



The Ugly Duckling

Texte : Hans Christian Andersen

Illustrations : Theo Van Hoytema

Le vilain petit canard

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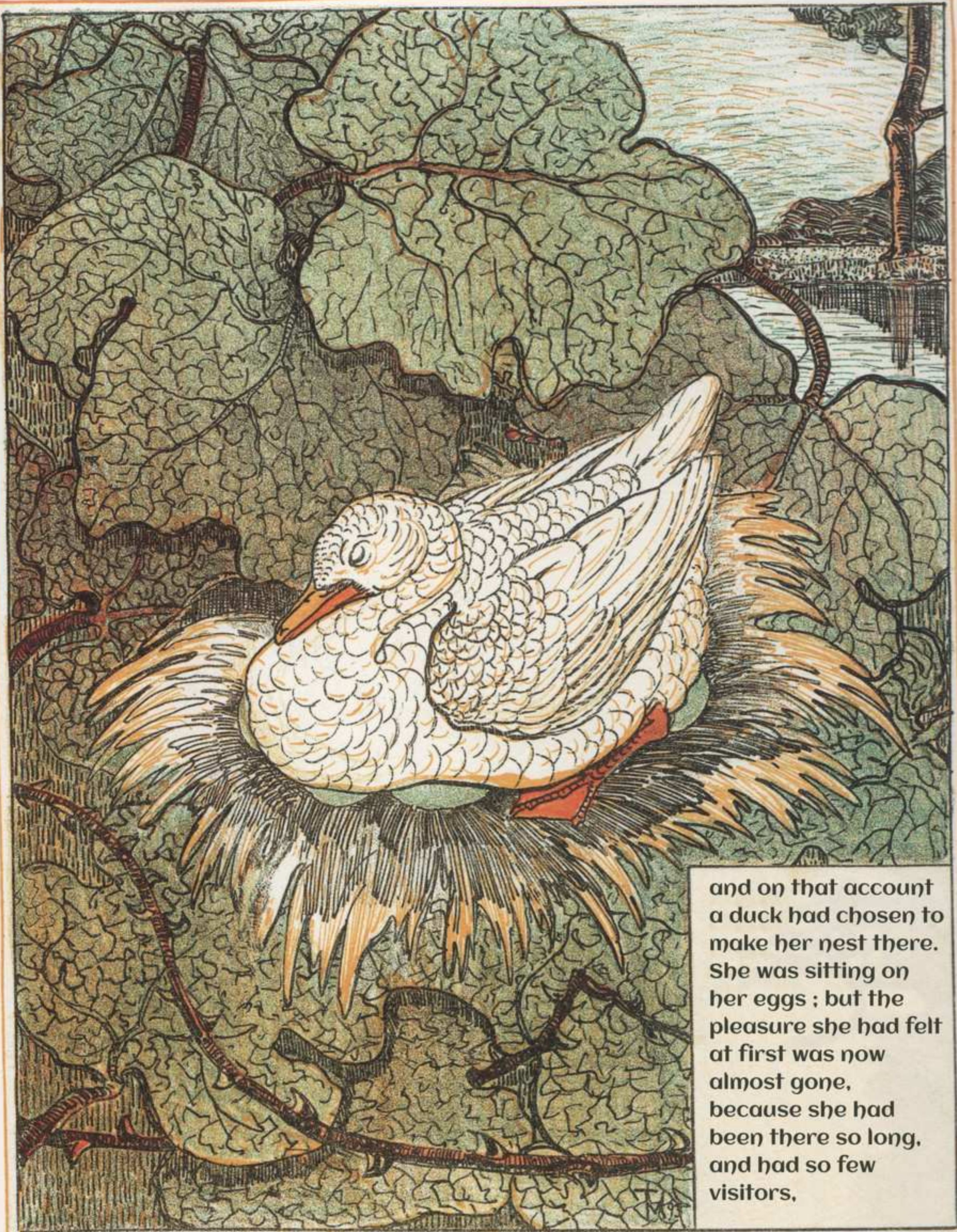




It was beautiful in the country, it was summer-time; the wheat was yellow, the oats were green, the hay was stacked up in the green meadows, and the stork paraded about on his long red legs, discoursing in Egyptian, which language he had learned from his mother.



The fields and meadows were skirted by thick woods, and a deep lake lay in the midst of the woods.—Yes, it was indeed beautiful in the country ! The sunshine fell warmly on an old mansion, surrounded by deep canals, and from the walls down to the water's edge there grew large burdock-leaves, so high that children could stand upright among them without being perceived. This place was as wild and unfrequented as the thickest part of the wood,



and on that account
a duck had chosen to
make her nest there.
She was sitting on
her eggs ; but the
pleasure she had felt
at first was now
almost gone,
because she had
been there so long,
and had so few
visitors,



for the other
ducks preferred
swimming on
the canals to
sitting among
the burdock-
leaves gossiping
with her.



At last the eggs cracked one after another. 'Tchick tchick!' All the eggs were alive, and one little head after another appeared. They peeped about from under the green leaves.

'How large the world is!' said the little ones, for they found their present situation very different to their former confined one, while yet in the egg-shells.

'Are you all here?' said the mother. And then she got up. 'No, I have not got you all, the largest egg is still here. How long will this last? I am so weary of it!'




And then she sat down again.

'Well, and how are you getting on?' asked an old duck, who had come to pay her a visit.

'This one egg keeps me so long,' said the mother, 'it will not break. But you should see the others; they are the prettiest little ducklings I have seen in all my days; they are all like their father,—the good-for-nothing fellow! he has not been to visit me once.'

'Let me see the egg that will not break,' said the old duck; 'depend upon it, it is a turkey's egg. I was cheated in the same way once myself, and I had such trouble with the young ones; for they were afraid of the water. Leave it, and teach the other little ones to swim.'

'I will sit on it a little longer,' said the duck. 'I have been sitting so long, that I may as well spend the harvest here.'



The great egg burst at last, 'Tchick, tchick,' said the little one, and out it tumbled—but oh, how large and ugly it was! The duck looked at it, 'That is a great, strong creature,' said she, 'none of the others are at all like it; can it be a young turkey-cock? Well, we shall soon find out, it must go into the water, though I push it in myself!

The next day there was
delightful weather, and
the sun shone warmly
upon all the green
leaves when mother-
duck with all her family
went down to the canal;






plump she went into the water, 'Quack, quack,' cried she, and one duckling after another jumped in. Their legs moved without effort. All were there, even the ugly grey one.

'No! it is not a turkey,' said the old duck; 'only see how prettily it moves its legs, how upright it holds itself; it is my own child! it is also really very pretty when one looks more closely at it; quack, quack, now come with me, I will take you into the world, introduce you in the duck-yard; but keep close to me, or some one may tread on you'



So they came into the duck-yard. There was a horrid noise; two families were quarrelling about the remains of an eel.

'Now use your legs,' said she, 'don't turn your feet inwards, keep together, and bow to the old duck you see yonder. She is the most distinguished of all the fowls present, and is of Spanish blood, which accounts for her dignified appearance and manners. And look, she has a red rag on her leg; that is considered extremely handsome, and is the greatest distinction a duck can have.'



'Those are fine children that our good mother has,' said the old duck with the red rag on her leg. 'All are pretty except one, and that has not turned out well; I almost wish it could be hatched over again.'

'That cannot be, please your highness,' said the mother. 'Certainly he is not handsome, but he is a very good child, and swims as well as the others, indeed rather better. I think he will grow like the others all in good time.'

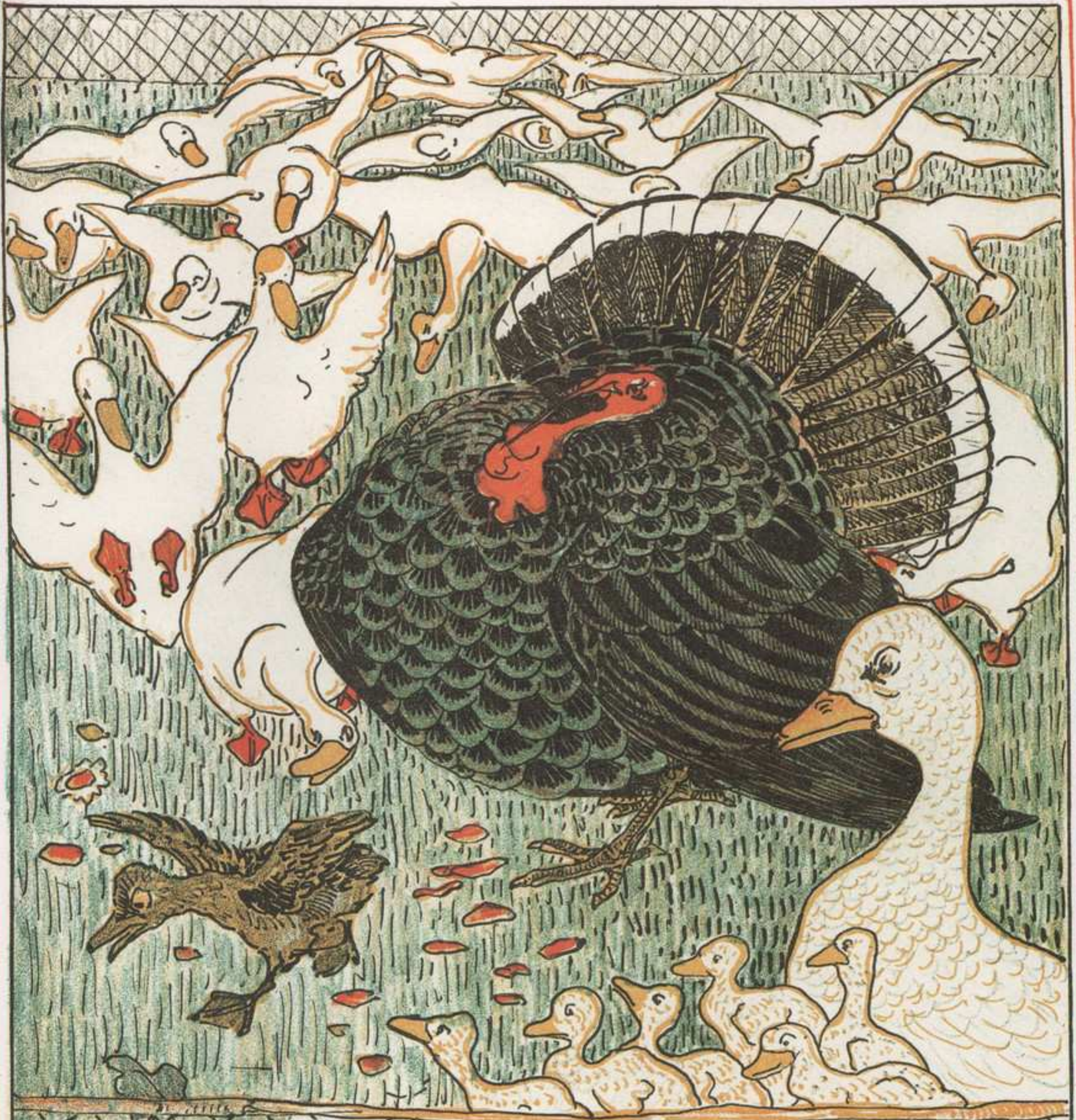
'Besides,' added she, 'he is a drake; I think he will be very strong. Pray make yourselves at home, and if you find an eel's head you can bring it to me.'



But the other ducks who were in the yard looked at them and said aloud, 'Only see, now we have another brood, as if there were not enough of us already. And fie! how ugly that one is! We will not endure it'; and immediately one of the ducks flew at him, and bit him in the neck.

'Leave him alone,' said the mother, 'he is doing no one any harm.'

'Yes, but he is so large, and so strange-looking, and therefore he shall be teased.'



But the poor little duckling, who had come last out of its egg-shell, and who was so ugly, was bitten, pecked, and teased by both ducks and hens. It is so large,' said they all. And the turkey-cock, who had come into the world with spurs on, and therefore fancied he was an emperor, puffed himself up like a ship in full sail, and marched up to the duckling quite red with passion. The poor duckling was scorned by all. Even his brothers and sisters behaved unkindly, and were constantly saying, 'The cat fetch thee, thou nasty creature!' The mother said, 'Ah, if thou wert only far away!'



He ran over the hedge; the little birds in the bushes were terrified. 'That is because I am so ugly,' thought the duckling, shutting his eyes, but he ran on.



At last he came to a wide moor, where lived some wild ducks; here he lay the whole night, so tired and so comfortless.



In the morning the wild ducks flew up, and perceived their new companion. 'Pray, who are you?' asked they; and our little duckling turned himself in all directions, and greeted them as politely as possible. 'You are really uncommonly ugly,' said the wild ducks; 'however that does not matter to us, provided you do not marry into our families.' Poor thing! he had never thought of marrying; he only begged permission to lie among the reeds, and drink the water of the moor.



There he lay for two whole days—on the third day there came two wild geese, or rather ganders, who had not been long out of their egg-shells, which accounts for their impertinence. 'Hark ye,' said they, 'you are so ugly that we like you infinitely well; will you come with us, and be a bird of passage? On another moor, not far from this, are some dear, sweet, wild geese, as lovely creatures as have ever said "hiss, hiss." You are truly in the way to make your fortune, ugly as you are.' Bang! a gun went off all at once, and both wild geese were stretched dead among the reeds; the water became red with blood. There was a grand hunting party. He waited several hours before he looked around him, and then hastened away from the moor as fast as he could.



Towards evening he reached a wretched little hut, so wretched that it knew not on which side to fall, and therefore remained standing. The wind blew violently, so that our poor little duckling was obliged to support himself on his tail, in order to stand against it; but it became worse and worse. He then remarked that the door had lost one of its hinges, and hung so much awry that he could creep through the crevice into the room, which he did.



In this room lived an old woman, with her tom-cat and her hen; and the cat, whom she called her little son, knew how to set up his back and purr; indeed he could even emit sparks when stroked the wrong way. The hen laid very good eggs, and the old woman loved her as her own child.

The next morning the new guest was perceived; the cat began to mew, and the hen to cackle.

'What is the matter?' asked the old woman, looking round; however, her eyes were not good, so she took the young duckling to be a fat duck who had lost her way. 'This is a capital catch,' said she, 'I shall now have duck's eggs, if it be not a drake: we must try.'

And so the duckling was put to the proof for three weeks, but no eggs made their appearance.



The duckling thought it was possible to be of a different opinion, but that the hen would not allow.

'Can you lay eggs?' asked she. 'No.' 'Well, then, hold your tongue!' And the cat said, 'Can you set up your back? can you purr?'

'No.'

'Well, then, you should have no opinion when reasonable persons are speaking.'

So the duckling sat alone in a corner, and was in a very bad humour; however, he happened to think of the fresh air and bright sunshine, and these thoughts gave him such a strong desire to swim again that he could not help telling it to the hen.



'What ails you?' said the hen.
'You have nothing to do, and,
therefore, brood over these

fancies; either lay eggs, or purr, then you will forget them.'

'But it is so delicious to swim,' said the duckling, 'so delicious when the waters close over your head, and you plunge to the bottom.'

'Well, that is a queer sort of a pleasure,' said the hen; 'I think you must be crazy. Not to speak of myself, ask the cat—he is the most sensible animal I know—whether he would like to swim or to plunge to the bottom of the water. Ask our mistress, the old woman—there is no one in the world wiser than she—do you think she would take pleasure in swimming, and in the waters closing over her head?'

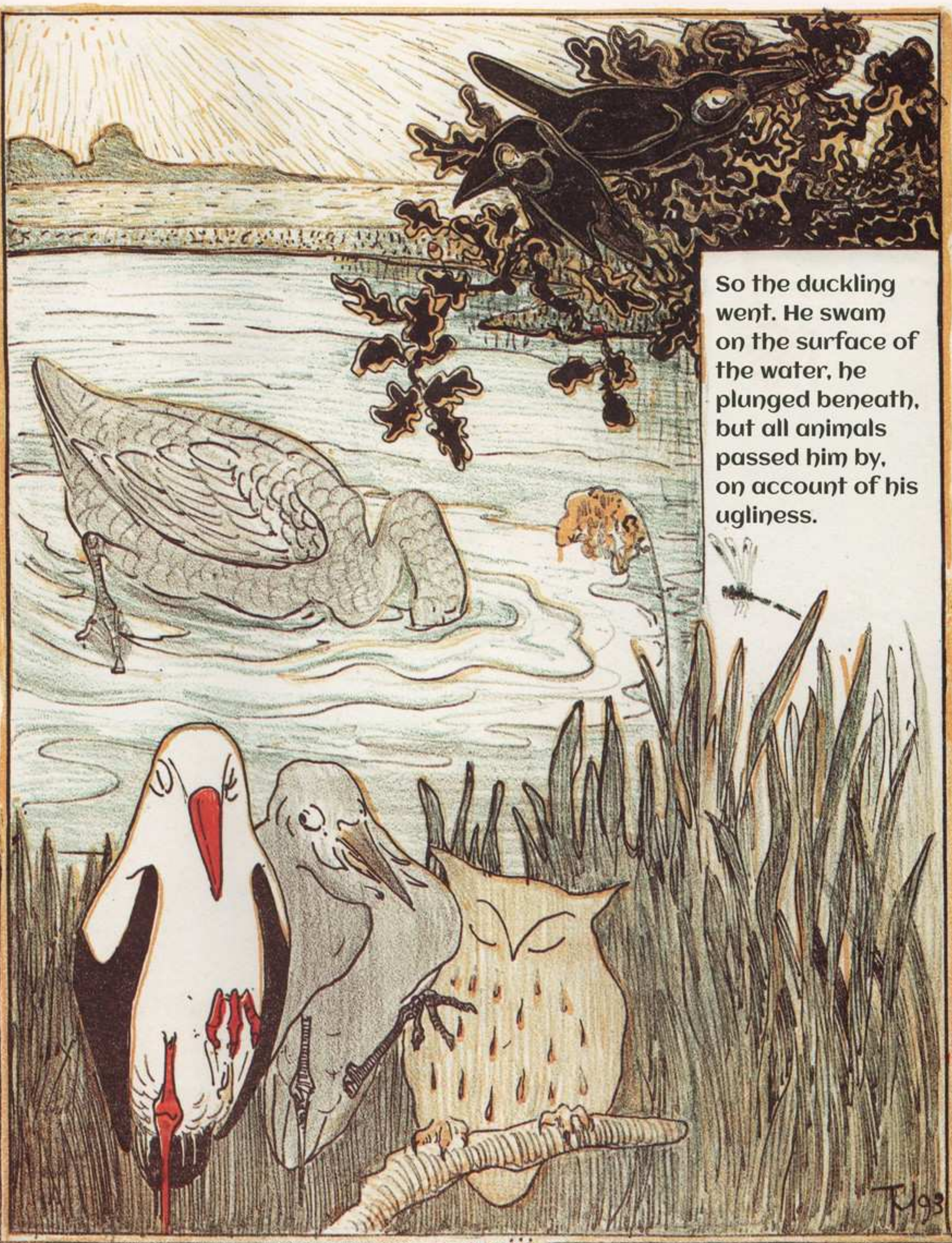
'You do not understand me,' said the duckling.



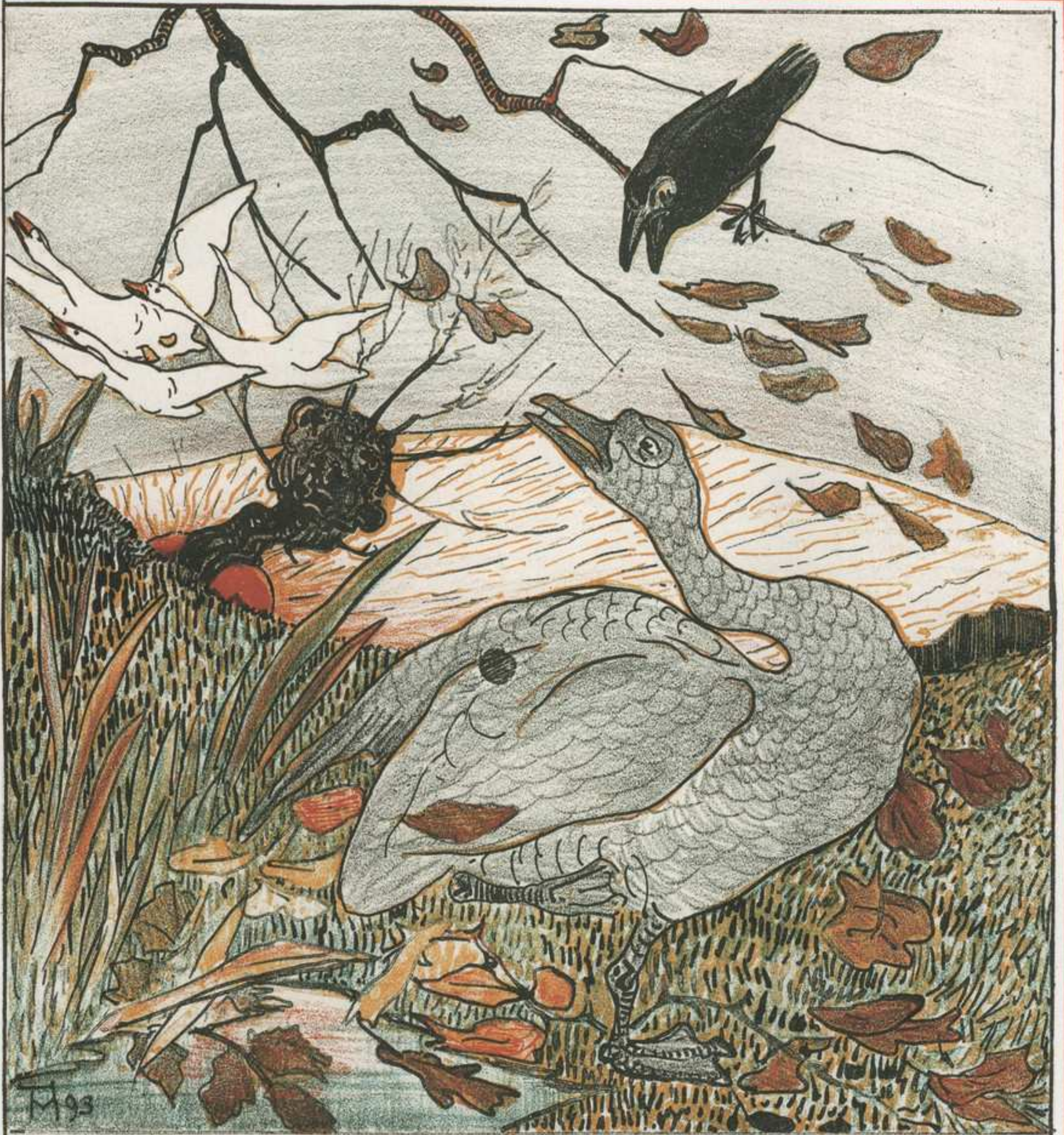
'What, we do not understand you! so you think yourself wiser than the cat, and the old woman, not to speak of myself. Do not fancy any such thing, child, but be thankful for all the kindness that has been shown you. Are you not lodged in a warm room, and have you not the advantage of society from which you can learn something? But you are a simpleton, and it is wearisome to have anything to do with you. Believe me, I wish you well. I tell you unpleasant truths, but it is thus that real friendship is shown. Come, for once give yourself the trouble to learn to purr, or to lay eggs.'

'I think I will go out into the wide world again,' said the duckling.

'Well, go,' answered the hen.



So the duckling went. He swam on the surface of the water, he plunged beneath, but all animals passed him by, on account of his ugliness.



And the autumn came, the leaves turned yellow and brown, the wind caught them and danced them about and the raven sat on the hedge and croaked:—the poor duckling was certainly not very comfortable!

One evening, a flock of large beautiful birds rose from out of the brushwood; the duckling had never seen anything so beautiful before; their plumage was of a dazzling white, and they had long, slender necks. They were swans; they uttered a singular cry. They flew so high, so very high! and the little ugly duckling's feelings were so strange; he turned round and round in the water like a mill-wheel, strained his neck to look after them, and sent forth such a loud and strange cry, that it almost frightened himself.—Ah! he could not forget them, those noble birds! those happy birds!



And the winter was so cold, so cold! The duckling was obliged to swim round and round in the water, to keep it from freezing; but every night the opening in which he swam became smaller and smaller; it froze so that the crust of ice crackled; the duckling was obliged to make good use of his legs to prevent the water from freezing entirely; at last, wearied out, he lay stiff and cold in the ice.



Early in the morning there passed by a peasant, who saw him, broke the ice in pieces with his wooden shoe, and brought him home to his wife. He now revived.

The children would have played with him, but our duckling thought they wished to tease him, and in his terror jumped into the milk-pail, so that the milk was spilled about the room: the good woman screamed and clapped her hands; he flew thence into the pan where the butter was kept, and thence into the meal-barrel, and out again, and then how strange he looked!

The woman screamed, and struck at him with the tongs; the children ran races each other trying to catch him, and laughed and screamed likewise. It was well for him that the door stood open; he jumped out among the bushes into the new-fallen snow—he lay there as in a dream.





But it would be too melancholy to relate all the trouble and misery that he was obliged to suffer during the severity of the winter—he was lying on a moor among the reeds, when the sun began to shine warmly again. And once more he shook his wings. They were stronger than formerly, and bore him forwards quickly, and before he was well aware of it, he was in a large garden. And out of the thicket came three beautiful white swans.

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They displayed their feathers so proudly, and swam so lightly, so lightly! The duckling knew the glorious creatures, and was seized with a strange melancholy.

'I will fly to them, those kingly birds!' said he. 'They will kill me, because I, ugly as I am, have presumed to approach them; but it matters not, better to be killed by them than to be bitten by the ducks, pecked by the hens, and to have so much to suffer during the winter!' He flew into the water, and swam towards the beautiful creatures—they saw him and shot forward to meet him. 'Only kill me,' said the poor animal, and he bowed his head low, expecting death,—but what did he see in the water?—he saw beneath him his own form, no longer that of a plump, ugly, grey bird—it was that of a swan.



It matters not to have been born in a duck-yard, if one has been hatched from a swan's egg. The good creature felt himself really elevated by all the troubles and adversities he had experienced. He could now rightly estimate his own happiness, and the larger swans swam round him, and stroked him with their beaks.

Some little children were running about in the garden; the youngest exclaimed, 'There is a new one!'—the others also cried out, 'Yes, there is a new swan come!' and they clapped their hands, and danced around. They ran to their father and mother, bread and cake were thrown into the water, and every one said, 'The new one is the best, so young, and so beautiful!' and the old swans bowed before him.



The young swan felt quite ashamed, and hid his head under his wings; he scarcely knew what to do, he was all too happy, but still not proud, for a good heart is never proud.

He remembered how he had been persecuted and derided, and he now heard every one say he was the most beautiful of all beautiful birds. He shook his feathers, stretched his slender neck, and in the joy of his heart said, 'How little did I dream of so much happiness when I was the ugly, despised duckling!'