**The Ugly Duckling**

Once upon a time, in the tall grasses of a green canal, a mother duck sat patiently hatching her eggs. At last she heard the first egg crack, then the second, and soon six fluffy yellow ducklings were hatched into the world. Only one large egg was left unhatched in the nest. The mother watched it anxiously and was relieved when it began to crack open. But her relief changed to dismay when out hopped the ugliest duckling she had ever seen.

 Instead of being small and round and soft and yellow like the other ducklings, he was large and awkward and gray. He seemed to grow uglier every day. But he was kind and friendly to everyone. Even though his brothers and sisters were ashamed of him and all the ducks in the canal laughed at him.

 “That’s no duckling,” they cackled meanly. “He’s probably a worthless young turkeycock.”

 Only his mother loved him and defended him.

 “He’s really not so ugly when you look at him closely. He’s quite pretty,” she kept on insisting. Carefully she taught him everything she taught her other children and refused to leave him behind when she took them for their first swimming lesson.

 “Quack!” She said proudly. “See how beautifully he swims, better than all the others. No one can say now that he’s not a duckling.”

 But the other ducks were not at all impressed, and when his mother lined up ducklings and took them all to visit the barnyard, his brothers and sisters were so ashamed that they did not want him along. And it was even worse in the barnyard, where all the new animals he met scorned and ridiculed him. Even the pigs snorted at him, and the geese honked at him viciously.

 “Leave him alone,” cried his mother. “He’s not doing any harm.”

 “He’s too ugly to look at, and we shall tease him all we like!” As they kept right on honking and snorting.

 “He’s not handsome, I’ll admit,” replied his mother, stroking him gently and scratching his neck, “but he’s good and kind, and he’s still young. I’m sure he’ll outgrow this stage soon and end up just like the others—and even stronger.”

 The ugly duckling did not believe her words and knew that she was heartbroken because he was so different and so ugly. She became sadder and sadder as time went on and the teasing became worse and worse. The ducks bit him, the hens pecked at him, the geese chased him, and even the girl who fed the poultry kicked him. He was the laughing stock of the whole barnyard.

 No matter where he turned he met meanness and cruelty. He tried to hide, but wherever he went someone found him and teased him some more. Finally, he could stand all the cackling and squawking no longer, so he jumped over the barnyard fence and ran away. He kept on running even though he really had no idea where he was going. Things were not much better outside the barnyard either, because even the wild creatures ran away from him.

 “I guess I’m so ugly, everyone’s afraid of me!” He quacked miserably to himself.

 He found some wild ducks and geese for company for a while, but one day these friendly birds were shot by hunters and carried off by some fierce-looking hunting dogs. But the dogs ignored the scared little duckling, hiding in the tall grass nearby.

 “I guess I’m even too ugly for them to take,” he sighed thankfully.

 The poor duckling feared that the dogs and hunters might come back, so he ran away from the pond and kept on running till he came to a little hut in the woods, where a very old lady lived with her hen and her cat. She loved them both dearly, because the hen laid tasty eggs for her and the cat purred constantly to cheer her. The old lady’s eyesight was so poor that she thought that duckling was a full-grown duck because he was so oversized.

 “How lucky I am!” She cried. “I have a beautiful hen to lay beautiful hen’s eggs for me, and now I have a fine duck to lay some fine duck eggs.”

 She brought the duckling into her house and treated him kindly, but the cat felt himself to be master of the house and the hen that she was its mistress, and both were jealous of the new guest.

 “Can you really lay eggs!” asked the hen suspiciously.

 “No,” answered the duckling honestly.

 “Then of what earthly use are you to anyone?” Snapped the hen, who proudly laid her daily egg just to show off.

 “Can you purr?” Asked the cat.

 “I can quack, “replied the duckling,” but I can’t purr.”

 “Then of what earthly use are you to anyone?” Sneered the cat, purring loudly just to show off.

 Then both of them began to torment the poor duckling, so that once again he had to run away.

 “It’s good to be out of that house and in the wide world again,” the duckling said to himself, though he was so lonely he did not believe a word he was saying.

 But he soon found a nice pond to swim in and amused himself splashing and diving and chasing insects and catching minnows. After a time, however, the water grew colder and the winds stronger; the leaves began to turn yellow and then brown, and autumn arrived. Just before winter came, the duckling heard a strange sound in the sky. He looked into the sunset and saw a flock of graceful swans flying over him. He had never seen any creature so beautiful and stared in wonder at their snow–white plumage, their splendid wings, and their long slender necks.

 The duckling did not know that these birds were swans, but he knew he loved them more than he had ever loved anything in his life before. He did not envy them, either, because it would have been beyond his wildest dreams to wish such beauty for himself. He just watched them worshipfully as they flew off to warmer lands across the sea. All through the long, cold winter he remembered their beauty with pleasure.

 The winter was long and very cold! The duckling had to keep swimming around in circles, or the water would have frozen him in tight. Still, as the ice on the pond grew thicker, it became harder and harder for him to swim at all. His legs were numb from the cold. Worn out at last he lay there stiff, frozen right into the ice. A kind peasant soon found him, broke the ice around him, and carried him home. In the cozy house, the man’s children placed him gently by the fireplace to warm himself.

 The children wanted only to play with the duckling when he revived, but he thought that they like everybody else wanted to torment him for his ugliness, so he fled in terror and ran straight out the front door into the cold and snow again.

 Somehow the duckling managed to live through the rest of the hard winter, and when spring came he felt bigger and stronger. Then, one day as he was swimming happily, coming toward him he saw three of the glorious birds he so worshiped.

 “I’ll go over to those beautiful creatures,” he thought, “and they will surely kill me because I am so ugly. But I would rather be killed by such kingly birds than live on only to be bitten by ducks, pecked at by hens, and chased by everyone else.”

 So, bowing his head humbly, he swam toward the graceful swans. As he drew closer, bowing his head and even lower he saw his reflection in the water and gasped. He was no longer an ugly duckling but a stately swan with snow-white plumage, splendid wings, and a long slender neck. The other swans glided toward, not to kill, but to greet him and stroked his neck. Children ran to the water’s edge.

 “Look!” They cried. “There’s a new swan.”

 “Yes,” said their parents. “And the new one is the most beautiful of all.”

 As everyone gathered around to admire him, the new swan hid his head modestly and thought, “I never dreamed that I could ever know such happiness when I was the despised ugly duckling.”