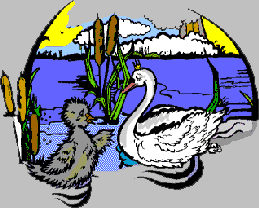
[Hear this tale read aloud](http://www.childrenstory.com/tales/sounds/ugly.ram)  <http://www.childrenstory.com/tales/1page/indexuglyduck.html>

That summer the country was particularly beautiful, and it was glorious to be out in the green fields and meadows. It was so amusing to see the white stork parading around on his long red legs and to hear him talking Egyptian, a language he had learned from his mother.

In the midst of the sunny meadow stood an old farmhouse. It was surrounded by a deep canal, and from the walls down to the water grew burdock shrubs so tall that children could stand under them. It was so nice and shady there that a mother duck decided it would be a good place to sit on her nest and hatch out her young ones.

At last one of the eggs cracked open, and then another and another until eight new little yellow ducklings poked out their heads and cried "Peep! Peep!"

"How big the world is!" exclaimed the ducklings. They were glad to be out of those tight little eggs, and their mother was glad to let them look around at the leaves, for she knew how good for the eyes the color green is.

"But this isn't the whole world by any means," she told the ducklings. "There is much more of it. It extends far beyond the other side of the garden. Maybe we can all go there sometime. Let me see now; are we all here?"

She looked around and saw that one of her eggs, the largest, had not yet hatched. "Oh, dear," she said to herself, "I am so tired of sitting on eggs! I wonder how much longer this is going to last."

But she sat down on the nest again and waited some more.

At last the big egg cracked and broke open. Out came two big feet and a head. But it wasn't a soft little downy yellow head like the other ducklings. This one was big and white, with a long scrawny neck and a fuzzy body.

"My, my!" exclaimed the mother duck when she saw him. "He certainly doesn't look like any of my other children. I wonder how he got to be so funny-looking?"

"He's ugly!" quacked the other ducklings. "He doesn't look a bit like us. We don't want to play with him." And they waddled down to the pond with their mother behind them. She shoved them in and jumped in after them. The all swam beautifully.

"I'll bet that big ugly white brother of ours can't swim!" exclaimed one of the little yellow ducklings.

But the ugly duckling had followed them down to the pond and , seeing them all swimming, he jumped in and swam too, at least as well as any of them.

"On my word!" exclaimed the mother duck. "He certainly can swim, big and ugly as he is! He must be my own child, and, after all, he's not so very ugly if you look at him right."

The next day the mother duck decided to let her ducklings see something of the world. "Come along," she said, "and I'll introduce you to the animals in the poultry yard across the meadow. Stay close to me now, all of you, so you won't get stepped on. And look out for the cat."

When they got to the poultry yard, a terrible fight was going on. "Dear, dear!" said the mother duck. "People are always fighting!"

But she gave her ducklings their first lesson in good manners too. "You see that big haughty-looking duck with the red ribbon around her leg?" she said. "That means she is a very important person - a Spanish grandee, in fact. Now, I want you all to curtsy to her politely."

They did it, nicely too, but the Spanish grandee took one look at the poor ugly duckling and bit him in the neck.

"You leave him alone!" commanded his mother. "He may not be as pretty as some, but he has a sweet disposition, and he is the best swimmer of the lot. Besides, he'll look better when he grows up. He won't seem so big and awkward then."

But all the creatures in the yard made fun of the ugly duckling just the same. The ducks pushed him and the chickens teased him and the turkeys bit him. Even the girl who fed the poultry kicked him. And his very own brothers and sisters were so mean to him that he felt just terrible.

One day, when he couldn't stand it any longer, her decided to fly away. He flew over the barnyard fence and on and on, weary and unhappy, until he came to the marsh where the wild ducks lived.

When they saw the poor duckling, they said, "My, how ugly you are! But we don't really mind as long as you don't marry any of us. You can stay here if you want to."

The poor duckling was very grateful and lay down to get some much-needed rest. But at that very moment two shots rang out, and two wild geese fell down dead in the marsh. A hunter had shot them, and the ugly duckling was frightened almost to death. He bent down and put his head under his wing until the gunshots stopped. When they did, it began to rain, and soon it was pouring. But the duckling didn't care. He had to get away. So he half run and half flew over many fields and meadows, though he was drenched by the storm.

At last he came to a miserable little shack that seemed to remain standing only because it didn't know which way to tumble down.

The door hung open crookedly, and the duckling slipped in out of the rain.

Inside he found a woman with a pet cat named Sonnie and a pet hen who, because of her little legs, was called Chickabiddy-Shortshanks. The ugly duckling fell asleep at once and no one noticed him. But in the morning the cat purred and the hen clucked and the woman said "what's the matter?" Her eyesight wasn't very good and she thought, "Maybe this is a rare prize duck who will lay eggs for me."

"Can you lay eggs?" the hen asked. "No," replied the duckling. "Can you purr and arch your back?" asked the cat.

"No."

"Then what can you do?" they wanted to know.

"I can swim," exclaimed the ugly duckling. "It's delightful to dive into the water and feel it all around you."

"You must be crazy," said the cat and the hen. And the duckling went. He swam and dived and ran and flew but everyone gave him the cold shoulder because he was so ugly.

At last summer was over and autumn came with leaves turning brown and whirling in the chilly wind. The duckling was miserable indeed all alone in the cold cruel world.

But one evening, just as the sun was setting, he saw coming out of the bushes a flock of handsome white swans with long graceful necks. They spread their wings and, with a strange cry, rose higher and higher as they flew to warmer regions.

The ugly duckling thought he had never seen such beautiful creatures before. How he admired them! He would have been happy indeed if they had so much as noticed him.

But they did not. They flew south, not even seeing the ugly duckling in the freezing lake. And soon it was winter and the lake froze over holding the duckling fast. What a terrible night that was for the poor creature! He almost froze to death.

But early the next morning a farmer passing by broke the ice, lifted the duckling out, and took him home.The duckling soon came to himself again as the farmers children played with him. But he was so frightened at these strange surroundings that he fluttered into the milk-pan, spilling milk all over the place. The farmer's wife was annoyed by this and the duckling, frightened out of it's wits, flew first into the butter tub and then into the flour- barrel. What a sight he was! The woman struck out at him with the fire-tongs while the children laughed and screamed and tumbled all over each other trying to catch him.

Luckily for him the door was open and he was able to slip out. He lay behind a bush in the snow and stayed there until the winter was over. But at last it grew warm and sunny. Birds sang and buds swelled. It was spring!

All at once the duckling found he could flap his wings, and one day he found himself in a beautiful garden where sweet-scented blossoming trees bent down to the water Suddenly three glorious white swans appeared ruffling their feathers as they swam lightly across the water. The ugly duckling gazing at the beautiful birds, thought to himself, "If I dare go near them, they will kill me because I am so ugly. But I don't care. Better to be killed by these beautiful creatures than to be bitten by ducks and hens, or kicked by the poultry-girl, or starve in the winter."

So he dived into the water and swam out to the swans. "Kill me!" cried the poor creature, bending his head down to the water.

But what was this he saw reflected in the clear water? It was his own image! For the first time he saw himself as he really was. And, to his utter amazement, he saw that he was not an ugly duckling- or a duckling at all-but a swan-a beautiful white swan!

You see, a bird who comes a swan's egg is a swan even if the egg happens to be hatched by a duck, and ducks think that no one is pretty except a duck. They think anyone who doesn't look like a duck is ugly, even the most beautiful swan.

But now the "ugly duckling" knew why he had felt so much love for the beautiful swans, and he knew he was as beautiful himself as they were.

The swans recognized him too, as one of them, and they swam around him stroking him with their beaks.

By and by some children came down to the lake to throw breadcrumbs to the swans. "Look!" cried the youngest. "There's a beautiful new white swan!" And the other children shouted happily, "Yes, he is the most beautiful one of all!"

Of course the swan who had been considered an ugly duckling was very happy. But he never became vain or conceited. He always remembered how it felt to be despised and teased, and he was very sorry for all the creatures who are so treated merely because they are different from the people around them.

But now that he was appreciated at last, he rustled his wings, lifted his slender neck, and sighed happily, "To think that this joy should come to one who has always been considered an ugly duckling! It's almost to good to be true."