



# The Ugly Duckling

By Hans Christian Andersen (1844)

It was lovely out in the countryside. It was summer, the grain was golden, the oats were green, and the hay stood in stacks in the meadows. The stork walked on his long, red legs and chattered away in Egyptian—for that was the language his mother had taught him. Around the fields and meadows were great forests, and in the middle of them, deep lakes. Yes, it was truly beautiful out there in the country.

In the bright sunshine, there stood an old manor house with wide canals running around it, and down by the water, under a great tangle of burdock leaves so tall that even small children could stand beneath them, a duck was sitting on her nest. She was waiting for her ducklings to hatch, but it was taking such a long time, and she was getting rather bored. She rarely had any visitors. The other ducks preferred swimming in the canals to sitting under the leaves and chatting with her.

At last, one egg after another began to crack. “Peep! Peep!” the ducklings said, and out they came, all yellow and fluffy. “Quack! Quack!” said the mother duck, and they quacked too, as best they could, looking around under the green leaves. Their mother let them look as much as they liked, because the green is good for the eyes.

“What a big world!” the ducklings said. They had, after all, only just come out of their shells.

“Do you think this is the whole world?” their mother said. “It stretches far beyond the garden, all the way into the vicar’s field—but I’ve never been that far. Now then, are you all here?” She stood up. “No, wait—there’s still one egg left. And it’s the biggest of them all! How long is this going to take? I’m getting quite tired of it!” Still, she settled back down.

Soon, an old duck came by for a visit. “How’s it going?” she asked.

“It’s taking so long with this one egg!” said the duck on the nest. “It just won’t crack! But look at the others—they’re the prettiest ducklings I’ve ever seen! They all take after their father. Not that he ever comes to visit.”

“Let me have a look at that egg that won’t hatch,” said the old duck. “Oh, I’ll bet it’s a turkey egg. I was once tricked by one myself, and what trouble I had! The young ones were terrified of the water. I tried everything—quacking and pecking, but it was useless. Let me see... yes, this is a turkey egg. Leave it be, and teach the others to swim.”

“I think I’ll sit on it a bit longer,” said the duck. “I’ve been here so long already, what’s a little more?”

“As you wish,” said the old duck, and off she waddled.



Finally, the big egg cracked. “Peep! Peep!” said the chick, and out tumbled a large, grey, and awkward-looking duckling. The mother duck looked at him. “He’s very big—and rather odd-looking,” she said. “Not like the others at all. Could he really be a turkey chick? Well, we’ll soon find out—into the water he goes, even if I have to push him!”

The next day, the weather was glorious. The sun shone on the green burdock leaves. The mother duck took her family down to the canal—splash!—she jumped in, and one by one, the ducklings followed. The water closed over their heads, but they popped up again and floated perfectly. Even the odd grey one swam just as well as the rest.

“No, he’s not a turkey,” the mother duck said. “See how well he moves his legs and holds himself! He’s mine, even if he does look a little strange. Actually, when you look closely, he’s quite handsome. Quack, quack! Come now, I’ll take you all into the duck yard and introduce you. Stay close to me and watch out for the cats!”

And so they went into the duck yard. There was a dreadful fuss—two families were fighting over a piece of eel head, which the cat ended up getting anyway.

“That’s how it goes in the world,” said the mother duck, licking her beak—she’d have liked that eel head herself. “Now, mind your legs,” she told the ducklings. “Hold your heads high, like your father and me! And don’t waddle too close together. See that old duck over there? She’s the grandest of all. She’s of Spanish blood, which is why she’s so plump, and look—she has a red ribbon on her leg. That means she’s very special, both to humans and animals. Now curtsy to her, and remember: say ‘quack’ properly.”

The ducklings did their best, but the other ducks muttered loudly, “Look at that crowd! As if we didn’t have enough already! And what is that ugly one doing here? We won’t have him!”

And one duck flew at the grey duckling and bit him on the neck.

“Leave him alone!” cried his mother. “He’s not hurting anyone!”

“He’s too big and strange,” the duck snapped. “He needs to be taught a lesson!”

“That brood is lovely—except for that one,” said the old duck with the ribbon. “He really didn’t turn out well. I wish his mother could do him over again.”

“She can’t, Your Grace,” said the mother duck. “He may not be pretty, but he has a kind heart, and he swims just as well as the others—maybe even better. He was in the egg too long, that’s all. He’ll grow into it. Or he’s a drake, and then it matters less. I think he’ll be strong. He’ll manage.”

The poor duckling was pecked and mocked by everyone—ducks, hens, even the girl who fed the animals kicked him away. Even his siblings were cruel. “We wish the cat would get you!” they said.

So he ran away.

He crossed fields and meadows, scared the little birds in the bushes, and fled into the marsh, where wild ducks lived. He stayed there all night, cold and sorrowful.

In the morning, the wild ducks looked him over. “What are you supposed to be?” they asked.



The duckling bowed politely. “You’re ugly,” they said, “but as long as you don’t try to marry into our family, it doesn’t matter.”

Poor thing! He had no thoughts of marrying—he only wanted somewhere to rest and drink the marsh water.

For two days he stayed there. Then two wild geese flew by. They were young and bold. “You’re so ugly, we quite like you!” they said. “Come with us. In the next marsh, there are lots of beautiful geese—maybe you’ll get lucky!”

Just then—bang! bang! Gunshots rang out. Both wild geese fell dead into the reeds, and red spilled into the water. Hunters were everywhere. Dogs splashed through the mud, guns boomed, and smoke drifted between the trees. It was terrifying.

The poor duckling tried to hide. A great hunting dog came close, bared its teeth—but passed him by. “Thank goodness,” the duckling sighed. “Even the dog doesn’t want me. I’m too ugly.”

The shooting lasted all day. When it finally stopped, he dared move again and ran as far as he could. As evening fell, he reached a small cottage. The wind howled, the door hung crooked on one hinge, and through the gap, he slipped inside.

An old woman lived there with her cat and her hen. The cat could purr and arch his back and even spark if rubbed the wrong way. The hen laid fine eggs and was much loved. The woman noticed the duckling and, thinking it was a fat young duck, said, “Oh, what a prize! I hope it lays eggs!”

But after three weeks, no eggs came. The cat was master, and the hen was mistress. “We and the world!” they said, thinking they were the better half of everything.

The duckling had different ideas, but the hen snapped, “Can you lay eggs?”

“No.”

“Then keep quiet.”

The cat added, “Can you purr or spark?”

“No.”

“Then hold your tongue when clever people speak.”

The duckling sat in a corner, dreaming of sunshine and fresh air. At last, he said, “How lovely it would be to float on water again, to dive to the bottom!”

“You must be mad!” said the hen. “Ask the cat—ask the old woman. None of them want to swim. Be grateful for what you have!”

“You don’t understand me,” the duckling said sadly.

“Then who would?” clucked the hen. “Lay eggs or purr, and the nonsense will pass!”



So the duckling left and went back into the world. He floated on ponds, dove under water—but all animals turned away from him for his ugliness.

Autumn came. The leaves turned golden, the air grew cold. One evening, just before sunset, a flock of majestic white birds rose from the reeds. Their feathers gleamed, their necks curved gracefully—it was a group of swans. The duckling had never seen anything so beautiful. He cried out, a strange sound escaping his throat, and longed to follow them.

But he couldn't.

Winter came. The pond froze, and he had to paddle constantly to keep the water from turning to solid ice.

At last, he grew too weak and froze fast.

A farmer found him, broke the ice, and brought him home. But when the children tried to play with him, he panicked, splashed into the milk pan, jumped in the flour, and caused chaos. The woman screamed.

The children laughed and chased him.

At last, he escaped into the snow and lay there, half-buried and half-frozen.

Spring arrived. The sun shone, the birds sang, the trees bloomed. The duckling stretched his wings—they were strong now—and soared into the air. Before he knew it, he was in a grand garden full of apple blossoms and flowing canals.

Three swans floated on the water.

He swam towards them, heart pounding. "They'll kill me," he thought, "because I'm so ugly and dared to approach."

He bowed his head... but in the water, he saw his reflection.

He wasn't a grey duckling anymore. He was a swan—a beautiful, elegant swan.

Children came running, tossing breadcrumbs. "Look!" they cried, "There's a new one! The most beautiful of all!"

And the swan, who had once been the ugly duckling, felt his heart swell with joy. He had known hardship, loneliness, and cruelty—but now, surrounded by beauty and kindness, he whispered:

"I never imagined such happiness when I was the ugly duckling."

*The End*

