

A SWAMP TALE

Text: Narrator in black Bullfrog in green Mockingbird in red

It was a new day in the pond that had been part of a great swamp for as long as generations left their memories. Cattails lifted their tufted mittens in great brown crowds along the shore. Small green stems pushed their spring fists up into strands of sun just peeking over still water. Spiders pulled down their silky webs and prepared for a day of fishing. Birds were already darting into the pond to snatch a morsel of insect skating on the surface. Everything seemed at first glance to be the same familiar neighborhood.

CHOIR: Morning Song (Scholl. website under choral)

Frog: Peee-yeewww! Here I just dug myself out of my winter home expecting to take a breath of fresh spring air, and what do I get? It smells like the whole swamp died!

Bird: You said it! No way I can escape even clear up here in this oak tree.

FROG: You got wings. Why don't you just fly off?

Bird: My mate and I built the nicest nest ever, and we have three babies with not a feather among them. I have no way of taking them out of here and I think they'll get sick in this bad air.

Frog:: I just noticed there's something bad with the water too. I got an itch and my skin's scaley. I have to go see about my tadpoles.

Narrator: With a hop and a plop the frog disappeared into the murky water. Birds gathered in the oak tree to discuss their problem. One of them said to the mockingbird: "how come you talk frog?"

Bird: I'm a mockingbird, remember.

Narrator:"Well that could come in mighty handy if we need to organize something." The group wasn't sure what organizing was for. They just heard you did it, but not what came next. The big question hanging in the air was what was causing this terrible smell and the bad water. The pond was so large that they couldn't be sure where the problem started. The birds had the best view, so they were sent out to take a look.

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Bird: Whew! Let me catch my breath. OK, here's what I saw. There's a lot of round shiny things stacked over there at the far end of the pond. A few of them have fallen over and are spilling some awful looking brown stuff into the air and water. Everyone who lives near there has run out of their homes. Some of their skins are falling off. Others can't breathe. I tell you, it's terrible, terrible!

Frog: I just talked to my cousins who live behind the little island. They swear a bunch of Two- legs are to blame. They saw them when it was almost dark come up in one of those noisy four-wheels with open backs. The Two- legs took those shiny things down and stacked them by the pond. Real careless, too, I heard. Didn't care if they spilled or not.

Narrator: Soon the information passed from birds to mammals clear down to insects. The plants were sympathetic, but plants can't say much. They just nod a lot. After awhile everybody had the right story but nobody knew what to do about it.

Frog: Those Two- legs broke the basic rule, the one I learned as a tadpole and was told never to forget.

Bird: What do you mean, basic rule? You talking about the golden rule?

Frog: No, simpler than that: You mess it up; you clean it up. All of us belong to this pond and we got to keep it in good order for everyone. We come from the pond and go back to the pond. This place is all we got.

CHOIR: We and the Earth are One (James Ritchie)

Narrator: Discussion continued far into the night, as the fireflies came in a drove and gave light to the conference. All the creatures came to the conclusion that they were not strong enough together to move those shiny things and keep the tipped ones from spilling. They had to make the Two legs obey the frog's basic law. The Two- legs messed it up and they had to clean it up.

Bird: I agree that's how to do it, but how do you get Two- legs to do anything? I don't think the mosquitoes' offer to annoy them into surrender is going to work. Two- legs have more bug spray than we have mosquitoes. The woodpeckers' offer to flatten all their tires would be sweet payback, but wouldn't bring them back here to clean up.

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FROG: Hold on there, from my cousins I hear tell of a Two- legs that comes to the pond every so often. He takes some water in a little tube and looks at it real careful. He wades in and takes a fish in his hands to see if it looks healthy. He seems to like to have his lunch here and just visit with the swamp like he cares about it. Trouble is, he doesn't come over to our pond. He always stops at the one yonder nearest the road. We got to get him over here some way. I just know THAT Two- legs could help us.

Narrator: If you ever doubted how creative wild creatures could be, you would be amazed at the ingenuity offered by this group and that group to attract the Two- legs to their pond. The locusts volunteered to chew a little path from the road to their pond, but recognized it would take a long time to do that. The birds offered to drop a trail of sticks, but they had babies to feed and no time to do it. The fireflies offered to make a light trail in front of the Two- legs to lure him on, but they wouldn't be noticed in the middle of the day. They sat in dejected silence until at last the mockingbird spoke up.

Bird: Friends, when you come down to it, we have only whatever sound we can make. I lead a mockingbird choir, and I know I can whip all of you into shape. How about it?

Frog: Excellent idea! My mate swears she can hear me all the way to yonder mountain. At night we are a riot around here. All we got to do is make that music in the daylight when our scouts see the Two- legs come.

Bird: Should we ask the sloth to join us?

Frog: All that lazy thing will do is offer to yawn louder.

Bird: What about the alligator? He has a huge roar.

Frog: Don't even think it! He'll eat us all!

Narrator: All the others offered their distinctive sounds. A cow that came often to the pond to drink offered to shake her neck and ring her cow bell. Grasshoppers and locusts demonstrated the screech their rubbed legs could make. The mosquitoes looked dejected, thinking their sound was too soft to count, but everybody chimed in that altogether that whine could drive someone crazy. The mockingbird clinched it when she concluded:

Bird: All God's Critters Have a Place in the Choir.

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OFFERTORY: As our friends in the swamp prepare to give the best they have to saving their piece of earth, let us remember all the initiatives our church has made, the promises we have given to support our Green Sanctuary practices, our garden, the Arlington Community Services. Now is your chance to give generously to support these and other worthy programs. Will our ushers come forward, please?

CHOIR: All God's Critters....

FROG: At last I feel real good about all this. We're not all hopeless and dejected any more. We have a plan and it's something we can all do with a lot of effort. We're going to have to croak, hum, scrape, and tweet louder than we ever have. Yes, we can do this.

Narrator: The mockingbird held sectional rehearsals as her musicians were available – some in the day and some at night. All of them learned how to make their sound with all the others so the sound grew bigger with each rehearsal. So when the day came, they were all prepared.

Bird: Our scouts have seen the Two- legs we want to find us. He came in his noisy machine and parked where he always does. But we have to get him over here instead. Fly quickly. Wake up the swamp people. Tell them to look up into the oak tree, and I will give them the signal.

Frog: I'll alert the water folks, especially that beaver family. When they hit the water with their tails, it sounds like gunshots. We have a little time. The scouts say he hasn't started on his lunch yet.

Narrator: The swamp was buzzing with movement, furred folks gathering with other furred folks, insects in their choirs, birds draped all over tree branches like operatic divas. Finally all was ready. The mood was electric with excitement. The mockingbird called.

Bird: Now!!

(recording of swamp sounds for about 20 seconds)

Narrator: Two- legs looked startled but shrugged and went on with his water collecting. The sounds were unusual, but not loud enough or long enough to demand an investigation.

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Bird: Oh, I could just cry. You all did so well, but it wasn't good enough. We'll have to try again and this time not stop until Two- legs is well on his way to us. Here we go. Big effort. Now!!

(recording of swamp with assist from noisemakers in the choir – 20 seconds)

Narrator: This time Two- legs put down his measuring tools and began walking toward their pond. Then he began to jog as though something terribly bad was happening. He burst through the weeds where he could see the shiny barrels and then the smell must have hit him. He leaped back, pulled out a white cloth and stuffed it up to his mouth and nose. The birds saw him go up to the spilled barrels and set them upright. He left quickly and before he got to his machine, he was talking into his hand.

FROG: Whew! I'm one winded critter! I'm as wrung out as I was after that frog hop back in my youth. But I have a mighty fine feeling about all this effort. I believe something good will come of it. Yes sir! I'm looking for good things.

Bird: I think we have a sign right here before us. Look at that fine rainbow up there over the elm trees. You can always rely on a rainbow.

CHOIR: Across the Sky (Vicki Courtney)

Narrator: The pond saw no more activity the rest of that day, but everyone talked about how it took Two- legs awhile to get themselves organized. Like them before they realized what they had to do. So the day creatures went happily to sleep and the night creatures went about their usual business.

The sun hadn't gotten much above the distant elm trees when the swamp creatures heard a powerful roar and saw a cloud of dust curling from the road. A fleet of trucks with open backs came flying down off the road and stopped close to the barrels.

Bird: Bless my feathers, I never saw that many Two- legs all dressed alike in green come to one place like that. And from here I can see they are picking up those shiny things, putting them on the backs of their machines, and making a big fuss about cleaning up. Now what? They are pulling a big machine with a powerful long nose right up to the pond.

Frog: I can sure feel that! They are sucking water out of the pond, and I can

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feel the fresh water from the swamp beginning to move in. The smell is going and the itch is going too. I got to run see they don't suck up some of my tadpoles.

Narrator: The trucks left slowly, trying not to bounce their cargo. They had all the evidence they needed to track down the illegal dumpers. The Two- legs who loved the pond laughed and squeezed shoulders, telling everyone maybe it was small, but they'd just made a better world.

CHOIR: A Better World (Sonja Poorman)

Narrator: Summer passed dragging its green robes over the mountains. The baby mockingbirds grew up and flew away. A blaze of autumn leaves settled on the water, and the frog began testing the mud bank for his winter home. So the pond lived on and on, acquiring a long list of Two- legs who looked after it, and reminding us that however small our corner of the earth, thousands of creatures, seen and unseen, call it home. Let us resolve to keep it home for them.

Let us join together as you are able in our closing hymn,