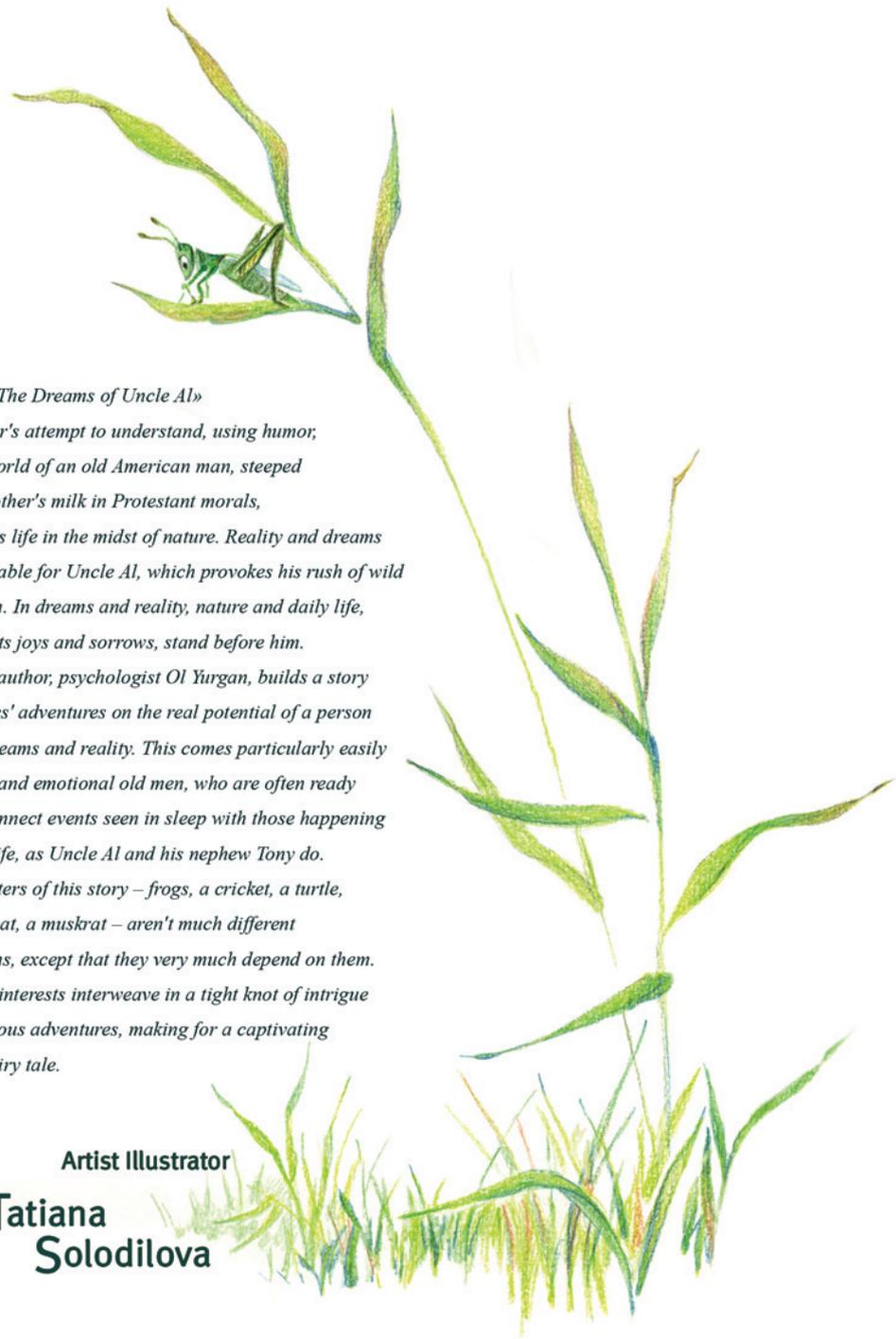




Ol
Yurgan

The *Dreams*
of Uncle *Al*

2015



The story «The Dreams of Uncle Al» is the author's attempt to understand, using humor, the inner world of an old American man, steeped from his mother's milk in Protestant morals, living all his life in the midst of nature. Reality and dreams are inseparable for Uncle Al, which provokes his rush of wild imagination. In dreams and reality, nature and daily life, with all of its joys and sorrows, stand before him. The book's author, psychologist Ol Yurgan, builds a story of the heroes' adventures on the real potential of a person to merge dreams and reality. This comes particularly easily to children and emotional old men, who are often ready to firmly connect events seen in sleep with those happening in waking life, as Uncle Al and his nephew Tony do. The characters of this story – frogs, a cricket, a turtle, a dog and cat, a muskrat – aren't much different from humans, except that they very much depend on them. All of their interests interweave in a tight knot of intrigue and dangerous adventures, making for a captivating detective fairy tale.

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The Dreams of Uncle Al

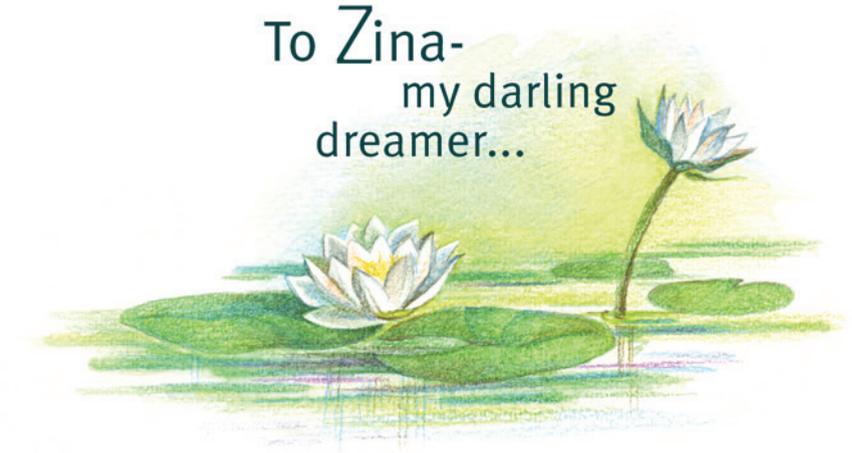
**a fairy tale
detective story**

Translated from Russian by Anna Rasshivkina



2015

To Zina-
my darling
dreamer...



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Contents

The First Dream

*Suspicious strangers. A hidden treasure.
A forest glade that began to change into a swamp*9

Still the First Dream, but now, on to Part Two!

*The swamp that was once my small clearing turns green.
I see tadpoles! I meet Mrs. Big Frog. My goodness,
how many children she has! I befriend Updown the First* 18

The Second Dream

*Toni tells me how to bring anyone you want into your dream.
I get to introduce Updown the First to my ginger-haired nephew; my dog, Jacob;
and my cat, Cinderella. The little frog tells us about his dangerous adventures.
It looks like I figure out a way to find the Shaggy
Strangers' treasure on the bottom of the swamp*28

The Third Dream

*Tony asks Updown the First for advice.
Turtle, it seems, finds the treasure beneath the swamp's green water!
What's happened to Spotted Lady? We luck out – we woke up in time,
or else something terrible would have happened!*75

The Fourth Dream

*The sheriff asks me again to be careful. Updown Acrobat shows his first signs
of progress, but a rival appears: a grasshopper by the name of Hopper.
Mrs. Big Frog tells us a sad story. The swamp and everyone who lives
there are threatened by grave danger!* 100

The Fifth Dream

*The rubber hose is connected to the pump!
Hopper, Jacob and Cinderella give the Strangers a good scare!
The treasure finds its way into the sheriff's hands! The water is returned
to the swamp. My friends: saved! Hopper dreams of the circus.
Tony returns. Updown Acrobat does a somersault and lands right on the target!* 131

The Sixth Dream

*There's a celebration at the rescued swamp.
I make a bet with Turtle. Up-down Acrobat makes a record-breaking jump!
I meet Arricola – a muskrat. Tony returns! He brings good news!
Jacob and Cinderella want to become... circus artists!* 145

The Seventh Dream

*Up-down the First, Hopper and Up-down Acrobat practice the circus
routine that Tony came up with. Cinderella and Jacob want to be a part of it, too.
Turtle consoles me. It looks like Arricola is also going to perform in the circus.
Tony's parents get lost, but find their way again soon!* 171

The Eighth Dream

*I saw something which hadn't happened yet, but soon came to pass
in the little town of Barto – home of my sister, Tricia, her husband, Michael,
their son – my nephew – Tony, and the sheriff's brothers:
police officers Gary, Stanley and Paul* 196



The First Dream

*Suspicious strangers. A hidden treasure.
A forest glade that began to change into
a swamp...*

Let me tell you about a dream I had not long ago, before I forget it. (That happens to you too, doesn't it?) But first, let me introduce myself: Hello! I'm Uncle Al. Where I live, what I do and the adventures I've had, we can get to later. First, listen to what I saw in my dream...

A five-minute walk from my house, there's a small swamp. Just a little while ago, it was a regular forest clearing. I used to take my dog, Jacob, and my cat, Cinderella, on walks there. I would gather kindling for my stove, and then I'd cook up some delicious beef to treat my sister, Tricia (her name is Patricia, but I've called her Tricia since I was a boy), my nephew, Tony, and his father, Michael Stern (he's our town sheriff). They come by and visit sometimes.

Anyways... I dreamt that a campfire was burning in this clearing (it hadn't turned into a swamp yet), and around it sat some strangers. I wanted to go over to them and say hello, but first, I decided to watch them for a bit. It was getting late, and it never hurts to be careful. So I hid in the bushes. To be perfectly honest, I had good reason to wonder. I've lived here a long time, but never before have I seen people with such messy hair..

«Maybe I should call the sheriff?» I thought. But Michael Stern had gone to Virginia to visit his parents. Of course, I knew that Michael's

brothers – Gary, Paul and Stanley – were also policemen. They protect this forest, and my peace and quiet with it. But I decided that instead of running home to my old phone, I would keep an eye on these strangers.

...What? Do you think they scared me? No! I may be old, but I can stand up for myself! In this neck of the woods, in central Pennsylvania, I spent my life working as a forest ranger, like my granddad and dad before me. Then I grew old, and here is where I settled.

Besides, I got curious – what would these strange people do? But twilight came quickly. At dusk, it was hard to see how many there were – three, or four? I heard arguing. It sounded like they were trying to divide something amongst themselves. Some sort of shiny objects? Could they be jewels? But from where? ...They had robbed someone!

The messy strangers argued loudly. Then they actually started fighting! Suddenly, one of them shot a gun into the sky. He was probably trying to scare his fellow brawlers... «They won't be walking around here long,» I thought. «The sheriff's brothers are going to hear that gunshot, jump right on their horses, and come tearing over here. They'll know which way to go from the campfire smoke.»

Then: one of the men dropped down and put his ear to the ground. Do you know why? When horses gallop, you can hear their hoof beats from far away! That's what the stranger heard. He sprung up, shouting and waving his arms around.

«They're coming for us! Hide the gold!»

Aha! Turns out I'd guessed correctly: thieves! The leader of the pack of dirty strangers started stamping out the fire and yelled:

«Bury it! Hurry up – Hey, don't hide it in your shirt! I'll shoot you! Do you hear me?! Everything in the bag, and bury it!!»

In the dark, I could only guess that the thieves had dug a hole somewhere around the stamped-out campfire, then hid the treasure there and covered it with leaves. But I couldn't get a good look at the spot. I tried to come closer, but then a twig snapped under my foot. The strangers must have heard it. They probably would have spotted me, but I got lucky!

Gary, Stanley and Paul – the sheriff's brothers – charged into the glade on horseback.

«Stop! Police!» They commanded threateningly.

The shaggy men scattered like ants in every direction. I had no doubts the sheriff's brothers would catch them. Let me tell you, I really wanted to see it! I thought, «Let them catch the strangers, and then I'll show the police the clearing where they hid the gold!»

I darted after them, from tree to tree, bush to bush; I couldn't wait to see Gary, Paul and Stanley catch those thieves. But this turned out to be harder than I thought! It was already dark. The woods were thick, full of bushes and fallen trees; even the horses were stumbling. I was tired, too. I'd banged my knee against a tree stump...Really, I wasn't the only one having a hard time of it – the policemen weren't doing much better. But, even though the Shaggy Strangers had run off, the brothers still shook them up good!

So, I lay in the dark, rubbing my aching knee and thinking, I could invite Stanley, Gary and Paul over for some hot coffee and ham sandwiches... But of course not! The brothers had galloped off. They had bigger things on their minds than dinner – they had burglars to catch! I could no longer hear their voices or their horses' hoof beats. I was surrounded by quiet and darkness.

And where was I? It looked like I'd gotten lost! Even though I've lived my whole life in these woods, it's still not easy finding your way home at night! Not to mention, my banged knee was throbbing. I decided to rest, and sat in the grass. I was surrounded by darkness. The forest was dense. Of course, I regretted my curiosity. What, am I going to search in the pitch-black dark for the place where the strangers had buried the stolen treasure? I started scolding myself. Why couldn't I have just stayed in the other glade? Why, instead, had I scrambled from bush to bush trying to see the Stern brothers catch the robbers? Why hide it – I got really upset!

I'd have to wait until morning. You've probably heard your mother

say, while tucking you in at night, «Set everything down, and go to bed! Morning is wiser than the night.» And so I decided: I'll just sleep right here in the forest. Tomorrow, I'll find the glade, start digging, and discover the Shaggy Strangers' hidden treasure. I have a shovel at my house. I'll muster my patience, find the stolen jewels, call the police, and them all of it!

...Hey! You remember this whole adventure is just in my dream? Let me remind you, I'm really asleep in my own bed, having this amazing dream!

You know that all sorts of things happen in dreams – you can wake up from one place and go right back there when you fall asleep again. Can you believe it – this is what happened to me!

Of course, I could have found the way to my house or the clearing even in the dark, but I was just so tired. And why wander around at night when you can gather some dry leaves into a pile, curl up, and go to sleep? So that's what I did. I woke up with the sunrise. I found the way back to my house quickly. I snatched my shovel from the closet, and went back to my clearing.

I didn't know exactly where the thieves had buried their treasure, and I had a big task ahead of me. This was a job that required patience! Well, patience and I are great friends! When I was still a little boy, my parents gave both me and my sister, Tricia, the gift of lots of patience.

«Albert, remember!» dad would tell me, «Patience is a great sidekick in anything you do.» And mom often repeated to my sister, «Anything can be overcome with patience.»

By the way, do you know what patience is? Ask your parents. They'll probably explain to you that it's hard to live without. Of course, they would know, and you've probably heard them say more than once, "Be patient!" It's exactly what my grandma Amy and grandpa Andrew always told me, about how useful it is to befriend patience...

You want to know what happened next? Let me tell you...

I walked all around the glade, but I couldn't figure out where to start digging. It seemed that the Rumpel Strangers had not only buried

the treasure, but had time to hide the spot, too!

I sat down on a big rock at the edge of the field to think. I mulled it over, and decided to dig where the campfire had been. But no – I didn't find it there. Then I started shoveling around the fire pit... I walked over to the bushes where I'd hid when the unkempt strangers were fighting. It had seemed to me that they'd buried the jewels within ten paces of my hiding spot.

While taking a break, I remembered the words of my grandfather (he was a sly old fox): «If at first you don't succeed, then try, try again!» So I tried again: I started digging not far from a rock poking out of the dry leaves. But no – it was hopeless! I looked around me: nearly the whole clearing dug up, and nothing to show for it!

While I'd been digging, I'd been surrounded by all sorts of curious onlookers. A crow cawed, flapping its wings in astonishment. The mosquitoes landed right on my nose for a better look: what I was digging at for so long? Occasionally the magpies came by to cry loudly. They hopped from branch to branch, probably asking each other, «What's Uncle Al looking for?» Even an old hawk sat down on a nearby tree branch to watch. He turned his sharp-beaked grey head side to side, then flew away again. He doesn't know how to dig dirt. He can't help me, and he doesn't have time to stay and watch...

Ah, how badly I wanted to find the treasure! I would have given it to Michael Stern, our sheriff, and he would have returned the gold to its rightful owners...

Now let me remind you that in my dream, it was already coming up to the second night, and I was awfully tired! I decided to go home and get a good rest. Even in dreams, when you work hard, you get tired!

So, I went home. Meanwhile, clouds were gathering in the sky. It grew dark; a biting wind began to blow. I had just arrived home – shovel in hand, exhausted and drained of nearly all my patience – when it started to drizzle. And I'd barely lain down in bed when the drizzle became a vicious



downpour! One sleeps sweetly, surrounded by the sound of the rain! Even if the rain is falling in your dream!

Though I slept very deeply in my dream, I still woke up every once in a while. You know why? I really wanted for the rain to hurry and end — then I'd go back to the glade to look for the Rumples Strangers' treasure. If it didn't work out on the first try, surely I'd get lucky on the second! But the rain kept pouring.

Finally, I just got out of bed, pulled on my big rubber boots, grabbed a big umbrella and headed off towards the glade where I'd been digging. And what do I see there? The whole thing was full of water! I got very bitter! You would've been pretty upset too, right? There was so much water that even my rain boots and umbrella didn't do any good. I realized that, now as before, luck was not on my side. No wonder my mother, whenever some misfortune came out of the woodwork and got worse every hour, had always sadly said, «When it rains, it pours.» You see it for yourself! I'd barely even noticed the harmless rain at first. So what if I got a little wet? I'd had to get an umbrella and put my boots on, but the clearing



wasn't flooded yet! And now what? Disaster! Water – everywhere! I may as well climb into a boat and row around!

Returning home, I thought, «How did this happen? I had a shovel; I had patience. I dug up practically the entire field where the thieves hid their treasure. There was probably just a little left to dig up, around that rock where I'd rested, and suddenly there comes a big, roaring downpour and drowns my entire glade!»

But even in dreams there can be strong hope. I started daydreaming: the sun would peek out from the clouds. The water would evaporate! The ground would dry out again. And then I'll pick up my shovel, pack a lot of patience, and get back to digging! I'll find the treasure and give it to the sheriff. He probably already knows who these riches were stolen from, and he'll make sure to give them back to their rightful owner!

May be you're tired of listening to me? Go ahead, throw the ball around with your friends and play some baseball. I'll go relax, too, and remember what happened next...



Still the First **D**ream,
but now,
on to Part Two!

*The swamp that was once my small clearing
turns green. I see tadpoles!
I meet Mrs. Big Frog. My goodness, how many
children she has! I befriend Updown the First.*

In my dream, the sun had already started to warm the ground, but the water wasn't vanishing. It didn't seem to be planning on going anywhere – it had even begun to turn green! This happens when water stands still for a long time, with nowhere to flow. But this didn't help me any!

I gazed despairingly at the green water, and already began to feel like it would never go anywhere at all. I chided myself: «Had you not been so curious, Al, had you not run after the Stern brothers to see if they caught the thieves, you could have found their hidden treasure. You could have called the sheriff and said, «Hey, Michael! I found the treasure! The thieves buried it in a forest glade not far from my house. Come on over and pick up the gold.» The sheriff would be proud of me! Maybe they would even write about me in the newspaper! And televisions would show me all over America! But, it's already too late for that! And you know why? Because my curiosity got in the way!»

While I was grumbling to myself and saying goodbye to my dreams of the water disappearing, little black spiders were gliding quickly across its green surface, like on ice. You can see them in any swamp. And the mosquitoes were noticeably increasing, too.

Of course, I was really upset by everything that had happened to me. But my curiosity hadn't gone anywhere, and in this dream that I'm telling you about, something very interesting began to happen.

Soon, I noticed the surface of the water was stirring! Do you want to see what that looks like? Here, ask your brother, sister or mother to tightly stretch out a sheet. Now hide your hand under it and curl your fingers. Touch your fingertips to the bottom of the sheet and wiggle them around. See, the top of the sheet moves! That's exactly how the water's green surface was moving. Oh, I got so curious watching this!

I lay down on my stomach. I crouched down so low that my nose nearly touched the water. And do you know what I saw? A whole lot of tadpoles! They were swimming right along the surface of the water, skimming it with their tiny heads...

A long time ago, when I was young, my parents told me that tadpoles are baby frogs. I remembered this and thought that pretty soon I would see little green frogs jumping out of the water onto all the leaves floating around its surface.

In my dream, the sun was already nearly hidden by the trees. I noticed, near the shore, sitting completely still on a rock poking out of the water, a large green frog. She had big bulging eyes and a little white pouch under her mouth.

I named her Mrs. Big Frog. She was looking at the surface of the water and, from what it seemed like to me, talking to the tadpoles. Now, in dreams, all sorts of fantastic things happen – you know that. Well, I could hear – and even understand – what Mrs. Big Frog was talking about with her kids – the frogs-to-be! Listen:

«Chi-i-i-i-ldren! Pay attention to what's around you – there could be hungry fish in the water! Soon, you will be frogs; you will jump out of the water onto the leaves. And when that happens, be careful! There could be a heron in the swamp. It'll be ready to grab you with its long, sharp beak and swallow you whole!»

When I was little, and I wandered in the woods or in the meadow by

the river with my friends, my mother would also tell me things like that. Of course, it wasn't about the herons or the fish. «Al,» she would urge me, «be careful! Don't run so fast! You'll trip and crack your head open!» Even in my dreams, my mom showed up, asking me to be careful.

When you dream of playing football or flying down the street on roller-skates, does your mom show up, too? I'm sure she says, «Be careful, don't fall!» That's mothers for you! They worry constantly, even popping up in our dreams to keep us from hurting ourselves...

I already know how time passes unnoticed in dreams. Everything happens so quickly. But I still had a chance to watch the tadpoles start turning into frogs. I watched as, not far from the bank where I was sitting, the very first tiny green frog jumped onto a little round leaf!

I got so excited that I jumped up, clapping my hands, and joyfully yelled, «Hello, first frog! Well, how are you doing?» But it dove right back into the water. I'd scared it. It's a shame, but I just couldn't help myself...

As you already know, I am very curious. So I hid behind a thick tree and stood waiting for that first frog to show itself again on one of the green swamp leaves. Even though I'd spent a lot of my patience digging for the Rumpled Strangers' treasure, I still had some stored up. So there I was, behind the tree. I waited and waited for that frog to hop out of the water. But no, he didn't show up! I started thinking that he would end up having even more patience than me.

Then I heard the quiet, gentle voice of Mrs. Big Frog; it turns out she was still sitting on the rock. She was looking out over the water, softly croaking, «Ribbit! Hey! Updown the First, come out of the water! Don't be afraid, this is Uncle Al! He's come to take a look at us. Come now! Hop up on the leaf and say hello. Don't be afraid, my boy. He got so happy when he saw you. You're the very first baby frog in our swamp, and Uncle Al would just like to meet you.»

Mrs. Big Frog jumped from the rock into the water, swam to the shore where I stood, and warmly greeted me.

«Good afternoon, Uncle Al!»

I bowed politely. «Hello, Mrs. Big Frog! Please forgive me for scaring your little boy...»

«My son was rightly frightened by your booming voice. I beg you, Uncle Al, please speak a little quieter!»

Out of the water appeared a small green frog, hopping up onto a leaf floating near the bank. I heard a tinny little voice: «Hi, Uncle Al! Please, don't be happy so loudly. I'm still small and I get scared of my own shadow.»

When I saw the frog, which Mrs. Big Frog had named Updown the First, I crouched down by the shore. «Hi! Please forgive me.»

His mother had hopped off somewhere. She was probably rushing to greet all of her new babies, who, as you know, turn from tadpoles into cute frogs, just like my new acquaintance, Updown the First.

I wanted to learn a bit more about my new friend. «I heard your mom calling you Updown. That's your name?»

«Of course!» The frog jumped onto the bank and landed right at my feet. «Everyone has a name,» he said in a ringing voice. «My mom gave me my name...who named you Al?»

«My mom told me that my dad gave me that name,» I answered. «But why do you have that name – 'Updown'?»

«If you watch me carefully, Uncle Al, you'll figure out why my mom named me that.»

The frog started hopping over the grass and onto the leaves, and across the many branches along the edges of the swamp. The little frog jumped up and yelled, «Up!» He instantly landed back on the grass and yelled, «Down!» It was very simple: “Up”: a hop up. “Down”: coming back down. The frog giddily skipped around, calling loudly, «Up-down! Up-down!» So it turns out that's how he got his name!

«Just like that,» said Updown. «That's how my brothers and sisters jump, too.»

While I was talking to him, new frogs had already started hopping from the water onto the leaves around the swamp. They were just like my green friend. They had noticed that Updown the First was calmly talking to me,

and understood that they didn't have to be scared. Jumping from leaf to leaf, the frogs kept croaking, «Up-down! Up-down!» and their voices resounded over the swamp.

...I don't know about you, but if I have to wake up by a certain time, I'm pretty good at doing that! No matter how deeply and sweetly I may be sleeping, I can always wake up when I want to. But this time, I really didn't want to! You'll see why in just a minute...

It wasn't long before something else made me wonder. Really, if all of the frogs look the same, like two drops of water, and, moreover, they all have the same name, how in the world could their mother tell them apart? I couldn't help asking. I said to my bug-eyed green buddy:

«Listen, you all look alike! You're all green with golden circles around your eyes, and you all have the same name: Updown. How does your mother know who's who?»

«No,» answered the little frog, «we're not all the same. It just seems that way to you. If you were a green frog like me, and my mom was your mom, then she would easily be able to tell you apart from the other kids!»

«But, how?» I really didn't understand.

...From many experiences, I've long known that in dreams, everyone is very smart and talkative. Frogs, ants, robins, butterflies and even fish can all talk! And, when you ask one of them about something, like the way I asked the frog, any of them will correctly explain it to you. And just like that, the little green frog happily cleared everything up for me.

«Uncle Al,» he told me, «obviously you know that humans, too, can have more than one baby at a time. You call them twins, right?»

I did know this, of course. Someone's mother can give birth to a brother and sister at the same time. And they'll look like one another, so much so that it's not always so easy telling them apart! Or sometimes, one mother will give birth to three boys or three girls, all at once; those are called triplets.

It turns out, Updown the First knew about this, too. Even though he'd just been born in my tucked away swamp, he already knew a bit about



people! Of course, these kinds of things could only ever happen in dreams.

Updown continued: «If you had a twin brother, Uncle Al, then your mom would probably still call him by a different name, right?»

«Yes,» I agreed.

Mr. Frank Thompson and his wife, Emily, who own a farm about an hour's drive from our village, Ole, had twin girls. Emily named one of the girls Kathryn, and the second, Judy. Anyway, their father, the large and kind Mr. Thompson, could never get them right: which one is Kathryn, and which is Judy? But their strict and beautiful mother, Mrs. Thompson, never got the girls confused! And I just recently saw on TV that a woman had given birth to six children. They all look the same, like peas in a pod! It's probably very hard learning who is who. I told Updown the First about this. And he told me about a secret method that Mrs. Big Frog had come up with to tell the children apart. You would never guess! And neither did I.

As soon as a tadpole becomes a frog and hops from the swampy water onto a leaf, Mrs. Big Frog happily greets it and tells it its number. So this is why my green bug-eyed friend was called Updown the First – because he had turned into a frog before any of his brothers and sisters. He was the first one to jump out of the water onto a leaf, and, seeing him, his mother said, «Hello, Updown the First!»

I got lucky – I got to hear Mrs. Big Frog greet her first son. To be honest, I didn't understand at the time that this was my green friend's full name. The rest of the frogs got their names in order: Updown the Second, Updown the Third, Updown the Fourth... And already, I'd gotten used to hearing the voice of Mrs. Big Frog, calling her children by their numbers.

«Updown the First, time to come home! Updown the Second, where are you? Updown the Third, go play with Updown the Fifth, he's lonely! Hi, Updown the Sixth! Remember your name, child!»

I wanted to ask Updown the First how his mother named the girl frogs.

But I didn't get a chance.

«Excuse me,» said my bug-eyed green buddy, «My mom is calling for me. I don't want to make her mad...» And he hopped away along the grassy bank of the swamp, and then across the clusters of leaves floating in the green water...

Remember how I told you that everything in dreams happens very quickly? Well, that's what it was like in this dream, where I dug up my clearing in search of the Rumples Strangers' loot, and the downpour flooded it, and turned it into a swamp. I may not have had much luck finding the hidden treasure, but I did get to meet Mrs. Big Frog and her son, Updown the First.

«Time to wake up now,» I told myself in my dream, and right away, I found myself awake... Good morning!



The Second Dream

Tony tells me how to bring anyone you want into your dreams. I get to introduce Updown the First to my ginger-haired nephew; my dog, Jacob; and my cat, Cinderella. The little frog tells us about his dangerous adventures. It looks like I figure out a way to find the Rumples Strangers' treasure on the bottom of the swamp!

I opened my eyes. It was a bright, early morning that immediately took the dream I've just been telling you about and hid it away somewhere. But I knew nighttime would bring it back to me, and I'd once again see my swamp, and my cheerful friend Updown the First, and Mrs. Big Frog.

When you wake up in the morning, you want to lie around in bed for a while, right? And so I lay, listening to the robins chirping. There's nobody else in my house, except Jacob and Cinderella. Jacob is a big, black, floppy-eared mutt. He's very good-natured. He ran into my house one fall from God knows where. I fed him, and then he stayed with me. I didn't know his name, so I started calling him Jacob. Turned out he liked it. How did I know? The dog responds to it – he comes running to me, so that must mean he likes it!

As for the cat, here's how that story goes: Tricia lives in Barto and used to work as a veterinarian at an animal hospital. One day, she brought me a kitten, who I named Cinderella; Ever since I was a boy, I've liked that story that my mother read to me, about the girl with the same name.

My Cinderella grew into a big, fluffy cat with blue eyes.

As they say where I'm from: «A yard isn't a yard without a dog, and a house is no home without a cat.» Now I didn't need to worry about having both a proper yard and home. Jacob turned out to be a great guard dog, and the cat caught all my mice. She also chases away the crows that try to peck the apple tree in my yard. She fully considers herself to be the lady of the house. The cat and the dog used to fight at first. But then they became friends. Speaking of which, I better get up and feed them!

...I had made the bed, washed up, given Jacob and Cinderella their food, and was just about to eat breakfast, when I suddenly heard a loud knock at my gate.

I guessed it must be Tricia arriving from Barto. From there, you can make it to my village in an hour, so she drops in pretty often.

Tricia usually works late. And her husband, the sheriff, is a very busy man. So they don't always get to spend as much time as they'd like with their son, Tony. Their boy – red-haired, bright, and full of energy – comes to my place a lot. In the summers and winters, Tricia drives my nephew over for his school breaks. He's always interested in roaming through the forest with me, and I don't get bored with him, either.

I opened the gate. A red Ford pulled into the driveway. My sister got out of the car, and nodded at me without a word. It seemed like something had soured her mood.

I saw my red-haired nephew. «Hi, Tony. How's it going?»

He also just nodded sullenly. And he wasn't getting out of the car for some reason. Hmm...what had happened to my guests?

Tricia opened the trunk and pulled out...a folded wheelchair? That was surprising – what could she need that for?

Well, go figure, it turns out it was for Tony! I hadn't known yet what had happened to him! It was only later, when we sat down for peppermint tea in my kitchen and Tricia told me the story, that I found out what misfortune had struck my sister's house a few days ago.

Tony had taken a job at the circus. That much I knew about – Tricia had

told me. Not to mention, Tony was so excited that he couldn't keep quiet about it when he stayed with me two weeks ago. Working for the circus was really fascinating for him! Trained horses, cats, dogs, donkeys... there was even an elephant.

All of these animal performers need to be taken care of, and that's what they hired Tony to do: watch over the animals. He cleaned cages, fed them... not a bad job, right?

It wasn't long before my nephew learned how to do somersaults over an elephant's back. He made friends with a monkey named Lacy. Just like the chimp, he climbed easily on the ropes under the circus' canopy. Sometimes, Tony would even entertain the audience by playing soccer with her in the arena. But it was this same monkey that turned out to be the cause of his current troubles.

One day, Lacy got upset with someone. She climbed up the ropes to the very top of the circus tent and sat down on the center beam. Nobody noticed. The circus workers put all of the animals away in their cages, and Tony gave them their food and bowls of water. The horse was chewing its oats. The elephant was taking up chunks of pumpkin with his trunk, carefully placing them in his mouth, and loudly chomping away...

There was no one left in the arena, and the performers were eating dinner at a restaurant nearby. That's when Tony noticed the chimp sitting on the beam right under the tent's peak. Probably, he felt bad for Lacy, so he thought he'd treat her to a banana. He climbed the thick ropes up to her, and, holding to the cables with both legs and a hand, he used his other hand to hand the monkey the banana, coaxing her to coming down.

Well, when a chimp is in a bad mood or is really upset with somebody, you ought to just leave it alone. It's not even worth trying to offer up its favorite treat – a banana. But Tony really wanted Lacy to listen to him: to come down, and go to her feeder. But all of a sudden, she grabbed the banana and jumped right on Tony's shoulders! Right then, the boy started sliding down the thick cables. He got rope burn on his hands from all the friction. He lost his grip, and fell to the arena! Lacy was completely



fine! She'd jumped off to the side. But Tony hurt himself pretty badly. Jumping up and down around the boy, the chimp started screeching loudly. She was probably scared. Or maybe, she felt bad for Tony?

The performers heard the monkey's scream. They rushed Tony to the hospital. The boy's right leg was broken. His neck was sprained. They put a cast on his leg, and a brace around his neck. Now my nephew can only get around with a wheelchair. This is the bad luck that struck Tony. I had only just found out all the details of this misfortune.

«Al,» Tricia said, «why don't you let Tony stay with you for a while? Summer's already started, and he's bored in Barto.» She broke out crying. There's no point in hiding that Tony was pretty upset, too!

I'm the only brother Tricia has, older than her by twenty years. Our parents died a long time ago. When my sister was still a young girl, I helped her with anything I could. I did that after she married Michael Stern, too.

Anyway, Tricia left her son with me and went home. She had to work early the next morning. I set up a room for my nephew – the same one that his mother slept in when she was a little girl.

Tony in his wheelchair rolled silently to the window and sat for a long time looking out over the yard. Jacob and Cinderella sat by him, all probably lost in their own thoughts. Of course, I would've been curious to know what the cat was thinking about, and the dog, and my ginger-haired nephew. But I decided not to bother them.

I went into the kitchen, washed the dishes and wiped down the table, then went back to Tony's room. Jacob wasn't in the room anymore. He'd probably gone to check on the yard, and make sure there were no intruders! Cinderella had also run off. Tony was sitting in his wheelchair, and it seemed to me that the boy was on the verge of tears.

«Tony.. what happened?»

«I'm bored,» my nephew answered.

«Maybe we can play Monopoly,» I offered. «Or Bingo.»

«I don't want to,» Tony said, already sobbing.

Of course, I have a TV at home. We could have watched cartoons

or a movie. But my red-haired boy declined.

«Tell me, then, Tony, why are you crying so much?»

«I'm scared!» His hair was in his eyes. He rubbed his tears over his cheeks.

«Could you tell me what you're scared of?»

«Now I'll never be a circus performer, Uncle Al!»

«Why, Tony? Your leg will heal. Even your neck will firmly hold up your red head again. On its own! Without this brace. Everything will be okay! Don't worry, my boy.»

Tony heaved a sad sigh. «No-o-o-o, Uncle Al...the circus won't have me now.»

My nephew started sobbing again. I even started to get a little irritated with him.

«And how do you know that? Did a trained little magpie tell you that?»

«We don't have any trained magpies,» Tony answered. His freckled face, wet from tears, spread into a smile. Tony's freckles are just wonderful!

Tricia told me a funny story once. When the boy was five years old, she was laying him down for an afternoon nap under an old oak tree. The tree had been planted long ago by a bearded and bulry man: Jake Stern, Tony's grandpa – his father's father.

«I'll never forget it» – my sister had said, laughing, «There's my boy, sleeping, and I see a tiny little bird sit on his nose, and Tony doesn't even wake up! This bird started pecking... at his freckles! The bird probably thought Tony had seeds scattered on his face!»

Now he's nine years old, and when such a lively boy has a broken leg and a bruised neck, one has to try and distract him from his misfortunes! Have you already guessed what I did? Of course, I started telling my nephew about my dream – that same dream that you already know..

As Tony listened to me, the tears disappeared from his eyes! Occasionally, he even laughed with joy! That's exactly what I needed! If the boy was laughing, that means he'll be alright.

And then – imagine! – my nephew says, «Uncle Al, take me into your

dream!»

When I heard this request, I got flustered!

«You – in my dream? But I don't know how to do that!»

And honestly, I really didn't know how to take Tony into my dream. Like everyone else, I always head off into my dreams alone! Just like you, your mom, your grandma, your friends: I lie down in bed; I close my eyes; In another minute or so, I'm already in my dream. So what to do with Tony's request? I really hated to disappoint him, but honestly, I didn't know what to do. But Tony was blubbing.

«Uncle Al, I want to see the place where you were hunting the Rumped Strangers' treasure – your swamp. I want to meet Updown the First and Mrs. Big Frog.»

«Okay, okay, Tony! I'll agree. Stop whining! Let's just think for a moment about how to get both of us to show up in my dream.»

«What is there to think about, Uncle Al,» exclaimed my nephew. He stopped sobbing. He wiped away his tears with the palms of his hands.

«You have a couch in your bedroom. It's wide, and comfortable. And you can lie down near me, on your bed.»

«So, then what will happen?»

«Well, if you give me your pillow and blanket...»

«Tony, why do you need my pillow and blanket?» «Why don't you understand,» the boy exclaimed. «I need your pillow and blanket because – And here I got it. Of course! Ah, the dreamer!

«You think that my dreams have soaked into them?»

I broke out in loud, gleeful laughter! But Tony was being serious. I'd thought that the boy was just pulling my leg. But his face didn't show any trace of a joke. I was bewildered: could he seriously believe that my pillow and blanket are soaked through with my dreams? It looked like he did...

«For a long time, you've been sleeping on this pillow, under this blanket,» Tony continued. «You have dreams, and I bet if I fall asleep on your pillow and cover myself with your blanket, I'll see those same dreams that you saw.»

Here I thought, well, since my boy believes it, then that's the way it'll be! I've got nothing to lose! I'll give him my pillow, my blanket that I've covered myself with for all these years and... well, why not try it, right? What, do I mind giving him my pillow? I'll just get myself another one. And he can have my blanket, too – I've got an extra... The important thing is for my dreamer to stop crying, and to fall asleep quickly. What will be, will be! Who knows, maybe it'll actually work out the way my red-haired kid says!

«Listen, Tony, what if instead of both of us showing up in my dream, I turn up in yours? Then what will we do?»

«You just fall asleep a little bit faster than me,» answered my wily nephew. «Then I'll definitely end up in your dream!» His cleverness was delightful.

«Alright! But keep in mind that if you're late, which may well happen, I'm going to find you in my dream no matter what – even if we have to spend the whole night searching for one another!» Tony nodded.

It seemed to me that my boy's cheeks were a little red. «Hey kiddo, let's take a look and see if you don't have a fever.»

My nephew, probably thinking I was about to give him some kind of nasty medicine, hurriedly said, «Uncle Al! I'm completely fine. Just carry me quick to the couch in your room.»

«Alright, but I'm still going to take your temperature, okay?»

I carried my nephew into my room and laid him on the couch. I gave him my pillow and covered him with my blanket. I sat down on a chair nearby and put the thermometer in his mouth. I took his hand and waited for the thermometer to beep, so I could check whether the boy was actually running hot. Maybe I had only imagined that his forehead felt warm.

Cinderella came into the room, followed by Jacob, who was wagging his tail. The cat jumped up onto the couch at Tony's feet, and Jacob sat down next to me.

To tell the truth, I was surprised: why was this dog of mine, instead of guarding the yard, settling himself in my room? And the cat, it seemed, had no intention of spending the night catching mice like she usually



does, and instead was laying down here and purring loudly!

I heard Tony's pleading voice: «Uncle Al! Don't make them leave! They also want to go into your dream, so they can meet Updown the First, too.»

«Really,» I thought, «if everything is as simple as my nephew says, then why don't my best friends go with us? What if everything works out and we meet up in my dream? Alright, let them lie down with us...»

The thermometer showed a normal temperature, and I set it down on the nightstand. Tony closed his eyes. «The boy's tired out,» I thought, and I felt the heaviness of my own eyelids. Jacob settled down by my knee. «I ought to get into bed myself,» I muttered, but I stayed sitting, holding my nephew's hand, not noticing how quickly I was falling asleep...

Go figure! We really did all end up in my dream! Tony turned out to be right – everything worked out. As for what happened in the dream, I'll tell you about it:

The first thing I saw was that my boy was healthy and happy! He was running quickly and easily. There was no cast on his leg, and no brace on his neck. And do you know what happened with Jacob and Cinderella? They were talking!

The cat had a gentle voice, and the dog, a pleasant baritone. I never thought that my dog would be able to speak just like I do. And on top of that, Jacob turned out to be a wise philosopher! How would you like to hear a dog say, for example, «Uncle Al, I think that our dream will be just as long as the day we take pleasure in and the night that we sleep through?» I always knew Jacob was a smart dog. But I never would have guessed that my pooch was this profound!

Tony, looking around, became confused. «Uncle Al, where's your house?» I had to explain to my nephew that, though we were actually sleeping under the roof of the house I've lived in for many years, in my dream, we had shown up on the bank of that swamp I'd told him about. In any case, it's not far from my house. We'd turned up here because Tony really wanted to meet Mrs. Big Frog and my bug-eyed friend Updown the First...

«But Uncle Al,» asked my nephew, running along the shore, «when will I get to see him?» My ginger-haired boy was restless. He played constantly with Jacob and Cinderella, and he wasn't even surprised that our four-legged friends were talking to him. And again, my nephew asked me about my friend, Updown the First.

Honestly, I wanted to see him, too. I talked my companions into being quiet so they wouldn't scare the frogs away, and we carefully kept watch over the leaves scattered on the swamp's green surface – but we didn't spot a single frog!

Jacob unexpectedly walked up to me. Putting his forepaws on my shoulders, he said very quietly, «Uncle Al, on that other bank, by the old tree, I just noticed somebody. I really didn't like the look of him!»

Who could it be? I gestured Cinderella and Tony over to me. They came in close. We lay down on the grass under a wide, thick bush. Across the swamp, with his back to us, sat a dirty, messy-haired man. When had he gotten here? Was it with us, or earlier? Wa-i-t a second... had he seen us?

But no, it looks like we'd gotten lucky! We'd hidden just in time. This suspicious stranger hadn't noticed us. He got to his feet and hurried into the depth of the forest. Almost immediately, green frogs started jumping onto the leaves littered about in the water. They all looked exactly the same, but somehow I recognized Updown the First right away!

Warning Tony, Jacob and Cinderella one more time to be quiet and not scare away my friend, I, peeking out from the bushes, called softly, «Hi, Updown the First! It's me, Uncle Al! How's it going?»

He answered me right away. «Uncle Al?» He hopped quickly from leaf to leaf, getting closer and – froze. It was clear why! He'd gotten scared of the cat and the huge dog, who he'd never seen before in his life. He was seeing Tony for the first time, too.

«Hi, Uncle Al,» he repeated uncertainly, and asked so quietly I could barely hear him, «Who are these guys?»

«Don't be afraid,» I rushed to calm Updown the First. «This is my cat,



Cinderella, and my dog, Jacob. Come meet them. This here is my nephew, Tony.»

«Hi, Jacob...Cinderella...Hey, why does Tony have a campfire on his head? Isn't he scared? Uncle Al, you can get burned like that!» Updown the First hopped a little closer to the water, just in case. Tony and I started laughing.

«My nephew doesn't have a fire on his head, just very red hair!»

Cinderella and Jacob were also laughing quietly at the little frog's fear.

«Come on, don't be scared, come over to us. Tell us how you're doing!»

Updown the First got a bit braver. He came closer, and said hello to Tony and my four-legged friends. Cheerily, he said, «So-o-o-o much has happened while you were gone, Uncle Al! Did you notice the Rumpled Stranger in the bushes?»

«So that was him? I wasn't sure, because it's hard to see from the bushes, and he left pretty quickly...»

We squatted on the grass in front of my green buddy, to better hear his story. Updown the First jumped onto my knee. We listened to the tale of the frog's adventures while we had been away from my swamp.

Here's what happened: Updown the First had decided to hop around the swamp leaves a bit, singing his lively song. Suddenly, he saw on the opposite bank some rumpled, dirty person. The man was gazing attentively into the green water. The stranger took a long stick and started poking around the bottom of the swamp. Then the Rumpled Stranger left, but soon he came back. And not alone! He had with him somebody else, just as dirty and rumpled as he was. The man was carrying a long pipe in his arms. Having stuck the opposite end of it into the water, they started taking turns looking through it.

What a story! As I listened to the frog, I lost myself in possibilities. Could these be the same Rumpled Strangers that I'd seen in my first dream? I remembered how, while I'd been searching for the treasure, I'd had to dig up the whole clearing in vain... I already told you about that part. You remember? The downpour had started... everything got flooded...

and this swamp formed. At first, I'd been upset, but now – I was happy. Mrs. Big Frog had turned up here. At this swamp, Updown the First and his many-numbered brothers and sisters were born.

But from where, and why, had the Rumpled Strangers come here? What do they need here? The forest glade is already gone! There's nothing but green water everywhere.

It seems I may have figured it out! You, too? Well, of course! These were those very same robbers! And what they want is to find, under the water of my swamp, their buried treasure! That's why they were sticking some pipe under the water and looking through it.

I was distracted from my alarming thoughts by the voice of Updown the First.

«And then something really interesting happened to me, Uncle Al! You listen, too, Tony, Cinderella and Jacob! I was sitting on a leaf, swimming around the swamp. I saw a branch in the water, and on the branch sat a hairy, black worm. All of a sudden I hear this worm say to me, 'Updown the First! Please, help me!»

«How can I help you?»

«Take the branch out onto your lead,» says the worm, «and swim for shore, because I'm scared of the water!»

«Why are you scared of the water,» I ask the worm. «I'm not afraid! Just swim, like me!»

«No-o-o! I'm a caterpillar. I can't swim. I'm going to have to spin a cocoon pretty soon. Then I'll turn into a butterfly. If I get wet now, I won't be able to become a cocoon, let alone a butterfly!»

Tony was listening carefully to Updown the First, but Jacob couldn't help but mutter something philosophical.

«How everything changes in the world! But few get the opportunity to see these transformations! Could Updown the First have seen, in this hairy black caterpillar, a future spectacular butterfly? I don't think so! But our Updown turned out to be kind and patient! He saved this future beautiful butterfly from certain doom, when she was still nothing but an

ugly worm!»

I listened to my dog's contemplation with wonder. Tony sat down next to Jacob and hugged him. Updown the First respectfully listened to the dog's words. Cinderella couldn't help herself and licked her friend's nose. I understand the cat – the dog's wisdom was deserving of praise!

«I started to feel sorry for the worm.» Updown the First continued his story. «Of course, I didn't know that she'd turn into some kind of cocoon, and then a butterfly. But I took the caterpillar out of the water and put her on my leaf. I swam toward the shore. She crawled off somewhere right away.»

«Then what happened,» Tony asked impatiently.

Jacob grumbled, «Tony – rushing gets in the way of listening, thinking and understanding!»

Tony nodded in agreement. Updown the First cheerily hopped off my knee and, after jumping around on the grass a bit, continued his tale.

«And then...then what happened is what my brothers and sisters and I do all the time! I hopped around the bushes and leaves and grass O-o-o! I really love to jump! This one time, Uncle Al, I came up with a happy song that we – the baby frogs – sing now. Do you want to hear it? I'm going to hop around and sing this song, and you all watch me and listen.»

Updown the First started hopping about the grass and singing:

I'm small of the green frog.
I live on the bog...
I love to jump from dawn,
I'm friends with everyone!
Up-Down! Up-Down! Up-down!
Please, do leap, to hop with me!
I leave tracks on this ground,
Leap! She left the print and he.

It was a peppy little song. Updown hopped in the damp dirt around

the edge of the swamp, leaving behind prints of his tiny feet. Tony couldn't help himself. He leapt up and also started hopping alongside the frog, leaving behind his own footprints. Cinderella, Jacob and I, meanwhile, were having a great time watching the rowdy kids. Finally, the frog settled down, and Tony, after rinsing his feet out in the water, sat down near us. Updown the First jumped up on his knee and said, in a near-whisper, «And now I'll tell you something scary. And this happened to me, too! Like today, I had been hopping around for a long time with the other frogs. We were singing our song together. I even got tired. I swam to the shore where the fuzzy caterpillar had crawled away..»

«The one you saved?» asked my nephew.

«Yeah, Tony! I really wanted to see if she'd turned into a cocoon or a butterfly yet, like she'd promised. I sat down on the grass and, probably because I was so tired, I started dozing off. Then, suddenly, someone grabbed me by the sides and picked me high, high up over the swamp!»

With Updown the First's words, my heart grew cold. Jacob pressed himself to the ground, lay his head on his paws and muttered in a lost voice, «When you hear of these things, you become so afraid!»

Cinderella's hair stood on end. She was also scared for Updown. Tony kept looking from me to Jacob and back. He probably couldn't wait to find out what had happened to the little green frog.

«I couldn't even breathe! This somebody kept lifting me higher and higher! And then I saw a black hole under me. I'd just thought of my mother, and my brothers and sisters, when something flashed bright and it was like the wind was blowing! I felt myself come free from that scary grasp and zoom down! I plopped into the green water of the swamp and dove deep. To the very bottom of the swamp!»

«Updown the First,» Tony, Jacob, Cinderella and I all asked at once, «who grabbed you?!»

Looking from side to side, Updown said in a whisper, «That day, at our swamp, appeared... a heron! Mom had warned me that we, the frogs, had to watch out for it. It'll swallow you in the blink of an eye! But, Uncle

Al, even though my mom had told me about the heron, I'd never seen it before!»

«That's for sure,» Jacob stated. «Better to see it once than to hear about it a hundred times!»

I again looked at my dog with respect. Jacob's intelligence and wisdom continued to amaze me.

«But where did the wind come from?» Tony impatiently moved closer to the frog.

«Updown the First, you said that something bright flashed in front of you.» My cat was looking at Updown with her enormous blue eyes. «What was it?»

«Hold on, Cinderella...Hold on, Tony. I'll tell you everything! Anyways, the black hole under me, it was...the heron's throat! Another second and... it would have...swallowed me!»

«M-E-O-W-W-W!» Cinderella screamed. Then, embarrassed by her outburst, she apologized. «I meant to say, "How terrifying!"»

«That's for sure,» agreed Updown the First. «But I got lucky! Look here – and in two jumps, Updown was next to a dried oak leaf, on which sat a big, bright butterfly, warming herself in the sunshine.

«A butterfly...» whispered Tony in admiration. Jacob and Cinderella sat down, very still, around the leaf.

Ah, what a beauty she is! The double motled wings – orange with black stripes along the edges, and white spots in the middle – touched at their upper tips. The butterfly, who probably wanted to show off a bit in front of us, spread her wings. They looked to me like two pages of a bright, colorful book. Between the wings, we saw a small head with a pair of sparkling eyes and a long, dark body.

«She said to call her Spotted Lady,» Updown said, solemnly presenting the butterfly to us. He seemed to get the sense that the butterfly was disturbed by our presence, and he rushed to reassure her.

«Spotted Lady, please don't be scared! These are my friends!»

Updown the First jumped onto Jacob's head, but my smart mutt was

so mesmerized by the butterfly's beauty that he didn't even budge.

«Oh, I'm not afraid, Updown the First!» Spotted Lady's voice rang out like a tiny bell. «I'm very pleased to meet your friends...»

«She,» declared Updown the First, «saved me!»

«How?!» Tony and I blurted at almost the same time.

Jacob stretched out his paws and carefully lowered his head with his big floppy ears. He probably wanted it to be more comfortable for Updown to hop down to the ground. At first, the little frog sat himself on the dog's nose, then he jumped onto the grass and wound up next to the butterfly. Folding her wings, she soaked in the sunshine.

«When the heron snatched me up by my sides and was all set to eat me, Spotted Lady flew right up to its eyes and flapped her wings really quickly! The heron was caught by surprise and got scared and opened its beak. I fell into the water, and it ran away!»

We all clapped our hands. Spotted Lady fluttered into the air. We were enchanted by her bright, festive wings, and we couldn't hide our amazement! The butterfly knew that we were in awe of her beauty and bravery, and returned to the oak leaf, and the little frog continued his story.

«I popped out of the water and asked the butterfly, "Where did you come from? I've never seen you in our swamp before!"»

«I was a caterpillar a little while ago,» she answered. 'You saved me and brought me to shore. Here, in the bushes, I spun my cocoon. And then I turned into a butterfly. I was flying around to find you and say "thanks!" Then I saw a heron grab you in its beak...»

«Was it scary?» Cinderella asked quietly.

«Yes! Very... But I wanted to save Updown the First,» answered Spotted Lady. «After all, he'd saved me once!»

Jacob cheered us up with his wisdom. «A debt is made sweet when it's repaid,» he said.

He wanted to get closer to the butterfly to get a better look at her decorative wings, but the dog's loud breathing blew the butterfly off her leaf. Quickly flapping her wings, she fluttered up and soared over

the swamp, coming right down to the water and somersaulting through the air. When the butterfly came close to us, we heard her tinkling and joyful voice.

«She has a warm and brave heart,» said Cinderella.

We'd been listening to Updown the First's story of adventure, and hadn't even noticed that on the opposite side of the bank, the Rumples Stranger had reappeared. But Updown saw him. Hopping onto my knee, he quietly said, «Uncle Al, look! On the bank of the swamp – that same Rumples Stranger we saw before has shown up again! We've all got to hide, quick!»

I waved my hand over at Tony. He, Cinderella and Jacob hid behind a thick stump not far from the bushes where we'd listened to Updown the First's remarkable tale of adventure.

Then Spotted Lady sat down on his head, and he looked like some storybook frog prince with a crown. The stump and the bushes hid us well. We had a good view of what was going on across the swamp.

The Rumples Stranger sat on the grass. He took a pair of enormous galoshes out of a bag and put them on. Pulling the tops straight up to his stomach, he stood and awkwardly walked towards the water. Carefully stepping along the bottom of the swamp, he approached the rock sticking out from the water. He slipped and, comically waving his arms around, splashed face-first into the water. It was pretty deep in that spot. The Rumples Stranger choked, started coughing and, turning back, began hurriedly making his way out of the water.

Updown the First ribbitted gaily. We also thought it was really funny, but Tony, Cinderella, Jacob and I tried not to do anything to blow our cover.

«Uncle Al,» I heard Tony whisper, «why did the Rumples Stranger get in the water?»

«He probably wanted to find something on the bottom, like last time.»

I decided not to tell Tony about my hunch yet. I needed to sit quietly and carefully watch what the bandits had come up with.

«Uncle Al, I can scare him and chase him away,» offered Jacob.

I didn't let him. We had to be cautious. What if the rest of the Rumples turned out to be nearby? They'd clearly come up with some plan. Only patience will help us keep track of them...

Having made his way back to the bank, the Rumped Stranger took off his shirt, wrung it out and put it back on. Then he took off his boots, poured out what water had gotten in through the tops, put them back in the bag and walked into the woods.

It was already clear to me that the Rumped Strangers were trying to find the place where the treasure was buried, which now, after the downpour, had ended up under water.

«Uncle Al!» I heard the little voice of Updown the First.

The butterfly had already taken off from his head and was fluttering nearby, until she settled herself at the very bottom of Jacob's wide, dangling ear. What a sight that was! The huge, black mutt, and there on his ear, like an earring, hung a bright butterfly. I almost started laughing. Updown the First hopped around in front of me impatiently.

«Uncle Al, it so happens I know why the Rumped Stranger showed up here. I can even tell you what he's looking for in our swamp!»

«Wh-a-a-t?» Tony, Cinderella and Jacob all whispered at once.

«I'm going to show you something!»

Updown the First hopped to the bush where the butterfly had recently been dozing on an oak leaf. The frog came back quickly, and I noticed that in his mouth he had a tiny, yellow stone. Coming up to my legs, he set it on the ground.

«Look what I found on the bottom of the swamp. Isn't this what the Rumped Strangers are looking for?»

I took the little frog's finding and put it in my palm to get a better look at it. My eyebrows must have shot up in surprise.

«But this is gold...» I blurted.

Of course I was stunned by Updown's find, but I was glad! Jacob, Cinderella and Tony were getting in each other's way trying to look at my

palm, where lay the little piece of gold that the frog had brought.

«Uncle Al, you said 'gold?' What's that?» Updown the first looked at me in surprise.

«I don't know what gold is, either,» rang the tinkling bell-like voice of Spotted Lady, who had landed in the center of my palm.

«It's...well, it's kind of like money...» Tony tried to explain to the little frog.

«Not all money is gold – and not all gold is money!» Jacob couldn't contain himself and said something smart again.

I was so stunned by Updown's discovery, that I wasn't listening to what my friends were talking about. Now it was all clear: the stolen jewels were buried by the Rumped Strangers under the rock on the bank of our swamp. Ah! What a knucklehead I am! I dug all around and next to this rock, trying to find the treasure, and never guessed where I should have been looking. W-e-e-ll...this means the Rumped Strangers know everything! Now I had something to worry about. Are the stolen jewels really going to end up back in their hands? We can't let that happen! In that instant, I got so angry with the Rumped Strangers that I...woke up!

I saw Tony sleeping on the couch. I was sitting in the chair, holding his hand. Jacob and Cinderella weren't in the room...they had awoken and run off, each going about his own business. While I was still in the dream, I had noticed that they'd disappeared somewhere. But to tell the truth, I'd had other things on my mind. Together with Tony, I'd been examining Updown the First's finding.

My nephew woke up and, noticing that I was trying to rub some feeling back into my numb legs, he gave me a sympathetic look.

«So you sat next to me like that all night?»

Ah well, it's no big deal! I may have slept in a chair, but now my boy was happy and almost completely healthy! I yawned, satisfied.

«It's your own fault: you slept like a log! You were in such a rush to get into our dream that I didn't even have a chance to walk to the bed. But the important thing is that it all worked out!»

«Yeah, we had a really cool dream,» the boy happily exclaimed. «The things I saw – wow!»

Tony probably wanted to move now with as much speed and ease as he had in the dream. He threw off the blanket and tried to put his plastered leg on the floor. He'd forgotten to be gentle, and winced. The bandage around his neck also brought him back to reality.

«Hey, boyo! Careful!» I tried to warn him. The boy froze in pain. «Stop, stop! Don't rush! Everything in its own time. Let's make a deal: for now, you'll run around in the dream. Then, when you're better, you can run in real life. Okay?»

Trying to keep himself in check, my ginger-haired nephew muttered, «I was running so well in the dream. You saw: quick and easy! And my back didn't hurt, and my leg...»

«Be patient, buddy!»

After sitting my nephew into his wheelchair, I rolled him to the yard. Jacob was sitting by the house, and next to him was Cinderella. My blue-eyed cat was carefully licking her fur.

After breakfast, Tony and I settled in under an old maple tree, and the boy recalled our recent dream.

«Updown the First is such a great jumper! And what a funny song he sang, right?» Tony started singing the frog's little song.

I was listening to my nephew, still thinking about the discoveries of my green bug-eyed buddy.

«Uncle Al,» Tony asked, «if Updown the First wasn't in the dream, but was here, in real life, we could teach him not just to hop around in every direction, but to jump over, for example, a pole, or we could put a target on the ground and he could jump right on it! And that's a circus trick, right?»

«Sure, why not,» I mumbled, confused.

And for good reason. Well, tell me, how could Updown the First get from my dream into our yard, so Tony could train him for a circus performance?

My nephew and I got caught up in our conversation and didn't notice a police car drive through the open gates into my yard. Tony's dad –

Sheriff Michael Stern – got out of the car. He was in uniform and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His sheriff's star gleamed on his chest, and a black holster hung on his side, holding a big Colt. I wasn't expecting to see him in my yard at such an early hour.

«Hey there, Uncle Al! I'm happy to see you, son. How did you sleep last night?»

«Hello, Michael, how are things?»

«All is well! Thanks for Tony. Honestly, Tricia and I really miss our boy. She'll drive up here on the weekend, and I decided to drop in today! Figured I'd look in on the boy and you and I could talk business.»

He walked up to Tony. The boy gave his dad a high five. «Hey, Dad.»

I was surprised. What kind of business was the sheriff planning to talk to me about? I went to the kitchen to prepare some fresh hot tea and sandwiches for Michael. Through the open window I heard Tony telling his dad about the adventures in our dream. He told him about the frogs, the cat and dog and Spotted Lady. And, of course, of the Rumples Strangers.

When my nephew was a little boy, I sometimes told him about my dreams. But it so happened that only now was I able to take him into my dream for the first time. Why and how this worked, you already know..

From the yard, I couldn't hear Tony's voice very well. It seemed the boy didn't get the chance to tell his dad about everything. Like the most important part: Updown the First bringing us a piece of gold found on the bottom of the swamp – this the boy kept to himself. «Just as well,» I thought. «Or else Michael will laugh at me.» I called the sheriff to breakfast.

Honestly speaking, it seemed to me that something was bothering him. Hearing that I was calling him, Michael patted his son's red curls, and went toward the house. I gave him a plate of sandwiches and a cup of hot tea, and we sat not far from the house on a wide stump that had once been an enormous elm. The tree had been struck by lightning, and half of it had burned. My dad had had to saw it down.

Sipping his tea and chewing his ham and cheese sandwich, the sheriff

asked me:

«A day or two ago, did you notice anything strange nearby? Maybe, some unfamiliar people showed up in this forest?»

«You know, Michael, since Tricia brought Tony, I haven't been going anywhere. I stayed with the kiddo around the yard or in the house. I don't think that any outsiders could show up in this wilderness.»

I went silent. I waited: what else would the sheriff ask about? Having finished with the tea and sandwiches, Michael stood. We walked into the kitchen. Tony had stayed sitting in his wheelchair under the big apple tree where I had put him as soon as he'd been washed and fed. He waved to us. But his father didn't respond. Michael, it seemed, really had bigger things on his mind than his son. We sat down at the table.

«Well, why are you so quiet, Uncle Al?» The sheriff studied me carefully.

«He didn't come here for no reason,» I thought, and I sensed some alarm in Michael's eyes and voice. «So it goes, but, what could I do to help?»

«No... I haven't seen anyone here... but I promise to keep an eye out! Maybe I will notice somebody! But, why are you asking me this? I think you must still be hungry! How about I make you a big, delicious omelet, like the one Tony and I gladly ate this morning.»

Michael took off his hat. His shaved head shined under the sun's rays peeking into my kitchen.

«No thanks, Uncle Al... I'm grateful for the sandwiches and tea. There's no need to fry up an omelet... I'd rather you just listen to me carefully. We got word that in Harrisburg – the capital of our state – a jewelry store was robbed. The burglars got in through a hole in the ceiling, and...»

«But what's this got to do with us?» I was truly surprised. After all, why would robbers from a faraway city run here to our neck of the woods? But the words of the sheriff put me on guard...

«I wanted to ask you just in case. The robbery happened last Tuesday. Maybe you noticed something but forgot. You strolled through the forest a while ago? Maybe you smelled smoke from a campfire, or heard a gunshot?»

You already know that I saw something very similar in my dream. But to admit this to the sheriff? He'll laugh at me! I shrugged my shoulders.

Michael stood. He adjusted his leather belt with its holster. «As they say, where there's a robbery, there's a thief...so we'll look for him.»

He went out of the house and walked up to his son's wheelchair. Tony was loudly and happily singing Updown the First's song.

I washed the dishes, and this time, I couldn't hear what father and son talked about. I was thinking my own thoughts...so that's what it was – he came because of the thieves. But the robbery happened in the state capital, and here – just wilderness!

Yet Michael's story forced me to remember my recent dream again! Can you believe it? Robbers...stolen jewels...I'd thought that all of this was just in my dream! But since our town's sheriff himself had taken up this matter, that means it's serious business...

Over my shoulder, I heard the sheriff's voice. «Mr. Albert Johnson!» Michael clapped me on the back. To tell you the truth, he very rarely treated to me so officially. But a sheriff is the face of authority. He's guardian of the law! He's supposed to speak like that, even to a relative, if there's a reason for it. But now Michael Stern was grinning widely, showing me his straight white teeth. To be honest, I was taken aback by his sudden change of mood.

«Maybe, you'll tell me about these dirty messy-haired people at the swamp? And speaking of that, about how a frog named Updown the First brought you a piece of gold in his mouth?»

Tony rolled up to the porch in his wheelchair. Michael and I went out to him. From my face, my nephew understood: I did not approve of his gabbing. Guiltily lowering his face, he muttered, «Uncle Al, I told my dad about our dream. And about all of the adventures in it...»

I won't hide it, I was not happy. Well, why tell Michael about the adventures in our dream? Now there's no question about it – the sheriff's going to have a long laugh at me over this one.

«Your son told you about our dream,» I said quietly. «... So, what do you



want me to say?»

Still smiling, the sheriff offered to take a walk with me to the swamp. «Maybe, we'll get lucky, and we'll see Updown the First there... and Spotted Lady... and the Rumpled Strangers.»

I wanted the sheriff to leave me alone and take off.

«What about Tony?»

I want no part of Michael's mockery! I'm sure he has dreams, too. True, the sheriff has never talked about them...

«You're right. I'll go myself and take a look,» he agreed. «We won't leave Tony here alone.»

The sheriff put on his hat, and adjusted his gun in its holster. He glanced at me with a smile. «Maybe I'll get lucky? At your swamp I'll see these...» He turned to his son. «What do you call them? You know, the ones you and Uncle Al hid from in the dream?»

«The Rumpled Strangers,» my ginger-haired nephew offered in a resounding voice.

I shrugged my shoulders. «Go, Michael, look around...»

Winking at his son, the sheriff unhurriedly walked into the forest.

The sun was getting warm. I rolled the wheelchair with my nephew in it into the house. It's cooler in here. Jacob lay down on the floor of the veranda, and Cinderella, under my bed. Tony and I moved to the kitchen. It was time to cook lunch.

«Listen, Uncle Al,» Tony said carefully. «I want to ask you a favor...»

«What have you thought of now?»

«I want to try» – My nephew looked at me earnestly. «I think...» The boy lost himself in some thought.

I asked him, «You want to ask me about something, right, kiddo?»

«Yes, Uncle Al. While I'm living with you, I want to try to train the frog.»

Hearing something like this, you would have been surprised, too, right? «Tony, have I heard you right? Train the frog?»

«For example, Updown the First, or...»

I barely kept myself from laughing.

«Oh, what a daydreamer you are! How could we bring Updown the First here out of our dream?»

I look carefully at red-haired boy. Maybe, like his father, he was just joking or laughing at old Uncle Al?

«Let's pretend that you have a frog... what will you teach it? What is it supposed to do?»

«Jump long distance. Hop over barriers! Jump at targets – a straight “10/10”!»

Tony's voice was ringing. His eyes were shining. It looks like the boy had completely forgotten his troubles. Of course, to me, this was what was most important! Let the boy daydream all he wants!

Just as long as he's distracted from pain!

«Okay, Tony, tell me, what do I have to do?»

«I'll explain everything in a minute,» my ginger nephew said, and was silent.

I peeled potatoes and thought of how to take my nephew's mind off his ills that night. I'll fall asleep and, of course, I'll turn up in my dream. But what about Tony?

To be frank, I wanted to spend some time at my swamp alone. I have to take a look around, and sort out just what is going on there. I understand – it's not for nothing that the Rumped Strangers are trying to get to that rock, the one that sticks a foot or more out of the water. Really, I need to check out everything, and I can do that better if I'm by myself.

Caught up in my own thoughts, I had no idea why my nephew was quiet for so long, and carefully asked him.

«So, you've decided to train Updown?»

Tony didn't answer me right away. It looked like he'd already realized that it was one thing to daydream about something, but another thing altogether to achieve what you've dreamed up. My nephew wanted to say something, but I cut him off with one more question that I was caught up in at that moment:

«Listen, kid, you haven't told me how to get Updown the First here from our dream so you can train him.»

I was sure this wouldn't be an easy question for Tony! But I was wrong! I never stop being amazed at his resourcefulness.

«Uncle Al,» he said, «doing that is going to be a piece of cake!»

Tony started explaining to me that the swamp next to our house in the woods is the same as the swamp in our dream. The frogs in this swamp are exactly the same as the ones there. We just have to catch any frog, name him Updown... the Third, the Fifth, the Tenth, or anything. And train him!

The way Tony made it sound, it really did look simple as pie. I, for one, would never have thought of it! Of course, I'm not such a daydreamer, like my nephew. You boys – and girls, too – can be very insightful at figuring things out, not like old folks like me, for example.

«So it's like this then, Tony.. you want me to go to the swamp near our house, catch you a green frog, and then you would start training it, right?»

«Yup, Uncle Al,» my unstoppable inventor said gladly.

«But Tony! This frog needs somewhere to live!He needs food to eat! What do you say to that?»

My resourceful boy mumbled, perplexed, «I – I don't know..»

I hurried to reassure him. It looked like I had just had a brilliant thought. I just needed to take another look at my yard. I said to him cheerfully, «Okay, don't get upset! Together, you and I will come up with something.»

Though my nephew had added to my troubles, I didn't want to grumble at him. And Tony's fantasies have gotten me thinking, too. After all, how and where in this house are we going to put a captured swamp frog so that he can train it? Especially when he's stuck in that chair! You probably would have been at a loss, too, right? But I got lucky, and an idea came to mind!...

«And here I am!» The voice of Michael Sterninterrupted my thoughts.

Tony's father appeared in the doorway of my house and walked into the kitchen, where his son and I were cooking lunch and talking about

training frogs.

«Mr. Stern,» I addressed the sheriff, «Sir! Did you get to see anybody at the swamp?»

«Not a soul,» Michael answered, smiling. He was probably amused by my official greeting. «But you should know that, when I got back from Virginia, Gary told me that he, Paul and Stanley had heard a gunshot. And it seemed to come from somewhere not far from your house—in that glade, that’s now been flooded with water after the storm. Gary told me that when they rode into the clearing, they saw what was left of a kicked out campfire. They noticed people running away. The brothers tried to catch them. But luck wasn’t on their side – it was getting dark fast, and these strange people ran off. The rest you know yourself... what I don’t understand is why, before the storm, they turned up specifically here? What if they come back? If they’re the thieves, then it’s possible they hid the stolen gold here somewhere! I have no doubt, Uncle Al, that they’ll try to dig it up! Be careful! Do you have a gun?»

«Of course! My father’s old Winchesteris hanging on my living room wall.»

«I know it. It’s a good, reliable rifle,» Michael said, and, walking up to his son’s wheelchair, added, «In that case, I’m not worried about you two. Well, it’s time for me to get back to Barto.» The sheriff hugged his son, shook my hand and headed towards his car. Soon he drove out of the gates, and I locked them.

Tony and I ate lunch. I asked him to sit by the window. I called Jacob in from the yard. I ordered him to look after my ginger-haired boy. Cinderella came, too. She jumped into Tony’s lap and began purring sweetly. I think my nephew guessed that I wanted to walk to the swamp and catch him a frog.

I thought for a couple minutes, and then dug through the rags in the kitchen for an old sock. I bent a wire clothes hanger into a circle and fit it into the sock’s top. Now I had a net. The only thing left was to attach it to a long stick and head to the swamp. I’ll use the net to try to catch an

inattentive frog. I also grabbed a big jar. I’ll gather some swamp water in it and put the future circus performer in there.

The work that lied ahead was straightforward, but required sitting quietly and patiently on the bank of the swamp. The important thing was to scoop up a frog in my sack, get it into the jar of swamp water, and bring it to my nephew. Of course, there was one other task at hand. What was it? Hold on, I’ll tell you...

When I got to the edge of the swamp, it was about two hours past noon. I sat near an old, partly-rotted stump, which was half underwater and overgrown with bushes with tiny white flowers on them. On the stump, three frogs were warming themselves in the sunshine. As soon as they saw me, they hopped off into the water. Why did they take off? It’s simple: I am, for them, a stranger! Of course, they didn’t know that I would catch one of them and bring him to Tony, so that he could train it to perform in the circus...

I gazed at the green water, and thought that I’ll have to make something like a little swamp in my yard for the frog. It would be a simple job: I’ll dig a pit under the big old maple that grows behind my house. I’ll pour a couple buckets of this same swamp water in there. I’ll throw some green leaves on it, which I’ll also gather here, next to this rotted stump...

The sun bore down on me, but I wasn’t getting any frogs in my net! O-y-y-y! It looked like the task I was facing was no joke, after all! I was tired. I wanted to get home soon and lay down. But, since I promised my nephew that I’d catch a frog, that means I just have to stick it out and do everything I can think of. Or else Tony will get really upset. I can’t let that happen. My red-haired daydreamer needs to be distracted from his illness. He won’t whine and he’ll get better quickly...

While I was thinking about this, the frogs that had jumped from the rotten, grass-covered stump were still hiding. I scooped up some swamp water in my big jar. Setting it on the grass, I started looking around for some bug-eyed green hoppers.

Let me tell you, I really wanted to catch one of them as fast as possible

and get back to Tony! He was, after all, home alone. I locked the doors, of course, and Jacob wouldn't let any harm come to him, but as you know, we all want to wander off sometimes! Does the same thing happen to you? Well, then who would help my red-haired nephew?

Hey, frogs, where are you? Tony can't wait too long! I sat, looking over the green water. I examined the leaves, the blades of grass. And this swamp really is exactly the same as the one in my dream. To the left: a shrub. It looked like the one Tony, Cinderella, Jacob and I had hid behind. And next to the shrub: a big stump! A rock stuck out of the water on the opposite side of swamp. Ah, there's a frog sitting on it! According to Updown the First's story, it was right there, at the stump, where the heron had grabbed him...

Suddenly, a butterfly flew by me. I had seen one just like it in my dream! Spotted Lady? If I hadn't been at this swamp now, but at the one in my dream, I'd probably hear the ringing voice of Updown's rescuer. She would call to me, «Hi, Uncle Al!» This butterfly had the same pretty orange wings, with black lines along the edges. And her eyes were small and sparkling!

A turtle moved slowly along the grass. Hi there! Where did you come from? Alright, I won't bother her...But then, a sudden thought flashed unexpectedly in my mind! I even slapped my palm against my forehead! How had I not thought of this earlier? I carefully picked up the turtle and put her into my shirt pocket. She was immediately still. It was as if she was sleeping. I won't tell you about my plan for the turtle just yet. I've got to think everything through carefully... Hey, frogs, come on, where are you?

Finally, I got a stroke of luck! I noticed, not far from the tree stump, a pair of eyes ringed in gold. A frog! Had he dozed off? That's exactly what I needed! I quickly stuck the net under him, snatched the bug-eyed dreamer and put him in the jar of swamp water...

Tony was waiting for me patiently. Jacob happily wagged his tail. He was probably telling me that there hadn't been any wild adventures during my absence. I gave my nephew the jar with the frog to hold. Let him admire it. I grabbed his wheelchair by the handles and rolled my ginger

daydreamer into the yard, to the spot where I was thinking of building my tiny backyard swamp. Sitting calmly in the half-full jar of swamp water, the future circus performer had no idea what awaited him!

The captured frog probably needs a name, I thought, but let Tony deal with that himself, and I'll make a small swamp in the yard. Soon, it'll become home for the captured frog!

Not far from the old, sprawling maple, I dug a ditch about three paces long and two across. On the bottom, I lay down many small stones. I brought two full buckets of water from the swamp. Now I just had to make a wall around the frog's new home – particularly one that he couldn't jump over, and run away from Tony's training.

Last year, I fixed the furnace in my house. There were about fifteen to twenty bricks left over. They came in handy...I set them around the swamp. It made a fence – one that was no easy task for a frog to hop over! In the center of the backyard swamp, I put a rock. The future acrobat could now climb onto it, warm himself in the sun, and watch the going-ons around him.

When the yard swamp was ready, I took the glass jar with the frog sitting in it from Tony. I carefully helped the frog head into his new home. He immediately dove into the water. He lay for a moment on the bottom of my swamp, then appeared out of the water and sat on one of the leaves I had tossed around the surface. The frog probably couldn't get over its surprise: where had he ended up?

The sun slid behind the treetops. After all this work, I'd gotten incredibly hungry, and Tony and I went into the house for dinner. In the kitchen, my nephew spotted my turtle guest in a box. She was chewing on some thinly sliced cabbage leaves. It looked like she was enjoying my treat.

«Where'd you find her, Uncle Al?» Tony asked.

«At the swamp, when I was catching you a frog. This turtle told me something very interesting!»

«What, Uncle Al?» Tony's eyes lit up with curiosity!

«For now, it's a secret,» I answered slyly.

My kiddo didn't get upset with me. I think that, like me, he'd also gotten pretty hungry. He wanted to eat dinner, so he could quickly get back to our backyard swamp, where the frog I caught awaited him.

«How about we go set the turtle in our swamp,» I offered. «Maybe she'd like to live there, too.»

Tony gladly agreed.

We were eating in silence. But I couldn't take it, and asked my nephew, «Listen, Tony, have you forgotten that we still have one more big task ahead of us?»

«What is it, Uncle Al?»

«Your future circus artist needs to have a name... and my guest, too.»

Tony didn't think long, and declared decisively, «Uncle Al, we'll name the frog Updown!»

I nodded my agreement. «Why not? We have a friend with the same name and the first number. Let this one be Updown, too. The only thing I can't figure out, is what number to give him? It's not as if you're going to ask Mrs. Big Frog...»

«Do you think, that this Updown has a mom named Mrs. Big Frog – and she also gave him a number?»

I shrugged my shoulders. «Maybe... What do you think I should name this turtle?»

But my nephew had already stopped listening to me. He'd eaten quickly, and asked me to set his wheelchair in the yard, next to the brick wall of the little swamp. The frog I'd caught and that Tony and I had just named Updown sat on the rock. I don't know if he was dozing or lost in thought, but, having rolled his wheelchair up to the edge of the backyard swamp, my nephew began telling the frog all about his plans.

He was saying that Updown would be comfortable here and that he – Tony – would start training him, so they can perform together in a real circus, once his wounds have healed! Maybe the frog didn't understand a word? Or he got bored? Or maybe he was just hot? I don't know... Updown hopped off the rock and dove into the water. Then he jumped out of

the water, got back up on the warm rock, and looked at Tony.

«Look, Uncle Al,» my boy said joyfully, «our Updown isn't afraid at all! He sits there as if it was his own home swamp! See, even the turtle's crawled over to him.»

Suddenly, Updown hopped onto the turtle's back. Tony laughed gleefully.

«They're already friends!»

«Tony,» I decided to remind my nephew, «what are we going to name her?»

«The turtle? Let me think, Uncle Al.»

I was glad that Tony, at least for the time being, had forgotten about his aches, which keep any boy from feeling free. He was looking at the turtle, and the frog still sitting on her back, and with our conversation, we didn't notice the approach of the thick evening twilight.

Eventually, Tony and I came up with a name for the turtle! To tell you the truth, she suggested it herself. Here's how it happened: Once Updown jumped down from her shell, the turtle started matter-of-factly exploring our backyard swamp. She crawled around slowly and awkwardly. Watching her, Tony said, «What's there to think about, Uncle Al! Let's just name her "Turtle!"»

Hmm! Why not? «Turtle» – that's a great name! After all, once upon a time, somebody chose that name for this awkward, unhurried creature with the shell on his back!

«Good job, Tony!» I praised my nephew.

When it came time to head to bed, I decided to take only the turtle into my dream. I had no doubt that, once we were in my dream, she would talk, just like Updown the First, Spotted Lady, Jacob and Cinderella. That means I can tell her what I have in mind, and how she can help me.

Here was my plan: Updown the First will show Turtle the place where he fell out of the heron's mouth... Remember, when Spotted Lady scared it, saving our little green buddy? That's where he dove and saw the gold pellet on the bottom, which he brought to me.

Turtle will plunge under the swamp water in the same spot. She'll crawl along the bottom, to that same place where Updown the First found the piece of gold. Carefully, she'll look all around. Finally, she'll return to the bank and tell us what she saw there. Maybe she'll get lucky, like Updown the First? She'll find and even bring me back something from the treasure hidden by the Rumples Strangers...

So what do you think? Have I come up with a brilliant idea? Now you understand that it's better if I head off into my dream with just me and Turtle. We need to not be bothered, and if the Rumples Strangers show up, I'll hide her in my pocket and take cover in some bushes.

It was already completely dark. Tony and I returned to the house. I noticed that my nephew had grown sad. Could his back have started hurting again? His leg? His neck? Any other reason for his sadness didn't even cross my mind, because at that moment, I was so distracted by my own plans.

«Tonight, you'll sleep in the room your mother used to sleep in when she was a little girl.» I rolled Tony's wheelchair into my sister's room. Her bed was there, and the room was cozy and neat. Then I saw the boy's eyes. In them were unhappiness and despair. «So it goes,» I thought. «I won't get to head off into my dream alone tonight.» But I wasn't in a hurry to change my plans.

My nephew muttered pitifully, «Please, Uncle Al, let me sleep on the couch in your room, and take me into your dream tonight!»

«I'll give you my pillow and blanket,» I promised half-heartedly.

Tony pouted his lips and shook his head. «I'll only get into your dream if you're close to me.»

«Well, where'd you get that from?» I almost got angry at his stubbornness.

«Did you forget? Everything worked when we were close by..»

«Maybe we'll try it from different rooms?»

Of course, I started trying to be sneaky, too, like my nephew. Why? You know that it was very important for me to go into my dream alone that night. But Tony stood his ground.

I admit I hesitated. Jacob and Cinderella would probably follow after the boy. With such a big group gathered around me, working with Turtle at the swamp won't be easy. And if the Rumples Strangers turn up, then what will we do? Who knows how they'll react? What if they have guns? These are robbers, after all! I started thinking about what I could do.

Then I see: Tony's lowered his eyes. He snuffles –the first sign of a bad mood. I was at a loss! Honestly speaking, when my nephew's eyes are wet, I can't say no to him for anything! Annoyed, I waved my hand.

«Tony, you can't look at me so pitifully! I take one look at you, and I want to cry myself,» I admitted.

My red-haired slyboots, with eyes green like the backs of frogs, shouted joyfully, «Hooray! Thank you, Uncle Al! I'm so happy we'll see Updown the First and Spotted Lady again!»

Laying my nephew out on the couch in my room, I covered him with my blanket. Somebody rubbed up against my leg. Guess who? Exactly! Next to me stood Jacob. He wagged his tail. He poked his wet nose into my knees. And if you could only see his eyes! They were looking at me with such pleading, that I couldn't take it. I don't know what I muttered under my breath, but Jacob understood it in his own way and barked happily! His voice carried to Cinderella out in the yard. She jumped onto the windowsill, lifted her bushy tail and loudly meowed. To be honest, I was really upset.

«Tell me, you intolerable little boy,» I looked angrily at my nephew, «was it you who taught them to beg into my dream, and in a way that I can't say no to them?!»

«They can do that on their own,» Tony laughed.

This time, Cinderella and Jacob settled in on the plush rug by my big bed. I went to our backyard swamp to check that everything was in order and to grab Turtle.

I didn't spot our captured frog anywhere. When he'd heard my footsteps, Updown the numberless had probably dived under the water, but Turtle I saw right away. I snatched her up, and returned to my bedroom.

Sleepy Tony, Jacob and Cinderella awaited me.

I carefully put Turtle into a box lying under my bed. Finding within it a couple pieces of cabbage leaf, she started gently chewing.

Having lain down in my bed, I listened. Tony's quiet steady breathing from the couch, Cinderella's purring two feet away, and Jacob's snoring all suggested that they were already falling asleep. I needed to hurry, so we would all meet in my dream...



The Third Dream

Tony asks Updown the First for advice.

*Turtle, it seems, finds the treasure beneath
the swamp's green water!*

What's happened to Spotted Lady?

*We luck out – we woke up in time, or else something
terrible would have happened!*

«Hey Uncle Al! Hi, Tony, Jacob, Cinderella. How's it going? I'm so happy to see you!»

That's Updown the First. After spotting us on the bank of the swamp, he jumped out of the water and hopped over to my legs. He wasn't the least bit surprised when he noticed Turtle.

«Hi Turtle! You're here, too?» Hopping around Tony's feet, the little frog glanced at him slyly.

«Hey Tony – I know everything!»

«What do you know, Updown the First?» I asked my green friend with the gold-ringed eyes. I was confused – what was making him hop so giddily around my nephew?

Updown the First happily shouted, «Uncle Al! Tony brought the frog you caught for him. He's planning to train him to perform in the circus! I even know that the frog is a boy, just like me, and his name is also Updown, except you don't know his number. Then again, you don't really need it, right?»

I'll be honest, I had no idea how everything was so clear to Updown the First, or how the frog I caught could have wound up in our dream.

Jacob and Cinderella both had to ask to come into my dream. Before bed, I'd gone out to the backyard swamp to see how our frog guest was doing, but I hadn't seen him. He could have hidden behind the rock or dived under the water. But now, if you please, Updown the First is suggesting that our green visitor is here, in my dream!

Jumping up onto Jacob's head, who was laying on the grass, Updown the First continued confidently:

«Listen, Tony, I think you want to add something to the name of the frog you're planning on training. But you don't want to add a number, like my mom does, you want to add a word.»

«Would you look at him, he's so smart,» laughed my red-haired boy. «Yes, I want to name him Updown Acrobat!»

Tony opened up his palms and carefully set his frog on the grass. Ah, that sly kid! Turns out my ginger nephew had brought him into bed before going to sleep! I couldn't resist asking Tony how he managed to sneak a frog into our dream so smoothly.

It turns out, before I'd brought him inside to eat dinner and go to sleep, Tony had gotten a chance to catch the frog in his hands, when he'd jumped onto his leg by the backyard swamp!

Before bed, the boy had decided that instead of asking Mrs. Big Frog about Updown's number, he would add the word «Acrobat» to his name.

No, I definitely did not know a thing about any of it! But how was all this obvious to our green friend, Updown the First? It seems like magic, doesn't it? Speaking of which, it's high time you and I get used to the fact that in dreams, there are plenty of wonders!

When Tony set Updown Acrobat free on the grass, the little frog croaked out happily, «Finally! Thanks for letting me jump around. Hi, everyone! How's it going, Updown the First?»

«Great, Updown Acrobat! I already know you're going to be performing in the circus, and to tell you the truth, I'm a little jealous!»

«It's true, Tony's going to be my trainer,» answered Updown Acrobat with a sense of importance, and he hopped onto Turtle's back, who was

creeping slowly along the grass. It looked like he really liked riding around on her shell.

But I thought it was time she helped me search, on the bottom of the swamp near that rock, for the Rumpled Strangers' treasure. First, I'd have to carry Turtle to the opposite side of the bank without anybody noticing. Then, I'd have to talk her into diving under the water and crawling along the swamp bed around the rock. Maybe we'd get lucky, and Turtle would see a hidden treasure there!

I glanced around: were there any uninvited guests around: the Rumpled Strangers? They were the last people I wanted to see right now. I put Turtle in my palm, readying myself to talk to her about the job ahead of us on the swamp bottom.

Updown the First, sitting on the grass next to Jacob, called out excitedly, «Look, look! Spotted Lady's flying this way!»

We saw the butterfly with the bright yellow wings. She landed on our bug-eyed green buddy's head. Ah, what a looker!

I couldn't help myself – to our prankster with the yellow-ringed eyes, I said, «Hey, Updownthe First, you look like a king right now. I keep wanting to address you, «Your Highness!» ...But still, how did you know everything about us? As soon as we showed up here, you were ready to tell us about everything that happened to us while we were awake, and about all of our plans...»

To be honest, I didn't ask that question out of simple curiosity. I wanted to know whether my plans for Turtle were also obvious to Updown the First. After all, I'd never spoken them aloud. I didn't even confide in Tony! I'd only thought about convincing Turtle to head off into the swamp bed...

«Well alright, Uncle Al, I'll tell you. I know Turtle because she lives here, in our swamp. One time, we talked about how it wouldn't be a bad idea for her to crawl around the bottom near the rock. When I fell out of the heron's beak and ended up there... well, you know what happened. Updown Acrobat also lived here... until you caught him. And as for Tony's plan –



Updown had told our mom about becoming an acrobat and performing in the circus.»

«That's true!» – We heard, not far away, the soft, kind voice of Mrs. Big Frog. «I'm happy to see you, Uncle Al! Hello...»

I bowed graciously in response. Tony, Cinderella and Jacob followed my lead.

«Thank you, Uncle Al,» she said, «for making a small swamp in your yard for my Updown. Now Tony will help him become a circus star. My little boy has dreamed of that for a long time...»

You see that? It wasn't just Updown the First who knew everything about us, but his mother, too! Let's not be too shocked. Our friends know everything about us? Well, so what? After all – they're our friends!

«Dear Mrs. Big Frog,» I said, «believe me when I say that Tony and I will do all that we can, so that Updown Acrobat can become a real circus artist!»

«Ooh! I am so grateful to you both,» said Mrs. Big Frog, and she hopped onto the wide leaf of a thistle plant growing near the water.

She called to Updown the Fifth. She told him Updown the Twenty-Third was feeling sad for some reason, and asked Updown the Fifth to go play with him. Then she quietly said something to another frog who showed up nearby, and she jumped into the water. Once again, I didn't get a chance to ask Mrs. Big Frog how she names her daughters!

Well, now is not the time for idle curiosity. Turtle, who was still sitting in my palms, quietly spoke:

«Uncle Al, I would love to go sleep under that big leaf, where Spotted Lady is sitting and warming herself in the sun.»

I was alarmed. A nap? Now? No, absolutely not! I had to convince Turtle to help me. Not to mention, if the Rumpel Strangers showed up again, they might get in our way!

Holding Turtle in my hands, I squatted down a few feet away from Cinderella, Jacob and Tony. Updown Acrobat sat on his knee, and Updown the First on his right palm. The boy was quietly discussing something

with the frogs. Listening in, I understood that the friends were talking about the upcoming training.

I hadn't forgotten caution! I signaled the dog over to me. In his ear, I whispered that we ought to take a look around the woods across the swamp and check that there aren't any Rumpled Strangers nearby. Jacob ran off.

I heard Turtle's voice. «Uncle Al, since you're not letting me take a nap under that wide leaf of thistle, there must be a reason! It seems to me, you want to ask me about something important.» She was lisping a little bit, probably because she was constantly chewing on a cabbage leaf, which she'd brought with her into my dream.

I was stunned by such insightfulness! Really, it's impossible to get used to the kinds of things that happen in dreams! But I didn't have time to think about this.

«You guessed it, Turtle,» I answered. «I can't do this without your help!»

«Tell me, Uncle Al! I'm listening...»

«Maybe first, you can finish chewing your cabbage leaf? I don't want to distract you. I know from experience, you can't think too well on any empty stomach...»

«But, Uncle Al» – Turtle said graciously, «I can chew for a long time, and I can even nap and eat at the same time. Pay no attention. Tell me, what do you need me to do?»

«Well alright...I just want to ask Jacob if everything is in order around our swamp.»

My mutt had already returned from the opposite side of the swamp. He ran up to me, placed his mighty paws on my shoulders, and whispered, «I picked up a foreign smell coming from the forest...» «How about this,» I said to Jacob, «go where you smelled the scent and hide in the bushes. When the Strangers get close to the swamp, let me know.»

«Bark?»

«No, no! The Strangers will hear. We don't know how they'll act if they

see us. Not to mention, they might have a gun... Whisper to Cinderella. She'll run over to us without being seen and tell us everything.»

Spotted Lady had moved to a new place. Now she was dozing, perched upon Tony's ginger curls. The boy looked pretty silly, but there was no time for fooling around. I called to Cinderella. The fluffy blue-eyed beauty walked over, and amazed me with her perceptiveness.

«I think, Uncle Al, that I have to help Jacob, is that right?»

Honestly, when your friends are this bright and know everything, it gets to be simple and easy to do good things!

«That's right! You and Jacob will go to the other side of the swamp. When you see the Rumpled Strangers – Jacob will probably smell them – run over to me right away! I'll be sitting here.»

«Okay,» Cinderella readily agreed. «Jacob, let's go!» she commanded.

«If everybody does their part, there won't be any mishaps,» my wise mutt said, and added strictly, «Cinderella, please, stop issuing orders!»

«Well okay, okay,» she said compromisingly.

I noticed her long white whiskers tremble. She was offended...

«Don't get mad,» I said, gently petting the cat. «This is pretty serious business, and you should listen to Jacob. Most importantly, be careful!»

She nodded and quietly asked, «Did something happen, Uncle Al?»

Without waiting for my reply, Jacob muttered, «I think I sense something. But I have to go make sure...»

The cat and dog took cover in the bushes.

Sitting in my hand, Turtle nudged my thumb with her nose. «Uncle Al, I'm going to fall asleep soon if you don't tell me what I need to do!»

I answered hurriedly, «Listen, Turtle, did you happen to hear of any jewels, hidden beneath the water of the swamp?»

«Of course,» she answered assuredly, «But first, set me down in the grass, please. It's so cozy in your hands that I keep dozing off. And if I fall asleep...»

I lowered her down to the grass and looked across the swamp. I didn't see any Strangers. But still, we had to hurry! Most likely, my wise Jacob

had sensed their smell and they would show up any minute! I squatted down in front of Turtle, so she wouldn't miss a word of what I had to tell her.

«It would be great if you could swim down to the bottom of the swamp... There, around that rock that's poking out of the water. You need to take a good look around every bump and cranny. I think the Rumples Strangers' treasure is buried there. Can you do it?»

«I don't know,» murmured Turtle. «If I get lucky.. I heard about the treasure from Updown the First. He was telling us about how the heron snatched him up by that rock» –

I impatiently interrupted Turtle. «Yes, yes! That's exactly what happened, my dear, darling Turtle...» «Oh, you call me such pretty names, Uncle Al! Is that because you need me to find the treasure for you, or will you always talk to me so sweetly and beautifully?»

I was at a loss. Was she making fun of me?

«I'd be happy to talk to you like this all the time, since you like it,» I said, and added warmly, «my dear, amazing Turtle!»

«How wonderful! I like listening to you, Uncle Al. Tell me, what do I have to do? I want to help you as quickly as I can! And if everything works out like it should, will you call me such sweet and beautiful names again?» Turtle lifted her head and studied me carefully. I nodded quickly.

«So now, my amazing, outstanding Turtle – you need to dive under the water, get down to the bottom, and search for the treasure there. Only you can find out where it's buried. Please, help me!»

«Wait, wait, Uncle Al. How will I know that it's the real treasure, and not just a bunch of metal and rocks?»

«My dear, you already know that gold is yellow, right? Down there, in addition to gold nuggets, there could also be gold coins, or jewelry with gemstones...»

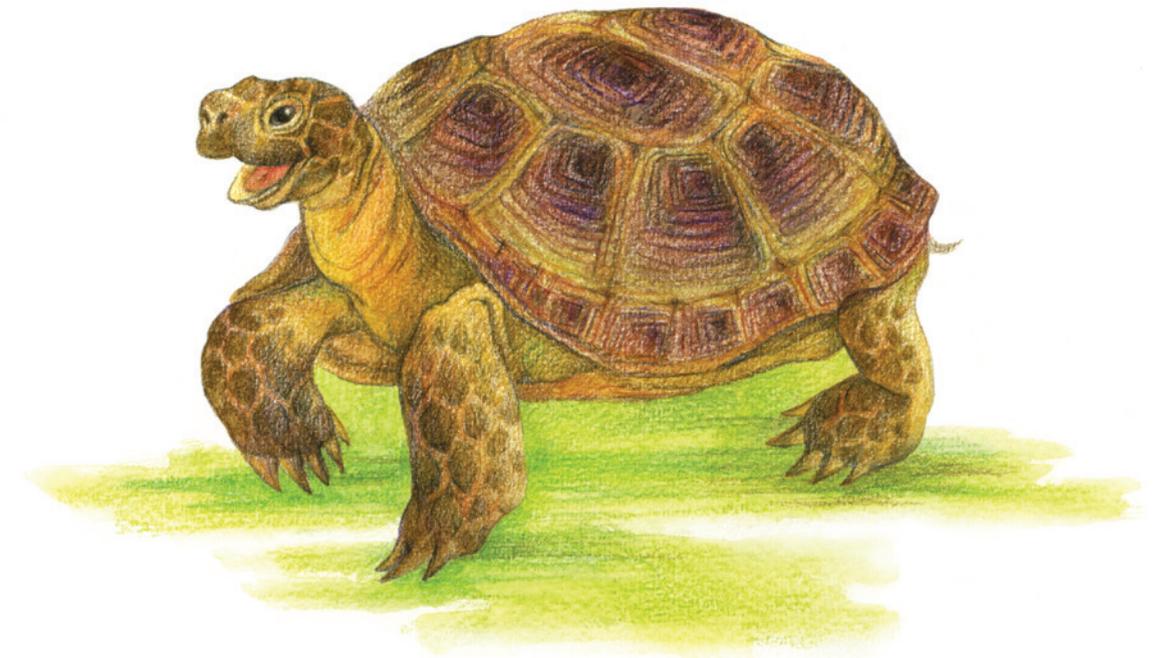
«By the time I make my way to the other side of the swamp» – muttered Turtle, at a loss, «but I crawl so slowly! The whole day will be lost...»

«I'll help you, my darling Turtle! I'll carry you there in my hands.»

«Really?!» Turtle gleamed. «Not only do you talk to me so sweetly and kindly, but you're also going to carry me in your arms to the other bank! I promise, Uncle Al, I'll crawl along the bottom of the swamp until I find at least something yellow or shiny!»

Just as I was about to walk to the opposite side of the swamp, where the rock stuck out of the water, Tony came up to me. Perfect timing! I asked him to wait for me on this bank. Waiting for Turtle's return from searching the bottom of the swamp, I might not notice the Rumples Strangers showing up out of the forest.

My nephew nodded in agreement: as soon as he notices something suspicious, he'll give the signal to Updown the First. Updown will jump into the water and swim over to me. The Strangers won't pay him any mind. There are plenty of frogs in the swamp, and the bug-eyed green



rascal will be able to warn me of any danger..

...Hunched over, creeping carefully from bush to bush, I approached the other side of the swamp. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Updown, hopping from leaf to leaf – there were a lot of them on the water’s surface – happily singing his song. He was heading to the same place that I was, with Turtle in my hands. I think the little green hellion was even trying to beat me to it! Not that that was hard to do! Jump from one leaf to the next, and in no time at all you’ll find yourself on the opposite bank...

As we got closer to the place where – as you remember – the heron nearly swallowed the baby frog, I noticed that Updown was already sitting on top of that rock sticking out of the water, catching flies with his sticky quick-flicking tongue. «Hey,» I thought, «from the height of that rock, he can see everything! If he spots something, he can just yell to me, and I’ll understand him! He doesn’t even have to swim over. The Rumpled Strangers can’t understand their frog language, but I can...»

There was nothing worrisome going on, and when I appeared not far from the rock, Updown the First shouted, «Uncle Al, here’s where I dove when I fell out of the heron’s beak and found that gold stone on the bottom. You need to send Turtle here.»

«I remember, I remember,» I muttered in a half-whisper, and thought, «Maybe she’ll get lucky like Updown, and find something, too...»

I set Turtle down onto the ground right next to the water’s edge. She was already walking into the water, when she suddenly stopped and turned to me. I was confused. What was this about? Then I heard her squeaky voice:

«What about if I also call you affectionate names? Like this, for example: «My darling Uncle Al!» Would you like that?»

«Of course, of course, my dear Turtle» – I agreed hurriedly. There wasn’t much time left. Since my dog had picked up a foreign scent, it was entirely possible that the Rumpled Strangers would soon arrive at our swamp...

Turtle slowly and carefully sunk deeper into the water. Soon she had disappeared into swamp’s depths. Suddenly, Tony appeared. In his palms

sat Updown Acrobat.

«Don’t get mad, Uncle Al,» my nephew said guiltily. «We couldn’t just sit around, knowing you were here sending Turtle off on a scouting mission!»

«Fine, alright...» I grumbled more for the principle of it than out of actual anger. «Just sit quietly and don’t miss Updown the First’s signal when he sees the Rumpled Strangers or Cinderella running over with news from Jacob.»

My nephew and I, and Updown Acrobat in Tony’s hands, hid in the bushes not far from the bank. Impatiently, we awaited Turtle’s return.

Spotted Lady was flying towards us. I remember she had fluttered up from the thistle leaf when Cinderella and Jacob had ran into the woods to check if the Strangers were coming. She appeared not far from the bushes where we sat.

Spotted Lady’s flying seemed strange to me. Something had clearly happened to her! It looked like she was about to plummet into the water at any second. Managing to make a few more powerful flaps of her wings, the butterfly rose above the swamp. It was as if the water was pulling her towards it. Finally, finding herself not far from us, she fell onto the grass and... became still.

Seeing this, Updown the First jumped off the rock into the water and, having swum to the bank, appeared next to Spotted Lady. He looked at her bright folded wings with bewilderment. Updown Acrobat couldn’t hold back, and jumped from my nephew’s hands and also went towards the unmoving butterfly laying on the ground. Tony was also worried.

«What happened to Spotted Lady?»

He wanted to run over to the frogs, who were hopping around the fallen butterfly, but I stopped him. We had to be more careful! I didn’t want the Rumpled Strangers to spot us. They could show up unexpected and catch us off guard.

Of course, Tony and I were both distressed from seeing Spotted Lady’s difficult and shaky flight over the swamp, and her fall into the grass. With great sadness, I understood – the butterfly wouldn’t fly again; she won’t

cheer us with her beauty. I remembered a story of my mother's...

Once, when I was still a very young boy, she told me that butterflies don't live for very long. Even lots of flowers and sweet nectar can't save them.

«Spotted Lady is dead,» I burst out.

Tony heard the deep regret in my voice, and his own heart echoed my compassion for the butterfly. But I tried to calm him, and myself, as well.

«A bit of time will pass,» I said, «and caterpillars will appear. They'll spin cocoons, too. Pretty soon, there will be another Spotted Lady flying over our swamp, flapping her bright, pretty wings! Don't be sad, Tony! Soon we'll see a new butterfly. We'll hear her crystal voice!»

«But, Uncle Al, it won't be our Spotted Lady!»

My nephew turned away from me. He was struggling to hold back his tears, and having a hard time of it.

«Let it be another butterfly, Tony! But she'll be called, just like our butterfly, Spotted Lady! She'll talk to us. One day, she'll sit on your red curls, or on Updown the First's head, and he'll once again look like a king with a bright pretty crown!»

I noticed that our green bulging-eyed friends were hopping towards the bushes where Tony and I were hiding. They, too, were very upset.

«Uncle Al, Spotted Lady doesn't want to fly and is just laying in the grass!»

Like with Tony, I explained to the Updown brothers that we just had to be patient for a little while, and then we would certainly see a new butterfly flying over our swamp. Surprised, they exclaimed, «And she'll be the same as our own Spotted Lady?»

«Of course! She'll fly joyfully over our swamp. She'll talk to us with her thin ringing voice!»

Then Cinderella ran up. Her eyes were wide with fear. Jumping into my arms, she whispered, «Uncle Al! Jacob smelled the Rumples Strangers near the swamp! And I heard the rustle of dry leaves and grass. You know, like the sound when somebody is walking through the forest. Jacob and I haven't seen anybody yet, but he's positive – it's the Rumples Strangers!»

We had good cause to worry! Turtle was still crawling around the bottom

of the swamp, searching for the treasure, and there was no way Tony and I could be spotted by the Rumples Strangers.

Jacob showed up. He was breathing heavily. «Uncle Al,» he said, «Cinderella told you everything? There...there – the Strangers!»

«Hey, Updown the First,» I asked the frog, «hurry, dive quickly, and find Turtle! Tell her to hide herself well under a dead branch on the bottom. Better for her to wait until the Strangers leave. You sit nearby. Make sure she doesn't get out of the water too soon.»

Updown the First dove immediately into the swamp. The dog, the cat, Tony with Updown Acrobat in his hands, and I all hid in the bush, which shielded us well.

Soon, the Rumples Strangers really did show up. There were two of them. They were walking to the swamp's bank where the rock stuck out of the water. Like you remember, not far from there was the place where Turtle had plunged to the bottom of the swamp. Updown the First poked his head out of the water. He looked around and started moving towards our spot in the bushes. He hopped up onto my knee.

«Uncle Al, I found Turtle and gave her your message. Right now she's sitting under a dead branch.»

«Did Turtle tell you anything?» asked Tony impatiently.

«No-o-o... she didn't get a chance. I was hurrying back to you all, to tell you about my plan.»

«And what plan is this?» I also asked impatiently.

«I'll hop across the leaves over to that rock. I'll climb to the top of it again, and I'll listen in on what the Rumples Strangers are saying to one another. They won't pay any attention to me. There's so many of us here, and we all look so similar, that there's no telling the difference. If I hear something suspicious, I'll come back to you and tell you everything. Well, Uncle Al, how's that for a good plan?»

«Good job,» I praised Updown the First.

«I'm with him,» Updown Acrobat called, and hopped away after his brother.

I very much liked our little busybody's plan. Really, it wouldn't be bad to know what the Rumples Strangers were talking about amongst themselves. Then we'll know for sure what they're planning.

Hopping from leaf to leaf, the frogs had already appeared next to the place where the Strangers were headed for. We could see the men from the bushes. They looked around constantly, and walked very cautiously. The Rumples Strangers finally stopped at the edge of the water, ten paces from the protruding rock. Updown the First was already sitting on his perch. In the water, Updown Acrobat had settled himself on a leaf next to the rock. For me and Tony, and Jacob and Cinderella, there was nothing left to do but sit, hiding in the bushes, and wait to see what the Rumples Strangers would do. It wasn't long before I could see that they were well-prepared for a treasure hunt. Yup! That's what they came here for..

One of the arrivors carried a backpack. A pair of big rubber boots hung from the other's shoulder, and on his hands he wore yellow rubber gloves. And their faces were horribly dirty!

After throwing the backpack and boots onto the grass, the Rumples Strangers came up to the water. The light-haired one took a diving mask out of the knapsack. «He's probably going to try to dive,» I thought, «so that he can find the bag of stolen jewels in the water.» I'll be honest, I didn't like this one bit!

The other Rumples Stranger, having sat down on the grass, started pulling on the galoshes...

«Uncle Al,» Tony whispered in my ear, «he wants to walk around the rock, where it's probably not too deep, and feel around along the bottom with his hands! But Turtle's down there! What if he notices her? We've got to distract them!»

«How can we distract them, Tony?»

I was slightly at a loss and I just didn't know what we could do. But my nephew turned out to be one step ahead of me this time, too.

«Let Jacob run over to the forest, to the Rumples Strangers, and growl, and bark loudly.. He'll scare them... As soon as the Strangers see a big

black dog, they'll run away! Then Turtle can come out of the water!»

I immediately agreed with Tony's plan, and Jacob knew what he had to do before the words were fully out of Tony's mouth.

Meanwhile, the light-haired Rumples Stranger was trying on the mask, and his partner was awkwardly tramping around the bank in the rubber boots. Finally, after he'd put on the mask, the blonde man headed to the water and took his first steps in towards the rock. The other man, looking in the direction of his partner, was in no hurry to get in the water.

«Uncle Al,» yelled Updown the First from the rock, «they're not saying a word, but it looks like they're about to find everything on the bottom of this swamp!»

«Yeah, yeah!» Updown Acrobat chimed in. «We've got to do something!»

Remember, from anyone else's point of view, the frogs' cries were ordinary croaks, not understandable to the Rumples Strangers, so there's no need to worry. Only Tony and I could understand their language.

The frogs didn't know yet what my nephew and I had thought up. Unlike them, we had to keep our mouths shut, and sit silently in the bushes...

In a second, Jacob, barking loudly, erupted towards the direction of the Rumples Strangers. Growling menacingly, he approached them, ready to bite. You should've seen what happened then! The Strangers were terrified! The blonde one leapt out of the water. He threw down the mask, shouted, and ran into the woods. The second one hopped and stumbled through the grass, trying to free himself of those big rubber boots. He finally managed, and ran off after the path of his companion, who was hiding within the trees.

Cinderella was set to sprint off after Jacob. I think she wanted to leap onto the Rumples Strangers' heads and give their mangy hair some good yanks. But I held her back – Jacob had given our unwelcome visitors a solid scare!

«Hey, Updown the First,» I shouted to my green buddy, «go call Turtle. Hurry! The Rumples Strangers could come back!»

Updown the First dove, and Updown Acrobat went after him. A short

while later, Tony and I saw Turtle carefully crawling out of the water. She was moving slowly and awkwardly towards us, following behind Updown the First. Updown Acrobat had once again settled himself on top of her shell. I wanted to rush out of our hiding spot and take Turtle in my hands, but I didn't want to ruin Updown Acrobat's fun! Finally Turtle made her way to our clump of bushes. Jacob also ran up to us. He asked gleefully, «I really scared them, huh?»

We affectionately stroked our fearless friend and wise philosopher, and prepared to listen to Turtle. After what she'd just been through, she needed to rest, and Tony and I waited patiently. Updown the First hopped in circles around Turtle, trying to find out whether she got to see anything at all on the bottom of the swamp, near the rock.

«Well, Turtle! Don't just sit there silently! What'd you see?»

To be honest, Tony and I, and probably Cinderella and Jacob, were also dying of anticipation.



«Uncle Al,» Turtle slowly started her tale...

Listening to her, I had no idea why she was having such a hard time talking. Turtle was lisping, like an old woman, not fully pronouncing words. It took a lot of effort just to try to understand her!

«I... I saw...a hole. Inside it was...there was a bag. It was...covered...in muck... I tried to...I crawled up to it...I saw..I brought...only this...» Turtle opened her mouth wide and spit out a pea-sized golden stone.

Now I understood why she was having trouble talking. Taking the gold stone in my hand, I closely looked it over as Turtle continued her story. Now she was speaking clearly.

«I was just about to swim away so I could show you what I found, when I saw Updown the First.

He dove down to me and told me to hide from the Rumped Strangers. Then the Updown brothers told me that it was time to come back and... I came... Did I do everything right, Uncle Al?»

«Great job, Turtle!» But I was so caught up in examining the piece of gold she'd brought, that I forgot to call my helper something affectionate! I didn't call her «dear», or «darling»! True, it didn't take long for me to notice that she was sinking into a bad mood, and I understood why. I took her on my hand and said sweetly, «Forgive me, please, my dear Turtle! Thank you so much! You have done a remarkable job! I don't even know what we would do without you.»

«That's the truth,» mumbled Tony. He was no less stunned by Turtle's find than I was.

Suddenly Jacob leapt up. He uttered a ferocious growl. Cinderella's claws slid out, and her fur stood on end. Tony and I squeezed in closer to the bush. We looked around. There was nobody. I asked in a whisper, «What happened, Jacob?»

«I smell the scents of the Rumped Strangers again, Uncle Al!»

«And I hear rustling,» confirmed Cinderella.

«It's time to go,» I thought. I can't put my friends at risk! My wise mutt may have scared the Rumped Strangers off, but it's entirely possible that

they'll come back, and this time, with a gun! We had to hide right away.

«Darling Turtle,» I said, as sweetly as I could, «I'm going to hide you in my pocket, okay? Tony, take Updown Acrobat in your hands! And you, Updown the First, hop home and blend in with your numbered brothers and sisters! Please say hi to your mother for me – Mrs. Big Frog!»

«Got it, Uncle Al!» He disappeared into the swamp's green waters. Updown Acrobat jumped onto Tony's open palm.

A second later, I was awake...

My heart was beating wildly. After seeing that my eyes were open, Cinderella jumped out the window into the yard. Jacob went after her, after giving me a friendly wag of his tail.

Tony looked like he was waking up. In his hands, Updown Acrobat was peacefully quiet. On my nephew's face I saw first a grimace of worry, but soon he smiled widely, showing an even row of teeth. They reminded me of the kernels on the young, milky corncobs that my grandfather once grew on the land of my family's farm.

«Good morning, Tony! We should send Updown Acrobat back to his backyard swamp, don't you think?»

«Yeah, Uncle Al! Put him back soon, please. He's already wants to jump and eat some flies for breakfast.»

I carried Updown Acrobat to the bank of our mini swamp. He immediately hopped happily towards the water. I set Turtle down in the grass nearby. Having found a cabbage leaf left over from last night, she set to chewing on it with pleasure. She'd probably gotten hungry after all those stressful adventures in my dream!

I went back to the house and placed my boy in his wheelchair.

«Hey Uncle Al, do you know the secret Updown the First told me?»

«Secret? Well, come on and share what he told you, that little green hellion who somehow knows about everything that happens to us here.»

To be honest, I was unbelievably hungry. After all of our dream adventures, my appetite had really flared up. I wanted to run to the kitchen quick and cook up something tasty. But I also couldn't wait

to find out what secret Updown the First had shared with my red-haired boy.

«Maybe,» I thought, «the little frog told Tony something unusual about the Strangers' hoarded treasure? After all, he dove down there twice. But why didn't the kiddo share the secret with me?» Rolling Tony's wheelchair towards the kitchen, I asked in impatience, «Well, hurry up and tell me, what was this secret that Updown the First told you?»

My nephew gave me a mischievous glance. «He said that, when I'll be training Updown Acrobat to perform in the circus, I have to softly blow on his nose every once in a while!»

«His nose? Blow?» I was astounded. «That's some advice! But why?»

«It'll put the frog in a good mood!»

«Ah so that's what it is!» I started laughing. «Well that's quite the secret!» «But that's not all,» Tony continued. «I have to wait until the frog jumps – and let him jump wherever he wants,» pointed out my ginger nephew, «the important thing is just for him to jump! As soon as he does that, I have to praise him right away!»

«How, Tony? Say, "good job?"»

«Well, yeah! Or, "Hey! Updown Acrobat, you're turning out to be a really talented guy!"»

«Is that so?»

«If you don't blow on his nose and praise him, the frog won't do what you're teaching him! That's what Updown the First said. He knows his brothers and sisters pretty well!»

Tony and I had just sat down at the table, when from the yard we heard the voice of Michael Stern and his wife, Tricia.

«Hey, Tony,» I said happily, «looks like we've got a surprise this morning: your parents are here! They've probably been missing their son!»



The Fourth Dream

*The sheriff asks me again to be careful.
Tricia takes Tony away so the doctors can take
a look at him. Updown Acrobat shows his first
signs of progress, but a rival appears:
a grasshopper by the name of Hopper.
Mrs. Big Frog tells us a sad story.
The swamp and everyone who lives there
are threatened by grave danger!*

...It turns out, Michael and Tricia had come to get Tony. It was time to take him to the doctor.

«Maybe they'll take the brace off your leg, and the bandage off your neck,» Tricia said hopefully, as she pushed her son's wheelchair into the middle of the yard.

Upon seeing the miniature swamp, where Turtle was perched on the rock and Updown Acrobat sat with his head poking out of the water, Tricia was very surprised. Tony told her about how this swamp got here, and his dream to train a frog to perform in the circus. My sister threw up her hands.

«What a fantastic boy! That's a pretty hard thing to do, after all!»

Tony's father gave his shoulders a squeeze.

«Training a frog? You think it'll work? It'd be better to train a rabbit, or a mouse – they've got more brains than a frog.»

Then, seeing that he'd hurt Tony's feelings, he rushed to calm him. «It's alright, son, don't huff! If everything works out like you've planned,

I promise to come to the circus to see your show.»

Then the sheriff touched my elbow. «Let's go have a talk, Al...»

We headed towards the house. Stepping through the doorway, we passed into the kitchen. Michael asked for some orange juice. Looking at me sideways, he grumbled, «Again you're filling the boy's head with your nonsense?»

I had to tell Michael that I was only trying to distract his son from his pain. The sheriff listened to me doubtfully, then scoffed with a smile.

«So...Tony sleeps on the couch...you lay down in your bed. The dog and the cat also go to sleep in the same room, and then all of you together go off into your dream?»

I didn't force him to say it! He wanted to know? By all means! I told him everything, as it was. Let him think whatever he wants of my adventures with my red-haired nephew.

Michael sat silently by the open window, and I started washing the dishes left over from my breakfast with Tony. Still, it seemed to me that the sheriff wasn't at all preoccupied with what he had heard from me and his son. He had thieves, robberies and outlaws on his mind. It's perfectly understandable! Even now – like on his last visit to my tiny homestead – he was probably thinking of them...

We sat down on the sun-baked front stoop. The sheriff took off his hat. He wiped his shiny forehead with a kerchief. His eyes were tired and troubled.

«Do you remember, last time I told you about the robbery of that jewelry store in Harrisburg?»

Of course I remembered. I also remembered how he went looking around my swamp for anything suspicious. «Aha! So this means they haven't caught the thieves yet...» I thought. Now I understood why the sheriff was in a bad mood! Carefully, I asked him, «Do you think the robbers might show up in these parts again?»

«I don't know much at this point,» he muttered. «Who are these burglars? Where did they stow the stolen goods? Where are they hiding? Nothing

but questions! I have my suspicions that they might be taking cover in this area. Why not? It's surrounded by woods, it's calm and there are no people...»

«That's true, it is quiet here,» I agreed. «But why would they hide here in particular? There are plenty of forests in Pennsylvania!»

To tell you the truth, I wanted to calm Michael. Also, I really didn't think that the Rumped Strangers in my dream were those same robbers that the sheriff was telling me about. So I wasn't going to lay out all of the details of my dreams. Even if Tony said something, his dad had plenty of time to get his fill of laughing at me last time he was here. Well, let him!

«Do you remember when I went to my parents' house?» continued Michael.

«Sure... you went to visit them in Virginia.»

«Well, my brothers told me that they nearly caught some strange people here, by your house! They rode over after hearing a gunshot, and they saw the remains of a campfire in the forest clearing. But they weren't able to catch anybody...the next day there was a long, hard downpour. A lot of places got flooded around here. At the edge of the woods, where there's a big dip in the ground, a swamp formed. There's no tracks. Everything was washed away! Maybe these were the thieves who robbed that jewelry store in Harrisburg? They ran off and took the stolen gold with them. Or they buried it in the woods somewhere...Anyway, why am I bothering you about all this again? You already know it all...»

I listened to Michael patiently. It was useless to tell him that I saw the Rumped Strangers bury their treasure. You understand. This happened in my dream, and the sheriff needed facts. Facts, not my dreams! So all that I could do was listen to Michael and be sympathetic towards him. It's not easy searching this entire area for thieves! And it's even harder to search for stolen gold when the thieves have run off.

I'll be honest with you! At one point in this conversation with the sheriff, when I started to feel really bad for my nephew's weary father, I very nearly opened my mouth. That is, I was ready to tell him about the things I saw

in my dreams. Well, like at the forest clearing, I accidentally saw –

But I stopped myself in time! After all, it's not like I could show the sheriff the pieces of gold that Updown the First and Turtle had found and brought to me! I left them in the dream! They're lying there, under the wide leaf of the thistle plant – right by the bushes where, in my latest dream, I hid from the Rumples Strangers with Tony, the two frogs, the cat and dog.

«Alright, Michael,» I said quietly, «you're a policeman, and you have your work. Ask me questions if you want to, and I'll tell you what I saw with my own eyes. Okay?»

The sheriff nodded. He took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. He opened it, showed it to me, and said, «This drawing was faxed to me. It was made from the description the guard gave – the robbers scared him good and knocked him out. Take a look, Uncle Al.»

You won't believe it! The picture was of... The Rumples Strangers! Of course, they weren't exactly like the ones in my dream, but very similar! They all had disheveled hair, and they had faces that would get first place in a Halloween contest!

«Alright,» I thought, «so they look alike... so what of it?» I only said it to myself, though! I remembered what my grandpa used to say: «Albert, do you want your tongue to listen to you? Keep it leashed!»

Think about it for yourself, what am I to tell the sheriff? Thieves all look alike, anyway! Low brow...mean eyes...messy hair...Maybe I just imagined that the people in the sheriff's drawing are the same as the Rumples Strangers in my dream. «If you don't know it, don't say it!» That's what my father taught me when I was young. Well really, why bother the sheriff's head with it?

«I do not think that, in this area, these people,» I poked my finger at the drawing, «have shown up.» I shrugged my shoulders and added, «I definitely haven't come across anybody just like the ones in this picture...»

«Well, they don't have to look exactly like this,» Michael interrupted me impatiently, «maybe someone resembled them?»

I actually got a little angry with Michael. «You're asking about anyone that kind of looks like them? Or about people that look exactly like the ones on this paper?» Sweat even started beading up on my forehead! But I couldn't tell Michael about that night at the clearing, by the fire. Remember, from my first dream? I couldn't! Because then I'd have to tell him about what happened in my second dream... the sheriff would laugh his head off! So do you know what I said to Michael?

«Here, at my swamp, near the forest, I have not seen in real life any people like the ones on this drawing!» That's the truth, after all!

«Fine, Uncle Al...» The sheriff folded up his paper into quarters and placed it back in his pocket. He looked at me suspiciously. «A few days ago and again today, Tony was telling me about some disheveled strangers.»

«Tony?» I asked. And here I blurted it all out and even I don't know how that happened. My tongue managed to tear itself free of its leash, like a mischievous mutt.

«Well there was... Tony and I were walking... on the bank of our swamp – in my dream – and there we saw the Rum.»

Michael abruptly stood up from the stoop.

«Oh, for God's sake, Uncle Al!» The sheriff angrily threw up his hands. «Why do you keep telling me these ridiculous stories! You can fill the boy's head with your fantasies, but I want no part of it!»

And that's how it goes! You tell the truth, and nobody believes you. You stay quiet and people look at you with distrust. What can you do? I decided to do what everybody in my shoes has to do!

«Listen, Michael, let me make you a promise: as soon as these... what did you say they are? Robbers? When some robbers show up that look exactly like the ones in your drawing, I'll tell you right away! Do we have a deal?»

«But how are you going to let me know, Uncle Al? You live here like it's the Middle Ages! Even your phone is ancient! If you see the thieves, every second will count! Here, take this! It's a cell phone.» The sheriff took out of his pocket a little black thing with shiny buttons.

I saw Tricia with something like it once. «Press here,» Michael showed me a white button on the upper left. «Press it and wait. I'll answer quickly, you understand? Don't forget, Uncle Al, wherever I am, I will absolutely pick up!»

«But what if I lose this thing? It's not mine – you'll want money for it, right? I don't need this headache!»

«So don't lose it!» Good-naturedly slapping me on the shoulder, the sheriff put the phone in the breast pocket of my shirt. «So we have a deal? As soon as you see something suspicious, call me right away!»

«Okay!» I answered, and saw Tricia walking over toward us.

«Where have you been hiding? You've been gone an hour already! Al, the things that Tony is telling me! I even got caught up in the story! If only I had such dreams, ah, that would be some fun. Our son is showing me how to train Updown Acrobat! Michael, come on, let's go watch!»

We headed to Tony. He was sitting in his wheelchair by the little yard swamp. The ginger-haired trainer was coaxing Updown Acrobat into jumping over a branch, which he'd put in front of the stilly sitting frog. His voice was affectionate, but persistent. Turtle was there, too, warming herself in the sun, sticking her head out of the shell, looking around her. Suddenly, the frog hopped over the branch!

Maybe Updown Acrobat finally understood Tony's command, or maybe he just got sick of hearing his order, "Jump! Jump!" and decided to hop away from his trainer, and just happened to jump over the branch...I don't know! The hop wasn't very big, but for Tony this moment was probably the happiest! He cheered loudly, clapping his hands.

«Great job,» Tony praised the frog. «Updown, you're so good! You see how talented you are? A true acrobat! You just made me so happy!»

I heard my nephew's father's voice. «That's really something!»

Michael looked with amazement at Updown Acrobat, who had again sat down on the rock in the center of my backyard swamp. Tricia walked up to her son and gently stroked his red curls. Tony's eyes were shining!

«Mom, Dad, did you see? Uncle Al! Updown understood everything!»

I just need to work with him. He'll become a real circus performer, like the horses and the elephants in the Barto city circus!»

My nephew rode closer to me in his wheelchair and delightedly started telling me how long it had taken to talk the frog into jumping. And even though Updown Acrobat had jumped only once, it seemed that he'd finally understood Tony's command!

«If we keep up the training,» my nephew said joyously, «then by fall, we'll have a circus routine ready!»

«Time to drive back to Barto...» Michael moved the wheelchair with his son towards the car.

«Tomorrow morning,» said Tricia, «we have to be in the hospital, to show the boy to the doctors...Tony will spend a day there, and then: home. He's going to have to learn to walk again, and train up the weakened muscles of his legs and back.»

«Listen, Tony,» I asked my nephew, «while the doctors work on you, what do you want me to do? I am at your service, Mr. Executive Trainer of Frogs! I am, after all, your assistant – isn't that right, kiddo?»

«You'll do it, Uncle Al?» Tony's eyes lit up. «Super! Every morning, you'll train Updown Acrobat. Make sure he jumps a lot! Put a branch in front of him and if he hops over it, praise him! Don't forget to blow on his nose. I already know he likes it! By the time I come back, he should have learned to jump at the command, "Up!"»

«Tony, calm down!» Tricia lovingly kissed her son's red curls.

«It's alright,» I quickly assured my sister, «I'm curious to work with the frog.»

«It's time for us to get going,» said Michael, climbing into the police car with its multi-colored lights on the roof.

Tony and I said our goodbyes. I hugged my sister, and squeezed the sheriff's strong hand. He winked at me, meaning, «Remember our agreement.» Already sitting in his car, he said, quietly, «Don't forget!» He pointed his finger at my breast pocket, where he'd put the cell phone.

I was left with Jacob, Cinderella, Updown Acrobat and Turtle. But

when I returned to my house, there was a surprise awaiting me! On the windowsill there sat a big green grasshopper. He waved his feelers, and his big buggy green eyes were nearly popping out of his head. His front feet were short, but his rear legs were bent high and neatly folded alongside his green body. The grasshopper was slowly moving along my windowsill and didn't seem in any hurry to jump into the grass under my window.

I liked him right away! I wanted to give him some sort of treat. But what? Obviously, like all living things, the grasshopper ate something, but I had no idea what exactly! Actually, why worry about him? If he happens to be hungry, he'll go where he knows he can find a meal...

After my talk with the sheriff, I decided to check my Winchester. I suppose that when it comes to being careful, Michael is right. He knows what he's talking about! What if some strangers really did show up in my neck of the woods...Of course, I'd call the sheriff right away! But still, with a rifle in my hands, I'll feel better, right?

I took my Winchester off the wall and looked it over. It seemed the rifle was in good shape, since I'd recently cleaned and oiled it. Now all that was left to do was shoot it into the air and make sure it didn't misfire. The police – the Stern brothers – won't come galloping over at the sound of my gunshot. Before he'd left, Michael had told me that he'd sent them to a distant village today, to ask people if they'd come across any strangers lately.

Oka-a-y... so I'll check the rifle... shoot it... But if the strangers hear it? Well, what of it then? Let them know, I will stand up for myself!

I would do the test shot in the woods – in that same clearing, which was now flooded with water after the long, loud downpour. I called the dog to me. Running over, he obediently sat by my leg. I noticed Cinderella was running over, too.

«You have to stay at home,» I told the cat.

She got clearly upset. In my dream, Jacob would have said something wise to her. For example, «We don't always like what we are obligated

to do!» Now, my loyal mutt was wagging his tail, awaiting a command, and Cinderella had climbed up a tree branch and turned away from me. Come now, don't be bitter – we have important things to do, I thought.

Speaking of which, do you know what the difference is between a dog and a cat? Think about it, then I'll tell you. When Jacob is in a good mood, he wags his tail; when he's in a bad mood, his tail hangs without moving. The cat, on the other hand, shows her sourpuss mood by waving the tip of her tail in different directions. And if she's in a good mood, her tail stands straight up. It was clear: Cinderella was definitely not in good spirits now! I don't think she understood that Jacob had long ago grown used to my rifle shots, and I didn't want to frighten the cat.

The dog and I went out the gate and headed towards the forest. I saw the grasshopper! He was leaping in long strides, keeping up with me and Jacob. The mutt barked happily. He even tried to catch up to the grasshopper. But I sternly called the dog back. There's no time for fooling around, when we've got important work to do! Hm! Maybe this was a different grasshopper, and not the one that was sitting on my windowsill? What business did he have jumping after me and Jacob?

The thick tree where I usually fired my Winchester's test shots into the air hadn't been flooded in the storm. I walked up to it and, as I always did in these situations, I lifted the barrel of the gun and looked around. I wanted to be sure the shot wouldn't hurt the tree's branches, and that there were no birds nearby that could accidentally come to harm. Now all that was left was to pull the trigger and...

In that exact second something green flashed before my eyes and came to a rest on the tip of my Winchester.

«You dope! Look where you're sitting!» I got mad at the little grasshopper and shouted one more time, «What, did you get sick of being alive? Come on, go jump somewhere far away from here!»

I shook the grasshopper off the Winchester's barrel onto the grass. He hopped far off to the side. Lifting the barrel skyward, I pressed the trigger. The shot rang out, loud and roaring. My Winchester was in

full working order! Now I could return home. Let the Rumpled Strangers – I mean, those robbers the sheriff warned me about... you know, the ones in his picture – anyways, let them know. They're in some hot water, if they show themselves in my neck of the woods.

Returning to my yard, I remembered that I had to work with Updown Acrobat. Since I'd promised my nephew, I'd have to fulfill my duties. I was the one who asked to be my young red-haired frog trainer's helper. But where's Updown Acrobat? There he is! He was warming himself in the sun, sitting on the rock in the center of the swamp...

Once again, something green flashed before my eyes. The little grasshopper settled himself on my shoulder. As my loyal Jacob would have said, finding himself in my dream, «Everybody looks after their own comfort!» I didn't chase away the grasshopper. If he likes it, let him sit there. He's not bothering me, after all!

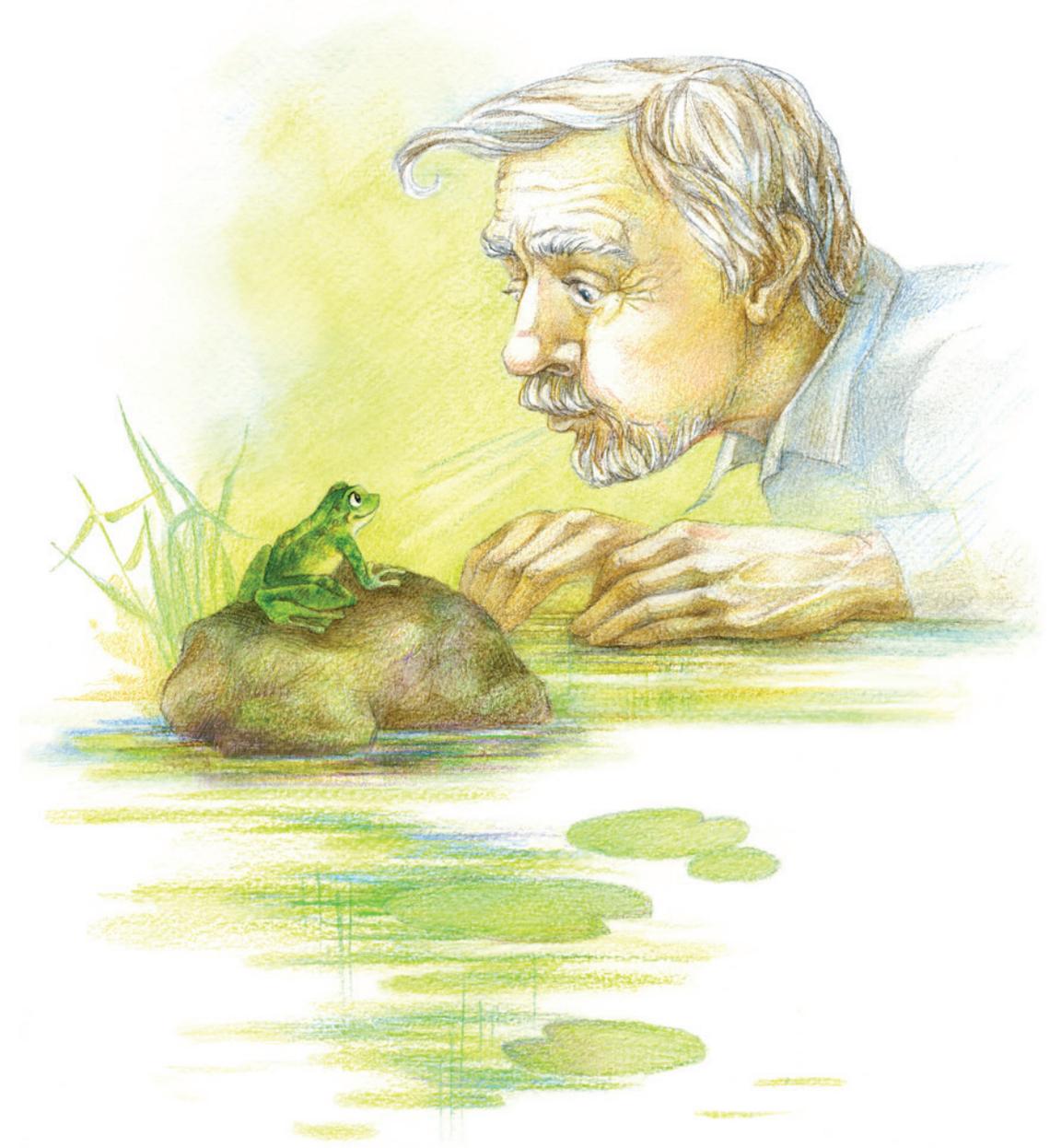
Updown Acrobat paid absolutely no attention to me. Turtle was sitting in the grass and, as usual, chewing on a cabbage leaf. «Let her munch,» I thought, «she doesn't have any jumping to do!» It looked like the bug-eyed green lazybones didn't want to work! True, I didn't call the frog that out loud. It might hurt his feelings and he won't want to hop. That's what I thought as I watched him close his puffy eyes and doze off.

I lay down on the grass right at the edge of my backyard swamp, so that my mouth would be level with Updown's nose. He didn't even budge, but he did open his eyes. Maybe he likes looking at me?

I blew a puff of air on the frog's nose and said, «Up!» He immediately jumped in the water, swam to the opposite side of the bank, and crawled out onto the grass.

«Aha!» I got excited and loudly started praising the frog: «Great job, Updown! Wonderful work! It's a shame Tony didn't see it. Hey! Do you hear me? Up! Come on, hop one more time! Here! Towards my side!» But the frog sat still and didn't move from his spot.

I had to walk to the other side of the yard swamp, where Updown was sitting. I again squatted down and blew on his nose. «Well... look at you!



Self-important, like a king! Now I have to get on my knees before you and bow down!»

No, no! I didn't say that out loud! Tony had warned me: I can't grumble at the frog when I train him! He might not like it! I again blew on the frog's nose. I repeated it a few times. «Up!» But Updown Acrobat didn't want to jump any more.

I was ready to leave the frog alone, and go back to the house and eat, but then something unusual happened! Do you remember when my new friend – the green grasshopper – sat down on my shoulder? He'd been sitting there the whole time I was trying to talk Updown Acrobat into jumping. Now, leaping off my shoulder, the grasshopper landed next to the frog, wiggled his tiny antennae, moved his rear legs and looked at him attentively. I waited impatiently for Updown Acrobat to hop, and didn't pay attention to the grasshopper.

After walking around the frog, the little grasshopper unexpectedly shot itself like a long green arrow across to the opposite end of my swamp and landed right at the edge. Before I had time to figure out what was happening, Updown Acrobat j-u-u-u-m-p-e-d! He didn't make it as far as the grasshopper, and he splooshed into the water. Almost immediately, I heard a quick chirrup. That's the sound that grasshoppers make! Between their back legs they have tiny bumps, and they rub them along their sides when they're happy or talking to each about something grasshopper-ish.

It even seemed to me that the grasshopper was laughing at Updown Acrobat! He leapt again, this time landing on my boot. And again I heard his happy chirruping. «Look at you,» I thought, «so agile!»

Then I saw Updown Acrobat had jumped again. This time he was able to hop over the low brick wall around the swamp. He ended up at the same place where I was standing with the grasshopper sitting on my boot. I was in awe!

«Hoor-a-a-a-y!» I shouted. «Way to go, Updown!» I praised him generously and, truly, he deserved it! His jump was of record length!

Ah, if only Tony had seen it!

The grasshopper hopped off to the side. Then again, and again, getting further away from the backyard swamp. «Let him,» I thought, «who knows where he has to go? Now if only Updown Acrobat always jumped the way he did just now...» I hurried to praise the frog again, and said loudly, «Great job, Updown! You are a true acrobat, and I'm proud of you!»

The frog jumped easily onto the brick wall, and from there, into the water. He swam up to the rock in the middle of my swamp and sat himself next to Turtle, who had been dozing there nearly all day. I placed a cabbage leaf on the rock, right in front of Turtle's nose, and headed off towards my house. It was time to feed Jacob and Cinderella, and I was hungry myself.

After lunch, I got to thinking. Have you guessed why? I needed to name my new buddy, the grasshopper. Tony would have helped me, but he was in the hospital. And that's when it dawned on me!

«I'll call him, "Hopper!"» It's a good name, right? I had no doubt that the grasshopper's arrival would make Tony happy. My ginger nephew would come up with some sort of circus act for him, too...

Dusk was approaching. It got chilly in the evening time. I decided that I deserved a good night's sleep. I put on my pajamas, lay down in my bed and turned out the light. Today had turned out to be a good day: my rifle didn't misfire, I made a new friend: Hopper the grasshopper, and Updown Acrobat showed me that he's good at leaping long distances. It's a shame that I still hadn't seen the grasshopper before bed. I hadn't gotten a chance to wish him good night.

At this point, something plopped onto my bedspread – right next to my arm. I looked closer... Aha! The grasshopper!

«Hey there!» I said.

He joyfully chirruped in response, hiding under my hand. It looked like Hopper had decided to stay with me for the whole night.

«Alright... just don't tickle me with your antennae when I sleep, or else I'll sneeze – and you'll go flying through the window!»

In answer to my joke, the little grasshopper loudly and happily chirruped.

That night, Jacob and Cinderella didn't come to me. They probably had more important things to do than go to my dream. Pulling my blanket right up to my nose, I drifted off into sleep...

When people give you a warm welcome, it's good whether it's in reality or in your dream! It was nice to see Updown the First again, and his mother, Mrs. Big Frog!

«Uncle Al, how's it going?» my green buddy called out loudly. «My mom and I missed you!»

«Hey! To be honest, so did I!»

I bowed politely to his mother – the big green frog with the bulge by her throat and the enormous eyes, encircled by gold rings. You know, they're big fashionistas, these adult frogs! And even though Mrs. Big Frog's little son – Updown the First – also looks festive, he's got a way to go to match his mother! «Don't forget to ask the respectable mother of the frogs about how she names her girls,» I thought. But I was just about to do it, when I heard the ringing voice of a little boy:

«Mom! Hello! I haven't see you for a long time – I was even scared you'd forget me!»

I turned my head this way and that in confusion, trying to figure out whose voice this was. Who's calling for his mother? And where is this mother, anyway? Except for Mrs. Big Frog, there was nobody around me. I already knew that she was the mother of Updown the First and all of the numbered frogs, jumping all day long amongst the leaves of the swamp. But I'm pretty sure that my green friend, who had jumped up onto my knee, was silent! Not to mention, his voice is nothing like that. He, like me, was trying to figure out who was calling his mother «Mom.»

And here I saw the little grasshopper jump onto the wide leaf of thistle growing by where Mrs. Big Frog sat on the bank of the swamp. Updown the First, surprised, stared at the grasshopper. Just like me, he didn't understand a thing.



The voice of Mrs. Big Frog was gentle and full of joy! She was looking at... the grasshopper. Yes, yes! At my Hopper, who I had accidentally brought with me into my dream! She was looking and speaking in a way that made my heart swell.

«My darling little son... hello! You're alive!! Oh, how I had missed you! I thought that I would never ever see you!»

I'll tell you plainly, even in my dreams, I've never seen such a thing before! I couldn't take it and asked in a whisper, «Hey, Updown the First, why is your mom calling a green grasshopper her son?»

«I don't know,» Updown the First answered perplexedly.

He was looking with bewilderment at his mother talking with the grasshopper, who, standing up on his rear legs, was gently stroking Mrs. Big Frog's nose with his front legs. She turned to me and Updown the First and said in a quiet voice, «Pardon me, Uncle Al! I can imagine how surprised you must be! I see Updown the First also doesn't understand... I'll explain everything in a moment. But first I want to thank you, Uncle Al, for the name that you have given my boy. Hopper – it fits him very well... Yes, yes! Don't be surprised! This is my son, which means that he is the brother of Updown the First and all of my children. Of course, he's no stranger to Updown Acrobat, either.»

«But how is this possible,» I blurted. «How could a grasshopper be your son, esteemed Mrs. Big Frog?»

The little grasshopper and his mother made their way over to where we were on the grass by the water. Mrs. Big Frog told us an unbelievable and very sad tale.

«We came to this swamp before my boys and girls were born. Before that, we lived in a beautiful swamp. It was two miles away from here. This was where my parents lived, and their mothers and fathers, and grandmothers and grandfathers. One day, somebody started laying a Big Road in our area. The builders chopped down the trees and dried out our swamp! We had to escape! We needed to find someplace new. This was very difficult, because around here, everything was dry!» Mrs. Big Frog began crying.

«Mom!» called Updown the First, «Tell me, was everybody saved?»

«Not many were able to escape.» Mrs. Big Frog continued her sorrowful story. «We did not learn right away that here, not far from your house, Uncle Al, after a long and very heavy rain, such a pretty swamp had formed. For a long time, we wandered in search of water or food. The downpour helped us greatly. For frogs, after all, dampness is our savior! When the sun warms us, and there's no water nearby, our skin, cracking, dries out, and we...» Mrs. Big Frog fell silent, glancing gently at Hopper. Sighing, she went on:

«Finally, we discovered your wonderful swamp, Uncle Al! But not everybody lived to see this happy moment. Many frogs in our family started...turning... into grasshoppers, like my son: Hopper.»

Mrs. Big Frog grew silent again. Updown the First, listening to his mother, became very worried. He jumped onto the leaf where the grasshopper sat.

«Hey, brother! Mom said that you were once a frog, a numbered Updown, just like me. You already know that that's my name.»

«Hey, Updown the First!» Hopper touched his nose with his antennae, which grew on his head.

I noticed Mrs. Big Frog crying. These were tears of joy. To think! After so much woe and wandering, after the turning of her son from a frog into a green grasshopper, his mother saw the brothers meet! But what happened with the rest of her children – who roamed in search of a new swamp, running from heat and hunger – Mrs. Big Frog couldn't tell us! It was too hard for her to remember it.

If you see a big green grasshopper, know: it used to be a frog. It turned into a grasshopper because very many swamps were dried out to build long roads, or houses, or factories and mills. Under the hot sun, frogs died or turned into grasshoppers, who could no longer turn back into frogs...

I gazed for a long time at Hopper, who, sitting with Updown the First on the swamp leaf, was quietly telling him something. I looked at the brothers and compared them. They were remarkably similar!

The frog, like the grasshopper, has strong back legs that form sharp angles when he sits. Hopper was green, with buggy eyes – just like Updown the First and his many numbered brothers and sisters living in the swamp. The grasshopper had a smooth back, on which you could notice dark dots, like the spots on the backs of frogs. Hopper had already grown small wings, which help him stay in their air during a long jump. And I saw frogs that also knew how to jump, just as high and far, as the grasshopper, even though they didn't have wings. When frogs jump, they spread their feet, which have wide webbing between the toes, and press them against the air. Hopper, like a frog, usually sat on his rear legs. His front ones were short, with tiny fingers. All this was, for me, an earth-shaking discovery! I told myself, «I'm going to tell Tony about everything when he comes back from the hospital.»

«Uncle Al, why, why, do people dry out swamps, without thinking of our fate?» Mrs. Big Frog interrupted my thoughts with a despairing sigh. «I think something is going wrong with our swamp, too...Does it seem to you, Uncle Al, that there's less water here? It can't be that disaster awaits us here, also?»

To be honest, I wanted to take the opportunity to ask Mrs. Big Frog how she names her daughters, but, hearing her words about the water drawing back from the bank, I was surprised.

«How? It can't be! I haven't noticed anything troubling. Maybe, Mrs. Big Frog, you're just worrying?»

«No, Uncle Al, my mom's got a reason!» That was Updown the First. He and Hopper appeared at my feet, jumping to the bank of the swamp, and then back to me. «Look at the line of the water and the bank! The ground here's become a lot drier! Even yesterday the water was right up to the grass, but now only its tracks are left! It went back from the bank, and the sun dried out the grass!»

Updown the First was hopping nonstop from the water to the grass on the bank. Looking closer, I noticed that the grass on the bank really wasn't as bright as last time. This means it's drying out! But why?

Of course, I was incredibly upset. Placing my palm between the surface of the water and the edge of the bank, I was astounded: the water had receded almost the width of my hand! But where's it going? Is it evaporating in the hot sun?

Mrs. Big Frog came closer to me and said in nearly a whisper:

«Last night, Uncle Al, I was horribly frightened! You know, of course, of our habit to croak through the night. That's how we call each other, because at night, we can't see and are afraid to lose each other in the dark.»

Of course, I knew that frogs croak very loudly at night. Some people, maybe, don't like this – but not me. I love their night calls, which I can hear when it takes me a long time to fall asleep.

«Mom, tell Uncle Al what you heard last night,» Updown the First persistently pestered his mother, hopping in circles around her.

«Alright,» she said gently, «and you go on and play with Hopper.»

Mrs. Big Frog watched as Updown the First headed towards the water, where the grasshopper sat on a leaf, waiting for his brother.

«I don't want to trouble the children, Uncle Al, but I am terribly afraid of disaster!»

«Please, tell me, what did you hear last night, Mrs. Big Frog?»

«When we croak at night,» she said, «we don't hear anybody or anything except ourselves. But still I heard some sort of noise and immediately remembered! When we were running from our old swamp that the road builders were drying out, it was the exact same sound! I don't know what it could have been, but I remember well that as soon as I heard that noise, the water in our old swamp began gradually disappearing!»

I guessed it! Most likely, it was the sound of a pump! Yes, that's exactly it: Mrs. Big Frog heard the sound of a working pump! The water is receding from the bank, because somebody is trying to pump it out of my swamp! But who and why?

Suddenly, I distinctly heard a noise that reminded me of the sound of a working tractor. Hopper appeared on my shoulder and, holding onto

my earlobe with his forefeet, shouted, «Who's making this sound is somewhere nearby...»

Updown the First was jumping nonstop at my feet, shouting, «Uncle Al! Come with me! I have to show you something!»

He hopped in the direction of the bushes behind which we'd hidden from the Rumped Strangers in my last dream. Carefully stepping along the grass, I walked behind him. We got to the spot where, in my last dream, the Rumped Stranger, while trying to walking along the bottom of the swamp, fell and splashed into the water. Then, Updown the First had laughed merrily. Now, he was showing me something long and black laying in the water.

That's what it was! Now I had no doubt! The black hose, which looked like a long snake, was underwater. It gurgled, and sometimes little bubbles leapt out onto the surface of the water.

Someone really was pumping the water out of the swamp. I was already certain that this was the work of the Rumped Strangers! Probably – it's clear to me now – they decided to pump the water out so it would be easier to search for the treasure buried on the swamp's bottom!

Ah, the scoundrels! I got really mad at them. But what to do? In my dream, I was without my gun, and my friends, Jacob the dog and Cinderella the cat, who could have helped me, weren't with me this time.

Hopper was still sitting on my shoulder and looked ahead with his enormous eyes. «If I follow the hose,» I thought, «then I will absolutely come to the pump. But then what do I do?» I was lost. After all, I probably wouldn't be able to chase the Strangers away and turn off the pump! And yet... I could take this hose out of the water and throw it off to the side!

That's exactly what I did. The roar of the pump soon stopped. I hadn't had any doubt that the Rumped Strangers would quickly notice that water wasn't pouring out of the other side of the rubber hose and they would come here. What to do? Hopper sat on my shoulder. He probably didn't know either, what to do when the Rumped Strangers come.

Of course they'll stick the hose back in the water and turn the pump back on. Updown the First hopped impatiently around my ankles. Mrs. Big Frog, sitting at the very edge of the swamp, sighed sadly and quietly. She was probably picturing with horror her numbered children drying out in the heat of the sun, dying or becoming grasshoppers...

And there I awoke! My heart was pounding. I was anxious. The arms of the wall clock showed four o'clock in the morning. It was dark outside. I didn't want to get out of bed.

The little grasshopper jumped onto the windowsill. Turning his back to me, he, as usual, chirruped a bit, then hopped through the open window into my yard.

I clearly heard a sound in the distance. It seemed familiar to me. I listened closer – yes, that was it! It was the same sound I had heard in my dream only a few minutes ago!

«What is this,» I wondered, and then quickly leapt out of bed. «I have to go see – who's making themselves at home in my neck of the woods?»

I put on my wading boots, took my Winchester, and went out into the yard. It was dreary, cloudy and damp. The sun hadn't come up yet and, after a warm bed, it was chilly! A thick fog rolled over everything around me.

I felt something like a big raindrop plop onto my shoulder. «Is that you, Hopper? Hey, buddy! Do you also want to see who's fooling with our swamp? Thanks for the loyalty! Well, let's go I guess, if you're this brave.» At my leg, I felt Jacob's strong side. Just as a true friend should, the dog padded along next to me.

But it wasn't long before we had to return home. The damp morning twilight and the thick fog made it hard to see the path. It was especially difficult to walk through the woods. I even stumbled into bushes and tree trunks a few times! I couldn't hear any sounds anymore. Which way should I go? Jacob was quiet, too. Even for him, it was probably hard to make out foreign smells in the morning dampness.

If only you knew how badly I wanted to catch those criminals off-guard!

To point the barrel of my Winchester at them, and scare them far away from here! But how could I find them in the heavy fog? My swamp was shrouded in fog, too, like a thick blanket. Not one frog sounded its voice. After wandering around for several minutes, I got cold and decided to return home. «I'll continue my search once the fog lifts a little,» I thought.

Having returned to my house, I went out to my small backyard swamp. Hopper immediately jumped off my shoulder and landed on the rock in the very center, where Updown Acrobat was sitting. I noticed that, upon seeing the little cricket next to him, he wasn't surprised, and even croaked. Turtle appeared at my feet. «She's gotten hungry...»

«Hello, my darling Turtle! Would you like some food?»

I took a cabbage leaf out of my coat pocket. I tore it into little pieces and put them right in front of Turtle's nose. She began slowly chewing on them. I wasn't worried about Updown Acrobat or Hopper – they'd find themselves food. «I'll go home. I need to warm up, and it's time to call the sheriff!» Even though it was very early and I didn't hear any more noises, I had still decided to tell Michael about the rattling of some motor.

I walked up to my bed. Without taking off my boots or my coat, standing my rifle between my legs, I took the cell phone out of my shirt pocket. Remember, the sheriff lent me his before leaving for Barto? I pressed the button he'd shown me.

«Hi, Uncle Al! How's it going?» Michael's voice came through clearly and loudly, as if he was standing right next to me!

Surprised, I asked him, «Hi! How's it going? You're not sleeping?»

«We never sleep, Al! We've had this rule ever since the age of the eminent detective, Mr. Pinkerton!»

«A true sheriff,» I thought. «The number one thing for him is the peace of the people!»

I didn't want to admit to Michael that I'd first heard those suspicious sounds from the swamp in my dream, or that I saw a long rubber hose there that someone was using to pump water. I immediately thought back to his disbelief and bemusement when he'd listened to Tony, while his

son told him about our dream adventures! I'll tell him that I heard some sound as soon as I woke up.

«Hey! Uncle Al! Why did you stop talking?»

«Everything's alright, Michael! I was just thinking about how to best explain everything to you.»

«You probably just woke up? And what did you dream this time?» The sheriff's voice was merry!

«N-o-o-o,» I decided, certain now, «I need to tell him only about what happens in real life.»

«What a dream! The things that were happening there!»

«Well come on, tell me! What happened?» This time, Michael's voice sounded strict.

«You see, Michael, I woke up from the roar of a motor...»

«What motor?»

«Well you know, it was as if there was a tractor, or a pump, working nearby.»

«Huh! And could you hear it well?»

«It's far away, but clear. True, I haven't heard anything for about half an hour. But who knows, maybe it'll start rattling again...»

«Really?» He grew silent. Then he started talking as if he was giving orders.

«Here's what, Uncle Al...You stay at home! Don't even think of going to the pump! It's probably the robbers who are trying to pump the water out of the swamp!»

«It couldn't be!»

Honestly, in the mornings, especially that early, I have a hard time thinking clearly. So it happened that, awake, I forgot that in my dream I had been worried about the same thing! Michael was saying something into the phone.

«Hey, wake up! Remember, I showed you the drawing of the thieves that robbed that jewelry store in Harrisburg? Maybe it's them. Their tracks lead towards your area. Lock the gate up good and sit at home...»

The sheriff was speaking sternly, but I was listening to him and thinking, what do I do now? Run to the swamp? See what's going on there, if there's a hose in the water? Maybe somebody is actually pumping the water out of my swamp? Maybe wait, until the fog thins out? Moreover, I really hadn't heard the sound of the working pump anymore.

What a situation! Could it be that the sheriff was right and the robbers had turned up in my neck of the woods? ...Why not? They buried the stolen valuables in the forest clearing, which, after the downpour, became a swamp! Now they're trying to pump the water out and make their search for the treasure easier. How did I not figure that out the second I heard the sound of the motor?! But that was in my dream, and now I'm... Honestly speaking, it's no wonder one gets confused here! Adventures in a dream are one thing, but in reality – that's a different thing entirely..

And the sheriff was already ordering me around!

«Uncle Al! Don't even think of going into the woods! Or something bad might happen to you! Do you hear me? This isn't in a dream anymore, it's real life! Do you understand me? You don't leave your house to go anywhere! Be patient for a little while, and I'll come to you and tell you everything once we finish all our business here. Are you listening to me, Al?»

«I'm listening, I'm listening, Michael,» I said, and turned off the phone.

The sheriff, the police – everybody knows what they deal in. Chases, ambushes... of course, I won't get in the way. But they need to not order me around! I live here, and I know what I have to do...

And yet running to the swamp now, through this dense fog, this early – that wouldn't do any good! I'm not going to see anybody there, because I don't know in which direction the robbers put the pump. In my dream, I saw a black hose, and even then, Updown the First helped me. But in reality? I listened closely. The pump was silent.

It seemed that the thieves had also gotten cold. Or maybe they were afraid to attract attention with the sound of the pump, so they turned it off for long periods of time. In any case, it's as my grandpa said: if we

don't know how to do it they way we'd like to, then we need to do it the way we can. So it is. Once the sun rises a little, I'll head towards the swamp with my Winchester in my arms, and check who's messing around out there!

You know what else my sharp-witted grandpa used to say? «Albert, know this: the first bird gets the worm, and the second mouse – the cheese!» You don't understand? I also didn't know what my grandpa meant, until he showed me a mousetrap that firmly clasped a greedy mouse. Oh, how badly she wanted to eat the cheese! She was the first to run over, and got caught! The second mouse was late...but, without risking anything, calmly ate the cheese-bait!

So one needs to think ahead, not act rashly. I'll wait for dawn and find out who's endangering my friends. Then, before you know it, the police and the sheriff will show up in my neighborhood...

I went back into my house. I took off my boots and lay down on my bed in what I was wearing. My Winchester was lying next to me. Jacob walked into the room, wagging his tail. He lay down on the floor by my bed. Cinderella was right behind the dog. She settled herself at my feet and purred affectionately. From the windowsill, the little cricket hopped onto my shoulder.

Well! You've also decided to doze off with me? Wait for the sun? Alright! We'll sleep for a bit, to make the time pass faster. The fog will disappear, and then we'll pleasantly take to our task. The pump was still quiet. It seems the robbers were hiding from the bad weather, until the first rays of sunshine... With Cinderella's purring, I soon fell asleep...



The Fifth Dream

*The rubber hose is connected to the pump!
Hopper, Jacob and Cinderella give
the Strangers a good scare! The treasure
finds its way into the sheriff's hands!
The water is returned to the swamp.
My friends: saved! Hopper dreams of the circus.
Tony returns. Updown Acrobat does a somersault
and lands right on the target!*

Updown the First saw me. Right away, he said that he hadn't heard the rattling of the pump for a long time, but it just had started again a few minutes ago...

«Uncle Al, I was playing with my brothers and sisters on the other side of the swamp,» the little frog was telling me, «and when I came here, where you threw the hose out of the water, I saw it in the water again!»

I got really angry. With Hopper on my shoulder, and Jacob and Cinderella, I walked up to the bank of the swamp. It was true! The end of the hose was back in the water. I listened closely... Indeed, somewhere not too far away, the pump was working... So that means the Rumples Strangers were draining the water from the swamp again.

They had probably noticed that the water wasn't flowing out of their end, then walked along the hose to the swamp, and seen that somebody had taken the other end out and thrown it to the side. Their guard went up, and they turned the pump off to wait and see... That's why Updown the First and I hadn't heard the sound of the motor in a while! The thieves

had waited for a bit, then, when they saw that nobody was around, they threw the end of the hose back into the water right at the same rock, returned to the pump and turned it on again...

Remember how I had woken up very early? It had been cold. There was a thick fog and you couldn't see a thing. I'd had to return home. I had lain down on my bed, fully dressed, with my Winchester in my arms – remember? Well, I had my gun in my arms in my dream, too. Now I'll have something to threaten those Rumples Strangers with. Maybe I should follow the hose back to the pump, find the Rumples Strangers and scare them off? But I decided not to rush. Also, my wise Jacob made a very good point:

«Uncle Al, the Rumples Strangers will probably come here and will go for this rock, and you know why...»

I agreed. After all, the robbers are only pumping out the water for one reason: to get to this rock and try to find their loot hidden at its base. So there's no reason to go looking for them, following the hose – let them come here themselves. And once they get here, why, we'll...

Having hidden in the bushes, I ordered Jacob not to growl or bark, even if he smelled something unfamiliar. I also convinced Cinderella to sit calmly next to me. The grasshopper sat on my shoulder, and Updown the First jumped onto my knee.

I remembered how happy he'd been when Turtle, coming out of the water, had set the gold pebble onto the grass and said, «Uncle Al, now I definitely know where the treasure is buried!» Right then, the frog had hopped into the swamp and, swimming to the rock, climbed to the top of it and shouted, «Uncle Al, this rock will be your guide.»

I hate to admit it, but I hadn't understood that the Rumples Strangers had buried their treasure right at its base! Ah, how stupid I was, when I was digging up the entire clearing around it. It's a shame, right? Only now do I understand everything. My father was right when he told me a long time ago, «Al, it's better to be clever than curious! Cleverness helps when you're looking for something, while curiosity is just a distraction.»

If only I had dug at the rock itself, the Rumples' treasure would have ended up in my hands...

There was about fifty feet between the shrub where I was hiding and the rock. The water in the swamp had shrunk by half, and you could clearly see the rock's sides, covered in thick green moss.

...Soon, I saw two people. They came out of the trees to the right of our shrubs. Jacob nearly snarled out loud. I patted him on the back, and asked him to calm down. Cinderella's fur stood on end. I gently petted the cat. We needed to wait patiently and watch: what were the Rumples going to do? Oh yes, it was them! Hopper, who was sitting on my shoulder, leaned right up to my ear and whispered, «Uncle Al, it'd be good to know where the Strangers are putting all this water from the swamp. We've got to hurry up and get it back! I'm scared for my mom and my brothers and sisters. Let me, Jacob and Cinderella find where they're pouring the water. We'll be really careful, I promise!»

«Well, why not?» I thought to myself. «It would be good to send my friends somewhere far away from danger. I have a gun, and I can keep myself out of trouble!» But it proved harder to talk Jacob and Cinderella into going in search of the water.

«How could I leave you, Uncle Al?» My intelligent mutt said in dismay.

Cinderella whispered angrily, «You would be left completely alone, Uncle Al...that's very bad! What if the Rumples should see you?»

Finally, after explaining to my friends that I had a rifle in my arms and could stand up for myself, I managed to talk them into looking for the place where the Strangers were pumping the water. Jacob and Cinderella headed towards the sound of the working pump, and Hopper stayed with me. He sat down on my shoulder, and I didn't worry about him...

No sooner had the dog and cat disappeared into the trees, than the two Strangers that we had noticed earlier were joined by a third. Ohh! Well, this is an old familiar face! Of course! I've seen their leader before. In my first dream, he was the one who had ordered the others to bury the treasure! Remember, the Stern brothers were riding in on horseback

to catch the robbers, and one of the Strangers put his ear to the ground and heard the horses' hoof beats? The policemen brothers didn't get to catch them then, because the Strangers ran off into the darkness...

Their ringleader sure strikes fear into the heart! Brrrr!! A mangy beard, messy hair, grimy... Now, looking around him, he was saying something to the other Rumples. But I couldn't hear a thing. I saw that two of them had shovels! Slowly, so they wouldn't slip and fall in the mud, they started approaching the rock where Updown the First and Turtle had found the gold stone, when there was still a lot of water. It was just as we thought! For the Rumples, this rock was a landmark! This is where they'd buried the stolen jewels!

What to do? There's their leader, with big rubber boots and shovel in hand, going towards the rock. It was slippery. Sometimes, he would fall and start cursing. His two helpers were holding him up.

Taking cover behind the bushes, I carefully crept closer to the Strangers. When their leader poked at the loose dirt with his shovel, I jumped up from the bushes and pointed my rifle at them! I yelled loudly. I even thought it was pretty threatening!

«Don't you dare dig! Get out of here!»

If only you could have seen how scared the Strangers were! They even wanted to run away, but the swamp bottom had a strong grip on them. Trying to pull their legs out, they fell face-first into the mud, and couldn't manage to stand themselves up again. Wet, covered in muck, they looked around them.

The head Rumples saw me standing alone and started cursing again.

«Hey, to hell with you, old man! Put your toy away!» He pointed at my rifle. I aimed the muzzle of my Winchester at him and ordered, «Leave! If you start digging, I'll start shooting!»

The Rumples leader quietly, even gently, said, «Dear sir! Wait! What do you want? After all, this isn't your treasure!»

«This is the swamp where my friends, the frogs, live. And Mrs. Big Frog lives here. Your pump drained all the water, and now you've put my friends in danger! Get away from here, and put the water back right now!»

For some reason, the Rumpled Strangers started laughing hysterically! Somehow, they finally managed to get back on their feet. Paying absolutely no attention to me, the head Stranger resumed digging at the dirt by the rock with the point of his shovel.

They probably thought that I, old Uncle Al, was no threat to them! I was even a little stunned by their arrogance! But what to do? I decided to fire a shot into the air, just to scare them. I lifted the barrel of my gun and looked up out of habit, to make sure that I wouldn't accidentally hit a tree branch or flying bird. Suddenly, a terrible wail rose up!

What I saw then is impossible to describe! Imagine, the Rumpled leader, throwing his shovel with a shout, was desperately clawing with a dirty hand at his left eye. He was waving the other hand around, as if he was being attacked by a swarm of wasps or bees. The other Strangers froze – they didn't understand a thing. I spotted my Hopper, zooming like a green arrow towards the leader, and hitting him in the second eye! The head Stranger, trying to clamber out of the mud and run towards the woods, tripped and crashed face-first into the swamp muck!

The two other Strangers were desperately swiveling their heads back and forth, and when they noticed that something green was alternately hopping and flying around them, they dropped onto their stomachs in the mud, screaming and waving their hands around! The third Rumpled Stranger, meanwhile, threw himself into a sprint towards the forest.

I wanted to walk up to the screaming thieves that my little grasshopper had scared, so I could tie them up with my belt. You remember, I had lain down fully dressed to wait out the fog, and I had a belt on my jeans. But I decided not to wade into the muck. Before lying down on my bed, I'd taken off my rubber boots. I definitely couldn't risk slipping and falling, because I was pointing my rifle at the Strangers and they were scared that I'd fire. But if I fell...

Updown the First was ecstatic. «Way to go, Hopper! That's what they get! Pfft, they thought they would ruin our swamp! Not a chance!» The grasshopper perched himself again on my shoulder. The little frog shouted, «Hooray! We won! We'll chase these Rumpled Strangers out of here, right, Uncle Al?»

Hopper, standing on his back legs, touched his antennae to my earlobe and asked, «Well, are you proud of me, Uncle Al?»

«Of course,» I answered. «You're a true hero!»

It was pretty funny watching the scared Strangers flail around in the mud! They cried, «Old man, please, don't let that green thing attack our eyes anymore! We'll go to the woods! We don't need the trea-s-u-u-u-re!»

And here I remembered the phone that Michael Stern left for me. In all the chaos, I'd forgotten about it. Now was the perfect time to call and find out where the sheriff and his policemen were. Luckily, I had grabbed my phone and brought it into my dream. I took it out of my pocket to press the button that called the sheriff.

It was incredibly loud: the scared Strangers were screaming, and Updown the First was jumping around and shouting. Hopper was chirping happily. He had leapt off my shoulder and was back to carrying on right around the robbers' heads, threatening to fly into their eyes again. And then, to the dismay of the thieves, Jacob and Cinderella unexpectedly jumped out of the bushes.

Here's what happened: having found out where the Rumpled Strangers were pouring out all the water, they'd come back to me. Then, with a ferocious growling and barking, Jacob started running in circles around the terrified robbers. Cinderella, meanwhile, had jumped up onto the ringleader's head and dug in with her sharp claws. He let out a terrible yowl of pain.

Great! It serves them right! Now I could calmly take a seat on a wide tree stump and call the sheriff. I was just about to press the button when I felt someone land on my foot. It was Mrs. Big Frog.

«Uncle Al,» she called, «look, look! Someone is already taking

the Rumples Strangers away!»

Well isn't that something! I saw the sheriff and his brothers, who had already handcuffed the thieves, leading them towards the bank. Nearby, tail wagging, frolicked Jacob – with Cinderella standing on his back, her tail held upright with pride. Hopper was joyfully chirruping on my shoulder.

To tell you the truth, I was very surprised and thought, «This is amazing! I didn't even get a chance to call the sheriff, and here he already is with his brothers.» Can you believe it? These things could only happen in dreams!

«Uncle Al,» I heard the voice of Mrs. Big Frog again. «We have to hurry and return the water to the swamp! Jacob and Cinderella found the place where the robbers were dumping it. The sun is getting hot, and I'm so worried for my children!»

«Yes, yes!» I hurried to reassure Mrs. Big Frog. «Right away... right away... We'll return the water to the swamp... Don't worry! Don't worry!»

Someone kept tugging at my shoulder. I heard the voice of Michael Stern.

«Uncle Al! Wake up, you, for goodness' sake!»

I opened my eyes and saw the sheriff next to my bed. Gary, Paul and Stanley stood in the doorway, laughing. Jacob was barking happily, and Cinderella jumped up next to me and started purring loudly. Still in a half-sleep daze, I couldn't understand what was happening and kept muttering, «Hurry up and return the water to the swamp! Quick! Hurry! Things will get very bad for them!»

«Who?» asked Paul.

«Updown the First, Mrs. Big Frog, her children. Hurry, put the water back in the swamp! Don't let the little frogs turn into grasshoppers!!»

«Uncle Al,» Gary Stern bent closer to me and asked, mockingly, «And who is Updown the First? Is he the frog king of your swamp? And who is this Mrs. Big Frog?»

The brothers all guffawed good-naturedly.

Finally, I woke up fully! How did I sleep so late? This means that

everything that I'd seen just a minute ago had all happened in my dream! But of course! It was already daylight and we had to hurry to check up on what was happening at the swamp. I just couldn't understand, what's the dream, and what's the reality? Getting out of bed, I looked at Michael. He was smiling warmly.

«Don't worry, Uncle Al. We caught the robbers. We already took them to the police station. We got their stash, too, and the water is almost all back in the swamp. Your Jacob is a good dog! He grabbed one of the thieves by the collar with his teeth and wouldn't let him turn on the pump. He held him like that until we got there. In half an hour, everything at your swamp will be okay. But since you're up, can you make us a big omelet and a few sandwiches, please? And don't forget some hot coffee. Our stomachs are empty as the heads of those robbers heading to jail.»

Of course, I made a delicious and hearty meal for the Stern brothers, and the sheriff told me about how they came to catch the robbers.

It turns out that the police officers had spent all night sitting in the woods and waiting for them to show up. Soon, Michael Stern and his brothers had noticed people arriving in a car with a pump and hoses, and start pumping the water from the swamp. There was no doubt that these were the thieves. But they had to be caught only at the scene of the crime, at the moment when they were digging up the stolen jewels. Or else you can't arrest them! If you grab them earlier, they'll say that they were just walking through the woods, and they've never even seen the pump before! Then you can't prove that they're thieves!

Having waited until the robbers drained part of the water from the swamp and went to the rock to dig up the loot, the Stern brothers and the sheriff followed them inconspicuously. As soon as the leader took out the bag with the jewels, the police ambushed them, nabbing him and the other Rumples Strangers! Everything happened almost exactly like in my dream – except mine was more interesting, don't you think?

Michael showed me the bag, stuffed with stolen valuables. «Take a look, Uncle Al, at the riches we'll be returning to their rightful owner!»

I saw gold, rings, bracelets, necklaces. Now, this was a real treasure!

«By law, you, Uncle Al, are owed a reward.»

«But how?»

«Your dreams really helped the police! When Tony told me about what he saw in his dreams with you and about the adventures you two had with the Rumpled Strangers, I doubted you, and I even laughed at you a little, but I decided to check... True, when you were roaming around the swamp early in the morning with a rifle, you could have really gotten in our way. But you were chilled to the bone and left for home to warm up and finish your dream. That's when we calmly waited for the thieves and...»

«Okay, Michael, if that's how it was, let's just let it be,» I said appeasingly.

Really, the sheriff knows better than I do how my dreams helped him catch the thieves. And if I get some sort of reward for the treasure, which was recovered, as the sheriff said, with my help – well then, that's pretty good, don't you agree?

«Michael, how's Tony doing? What's going on with him? Why didn't you bring him over?»

«Tony's still not completely better, Uncle Al,» he answered sadly.

«How?»

«The doctor says they still have some work left to do on his back...»

The brothers called to the sheriff. It was time to drive to Barto, to return the jewels to their rightful owner. Michael gave me a friendly slap on the back.

«Thanks, Uncle Al, for feeding us! The fog's gone, so go ahead to your swamp and make sure that everything's in order there and that your frogs are safe. We'll pick up the pump tomorrow.»

When Michael Stern and his brothers left, that's exactly what I did.

The swamp had plenty of water again. The policemen pumped it back in from a deep pit that the robbers had been draining it into. On a wide dead tree stump not too far from the bank sat a big green frog. She was looking in my direction. Another, smaller, one had settled on top of her head. «This is probably the real Mrs. Big Frog,» I thought, «and the one on her

head is her son – Updown the First or Thirtieth or Ninth or something.» I wanted to come up a little closer. But this wasn't a dream anymore, it was the real world. The frog and her little one hopped into the water..

I noticed a beautiful butterfly fluttering over the swamp. How lovely! Could this be our own Spotted Lady gracing my swamp? Of course, I figured that this was a different butterfly. I thought back to how, in one of my dreams, a Spotted Lady just like this one had saved Updown the First, and my mutt Jacob had no idea how festive he looked when the bright butterfly landed on the edge of his wide, dangling ear. You had to see it to believe it! And what about when the butterfly would sit on top of Updown the First's head, and he looked like a true king!

I wandered for a bit around the bank, to take pleasure in the friendly croaking of frogs, the hopping of grasshoppers, and the singing of birds, but then it was time to head home.

Having returned to my own yard, I walked past my small swamp, where Updown Acrobat perched on a rock, and next to him the grasshopper Hopper, and I tried to find Turtle. I finally noticed her by the small brick wall around the swamp. She, as always, was contentedly chewing on something. Squatting down to make sure Turtle had enough food, I said aloud, «The treasure's been found. The Rumpled Strangers have been captured. The sheriff and his brothers are bringing the jewels to their rightful owner.» I was speaking loudly, so Updown Acrobat and Hopper and Turtle could all hear me.

«Of course,» I thought, «I doubt they'll understand me. That was in my dreams, but this is reality!» But it seems I was wrong! Updown Acrobat dove into the water and then, having jumped over the little wall, started hopping around my feet, over and over again, like a ball. Then, he gave out s-u-u-ch a j-u-u-u-u-u-u-m-p! I was so shocked, my jaw dropped! I've never seen a frog jump like that! It must have been a world record!

After sitting for a minute, Updown Acrobat pushed off the ground and jumped up again! He turned over twice, doing somersaults, like a real acrobat!



The Sixth Dream

*There's a celebration at the rescued swamp.
I make a bet with Turtle.
Updown Acrobat makes a record-breaking jump!
I meet Arricola – a muskrat. Tony returns!
He brings good news! Jacob and Cinderella
want to become... circus artists!*

Have you ever seen a frog do a somersault before? No? Me neither! I've never seen such a wonder in my whole life! Not in my dreams, either!

«Hey, Acrobat! Tony's going to be so happy when he sees the jumps you can do!»

Hopper, who had been sitting motionless on the rock in the middle of my backyard swamp, flashed past me like a streak of green lightning and landed on Turtle's shell! Ah, what a shame that nobody except me saw this spectacular scene!

Oh! I forgot to praise Updown Acrobat! He deserves a blow on his nose for such remarkable jumps! He worked hard, entertained me, while I, on the other hand... Lowering myself to my knees before Updown Acrobat, I gave him a puff of air on the nose, and as sweetly as I could, said, «You're incredible! You jump as if somebody's throwing you! And those somersaults of yours, they take my breath away!» At this moment, the grasshopper jumped up on my shoulder, and I heard his happy chirping! «Okay, okay,» I whispered to him, «you're great, too!»

My bustling day passed quickly. It came time to rest. With the little grasshopper on my shoulder, I headed towards the house. Evening crept in unnoticed. I thought of Tony, of his plans to return to the circus, of the rescued swamp, the captured thieves, the found treasure, the record-breaking jumps of Updown Acrobat. I walked into the kitchen. I drank a cup of tea with mint and felt my eyes start to grow heavy.

I came into my bedroom alone. I lay down in my bed, covered myself with the blanket. I fell asleep so fast that I didn't hear my loyal friends, who didn't want to part with me for the night, gathering at my bed. They all knew what they had to do to get into my dream...

I fell asleep and showed up at my swamp among my friends. I saw Mrs. Big Frog warming herself on a rock, and Spotted Lady fluttering above her. Yes, yes! This was already a new butterfly, but as always, we admired her bright wings, her silvery voice, and the happy somersaults she did as she flew over the lake. «I wonder if she plans on settling down on Mrs. Big Frog's head?» I thought. And sure enough! That's where Spotted Lady landed. Ah, how glamorous and beautiful Mrs. Big Frog looked! Updown the First sat not far from his mother and, seeing me, called out loudly, «Uncle Al, hi! The water's all back in our swamp!»

«Ooh! We're so thrilled, Uncle Al,» I heard the voice of Mrs. Big Frog.

«Hello, madam,» I greeted her respectfully. «If only you could see how well this ornament suits you: a live butterfly named Spotted Lady on your head!»

«Really?» Mrs. Big Frog asked shyly. «I'm so glad that Spotted Lady has returned to us. If only you'd seen how happy Updown the First was!»

Mrs. Big Frog tried to bend towards the water, so she could better see her reflection. This wasn't easy, since she was a little bit plump.

«You...you, Uncle Al, really think that, sitting on my head, the butterfly makes me more beautiful?»

I agreed right away! First of all, one must always be a gentleman! In dreams, too. Second of all, Spotted Lady, having spread her remarkable wings, truly did make a beauty of Mrs. Big Frog. I just couldn't tear my eyes off her. I even forgot that, for quite a while now, I've wanted to find out how she names her daughters.

Updown the First hopped up to my feet.

«Can I congratulate you? Your favorite Spotted Lady is back again!» I said.

«If only you knew, Uncle Al, how happy I am,» answered my green bug-eyed buddy.

I crouched down on the grass next to my friend and, jumping up onto my knee, he said quietly, so that Spotted Lady wouldn't hear him, «Of course, this isn't exactly the same butterfly from before, remember? But she's just as pretty and cheerful! As a matter of fact, Uncle Al, we have a surprise for you!»

«I have to say, Updown, I really love surprises! I probably have to close my eyes?»

«Yes, yes!» Updown the First shouted happily, continuing to hop around me.

Now Spotted Lady lowered herself down atop his head. Flapping her bright wings, she said in her ringing voice, «Just don't peek, Uncle Al!»

«What could they have planned?» I wondered, perplexed. I put my hands over my eyes.

«Okay, you can open them.» I heard the voice of Updown the First. «Open your eyes! The surprise is in front of you!»

To tell you the truth, at first, I couldn't figure out where the surprise was. Updown the First was in front of me, and next to him, another frog just like him—just as green and buggy-eyed as the one who kept hopping around my feet.

«Uncle Al,» said Updown the First, «c'mon, why aren't you saying anything? You don't know who this is?» I heard disappointment in his voice.

And here I understood. Of course! «Ah, I'm old and thoughtless,» I scolded myself. And with good reason! You see, the frog sitting next to Updown the First was...Updown Acrobat!

«Hey! How'd you get here? You weren't in my bedroom, right?»

«Hey, Uncle Al,» the future circus performer answered. «I'm sorry, but when you went to bed, Hopper told me that I had a chance of getting into your dream to see my mom, Mrs. Big Frog, and my brother Updown the First! So the grasshopper and I couldn't help ourselves.»

Right away, I heard the familiar happy chirrup in my ear of the grasshopper, who had hopped up on my shoulder.

«You're here, too! I'm so glad!»

«You're not mad, Uncle Al?» asked Hopper.

«Of course not!» I said. «It's you who should forgive me for not thinking of taking you with me! I was so tired and fell right asleep! But you did a good job, figuring out by yourselves how to get into my dream!»

«Interesting,» I thought, «are my dog and cat and Turtle also this clever?»

Hopper, seeing Mrs. Big Frog, shot like a green arrow in her direction and landed next to his mother. She quietly and very sweetly said something to him. Understandable! The mother and her son missed each other...

Suddenly, out of the bushes leapt my wise mutt Jacob and the beautiful Cinderella!

«Good job!» I was delighted. «Thanks for fixing my mistake.»

Jacob, his tail wagging, sat down nearby and said, «Uncle Al, you know that if you really want something, you need to give it a good try! So Cinderella and I tried. Carefully, so as not to wake you, we've ended up back in your dream with our friends!»

«I'm proud of you both for turning out to be so smart,» I said. «But it seems to me that my wonderful Turtle will probably be mad at me. I forgot about her, after all! Getting into my dream was probably too much for her! What a shame!»

I really was deeply sorry. The dog, the cat, Updown Acrobat and Hopper were all able to fix my blunder, but Turtle...she moves so slowly...

By the time she makes her way from the backyard swamp to my bed, I might already be awake!

And suddenly I heard the slightly squeaky but very familiar voice of Turtle.

«Uncle Al, you're wrong to think so!» Slowly, carefully stepping over every tiny twig in the grass, she was heading towards me. I couldn't believe my eyes! I picked her up and placed her on my palm.

«You're here, too, my darling Turtle?! But how did you make it to my bed?»

«With Jacob's help,» she said, and let Cinderella tell the story of how everything happened.

It turns out Jacob had carefully taken Turtle by her shell in his sturdy teeth, Updown Acrobat had jumped on the dog's back, and the little grasshopper had held onto the cat's fluffy tail. That's how they all made their way to my bed and quietly lay down on the floor. I had already fallen asleep by then, so my friends had had to wander around the woods for a bit, looking for our swamp. But Jacob found the way, and we met up...

I patted my dog and thought that as soon as I wake up, I'll feed Jacob something delicious for being so clever. And I'll give Turtle an extra fresh and juicy cabbage leaf. It was good to all be back together, but honestly, we really felt Tony's absence...

«Uncle Al» – I again heard the excited voice of Updown the First, «it's time for you to hear about the most important event! Today we have a celebration for the saving of our swamp! And there's one more surprise waiting for you!»

«This sure is something,» I marveled. My friends had decided to cheer me up after all of these dangerous adventures at the swamp. What sort of surprise had my excitable friend, Updown the First, prepared for me? It wasn't for nothing that our neighbor – the irrepressible joker Mr. Benjamin – had always said, «Life is like a box of chocolates: it's full of surprises!» Anyways, I had to close my eyes one more time.

I felt Turtle trying to crawl out of my hands. I didn't try to stop her, and

carefully set her down on the grass. You already know that I'm horribly curious, and it was no easy task for me to await a surprise with my eyes closed!

«Soon?» I impatiently asked, and heard the happy laugh of either Updown the First or his brother, Updown Acrobat. Of course, I really wanted to open my eyes, but I was held back by the voice of Mrs. Big Frog and the chirrup of the grasshopper, who had again hopped up onto my shoulder.

«Don't rush, Uncle Al,» Mrs. Big Frog warned me. Hopper added, «Soon, you'll be really surprised!»

Finally I heard Mrs. Big Frog tell me, «Now, Uncle Al, you can open your eyes!»

I pulled my hands away from my eyes, and what I saw shook me right to the core!

Updown the First was zipping across the water. It was as if he was flying over the swamp! On his head sat Spotted Lady, her wings pressed against her body.

Seeing this spectacle, I was so amazed that I couldn't say a single word! Hopper sat on my shoulder and chirruped happily.

«Well, what do you think? Isn't it cool? Our Updown the First is like me now – a shooting arrow! Right, Uncle Al?»

«But how's he doing it? Who's carrying him this quickly?»

Looking closer, I noticed that Updown the First was standing on the back of some creature with a long, sharp face. With his forelegs, he was holding onto some sort of long, reddish ropes!

«Oooh! If only you knew,» Mrs. Big Frog nearly moaned, «how afraid I was for Updown the First, when Arricola offered to give him a ride around the swamp on her back.»

«Who's Arricola?» This was the first I'd heard the name.

Hopper, comfortably settled on my shoulder, said, «She's a muskrat who came here right after the water returned to our swamp. She lived in that hole where the Strangers were dumping the water..»



«Yes, yes, it's true,» said Mrs. Big Frog, glancing over in the direction of the swamp, where Updown the First, standing on Arricola's back, was speeding over the water full force, resoundingly singing a new song:

I'm tempered the will!
My nerves from a steel...

I was so blown away by what I was seeing, that I didn't hear the voice of Mrs. Big Frog. She jumped closer to me and persistently repeated herself.

«Uncle Al, of course for you this is a real surprise, but what do you think, isn't it dangerous for my son to be speeding along so quickly? He's still so little...»

«Ah, I don't know, Mrs. Big Frog,» I didn't know what to say, and asked her to introduce me to Arricola.

«Yes, of course,» she answered, glancing towards the swamp, where Updown the First was carrying on like the wind, standing on the muskrat's back.

Mrs. Big Frog croaked softly two times. The little frog, though he was caught up in his race across the water, immediately heard his mother's voice and shouted something to Arricola. The muskrat quickly turned towards the shore, and jumped out onto the grass. Breathing heavily, she greeted us.

«I'm happy to see you, Uncle Al. Forgive me, I'm a little tired! Updown the First has told me so much about you, Tony, Jacob and Cinderella, that I feel like I've known you all for a long time! Ah, and this speed demon has tired me out! I need to catch my breath for a minute...»

Hopping off Arricola's back, Updown the First jumped up onto my knee.

«Uncle Al, did you like my new song?»

Mrs. Big Frog, barely containing her worry, said, «Updown the First! My boy! Have some sympathy for Arricola – it's not easy for her to rush through the water like that! Not to mention, this game might be dangerous for you!» She clearly was looking for me to support her: «Right, Uncle Al?»

«I am amazed by your ability to swim so quickly, Ms. Arricola,» I said. «But I'm also worried – couldn't Updown the First hurt himself when he's flying along the swamp on your back?»

«Uncle Al and Mrs. Big Frog, don't worry about Updown the First,» said Arricola. «He's a brave little frog! You heard his peppy song? I'm ready to race even faster!»

«Mom, listen!» Updown the First started singing again, jumping around the grass:

I'm tempered the will!
My nerves from a steel,
I ride on Agricola's back
Like wind of the strong

«Ah, you're a restless spirit!» sighed Mrs. Big Frog. «Okay, you've shown your surprise to Uncle Al—now that's enough! I see that you've forgotten about the day's most important event. It's time to start the celebration of our saved swamp.»

«Hooray!» shouted Updown the First and Updown Acrobat, hopping and repeating in unison: «It's time! It's time! It's time to show our present!»

They started calling their brothers and sisters. Throughout the swamp, croaking joyously, dozens of frogs started hopping. They'd long been ready for the celebration and were waiting for the signal.

I was really lucky! After our dangerous adventures, I got to see an athletic competition that my swamp friends had put together. Mrs. Big Frog invited me, Turtle and Hopper to sit next to her.

«Would you like to sit over on that rock there? It's already been warmed in the sun.»

That's what we did. Turtle was very comfortable in my hands, and the grasshopper, on my shoulder. I didn't see Updown Acrobat. He'd probably hopped off somewhere with Updown the First.

I thought that, now, since Mrs. Big Frog was sitting next to me,

I'd finally get a chance to find out how she names her daughters. But, because of my own curiosity, I felt uncomfortable distracting her from the main event: the start of the swamp rescue's athletic celebration.

I heard some sort of strange sound. It seemed familiar to me. Then I remembered! This was how Mrs. Big Frog called her children. The sound was gentle, but firm and melodic. I had heard it when the forest clearing had just become a swamp like it is now, and tiny tadpoles had only begun appearing there. I guessed that the mother of the numbered Updowns was giving a signal to her children.

Two dozen frogs started quickly hopping along the leaves in the very center of the swamp. The jumps were high and very precise. Three or even four frogs, having jumped simultaneously, would fly over one another and, without once bumping into each other in the air, dive from the leaves into the water. Then, a few frogs would sit on a leaf next to one another – the leaf's edges nearly submerged in the water – and they would push off forcefully, jumping up together and landing on the opposite side, on another leaf.

I was in awe of the grace of the frogs' hops, and I tried to find Updown Acrobat. He'd probably show everyone his skills! But in the midst of his brothers and sisters, I wasn't able to find him!

«If only my red-haired nephew was at this celebration,» I thought, «he'd be so happy!»

I noticed that they had started preparing for the swimming of the frogs. Turtle, who had been dozing peacefully in my palms, immediately stirred. Unexpectedly, she offered to make a bet with me on the victory of the first dozen frogs versus the second dozen. I was thrown off guard.

«I'd be happy to, darling Turtle, but I don't know, what will we bet with?»

«Well, alright, Uncle Al,» Turtle said indulgently, «let the prize for our bet be... delight!»

«I understand bets for money,» I said in surprise. «For chocolate candy, too. But how do you make a bet for delight?»

«I didn't think, Uncle Al, that you were this slow-witted,» said

Turtle, upset.

She was paying close attention to the first dozen frogs getting ready to swim by a long dead branch sticking out of the water. Nearby, the second dozen were forming a line.

I became a little sad that I didn't understand Turtle. Maybe I really am so old that I don't understand anything anymore?

«Come on, please, my dear... my darling Turtle, explain to me how you win the prize of "delight".»

Very carefully and gently, I touched my fingers to the back and neck of my overly-proud Turtle. She raised her head, looking at me with her tiny eyes, which reminded me of two dark shining beads.

«It's all very simple, Uncle Al! I, for example, am certain that the first dozen frogs will win. If this happens, then I'll shout, "Hooray", and I'll be completely delighted! That'll be my prize. Which is to say, I'll get it if the dozen frogs that I'm betting on win. Do you understand me? And if your dozen frogs lose, you won't get delight. You won't get to shout, "Hooray!"»

I was so amazed by the common sense of Turtle's suggestion that I was even jealous of her. Why didn't I figure that out right away? It's true, after all, that we do get really happy...No—we are absolutely delighted, if in a football game, the mighty players of the Steelers, who I always rooted for when I was a boy, win. Or I worry for my baseball team, the Phillies! The sun doesn't shine the same if they lose! And if they win – I'm ecstatic! I get so happy that I loudly scream, 'Hooray!' That's the prize that Turtle suggested betting for when we waited for the two groups of frogs to start swimming.

I told Turtle that I've chosen the second group of Updowns and I think that they're going to be the ones to win the swimming competition. She didn't bother arguing and calmly responded, «The first dozen will outpace everybody! Their victory will bring me delight! And as for you, Uncle Al, believe me – it will not be a lucky day. Your dozen's going to lose and you won't be delighted, only upset...»

«We'll see about that,» I said.

We impatiently waited for the race to start, both hoping that our dozen green swimmers will bring one of us the main prize: delight! I made myself comfortable and looked at Mrs. Big Frog. It seemed to me that she wasn't particularly worried about which of the two teams of her children would turn out to be the winner. Most likely, she was happily basking in the sunlight with the grasshopper, who had hopped from my shoulder onto his mother's head, so he could better see the frogs' swimming race.

I thought that he, too, could have been among them, back when he was still a frog – and he wouldn't have turned into a grasshopper, if the people building the road hadn't dried up his home swamp!

It seemed to me that Mrs. Big Frog had dozed off, but I was wrong! After making sure that the two groups of her green buggy-eyed children were ready to race, she gave the signal: «Start!»

What a race began then! Two groups of frogs sped toward the opposite bank, and for a few seconds, they were nose to nose. But I noticed that the second dozen frogs started moving faster. Wow! That's my group of frogs tearing ahead! But not for long, it turned out! The first group of frogs, who Turtle was rooting for, caught up to their rivals.

It seemed to me that Updown the First was swimming for my team of frogs. I couldn't help myself, and shouted, «Updown the First, hurry! You're first!! Don't lag behind!!»

«Uncle Al,» I heard the startled voice of Turtle, «can you be a bit quieter? You'll make me go deaf!»

«Sorry, Turtle, but I'm worried!»

«You can worry like I do – calmly!»

She was sitting in my palm and, when I jumped up, it was perfect for her to get a good view of the race. I leaned my back against a tree and watched anxiously as my dozen frogs were losing to the group of frogs that Turtle was rooting for.

There were only a few feet left to the finish line. Suddenly I saw something, like a green flash of lightning, shoot off of Mrs. Big Frog's

head, blink past my nose, and fly towards the bank of the swamp where the victors of the race would, in just a few moments, hop out of the water.

Hopper's nerves couldn't take it! Wanting to support Updown the First, who he was also cheering for, the little grasshopper landed on the bank, and chirruped loudly to root for his brother and to greet his team as the winners...They made it! The first frogs to jump onto the bank were from my dozen.

«Hoor-a-a-a-y!» I yelled loudly in delight. «We w-o-o-o-n! Good job, Updown the First!»

«Well, Uncle Al,» I heard Turtle's disappointed voice, «set me down, please, on the grass. Congratulations! You've won your prize: delight! And I am going to take my distress and go doze off for a little while. I've gotten very tired from worrying...»

As soon as I put her on the grass, Turtle slowly wandered off towards the bushes. Spotted Lady probably sympathized with her, because instead of sitting on the head of the second team's winner, Updown the First, like I expected, she sat instead on the shell of Turtle, who moved beneath a wide leaf of thistle.

I walked up to the bank of the swamp where the winners hopped out, and shouted again, «Hooray!! Congratulations, Updown the First!»

The little frog hopped around me and told me about how hard it was to overtake his rivals and how happy he was that his team won!

«And now, Uncle Al,» he said, catching his breath, «you'll see a new competition.»

When I crouched down again, Updown the First settled himself comfortably on my knee. At this point, the frogs on the swamp bank were forming groups of five, and waiting for the command.

«What's going to happen now?» I asked Updown the First.

«The long jumps,» he answered. «Watch Updown Acrobat carefully. I bet he'll give you something to tell Tony about!»

Two frogs set down a long branch, which, Updown the First explained, five competitors would try to hop beyond. Again I heard the familiar signal

given by Mrs. Big Frog.

For many frogs, long jumps turned out not to be an easy task. The branch they had to jump to was set down too far. Finally, the last of the competitors came forward out of the group, and I recognized Updown Acrobat. He pressed himself for a second into a tight green bundle, then forcefully shoved himself off the ground and jumped! I noticed Updown Acrobat didn't just reach the branch, he jumped much further!

«Way to go!» I shouted, unable to contain my joy.

I wished I could crouch down in front of his nose and blow on it, like Tony wanted me to when the frog was able to make a particularly good jump!

Then it got very quiet. «Did something happen?» I wondered, surprised.

Then I saw Mrs. Big Frog giving somebody a signal. Two frogs moved the branch that Updown Acrobat had just jumped over further away. «Aha!» I thought, «He might set a new record!»

So I could comfortably see Updown Acrobat's jumps, I lay down on the grass, and Updown the First immediately hopped onto my shoulder and asked, «Well, what do you think, Uncle Al – will he be able to beat his own record?»

«It's hard to say. All I know is that he's really going to try!»

Here I noticed that Hopper, who had sat back down on his mother's head, was quickly rubbing his back legs together. I heard the familiar sound, which reminded me of a rattle, and knew for certain: now the grasshopper's going to jump! I got worried – will he make it harder for Updown Acrobat to concentrate? I wanted to stop Hopper. I stretched my hand towards Mrs. Big Frog's head, but the grasshopper understood that it wouldn't be good to distract Updown Acrobat, and he got quiet. He only twitched his front legs and antennae in anticipation.

The unbelievable happened, after all! With a strong push, Updown Acrobat tore his body from the ground and flew towards the branch, which lay at a record distance. Ah, how beautiful his flight was! He threw apart his front and back legs. Between his fingers, I noticed tiny stretches

of webbed skin. The frog skillfully used them to press against the air, flying to the finish line. Updown Acrobat's landing was precise. A new record!

«Ah,» I exclaimed, «what a shame that Turtle missed such a flight!»

«Uncle Al,» I heard her grouchy voice, «you're wrong to think so.»

«You saw the whole thing?» I asked Turtle in surprise. Spotted Lady was still sitting on her shell.

It turns out, that, while Updown Acrobat was getting ready for his record-breaking jump, Turtle had carefully crawled out from under the giant thistle leaf and come closer to the bank of the swamp.

«Spotted Lady!» Turtle said to the butterfly. «It would be right of you to sit on the head of the record-breaking jumper! Could you be the crown on Updown Acrobat's head for a bit? He's earned it!»

The butterfly sat herself on the champion's head. A delighted cheer rose up from the entire brotherhood of green frogs. They hopped up and down and their croaks were deafening. There was good reason to be happy. Updown Acrobat with Spotted Lady on his head was magnificent! I clapped. Mrs. Big Frog looked at me, and I spotted tears of joy in her eyes.

I thought that the celebration was over and wanted to finally ask Mrs. Big Frog how she names her girls, but then I heard the excited shout of Updown the First.

«Look, Uncle Al, look!»

He gestured towards the center of the swamp. There, with her head and long whiskers sticking out of the water, sat Arricola. I didn't have time to guess what the muskrat was going to show us before Updown Acrobat jumped on her back and grabbed the tips of her whiskers. Arricola turned in an instant, swimming swiftly towards the opposite bank. Updown Acrobat was standing firm and calmly rushing ahead! All of a sudden, he jumped, did a somersault in the air and landed back on the muskrat's back.

«Ah!» gasped Mrs. Big Frog. «What is he doing?! That's so dangerous!»

Updown Acrobat, holding to the muskrat's whiskers, was flying over the water! The oncoming wind had lifted him over Arricola and was

weaving him from side to side. He sped forward, as if he was a kite that I had launched and held in my hands by a string. My heart raced anxiously. Mrs. Big Frog squeezed her eyes shut, shouting, «I'm so afraid for him!»

Spotted Lady, unable to restrain herself, fluttered up and flew towards the swiftly racing Updown Acrobat.

His brother, Updown the First, hopped to the bank of the swamp, and there, suddenly stood on his back legs and froze. He looked a lot like a clay frog statue that I bought last year in our little town, Barto, and set on the kitchen cabinet where I keep my spices!

It was impossible to sit still! I ran to the bank of the swamp and clapped. I had never expected such a trick from Updown Acrobat! Arricola swam up to the shore and Updown Acrobat jumped from her back and aimed for the rock where his mother was sitting.

Crouching down in front of Arricola, I thanked her for giving us such an incredible show.

«Uncle Al,» she said modestly, «swimming fast is normal for me. Updown Acrobat, on the other hand, truly deserves praise! I'm sure that Tony would be absolutely overjoyed to see his tricks. What do you think, Uncle Al, would your nephew take our performance today to his circus show?»

«Of course!» I exclaimed, and...woke up. Ah, how quickly my dream had flashed by! Time flies when you're having fun! I was awoken by the bright morning sun, when its warm rays started tickling my face. Opening my eyes, I noticed Updown Acrobat sitting on my windowsill. Hopper had settled in next to him. Turtle had already crawled out from under the bed and was moving towards the open door of my room. Carefully crossing the threshold, she headed towards the kitchen. I got up and sliced up a cabbage leaf for her. Coming back, I looked at the windowsill, but it was empty. Hopper was gone. I carefully held Updown Acrobat in my palms. There won't be any jumping off windowsills for him – he might hurt himself! I carried him to the backyard swamp, and the frog immediately dove

under the water. «Well there you go,» I thought, «everybody is busying himself his own business. Time for me to do the same! I'll walk down to my swamp – who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and see a muskrat?»

What a shame that Tony wasn't there! I really wanted to tell him about Updown Acrobat's record jump in my dream, and about his mind-blowing ride on Arricola, and Updown the First's new song, and the amazing frog race and the bet for delight that Turtle and I made!

If only my red-headed nephew would think something up for the grasshopper, too, that would be great! Really, why not have Hopper take part in Tony's circus tricks, too? I thought again of Updown Acrobat, standing on the muskrat's back, zipping swiftly over the water of the swamp. If the circus-goers saw that, there'd be true delight! Plenty, plenty of delight!

After having breakfast, I went out to the yard. Hopper was sitting on the swamp's brick wall.

«Hey, buddy! Why don't we train a bit?»

The grasshopper was looking attentively in my direction. The frog was sitting on the rock and warming himself in the sun. Turtle, as usual, was chewing on a cabbage leaf, sitting on the grass in the shade.

Having set down two branches and stretched a string between them, I showed the grasshopper that he needed to jump. It seemed he was in a good mood, and he immediately understood what I wanted him to do. Quickly and easily, he hopped over the string. Not far away sat Jacob, and, seeing this, he barked happily, running around my backyard swamp. Cinderella was quiet, but kept her eyes trained on what Hopper was doing.

Next, I busied myself with training Updown Acrobat. I had given my word – one must stick to it! Remember, I promised Tony to work with the frog while my nephew was getting looked over by the smart doctors? Today, I got really lucky! Updown Acrobat performed such tricks that it took my breath away! He effortlessly hopped over any obstacles that I put in front of him. He even landed right on Turtle's back. Maybe that just happened

on accident, but it sure looked neat! But I didn't know what to teach my friends next. I didn't have enough of Tony's imagination...

All day until dusk, working with Hopper and Updown Acrobat, I got so tired that when I lay down in my bed, I didn't get into my dream! This happens sometimes, when you're very, very tired! You sleep so deeply that you don't dream. Then you wake up in the morning, and it's as if there was no nighttime at all. That's happened to you, too?

After I woke up the next morning, had some breakfast, checked that the turtle had some food, and made sure that Updown Acrobat was okay, I went to my swamp and wandered around until evening looking for the muskrat. I didn't see her. But I didn't despair!

I returned home, and came into my yard. There I had a surprise awaiting me! Have you guessed what it was? You're right, Tricia and Michael had brought Tony! The father helped the boy get out of the car. I was really happy to see him!

«Hey Tony! How's it going, kiddo?»

I noticed that he didn't have a brace on his neck anymore! And on his leg: no cast! True, the boy winced a few times when he walked across the yard. But I understood that the good doctors had finally healed Tony, and now he'd really get better. And there's still a whole month before the end of the summer!

«Yes, Al,» Tricia confirmed my guess, «Tony is feeling pretty good...»

Tony, Tricia and I were drinking tea in the kitchen when Michael walked in. He'd had to do a bit of work on the car's engine. Sitting down at the table, the sheriff took out of his pocket a stack of bills wrapped with thin bands and set it in front of me.

«This is for you, Uncle Al! The owner of the recovered jewelry asked me to pass it along. There's twenty thousand dollars here. Take it, take it! Turns out your dreams aren't all that stupid of a preoccupation! If Tony hadn't babbled to me about your adventures in your dream... there at the swamp with the Rumpled Strangers, Updown... I wouldn't have known where to look for the robbers!»

I stared at the packet of bills and for a while couldn't even understand what this much money was for. Finally, I snapped out of it and asked, «Hey! Michael, Tricia, why are you messing with my head?»

«What do you mean, Al?» the sheriff said, surprised.

Tricia looked at me in alarm. She probably thought that, when I saw that much money, I lost my mind and was now talking crazy. Honestly speaking, I thought that my sister and brother-in-law had gotten something mixed up. Really, why are they putting money in front of me that I didn't even earn!

Think about it yourself! Sure, I had dreams about my swamp and the Rumped Strangers. Sure, I had some adventures with Tony and our green bug-eyed frog friends. But it was the sheriff who saved my swamp – not me, old Uncle Al! I don't need any reward! It seemed unfair! That's what I told Tricia and Michael.

«You should have put the money in the bank for Tony. The kid is growing, after all! Some time will pass, and you'll have to buy him a car – not to mention it's already time to start thinking about college! Money will always find its uses! The important thing is not to make a mistake and completely waste it! Well, isn't that right?»

Michael looked at me in bewilderment, and tears welled up in Tricia's eyes. My sister is very sensitive...

«Tony!» I yelled to my nephew, «why don't we go to our backyard swamp! I have to show you how Updown Acrobat jumps! If only you'd seen what he was doing yesterday! Oh yeah! A little grasshopper named Hopper has turned up here! And have you heard anything about a muskrat? Her name's Arricola.»

My nephew was looking at me, dumbfounded. Of course, how could he know? I'll take him into my dream later, and there he'll meet her!

...I told my nephew about the grasshopper and his sad past. And about how he scared the Rumped Strangers. How his father's brothers had nabbed and tied up the robbers. And I told him about my dream, when Updown the First, and then Updown Acrobat after him, were speeding

across the swamp like a whirlwind, standing on a muskrat's back, holding onto her long whiskers. And about the athletic celebration in honor of the saved swamp...

«And now, buddy,» I offered my nephew, «you go work a bit with Updown Acrobat and the grasshopper, while your parents and I toast to your health with a bit of whiskey.»

«Uncle Al, did you remember to praise Updown Acrobat?» I was asked with unexpected strictness by The Head Executive of Training – for whom, after all, I was only a helper.

«Yes – like a servant to the king, I got down on my knees after each of the frog's jumps and blew on his nose!»

Tony laughed merrily and called out to the frog and grasshopper, «Hey, Updown Acrobat! Hopper! Come on and show me what you're made of. If you really want to get into my circus show, you've got to train!»

I returned to the house, and Michael, Tricia and I sat around the dinner table, which my sister had already set with food and plates. We toasted to Tony's health, and to the good luck of the sheriff.

«Tony's needs to build his strength up before school,» said Tricia. «I think this is the best place for him.»

«You know I'm always happy to have my nephew, Tricia,» I said. Of course, as usual, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked the sheriff, «How are things in Barto? Have the Rumped Strangers gone to trial yet?»

Michael laughed gaily. «They're in jail, Uncle Al! And for good reason! They won't be stealing anymore...»

I smiled. Did you notice? Now even the sheriff called the robbers by the name from my dream!

Michael and I each had another glass of whiskey, and he continued with his story.

«The owner of the jewelry store couldn't believe his eyes when we put the jewels we found at your swamp in front of him! He immediately grabbed a calculator and started figuring out how much he would have lost if we hadn't caught the robbers.»

«I'd be interested to know how much it was all worth – what the Rumples Strangers stole and buried.»

«Two million dollars!»

«Whoa,» I heard Tony's voice. He knew that his dad would be telling me about the robbers and the treasure, and he came in, interrupting his training of Updown Acrobat and Hopper.

After the sheriff's story, I asked my nephew, «Have you already thought of a circus routine for Updown Acrobat and Hopper?»

«Of course! But, Uncle Al, we still have some work to do! Actually, will you take me into your dream tonight? I really miss it...»

My red-haired pal looked at me pleadingly. Michael and Tricia were smiling. It's nice when his parents don't interfere with our fantastical adventures...

«You know, Al,» said Tricia, «we'd like to spend the night here. Tomorrow we have to drive not to Barto, but to Harrisburg. Since you've given us your money, we'll put it in the bank for Tony, okay?»

«You're welcome anytime!» I said, and thought, «Tony and I will go into my dream together, but without his parents! You, my dear guests, can sleep by yourself and dream whatever dreams you wish, but please don't bother ours!»

As it often happens when you have a lot to do and the house is full of guests, the time flies by quickly, and tiredness comes unnoticed, then stubbornly pulls you toward your bed. It knocks you off your feet and, once you've made it to the bed, you fall asleep almost immediately. Well, now, stuffed from dinner, full of conversation with my guests, remembering my adventures with the Rumples Strangers, happy that the robbers were already in jail, I felt that it was time for bed!

Tricia and Michael went out to the yard to breathe the evening air. Tony headed to his couch. I went after him. In my room, on the windowsill, sat Updown Acrobat and Hopper. I didn't even notice when Tony had had time to take the frog out of the backyard swamp and put him on the windowsill. I didn't doubt that the grasshopper had made it here on his own. Through

the frame of my bedroom door, I saw Turtle, slowly and persistently making her way over, and Jacob settled in on the floor next to my bed. Next to him lay Cinderella, purring loudly.

«Just look at that,» I thought, «my friends have gotten so used to coming into my dream, that they don't even ask permission anymore!» No, no – I wasn't angry at them... I lay down in my bed and turned off the lamp. In the yard I heard the voices of Michael and his wife. They were singing something quietly. They must've been in a good mood!

I closed my eyes and dipped into my dream like warm water. Soon, we all appeared on the bank of my swamp...



The Seventh Dream

Updown the First, Hopper and Updown Acrobat practice the circus routine that Tony came up with. Cinderella and Jacob want to be a part of it, too. Turtle consoles me. It looks like Arricola is also going to perform in the circus. Tony's parents get lost, but find their way again soon!

We spotted Mrs. Big Frog and Updown the First. They were really happy to see us, and Mrs. Big Frog, glancing at her son, said, «He was sure we'd come across Tony and Updown Acrobat today.»

«I want Tony's circus performance to be the best ever!» exclaimed the little green frog.

«It seems to me, that no other circus in the world has trained frogs,» I said delicately, to flatter Mrs. Big Frog.

«You're probably right, Uncle Al,» she agreed, then, with a hint of alarm in her voice, added, «I worry terribly! I see the risky tricks that Updown the First comes up with, and then I can't sleep at night...»

Honestly, I couldn't wait to tell my nephew about the delight that turned out to be such a wonderful prize for my victory – when my team of a dozen frogs won the swimming race. You remember, of course, how that became the main prize in my bet with Turtle. Ah, what a shame that Tony hadn't been there!

In a good mood, I jokingly asked Mrs. Big Frog, «I hope you haven't seen

any more signs of the Rumples Strangers around here?»

I didn't at all mean to scare her. But it was as if she'd been waiting for me to ask that. Jumping up on an old, low stump that I was standing near, Mrs. Big Frog, looking around her, said very quietly, «Uncle Al, it seems they've come back...»

I had to get down on my knees to hear her better.

«What? You've seen them?!»

She was on the verge of crying. I was confused. Think about it: Mrs. Big Frog wouldn't be this worried without a reason.

«Darn it,» I thought with annoyance, «who could've turned up here now, if the Rumples Strangers are in prison?»

«Forgive me, Uncle Al – maybe I'm mistaken – but I heard cracking branches and the rustle of dead leaves right before you arrived. I, of course, couldn't check for myself, if there are strangers in our neighborhood – to be honest with you, I'm frightened... Please – if it's not too much trouble for him – let Jacob walk around our swamp and make sure that I only imagined it all.»

«Cracking branches? Rustling leaves?» Jacob growled indignantly. He didn't wander a single step from my side, and neither did Cinderella. Standing on his back legs, the mutt was almost as tall as me. His nose was at my ear.

«Uncle Al, if there were branches cracking, then, there are dry branches around. If somebody's stepping on them, then they crack, right? So somebody probably really is walking around nearby?»

For the umpteenth time, I marveled at my dog's wisdom, and petted him gently.

«Of course, Jacob, your reasoning is solid! Are you ready to carefully make a round of the swamp, take a look into the forest and check everything out? After all, we've got to calm Mrs. Big Frog, right? Even if she imagined everything, it won't hurt to check!»

«I'm ready, Uncle Al!» Jacob looked at me carefully, then at the mother of the many-numbered Updowns, and said in a soft baritone, «Dear Mrs.

Big Frog, you shouldn't worry yourself so much. I'll go check everything right now.» He was about to leave, but suddenly he came back to me. «Uncle Al, would you mind if I asked Cinderella to come with me? She has better eyesight. I have a good sense of smell and good hearing, but the cat can see much farther than I can.»

«That's fine by me, if Cinderella is okay with it.»

My blue-eyed beauty rose from the grass. Spotted Lady immediately landed at the tip of her fluffy tail. I think the cat liked it.

«I'll go with Jacob,» she said. «He's right, I really do see farther than he does. Whoever might be walking around – unless, of course, Mrs. Big Frog imagined it – I'll probably notice them from far away!»

«Okay, go ahead with Jacob,» I agreed.

But before they ran towards the forest to check Mrs. Big Frog's suspicions, the dog and cat unexpectedly asked me to step off to the side with them. As I understood it, there was some important and urgent conversation to be had.

To tell you the truth, I was really surprised that Jacob and Cinderella didn't run straight to the woods to check on Mrs. Big Frog's worries, and wondered what they could have thought of to say to me. Couldn't they do this later, once it was clear who was wandering around these woods?

«Uncle Al,» began Jacob, «we know that Tony's preparing a circus act with Updown Acrobat and Hopper. You were helping him, weren't you, Al?»

«Sure,» I shrugged my shoulders, still not understanding what Jacob was getting at.

«With my own blue eyes, I watched you train Hopper and Updown Acrobat,» Cinderella joined in the conversation.

«That was in our yard, by our little swamp, while Tony was sick,» added my wise dog.

«I'm not arguing, that's all true,» I agreed. «But what of it?»

I still couldn't figure out what it was my dog and cat wanted from me. I was even getting a little angry with them. Really, when are they going to start searching the forest? We have to calm Mrs. Big Frog! But my four-

legged friends were in no hurry to get to my favor. I decided not to be mad, because I noticed how worried they seemed. Cinderella, leaping up on Jacob's back, even stood up on her back legs, and pressed up against me with her forepaws.

«Uncle Al! How do you not understand? Jacob and I want to perform in Tony's circus act, too!»

Ah, so that's what it is! I remember when I started training Updown Acrobat and Hopper, Jacob and Cinderella would sit nearby and watch carefully. I hadn't noticed anything particular about the way they were acting. It even seemed to me that they weren't very interested in those jumps of Updown Acrobat's that amazed me so much. But I'd been wrong! As I now came to realize, Jacob and Cinderella, when watching Updown Acrobat and Hopper's training, had also been dreaming of getting a part in my ginger-headed nephew's circus performance!

«Why don't you tell Tony about this?» I asked, perplexed. «It's my nephew, not me, who's prepping the frogs and the grasshopper for the circus!»

Now Jacob was the one who looked at me in plain amazement.

«But, you're our master, Uncle Al!»

«What about it, Jacob?»

My dog once again wowed me with his unexpected words.

«You're my master, and that's why I don't starve! If I was my own master, who would feed me?»

«Exactly,» Cinderella loftily pitched in.

Probably envying the grasshopper, she jumped up onto my shoulder, but she didn't start purring. «It looks like now I've made the cat mad at me!»

«I guess you're right, Jacob,» I agreed – and thought to myself that the dog and cat had once again taught me a valuable lesson: since I'm their master, then not only do I need to think about feeding them, but I also need to make sure they're happy with their lives, and enjoying themselves! Think about it: I buy them delicious wet food, never forget

to feed them, and in exchange, they do a good job around my house. But both Jacob and Cinderella have other dreams and desires! How could I have forgotten that?

As it was, Cinderella acted as if I wasn't her master. The cat seemed to live entirely by herself! Yet there were no mice in my house! She caught them regularly! She purred sweetly when I took her in my arms or when she jumped onto my bed. Because of her gentleness and tenderness, I forgave her for her independence and pride.

I became distraught! Did my friends want to leave me? They couldn't wait to become circus artists. Alright... But if I let them join the circus, then who will do their jobs around my house and yard? Who will guard them, and catch mice? Tony might actually take them with him into his circus program. He might go on tour with them. First around the cities of Pennsylvania, but then all over America, and then... To be honest with you, I didn't actually expect that it'd give me any big problems in my life, if I let my dog and cat try their luck in the circus! But without much joy, I said, «Please, let me think about it, and in the time being, you guys take a quick look around. Are there any strangers here? Mrs. Big Frog didn't share her worries with us for nothing. It would be great if she had just imagined everything. But what if a new stranger has turned up here again? That wouldn't be pleasant!»

«We're off, Uncle Al!» exclaimed the dog and cat in unison, and disappeared into the bushes.

With heavy thoughts, I headed towards the clearing where Tony was training Updown Acrobat. Updown the First sat off to the side on a rock, occasionally making comments. Turtle dozed not far away. On her shell sat a bored Spotted Lady, her wings folded.

«Jumping,» said Updown the First, «will be more comfortable if the platform is as tall as this tree stump.»

Tony nodded in agreement, and looked with respect upon his bug-eyed green consultant.

«Hey there, Uncle Al!» I heard the voice of the red-haired trainer. «Updown



Acrobat and Hopper and I want to show you something.»

Tony took a long, flexible branch, bent it into a circle, and put it on the grass about three steps away from me. Seeing his signal, Updown Acrobat leapt up, somersaulted, and, tracing an arc through the air, landed right in the middle of the circle.

«See, Uncle Al,» my nephew said happily, «he got it! Even though the somersault is hard to do, his aim is perfect!»

Tony ran up to Updown Acrobat, squatted on his heels, blew on his nose, and said, «Good job! Now show Uncle Al your new trick!»

I watched as Updown Acrobat, standing on Arricola's back, holding onto the tips of her whiskers, raced across the water of the swamp. All of a sudden, pushing off the muskrat's back, Updown Acrobat did a somersault, but then...plopped into the water! It thought, this happened because Arricola was speeding along too quickly! But none of this discouraged Updown Acrobat, and after a couple tries, he finally got it! When he managed this incredibly difficult trick, I couldn't hold myself back, and shouted out, «Way to go, Updown Acrobat!»

My forester grandfather – he, like me, was named Albert – had told me this: «Failure scares off the weak, and toughens the strong!»

One could watch Updown Acrobat's feats of bravery and agility forever. I'll admit it: these things can only be seen in a dream!

Distracted by Updown Acrobat's tricks, I completely forgot about Jacob and Cinderella's request to take part in Tony's circus program! But they reminded me themselves. Returning from the woods, the dog and cat sat down next to me.

«Uncle Al,» began Jacob, «it turns out Mrs. Big Frog wasn't worried for nothing!»

«What are you saying?» I became upset! «Who could have turned up around here?»

«I heard voices and rustling in the distance,» said Cinderella, «but Jacob stopped me from climbing a tree for a better look of who was walking around our neck of the woods!»

«Uncle Al! I should've told you sooner about the strange scents I smelled!» I thought the dog's eyes were full of utter confusion. I'd never seen Jacob like that before.

«I can't understand it,» he said, thinking aloud, «the smells are familiar to me – but I couldn't figure out whose they were! Maybe they were too far away, and the wind thinned them, making it harder for me to make sense of!» Jacob was very upset.

This was some news! I'd be ready to argue to anybody that my dog has a very fine sense of smell! But why wasn't Jacob sure of himself now? What sorts of familiar smells did he pick up, without being able to figure out who they belong to?

The dog sat with his head down, staring at his front paws. Now Jacob looked like me when I was a little boy. A long time ago, this used to happen to me. If I had done something wrong, I would stand, head lowered, silent and listening as my dad gave me a stern talking-to. I started feeling bad for the dog. I asked Jacob, as gently as I could, «Why are you so quiet, my dear pup?»

«Uncle Al! I can't say for sure what smells those were!» He glanced up at me, eyes full of despair. «Maybe I, too, am getting old?»

Hearing this, I got mad.

«Jacob, that's a bunch of foolishness! Why are you asking to be part of Tony's circus performance, then?»

Jacob looked at me, frightened, and whined plaintively, like dogs do when they feel really bad.

«I'm sorry, Uncle Al! You have to understand, the smells are familiar to me, and I'm even certain that they're not from the Rumped Strangers!»

«Haha!» Cinderella laughed loudly. «As if! Those thieves are in jail!»

«But what if they ran away?» asked Updown the First.

Having finished helping Tony train Updown Acrobat, he'd hopped up on my knee and was attentively listening to our conversation with Jacob. Mrs. Big Frog came closer.

«What horrors! I heard everything, Uncle Al!» she exclaimed. «Who



could it be? New strangers?»

«Mrs. Big Frog,» muttered Jacob, his tail squeezed between his legs in shame, «I repeat: even though this smell is familiar to me, it's completely different than the one from the Rumpled Strangers!»

It seemed to me that the cat was not at all sympathetic to my distraught dog. She said, loudly and angrily, «Yes, Jacob, it seems that you weren't able to figure out whose smell this was, after all – even though you always brag about your sense of smell!»

I think the cat was harboring hurt pride from the dog not letting her climb a tree to get a look at whoever was wandering around our forest. Now she sat down next to me. Without looking at the dog, who was wretched with his failure, Cinderella calmly began licking her fur.

Tony came up to us, Updown Acrobat catching his breath in his palm, and asked, «Did something happen?»

«Jacob here caught a whiff of some familiar smells,» said Cinderella, continuing to clean herself, «but can't figure out what they were. I have no doubt that this was the scent of the Rumpled Strangers. They just ran off from jail, that's all!»

«Anything but that,» pleaded Mrs. Big Frog. «Could it really be that after all of this awful worrying, trouble is again approaching our swamp?»

«No, I said!!» Jacob was nearly crying. «It's not them!»

«Answer me then, why not them? You yourself said that the smell of the Rumpled Strangers is familiar to you!» Cinderella was so indignant at Jacob's stubbornness, that she stopped licking her fur.

«That's not possible!» Tony said decisively. «They've got no business in our swamp! The treasure's not here anymore!»

I agreed. Of course, all sorts of things can happen in life – but a surprise as horrible as the reappearance of the Rumpled Strangers or some other new strangers at our swamp shouldn't happen, even in dreams!

My dad told me once, «Al, son! It's better to check a hundred times, than to be wrong once.» It's a good rule, right? I carefully lowered Updown the First from my knee to the ground, led Tony off to the side, and said, «Keep up the training.

We have to distract Mrs. Big Frog any way we can. I'll go into the woods and check who's walking there, let alone with a smell familiar to my dog that he still can't recognize. It occurs to me that Jacob has a bad cold right now, and that's why he can't figure the smells out...»

Tony nodded and went back to training Hopper and the frogs. I noticed that the mother of the many-numbered Updowns had a small distraction from her troubles, and was looking in wonderment at her agile children.

I headed into the woods, wondering what could have happened to make my dog catch a cold. There was no other explanation for Jacob's unusual confusion with smells! I get colds, as I'm sure you do, too. When that happens, it's difficult, or even impossible, to smell flowers or good food...

Hiding between trees and trying to step carefully, so as not to make any noise, I didn't notice that Jacob and Cinderella, and my ginger-headed nephew with them, had followed me after all. I didn't get mad, because my friends were worried for me, and were ready to help in a difficult moment! I hoped that Mrs. Big Frog would rally her patience and be able to wait for our return from the forest...

I had barely walked a few steps between the trees, when I heard distant voices, the rustle of dry leaves, and the cracking of branches. That's what happens, when you walk through the woods in the summer or early autumn. The sounds grew closer, then drew further away.

I waved to Tony, the dog and the cat, so they would hide in the bushes, and I pressed my finger to my lips. Crouching down in some shrubs, they got quiet. Jacob crawled closer to me. Now he was attentive and calm. He looked around, nose stretched forward. That's how dogs focus in on scents. «Well, what's he going to smell with his cold...» I thought, annoyed. But then I noticed my friend's tail was quickly waving from side to side! You probably know that's what dogs do when they smell people they know well, who they aren't afraid of, and even love!

Jacob's behavior surprised me! Why was he doing that? I couldn't smell anything of the people who were walking far away. So I didn't know – are these our people, or strangers? In the dense forest, you couldn't even see

people walking ten feet away! But by this point, I already heard clear voices. A man and a woman. But neither me, nor Tony, nor the dog or cat could understand who it was talking in the woods. Soon, the voices seemed familiar to me...I really couldn't believe my ears!

«Uncle Al,» I heard Jacob's loud whisper. «That's Tricia and Michael wandering around the forest! But why are they walking around in the trees, instead of just coming right to us? You think they got lost?»

It was hard to believe that Jacob could be wrong. But I didn't understand how Tony's parents could have gotten into my dream.

Cinderella quickly climbed up into an old tall pine. Meanwhile, we hid behind its thick trunk. The cat was looking in the direction of the rustling leaves, cracking branches and voices. She called down to us, «But it's them!»

She leapt down to the ground, and her blue eyes shone in the rays of sun breaking through the canopy of the trees. In an angry whisper, the cat told the dog, «If you, Jacob, hadn't kept me from climbing up in the tree in the first place, then we would've known a long time ago who was coming towards us – see?»

Jacob looked away in shame and muttered, «That's what mistakes are for – so we can fix them and learn from them!»

Tony hopped up on a tall tree stump and stared between the trees. There, his parents appeared. They were walking in our direction. Confused, I asked my nephew, «How did your parents turn up here? We didn't take them into our dream like we did with Jacob, Cinderella and –»

«It's alright, Uncle Al, we'll figure it out later,» Tony interrupted me impatiently. My ginger-headed nephew, and my dog and cat, really wanted to run over to our unexpected guests. They took off towards Tricia and Michael, who, noticing us, started waving and shouting happily, «Hi, Uncle Al!»

Michael hugged his son, and patted the dog on the rump. Jacob was so glad, he forgot how to talk, and was wagging his tail so hard that I was about to shout, «Calm down, before your tail unscrews itself!»

«Tony, my boy,» his mother exclaimed, «what a meeting this is! I never thought, my son, that I'd get into Al's dream and see you!»

Returning with us to the swamp, Tricia told us about how she and Michael had ended up here. It was all so simple! Now I understood – the important thing was that everybody went to bed not far from me. If, for example, you sleep on the other side of the wall from my bedroom, then you can get into my dream, sure – but you'll wind up some distance away from me! If, for example, you fell asleep in my barn, in the hayloft, like Tricia and her husband. You can get into my dream, but you'll have to look for me. It could happen that you would be looking for me so long that you'd wake up again!

You're wondering how to meet up in my dream? First of all, muster up all your patience! Search for my swamp or my house in the village of Ole. That's where you'll meet me, my nephew, Tony, and my friends: Turtle, Arricola, Mrs. Big Frog, Hopper, Updown the First, Updown Acrobat, the butterfly Spotted Lady, and the many-numbered Updowns and their green bug-eyed sisters!

«Uncle Al,» the sheriff admitted, «this is pretty here! I like it. Before, I couldn't understand that this could happen to me, too. You probably got mad at my making fun, huh?»

«Don't worry about it, Michael...»

Honestly, I'd already forgotten about the sheriff poking fun at me.

«The scenery's no worse in our forest – not in dreams, or in reality! Of course, there you can't hear how Jacob philosophizes, or Cinderella chatters on, or our frogs talk, or the turtle, or the butterfly. You can have a great time with all of them in the dream!»

We returned to the little field by the bank of the swamp. Mrs. Big Frog was waiting for us on a wide tree trunk. Updown the First, with Spotted Lady on his head, and Updown Acrobat, with Hopper on his back, were jumping around. Turtle and Arricola were quietly discussing something.

«I'm happy to welcome nice guests! Now I see that all my fear was for nothing,» said Mrs. Big Frog, sighing with relief.

I bowed to her. «I would like to present to you Michael Stern: the sheriff of these parts. It was him and his brothers, Gary, Paul and Stanley, who caught the Ruffled Strangers and saved the swamp! And here's Tony's mother, Tricia.»

Michael was completely amazed by the talking frog. Quietly, he asked me, «Could we watch Tony's training?»

I didn't get a chance to answer the sheriff before Jacob – who had finally remembered how to talk again, but whose tail was still wildly wagging – said, «Sir! If you'd like, you can also see mine and Cinderella's nearly completed circus act. I'll tell you frankly – fulfilling dreams multiplies your happiness, but the most important thing, is it strengthens your faith in your own abilities! Don't you agree?»

Honestly, I felt for the sheriff. The poor guy! I've never seen him so dumbfounded! It's really not all that easy to see a talking dog when you know for certain that dogs can only growl and bark, but now he's saying such wise things, that you may as well pick up a pencil and a notebook and start writing it all down! Michael silently nodded and obediently followed the dog to the small field by the swamp where Tony was training Updown Acrobat...

Tricia was talking to Mrs. Big Frog about something, but when the latter heard that Michael was calling his wife to watch their son, Tony, train her son, she said, «My dear! Let's go take a look! I admit, I worry terribly watching my children's tricks, but you'll enjoy it very much!»

It seemed to me that it was an appropriate moment, so now I could finally ask Mrs. Big Frog how she names her daughters. But right then, I heard Tony's insistent voice. He loudly called me to the field where he usually trained Updown Acrobat. I heard the voices of Jacob and Cinderella. They were also calling me. I figured they were going to ask me again to let them be part of Tony's circus show. Bowing respectfully to Mrs. Big Frog I started walking towards the field, holding Turtle in my hand and not even noticing when Spotted Lady landed on my ear.

When they saw Updown's tricks, Michael and Tricia couldn't believe

their eyes! But what amazed them most of all was that their son was running and jumping, as if the recent accident had never happened to him at all. Of course, Tony's parents were very happy!

Remember Spotted Lady was sitting on my left ear? Well, at my right ear, I heard Jacob's hot breathing.

«Uncle Al, will you let me and Cinderella perform in Tony's circus act?»

I'll tell you truthfully, I didn't want to let my dog and cat go. But I couldn't refuse them, either! Of course, Tony had probably already thought of a circus performance with them, and it could be that Jacob and Cinderella end up becoming stars! That would be great! But I'd have to spend all of my time alone...And yet to stop my cat and dog from becoming circus artists wouldn't have been right!

I was really curious to know what Jacob or Cinderella would have done in my position, if the dog or cat had been my master? That would have only been possible in a dream, and Jacob would probably have said, «Hope is borne of dreams come true, while depression rides in on bans and limitations!» It occurred to me that having a talking dog in your dreams isn't all that easy, and it's good that he loses the ability to speak in reality!

At the moment when I understood that I was parting ways with my beloved pets, I was not in a good mood! I couldn't stop thinking that I would have to wile away my days and nights alone, in a deserted home. As if she'd heard my sad thoughts, Turtle quietly and slowly said, «Uncle Al, I don't fully understand what the good is in all of these tricks and jumps?» She lowered her voice almost to a whisper, probably not wanting the dog and cat, who were sitting nearby, awaiting my answer, to overhear her words. I had to squat down and lean in close to Turtle.

«I'm sure,» she said, «that Jacob and Cinderella, after a month of these crazy hops and jumps, will return to your house, Uncle Al... They'll ask you to be their master again, and feed them tasty canned food, and let them busy themselves with their regular business: the dog guarding the home, and the cat catching mice! Believe me, my dear Uncle Al: your Jacob – and Cinderella, too – will realize sooner or later that new hobbies require

a lot of strength and patience, while old habits – this is their nature, after all – constantly remind you of themselves...»

«I don't know, I don't know,» I muttered, «maybe that's what will happen, but maybe it won't!»

While Michael, Tricia, Jacob and Cinderella were admiring the grasshopper's jumping and flying, and Updown Acrobat's stories about his rides on Arricola's back, I came up to Tony and led him to the side.

«Tony...» I started uncertainly.

My nephew quickly interrupted me.

«Wait, Uncle Al. I think you're going to tell me about Jacob and Cinderella wanting to join the circus. Right?»

Tony was petting Jacob's back. The dog's tail was wagging nonstop from one side to the other. Not far away from us sat Cinderella, acting like the conversation didn't concern her. But I knew how she worried! Jacob carefully spoke up.

«We've suggested something to Tony for his circus program... But if you don't let us, Uncle Al...»

«Okay, I'm not about to go against your wishes!»

The dog licked my cheek, and Cinderella, quickly forgetting about her usual habit of pretending that she was an island unto herself, hopped up onto my shoulder and purred loudly...Spotted Lady immediately fluttered up from my left ear, so she wouldn't get in the way of Cinderella expressing her happiness!

To tell you the truth, I was really interested in seeing what the dog and cat had come up with for their circus act. I asked Tony about it.

«It's a great number! You'll see for yourself in a minute, Uncle Al.»

He went up to his parents, who were captivated by Updown Acrobat's races atop Arricola, to tell them to come watch the dog and cat rehearse their act.

And there, I suddenly...woke up! That's because there was sunlight again. Its rays broke through the dense branches of the apple trees in my yard, through the glass and curtains, and touched my eyelids.

As you probably do when this happens, I opened my eyes, and my dream immediately evaporated. The first thing I noticed was Tony standing at my bedroom window. He was looking into the yard, where we could hear the voices of his parents. My nephew came up to my bed.

«Good morning, Uncle Al! Look, it's not hard at all for me to walk. Everything's okay with my neck, back and legs now!»

«Tony! Great job! I'm so happy for you!»

All of a sudden, I got the urge to blow on my nephew's nose! But I quickly remembered that that only works on frogs! If I'd done it, my red-haired trainer would have had something to laugh at me about for a long time! Tricia and Michael appeared in the doorway.

«Well, Uncle Al,» the sheriff said happily, wiping a towel over his shaved head, which was shining in the morning sun, «we really did have a remarkable dream! The things we saw there! And our boy, our Tony, turns out to be a real trainer! Follow it, son, and may God help you in your dreams.»

The father hugged his son, and the mother kissed him on both cheeks. We sat down around the table to eat my big bacon omelets, and drink green tea with mint.

After, Tony's parents left for Barto, where they had business to attend to, but my nephew stayed with me for another week, tirelessly training the frog, grasshopper, cat and dog.

It saddened me and Tony that Arricola wasn't in the circus program he'd come up with. My fantastic dreamer and I decided to go search for a muskrat at our swamp, to catch her and try to train her. But she didn't appear for a long time.

As you know, it wasn't possible to bring Arricola from my dream to our backyard swamp. So that's why Tony and I, after rallying our patience, had to search in the real swamp for a real muskrat, to catch her, tame her, and, if possible, prepare her for a circus performance in the city of Barto. We understood how hard it would be to do this, but we didn't lose heart. Patience and persistence promised success!

Every day, from morning to evening, we spent our time at the swamp, searching for a muskrat. We even put a small tent on the bank and slept there, to track her from sunrise to sunset. For a long time, we had no luck! I'll admit it, we would get so tired that we didn't even have dreams! Sometimes we would bring Updown Acrobat, who had become completely tame, to the bank of the swamp with us.

And then, one night, when Tony and I decided to roll up our tent and head home to sleep, out of the water, almost at the very bank, a muskrat stuck its nose out of the water. Imagine, she was completely unafraid of us! It even seemed to me that in just a minute, she'd be talking to us!

At first, Tony and I were at a loss. What do we do? That's a real muskrat, after all, not Arricola from my dream! Even if we manage to catch her, will she listen to my ginger-haired trainer?

And that's when something entirely unbelievable happened! Just like from my dream! While I was thinking everything over, watching the muskrat swimming past the bank of our woodland swamp, Updown Acrobat, who had been sitting on Tony's palms, hopped onto her back.

You wouldn't believe it, but the muskrat immediately began racing across the swamp, cutting the water with her nose! Yes, yes! And this wasn't in my dream anymore, it was in real life! The frog calmly sat on the muskrat's back, without holding on to her long whiskers. My and Tony's eyes nearly popped out of our skulls in disbelief!

I took a paper-wrapped sandwich that I'd brought for Tony out of my pocket, and put it on the bank as a treat for the muskrat. My red-haired boy nodded approvingly.

Stepping back from the bank, we waited for the muskrat to pick up the smell of bread, ham and cheese, and swim towards us for a treat. But there's no use hiding that both Tony and I were really afraid for Updown Acrobat. The frog could hop off the muskrat's back into the swamp and...

But he kept sitting calmly, and when the muskrat caught the scent of the cheese and came towards the bank, Updown Acrobat hopped off from her back onto the ground where we sat, and, as if nothing had happened,

came up to Tony. He stretched his palm out, and right away, the frog sat down on it! And the muskrat, you ask?

She was hungry, and really enjoyed my sandwich! Carefully, so as not to frighten our guest, I took her in my arms and laid her in a sack where there'd recently been a bag of tasty bread and cheese. She lay down and settled in, and sleepily dozed off. Tony, Updown Acrobat and I headed towards our backyard swamp.

You don't believe me? You think that a muskrat from a real swamp wouldn't just let you take her in your arms so easily, and wouldn't want to learn anything from Tony? If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't believe me either. Or I would have seriously doubted it. But listen, here's something my mother told me long ago: «Albert, if you never hurt anybody, no one will fear you, and if you teach somebody something good and useful, then anybody will want to listen to you and follow you!» It seems that my mother was right. It wasn't by accident that the muskrat enjoyed both my treat, and my backyard swamp. By the third day, she was already doing everything that Tony taught her!

I'll tell you a secret: sometimes it seems to me that the muskrat that we brought from the swamp really was Arricola from my dream! She became friends with Updown Acrobat so quickly, and she was already racing across our little swamp with the frog on her back, pleasing Tony with her intelligence and good nature. Once, Hopper even got on the muskrat's back next to Updown Acrobat, and she sped off as if there was nothing to it!

Tony was busy with the training, but I noticed the impatience with which he waited for his parents, so he could take his pets to the Barto city circus. It's understandable! He wanted to show the audience of his home town what he'd taught his friends from our swamp, as soon as possible.

On one of these tiring days of training, I was pretty beat and headed towards the house. I became so exhausted that I couldn't even muster the strength to see what circus routine Tony had prepared with Cinderella and Jacob.

I checked the weather report on TV, the evening news... My old phone rang. It was Tricia. Tony's mother wanted to know how her son was doing. After talking to my sister, telling her a bit about our daily adventures, I turned off the television and went to my bedroom. All the artists of Tony's future circus performance had settled in on the floor near my bed, and their red-headed trainer lay on his couch, covered in a blanket, waiting patiently for me. My nephew, pressing his finger to his lips, whispered, «Hurry up and get in bed, Uncle Al! Only be careful, please! Don't step on Jacob's tail, or Cinderella or Arricola.»

It turns out, Tony had decided to call the muskrat by the same name she had in my dream.

«Updown Acrobat is in my hands,» whispered the boy. «Hopper's on the windowsill, and Turtle's over there, near the foot of your bed. Next to the dresser...»

Well, everybody settled in where they were most comfortable. Time for bed! Laying down, I told Tony, in a whisper so I wouldn't wake our friends, that his mother had called. Tomorrow his parents would come for him and his performers. The boy nodded sleepily. He probably wanted to hurry up and get to sleep, so tomorrow would come as soon as possible! So as not to get too far behind him and have to look a long time for him in my dream, I closed my eyes, and immediately fell asleep...



The Eighth Dream

*I saw something which hadn't happened
yet, but soon came to pass in the little town
of Barto — home of my sister, Tricia,
her husband, Michael, their son — my nephew —
Tony, and the sheriff's brothers: police officers
Gary, Stanley and Paul.*

From the very first moments of my dream, I was completely confused. Where had it taken me? Where were my friends? But soon everything made sense!

In that very same field where, in my last dream, Tony had trained Updown Acrobat and Hopper under the watchful gaze of Updown the First and Mrs. Big Frog, there now stood a tall, brightly-colored tent. I'd been in a tent like that before, when, in my childhood, my parents had taken me to the circus in Barto.

I still remember the horses with fluffy white feathers on their heads, and brushed out, carefully styled tails. Their sloped sides shone under the glow of the lights. I haven't forgotten the brave sword-eaters, or the fat clown who brought a flaming torch to his mouth and then blew a long stream of fire towards the spectators. I sat in the first row and got scared when the flame shot towards me.

Now it was as if I had shown up in my childhood. The circus tent looked exactly the same. Clowns and dogs were running around the field. Decorated horses were tied up next to the tent. In a cage sat a tiger — big

and orange, with black stripes along his sides.

«Hi, Uncle Al,» I heard a familiar voice say. It was Updown the First. He hopped onto a stump near me, and gasping from excitement, started telling me, «Today you're going to see Tony's performance with Updown Acrobat, Hopper, Cinderella, your dog Jacob, and Arricola.»

«You're not going to perform?» I asked the frog.

«No. But I'm Tony's most important helper!» Updown the First proudly cocked his head and laughed happily.

«Hello, Uncle Al!» I heard Mrs. Big Frog's voice. With short little hops, she was approaching the circus tent. Atop her head, bright wings spread wide, sat Spotted Lady.

I couldn't help but compliment her, because Mrs. Big Frog really did look incredibly glamorous! Thanking me, she said, «Ah, Uncle Al, thank goodness at least Updown the First won't be in the arena today, and will be seated safely next to me. I've been worried enough as it is! Doesn't it seem to you that Updown Acrobat and Hoppers' act is too dangerous?»

«My dear Mrs. Big Frog,» I said, rushing to calm the mother of the many-numbered Updowns, «please, don't fret! Today is your day to be proud — after all, today, your children, Updown Acrobat and Hopper, are going to become real circus artists!»

I thought I felt something wiggle in my pajama pocket. I wanted to find out who could've crawled in there. I peeked in and found... Turtle.

«Forgive me, Uncle Al, but my neck is numb. Wouldn't you please take me in your soft, warm palms?»

I did as Turtle asked me to. Mrs. Big Frog hopped ahead, following after Updown the First, and I was a little ways behind them.

As I headed toward the tent entrance, I heard a gentle voice. It sounded like it was coming from my right, where there was a thick patch of bushes. Forgetting about Turtle, who had quieted down in my palms, I approached it. Now the voice sounded louder. Between the branches, in a tiny clearing, I saw a little frog, jump-roping with a string and quietly singing,



You can call me: «girl Updownka!»
What do I want: Leap? to Swim? or Ribbit?
Let's do little counting:
One, two, three, four, five and six –
Jump! Jump! Leap! To begin – twist!

Over and over, the little frog jumped over the string and repeated her song. She looked pretty funny in a short skirt made of leaves. To tell you the truth, I wasn't paying very close attention to the words of her song. Which is a shame. Or else I immediately would've understood how the frog is named! You know, I was afraid of scaring her. Not to mention, Turtle was stirring in my palm. Poking her head out of her shell and glancing at the jump-roping frog, she murmured, «How wonderful!...»

I nodded and walked away from the bushes. I wanted to hurry up and find Mrs. Big Frog and tell her about meeting the green rope-skipper! I turned towards the circus tent and, though the happy frog's song was still playing in my ears, I managed to ask Turtle how she'd gotten in my dream. The way I remembered it, I hadn't brought her with me into my room before bed!

«You were so tired and sleepy, Uncle Al, that you don't even remember how I crawled out from under your bed, and you, before lying down, put me in your pajama pocket!»

That's probably exactly what happened. I got into bed in my pajamas, and now, in my dream, that's what I was wearing! And my slippers? When I swing my legs off the bed, even in my dream, they warm my feet like faithful friends! I had probably forgotten to take them off when I lay down...

To be honest, taking a look at myself, I became a little upset. I couldn't go to a circus show dressed like this! But what else could I do? I hadn't even suspected that in my dream I would wind up at the circus! Brooding over my awful appearance, I muttered an apology to Turtle, who was still sitting on my hands.

«Forgive me, my darling, for my tired confusion and the way I look... I also couldn't remember how you'd wound up in my dream because I was distracted by that rope-skipping frog, who sang such a wonderful little song.»

«Ah, Uncle Al,» sighed Turtle, «of course, she's very interesting, but it looks like she's repeating her act so tirelessly because she's performing

in the circus...»

«Turtle's probably right, I thought. But I couldn't ask Tony about it. My nephew was really busy right now. Probably only Mrs. Big Frog could tell me which of her children were getting ready to perform in the circus. How could someone jump-rope with such rhythm and skill while singing such a great little song?»

Spotting me standing on the threshold to the circus tent, Updown the First came up to me. I probably looked really preoccupied, because he asked me with alarm if anything had happened to me.

«You see,» I muttered, distraught, «it seems to me that, in my pajamas, I don't look very presentable. If I'd only known that my dream would take me to a circus!...»

He laughed and said, «Don't worry about it, Uncle Al! My green bug-eyed brothers and sisters came to the circus wearing their birthday suits! And it's okay! And you, Uncle Al, are not only in pajamas, but even in slippers! See, all of us are barefoot!»

Now I started laughing, too! That's just how it was!

I told Updown the First about my run-in with the frog skipping rope and singing her happy little counting song.

«She was probably practicing her act,» I repeated Turtle's guess.

«No, no, Uncle Al,» said Updown the First. «That's my sister, Updownka! Our mom names all of her girls like that.»

«What?» I was so surprised that I nearly dropped Turtle, who, it seemed, had already had the chance to doze off again.

«Careful, Uncle Al!» she yelled.

«Forgive me, my dear Turtle! Can you believe it, I finally found out how Mrs. Big Frog names her girls!»

«I'm happy for you, Uncle Al,» she grumbled peevishly. «You would've found out her name even earlier, if you had listened to her song more carefully!»

We walked between rows of benches, crammed with sitting and hopping frogs. Updown the First impatiently tore ahead and hurried me along. But

now I was overcome by curiosity. I asked him, «Does your mom number her girls, too?»

«Of course! What else would she do?»

Mrs. Big Frog was sitting on a wide bench across from the arena and signaling us over to her. That's what we did.

«Finally, Uncle Al, you've appeared. I was starting to worry...»

«Mom, forgive Uncle Al! He got held up because he saw Updownka the Thirtieth. She was jump-roping and singing her song like she always does.» Mrs. Big Frog warmly laughed.

«Ah, you've met my rope-skipping daughter?»

«Yes, she was singing a peppy little song – she's probably also performing in the circus today?»

«No, Uncle Al, it's just that my daughter is remarkably good at math. She really loves jump-roping and singing songs about numbers. You know not all children like math! But Updownka the Thirtieth is a very talented counter! She'd be happy to count every bush on the swamp, every single flower and tree.»

I decided to double-check something.

«So you name your girls Updownka, and also number them, just like all your Updown boys?»

«Didn't you know about that, Uncle Al?» Mrs. Big Frog looked at me with surprise. «Ah, that's right! Forgive me...The fault is mine – I never explained it at all...»

Updown the First, after asking permission, hopped up onto my shoulder so he could see the arena better. In my palms, sticking her head out and chewing on a cabbage leaf – which she never forgets to take into my dreams – quietly sat Turtle.

Soon, the music started up – just like I remembered from when I was a boy and went to the circus. In those long-ago days, the sound of that music sent my child's heart happily racing. I was full to the brim with amazement and the expectation of magic! And now, something very pleasant awaited me.

In the arena, a clown appeared wearing a big green hat, wide green pants, and a shirt of the same color cinched with a gold belt. He had a ruffled white collar on his chest, and yellow circles painted around his eyes. I figured it must have been the traditional appearance of the frogs that had inspired the clown's outfit! That was the only explanation! The clown, like an enormous frog, hopped around the arena, croaking loudly! His cheeks were smeared with scarlet blush, and a white ball crowned his nose.

Hundreds of frogs started deafeningly croaking together and jumping in place on their benches. The clown raised his hands in the air, and I noticed thick green gloves with webbed fingers, and flippers on his feet that looked like a frog's. He was doing somersaults, croaking continuously, and laughing loudly.

«Hello to our swamp brothers and sisters,» he shouted. «My name is Super-Croaker Updown!» He ceremoniously bowed to Mrs. Big Frog, and she gaily returned the gesture.

«And now,» called the clown, coming closer to me, «I am honored to introduce to you Uncle Al, and I ask you all to kindly and loudly croak at the greatest friend of the frogs, and the savior of our swamp!!! Let Uncle Al always be healthy, sleep soundly, and come visit us both in his dreams and in reality. Ribbit! Ribbit! Ribbit!»

I heard the loud, joy-filled croaking of hundreds of Mrs. Big Frog's numbered children, but then I started feeling a little ill at ease! I'll confess: feeling almost like a Hollywood star is amazing!! But still, you've got to be fair! To tell the truth, it wasn't me at all who saved our swamp and all of the frogs' lives, but the sheriff of Barto, Michael Stern. Better to name him and his brothers, Gary, Paul and Stanley. If not for them...

I was awfully upset that they weren't here in the circus tent. I wanted to tell the screaming, adoring Croakers and Updowns about this. I raised my hand, but Updown the First impatiently shouted, «Uncle Al, the show is starting! Sit down...»

And in fact, Super-Croaker Updown, doing another and another



somersault, had jumped up to an enormous curtain that separated the circus arena from the place where the artists come out and, after ribbiting loudly three times, yanked the edge of the curtain.

The music started up again and jugglers hopped out into the arena. They were skillfully tossing and catching flaming torches. Then, a striped zebra trotted around the stage, a fluffy little red-hatted dog seated on its back. It's a wonder she was able to stay on the zebra while it cantered! It immediately made me think of Updown Acrobat, speeding across the swamp atop our muskrat, Arricola.

I couldn't wait to see Tony and his frogs and my dog and cat. Then, all of a sudden, a monkey ran out into the arena. She was dressed like a frog, too, and hopped and somersaulted just like Super-Croaker Updown. The monkey did a couple of flips, and a spotted green shoe flew off her foot. It flipped up, spinning through the air. A merry croaking rose up from the audience. Updown the First and Turtle laughed, and every now and then, Mrs. Big Frog exclaimed, «Incredible! Unbelievable! It's just too much, how funny it is! Uncle Al, when are we finally going to see Tony?»

Updown the First started hopping over my head from my right shoulder to my left shoulder and back! This probably also looked like a circus act – especially when the frog would land, sitting momentarily on my head, between jumps! The numbered Updowns and Updownkas ribbited giddily and hopped up and down in place. Someone yelled, “Hey, Updown the First! Go down to the arena with Uncle Al and show everybody your hops! They're funny!”

But Mrs. Big Frog sternly said something to her son, and he quieted down. Finally, the clown, Super-Croaker Updown, called out to the audience, “And n-o-w-w-w! You will s-e-e-e! The most am-a-a-a-azing ac-t-t-t-t! Of our progr-a-a-a-m! Our next perf-o-o-rmer: T-o-o-o-o-ny St-e-e-e-rn and his fr-i-e-e-nd-s-s!”

The music took up loudly. The drums beat in rhythm. Hundreds of froggy onlookers hopped on their seats and croaked deafeningly in welcome of my ginger-haired nephew. He leapt out into the arena with

Updown Acrobat sitting on his palm and Hopper on his right index finger, stretched high up over his head. Jacob and Cinderella ran out after their ginger-haired trainer. Tony was dressed in a frog costume, and was showing the circus workers how and where to set this or that piece of equipment...

«Ah, what a shame that Michael and Tricia aren't here,» I thought sadly. You remember – they had left for Barto and were sleeping tonight in their own house, and from their own bed, the dreams they saw were far from mine.

But I had just barely thought of them, when I saw, at the circus tent's entrance, hurrying and crouching down so as not to disturb the audience... Tricia, Michael, and the sheriff's brothers, Gary, Paul and Stanley!

I couldn't believe my eyes! Of course, I became horribly curious as to how they had managed to get into my dream this time. But I had to uphold fairness. I yelled, “For Sheriff Michael Stern! And the policemen Gary, Paul and Stanley – who saved this swamp from the Rumpled Strangers – our loudest RIBBIT! RIBBIT! RIBBIT!” The frogs gave up another deafening croak.

While I watched Tony get ready for his performance in the circus arena, I tried to figure out how my nephew's parents and the sheriff's brothers had made it into my dream – here, in a circus tent! You'd probably like to know, too, right?

When Tricia and Michael had been driving to Barto, their old car had broken down along the way. This misfortune happened right after they got on Route 45, the road that leads from my little town to Barto.

They soon decided to call Gary, who called Paul and Stanley, and they all came back to my house – this time in the police car. They saw that I was already asleep in my bed. There in the same room, on the couch, slept Tony. Cinderella and Jacob were settled in on the floor. Hopper and Updown Acrobat were quiet on the windowsill... Anyway, Tricia and Michael and the brothers decided not to disturb us. They lay down in the big barn on the edge of my yard, which is about fifty feet from my

house. There was plenty of aromatic cut grass, and I also occasionally love to lay and doze off there.

My friends talked for a long time, and it was well into the night by the time they fell asleep. Because they hadn't lain down in my house, but near it – and very late, at that – they spent a long time wandering through the forest around my swamp. But they finally heard music and loud croaking, saw the circus tent, and... showed up here, at our show.

Of course, it's a shame that they came late, but they made it in time for the most important part: Tony's act.

My restless friend Updown the First hopped off the bench where we were sitting with Turtle, who was in my hand, and situated himself next to Mrs. Big Frog. On her head, her gorgeous wings spread wide, had settled Spotted Lady!

Tony raised his hand. The music grew quiet. My nephew said, «Friends! I am happy to welcome your mother: Mrs. Big Frog!» Tony bowed to her.

The numbered Updowns and Croakers enthusiastically clapped their paws together. Then Tony walked up to the place where his parents sat with the sheriff's brothers, and bowed to them like a true artist.

After returning to the center of the ring, Tony checked one last time the structure the circus attendants had set up. It was a metal tube about my height or a bit taller. There was a platform attached to the top of it that was about the size of my palm. Tony placed Updown Acrobat there. He said something to him, and jokingly wagged his finger at him. That's how parents warn their kids not to mess around.

Meanwhile, around the sides of the arena, doing one cartwheel after another, jumped Lacy, the monkey. She was making funny faces, trying to get a laugh out of the frogs, who were, even without that, loudly laughing and clapping their hands.

Tony gave the signal to take away the mischievous monkey, and then loudly, so it carried across the entire tent, announced into a microphone, «The Gre-e-e-n Bu-u-u-llet!»

From out of nowhere, Hopper came flying up and around the outside

of the arena in front of the audience's faces. He was twisting fantastically through the air, zipping before the eyes of the frog onlookers, who shied back in surprise. Michael, Tricia and I laughed and clapped and turned our heads to follow him when he passed by our faces. We barely had time to spot Hopper's shooting zig-zags.

All of a sudden, I felt something plop like a heavy raindrop onto my shoulder. It was the grasshopper landing.

«Well, Uncle Al, do you like my act?» I heard him ask.

«You really are like a bullet, Hopper!»

I wanted to ask him if there would be any more acts with him in it, but he had already zipped off to the arena, and set down on the platform with Updown Acrobat.

Jacob came leaping out from one side of the arena. He was completely unrecognizable! Tony gave him some order, and Jacob, jumping up onto his back legs, started...dancing! Rock and roll started playing. Oohh! If you could only see the things Jacob was doing. The mind boggles! He would hop around on his back legs, then on his front ones, and did astounding jumps. It's as my father used to say: «All talent needs is a chance!» I had given Jacob the opportunity to show off what he was capable of, and now my friend was bringing us all joy with his skills.

The orchestra kicked into some blues. Cinderella walked out onto the stage. Turtle, Updown the First and I just barely got the word, «Woah!» out of our mouths. The cat was dressed in a spotted green dress, and a playful hat, also green. Suddenly, Spotted Lady unexpectedly flew out into the arena and, spreading her beautiful wings, landed on the very bottom of Jacob's black ear. The numbered Updowns and Updownkas were awe-struck!

Aha! The butterfly is also a performer in Tony's act! It looks like there's no end to today's surprises! Jacob, getting up on his rear legs, carefully and gracefully led Cinderella into the center of the arena. They started dancing together.

There was a time when I had also danced to the blues, with my wife,

Jenny. We were young, beautiful and happy. The cat and dog moved just as smoothly as I had tried to, in those long-ago times. Ah, Jenny, what a shame that you didn't live to see these magical days...

Jacob stood in the center of the arena, and Cinderella hopped up onto his back. Updown Acrobat, who had been sitting on the little platform and waiting his turn, jumped onto Cinderella's head. The green lightning flashed past me again with a whine, and I saw Hopper come to rest on top of Updown Acrobat's head! Then, softly waving her bright wings, Spotted Lady lowered herself on top of Hopper!

To the tune of soft music, the living tower slowly moved around the arena. To be honest, I actually got a little nervous. One careless move and... But everything worked out well. At Tony's signal, the living tower, having completed the circle, headed towards the green curtain.

The beat of the drums immediately started up. The circus workers came out into the arena. On the metal structure, under the platform where Tony had placed Updown Acrobat, they fastened a circle. Its edges were tightly wound with a white cord. Then, under the little hoop, they placed a big copper basin with water in it.

I heard Mrs. Big Frog's frightened whisper. Distracted by the preparations for the next act, I hadn't noticed her hop onto my knee.

«Unce Al! What has Tony come up with? Why is my little boy on the very top of this awful stick and why did they place that enormous basin of water underneath it? I never saw anything like this while they were practicing at our swamp! Maybe your nephew showed you or told you something of it?»

«Don't be afraid, Mrs. Big Frog,» I said very quietly and respectfully. «Tony spent so much time training Updown Acrobat, that I have no worries about the safety of your son! Trust me, it will all be okay!»

I won't hide from you that I was also worried. Tony hadn't showed me this trick, or said a word about it! Judging by all this, my nephew had thought up and prepared with Updown Acrobat something truly remarkable!

My red-haired trainer and dreamer stood next to the basin of water, watching Updown Acrobat walk up to the very edge of his platform



on the top of the stick and... then it began!

Super-Croaker Updown the clown came out into the arena with a flaming torch, and handed it to Tony. In the terribly fearful silence of the tent, the drumbeat began. Tony slowly (ah, so slowly!!) brought the flaming torch to the circle, which immediately caught fire! Hundreds of green numbered Updowns and Updownkas watched the arena. The pounding drums got louder. Now I started to feel really terrified!

Turtle stirred between my cupped palms. She tried to crawl deep into my hands, but I opened them, and heard her angry whisper.

«That's it, I've had enough! I'm never going to the circus again!»

I had no intention of calming or bickering with an angry Turtle! I had terrible, prickly goosebumps running up my body.

«How awful!» I heard Mrs. Big Frog's desperate whisper. Now she was sitting next to Updown the First, who was staring at the arena with astonished eyes.

Updown Acrobat pressed off from the edge of the platform and threw himself downward. Everybody in the tent gasped at once! Managing to do two somersaults in the air, he flew straight through the flaming hoop and splashed into the basin of water. Jumping back out immediately onto the stage, Updown Acrobat bowed to the onlookers. A thundering croak rose up from the awe-struck frogs, astounded by their brother's bravery...

...What happened next, I don't know. I woke up!...

The grasshopper was sitting on my nose, and the turtle was trying to crawl out from the pocket of my pajamas. Tony stood next to the bed, with Updown Acrobat sitting calmly in his palm. In my room, by the window, stood Michael and Tricia, and the sheriff's brothers, Gary, Paul and Stanley, stood in the doorway. They were looking at me and smiling.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I asked Tony, «Why didn't Arricola perform in your act?»

«Uncle Al,» said Michael, «Do only want to see anything in your dreams? Hurry and get up!! Get dressed! We're driving to Barto now! The whole town is already pasted with flyers about the circus show.»

To be honest with you, I was so taken by everything I had just seen in my dream, that while we were driving to Barto, I hardly held back from telling Tony something about it. You're asking why? Yes, of course, of course! He was there, too, and saw everything! Looks like I have to gather my patience again... Really! How can I bear to wait until the happy moment when, not in a dream but in reality, we'll be at the real circus of Barto, and watch our Tony's artists perform!



