

HOP-FROG

Edgar Allan Poe

I never knew anyone so keenly alive to a joke as the king was. He seemed to live only for joking. To tell a good story of the joke kind, and to tell it well, was the surest road to his favor. Thus it happened that his seven ministers were all noted for their accomplishments as jokers. They all took after the king, too, in being large, corpulent, oily men. (Whether people grow fat by joking or whether there is something in fat itself which predisposes to a joke, I have never been quite able to determine.) At this time, jesters were still in fashion at court. They wore a multi-colored motley costume, with caps and bells, and who were expected to be always ready with sharp witticisms, at a moment's notice, in consideration of the crumbs that fell from the royal table. The king required something in the way of folly—if only to counterbalance the heavy wisdom of the seven wise men who were his ministers—not to mention himself.



His fool, or professional jester, was not only a fool however. His value was increased in the eyes of the king by the fact of his being also a dwarf and a cripple. Dwarfs were as common at court in those days as fools, and many monarchs would have found it difficult to get through their days (days are rather longer at court than elsewhere) without both a jester to laugh with and a dwarf to laugh at. So that it was no small source of pride with the king that in Hop-Frog (this was the fool's name) he possessed a double treasure in one person.

I believe the name "Hop-Frog" was not that given to the dwarf at baptism, but it was conferred upon him by the ministers because of his inability to walk as other men do. In fact, Hop-Frog could only get along by something between a leap and a wriggle—a movement that caused unlimited amusement.

But although Hop-Frog, through the distortion of his legs, could move only with great pain and difficulty along a road or floor, the prodigious muscular power which nature seemed to have bestowed upon his arms, by way of compensation for deficiency in the lower limbs, enabled him to perform many feats of wonderful dexterity, where trees or ropes were in question (or anything else to climb). At such exercises he more resembled a squirrel or a small monkey than a frog.

I am not able to say from what country Hop-Frog originally came. It was from some barbaric region, however, that no person ever heard of—a vast distance from the court of the king. Hop-Frog and a young girl (almost as small as he, although of exquisite proportions and a marvelous dancer) had been forcibly carried off from their respective homes in adjoining provinces and sent as presents to the king by one of his ever-victorious generals.

Under these circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that a close intimacy arose

between the two little captives. Indeed, they soon became sworn friends. Hop-Frog, who, although he made a great deal of sport, was by no means popular and did not have the power to render Trippetta many services. But she, on account of her grace and exquisite beauty (although a dwarf), was universally admired and petted, so she possessed much influence and never failed to use it, whenever she could, for the benefit of Hop-Frog.

On a grand state occasion the king determined to have a masquerade, and whenever a masquerade or anything of that kind occurred at the court, the talents of Hop-Frog and Trippetta were called into play. Hop-Frog, in especial, was so inventive in the way of getting up pageants, suggesting novel character-disguises, and arranging costumes for masked balls that nothing could be done, it seemed, without his assistance.

The night appointed for the festival had arrived. A gorgeous hall had been fitted up under Trippetta's eye with every kind of device which could possibly give brilliance to a masquerade. The whole court was in a fever of expectation. As for costumes and characters, everybody had come to a decision on such points. Many had made up their minds as to what roles they should assume a week or even a month in advance. And, in fact, there was not a particle of indecision anywhere—except in the case of the king and his seven ministers. Why they hesitated I never could tell, unless they did it by way of a joke. More probably, they found it difficult (on account of being so fat) to make up their minds. At all events, time flew, and, as a last resort, they sent for Trippetta and Hop-Frog.

When the two little friends obeyed the summons of the king they found him sitting at his wine with the seven ministers, but the monarch appeared to be in a very ill humor. He knew that Hop-Frog was not fond of wine, for it excited the poor cripple almost to madness. But the king loved his practical jokes and took pleasure in forcing Hop-Frog to drink and (as the king called it) "to be merry."

"Come here, Hop-Frog," said he, as the jester and his friend entered the room. "Swallow this goblet to the health of your absent friends and then let us have the benefit of your help. We need characters to dress as. Come, drink! The wine will brighten your wits."

Hop-Frog endeavored, as usual, to get up a jest in reply to these advances from the king, but the effort was too much. It happened to be the poor dwarf's birthday, and the command to drink to his "absent friends" forced the tears to his eyes. Many large, bitter drops fell into the goblet as he took it humbly from the hand of the tyrant.

"Ah! Ha! Ha!" roared the king, as the dwarf reluctantly drained the goblet. "See what a glass of good wine can do! Why, your eyes are shining already!"

Poor fellow! His large eyes gleamed, rather than shone, for the effect of wine on his excitable brain was instantaneous. He placed the goblet nervously on the table and looked round upon the company with a half-insane stare. They all seemed highly amused at the success of the king's "joke."

"And now to business," said the prime minister, a very fat man.

"Yes," said the King; "Come lend us your assistance. Characters, my fine fellow. We stand in need of costumes—all of us—ha! Ha! Ha!" and as this was seriously meant for a joke, his laugh was chorused by the seven.

Hop-Frog also laughed although feebly and somewhat vacantly.

"Come, come," said the king, impatiently, "have you nothing to suggest?"

"I am endeavoring to think of something novel," replied the dwarf, abstractedly, for he was quite bewildered by the wine.

"Endeavoring!" cried the tyrant fiercely. "What do you mean by that? Ah, I perceive. You are sulky and want more wine. Here, drink this!" and he poured out another goblet full and offered it to the cripple, who merely gazed at it, gasping for breath.

"Drink, I say!" shouted the monster, "or by the fiends—"

The dwarf hesitated. The king grew purple with rage. The courtiers smirked. Trippetta, pale as a corpse, advanced to the monarch's seat and falling on her knees before him implored him to spare her friend.

The tyrant regarded her for some moments in wonder at her audacity. He seemed quite at a loss what to do or say—how best to express his indignation. At last, without uttering a syllable, he pushed her violently from him and threw the contents of the brimming goblet in her face.

The poor girl got up the best she could and, not daring even to sigh, resumed her position at the foot of the table.

There was a dead silence for about half a minute, during which the falling of a leaf or of a feather might have been heard. It was interrupted by a low but harsh and protracted grating sound which seemed to come at once from every corner of the room.

"What—what—what are you making that noise for?" demanded the king, turning furiously to the dwarf.

The latter seemed to have recovered from his intoxication. Looking fixedly but quietly into the tyrant's face, merely said, "I—I? How could it have been me?"

"The sound appeared to come from without," observed one of the ministers. "I fancy it was the parrot at the window, whetting his bill upon his cage-wires."

"True," replied the monarch, as if much relieved by the suggestion, "but I could have sworn that it was the gritting of this beggar's teeth."

Hereupon the dwarf laughed (the king was too confirmed a joker to object to any one's laughing) and displayed a set of large, powerful, and very repulsive teeth. Moreover, he stated his perfect willingness to swallow as much wine as desired. The monarch was pacified, and having drained another goblet with no perceptible ill effect, Hop-Frog entered at once and with spirit into the plans for the masquerade.

"Just after your majesty had struck the girl and thrown the wine in her face," observed Hop-Frog, very tranquilly, as if he had never tasted wine in his life, "just after your majesty had done this, and while the parrot was making that odd noise outside the window, there came into my mind a capital amusement—one of my own country frolics—often enacted at our masquerades, but here it will be new altogether. Unfortunately, however, it requires a company of eight persons—"

"Here we are!" cried the king, laughing at his sudden discovery of the coincidence. "Eight—I and my seven ministers! Come! What is the diversion?"

"We call it," replied the cripple, "the Eight Chained Orangutans, and it really is excellent sport if done well."

"We will enact it," remarked the king, drawing himself up and lowering his eyelids.

"The beauty of the game," continued Hop-Frog, "lies in the fright it causes among the

women."

"Capital!" roared in chorus the monarch and his ministers.

"I will dress you as orangutans," proceeded the dwarf. "Leave all that to me. The resemblance shall be so striking that the company of masqueraders will take you for real beasts—and of course, they will be as much terrified as astonished."

"Oh, this is exquisite!" exclaimed the king. "Hop-Frog! I will make a man of you."

"The chains are for the purpose of increasing the confusion by their jangling. You are supposed to have escaped *en masse* from your keepers. Your majesty cannot conceive the effect produced at a masquerade by eight chained orangutans, imagined to be real ones by most of the company, and rushing in with savage cries among the crowd of delicately and gorgeously dressed men and women. The effect is unique!"

"It must be!" said the king, and the council arose hurriedly (as it was growing late) to put in execution the scheme of Hop-Frog.

His mode of equipping the party as orangutans was very simple, but effective enough for his purposes. The animals in question had, at the time, very rarely been seen in any part of the civilized world, and as the costumes made by the dwarf were sufficiently beast-like and more than sufficiently hideous, their truthfulness to nature was thus thought to be secured.

The king and his ministers were first encased in tight-fitting stockinet shirts and drawers. They were then saturated with tar. At this stage of the process, some one of the party suggested feathers, but the suggestion was at once overruled by the dwarf, who soon convinced the eight that the hair of an orangutan was much more efficiently represented by flax fiber. A thick coating of the latter was accordingly plastered upon the coating of tar. A long chain was now procured. First, it was passed about the waist of the king, and tied, then about another of the party, and also tied, then about all successively, in the same manner. When this chaining arrangement was complete and the party stood as far apart from each other as possible, they formed a circle, and to make all things appear natural, Hop-Frog passed the remainder of the chain in two diameters at right angles across the circle.

The grand chamber in which the masquerade was to take place was a circular room, very lofty, and receiving the light of the sun only through a single window at top. At night (the season for which the apartment was especially designed) it was illuminated principally by a large chandelier, dangling by a chain from the centre of the sky-light, and lowered or elevated by means of a counter-balance.

The arrangements of the room had been left to Trippetta's superintendence, but, in some particulars, she had been guided by the calmer judgment of her friend the dwarf. At his suggestion the chandelier was removed. Its waxen drippings would have been seriously detrimental to the rich dresses of the guests, who on account of the crowded state of the chamber, could not all be expected to keep away from its center—that is to say, from under the chandelier. Additional sconces were set in various parts of the hall, and a torch, emitting sweet odor, was placed in the right hand of each of the statue-holders that stood against the wall—some fifty or sixty altogether.

The eight orangutans, taking Hop-Frog's advice, waited patiently until midnight (when the room was thoroughly filled with masqueraders) before making their appearance. No sooner

had the clock ceased striking than they rushed (or rather rolled in) all together—for the impediments of their chains caused most of the party to fall and all to stumble as they entered.

The excitement among the masqueraders was exceptional and filled the heart of the king with glee. As he anticipated, there were many of the guests who supposed the ferocious-looking creatures to be real beasts. Many of the women swooned with fright. If the king had not taken the precaution to exclude all weapons from the chamber, his party might soon have ended their frolic in bloodshed. As it was, a general rush was made for the doors, but the king had ordered them to be locked immediately upon his entrance, and, at the dwarf's suggestion, the keys had been deposited with him.

While the tumult was at its height and each masquerader attentive only to his own safety (for, in fact, there was much real danger from the pressure of the excited crowd), the chain by which the chandelier ordinarily hung, and which had been drawn up on its removal, could be seen very gradually to descend until its hooked end came within three feet of the floor.

Soon after this, the king and his seven friends, having reeled about the hall in all directions, found themselves in its center and in close proximity to the chain. While they were thus situated, the dwarf, who had followed noiselessly at their heels, inciting them to keep up the commotion, took hold of their own chain at the intersection of the two portions which crossed the circle diametrically. Here, with the rapidity of thought, he inserted the hook from which the chandelier had been wont to hang, and, in an instant, by some unseen agency, the chandelier-chain was drawn so far upward as to take the hook out of reach and drag the orangutans together in close connection, face to face.

The masqueraders by this time had recovered in some measure from their alarm and, beginning to regard the whole matter as a well-contrived pleasantry, set up a loud shout of laughter at the predicament of the apes.

"Leave them to me!" now screamed Hop-Frog, his shrill voice making itself easily heard through all the din. "Leave them to me. I fancy I know them. If I can only get a good look at them, I can soon tell who they are."

Here, scrambling over the heads of the crowd, he managed to get to the wall. When, seizing a torch from one of the holders, he returned to the center of the room—leaping with the agility of a monkey upon the king's head and thence clambered a few feet up the chain, holding down the torch to examine the group of orangutans and still screaming, "I shall soon find out who they are!"

And now, while the whole assembly (the apes included) was convulsed with laughter, the jester suddenly uttered a shrill whistle. Then the chain flew violently up for about thirty feet—dragging with it the dismayed and struggling orangutans and leaving them suspended in mid-air between the sky-light and the floor. Hop-Frog, clinging to the chain as it rose, still maintained his relative position in respect to the eight maskers and still (as if nothing were the matter) continued to thrust his torch down toward them, as though endeavoring to discover who they were.

So thoroughly astonished was the whole company at this ascent that a dead silence of about a minute's duration ensued. It was broken by just such a low, harsh, grating sound (as had before attracted the attention of the king and his councilors when the former threw the

wine in the face of Trippetta). But on the present occasion there could be no question as to whence the sound issued. It came from the fang-like teeth of the dwarf, who ground them and gnashed them as he foamed at the mouth, and glared with an expression of maniacal rage into the upturned countenances of the king and his seven companions.

"Ah, ha!" said the infuriated jester. "Ah-ha! I begin to see who these people are now!" Here, pretending to scrutinize the king more closely, he held the torch to the flaxen coat which enveloped him, which instantly burst into a sheet of vivid flame. In less than half a minute the eight orangutans were blazing fiercely, amid the shrieks of the multitude who gazed at them from below, horror-stricken, and without the power to render them the slightest assistance.

At length the flames, suddenly increasing in destructiveness, forced the jester to climb higher up the chain to be out of their reach, and, as he made this movement, the crowd again sank for a brief instant into silence. The dwarf seized his opportunity and once more spoke:

"I now see distinctly," he said, "what manner of people these maskers are. They are a great king and his seven privy-ministers—a king who does not hesitate to strike a defenseless girl and his seven ministers who assist him in the outrage. As for myself, I am simply Hop-Frog, the jester—and this is my last jest."

Owing to the high combustibility of both the flax and the tar to which it adhered, the dwarf had scarcely made an end of his brief speech before the work of vengeance was complete. The eight corpses swung in their chains, a fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass. The cripple hurled his torch at them, clambered leisurely to the ceiling, and disappeared through the sky-light.

It is supposed that Trippetta, stationed on the roof of the chamber, had been the accomplice of her friend in his fiery revenge and that together they made their escape to their own country, for neither was seen again.