

WARTS AND ALL

"You could always mention," replies Ms. Friesner to our inquiry, "that my husband Walter has an extensive frog collection and is thus partially to blame for this story."

"Live frogs or stuffed!"

"Now THERE is a question you don't expect to see every day," says the witty fantasist. "Or any day, for that matter."

Hats off to Walter and his collection of objets d'frog for inspiring this story that reminds us that boys will be boys and frogs will be frogs.

THE BETROTHAL RECEPTION was going swimmingly until the princess started spouting frogs. The attack came with no warning, at precisely the critical moment in the ceremonies when the archbishop called upon the royal lady to declare her freewill consent to the marriage. Princess Eudisia blushed prettily, gave her barbarian groom-to-be a languishing look from beneath plush black lashes, smiled, and said, "I swear by all holy that I enter into this union willingly."

Her words emerged half-smothered by a stream of brown and green froglings, most no bigger than a child's littlest finger (though one or two did top the scales at the mass of an apricot). The crowd gasped, the archbishop staggered back, the princess stared and swooned, her silver-powdered wig lurching to an awkward angle as she fell, and even Prince Feodor of the Frozen Wastes, who had once saved his father's entire kingdom by slaying an ice-dragon singlehanded, went pale. Only the princess's younger brother, Prince Goffredo, seemed pleased by this turn of events. He snatched a golden goblet from the waiting banquet table and flung himself forward with an unregal whoop, obviously bent on scooping up as many of the fugitive frogs as possible.

The festivities went to pot in short order: Prince Feodor and his entourage retired to their chambers in confusion, shedding wisps of sable and ermine in their wake; the archbishop alternately thundered and mumbled about the social and ecclesiastical irregularities which the princess's amphibious outburst had occasioned; the nobility buzzed and chattered amongst themselves, sucking every bit of sweetness from this toothsome newborn scandal; the servants shrieked and fled or stood their ground and giggled. To cap it all, in the heat of the hunt Prince Goffredo misjudged his distance and stepped squarely onto one of the frogs, which squished beneath his heel and sent him skidding across the marble floor into the backside of the Lord Chancellor, who promptly fell into a minor apoplexy and had to be given salts.

From her proper place upon the throne of her forefathers, Queen Annunziata sat observing all, frozen into the deathly stillness of a cobra contemplating its next strike. Her lily-white hands, frosted with diamonds, clutched the folds of her blue satin gown with a falcon's grip. Face aflame, she thrust herself to her feet and roared, "Be quiet, all of you! You act as though my daughter spewed up those hideous creatures on purpose! Are you too blind to know an evil spell when you see one? I should have your heads removed from your shoulders for such insolence! By God, I will!"

"Mercy, Your Majesty!" the Archbishop cried, his hand rising to shield his throat from the threat of the executioner's axe. "I never meant to imply --"

"Begone! Out of my sight! You useless boobies, clear this hall now!" The queen snatched up the orb of state and flung it at the heads of the assembled nobility, scattering them like chickens. "Convey the princess to her rooms and see to her comfort. Summon my physicians and my wizard to minister to her. Seal up the palace, that the agent of this perfidious attack may not escape my just and terrible vengeance. And for the love of heaven, Freddie, put down those frogs!"

"But Mummy --" Prince Goffredo began.

"Not another word. Ugh! Horrid, slimy, pop-eyed things. I don't see how you can bear to touch them. Well?" (This last word was addressed to the gorgeously appareled crowd still milling about in the grand salon. I "What are you waiting for? Individual death sentences? That can be arranged.")

Some queens owned reputations for beauty, some for grace, some for the fineness of their needlework. Queen Annunziata's reputation was based solely on the ferocity of her temper and the ghastly fates that had befallen those rash enough to dally in her presence when the fury took her. The prince's governess whisked him away, the princess's ladies-in-waiting waited not, but bore her to her chambers posthaste, leaving her wig behind, and the rest of the hall emptied itself in record time, until only the queen herself and one other person remained.

"My dear?" A mild voice from the second, lesser throne echoed strangely among the crystal

