

The Ugly Duckling

In a sunny spot down to the water's edge grew great burdocks, in the very center of the thick wood.

In this snug retreat sat a duck upon her nest, watching for her young brood to hatch.

At length, one shell cracked, and soon another, and from each came a living creature that lifted its head and cried "Peep, peep."

"Are you all out?" said the mother, rising to look. "No, not all; the largest egg lies there yet, I declare," so she sat down again.

At last the great egg broke, and the latest bird cried "Peep, peep," as he crept forth from the shell. How big and ugly he was! The mother duck stared at him and did not know what to think. "Well, we shall see when we get to the water."

On the next day, the weather was delightful, and the mother duck took her whole family down to the water and jumped in with a splash. "Quack, quack!" cried she, and one after another the little ducklings jumped in, and the ugly gray-coat was also in the water, swimming with them.

"Oh," said the mother. "See how well he uses his legs! He is my own child, and he is not so very ugly after all, if you look at him properly. Quack, quack! Come with me now. I will take you into grand society and introduce you to the farmyard, but you must keep close to me and, above all, beware of the cat."

When they reached the farmyard, the other ducks stared, and said, "We don't want him here"; and then one flew out and bit him in the neck.

"Let him alone," said the mother; "he is not doing any harm."

"Yes, but he is so big and ugly. He's a perfect fright," said the spiteful duck, "and therefore he must be turned out. A little biting will do him good."

"The others are very pretty children," said the old duck, "all but that one."

"He is not pretty," replied the mother, "but he has a very good disposition and swims as well as the others or even better. I think he will grow up pretty"; and then she stroked his neck and smoothed the feathers.

And so they made themselves comfortable; but the poor duckling who looked so ugly was bitten and pushed and made fun of, not only by the ducks but by all the poultry.

"He is too big," they all said; and the poor little thing did not know where to go and was quite miserable because he was so ugly as to be laughed at by the whole farmyard.

So it went on from day to day; even his brothers and sisters were unkind to him and would say, "Ah, you ugly creature, I wish the cat would get you" and his mother had been heard to say she wished he had never been born. The ducks pecked him, the chickens beat him, and the girl who fed the poultry pushed him with her feet. So at last he ran away, feeling very sorrowful.

"I believe I must go out into the world again," said the duckling. So the duckling left the cottage and soon found water on which it could swim and dive, but he was avoided by all other animals because of his ugly appearance.

Autumn came, and then winter approached. All this was very sad for the poor duckling.

The winter grew colder and colder; he was obliged to swim about on the water to keep it from freezing, but every night the space on which he swam became smaller and smaller. At length, it froze so hard that the ice in the water crackled as he moved, and the duckling had to paddle with his legs as well as he could, to keep the space from closing up. He became exhausted at last and lay still and helpless, frozen fast in the ice.

Early in the morning, a peasant who was passing by saw what had happened. He broke the ice in pieces with his wooden shoe and carried the duckling home to his wife. The warmth revived the poor little creature; but when the children wanted to play with him, the duckling thought they would do him some harm, so he started up in terror, but luckily he escaped.

It would be very sad were I to relate all the misery the poor little duckling endured during the hard winter; but one morning he felt the warm sun shining.

Then the young bird felt that his wings were strong, as he flapped them against his sides and rose high into the air. They bore him onward until he found himself in a large garden. Everything looked beautiful. From a thicket close by came three beautiful white swans, rustling their feathers and swimming lightly over the smooth water. The duckling had never seen any like them before. They curved their graceful necks, while their soft plumage shone with dazzling whiteness. The duckling saw these lovely birds and felt more strangely unhappy than ever.

“I will fly to these royal birds,” he exclaimed, “and they will kill me because, ugly as I am, I dare to approach them. But it does not matter.”

Then he flew to the water and swam toward the beautiful swans. The moment they espied the stranger, they rushed to meet him with outstretched wings.

“Kill me,” said the poor bird and he bent his head down to the surface of the water and awaited death.

But what did he see in the clear stream below? His own image—no longer a dark-gray bird, ugly and disagreeable to look at, but a graceful and beautiful swan.

He now felt glad at having suffered sorrow and trouble because it enabled him to enjoy so much better all the pleasure and happiness around him; for the great swans swam round the newcomer and stroked his neck with their beaks, as a welcome.

Into the garden presently came some little children and threw bread and cake into the water.

“See,” cried the youngest, “there is another swan come; a new one has arrived.”

Then they threw bread and cake into the water and said, “The new one is the most beautiful of all.”

Then he felt quite ashamed and hid his head under his wing, for he did not know what to do, he was so happy—yet he was not at all proud. He had been persecuted and despised for his ugliness. Then he rustled his feathers, curved his slender neck, and cried joyfully, from the depths of his heart, “I never dreamed of such happiness as this while I was the despised ugly duckling.”