

## Chapter 2

### Aquabatics

The pale gold locket of a moon hung in the purple-blue night. Silhouetted against it stood the tall sentinel trees, Silver Birch and Beech, arms outstretched, clothed in dusky verdant leaves. Their satin-barked shafts slid smoothly down to be lost in the tangle of shrub and flower that breathed a honeyed fragrance on the warm air. Ferns and blossoms blended with shadows, pressing closely the lichen-coated and moss-covered stones and earthen banks of the lake. Reeds and rushes laced its shallows and water-lilies rode out upon its deeps. From the platform that the lily-pads made rose the pulsing beat of music. The frogs were making a night of it.

A pair of old toads living in retirement in dark damp stone lodgings sheltered by a craggy outcrop, wagged their heads and blew out their cheeks in agreement.

“Disgusting noise those frogs are making tonight,” grumbled one.

“Deafening,” agreed her husband, moving round a toadstool in his way. “Having a Frok Fête.”

“Water-hop’s more like it. End of the Season you know, so they are having one last spree. It’s funny how some have to gather and make so much noise about everything they do. We never did. They’ll be off then having found homes for their families. I said to one, only the other night, you’re having a busy spell. You must be anxious too. So many dangers these times, you want to be sure your tadpoles know what’s what. But there, I expect they’ll be filling their heads with a lot of fairy tales; the kind where frogs are turned into human princes and princesses, ending happily with the change back. Much wiser they’d be, learning just plain common sense things, which is all they’ll need. Do you know what she replied?”

“Well, living in another world sometimes makes it easier to get along in this one.”

“Oh my goodness; hark at them now,” this as the throb of music grew louder.

“Deafening,” agreed her mate again. “Still my dear, you know it could be much worse. It could be one of those Pop Festivals you hear about, that go on for nights and nights.”

Birds asleep in the high Elm trees, heard the music, roused, tucked their offspring more firmly under their down quilts, fluffed up their own feather sleeping bags and snuggled their beaks well down. They needed their sleep, to be about bright and early next day. When winter winds blew keenly through bare branches the skyward flats of Birdsville would show empty and forlorn with notices ‘To Let’. Just now, full, busy and overflowing was life in the nests.

The moorhen on her houseboat nest chided her young, “Go to sleep. Go to sleep.”

Fish, silver and gold, came up goggle-eyed, open-mouthed to watch and listen. They poked their heads through the cluster of bubbles that had preceded them, wearing them like glass beads to add dazzle to the party.

It was quite a sight. The overlapping circlets of the leaves floated like tethered rafts. Strings of tiny fireflies flitting and dancing, weaving and bobbing, flashing and sparking, lit the scene. Here and there they streaked like comets in their excitement. Gathered on the pads were the frogs. All shapes and sizes they were, gay in colours from bluest-green yellowest-green with black and clear yellow; splashed, flecked, flocked and laced in shimmering patterns and roped with beads. They twitched, turned and twisted to the compelling rhythm. Some seemed bewitched, leaping in to tread the water with a light fantastic toe. Their delight reached its height when a group ‘The Pondweeds’ appeared. Reaching their heads together and plucking at the strings of their guitars the three males of the group sang an accompaniment to the female singer. She excited and united her audience with her charm and a folk song. With a shake now and then of her little tambourine she sang in thrilling tones:—

I'd like to make  
Each pond and lake  
A pool of crystal dew.  
Sunfill the days,  
Grow lily ways  
And dream a dream with you.

The world would be  
For you and me  
A water-lily pad,  
Where we would find  
A peace of mind  
And be forever glad.

With all so good  
Why then we should  
In happiness abound.  
From such a store  
Throw wide the door  
And spread it all around.

“Got a lovely voice,” said one frog to another as they queued for refreshments at a stall under the bank. A dock-leaf awning sheltered some seats and a bill of fare on the moss lawn that sloped to the water's edge. It belonged to a chandler's shop which had a small yard attached for boat building.

The owner was a ship-wright who had been nicknamed 'Shippy' because of his trade. He was a water-shrew by the name of Shrewsbury, as the sign above the door and old fashioned green-bottle-glass window, announced. Shrewsbury's Shore-line Store, selling everything for the aquatic life from a needle to an anchor.

Many said he had come there to get away from his wife who lived up to her name. She was always scolding.

“Shrewsbury don't shilly-shally!” she nagged, showing sharp little teeth.

He liked shilly-shallying now and then. It meant he could chatter shrilly with the customers in the shop or out in the boat yard, when serving fast food.

Often she snapped that he was silly; not like other shrews; no frog would last ten seconds near them! He supposed this was all true for he did like to 'Live and let Live'. Perhaps he would not have survived anywhere else, for here besides making a living from diving and fishing there was salvaging of scraps left by picnickers. Some said he had not run away from his wife, but had forgotten her somewhere. He was a bit forgetful and tied a knot in his tail at times to remind himself of things; an instant memo-pad he couldn't lose.

The smell of wax, oilskin, rope and all that go to make up that very special smell of the chandler's was homely to him. So too was the dim little store linked by a passage to living-room and store-rooms, far inside. He wouldn't change a bit of it, which was well, for the old world nature of the place was good for trade. Perhaps he knew this. Others thought he did, for a rather cheeky frog asked a friend:

"Should you say Shippy Shrewsbury's a shrewd or silly shrew, Sam?"

With the end of the song there came an interval in the programme for all to get second wind, sup and make ready for the next part of the romp. It was during this lull that Hitch arrived at the lake's edge having made good his escape from the fox. Wading into the water he struck out strongly for the opposite bank where there was a shingly beach near the mouth of a small stream. His way lay up the steep terraces where the stream plunged headlong in tiny waterfalls. This was a place that gave pleasure to many local people and children played there.

Hitch was a good swimmer. It was a fair distance that he had to go even though the lake narrowed here in the middle of its length. Some way from shore he noticed a great deal of hubbub ahead of him. Not wanting to delay, he changed course a little to avoid it. It was not to be. A slight error in judgement and he had hitched his foot in the anchoring line of a lily-pad. The stem held. Hitch floundered, wildly threshing the water and pandemonium broke loose. In a moment he was surrounded, ducked and dazed by bodies flying in all directions.



“Well...shake...my...spines!” he gasped each time he rose free of the water.

Platforms rocked, knocking into each other. Heads speared the water. It was difficult to tell whose legs were whose. Tempers were frayed. There was much pushing, shoving, clinging and shouting:

“Mind!” “Help!” “Hold on to me!” “Don’t d..o..o..o that!”

A caterpillar of the Tortoiseshell Butterfly family swinging from a sallow leaf on the end of his nylon-strong rope so as not to miss anything, was overcome by all the excitement. Losing his balance he fell with a ‘whoosh’ down the back of the neck of a frog. She had climbed with difficulty on to one of two alder-tree roots which poked from the water like knees from the bath. His sudden arrival quite upset her.

A hairy may-bug blundering by ‘rubbernecking’ collided with an oak-apple and gave herself a headache for the rest of the night.

Hitch withdrew from the uproar and swam steadily for the bank. There seemed to be something else that was odd, he thought. By now he should have felt the gentle influx of water from the stream. There was none, only a splash of water falling. How could he know that children playing there for a few days before, had built a little dam with a plank, some branches, leaves and mud, to make a basin of water on which to sail toy boats? He first knew of the dam when he tangled with one of the branches. Becoming irritated by so many surprising mishaps he wrenched free, rasping as he did so, “Sharpen my spikes!” One idea only was in his mind; to reach that beach. He was soon away.

Mud washed from the dislodged branch. Slowly the others making up the dam gave way. The weight of the water behind them swept the rest of the frail barrier aside as it broke into the lake in a tidal wave.

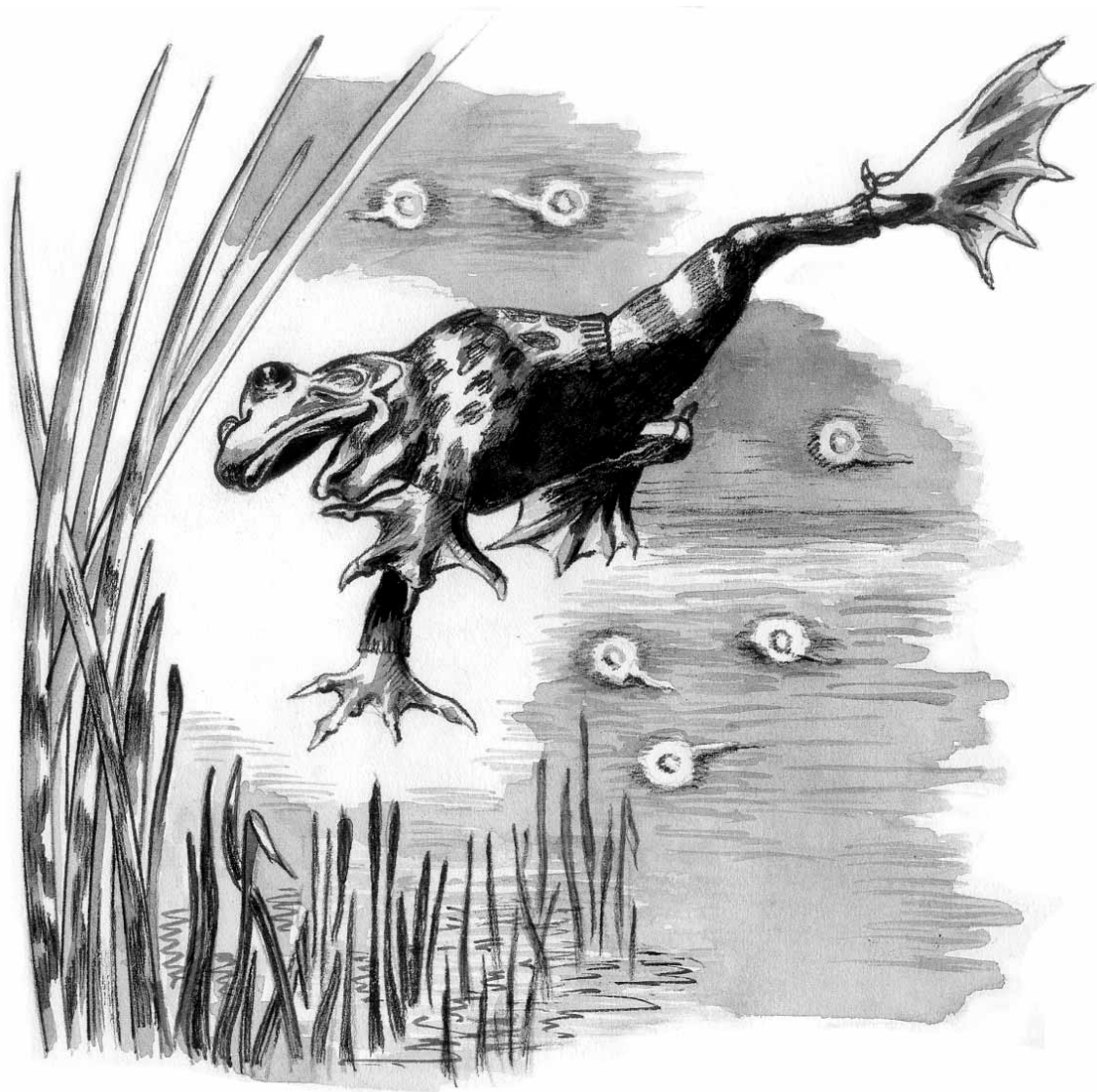
This last part was felt on the opposite shore as much as the first part had been in the middle of the lake. A rash of snails that had sprung up in the usual caravan holiday-camp manner left the enjoyment of their leaf-salads, rushed inside and slammed their doors.

Shippy Shrewsbury was not lacking in courage and mostly gave a good account of himself, but when that wave swept down upon his bank he was quite unnerved. Full and hard it came, smack, swap, right into his

little shop and premises. It lifted everything. On the ebb it swept all out, leaving some stranded, broken, on the beach and taking the rest with it back into the lake. Wringing his hands, chattering and hiccupping with dismay he sat down upon a log near one of his upturned boats and took his head in his hands. At that moment he thought all was lost. Later he was to look round at the fresh whitewash and restocking, all neat and tidy again, and note with satisfaction the improvements he had made. It had been the chance to begin afresh.



The same wave carried many of the frogs and left them stranded, clinging to the reeds like punters whose punts had slipped away beneath. One even found his head stuck between two rushes from which his friends struggled to free him. They pulled so hard on his back legs, while trying to bow the unyielding rushes that he appeared to stretch like a rubber band. Having no neck to speak of and a slippery skin, the smooth stems of the rushes could no longer keep their hold upon him. As they were eased apart, without warning his head came free like a cork from a bottle, catapulting him farther back than from where he had come. Quite likely he broke the record for the longest jump in those parts, if anyone had thought of it at the time. It wasn't measured though, nor was it a proper meeting. 'Leap-frog', twitted some on hearing of it. All that the leaper





could recall was the moment he left his lily-pad that had suddenly become a surging surf board.

Arriving at last at the bank Hitch heaved himself out and up the shingle. What a bother he had almost been tangled in out there. Not for a moment did he grasp that he had been the cause. Had he been told of the wreck, ruin and riot that he had left in his wake, he would have been surprised. That he was at fault he would have flatly denied. He well knew that innocent passers-by could be held guilty by just being there. How many times had he been blamed for robbing cows of milk or poaching eggs from hens? It would certainly be difficult to believe that one fettered foot could cause such a hullabaloo.

Dawn was very near. Drying himself out, he looked about for a shake-down. It was not long before he was asleep, warmly bunked in dry leaves under protecting clumps of bitterdock and fern. He was used to camping out and sleeping rough.

Evening found him up and about. After a hasty snack he was ready to climb the steep terraces to the near boundary of Knotty Cot. In the pearly moonlight blurry-bloom ran riot. All was fairy-like; magical. The little warm night breezes kept him company, though they were here, there and everywhere. They whispered secrets to the flower-inflated hummocks of candy-tuft, played hide-and-seek with the bushes and tag with the uprush of broom. Hitch moved steadily up. He tramped the winding parts, shuffled the steeps, waddling when weary and half of a mind to stop. Patience was rewarded though as the sun slipped from veils of blush-pink and lilac cloud; honey pale at first; then dazzling gold. He breasted the last steep rise. Finding a quiet nook under a bent tree-stump, screened by nodding grasses, he slept.