

THE UGLY DUCKLING

By **Hans Christian Andersen**

Adapted for The Ten Minute Tutor by: Debra Treloar

It was summer time and the wheat was yellow, the oats were green and the hay was dry and fun to roll in.

Near an old house, which nobody lived in, down near the edge of a river, the grass was so tall that a whole family of children could hide in it and never be found.

It was in this long grass that a duck had built herself a warm nest and was sitting on her eggs. All of them were white, but one egg was an ugly grey colour and larger than the others.



The duck was confused about that egg and did not know why it was so different from the rest.

Other birds thought, some other lazy mother might have popped her egg into the nest when the duck went for her morning swim.

But ducks are not very clever and not very good at counting, so this duck did not worry herself about it.

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She just took care of the big egg and kept it as warm as the rest.

This was the first set of eggs that the duck had ever laid. She was very pleased and proud. She laughed at the other mothers, who were always leaving their nests, to gossip with each other, or to take extra swims.

She knew that if she did not care for her eggs and the ducklings were to die, none of her friends would ever speak to her again. There she stayed, only getting off her eggs to see if the shells were cracking.

They seemed to be taking a very long time to crack. She had looked at the eggs at least one hundred and fifty times. Then, on the way back from her last swim, she saw a tiny crack on two of them and hurrying back to the nest, she drew the eggs closer to each other. Snuggling down, she never moved for the rest of the day.

Next morning she was rewarded, there were cracks in all of the eggs, except one.

By midday, two little yellow heads were poking out from their shells. She helped them along by breaking the shells with her bill, so that the little baby ducks could get free of them.

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The mother duck sat still for a whole night on the nest and before the sun came up, all white eggs were empty and lots of little eyes were gazing out at the green world.

Now, the mother duck was very house proud and did not like dirt in her nest, or broken shells to sit on. So she pushed the rest out over the side and was happy to have some babies to talk to, until the big egg hatched.

Day after day the big egg showed no signs of cracking and mother duck grew more and more impatient.

"I can't think what is the matter with it," the duck grumbled to her neighbour who had called in to pay her a visit. "Why, I could have hatched two lots of eggs in the time that this one has taken!"

"Let me look at it" said the old neighbour.



"Ah, I thought so. It is a turkey's egg! Once, when I was young, they tricked me in to sitting on some turkey's eggs. When they hatched they were so stupid I could not teach them to swim."

"Well, I will wait," sighed the mother duck, "and if it does not

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come out of its shell in the next day, I will just leave it alone. I will teach the rest of them to swim and to find their own food. I really can't be expected to do two things at once."

With a fluff of her feathers she pushed the egg into the middle of the nest.

All through the next day she sat on the big egg. In the evening, when she took a peep, she thought she saw a tiny crack in the top of the shell. Filled with hope, she tried to sleep but could hardly sleep all night just waiting.

When she woke up, there it was at last!

A big clumsy bird fell head first on to the ground. It was ugly, even the mother had to admit to herself. But she only said it was "large" and "strong".

"You won't need any teaching once you are in the water" she told him.

The new baby duck had dull, brown feathers, which covered his back and a long naked neck. Indeed he did not look half as pretty as the little yellow balls that followed her.

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The old neighbour was waiting on the riverbank, waiting to take them into the duck yard.

"No, it's not a young turkey, that's for sure" she whispered to the mother.



"Even though it is skinny and has no colour, there is something rather special about it. He holds his head up well."

"It is very kind of you to say so," answered the mother.

"Of course, when you see him by himself it is all right, but he seems very different from the others," said the old neighbour.

Now they had to go to the centre of the yard, where an old Spanish duck was sitting.

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"You must go up and bow low in front of her," whispered the mother duck to her children. "Keep your legs well apart, like I do, to show you are a well-bred duckling," she said.

The little ducks tried hard to make their small fat bodies copy what their mother did and the old lady was quite pleased with them.



All the other old ducks were not so happy. They said to each other "Oh, dear me, there are now lots more ducks in the yard and it is full already! Did you ever see anything quite so ugly as that big tall one?"

"I shall go and chase him out!" one said as she put up her feathers and went running to the big duckling to bite his neck.

The duckling gave a loud quack! It was the first time he had felt any pain and hearing him, his mother turned quickly.

"Leave him alone," she said fiercely, "or I will send for his father. He was not troubling you," she said.

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"No, but he is so ugly and so strange, no one can put up with him," answered the stranger.

The duckling did not understand the meaning of the words but he felt he was being blamed.

The old Spanish duck, who, ruled the yard, said, "It is a great pity he is so different from these beautiful darlings. If only he could be hatched all over again!"

The poor little fellow drooped his head and did not know where to look, but was comforted when his mother answered, "He may not be quite as handsome as the others, but he swims better, and is very strong. I am sure he will make his way in the world as well as anybody else."



They all started to carry on with normal life except for the ugly duckling, who, was snapped at by everyone when they thought his mother wasn't looking.

Even the big turkey never passed him without being rude.

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His brothers and sisters, who had been watching on, soon became as rude and unkind as the rest.

At last, he could not bear it any longer and one day he felt that even his mother was turning against him too. So that night, when the ducks and hens were all asleep, he crept away and under the cover of the long grass, hurried along the bank of the river until he reached a soft marshy place where the reeds grew. Here he lay down, but he was too tired, and too scared to fall asleep.

In the morning, the reeds began to rustle. He could see he had walked into a group of wild ducks. As he could not run away again, he stood up and bowed politely.

"You are ugly", said the wild ducks looking at him all over.
"But, we do not care, unless you want to marry one of our daughters. We would never allow that!"

The ugly duckling said that he did not want to marry anybody, and just wanted to be left alone after his long trip.

For two days he lay quietly amongst the reeds, eating any food he could find and drinking water from the pool.

He started to feel quite strong again and thought he might stay there forever.

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Here nobody was biting him and telling him how ugly he was.

Just then, two young geese caught sight of him. They were having their evening splash among the reeds and looking for their supper.

"We are getting tired of this river", they said to him, "to-morrow we are going to try another, where the lakes are bigger and the food is better. Will you come with us?"

"Is it nicer than this?" asked the duckling. The words were hardly out of his mouth, when he heard, "Piff! Pah!" and the two geese fell dead beside him.

At the sound of the gunshots, the wild ducks in the rushes flew up into the air and for a few minutes the firing of guns continued.

He was lucky he could not fly and he raced along the waters edge where he could hide among some tall ferns. He curled himself up in the soft grass till the shots died away and the hunters had moved on.

He then decided it was not safe to stay on the river's edge and marched bravely on until he came to a small cottage,

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where the only light in the room, came from a tiny fire. The duckling crept in and lay down under a chair. He lay close to a broken door, so he could get out quickly, if he needed to, but no one saw him, so he spent the rest of the night asleep.

In the cottage lived an old woman, her cat, and a hen. The next morning, when it grew light, the animals saw their visitor.

"Can you lay eggs?" asked the hen.

The duckling answered meekly, "No, I don't know how."

Then the cat came forward. "Can you make your fur stand up when you are angry, or purr when you are happy?" she asked.

Again the duckling had to say, "I can only swim."

So the cat and the hen went straight to the old woman, who was still in bed.

"A useless bird is in the kitchen", they said.

"It calls itself a duckling, but it can't lay eggs or purr! What should we do with it?"

"Keep it!" replied the old woman quickly.

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"It may be able to lay eggs one day. Anyway, we will let it stay here for a while and see what happens."

So the duckling stayed for three weeks and shared the food of the cat and the hen, but it did not lay any eggs.

One morning the duckling looked so unhappy that even his new friends noticed it.

"What is the matter?" asked the hen.

The duckling told her, "I am longing for the water again. It is so nice to put your head under the water and dive straight to the bottom."

"I don't think I would enjoy it," replied the hen.

"And I don't think I would like it at all," said the cat.

"I can't stay here any longer, I must get to the water," said the duckling.

The cat and the hen, who were feeling a bit hurt said, "Very well then. Go!"



For a while the duckling was quite happy and content back on the river once more.

Then winter came and snow began to fall. Everything began to get very cold and wet. The duckling soon found, that it is one thing to be happy swimming in the water, and quite another to be cold and wet on the land.

One day when the sun was setting and the riverbank was getting hard and slippery, he heard a sound of beating wings overhead, high up in the sky. As he looked up he saw a flock of swans flying high in a perfect 'V' formation.



They were as white as snow with long necks that stretched outwards. They were on their way south, to a land where the sun shone all day.

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"Oh, if only I could go with them!" he thought.

But that was not possible. Besides, he thought, I am too ugly to fly alongside those beautiful birds?

So he walked sadly down to a sheltered pool and dived to the very bottom and tried to pretend he was happy, but he knew he wasn't!

Every morning it grew colder and colder, and the duckling had to work hard to keep himself warm.

After one bitter cold night, his legs moved so slowly that the ice crept closer and closer and when dawn broke, he was stuck in the ice, as though he was caught in a trap.

Luckily, a man, who was crossing the river on his way to his work, saw at once what had happened. He had on thick boots and stamped so hard on the ice that it broke. He picked up the duckling and tucked him under his sheep-skin coat to warm him.

Instead of going to work, the man went back to his home, as he wanted to show the bird to his children. He put the duckling in a box by the fire and when the children came home from school he was looking and feeling much better.

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The kind children wanted to play with him, but the poor duckling had never played in his life.

He thought they were teasing him and he flew straight into a milk bottle and then into a butter-dish. At last, scared by the noise, he flew right out the door.

He hid himself in the snow amongst the bushes at the back of the house. He spent the rest of the winter very sad and very hungry, as he never had enough food to eat.

But soon spring arrived and things got better. The ground became softer, the sun warmer, the birds began to sing and the flowers started to grow in the grass.

When he stood up, he felt different. His body seemed larger and his wings felt stronger. He could see a pink mist hovering on the side of a hill and thought he would fly towards it, to see what it was.

Oh, how wonderful it felt to be rushing through the air. Turning this way and that. He never thought flying could be so much fun!

The duckling was almost sorry when he flew near the pink mist and found it was made up of apple blossoms.

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He flew slowly to the ground gazing around him.

Then he saw them, the flock of beautiful birds he had seen all those months ago flying South. He watched them one by one step into the river and float quietly on the water as if they were part of it.

"I will follow them," said the duckling to himself. "Even though I am ugly, I would rather be killed by them than suffer from loneliness, cold and hunger. I will stay away from the other ducks who were unkind to me."

He flew quickly down to the water and swam after them as fast as he could.

It did not take long to reach them as they had stopped to rest in the shade on the water. When they saw him coming, some of the younger ones swam out to meet him with calls of welcome. The duckling could hardly believe what he was hearing. He went towards them feeling happy, but nervous.

He said, "If I am to die, I would rather you kill me. I don't know why I was ever born, as I am too ugly to live." As he spoke, he bowed his head and looked down into the water.

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Looking into the still water he saw the reflection of many white birds, with long necks and golden bills.

He searched for the dull grey body and the long skinny neck, but no such thing was there. Instead, he saw he had become a beautiful white swan!



"The new one is the best of all," said the children when they came down to feed the swans with bread and cake before going to bed.

"His feathers are whiter and his beak is brighter than all the rest."

When he heard that, the young swan thought about all that he had been through and how lonely he had been. He now knew, that it was all worth it. He now knew, what it was, to be truly happy.