

THE UGLY DUCKLING

It was a lovely summer day in the country. The oats were still green and the wheat stood golden and tall. Down in the meadow the hay was piled into sturdy stacks. In the bright rays of the sunshine an old manor house with a deep moat surrounding it stood with burdock growing from its heavy walls all the way down to the edge of the water. Under the dense green cover of the thicket a duck had built her nest. She felt somewhat sorry for herself as she sat on the eggs. The hatching was taking so long.

Finally, one egg began to crack, then another. "Cheep! Cheep!" the young chicks said as they came to life and stuck out their curious heads. "Quack! Quack! Look around," said their mother. The newborns peered out at the green world around them.

"Well, you're almost all here now, aren't you?" the mother said as she turned around to look at her nest. "The biggest egg hasn't hatched yet, and I'm so tired of sitting here! I wonder how long it will take?"

Soon one old duck waddled over for a visit, and the mother duck complained to her about the unhatched egg. "I am quite certain it's a turkey egg!" insisted the old duck. "I was fooled like that once myself. I had my sorrows and troubles, to be sure, for turkeys are afraid of the water. You just let it lie there and teach the others how to swim, that's my advice."

"Oh, I've been sitting on it for so long that I might just as well wait a little longer," replied the mother duck.

The old duck bristled. "Suit yourself!" she huffed, waddling on her way.

At last the big egg cracked open and the last-born tumbled out, an ugly gray one. "He's awfully big for his age," said the mother. "None of the others look like that! Could he be a turkey chick after all? Well, we shall soon see."

The mother duck led her brood down to the moat. "Into the water we will go!" Splash! She jumped into the water. "Quack! Quack!" she ordered, and one after another the little ducklings obeyed. Their heads disappeared, then quickly popped up again, and they floated about like corks. They knew just what to do, and even the misfit gray one swam splendidly.

"He is no turkey!" proclaimed the mother, who set off to present her brood to everyone. "See how beautifully he uses his legs and how straight he holds his neck. That's my own child. When you look closely you can see he's quite handsome."

"Very pretty children, except that gray one; he didn't turn out right," said the grand dowager of the duck yard. "I do wish you could make him over again."

"That's not possible, Your Grace," replied the mother duck. "Perhaps he will grow to be better-proportioned over time. He may not be handsome, but he is of good character and swims as well as the others. Yes, I might venture to say he swims a bit better."

However, time passed and the poor gray duckling was bitten, shoved, and ridiculed by the other ducks and even the hens. He grieved over his ugliness. Each day was worse than the one before. Even his mother said, "I wish you were far away."

Before long the gray duckling was so miserable he flew over the hedge. When the little birds in the bushes flew up in fright, he shut his eyes and confessed: "It's because I'm so ugly!" He kept on running until he came to a great marsh where the wild ducks lived.

In the morning the wild ducks gawked at him, asking, "What kind of bird are you?" The duckling bowed to greet them as best he could. "How ugly you are!" ridiculed the wild ducks. "Don't marry into our family!"

Toward evening he came to a little house in the woods. An old woman lived in the house with a hen that laid good eggs and a cat that could arch his back and give off sparks if you rubbed his fur the wrong way.

"What's that?" said the old woman, who noticed the intruder at the first light of dawn. She couldn't see very well. When she first spied the duckling she thought it was a fat, full-grown duck. "Now we shall have duck eggs," she exclaimed, and the duckling was accepted.

The duckling sat quietly in the corner. He began to think of the fresh air, the sunshine, and how much he wanted to float on the water. At last he couldn't help himself; he had to tell the hen of his longing.

"What's wrong with you? You're just putting on airs. Lay eggs and you'll feel better." But when the duckling went on and on about the water, the hen said scornfully, "You must be quite mad!"

"You don't understand me," the duckling protested.

"Well," said the hen, "if we don't understand you, who would? Believe you me, when I tell you harsh truths, it's for your own good. See to it that you start laying eggs."

"I might go out into the wide world instead!" the duckling dared to reply.

"You just do that!" the hen sneered.

True to his word, the duckling found a lake where he floated alone on the water and dived to the bottom. In autumn the leaves of the forest turned golden and scarlet. One evening, just as the sun was setting in all its splendor, a great flock of beautiful birds rose out of the bushes. They uttered a loud, strange cry as they spread their powerful, glistening wings, craning their long, supple necks to survey the terrain around them. They were flying away from the cold meadow to a warm climate where the lakes did not freeze in the winter. As they soared into the sky the duckling was struck with a strange urge. He spun around in the water like a wheel, stretched his neck toward the sky, and sounded a cry so shrill that he frightened even himself.

He didn't know what those birds were called or where they were flying, but he longed to go with them. The winter turned bitterly cold. It was so cold that the duckling kept swimming in an unfrozen part of the lake to stay alive. But each night the hole became smaller and smaller. The duckling tried hard to keep his feet moving so the hole wouldn't close, but when he grew tired and couldn't swim anymore the ice froze him fast in place.

The next morning a farmer came along. He saw the duckling and freed it by breaking the ice with his wooden shoe. He carried the duckling back to his wife, who nursed him back to health. But the duckling couldn't remain in the house because the children chased and teased him. The bird spilled the milk pail and flapped his wings into the butter and flour. After this he was to suffer through the rest of the long winter alone.

Months passed and the sun began to shine warmly again. The larks sang—spring had arrived! All at once the ugly duckling raised his wings, which beat more strongly now. Before he knew it, he was flying over a beautiful garden. Suddenly out of the thicket came three beautiful swans, who ruffled their feathers and glided ever so lightly on the water.

He recognized the magnificent birds at once and was overcome with a strange sadness. “I will fly straight to those royal birds, though they will surely peck me to death because I am such an ugly duckling. It doesn’t matter,” he decided. And he flew out into the water and swam over to the swans.

As the poor creature landed, he bent his head humbly. But what was that in the water? It was his own reflection. He was no longer an awkward, ugly gray bird. He was a swan himself!

The newfound swan felt so shy that he hid his head beneath his wing. He was very happy, but not too proud, for he remembered how he had been ridiculed and persecuted. The big swans made a circle around him and caressed him gently with their bills. “Being born in a duck yard does not matter if one has lain in a swan’s egg!” the swans affirmed. Now everyone agreed the new swan was the most beautiful of them all. The lilacs bowed their branches right down to the water for him, and the sun shone warm and bright. He ruffled his feathers, lifted his slender, graceful neck, and from the depths of his heart cried out in joy: “I never dreamed of so much happiness when I was the ugly duckling.”

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