

In the Duck-Yard

Hans Christian Andersen
DanishNordicScandinavian

Intermediate
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A duck arrived from Portugal. Some said she came from Spain, but that's all the same. At any rate she was called the Portuguese, and laid eggs, and was killed and cooked, and that was her career. But the ducklings which crept forth from her eggs were afterwards also called Portuguese, and there is something in that. Now, of the whole family there was only one left in the duck-yard, a yard to which the chickens had access likewise, and where the cock strutted about in a very aggressive manner.

“He annoys me with his loud crowing!” observed the Portuguese duck. “But he's a handsome bird, there's no denying that, though he is not a drake. He ought to moderate his voice, but that's an art inseparable from polite education, like that possessed by the little singing birds over in the lime trees in the neighbour's garden. How charmingly they sing! There's something quite pretty in their warbling. I call it Portugal. If I had only such a little singing bird, I'd be a mother to him, kind and good, for that's in my blood, my Portuguese blood!”

And while she was still speaking, a little singing bird came head over heels from the roof into the yard. The cat was behind him, but the bird escaped with a broken wing, and that's how he came tumbling into the yard.

“That's just like the cat; she's a villain!” said the Portuguese duck. “I remember her ways when I had children of my own. That such a creature should be allowed to live, and to wander about upon the roofs! I don't think they do such things in Portugal!”

And she pitied the little singing bird, and the other ducks who were not of Portuguese descent pitied him too.

“Poor little creature!” they said, as one after another came up. “We certainly can’t sing,” they said, “but we have a sounding board, or something of the kind, within us; we can feel that, though we don’t talk of it.”

“But I can talk of it,” said the Portuguese duck; “and I’ll do something for the little fellow, for that’s my duty!” And she stepped into the water-trough, and beat her wings upon the water so heartily, that the little singing bird was almost drowned by the bath she got, but the duck meant it kindly. “That’s a good deed,” she said: “the others may take example by it.”

“Piep!” said the little bird; one of his wings was broken, and he found it difficult to shake himself; but he quite understood that the bath was kindly meant. “You are very kind-hearted, madam,” he said; but he did not wish for a second bath.

“I have never thought about my heart,” continued the Portuguese duck, “but I know this much, that I love all my fellow-creatures except the cat; but nobody can expect me to love her, for she ate up two of my ducklings. But pray make yourself at home, for one can make oneself comfortable. I myself am from a strange country, as you may see from my bearing, and from my feathery dress. My drake is a native of these parts, he’s not of my race; but for all that I’m not proud! If any one here in the yard can understand you, I may assert that I am that person.”

“She’s quite full of Portulak,” said a little common duck, who was witty; and all the other common ducks considered the word Portulak quite a good joke, for it sounded like Portugal; and they nudged each other and said “Rapp!” It was too witty! And all the other ducks now began to notice the little singing bird.

“The Portuguese has certainly a greater command of language,” they said. “For our part, we don’t care to fill our beaks with such long words, but our sympathy is just as great. If we don’t do anything for you, we march about with you everywhere; and we think that the best thing we can do.”

“You have a lovely voice,” said one of the oldest. “It must be a great satisfaction to be able to give so much pleasure as you are able to impart. I certainly am no great judge of your song, and consequently I keep my beak shut; and even that is better than talking nonsense to you, as others do.”

“Don’t plague him so,” interposed the Portuguese duck: “he requires rest and nursing. My little singing bird, do

you wish me to prepare another bath for you?”

“Oh no! pray let me be dry!” was the little bird’s petition.

“The water-cure is the only remedy for me when I am unwell,” quoth the Portuguese. “Amusement is beneficial too! The neighbouring fowls will soon come to pay their visit. There are two Cochin Chinese among them. They wear feathers on their legs, are well educated, and have been brought from afar, consequently they stand higher than the others in my regard.”

And the fowls came, and the cock came; to-day he was polite enough to abstain from being rude.

“You are a true singing bird,” he said, “and you do as much with your little voice as can possibly be done with it. But one requires a little more shrillness, that every hearer may hear that one is a male.”

The two Chinese stood quite enchanted with the appearance of the singing bird. He looked very much ruffled after his bath, so that he seemed to them to have quite the appearance of a little Cochin China fowl. “He’s charming,” they cried, and began a conversation with him, speaking in whispers, and using the most aristocratic Chinese dialect.

the little singing bird receives distinguished patronage.

“We are of your race,” they continued. “The ducks, even the Portuguese, are swimming birds, as you cannot fail to have noticed. You do not know us yet; very few know us, or give themselves the trouble to make our acquaintance—not even any of the fowls, though we are born to occupy a higher grade on the ladder than most of the rest. But that does not disturb us: we quietly pursue our path amid the others, whose principles are certainly not ours; for we look at things on the favourable side, and only speak of what is good, though it is difficult sometimes to find something when nothing exists. Except us two and the cock, there’s no one in the whole poultry-yard who is at once talented and polite. It cannot even be said of the inhabitants of the duck-yard. We warn you, little singing bird: don’t trust that one yonder with the short tail feathers, for she’s cunning. The pied one there, with the crooked stripes on her wings, is a strife-seeker, and lets nobody have the last word, though she’s always in the wrong. The fat duck yonder speaks evil of every one, and that’s against our principles: if we have nothing good to tell, we should hold our beaks. The Portuguese is the only one who has any education, and with whom one can associate, but she is passionate, and talks too much about Portugal.”

“I wonder what those two Chinese are always whispering to one another about,” whispered one duck to her friend. “They annoy me—we have never spoken to them.”

Now the drake came up. He thought the little singing bird was a sparrow.

“Well, I don’t understand the difference,” he said; “and indeed it’s all the same thing. He’s only a plaything, and if one has them, why, one has them.”

“Don’t attach any value to what he says,” the Portuguese whispered. “He’s very respectable in business matters; and with him business takes precedence of everything. But now I shall lie down for a rest. One owes that to oneself, that one may be nice and fat when one is to be embalmed with apples and plums.”

And accordingly she lay down in the sun, and winked with one eye; and she lay very comfortably, and she felt very comfortable, and she slept very comfortably.

The little singing bird busied himself with his broken wing. At last he lay down too, and pressed close to his protectress: the sun shone warm and bright, and he had found a very good place.

But the neighbour’s fowls were awake. They went about scratching up the earth; and, to tell the truth, they had paid the visit simply and solely to find food for themselves. The Chinese were the first to leave the duck-yard; and the other fowls soon followed them. The witty little duck said of the Portuguese that the old lady was becoming a ducky dotard. At this the other ducks laughed and cackled aloud. “Ducky dotard,” they whispered; “that’s too witty!” and then they repeated the former joke about Portulak, and declared that it was vastly amusing. And then they lay down.

They had been lying asleep for some time, when suddenly something was thrown into the yard for them to eat. It came down with such a thwack, that the whole company started up from sleep and clapped their wings. The Portuguese awoke too, and threw herself over on the other side, pressing the little singing bird very hard as she did so.

“Piep!” he cried; “you trod very hard upon me, madam.”

“Well, why do you lie in my way?” the duck retorted. “You must not be so touchy. I have nerves of my own, but yet I never called out ‘Piep!’”

“Don’t be angry,” said the little bird “the ‘piep’ came out of my beak unawares.”

The Portuguese did not listen to him, but began eating as fast as she could, and made a good meal. When this was ended, and she lay down again, the little bird came up, and wanted to be amiable, and sang:

“Tillee-lilly lee,
Of the good spring time,
I’ll sing so fine
As far away I flee.”

“Now I want to rest after my dinner,” said the Portuguese. “You must conform to the rules of the house while you’re here. I want to sleep now.”

The little singing bird was quite taken aback, for he had meant it kindly. When Madam afterwards awoke, he stood before her again with a little corn that he had found, and laid it at her feet; but as she had not slept well, she was naturally in a very bad humour.

“Give that to a chicken!” she said, “and don’t be always standing in my way.”

“Why are you angry with me?” replied the little singing bird. “What have I done?”

“Done!” repeated the Portuguese duck: “your mode of expression is not exactly genteel; a fact to which I must call your attention.”

“Yesterday it was sunshine here,” said the little bird, “but to-day it’s cloudy and the air is close.”

“You don’t know much about the weather, I fancy,” retorted the Portuguese. “The day is not done yet. Don’t stand there looking so stupid.”

“But you are looking at me just as the wicked eyes looked when I fell into the yard yesterday.”

“Impertinent creature!” exclaimed the Portuguese duck, “would you compare me with the cat, that beast of prey? There’s not a drop of malicious blood in me. I’ve taken your part, and will teach you good manners.”

And so saying, she bit off the singing bird’s head, and he lay dead on the ground.

“Now, what’s the meaning of this?” she said, “could he not bear even that? Then certainly he was not made for

this world. I've been like a mother to him I know that, for I've a good heart."

Then the neighbour's cock stuck his head into the yard, and crowed with steam-engine power.

"You'll kill me with your crowing!" she cried. "It's all your fault. He's lost his head, and I am very near losing mine."

"There's not much lying where he fell!" observed the cock.

"Speak of him with respect," retorted the Portuguese duck, "for he had song, manners, and education. He was affectionate and soft, and that's as good in animals, as in your so-called human beings."

And all the ducks came crowding round the little dead singing bird. Ducks have strong passions, whether they feel envy or pity; and as there was nothing here to envy, pity manifested itself, even in the two Chinese.

"We shall never get such a singing bird again; he was almost a Chinese," they whispered, and they wept with a mighty clucking sound, and all the fowls clucked too; but the ducks went about with the redder eyes.

"We've hearts of our own," they said; "nobody can deny that."

"Hearts!" repeated the Portuguese, "yes, that we have, almost as much as in Portugal."

"Let us think of getting something to satisfy our hunger," said the drake, "for that's the most important point. If one of our toys is broken, why, we have plenty more!"

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