

The Ugly Duckling

It was lovely out in the country! It was summer; the rye had already turned yellow, the oats were green, the hay had been stacked into ricks; a long-legged stork walked about the green meadow and chattered in Egyptian—he had learned that language from his mother. Beyond the fields and meadows stretched great forests with deep lakes in their thickets. Yes, it was lovely out in the country! Right in the sunshine lay an old manor house, surrounded by deep moats filled with water; from the very building down to the water grew burdock, and such large burdock that small children could stand upright beneath its largest leaves. In the very thicket of the burdock it was just as dark and wild as in a dense forest, and there sat a duck on her eggs. She had been sitting for a long time, and this sitting had begun to weary her—she was rarely visited: other ducks preferred swimming in the ditches to sitting in the burdock and quacking with her. At last the eggshells began to crack.

"Peep! Peep!" came from within them; the egg yolks came to life and poked their little beaks out of the shells.

"Quick! Quick!" quacked the duck, and the ducklings hurried, scrambled out somehow, and began looking all around, examining the green burdock leaves; their mother did not hinder them—green light is good for the eyes.

"How vast the world is!" said the ducklings.

Indeed! Now they had far more space than when they had lain inside their eggs.

"Do you think this is the whole world?" said their mother. "No! It stretches far, far away, beyond the garden, into the priest's field, but I have never been there in my life!... Well, are you all here?" And she stood up. "Ah, no, not all! The largest egg is still intact! How long will this go on? Truly, I am tired of it."

And she sat down again.

"Well, how goes it?" peeked in an old duck.

"Why, there's still one egg left!" said the young duck. "I sit and sit, but there's no result! But just look at the others! Simply delightful! Terribly like their father! And he, the wretch, hasn't visited me once!"

"Wait a moment, let me take a look at that egg!" said the old duck. "Perhaps it's a turkey egg! I was fooled once too! Oh, how I suffered when I hatched those

turkeys! They were terribly afraid of water; I quacked and called and pushed them into the water—they wouldn't go, and that was that! Let me see the egg! Yes, just as I thought! A turkey egg! Throw it away and go teach the others to swim!"

"I'll sit a little longer!" said the young duck. "I've sat so long already that I can sit a little while more."

"As you wish!" said the old duck and left. Finally, the shell of the very largest egg cracked.

"Peep! Peep!" and out tumbled a huge, ugly chick. The duck examined him.

"Terribly big!" she said. "And not at all like the others! Could this be a turkey chick? Well, he shall try the water anyway, even if I have to push him in by force!"

The next day the weather was wonderful; the green burdock was bathed in sunlight. The duck set off with her entire family toward the ditch. Splash! and the duck found herself in the water.

"After me! Quick!" she called to the ducklings, and one after another they too splashed into the water.

At first the water covered them over their heads, but then they surfaced and swam so beautifully it was a joy to watch. Their little feet worked away; the ugly gray duckling did not lag behind the others.

"What kind of turkey chick is this?" said the duck. "Just see how splendidly he paddles with his feet, how straight he holds himself! No, he is my own son! And he isn't ugly at all, if you look at him properly! Come, quick, quick, after me! I shall introduce you into society now: we are going to the poultry yard. But keep close to me so no one steps on you, and beware of cats!"

Soon they reached the poultry yard. Good heavens! What noise and clamor there was! Two families were fighting over a single eel head, and in the end it went to the cat.

"That's how things go in this wide world!" said the duck, licking her beak with her tongue: she too would have liked to taste the eel head. "Well, well, move your feet!" she said to the ducklings. "Quack and bow to that old duck over there! She is the most distinguished here! She is of Spanish breed and therefore so fat. Do you see that red rag on her leg? How beautiful! That is a mark of the highest distinction a duck can receive. People give this to show they do not wish to lose her; by this rag both people and animals recognize her. Come, quick! And don't

hold your feet together! A well-brought-up duckling must hold his feet apart and turn them outward, like papa and mama! Just like that! Now bow and quack!"

They did exactly so, but the other ducks looked them over and said loudly:

"Well, here's another whole brood! As if there weren't enough of us already! And what an ugly one! We won't tolerate him!"

And immediately one duck darted forward and pecked him in the neck.

"Leave him alone!" said the mother duck. "He has done you no harm!"

"True, but he is so big and strange!" replied the bully. "He certainly deserves a good thrashing!"

"You have fine children!" said the old duck with the red rag on her leg. "All very charming, except one... This one didn't turn out well. It would be good to remake him!"

"That cannot be done, Your Grace!" answered the mother duck. "He is ugly, but he has a good heart, and he swims no worse, I dare say, even better than the others. I think he will grow up, become handsome, or in time grow smaller. He stayed too long in the egg, that's why he didn't turn out quite right." And she smoothed the big duckling's feathers with her beak. "Besides, he is a drake, and beauty is not so necessary for him. I believe he will gain strength and make his way in life!"

"The other ducklings are very, very charming!" said the old duck. "Well, make yourselves at home, and if you find an eel head, you may bring it to me."

So they began to behave as if at home. Only the poor duckling, who had hatched last and was so ugly, was pecked, pushed, and mocked by absolutely everyone—both ducks and hens.

"He is awfully big!" everyone said, and the turkey, who had been born with spurs on his legs and therefore imagined himself an emperor, puffed himself up and, like a ship under full sail, flew at the duckling, looked at him, and gobbling furiously; his comb swelled entirely with blood. The poor duckling simply did not know what to do or how to be. And did he have to be born such an ugly laughingstock for the entire poultry yard!

Thus passed the first day, then things went even worse. Everyone drove the poor fellow away; even his brothers and sisters angrily told him, "I wish a cat would carry you off, you unbearable freak!" and their mother added, "I wish my eyes had never seen you!" The ducks pecked him, the hens pinched him, and the girl who fed the birds kicked him with her foot.

The duckling could bear it no longer; he ran across the yard and—over the fence! Small birds flew frightened out of the bushes.

"They are afraid of me—so ugly am I!" thought the duckling, and he rushed forward with closed eyes until he found himself in the marsh where the wild ducks lived. Tired and sorrowful, he sat there all night.

In the morning the ducks flew out of their nests and saw their new companion.

"Who are you?" they asked, and the duckling turned about, bowing in every direction as best he could.

"You are extremely ugly!" said the wild ducks. "But that matters nothing to us, only do not think of marrying into our family!"

Poor fellow! Where could he even think of such a thing! If only they would allow him to sit here among the reeds and drink some marsh water.

He spent two days in the marsh; on the third day two wild ganders appeared. They had recently hatched from their eggs and therefore strutted with great arrogance.

"Listen, friend!" they said. "You are such a freak that, truly, we like you! Would you like to wander with us and be a free bird? Not far from here, in another marsh, live some very pretty wild goose maidens. They know how to say 'rap, rap!' You are such a freak that—you never know—you might have great success with them!"

"Bang! Bang!" suddenly rang out above the marsh, and both ganders fell dead into the reeds: the water turned red with blood. "Bang! Bang!" rang out again, and a whole flock of wild geese rose from the reeds. The shooting began. Hunters surrounded the marsh from all sides; some of them sat in the branches of trees hanging over the marsh. Blue smoke enveloped the trees in clouds and drifted over the water. Hunting dogs splashed through the marsh; the reeds swayed from side to side. The poor duckling was neither alive nor dead from fear, and just as he wanted to hide his head under his wing, look—before him stood a hunting dog with lolling tongue and gleaming wicked eyes. It brought its jaws close to the duckling, bared its sharp teeth, and—splash, splash—ran further on.

"Thank God!" he breathed

The duckling. — Thank God! I am so ugly that even a dog does not want to bite me!

And he hid himself in the reeds; over his head pellets flew constantly, shots rang out.

The shooting ceased only toward evening, but the duckling was still afraid to move for a long time. Several more hours passed before he dared to stand up, look around, and set off running further across the fields and meadows. The wind blew so strongly that the duckling could barely move.

By nightfall he reached a poor little cottage. The cottage was already so dilapidated that it was ready to fall down, yet did not know onto which side, and therefore it stood. The wind kept snatching at the duckling—he had to brace himself against the ground with his tail!

However, the wind grew ever stronger; what was the duckling to do? Fortunately, he noticed that the cottage door had come off one hinge and hung quite crookedly: one could easily slip through this gap into the cottage. So he did.

An old woman lived in the cottage with a cat and a hen. She called the cat her little son; he knew how to arch his back, purr, and even emit sparks when stroked against the grain of his fur. The hen had small, short legs, and so she was called Shortlegs; she diligently laid eggs, and the old woman loved her like a daughter.

In the morning the newcomer was noticed: the cat began to purr, and the hen to cluck.

— What is there? — asked the old woman, looked all around, and spotted the duckling, but due to her blindness mistook him for a fat duck that had strayed from home.

— What a find! — said the old woman. — Now I shall have duck eggs, provided this is not a drake. Well, we shall see, we shall test him!

And the duckling was accepted on trial, but three weeks passed, and still there were no eggs. The master of the house was the cat, and the mistress the hen, and both always said: "We and the world!" They considered themselves half of the entire world, moreover—the better half of it. To the duckling, however, it seemed one could hold a different opinion on this matter. The hen, however, would not tolerate this.

— Can you lay eggs? — she asked the duckling.

— No!

— Then keep your tongue on a leash!

And the cat asked:

— Can you arch your back, purr, and emit sparks?

— No!

— Then do not thrust your opinion forward when wise people are speaking!

And the duckling sat in the corner, ruffled. Suddenly he remembered the fresh air and the sun, and he terribly wanted to swim. He could not hold back and told the hen about it.

— What is wrong with you?! — she asked. — You are idle, that is why such nonsense enters your head! Just lay eggs or purr—and the foolishness will pass!

— Ah, swimming on the water is so pleasant! — said the duckling. — And what delight to dive headfirst into the very depths!

— Fine delight indeed! — said the hen. — You have completely lost your mind! Ask the cat—he is wiser than anyone I know—whether he likes swimming or diving! I shall not even speak of myself! Ask, finally, our old lady mistress: there is no one wiser than her in the whole world! Do you suppose she wants to swim or dive headfirst?

— You do not understand me! — said the duckling.

— If even we do not understand you, then who will! What, do you wish to be wiser than the cat and the mistress, not to mention me? Do not be foolish, but rather thank the Creator for all that has been done for you! You were given shelter, warmed, you are surrounded by such company in which you might learn something, but you are an empty head, and it is not worth speaking with you! Believe me! I wish you well, and therefore I scold you: by this true friends are always recognized! So try to lay eggs or learn to purr and emit sparks!

— I think it would be better for me to leave this place and go wherever my eyes lead! — said the duckling.

— And go with God! — answered the hen.

And the duckling departed, swam and dived headfirst, but all the animals continued to despise him for his ugliness.

Autumn arrived; the leaves on the trees turned yellow and brown; the wind caught them and whirled them through the air; up above, in the sky, it became so cold that heavy clouds sowed hail and snow, while upon the fence sat a crow, cawing from the cold with all his might. Brr! One would freeze at the mere thought of such cold! Things went badly for the poor duckling.

One evening, when the sun still shone so gloriously in the sky, from behind the bushes rose a whole flock of wonderful large birds; the duckling had never seen such beauties in his life: they were all white as snow, with long, flexible necks! Those were swans. They uttered some strange cry, flapped their magnificent large wings, and flew from the cold meadows to warm regions, beyond the blue sea. They rose higher and higher, and the poor duckling was seized by some strange agitation. He spun in the water like a top, stretched out his neck, and likewise uttered such a loud and strange cry that he frightened even himself. The wonderful birds would not leave his thoughts, and when they finally disappeared from sight, he dove to the very bottom, surfaced again, and was as if beside himself. The duckling did not know what these birds were called, where they were flying, but he loved them as he had loved no one until then. He did not envy their beauty: it never even entered his head to wish to resemble them; he would have been glad even if the ducks themselves did not drive him away. Poor ugly duckling!

And the winter stood cold—extremely cold. The duckling had to swim in the water without rest to prevent it from freezing over completely, but with each night the ice-free space became smaller and smaller. It froze so hard that the icy crust cracked. The duckling worked tirelessly with his webbed feet, but in the end he grew exhausted, stopped, and froze entirely.

Early in the morning a peasant passed by, saw the frozen duckling, broke the ice with his wooden shoe, and brought the bird home to his wife. The duckling was thawed.

But then the children decided to play with him, and he imagined they wanted to harm him, and in fear he darted straight into the milk pail—the milk splashed everywhere. The woman screamed and threw up her hands; meanwhile the duckling flew into the butter churn, and from there—into the flour barrel. Good heavens, what did he look like! The woman shrieked and chased him with coal tongs, the children ran, knocking each other down, laughing and squealing. Fortunately, the door stood open: the duckling ran out, plunged into the bushes straight onto the freshly fallen snow, and lay there for a long, long time almost senseless.

It would be too sad to describe all the duckling's misfortunes during the harsh winter. But when the sun once again warmed the earth with its gentle rays, he lay in the marsh, among the reeds. The larks began to sing, and beautiful spring arrived.

The duckling flapped his wings and flew; now his wings rustled and were far stronger than before. Hardly had he recovered his senses when he found himself in

a large garden. The apple trees stood all in bloom, the fragrant lilac bent its long green branches over the winding canal.

Ah, how good it was here, how it smelled of spring! Suddenly from the thicket of reeds swam out three wonderful white swans. They floated so lightly and smoothly, as if gliding upon the water. The duckling recognized the beautiful birds, and some strange sadness seized him.

"I shall fly to these royal birds; they will surely kill me for my audacity, for daring, ugly as I am, to approach them, but let it be! Better to be killed by them than to endure pecks from ducks and hens, kicks from the poultry maid, and suffer cold and hunger in winter!"

And he flew down into the water and swam toward the beautiful swans, who, seeing him, also hastened toward him.

— Kill me! — said the poor fellow and lowered his head, awaiting death, but what then did he see in the water, clear as a mirror? His own reflection, but he was no longer an ugly dark-gray bird, but—a swan!

It matters not to be born in a duck's nest if one hatched from a swan's egg!

Now he was glad that he had endured so much sorrow and calamity: he could better appreciate his happiness and all the magnificence surrounding him. The large swans swam around him and caressed him, smoothing his feathers with their beaks.

Little children ran into the garden; they began throwing bread crumbs and grains to the swans, and the smallest of them cried out:

— A new one, a new one!

And all the others took it up:

— Yes, a new one, a new one! — clapping their hands and dancing for joy; then they ran to fetch their father and mother, and again threw crumbs of bread and cake into the water.

Everyone said that the new one was more beautiful than all. So young, so lovely!

And the old swans bowed their heads before him.

And he became quite confused and hid his head under his wing, not knowing why himself. He was excessively happy, but not at all proud: a good heart knows no pride, remembering the time when everyone despised and drove him away. And

Now everyone says he is the most beautiful among all beautiful birds! The lilac bent its fragrant branches toward him over the water; the sun shone so gloriously... And suddenly his wings rustled, his slender neck straightened, and from his breast burst a cry of joy:

"No, I never dreamed of such happiness when I was still an ugly duckling!"