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## Cobber Goes Fishing

Oh, what a happy day it was for Mona. She had been watching a cluster of little bubbles deep inside a bed of weeds. These were actually called spawn, but Mona only thought of them as eggs. She had laid them there, way down in the water of her pond in a spot where they would be hidden from fish and other creatures that might try to eat them. Mona, of course, had to eat herself, but she was never far from her eggs so that she could chase away anything that looked dangerous and came too close. To begin with, the bubbles didn't appear all that special; not until tiny dark specks could be seen inside; and later still the specks grew bigger and began to wriggle about. When she saw this, Mona became excited because it meant that very soon her babies would be born.

You have probably guessed by now that Mona was a frog. She had spent all of her life in the pond, from the time she herself had grown up from a little creature just like her children; and now she would be able to watch them grow too. And as time passed they certainly did, getting bigger and bigger. Mona continued to keep her eye on them, though, as they were still quite small, and she imagined that with herself constantly on guard no harm could possibly come to them. Unfortunately, Mona didn't know about some strange, very big creatures called humans, and in particular their children. She only became aware that two of them were close when dark shadows crept across the pond.

Rising to surface, Mona was able to hear the human children talking. "Are you sure you saw tadpoles in here?" queried the girl.

"Oh yes, definitely," replied the boy. "I spotted them yesterday." He paused for a moment, then pointed. "Look, there they are - lots of them." Mona, of course, couldn't understand what they were saying, but the humans were peering down at the exact spot where her children were swimming about, and this worried her; rightly so.

"Can I use the net?" asked the girl hopefully.

"Okay," said the boy, "But do it gently - we don't want to frighten them off."

Treading quietly to the edge of the pond, the girl began to lower the net slowly into the water. Mona had never seen anything like this long thin stick with a circle on the end from which hung a sort-of bag. Whatever it was, it was coming very close to her children - too close! In a panic, she swam over to them, making a flurry with her front legs as a warning; but her little tadpoles had no idea what their mother meant and starting heading towards her. It was the worst thing they could have done. For some reason they either failed to see the net, or more likely didn't know the danger it presented for them; then it was too late. The human girl swept the net quickly sideways, scooping up all of the little tadpoles. Another second and the net was pulled out of the water. "Got them!" said the girl excitedly. "Let's put them into the jam jar and take them home to our pond." Once they were in the jar she stared through the glass at them. "Funny, but they don't look anything like frogs."

"Not yet, they don't," said the boy, "But one day they'll grow up. Then we'll have loads of our own frogs."

Mona was so upset. She could only watch as her tadpoles were tipped from the net into a jar of water where they swam about in confusion. Climbing carefully out of the pond, she squatted at the edge, trying to think of some way that she could free her children; but it seemed impossible. The humans were too big, and in another moment they were walking away, the jar hanging from a string that the boy was holding. Why would they want to take the tadpoles – to eat them, maybe? Mona must have said this out loud because someone had heard and spoke to her: “Not to eat them,” said a strange voice. “They want them for their fish pond.”

“Fish pond!” exploded Mona. “The fish will eat my babies! What am I to do? And who are *you*, anyway; how do you know this?”

“I know because I heard them talking about it,” said the voice. “I’m their dog, Cobber.”

Mona had never seen a dog before. The only good thing, at least she hoped so, was that it didn’t look anything like a human. She was also surprised that she and Cobber could talk to each other. “I’m puzzled,” she said. “How is it that you can understand human speak, but I can’t?”

“That’s because I’ve lived with them all my life,” explained Cobber. “And I don’t understand everything they say, just enough to get by and keep myself out of trouble.”

“Well, I’m in trouble now,” croaked Mona, “And so are my babies. I have to follow the humans and find a way to rescue them.”

“I don’t see how you’re going to do that,” said Cobber. “*You* might be able to hop along the ground, but all your babies can do is swim, and they need water for that.”

Mona began to sob. “It’s hopeless, then. My babies are lost forever.”

Cobber was quiet for a moment or two, and his head cocked to one side as he was thinking. Finally he announced: “I’ve had an idea. I reckon there may be a way to save your babies. Let’s go after the humans. Hop onto my back – it’ll be quicker.”

The human children were almost at the fish pond with Cobber following. Fortunately, the dog’s hair was long and shaggy, so Mona was able to squat on its back and stay out of sight. Cobber just went close enough to see what was happening, and it was as expected: the boy was crouching down beside the pond, emptying the contents of the jar into the water. “There you are little tadpoles,” said the boy, “This is your new home.”

“Until they get eaten by fish,” whispered Mona gloomily.

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” said Cobber under his breath.

The two of them waited for the humans to leave, which they did eventually. Apparently they hadn’t noticed that Cobber wasn’t with them, and that just left him and Mona alone to put his plan into action. “Hop off, Mona,” he said. “I need you to get in the pond. Luckily, the jam jar has been left here on the bank – typical kids. I’ll take care of that bit. What you have to do is huddle your babies together and guide them into the jar.”

Cobber’s plan seemed easy enough in theory, but he hadn’t taken into account that he was dealing with children who don’t always do what they are told. Picking up the string holding the jar with his teeth, he stepped into the water. Sweeping the jar sideways filled it with water; then he was lowering it until it was well below the surface. Mona was a short distance away, herding her babies towards Cobber; but, of course, there was always one that wanted to go somewhere else. Keeping an eye on it, she guided the rest of the tadpoles into the jar, then went to fetch the stray one. On her return, however, some of the others had decided they didn’t like being in a jam jar, and they had swum out. It took four tries for Mona to shoo all of her babies into the jar; and as soon as she had, Cobber lifted up his head so that it was clear of the pond. It was only just in time – the human children could be heard chattering, and they were coming back.

“Hurry,” mumbled Cobber, and he had to do it through closed teeth so as not to let go of the string. Mona hopped out of the pond and onto Cobber; then they were off. Once beside Mona’s pond, the jar was lowered into the water and the little tadpoles swam out in a rush. “Now hide them,” he said urgently, “Before the human children get here.”

Mona didn't need telling twice. She guided her babies deep into the weed bed and told them to keep still, hoping that this time they would take notice of their mother.

The human children arrived to find Cobber still standing in the water with the jam jar dangling from the string in his teeth. "We wondered where you were, Cobber," said the girl, "And what do you think you are doing?"

"I bet I know," answered the boy. "He saw us catching the tadpoles before and he's trying to copy us. He's a smart dog."

"Not that smart," put in the girl. "There aren't any more tadpoles here. We caught them all and now they're in *our* pond."

The human children stayed only a short while, and as they were about to leave the girl turned. "Aren't you coming, Cobber?" she asked.

When their dog remained standing in the water, the boy laughed and commented: "I reckon he still thinks he can catch some tadpoles." He laughed again. "In your dreams, Cobber. We'll see you back home, once you've had enough of fishing."

Although this ending hadn't been in his plan, Cobber was happy with the way it had turned out. So too was Mona, except she was concerned that the human children would soon be wondering what had happened to their tadpoles and would return to catch her babies again. "Maybe they'll think the tadpoles they put in their pond have been eaten by the fish," reasoned Cobber, "So I doubt they'll bother catching more. But if they do come back," he assured his frog friend, "I'll run on ahead to give you plenty of warning. Between us we should be able to stay one step ahead of them. "

"Do you really think so?" asked Mona hopefully.

"I'm sure of it," declared Cobber positively. "They are, after all, only humans."