

1. In the Beginning - A Fable

William Harston

You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find a prince.

Anonymous Wallscribe

Many years ago in a faraway Eastern land there ruled a powerful king, who was so rich and so strong that he was used to having everything he ever wanted. He was, in fact, the richest, strongest and most unutterably pompous and spoiled king there has ever been. But that was nothing compared to the arrogance and pomposity of his daughter, the beautiful princess, whose eyes shone with the brilliance of a Tal sacrifice, whose hair was as finely spun as a Petrosian strategy and whose skin was as smooth as a Karpov interview.

The princess was as beautiful as her father was rich. Some said she was more beautiful. Others stressed the inherent incomparability of beauty and riches, emphasizing the essential difference between value judgements of an aesthetic nature and precise measurements involving the weight of quantities of gold. The matter was never fully resolved despite the organization of philosophical symposia and debates on the subject; but I am sure you get the message: the princess was indeed *very beautiful*.

She had, however, one flaw in her character, which gave the king great cause for concern. Actually she had two flaws, but nobody was allowed to speak of the second following her conviction and suspended sentence for misappropriation of property, to wit one bowl of porridge, breaking and entering, malicious hooliganism and carnal knowledge of a bear. The cause of the king's grief was not this minor indiscretion in the

past, but a far more worrying feature displayed by his daughter: the princess never laughed. The wisest and funniest men in the kingdom had tried to amuse the princess, but all had failed. Not so much as a chuckle could they raise from the sombre girl.

On her twenty-first birthday (it should really have been her sixteenth, but the princess was a late developer), the king announced a grand competition. Whoever could make the princess laugh would be rewarded with whatever he desired. The entry forms flowed in from far and wide. Contestants arrived by the coach load with their jokes, games and videotapes of old BBC comedy shows. But none could succeed in making the princess laugh, and they all forfeited their entry fees.

Then, late one dark night, there arrived at the palace a wizened old man, carrying a cardboard box and waving a crumpled late-entry form.

‘I have invented,’ he announced to the king, ‘the most wondrously funny game, which is the only thing in the world that can amuse the princess.’

‘What’s it called?’ asked the king.

‘It is called chess,’ replied the wizened old man.

‘Doesn’t sound very funny,’ mused the king. ‘Go on then, show us how it goes,’ his majesty added, resignedly.

‘Fetch a draughts board,’ instructed the w.o.m. And the king summoned the Bearer of the Royal Draughts Board, who brought it forth from out of the royal games cupboard.

‘Right,’ said the w.o.m. rubbing his hands in glee as wizened old men are bound to do in stories such as this. ‘Pay attention.’ And he explained the rules in his wizened old voice, pointing to the pieces and squares with his wizened old fingers. But the king hardly listened. He had heard so many ideas to amuse his daughter, and this one looked a loser from the start. Plain daft, he thought it. Not funny at all.

Having at last come to the end of the rules, the old man paused and set the pieces on their starting squares.

‘Now we must play,’ he commanded.

The king was reluctant, for he had only really been listening

as far as the pawn's move. He did not know how the other pieces moved at all. But the princess had heard all and was intrigued, in a morose way, by the complicated rules of this new game. She begged the king to take his seat at the board.

'Go on, dad,' she implored, 'it's good for a laugh.'

The king agreed, but on the one condition that he could have white. He thought for what seemed not very long at all and his hand alighted on the third pawn from the right. Cautiously he nudged it one square forward. The wizened old man moved his own king's pawn two squares up the board. Now the king felt that he was beginning to get the hang of it, so he moved the pawn second from the right boldly first one, then another square. The black queen shot immediately in reply to the end of her diagonal.

'Checkmate,' announced the w.o.m.

'Father,' exclaimed the princess, 'you are a twit. A ninny. A prize buffoon, a first-rate incompetent.' And she was smiling. Then the smile became a titter, the titter a laugh, and the laugh a full-throated guffaw. The outraged king hit her and she burst into tears.

But the king was an honourable monarch and told the wizened old man that the prize was his. Anything he desired, which it was in the king's power to bestow, he was free to request.

'Your Highness,' said the old man in a modest tone, 'I am but a simple peasant with few needs. I desire only the clothes in which I stand and some food to sustain me. I suggest therefore that you reward me at no great inconvenience to yourself by asking your agriculture minister to sign this document, thereby guaranteeing me one grain of rice for the first square on the chessboard, two for the second square, four for the third. . . .'

'Yeah, yeah,' said the king, 'and doubling all the time until you reach the sixty-fourth square. Well, hard luck; I've heard that one before. And I'm still paying off the guy who invented draughts.'

'Worth trying,' said the wizened old man. 'Okay, I'll settle

for a beef curry, one poppadum and a weekend for two in Paris with the princess.'

'It's a deal,' said the king, and they shook hands. But from that day on nobody was ever allowed to smile while chess was being played. All who did so were officially considered mad and were shunned in polite society.

Time passed, and people forgot that chess was the funniest game ever invented. Only the princess remembered and she would always have a secret chuckle to herself when she saw men playing. The wizened old man, incidentally, had the misfortune to turn into a handsome frog when the princess kissed him. He whiled away the rest of his days hosting a television show. Some you win, some you lose.