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In the Duck-Yard

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930], translated by M. R. James)

Once upon a time a Duck was brought from Portugal—some said from Spain, but it's much the same thing. She was called the Portuguese—she laid eggs, she was killed and cooked; that is her life-story. All the ducklings that crept out of her eggs were called the Portuguese, and that stood for something. At last, of all that breed only one was left in the duck-yard here, a yard to which the hens also had access, and in which the cock paced about with infinite pride.

"He makes me ill with his violent crowing," said the Portuguese, "but he is handsome, there's no denying, though he isn't a drake. He ought to control himself, but self-control is an art; it betokens a superior education. The little singing birds in the lime-tree in the garden next door have it. How deliciously they sing! There is something very touching in their song. I call it Portugal. If I had one of those little singing birds for my own, I would be a mother to him, loving and kind, it's in my blood, in my Portuguese nature."

Just as she was speaking there did come a little singing bird. He came headlong down from the roof. The cat was after him, but the bird got off with a broken wing and tumbled down into the duck-yard.

"That's just like the cat, that scum of the earth!" said the Portuguese. "I know him of old, ever since I had ducklings myself. To think that such a being should be permitted to live and go about on the roofs! I cannot think that would occur in Portugal." And she was sorry for the little bird, and the other ducks who were not Portuguese were sorry for him too.

"Poor little dear!" they said, coming up one after another. "To be sure, we're not singers ourselves, but we have got a sounding-board or something like it in our insides; we feel it, though we don't talk about it."

"But I will talk about it," said the Portuguese, "and I'll do something for him, for that is one's duty." So she got into the water-trough and splashed in the water so that she nearly drowned the little bird with the drenching he got, but it was well meant. "That's a kind action," said she. "Others can see it and take pattern by it."

"Pip!" said the little bird. One of his wings was broken, and it hurt him to shake it, but he quite understood the splashing was done out of kindness.

"You are exceedingly good, Ma'am," he said, but he didn't ask for any more.

"I never have thought much about my disposition," said the Portuguese, "I only know that I love all my fellow creatures, with the exception of the cat, whom nobody can expect me to like; he ate two of my children. But now do you make yourself at home here; it's easy enough. I myself come from a foreign land, as you can see from my bearing and my plumage. My drake is a native; he has none of my blood in him, but I'm not proud. If anyone here understands you, I can safely say I can do so."

"She's got Portulak in her crop," said a little common duck, who was witty; and the other common ducks thought this joke about Portulak excellent. It sounded so like Portugal, and they nudged one another and said: "Quack! Uncommonly witty she is." And therewith they began to talk to the little bird. "That Portuguese has a gift of speech, to be sure," they said. "We don't go about with big words in our beaks, but we have just as much sympathy as she. If we don't do much for you, we don't make a fuss about it, and that we consider is the civilest way to behave."

"You've got a charming voice," said one of the eldest, "it must be delightful to know that you give pleasure to so many people as you do. To be sure, I don't understand anything whatever about it, and so I hold my tongue, and that I'm sure is better than saying such silly things as a lot of people do say to you."

"Don't tease him," said the Portuguese, "he needs rest and nursing. Little bird, shall I give you another douche?"

"Oh, no! Do let me keep dry," he begged.

"Well, the water-cure is the only thing that does me any good," said the Portuguese. "Recreation too is of some use. Very shortly the neighbouring poultry will be calling. There are two Chinese hens who go about in feather-trousers, and are most cultured. They were imported too, which raises them in my estimation."

Accordingly the hens arrived, and the cock with them; he was on his good behaviour that day, and refrained from any vulgarity.

"You are a real singing bird," he said, "and with your little voice you do all that can be done with a little voice like that; but it wants a bit more of the steam-engine behind it, so that people can hear it's a gentleman speaking."

The two Chinese were ravished with the appearance of the little bird; he was so ruffled up with the douche he had had over him that they thought he was like a Chinese chick. "He's charming," they said, and entered into conversation with him, speaking in whispers and sounding their P's in the most distinguished Chinese manner. "We are of your kin. The ducks, even the Portuguese, belong to the swimming-birds, as you have doubtless observed. They do not even now appreciate us; but how many appreciate us, or care to do so? Not one, even among the hens, albeit we were born to sit on a higher perch than almost any of them. It matters not: we go our quiet way among the rest, whose principles are not ours; yet we look only on the good side, and speak only of the good in them—though it is hard indeed to find it where none exists. With the exception of our two selves and the cock, there is not a soul in the hen-house who is in the least gifted, but they are worthy, and that cannot be said of the inmates of the duck-yard. We warn you, little song-bird, trust not yonder one with the short tail, she is sly. That speckled one with the crooked stripe on her wings—she has a passion for wrangling and never lets anyone else have the last word—yet she is always in the wrong. That fat duck speaks ill of everyone, and that is repellent to our nature; if one cannot speak well of others, let him hold his tongue. The Portuguese is the only one who has the least pretensions to culture, and with whom one can associate, but even she is very passionate and talks too much about Portugal."

"What a lot those two Chinese have got to whisper about!" said some of the ducks. "They bore me; I've never said a word to 'em."

The drake now came up. He took the little bird for a sparrow. "Oh, well! I can't see these differences," he said, "they're much of a muchness. He's just a toy, and if you have 'em you have 'em."

"Never mind what he says," whispered the Portuguese. "He's excellent at his business, and business is the first consideration. But now I'm going to lie down and rest. One owes it to oneself, so as to be nice and fat when one comes to be embalmed with apples and prunes." So she lay down in the sun and winked with one eye. It was very nice lying there, she was very nice, and she went very nicely to sleep. The little bird pecked at his broken wing, and then nestled up to his protectress. The sun shone warm and pleasant, and it was a good place to be in. The neighbour hens went about and scratched; it was really only to look out for food that they had come there. First the two Chinese went off, and then the rest. The witty duck said of the Portuguese that she was fast getting into her second ducklinghood, and the other ducks shrieked with laughter. "Ducklinghood! She really is too funny." And then they repeated the former joke about Portulak—it was so amusing; and then they lay down too.

And there they were for a time, but suddenly someone threw down some mess into the duck-yard, which made a splash, and all the sleeping crew started up and flapped their wings. The Portuguese woke up too, rolled over, and gave the little bird a dreadful squeeze.

"Pip!" he cried. "You did tread hard on me, Ma'am."

"Well, why do you lie in my way?" she said. "You mustn't be so thin-skinned. I've got nerves too, but I never called out Pip."

"Don't be angry," said the little bird, "the Pip slipped out of my beak unawares."

The Portuguese paid no attention, but darted at the mess and made a hearty dinner. When she had finished and lain down again, the little bird came up and, meaning to make himself pleasant, he sang:

Tillelit
Of your head and wit
I'll sing a bit

As I flit, flit, flit.

"I want my after-dinner nap now," she said. "You must learn the ways of the house here. I'm going to sleep."

The little bird was quite taken aback, for he had meant to be very nice. When my lady woke up later on, he was standing in front of her with a little corn he had found. He laid it before her, but she hadn't slept well, and was consequently cross.

"You can just give that to a chicken," said she. "Don't stand there hanging about me."

"But you're angry with me," he said. "What have I done?"

"Done?" said the Portuguese. "The expression is by no means refined, I would have you observe."

"Yesterday it was sunny," said the little bird, "to-day it's dark and grey. I am very unhappy."

"You're out of your reckoning," said the Portuguese. "Why, the day isn't over yet. Don't stand there looking such a nincompoop."

"You're looking quite fierce at me, like the two horrid eyes when I tumbled down here into the yard."

"Impudence!" said the Portuguese. "Do you compare me to the cat, that beast of prey? Not a drop of bad blood have I in my body. I've taken you in hand, and I must teach you how to behave."

With that she bit off the head of the little bird, and there he lay dead.

"What now?" said she. "Couldn't he stand that? Well, then, he wasn't fit for this world. I've been a mother to him, that I know, for I have a heart."

The cock from next door stuck his head into the yard and crowed with steam-engine power.

"You'll be the death of me, crowing like that!" she said. "The whole thing is your fault. Now he's lost his head, and I feel like losing mine."

"Well, there ain't much of him lying there," said the cock.

"You'll please to speak respectfully of him," said the Portuguese. "He had tone, he had the power of song, and superior culture. He was affectionate and gentle, and that's as becoming to animals as it is to so-called humanity."

All the ducks gathered about the little dead singing-bird. Ducks have strong passions, whether of envy or of sympathy, and since there was nothing here to envy, they were sympathetic, and so were the two Chinese hens. "Such a singing bird we shall never find again! He was almost Chinese. And they wept till it made them cluck, and all the hens clucked, but the ducks were reddest in the eyes.

"We have a heart," they said. "Nobody can say we haven't."

"Heart!" said the Portuguese. "Of course we have—almost as much as you would in Portugal."

"Well, let's see about getting something into our tummies," said the Drake, "that's the first consideration. If one of our toys has come to bits, we've plenty left."

[End of *In the Duck-Yard* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]