collects birds' eggs; he puts butterflies on pins; he teases his little sisters."

"Why isn't the species exterminated?" asked another frog angrily.

Then the toad near Bobby's ear spoke timidly: "I think you are a little unjust, Professor. I have known boys who were comparatively harmless."

"It is true there may be a few, Mrs. Bufo," said the professor with great politeness, "but as a class they may be fairly set down as of very doubtful value. Speak up, Tadpole, and say if I have made any false statements so far."

Bobby fairly shouted in his eagerness to be heard.

"We do work," he said. "We have to go to school every day."

"What a help that must be to your parents and to the world at large!" said the frog with sarcasm. "I am surprised that we never see the results of such hard labour. Do you know how useful even our smallest tadpoles are? Without them this pond would be no longer beautiful, but foul and ill-smelling. As for what we do when we are grown up, modesty forbids me to praise the frogs, but you know what a toad is worth to mankind?"

"No," said Bobby. "About two cents, I guess." Bobby didn't intend to be rude. He thought this a liberal valuation.

"Twenty dollars a year, as estimated by the Department of Agriculture!" cried the frog triumphantly. "What do you think of that?"

"I should like to know why," said Bobby, looking as if he thought Professor Rana was making fun of him.

"What are the greatest enemies of mankind?" asked the professor, peering over his goggles at poor Bobby.

"Tigers," said Bobby, promptly; "or wolves."

"Wrong," said the lecturer. "Insects. Insects destroy property on this continent to the amount of over four hundred million dollars annually. Insects destroy the crops upon which man depends for his food. Going to school hasn't made you very wise, has it? Well, the toads are insect destroyers. That's their business. If the State only knew enough to make use of them, millions of dollars might be saved every year. Does it seem to you that the human animal is so clever as it might be, when it allows such numbers of toads to be destroyed?"

"It's a shame!" chimed in a voice from the front seats. "We keep out of the way as much as we can; we eat every kind of troublesome worm and insect,—the cutworm, canker-worm, tent caterpillar, army-worm, rose-beetle, and the common house-fly; we ask for no wages or food or care,—and what do we get in return? Not even protection and common kindness. If we had places where we could live in safety, who could tell the amount of good we might do? Yet I would not have this poor boy hurt if a word of mine could prevent it."

"This is a scientific meeting," observed the professor; "and benevolent sentiments are quite out of place. We will now proceed to notice the delicate nervous system of the creature. Stand closer, my friends, if you please."

"Nervous system, indeed!" said Bobby. "Boys don't have such silly things as nerves!"

Suddenly Bobby felt a multitude of tiny pin pricks over the entire surface of his body. The suffering was not intense, but the irritation made him squirm and wince. He could not discover the cause of his discomfort, but at the professor's command it suddenly ceased.

"That will do," said the frog. "Each hair on his head is also connected with a nerve. Pull his hair, please!"

"Oh, don't!" said Bobby. "That hurts!"

Nobody listened to him. It did hurt, more than you would think, for tiny hands were pulling each hair separately. When the ordeal was over, Bobby heard a faint noise in the grass as if some very small creatures were scurrying away, but he could see nothing. He was winking his eyes desperately to keep from crying.

"The assistants may go now," said the professor; and the sound of little feet died away in the distance.

"How interesting this is!" murmured a plain-looking toad who had been watching the experiments attentively.

"I think it's mean," protested poor Bobby, "to keep a fellow fastened up like this, and then torment him."

"Does it hurt as much as being skinned, or having your legs cut off?" demanded the professor.

"Or should you prefer to be stepped on, or burned up in a rubbish pile?" asked Mrs. Bufo.

"How should you like to be stoned or kicked, for a change?" said another toad sharply.

"Perhaps you would choose a fish-hook in the corner of your mouth?" said a voice from the pond.

"Or one run the entire length of your body?" came a murmur from the ground under Bobby's head.

"Wait a minute," said the professor, more gently. "We will give you a chance to defend yourself. It is not customary to inquire into the moral character of specimens, but we do not wish to be unjust. Perhaps you can explain why you made a bonfire the very week after the toads came out of their winter-quarters. Dozens of lives were destroyed before that fire was put out."

"I forgot about the toads," began Bobby.

"Carelessness!" said the professor. "Now you may tell us why you like to throw stones at us."

"To see you jump," said Bobby, honestly.

"Thoughtlessness!" said the professor. "That's worse."

"Why do you kick us, instead of lifting us gently when we are in your way?" inquired a toad in a stern voice.

"Because you will give me warts if I touch you," said Bobby, pleased to think that he had a good reason at last.

"Ignorance!" cried the professor. "The toad is absolutely harmless. It has about it a liquid that might cause pain to a cut finger or a sensitive tissue like that of the mouth or eye, but the old story that a toad is poisonous is a silly fable."

"Will you tell me, please," asked a toad in a plaintive voice, "if you are the boy who, last year, carried home some of my babies in a tin pail and let them die?"

"I'm afraid I am," said Bobby, sorrowfully.

"Do explain why you dislike us!" said Mrs. Bufo in such a frank fashion that Bobby felt that he must tell the truth.

"I suppose it's your looks," said the boy, unable to frame his answer in more polite terms.

"Well, upon my word!" interrupted the professor. "I thought better of a boy than that. So you prefer boys with pretty faces and soft, curling hair, and nice clothes, to those who can climb and jump and who are not afraid of a day's tramp in the woods."

"Of course I don't," said indignant Bobby. "I hate boys who are always thinking about their clothes."

"Oh, you do!" said the frog. "Now answer me a few more questions. Have you ever stolen birds' eggs?"

"Yes," said truthful Bobby.

"Have you collected butterflies?"

"Yes," said Bobby.

"Have you taken nuts from the squirrels' cupboards?"

"Yes," said Bobby.

"Do you think we ought to have a very friendly feeling towards you?" went on the questioner.

"No," said Bobby; "I don't."

"We have shown that you are not only useless, but careless and thoughtless and ignorant," said the frog. "Is there any very good reason why we should let you go?"

Poor Bobby racked his brains to think of something that should appeal to his captors.

"I have a right to live, haven't I?" he said at last.

"Because you are so pretty?" suggested the professor, and Bobby's eyes fell with shame.

"Any better right than we have?" came a chorus of voices. Bobby was silent. He felt very helpless and insignificant. There was a long pause. Then the frog professor smiled broadly at Bobby.

"Come," he said; "I like you. You are not afraid to be honest, and that's something."

"If you will let me go," said Bobby, "I'll see that the boys don't hurt you any more."

"I felt pretty sure that we'd converted you," said the professor; "and I'm going to let you go back and preach to the heathen, as the grown people say. You can see for yourself how much harm a boy can do if he doesn't think."

Bobby felt that he was free, and scrambled to his feet, rubbing first one arm and then the other to take the prickly feeling out of them. The frogs had vanished; there was only the blue sky, the waving pine tree, and the quiet pond.

"Well!" said Bobby with a long breath of amazement.

"Kerjunk!" came the warning voice of a frog, somewhere near the water's edge.

"Yes sir, I'll remember," said Bobby in the meekest of meek tones.

M. A. L. Lane