

# The Ugly Duckling

It was so delightful out in the country; it was summer, the corn stood yellow, the oats green, the hay had been raised in stacks down in the green meadows, and there the stork strutted on its long, red legs and spoke Egyptian, for this language he had learnt from his mother. Around cornfield and meadow there were large woods, and in the middle of the woods deep lakes; oh yes, it was truly delightful out there in the country! Right out in the sunshine there lay an old manor with deep canals round it, and from the wall and down to the water there grew great butterburs that were so tall that small children could stand upright under the largest of them; it was as overgrown in there as in the densest forest, and here a duck lay on her nest; she was to hatch out her small ducklings, but she was almost sick and tired of it by now, for it was taking such a long time, and she seldom had any visitors; the other ducks preferred to swim around in the canals rather than come on land and sit under a butterbur leaf to have a natter with her.

At last one egg after the other cracked: 'cheep! cheep!' was heard, all the yolks had become living creatures that stuck their heads out.

'Quack! quack!' she said, and then all of them hurried off and looked around everywhere under the green leaves, and their mother let them look as much as they liked, for everything green is good for the eyes.

'How huge the world is!' all the ducklings said, for now they certainly had a great deal more space than when they lay inside their eggs.

'Do you think this is the whole world!' their mother said, 'why, it stretches far beyond the garden, all the way into the vicar's land! though I've never been there myself! – You're all here, then, are you!' – and she got up, 'no, not all of you yet! the biggest egg's still lying there; how long is all this meant to take! I'm beginning to get sick and tired of it!' and she settled on the nest once more.

'Well, then, how's everything going?' said an old duck who had come to pay a visit.

'It's taking such a long time with one of the eggs,' the sitting duck said, 'it refuses to split open! but you really must see the others! they are the loveliest ducklings I've ever seen! all of them take after their father – the scoundrel, he never comes to visit me.'

'Let me have a look at the egg that won't crack!' the old duck said. 'Believe you me, that's a turkey's egg! I was fooled that way once, and I had all sorts of trouble with the young ones, for they're afraid of water, you know! I couldn't get them out in it! I quacked and snapped, but no good did it do me! – Let me look at the egg! Oh yes, a turkey's egg if ever I saw one! Just let it lie there and teach the other children to swim!'

'But I think I'll lie on it just a little bit longer!' the duck said; 'I've been lying on it for so long, so I may just as well keep on for a bit!'

'Suit yourself!' the old duck said, and off she went.

Finally, the large egg split open. 'Cheep! cheep!' said the new arrival and tumbled out; it was frightfully big and ugly. The duck looked at him: 'That's a terribly large duckling, that one!' she said; 'none of the others look like that! it can't be a turkey chicken, surely! well, we'll soon find out about that! into the water with him, even if I have to kick him out!'

The next day the weather was marvellous, delightful; the sun shone on all the green butterbur leaves. The mother duck with her entire family emerged down at the canal: splash! she jumped into the water: 'quack! quack!' she said and one duckling after the other plopped out; the water went over their heads, but they soon bobbed up again and floated so splendidly: their legs churned away all by themselves, even the ugly, grey one swam along too.

'No, it can't be a turkey!' she said, 'just look at his fine footwork, how upright his posture is! it's one of my own offspring! and it's quite good-looking when you take a proper look at it! quack! quack! – follow me now, I'm going to take you out into the world and present you to the duckyard; but always keep close to me so that no one treads on you, and watch out for the cats!'

And then they went into the duckyard. There was a terrible racket going on in there, for two families were fighting over an eel's head, and the cat ended up getting it.

'You see, that's the way of the world!' the mother duck said, licking her beak, for she too wanted to have the eel's head. 'Now make good use of your legs!' she said, 'look sharp about it and make sure to incline your head for the old duck over there! she's the finest duck around here! she's of Spanish blood, which is why she is a weighty bird, and, mark you, she's got a red cloth round her leg! that is something extremely fine, and the greatest distinction ever given a duck – it means that she is not to be got rid of, no less, and that she is to be recognised by both man and beast! – Look sharpish, now – don't almost cross your legs! a well-bred duckling plants its legs well apart, just like its father and mother! like this! now, incline your head and say: quack!'

And they did as she said, but the other ducks there looked at them and said quite loudly: 'just look! now we're going to have that new batch as well! as if there weren't enough of us in advance! and ugh! just look at that duckling! he's quite intolerable!' – and immediately one of the ducks flew over to him and bit it in the neck.

'Leave him alone!' the mother said, 'he's doing nobody any harm!'

'Yes, but he's too big and too bizarre!' the duck who had bitten him said, 'so he's going to be given what for!'

'Lovely children, mother's got there!' the old duck with the cloth round her leg said, 'lovely, all of them, with one exception – that one can hardly be called a success! I wouldn't mind her redoing that one!'

'I'm afraid it's not possible, your Grace,' the mother duck said, 'he's not good-looking, but he has such a pleasant nature, and he swims just as well as any of the others – indeed, I think he is a little better than they are! I think he will grow to be good-looking, or perhaps in time he will grow a bit smaller! he's been in the egg too long, and that's why he doesn't look quite right!' and she preened his neck and smoothed his figure. 'Besides which, he's a drake,' she said, 'so it doesn't matter all that much! I think he'll be a strapping fellow and will manage to stand his own!'

'The other ducklings are most attractive!' the old duck said, 'just make yourself at home, and if you find an eel's head, you can bring it to me!' –

And so they made themselves at home.

But the poor duckling that had hatched last and looked so horrible was bitten, pushed around and made fun of, by both the ducks and the hens. 'He's too big!' they all said, and the turkey-like cock, who had been born with spurs and therefore believed he was an emperor, puffed

himself up like a vessel at full sail, went right up to him and gabbled and gobbled till he went quite red in the face. The poor duckling didn't know what to do with himself, he was so miserable because he looked so ugly and was mocked by everyone in the duckyard.

That was how things went on the first day, and after that things just got worse and worse. The poor duckling was chased by all of them, even his brothers and sisters were so cruel to him, and they always said: 'if only the cat would take you, you unsightly creature!' and his mother said: 'if only you were somewhere a long way from here!' and the ducks bit him, and the hens pecked him, and the girl who was to give the animals food kicked at him with her foot.

Then he ran and flew over the fence; the small birds in the bushes shot up into the air in fright, 'that's because I'm so ugly,' the duckling thought and closed its eyes, but ran off even so, – then it ended up in the large marsh where the wild ducks lived. Here it lay all night long, it was so tired and wretched.

In the morning the wild ducks flew up, and they looked at their new companion, 'What are you meant to be?' they asked, and the duckling turned this way and that and greeted them as best it could.

'You're downright ugly!' the wild ducks said, 'but that's all the same to us as long as you don't marry into our family!' – The poor bird! he certainly had no thoughts of marrying, he was content just to be allowed to lie in the reeds and drink a little marsh water.

He lay there for two whole days, and then two wild geese arrived – or rather, wild ganders, for they were both males – they had hatched out of the egg not long since, and that was why they were so brisk about things.

'Listen, my friend!' they said, 'you're so ugly I rather like you! how about joining us and becoming a migrating bird! close by in another marsh there are some truly delightful wild geese, young ladies, all of them – that can say: quack! fortune could well smile on you, you being as ugly as you are!' – –

'Bang! bang!' it suddenly rang out above them, and the wild ganders both fell down dead in the reeds, and the water turned blood-red; 'bang! bang!' it sounded again and whole flocks of wild geese flew up out of the reeds, and then more shooting was heard. It was a big hunt, the hunters lay scattered round the marsh, some of them even sat up in branches of trees that hung far out over the reeds; the blue smoke drifted like clouds in among the dark trees and hung far out over the water; through the mud came the hunting dogs, splash splash; reeds and rushes swayed to all sides, it was a dreadful fright for the poor duckling, it twisted its head to try and get it under its wing, and at that very moment it came face to face with a terribly large dog, his tongue was lolling out of his mouth, and his eyes gleamed horribly; he brought his open jaws down towards the duckling, showed his sharp teeth – and splash! splash! on he went again without taking it.

'Oh, thank goodness!' the duckling sighed, 'I'm so ugly that not even the dog bothers to bite me!'

And it lay there perfectly still while the shot whistled through the reeds and shot after shot rang out.

It was not until well into the day that everything fell silent, but the poor young creature didn't dare get up, it waited several more hours before taking a look around and then hurrying away from the marsh as fast as it could: it ran across field and meadow, there was such a strong wind that it found it difficult to make any progress.

Towards evening it reached a poor farmer's cottage that was in such a wretched state that it didn't know which side to fall over onto, so it just went on standing. There was such a gale blowing around the duckling that he had to sit on his tail to stay put, and the weather got worse and worse; then he noticed that the door had come away from one of its hinges and was hanging so lop-sidedly that he could slip in through the crack, and so he did.

Here an old woman lived with her cat and her hen, and the cat, which she called *Sonnie*, could arch his back and purr, he even shot out sparks, but one had to stroke him against his fur for that; the hen had quite short legs, so it was called '*Cockadoodleshortlegs*', it laid good eggs, and the woman was as fond of it as if it had been her own child.

In the morning the duckling stranger was immediately noticed, and the cat started to purr and the hen to cluck.

'What's all this!' the woman said, and looked around her, but her sight wasn't too good and she thought the duckling was a plump duck that had lost its way. 'This is a pretty catch!' she said, 'now I can have duck eggs, as long as it's not a gander! we must try and find out!'

And so the duckling was given a three-week trial period, but no eggs came. And the cat was the master in the house and the hen was missus, and they always said: 'we and the world!', for they thought they were half of it, and the better half at that. The duckling felt it must be possible to have a different opinion, but the hen would have none of it.

'Can you lay eggs!' she asked?

'No!'

'Well, keep your mouth shut then!'

And the cat said 'Can you arch your back, purr and shoot out sparks?'

'No!'

'Then keep your opinions to yourself when sensible folk are talking!'

And the duckling sat in the corner and sulked; then it happened to think of the fresh air and the sunshine; it had such a strange urge to float on the water, finally it couldn't help it and had to tell the hen about it.

'What's got into you?' she asked. 'You've got nothing to do, that's why you're getting these strange ideas! Lay eggs or purr, then it'll go over.'

'But it's so delightful to float on the water!' the duckling said, 'so delightful to feel it above your head and dive down to the bottom!'

'Yes, a great pleasure indeed!' the hen said, 'You must have taken leave of your senses! Ask the cat, he's the cleverest creature I know, if he likes to float on the water, or dive down! Not to mention myself. – Ask our mistress, the old woman, there's no one cleverer than her anywhere in the world! Do you think she feels like floating and having water above her head?' 'You don't understand me!' the duckling said.

'Well, if we don't understand you, who else is going to! Will you pretend to be cleverer than the cat and the old woman, let alone me! Stop creating, child! and thank your Creator for all the good things you've had done to you! Haven't you ended up in a warm room together with others you can learn a thing or two from! but you are a load of nonsense and it's no fun having to be with you! believe you me! I only want the best for you, I tell you some home truths, and that is how one recognises one's true friends! now just you set about laying some eggs and learning how to purr or shoot out sparks!'

'I think I want to go out into the great wide world!' the duckling said.

'Well, you do just that then!' the hen said.

And so the duckling left them; it floated on the water, it dived under the surface, but it was ignored by all the other animals because of its ugliness.

Now autumn came, the leaves in the wood turned yellow and brown, the wind caught them making them dance around, and up in the sky it looked cold; the clouds hung heavy with hail and snowflakes, and up on the stone wall the raven stood and howled 'ow! ow!' from sheer cold; yes, one could almost freeze just thinking about it, the poor duckling certainly had a hard time of it.

One evening, the sun was setting so beautifully, a whole flock of beautiful large birds came out of the bushes, the duckling had never seen anything as beautiful, they were gleaming white, with long, supple necks; they were swans. They let out a very strange sound, spread their magnificent, long wings and flew away from the cold clime to warmer countries, to open lakes! they climbed so high, so high, and the ugly duckling felt so very strange, it spun round in the water like a wheel, stretched out its neck high into the air after them, let out a cry so loud and strange it even felt scared itself at the sound of it. Oh, it couldn't forget those lovely birds, those blissful birds, and as soon as it could no longer glimpse them, it dived down to the bottom, and when it came up again, it was as if it was beside itself. It didn't know what the birds were, nor where they were flying off to, but it felt fonder of them that it had ever felt of anyone; it did not feel envious of them at all, how could it ever dream of wishing for such beauty, it would be happy if only the ducks had put up with having it among them! – the poor, ugly creature!

And the winter grew so cold, so cold; the duckling had to swim around in the water to stop it from freezing over; but every night the hole in which it swam grew narrower and narrower; it froze so the crust of ice started to creak; the duckling had to use its legs the whole time to stop the water from closing completely; finally it was exhausted, lay quite still and the ice froze solid around it.

Early in the morning a farmer came by, he saw the duckling, went out onto the ice, broke the ice in pieces with his clog and bore it home to his wife. There it was helped to thaw out.

The children wanted to play with it, but the duckling thought they wanted to harm it, and from pure fright shot up straight into the milk dish, so that the milk splashed out into the room; the woman screamed and flung her arms in the air, and it flew over into the trough where the butter was kept, and then down into the flour barrel and up again; well, what a sight it became! and the woman screamed and tried to hit it with the fire tongs, and the children tumbled over each other trying to catch it, and they laughed, and they shouted! – it was a good thing that the door stood open, out it shot among the bushes in the newly fallen snow – there it lay, as if in a torpor.

But it would be much too sad to tell of all the need and misery it had to put up with during the hard winter – it lay in the marsh among the reeds when the sun started to shine warm again; the larks sang – it was lovely springtime.

Then it lifted up both its wings, they swished more strongly than before and powerfully bore it off through the air; and in no time at all it had arrived in a large garden where the apple trees were in blossom, where the lilacs hung fragrant on their long, green branches right down towards the winding canals! Oh, it was so delightful here, so spring-fresh! and straight ahead of it, out of the thicket, there came three beautiful, white swans; they rustled their feathers

and floated so lightly on the water. The duckling recognised the magnificent creatures and was seized by a strange melancholy.

'I'll fly over to them, the regal birds! and they will peck me to death, because I, who am so ugly, dare approach them! but it doesn't matter in the slightest! better to be killed by them than nipped by the ducks, pecked at by the hens, kicked at by the girl who takes care of the hen run, and suffer throughout the winter!' – and it flew out into the water and swam towards the magnificent swans, they saw it and glided towards it with rustling feathers. 'Just kill me!' the poor creature said, bowing its head down towards the surface of the water and waiting for death, – but what did it see in the clear water! it saw its own reflection beneath itself, but it was no longer a clumsy, blackish grey bird, horrible and ugly, it was itself a swan.

It doesn't matter if one is born in a duckyard if only one has lain in a swan's egg!

It felt really happy about all the trials and tribulations it had suffered; now it truly understood its good fortune, all the beauty greeting it. – And the large swans swam round it and stroked it with their beaks.

Some small children came out into the garden, they threw bread and corn out into the water, and the smallest of them cried out:

'There's a new one!' and the other children cried out enthusiastically too: 'yes, a new one's arrived!' and they clapped their hands and danced around, ran after their father and mother, and bread and cake was thrown out into the water, and everybody said: 'The new one's the most beautiful! so young and so lovely!' and the old swans inclined their heads to it.

Then it felt quite shy and hid its head behind its wings, it didn't know what to do with itself! it was far too happy, though not the slightest bit proud, for a good heart never feels proud! it thought of how it had been chased and sneered at, and now everyone was saying that it was the loveliest of all lovely birds; and the lilacs bowed their branches right down to the water to it, and the sun shone so warm and so fine, then its feathers rustled, the slender neck lifted itself, and straight from the heart it cried out with joy : 'I never dreamt of so much happiness when I was the ugly duckling!'