"How big the world is!" piped the little ones, for they had much more space to move around in now than they had had inside the egg.

"Do you think that this is the whole world?" quacked their mother. "The world is much larger than this. It stretches as far as the minister's wheat fields, though I have not been there. . . . Are you all here?" The duck got up and turned around to look at her nest.

"Oh no, the biggest egg hasn't hatched yet; and I'm so tired of sitting here! I wonder how long it will take?" she wailed, and sat down again.

"What's new?" asked an old duck who had come visiting.

"One of the eggs is taking so long," complained the mother duck. "It won't crack. But take a look at the others. They are the sweetest little ducklings you have ever seen; and every one of them looks exactly like their father. That scoundrel hasn't come to visit me once."

"Let me look at the egg that won't hatch," demanded the old duck. "I am sure that it's a turkey egg! I was fooled that way once. You can't imagine what it's like. Turkeys are afraid of the water. I couldn't get them to go into it. I quacked and I nipped them, but nothing helped. Let me see that egg! . . . Yes, it's a turkey egg. Just let it lie there. You go and teach your young ones how to swim, that's my advice."

"I have sat on it so long that I guess I can sit a little longer, at least until they get the hay in," replied the mother duck.

"Suit yourself," said the older duck, and went on.

At last the big egg cracked too. "Peep . . . Peep," said the young one, and tumbled out. He was big and very ugly.

The mother duck looked at him. "He's awfully big for his age," she said. "He doesn't look like any of the others. I wonder if he could be a turkey? Well, we shall soon see. Into the water he will go, even if I have to kick him to make him do it."

The next day the weather was gloriously beautiful. The sun shone on the forest of burdock plants. The mother duck took her whole brood to the moat. "Quack . . . Quack . . ." she ordered.

One after another, the little ducklings plunged into the water. For a moment their heads disappeared, but then they popped up again and the little ones floated like so many corks. Their legs knew what to do without being told. All of the new brood swam very nicely, even the ugly one.

"He is no turkey," mumbled the mother. "See how beautifully he uses his legs and how straight he holds his neck. He is my own
child and, when you look closely at him, he's quite handsome. . . .
Quack! Quack! Follow me and I'll take you to the henyard and
introduce you to everyone. But stay close to me, so that no one steps on
you, and look out for the cat."

They heard an awful noise when they arrived at the henyard. Two
families of ducks had got into a fight over the head of an eel. Neither
of them got it, for it was sniped by the cat.

"That is the way of the world," said the mother duck, and licked
her bill. She would have liked to have the eel's head herself. "Walk
nicely," she admonished them. "And remember to bow to the old
duck over there. She has Spanish blood in her veins and is the most
aristocratic fowl here. That is why she is so fat and has a red rag tied
around one of her legs. That is the highest mark of distinction a duck
can be given. It means so much that she will never be done away
with; and all the other fowl and the human beings know who she is.
Quack! Quack! . . . Don't walk, waddle like well-brought-up duck-
lings. Keep your legs far apart, just as your mother and father have
always done. Bow your heads and say, 'Quack!'" And that was
what the little ducklings did.

Other ducks gathered about them and said loudly, "What do we
want that gang here for? Aren't there enough of us already? Pooh!
Look how ugly one of them is! He's the last straw!" And one of
the ducks flew over and bit the ugly duckling on the neck.

"Leave him alone!" shouted the mother. "He hasn't done anyone
any harm."

"He's big and he doesn't look like everybody else!" replied the
duck who had bitten him. "And that's reason enough to beat him."

"Very good-looking children you have," remarked the duck with
the red rag around one of her legs. "All of them are beautiful except
one. He didn't turn out very well. I wish you could make him over
again."

"That's not possible, Your Grace," answered the mother duck.
"He may not be handsome, but he has a good character and swims as
well as the others, if not a little better. Perhaps he will grow hand-
somer as he grows older and becomes a bit smaller. He was in the egg
too long, and that is why he doesn't have the right shape." She
smoothed his neck for a moment and then added, "Besides, he's a
drake; and it doesn't matter so much what he looks like. He is strong
and I am sure he will be able to take care of himself."

The Ugly Duckling

"Well, the others are nice," said the old duck. "Make yourself at
home, and if you should find an eel's head, you may bring it to me."

And they were "at home."

The poor little duckling, who had been the last to hatch and was
so ugly, was bitten and pushed and made fun of both by the hens and
by the other ducks. The turkey cock (who had been born with spurs
on, and therefore thought he was an emperor) rustled his feathers as
if he were a full-rigged ship under sail, and strutted up to the duck-
ling. He gobbled so loudly at him that his own face got all red.

The poor little duckling did not know where to turn. How he
grieved over his own ugliness, and how sad he was! The poor creature
was mocked and laughed at by the whole henyard.

That was the first day; and each day that followed was worse than
the one before. The poor duckling was chased and mistreated by
everyone, even his own sisters and brothers, who quacked again and
again, "If only the cat would get you, you ugly thing!"

Even his mother said, "I wish you were far away." The other ducks
bit him and the hens pecked at him. The little girl who came to feed
the fowls kicked him.

At last the duckling ran away. It flew over the tops of the bushes,
frightening all the little birds so that they flew up into the air. "They,
too, think I am ugly," thought the duckling, and closed his eyes—but
he kept on running.

Finally he came to a great swamp where wild ducks lived; and
here he stayed for the night, for he was too tired to go any farther.

In the morning he was discovered by the wild ducks. They looked
at him and one of them asked, "What kind of bird are you?"

The ugly duckling bowed in all directions, for he was trying to be
as polite as he knew how.

"You are ugly," said the wild ducks, "but that is no concern of
ours, as long as you don't try to marry into our family."

The poor duckling wasn't thinking of marriage. All he wanted was
to be allowed to swim among the reeds and drink a little water when
he was thirsty.

He spent two days in the swamp; then two wild geese came—or
rather, two wild ganders, for they were males. They had been hatched
not long ago; therefore they were both frank and bold.

"Listen, comrade," they said. "You are so ugly that we like you.
Do you want to migrate with us? Not far from here there is a marsh
The Ugly Duckling

had very short legs and that was why she was called Cluck Lowlegs. But she was good at laying eggs, and the old woman loved her as if she were her own child.

In the morning the hen and the cat discovered the duckling. The cat meowed and the hen clucked.

“What is going on?” asked the old woman, and looked around. She couldn’t see very well, and when she found the duckling she thought it was a fat, full-grown duck. “What a fine catch!” she exclaimed. “Now we shall have duck eggs, unless it’s a drake. We’ll give it a try.”

So the duckling was allowed to stay for three weeks on probation, but he laid no eggs. The cat was the master of the house and the hen the mistress. They always referred to themselves as “we and the world,” for they thought that they were half the world—and the better half at that. The duckling thought that he should be allowed to have a different opinion, but the hen did not agree.

“Can you lay eggs?” she demanded.

“No,” answered the duckling.

“Then keep your mouth shut.”

And the cat asked, “Can you arch your back? Can you purr? Can you make sparks?”

“No.”

“Well, in that case, you have no right to have an opinion when sensible people are talking.”

The duckling was sitting in a corner and was in a bad mood. Suddenly he recalled how lovely it could be outside in the fresh air when the sun shone; a great longing to be floating in the water came over the duckling, and he could not help talking about it.

“What is the matter with you?” asked the hen as soon as she had heard what he had to say. “You have nothing to do, that’s why you get ideas like that. Lay eggs or purr, and such notions will disappear.”

“You have no idea how delightful it is to float in the water, and to dive down to the bottom of a lake and get your head wet,” said the duckling.

“Yes, that certainly does sound amusing,” said the hen. “You must have gone mad. Ask the cat—he is the most intelligent being I know—ask him whether he likes to swim or dive down to the bottom of a lake. Don’t take my word for anything. . . Ask the old woman,
who is the cleverest person in the world; ask her whether she likes to float and to get her head all wet.”

“You don’t understand me!” wailed the duckling.

“And if I don’t understand you, who will? I hope you don’t think that you are wiser than the cat or the old woman—not to mention myself. Don’t give yourself airs! Thank your Creator for all He has done for you. Aren’t you sitting in a warm room among intelligent people whom you could learn something from? While you, yourself, do nothing but say a lot of nonsense and aren’t the least bit amusing! Believe me, that’s the truth, and I am only telling it to you for your own good. That’s how you recognize a true friend: it’s someone who is willing to tell you the truth, no matter how unpleasant it is. Now get to work: lay some eggs, or learn to purr and arch your back.”

“I think I’ll go out into the wide world,” replied the duckling.

“Go right ahead!” said the hen.

And the duckling left. He found a lake where he could float in the water and dive to the bottom. There were other ducks, but they ignored him because he was so ugly.

Autumn came and the leaves turned yellow and brown, then they fell from the trees. The wind caught them and made them dance. The clouds were heavy with hail and snow. A raven sat on a fence and screeched, “Ach! Ach!” because it was so cold. When just thinking of how cold it was is enough to make one shiver, what a terrible time the duckling must have had.

One evening just as the sun was setting gloriously, a flock of beautiful birds came out from among the rushes. Their feathers were so white that they glistened; and they had long, graceful necks. They were swans. They made a very loud cry, then they spread their powerful wings. They were flying south to a warmer climate, where the lakes were not frozen in the winter. Higher and higher they circled. The ugly duckling turned round and round in the water like a wheel and stretched his neck up toward the sky; he felt a strange longing. He screeched so piercingly that he frightened himself.

Oh, he would never forget those beautiful birds, those happy birds. When they were out of sight the duckling dove down under the water to the bottom of the lake; and when he came up again he was beside himself. He did not know the name of those birds or where they were going, and yet he felt that he loved them as he had never loved any other creatures. He did not envy them. It did not even occur to him to wish that he were so handsome himself. He would have been happy if the other ducks had let him stay in the henyard: that poor, ugly bird!

The weather grew colder and colder. The duckling had to swim round and round in the water, to keep just a little space for himself that wasn’t frozen. Each night his hole became smaller and smaller. On all sides of him the ice creaked and groaned. The little duckling had to keep his feet constantly in motion so that the last bit of open water wouldn’t become ice. At last he was too tired to swim any more. He sat still. The ice closed in around him and he was frozen fast.

Early the next morning a farmer saw him and with his clogs broke the ice to free the duckling. The man put the bird under his arm and took it home to his wife, who brought the duckling back to life.

The children wanted to play with him. But the duckling was afraid that they were going to hurt him, so he flapped his wings and flew right into the milk pail. From there he flew into a big bowl of butter and then into a barrel of flour. What a sight he was!

The farmer’s wife yelled and chased him with a poker. The children laughed and almost fell on top of each other, trying to catch him; and how they screamed! Luckily for the duckling, the door was open. He got out of the house and found a hiding place beneath some bushes, in the newly fallen snow; and there he lay so still, as though there were hardly any life left in him.

It would be too horrible to tell of all the hardship and suffering the duckling experienced that long winter. It is enough to know that he did survive. When again the sun shone warmly and the larks began to sing, the duckling was lying among the reeds in the swamp. Spring had come!

He spread out his wings to fly. How strong and powerful they were! Before he knew it, he was far from the swamp and flying above a beautiful garden. The apple trees were blooming and the lilac bushes stretched their flower-covered branches over the water of a winding canal. Everything was so beautiful: so fresh and green. Out of a forest of rushes came three swans. They ruffled their feathers and floated so lightly on the water. The ugly duckling recognized the birds and felt again that strange sadness come over him.

“I shall fly over to them, those royal birds! And they can hack me
to death because I, who am so ugly, dare to approach them! What
difference does it make? It is better to be killed by them than to be
bitten by the other ducks, and pecked by the hens, and kicked by the
girl who tends the henyard; or to suffer through the winter."

And he lighted on the water and swam toward the magnificent
swans. When they saw him they ruffled their feathers and started to
swim in his direction. They were coming to meet him.

"Kill me," whispered the poor creature, and bent his head humbly
while he waited for death. But what was that he saw in the water? It
was his own reflection; and he was no longer an awkward, clumsy,
grey bird, so ungainly and so ugly. He was a swan!

It does not matter that one has been born in the henyard as long as
one has lain in a swan's egg.

He was thankful that he had known so much want, and gone
through so much suffering, for it made him appreciate his present
happiness and the loveliness of everything about him all the more.
The swans made a circle around him and caressed him with their
beaks.

Some children came out into the garden. They had brought bread
with them to feed the swans. The youngest child shouted, "Look,
there's a new one!" All the children joyfully clapped their hands, and
they ran to tell their parents.

Cake and bread were cast on the water for the swans. Everyone
agreed that the new swan was the most beautiful of them all. The
older swans bowed toward him.

He felt so shy that he hid his head beneath his wing. He was too
happy, but not proud, for a kind heart can never be proud. He
thought of the time when he had been mocked and persecuted. And
now everyone said that he was the most beautiful of the most beautiful
birds. And the lilac bushes stretched their branches right down to
the water for him. The sun shone so warm and brightly. He ruffled his
feathers and raised his slender neck, while out of the joy in his heart,
he thought, "Such happiness I did not dream of when I was the ugly
duckling."