

In the Duck Yard

From Portugal—or some say from Spain, but it is all the same—a duck was brought over. They called her the Portuguese Duck. She laid eggs, then she was slaughtered, roasted, and served at table—that is her entire story. The broods hatched from her eggs were also called Portuguese Ducks, and that meant something. Finally, of all the offspring of the first Portuguese Duck, only one duck remained in the duckyard. Hens and a rooster were also admitted to this duckyard, a rooster who held his nose incredibly high.

"He simply insults me with his furious crowing!" said the Portuguese Duck. "But he is handsome—that cannot be denied, though he does not compare with a drake. He ought to be more restrained, but restraint is an art requiring higher education. That is what distinguishes the songbirds nesting over there in the neighbor's garden on the lime trees. How sweetly they sing! There is something so touching, so Portuguese in their singing—that is how I call it. If I had such a songbird, I would take the place of its mother; I would be tender and kind to it! That is in my blood, in my Portugueseness."

Just at that moment, a songbird tumbled down from the roof. It had been fleeing from a cat and broke its wing in the process.

"How typical of that cat, the wretch!" said the Portuguese Duck. "I have known her since the time when I myself had ducklings. And to think that such a creature is allowed to live and run about here on the roofs! No, in Portugal, I suppose, one would not see such a thing!"

And she began to express sympathy for the poor little bird. The ordinary ducks, those not of Portuguese lineage, expressed sympathy as well.

"Poor little thing!" they said, approaching her one after another. "Though we ourselves are not songbirds, there is an inner resonance within us, or something of the sort. We feel it, even if we do not speak of it."

"Well, then I shall speak!" said the Portuguese Duck. "And I shall do something for her. It is the direct duty of everyone!" With these words, she approached the trough, splashed through the water with her wings, and nearly drowned the little bird in a shower of spray, yet all this came from a good heart. "There, a good deed!" said the Portuguese Duck. "Watch and take example."

"Peep!" chirped the little bird; its broken wing prevented it from shaking itself properly. Yet it understood that it had been bathed out of a good heart. "You are very kind, madam!" it added, though it did not ask for a repeat of the shower.

"I have never thought about what sort of disposition I have!" replied the Portuguese Duck. "But I know that I love all my neighbors, except the cat. And that cannot be expected of me! She ate two of my ducklings!... Well, now make yourself at home here! You may! I myself am not from around here, as you have surely noticed by my bearing and plumage. But my drake is local, not of my blood; yet I am not proud!... If anyone at all can understand you here in the yard, then, I dare say, it is I!"

"She has portulacaria in her crop!" joked one little duckling from among the common ones.

The other ducks, also common ones, found this superb: "portulacaria" sounds so much like Portugal. They nudged each other and quacked:

"Quack! What a wit!"

Then they turned their attention again to the poor little bird.

"The Portuguese Duck is a master of speech!" they said. "We do not have such loud words in our beaks, but we take no less interest in you. And if we do nothing for you, we do not shout about it! In our opinion, that is nobler."

"You have a lovely voice!" said one of the older ducks. "It must be pleasant indeed to know that you bring joy to many! I, however, understand little about singing, therefore I keep my tongue in my beak! That is better than chattering nonsense, such as you have to listen to so much!"

"Do not bother her!" intervened the Portuguese Duck. "She needs rest and care. Would you like me to bathe you again, dear songstress?"

"Oh no! Allow me to remain dry!" begged the little bird.

"But only water treatment helps me!" continued the Portuguese Duck.

"Amusement is also very beneficial! Soon the neighboring hens will come visiting, including two Chinese hens. They wear little trousers and are highly educated. That raises them in my eyes."

The hens arrived, and the rooster arrived too. Today he was polite and did not behave rudely.

"You are a genuine songbird!" he said to the little bird. "You make of your tiny voice all that can possibly be made of a tiny voice. Only one ought to have a whistle like a steam engine, so that it is audible that you are a male."

Both Chinese hens were utterly delighted by the little bird: after the bath, she was all ruffled and reminded them of a Chinese chick.

"How charming she is!" they said, and entered into conversation with her. They spoke in whispers, and moreover with an aspirated 'p', as befits mandarins speaking the refined Chinese language.

"We are of your breed! Whereas ducks, even the Portuguese Duck herself, belong to the waterfowl, as you have probably noticed. You do not yet know us, but how many here know us or take the trouble to get to know us? No one, not even among the hens, although we were born for a higher perch than most! But let it be! We peacefully go our own way, though we have other principles: we look only at what is good, we speak only of what is good, although it is difficult to find it where there is nothing! Except for the two of us and the rooster, there are no more gifted and at the same time honest natures in the entire henhouse. As for the duckyard, there is nothing to say. We warn you, dear songstress! Do not trust that short-tailed duck over there—she is treacherous! And that one over there, the piebald one with the slanted pattern on her wings, is a terrible arguer; she lets no one get a word in edgewise, yet she is always wrong! And that fat one over there speaks ill of everyone, and that is repugnant to our nature: it is better to remain silent if one cannot say anything good! Only the Portuguese Duck still possesses some education, and one can still associate with her, but she too is not impartial and talks far too much about her Portugal."

"Why are the Chinese hens whispering so much!" wondered two of the common ducks. "They simply bore us; we never talk with them."

But then the drake appeared. He mistook the songbird for a sparrow.

"Well, I do not particularly distinguish; for me it is all the same!" he said. "She belongs to the barrel-organ tribe; if they exist—well and good."

"Just let him talk, pay no attention!" whispered the Portuguese Duck to the little bird. "Yet he is a very businesslike drake, and business is the main thing!... Well, now I shall lie down to rest. That is a direct duty toward oneself, if one wishes to grow fat and be stuffed with apples and prunes."

And she lay down in the sunshine, blinking with one eye. She lay down well, she herself was handsome, and she slept well. The songbird smoothed its broken wing

and lay down beside its protectress. The sun warmed so pleasantly here; it was a good little spot.

The neighboring hens began scratching in the earth. Essentially, they had come here only for food. Then they began to depart; the Chinese hens left first, followed by the rest. The witty duckling said of the Portuguese Duck that the old lady would soon fall into duckish dotage. The ducks quacked with laughter. "Duckish dotage!" Ah, he was superb! What a wit! They repeated his earlier joke too: "Portulacaria!" Having amused themselves, they too lay down.

An hour passed, when suddenly kitchen scraps were splashed into the yard. From the splash, the entire sleeping company woke up and flapped their wings. The Portuguese Duck woke up too, rolled onto her side, and crushed the songbird.

"Peep!" chirped the little bird. "You stepped on me, madam!"

"Do not get underfoot," replied the Portuguese Duck. "And do not be such a weakling. I have nerves too, but I never peep."

"Do not be angry!" said the little bird. "It just slipped out!"

But the Portuguese Duck did not listen; she threw herself upon the scraps and had an excellent dinner. Having finished eating, she lay down again. The little bird approached her once more and wished to give her pleasure with a song:

Choo-choo-choo-choo!
I shall not be silent now,
I wish to sing of you!
Choo-choo-choo-choo!

"After dinner I must rest!" said the duck. "It is time for you to accustom yourself to the local customs. I want to sleep!"

The poor little bird was quite bewildered; it had only wished to be of service! And when Madame Portuguese Duck awoke, the little bird was already standing before her again and offered her a grain it had found. But the Portuguese Duck had not slept properly and, of course, was in a bad mood.

"Give that to the chick!" she cried. "And do not stand over my soul!"

"Are you angry with me?" asked the little bird. "What have I done?"

"'Done'!" mimicked the Portuguese Duck. "An expression not from elegant ones, allow me to point out!

"Yesterday the sun was shining," said the little bird, "but today it is so gray, so dark... I feel so sad!"

"You are not strong in chronology!" said the Portuguese lady. "The day is not yet over! Do stop looking so foolish!"

"Now your eyes are exactly as wicked as those from which I escaped!"

"Oh, you shameless creature!" said the Portuguese lady. "Are you comparing me to a cat, to a predator? There is not a single drop of evil in my blood! I took an interest in you, and I shall teach you proper manners!"

She bit off the little bird's head, and it fell down dead.

"What is this now!" said the Portuguese lady. "Could not even endure this! Well, then she was simply not meant to live in this world at all. And I was like a mother to her, I know that for certain! What, do I have no heart, perhaps?"

The neighbor's rooster poked his head into the yard and crowed like a steam engine.

"You could send anyone to their grave with your crowing!" said the duck. "You are to blame for everything! She lost her head, and soon I shall lose mine too!"

"She does not take up much space now!" said the rooster.

"Speak of her with more respect!" said the Portuguese lady. "She had manners, she knew how to sing, she had a higher education! She was tender and full of love, and this befits animals no less than so-called humans!"

All the ducks gathered around the dead little bird. Ducks in general are capable of strong feelings, whether envy or sympathy. But there was nothing here to envy, so only pity remained. The Chinese hens came as well.

"We shall never have such a songstress again! She was almost a Chinese hen!" And they sobbed; the other hens did too, while the ducks walked about with red eyes. "One thing we do have is a heart!" they said. "That at least cannot be taken from us!"

"A heart!" repeated the Portuguese lady. "Yes, we have nearly as much of that commodity here as they have in Portugal!"

"Let us rather think about what to fill our crops with!" said the drake. "That is the main thing! And if one organ-grinder has perished, well, there are still plenty left in the world."

