

The Portuguese Duck

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Intermediate
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A duck once arrived from Portugal. There were some who said she came from Spain, but that is almost the same thing. At all events, she was called the Portuguese duck, and she laid eggs, was killed and cooked, and that was the end of her.

The ducklings which crept forth from her eggs were also called Portuguese ducks, and about that there may be some question. But of all the family only one remained in the duck yard, which may be called a farmyard, since the chickens were admitted to it and the cock strutted about in a very hostile manner.

“He annoys me with his loud crowing,” said the Portuguese duck, “but still, he’s a handsome bird, there’s no denying that, even if he is not a duck. He ought to moderate his voice, like those little birds who are singing in the lime trees over there in our neighbor’s garden—but that is an art only acquired in polite society. How sweetly they sing there; it is quite a pleasure to listen to them! I call it Portuguese singing. If I only had such a little singing bird, I’d be as kind and good to him as a mother, for it’s in my Portuguese nature.”

While she was speaking, one of the little singing birds came tumbling head over heels from the roof into the yard. The cat was after him, but he had escaped from her with a broken wing and so came fluttering 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. How can such a creature be allowed to live and wander about upon the roofs? I don’t think they allow such things in Portugal.”

She pitied the little singing bird, and so did all the other ducks, who were not Portuguese.

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

“But I can talk,” said the Portuguese duck. “I’ll do something for the little fellow; it’s my duty.” So she stepped into the watering trough and beat her wings upon the water so strongly that the little bird was nearly drowned. But the duck meant it kindly. “That is a good deed,” she said; “I hope the others will take example from it.”

“Tweet, tweet!” 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 meant kindly, so he said, “You are very kind-hearted, madam.” But he did not wish for a second bath.

“I have never thought about my heart,” replied the Portuguese duck; “but I know that I love all my fellow creatures, except the cat, and nobody can expect me to love her, for she ate up two of my ducklings. But pray make yourself at home; it is easy to make oneself comfortable. I myself am from a foreign country, as you may see by my bearing and my feathery dress. My husband is a native of these parts; he’s not of my race, but I am not proud on that account. If any one here can understand you, I may say positively that I am that person.”

“She’s quite full of portulak,” said a little common duck, who was witty. All the common ducks considered the word “portulak” a good joke, for it sounded like “Portugal.” They nudged each other and said, “Quack! that was witty!”

Then the other ducks began to notice the newcomer. “The Portuguese has certainly a great flow of language,” they said to the little bird. “For our part, we don’t care to fill our beaks with such long words, but we sympathize with you quite as much. If we don’t do anything else, we can walk about with you everywhere; that is the best we can do.”

“You have a lovely voice,” said one of the eldest ducks; “it must be a great satisfaction to you to be able to give as much pleasure as you do. I am certainly no judge of your singing, so I keep my beak shut, which is better than talking nonsense as others do.”

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

do you wish me to prepare another bath for you?"

"Oh, no! no! pray let me be dry," implored the little bird.

"The water cure is the only remedy for me when I am not well," said the Portuguese. "Amusement, too, is very beneficial. The fowls from the neighborhood will soon be here to pay you a visit. There are two Cochin-Chinese among them; they wear feathers on their legs and are well educated. They have been brought from a great distance, and consequently I treat them with greater respect than I do the others."

Then the fowls arrived, and the cock was polite enough to keep from being rude. "You are a real songster," he said, "and you do as much with your little voice as it is possible to do; but more noise and shrillness is necessary if one wishes others to know who he is."

The two Chinese were quite enchanted with the appearance of the singing bird. His feathers had been much ruffled by his bath, so that he seemed to them quite like a tiny Chinese fowl. "He's charming," they said to each other, and began a conversation with him in whispers, using the most aristocratic Chinese dialect.

"We are of the same race as yourself," they said. "The ducks, even the Portuguese, are all aquatic birds, as you must have noticed. You do not know us yet—very few, even of the fowls, know us or give themselves the trouble to make our acquaintance, though we were born to occupy a higher position in society than most of them. But that does not disturb us; we quietly go our way among them. Their ideas are certainly not ours, for we look at the bright side of things and only speak of what is good, although that is sometimes difficult to find where none exists. Except ourselves and the cock, there is not one in the yard who can be called talented or polite. It cannot be said even of the ducks, and we warn you, little bird, not to trust that one yonder, with the short tail feathers, for she is cunning. Then the curiously marked one, with the crooked stripes on her wings, is a mischief-maker and never lets any one have the last word, though she is always in the wrong. The fat duck yonder speaks evil of every one, and that is against our principles; if we have nothing good to tell, we close our beaks. The Portuguese is the only one who has had any education and with whom we can associate, but she is passionate and talks too much about Portugal."

“I wonder what those two Chinese are whispering about,” whispered one duck to another. “They are always doing it, and it annoys me. We never speak to them.”

Now the drake came up, and he thought the little singing bird was a sparrow. “Well, I don’t understand the difference,” he said; “it appears to me all the same. He’s only a plaything, and if people will have playthings, why let them, I say.”

“Don’t take any notice of what he says,” whispered the Portuguese; “he is very well in matters of business, and with him business is first. Now I shall lie down and have a little rest. It is a duty we owe to ourselves, so that we shall be nice and fat when we come to be embalmed with sage and onions and apples.”

So she laid herself down in the sun and winked with one eye. She had a very comfortable place and felt so at ease that she fell asleep. The little singing bird busied himself for some time with his broken wing, and at last he too lay down, quite close to his protectress. The sun shone warm and bright, and he found it a very good place. But the fowls of the neighborhood were all awake, and, to tell the truth, they had paid a visit to the duck yard solely to find food for themselves. The Chinese were the first to leave, and the other fowls soon followed them.

The witty little duck said of the Portuguese that “the old lady” was getting to be quite a “doting ducky.” All the other ducks laughed at this. “Doting ducky,” they whispered; “oh, that’s too witty!” Then they repeated the joke about “portulak” and declared it was most amusing. After that they all lay down to have a nap.

They had been lying asleep for quite a while, when suddenly something was thrown into the yard for them to eat. It came down with such a bang that the whole company started up and clapped their wings. The Portuguese awoke, too, and rushed over to the other side of the yard. In doing this she trod upon the little singing bird.

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

“Well, then, why do you lie in my way?” she retorted. “You must not be so touchy. I have nerves of my own, but I do not cry ‘Tweet.’”

“Don’t be angry,” said the little bird; “the ‘Tweet’ slipped out of my beak before I knew it.”

The Portuguese did not listen to him, but began eating as fast as she could, and made a good meal. When she had finished she lay down again, and the little bird, who wished to be amiable, began to sing:

“Chirp and twitter,
The dewdrops glitter,
In the hours of sunny spring;
I’ll sing my best,
Till I go to rest,
With my head behind my wing.”

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

The little bird was quite taken aback, for he meant it kindly. When madam awoke afterwards, there he stood before her with a little corn he had found, and laid it at her feet; but as she had not slept well, she was naturally in a bad temper. “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 expressing yourself is not very polite. I must call your attention to that fact.”

“There was sunshine here yesterday,” said the little bird, “but to-day it is cloudy and the air is heavy.”

“You know very little about the weather, I fancy,” she retorted; “the day is not over 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 now I’ll teach you better manners.” So saying, she made a bite at the little singing-bird’s head, and he fell to the ground dead. “Now whatever is the

meaning of this?" she said. "Could he not bear even such a little peck as I gave him? 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 cock from the neighboring yard stuck his head in and crowed with steam-engine power.

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

"There's not much of him lying there," observed the cock.

"Speak of him with respect," said the Portuguese duck, "for he had manners and education, and he could sing. He was affectionate and gentle, and those are as rare qualities in animals as in those who call themselves human beings."

Then all the ducks came crowding round the little dead bird. Ducks have strong passions, whether they feel envy or pity. There was nothing to envy here, so they all showed a great deal of pity. So also did the two Chinese. "We shall never again have such a singing bird among us; he was almost a Chinese," they whispered, and then they wept with such a noisy, clucking sound that all the other fowls clucked too. But the ducks went about with redder eyes afterwards. "We have hearts of our own," they said; "nobody can deny that."

"Hearts!" repeated the Portuguese. "Indeed you have—almost as tender as the ducks in Portugal."

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

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