

The Ugly Duckling

Once upon a time, there was a mother duck who laid a clutch of six beautiful little eggs. One day, she looked into her nest in amazement. For there were her six small eggs but lying next to them was another egg that was much, much bigger than the others. "That's odd," she thought, and went back to sitting on the nest.

Soon, one by one, the smaller eggs hatched, and out came six pretty yellow ducklings. Yet the bigger egg still had not hatched. The mother duck sat on the large egg for another day and another night until eventually the egg cracked, and out tumbled a seventh duckling. But this one was very different. He was big, with scruffy gray feathers and large brown feet.

"You do look different from my other chicks," exclaimed the mother duck, "but never mind. I'm sure you've got a heart of gold." And she cuddled all the ducklings. Sure enough, he was very sweet-natured and played nicely with the other ducklings.

One day, the mother duck led her ducklings down to the river to learn to swim. One by one they jumped into the water and splashed about. But when the big gray duckling leaped into the water he swam beautifully. He could swim faster and further than any of his brothers or sisters. The other ducklings were jealous and began to resent him. "You're a big ugly duckling," they hissed at him. "You don't belong here." And when their mother wasn't looking they chased him away.

The ugly duckling felt very sad as he waddled away across the fields. "I know I'm not fluffy and golden like my brothers and sisters," he said to himself. "I may have scruffy gray feathers and big brown feet, but I'm just as good as they are - and I'm better at swimming!" He sat down under a bush and started to cry. Just then he heard the sound of a dog. Only a short way from where he was hiding, a dog rushed past him, sniffing the ground. The ugly duckling

did not dare to move. He stayed under the bush until it was dark and only then did he feel it was safe to come out.

He set off, not knowing which way he was going until eventually, through the darkness, he saw a light shining. The light came from a cozy-looking cottage. The ugly duckling looked inside cautiously. He could see a fire burning in the hearth and sitting by the fire was an old woman with a hen and a cat.

“Come in, little duckling,” said the old woman. “You are welcome to stay here.” The ugly duckling was glad to warm himself by the fire. When the old lady had gone to bed, the hen and the cat cornered the duckling. “Can you lay eggs?” enquired the hen. “No,” replied the duckling. “Can you catch mice?” demanded the cat. “No,” replied the miserable duckling. “Well, you’re no use then, are you?” they sneered. The next day, the old woman scolded the duckling: “You’ve been here a whole day and not one egg! You’re no use, are you?” So the ugly duckling waddled off out of the cottage. “I know when I’m not wanted,” he said to himself mournfully.

He wandered along for a very long time until at last he reached a lake where he could live without anyone to bother him. He lived on the lake for many months. Gradually the days got shorter and the nights longer. The wind blew the leaves off the trees. Winter came and the weather turned bitterly cold. The lake froze over and the ugly duckling shivered under the reeds at the lake’s edge. He was desperately cold, hungry and lonely, but he had nowhere else to go.

At last spring came, the weather got warmer and the ice on the lake melted. The ugly duckling felt the sun on his feathers. “I think I’ll go for a swim,” he thought. He swam right out into the middle of the lake, where the water was as clear as a mirror. He looked down at his

reflection in the water and stared and stared. Staring back at him was a beautiful white bird with a long, elegant neck. "I'm no longer an ugly duckling," he said to himself, "but what am I?"

At that moment three big white birds just like himself flew towards him and landed on the lake. They swam right up to him and one of them said, "You are the handsomest swan that we have ever seen. Would you care to join us?"

"So that's what I am - I'm a swan," thought the bird that had been an ugly duckling. "I would love to join you," he said to the other swans. "Am I really a swan?" he asked, not quite believing it could be true. "Of course you are!" replied the others. "You're just like us!"

The three older swans became his best friends and the ugly duckling, that was now a beautiful swan, swam across the lake with them and there they lived together. He knew that he was one of them and that he would never be lonely again.