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SPRING SONG OF THE TOAD

by

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The peaceful little brook fought on down the valley half choked by lush grass and bushes. Frogs and newts and turtles were crawling out of their cozy beds to catch the sun's rays. On the rim of the marsh big fern fronds were unrolling. Spring had come to the valley, chasing away the winter's cold and slush. Life was awake again and singing to the re-birth.

Toad had slept in the depths of the earth for what seemed to him a long time, from fall to spring. Now as he started to move about he was only half conscious. His feeble hind legs were folded under his stomach and had to be unlimbered. His drooping head lay on his pallid fingers. His skin had become the color of the clods about him and he would be indistinguishable until he moved. As the afternoon sun warmed the earth and his own cold blood, the clammy toad felt better. He came to life and exhaled the stale air that had filled his lungs for months. He dug his strong hind toes into the soil and began to move upward toward the light. He needed air and food, but mostly water. He struck out, pushing the dirt behind him with his hind feet and didn't stop until he got a glimpse of the blue sky.

He poked his head up and looked sleepily around, and then he climbed deliberately out. As his thirsty skin touched the wet grass, he instinctively shrank into himself. He crawled close to the ground, breathing fast, watching and listening to every movement. He hopped slowly along, stretching his legs, and scented a little rain that had been held in a hollow. He made for it and wallowed deliciously in its muddy bottom. His only way of drinking was through his skin.

The sun went down and the evening was cool with a hint of rain, just the kind of weather for a toad to make a spring journey to water. The temporary puddle that he had been hiding in would soon leave him high and dry, and he must make the break for bigger pools where he could find the swarms of early insects and worms. As he bided his time when the dusk would fall a little deeper, he heard

the love songs of the frogs, throbbing on the evening air, but those of his own kind would come later. He finally left his dwindling puddle and hopped with slow dogged determination through the wet grass into a fringe of woods beyond which he could hear the running water of the little stream. All the way he absorbed more moisture and swelled with the return of vigor.

But other folk were awake to the call of spring, and hungry also. He was laboriously plodding through a little open glade when a dark shadow flared above him. In a panic, he jumped for a bush and lay breathless and flattened just in time to hear an owl's wings fan close to him. Such is the narrow margin between life and death.

For some time he froze in his dim shelter with his heart beats almost stilled. He knew that the hungry owl rarely misses his catch. Toad wallowed cautiously deeper into the soft soil of the dank woods and made a hollow for himself, and there he waited with the patience of the hunted.

When toad reached the little brook a pale moon was shining. It was eerie and quiet, except for a soft outburst here, another over there, the beginning of uncontrollable ecstasy. He hesitated to detect sounds of danger, and then plunged with one jump into the water. It was good to be wet all over and feel the refreshing glow of a cold douse, the elixir of life. He swam over to a sunken log and sat with his nose just peeping out. Relieved, he smoothed his face ~~with his~~ ~~face~~ with his fingers. Above him the moon reflected his own yellow eyes.

He took in big gulps of cold air and his throatswelled until it was a big bubble on his chest. It inspired the toad nearly to bursting. He sang to the dewy fields and all the other toads struggling down through the woods. And he sang to the female toads that were still asleep. His song was full and confident and mellowed into the night air.

Toad didn't realize of how great economic importance he is to man. He had never counted up that at least eighty-three species of insects, mostly injurious, have been proved to be a part of his diet, or that he has been observed to snap up one hundred and twenty-eight flies in a half hour. At a low estimate, he could easily destroy more than a hundred insects during a day and do an immense

service to a garden during the summer. It has been estimated that he alone may devour cutworms in a garden to the value of \$20 a season, if the damage done by each cutworm is counted at only one cent. Added to this record, he also feeds upon slugs and other garden pests. And how pleasant a tenant of the yard he is as he hops out from among the bushes or hunts bugs between the vegetable rows. Or under the porch light in the evening, he may sit watching and suddenly shoot out his lightning tongue to scoop in a miller or moth. He and the garter snake are the handy men to ferret out the earwigs among the plants.

A gentle drizzle was coming down and with it the earthworms came out of the ground. Toad watched one not far away and his eyes narrowed. He was hungry. With a clumsy lurch he grabbed the wiggling slimy thing, settled back and crammed it into his mouth. He launched out for a second one, but it slipped away as if it was greased. It was squirming into the mud as he speared it again and it stretched and stretched, but finally he gobbled it down.

The next day he felt dumpy. He had a premonition that something was going to happen to him. His clumsy wrinkled skin felt like a prison. He humped his back and stretched. His skin split and then broke loose down his legs. He reached his head around and commenced to pull on the shroud, and with the help of his fingers got it over his head and into his toothless mouth. It was easy then to swallow the wad. His frog cousin had the advantage of small teeth to handle this job. He puffed his chest out. His warts stood out, bumpy and clean. He felt fine.

Toad dreamed of a wife, of strings of gummy eggs threading the sedgy edges of the stream, a thousand eggs, ten thousand eggs, ten thousand toadlets! And he was not to be disappointed. His tadpoles would differ from those of the frogs. They would be darker in color with larger bodies and more slender tails. And if the weather was mild, his children would be hopping all about him in about two months.

Sitting lazily in the ooze, toad's voice could be heard, now plaintive and lonely, now full and hankering for his fellows. And out of the woods and down the hill the toads, with a sprinkling of young frogs, came trooping from

every direction. By morning dozens of funny little creatures squatted on stumps and clung to overhanging branches. At the slightest sound they plopped into the mud and water below. Toad looked them over. He could lick a half a dozen of them. Some of the youngsters were probably his last season's sons.

Before long the small voice of the little brook was drowned out by a ringing, singing, croaking bedlam. Some of the notes were high pitched, some low and guttural, some with a rapid cadence, some slow and booming in and out with the rhythmic beating of drums. And before long, too, all the frogs and toads had found their mates. And toad had found his. She was fat and light colored, just the way he liked her.

As the days went by, as if by magic the rough grass stems and the water plants were entwined and festooned with strings of toad spawn. Masses of frog spawn in limpid jelly were already spilling out tadpoles by the thousands as they mature more rapidly than the toads. Soon the little water world swarmed with amphibian babies. During the warm weather the tails of the toads were absorbed with wonderful rapidity, and the change from tadpoles with no legs to small toads crawling out on land seemed to happen in a few hours. This has given rise to the absurd story that it rains toads, because during the night thousands of young toads may have changed their habitat from water to land. They were so thick now that the grassy banks were infested with them as if by hopping fleas.

Toad didn't know which were his own children, but he knew he had a lot of them. He didn't know where his wife was, and he didn't care much. She strayed away from him, or vice versa, soon after the eggs were laid, and hadn't been even a good mother. Somehow he had gone stale on the company of toads and frogs, and a lot of other scaly creatures that had pushed into the community. And he was annoyed by this everlasting noisy nursery. A little later there came a crispness in the air that made him glance up the hill to a sheltered spot that he remembered. It almost made him drowsy to think of that snug bed. But he turned his head and couldn't help but listen. Rising and falling on the night wind, the toad voices swelled and swung along.