

The Ugly Duckling

Dorothy Canfield

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THE fire on the nursery hearth gave a little flicker and the sleepy child opened his eyes as the story finished. " — arching his neck and looking down into the clear water the ugly duckling saw that he had become a beautiful white swan, and all the sorrows he had suffered while he was an ugly duckling vanished away and he was as happy as sunshine and — " The fire fell together with a soft purr and the child was asleep.

When the young mother came back, empty-armed from the bedroom, she sank down before the fire and the occupant of the big chair. "Dear Mother-Aunt," she said, "how sweet to have you in my own home. Every day of life with my children is like a fresh revelation of all you were to us in those days of childhood you made so happy. I took it then as unconsciously as the sunlight or any other blessed thing, but now I know what sacrifices and never-ending care it meant. And after all — though that is so hard to realize — we weren't your own children and you were giving up your own life to us, day by day. It is such a joy now to have you see me trying to be to my little ones what you were to us — to have you hear me telling them the lovely tales you told us. I think my favorite is the one I told to-night. I can always hear your voice as I end it, and if my children feel as happy over the joy of the swan as I used to — "

The older woman laughed a little, and then sighed. "I have just seen the other ending to that story, and I don't know if I am glad or sorry — if I dare be sad! I think it would be wrong to grieve — and yet — "

"What can you mean?" asked the niece. "How can there be any story in the family at Boston that you have not known before?"

"It wasn't there. It was in West Ripley."

The niece sat up with arched eyebrows of question.

"You never even heard of West Ripley, did you? Yet that was the chapter in my life before I came to the long, dear story of your childhood — yours and all the rest — after your mother's death."

"Oh!" cried the other, "is there a story you never told me? Auntie dear, pretend I am your little girl again, and tell me a new story."

The white-haired woman stroked the sunny head at her knee. "This is a tale for a grown woman, dear, not for a child, and perhaps you can help me decide what its meaning is. It's all a part of the only little scrap of life of my very own I ever had.

"I was twenty-five before they let me go away from Boston and the sweet but narrow bonds of our life there. They never could understand my wanting to — girls didn't thirty years ago as they do now — and they were disappointed that I didn't marry. Father blamed my music — 'the girl's in love with her piano instead of a decent marrying man,' he used to say; and I imagine he was right. I had a horror of decent marrying people and all that they meant, and was always living in a fancy world where everyone was gay for the mere joy of all the lovely things there are. I so loved my music I seemed to need no other friend and it was like a bird's swoop out of an open window into the sunlight, when I found myself at West Ripley, free from all the round of unending home duties and the endless chain of aunts and uncles and cousins who were so kind but so alien.

"It is true I had my music pupils, — what seemed to me such a flight into freedom, was in reality only going up to a little mountain town to teach music — but they and all the rest were frankly strangers to me, and could not come knocking at the door of my real life with the kindly brutality of the people in Boston, presuming on a long but shallow acquaintance. So I lived my life and dreamed my dreams, and wrote a few songs out of the many I heard in my new and peaceful solitude and liberty."

She fell to musing, eyes on the fire, till her niece said: "Why, auntie I never heard of all this before — and how is your ugly duckling in it?"

"I stopped in West Ripley on the way here from Boston, the first time I have been back. It brought all that life up with such startling clearness. I don't think I ever spoke of it to you; it was one of the things I put aside.

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"The ugly duckling was one of my pupils, a big ungainly boy of seventeen, his parent's despair and bewilderment, and my joy. I remember the first time I heard him play — and the second! His mother, kindly, capable New England housewife asked me to tea and Dan was there, all big dark eyes and awkward hands and feet. They talked about him and what a problem he was with the frank cruelty of devoted families.

"He's bright enough, if he'd apply himself,' said the father, 'and you'd think any boy with his prospects in life would take an interest in his studies.'

"Yes,' explained the mother, 'my husband's business is the best in town and we've always looked forward so to having Dan (he's the only child we have living) take his place in the factory. But we want him educated — I'd like to have him go to the business college here, and learn just how to keep accounts and all, but he's so crazy over music he can't put his mind on anything else. Wherever he got that kink we can't imagine. There never has been anybody queer in the family since I can remember.'

"I looked over at Dan with a sudden interest. I knew what that sort of talk meant. He was crumbling his bread with a sullen flush on his face, and in pity I tried to turn the conversation.

"After tea we went into the front room, where Dan's piano stood. Mr. Marvin looked at it with great disapproval. 'I got that for Dan when he was a little fellow. His mother wanted to have accomplishments, but I declare, I think it's bewitched him.'

"I asked eagerly to have Dan play; it sounded as though he were a misunderstood genius. His mother said, 'yes, of course he would play. Play the "Maiden's Prayer" for the lady.' Dan protested hopelessly but ended by sitting down and banging through that old show piece with the irritating monotony of a hand organ. I smiled at the prompt disappearance of the little romance I had begun to weave about him, — 'Another village talent,' I thought amusedly.

"In spite of themselves the parents looked pleased as he finished. 'It sounds real pretty, don't it, mother?' said Mr. Marvin with a shamefaced pride, and Mrs. Marvin, 'Sometimes I think Dan does play real good.'

"I was asked to play, and sure of their comfortable denseness, I threw my whole soul into the 'Sonata Appassionata.' They did not ask me to play again, and could only say, with a bewildered politeness, that 'It must have taken you a long time to learn to play such a hard piece.' Dan had disappeared, and when I started home in the pleasant summer twilight he was nowhere to be found to bid me good-night. His father was irritated, and said sharply: 'He's got to stop his foolishness and tend to his work at school. I know he has a Latin lesson to get to-night.'

"As I went through a little clump of young pines near the house where I was living, I was startled by hurrying footsteps behind me. Dan was there, his long, thin face pale in the starlight and distorted with some strong feeling. 'Oh,' he cried, carried out of his shy hesitancy, 'I didn't think anybody could play like that. How can you look so like people! It's like being an angel to be able to do that! And you mustn't think I am like what I was to-night, — I never saw anybody before I wanted to play for as I do for myself — how could I know till you played? Can't I come now and show you on your piano? I can't bear to have you sleep thinking I am like that — when you are the only one I ever saw who — oh, please let me play for you!'

"When we were inside the house he hurried to the piano and began the 'Spring Song.' I sat transfixed with astonishment and an odd pain, for I felt as though a powerful intruder had pushed his way into my own domain. And yet he could be no intruder — this joyful apparition of youth and ecstasy, who sat uncovering to me the hidden sweet things of his heart. When he had finished he whirled about, still glowing with the fire of his music, but was suddenly smitten dumb with his old awkward embarrassment, a crimson shame at his own boldness flaming in his cheeks, and a sudden doubt of himself quivering in his sensitive mouth. I am always proud when I think I had the generosity to welcome him to his own. 'Dan,' I said, 'you are one of the chosen. Never let anything come between you and your music. It is your kingdom.'

"The boy looked at me for a moment in silence. Then suddenly his face twisted like a child's and he broke into loud sobs. He rushed out of the house as rapidly as he had rushed in, and following him to the door, I heard the sound of weeping from the dark group of silent pine trees.

"After that there was a long time when I could never catch sight of him, until one day his mother came in with him to ask me to give him lessons. 'We think he plays plenty good enough a'ready,' she said cheerfully, 'but he's promised to study real hard and graduate with his class if his father will let him take lessons of you. He never liked that other teacher we had here.' I agreed, and Dan and I were left alone together — the boy all blushes and

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shamefaced embarrassment in speaking of his art.

"It was only after many months of work together that he came to trust me with his half-formed aspirations and ideals, though I lavished on the big rustic lad every atom of tact and sympathy I had. It was not that he was hard to lead. On the contrary, he had that curious plastic yielding to circumstances so often accompanying the lyric gift, and once he told me that just before I came he had been on the point of giving up his music altogether. I exclaimed in horror at this, and he explained. 'Father and mother were so much disappointed over me, and the minister came to talk to me about what was right to them, and my Aunt Jane told me there were other ways of going wrong and breaking your folk's hearts than by getting drunk, and —'

"I flamed at this with missionary fervor. It was like a soul to be saved. 'Dan!' I cried. 'Don't listen to them, — they don't know what a precious, — what an inestimable, what a sacred treasure you have. It is a holy gift from Heaven. They are like blind people, — trust me who can see!'

"We were under the pine trees that day, it was in early spring, and Dan was lying on his back on the brown needles. The tears came into his eyes as I spoke, and he said fervently: 'It's like being let out of prison to hear you say that. I want to do what's right, and it nearly kills me to be made to think it's wrong to go on with my music.'

"'Never think so again, Dan,' I cried with youthful sureness of my convictions.

"He shook his head uncertainly. 'When I am with you I don't, but at home — ' he paused, 'I'm all they have got —'

"I knew the way to exorcise this demon of a New England conscience, and took him into the house to the piano, where he was soon playing Beethoven with a premature power and vigor that surprised me. I had heard all the great pianists of that day and I had never seen one who could move me more, one who could equal the occasional felicities of expression which were absolutely ravishing in Dan's playing. At times, through the roughness of his technic, there pierced a poignant beauty that used to leave me quite breathless. I have heard all the great artists since then, but a certain throbbing spontaneity which was his, and which recreated the music he played, they all lack.

"The scene under the pines came back to me with a pang of compunction the next fall when his mother came to see me, her face swollen with weeping, to ask me to use my influence with Dan in turning him to his duty. 'He'll kill his father yet!' she sobbed. 'My husband is just heart-broken over his shiftlessness — the only child we have, and we've done everything in the world for him! To think a son of mine should be so lacking in a sense of duty! He's just told his father that he won't go into the factory at all — and I thought Daniel would have a stroke! I'm going to get the minister to talk to him again, and I thought if you would — ' She hurried away, her face buried in her handkerchief, leaving me with the first hesitation in my youthful, one-sided view of life. For a moment I blamed myself for fostering rebellion in Dan, and I almost decided to withdraw altogether from the responsibility of shaping his life, but later I felt again that, if I stood aloof, I would be leaving an exquisite and fragile flower to be ruthlessly thrust under the sod by a plow.

"Although I had decided, I had no opportunity to act on my decision, for that very evening came the letter from your father, telling of your mother's death, and begging me, his only sister, with no family of her own, to come to his desolate house."

The younger woman caught her hand and kissed it. "I know your side of the story from that moment, dearest — absorbing care, so loving and so complete that father's children never knew they had lost a mother. Did you see your boy again before you left?"

"Yes, he played for me once, something from a Wagner opera, I had somehow secured, though nobody knew him then. How he did play that! Ah, what would he have said to modern music?"

There was a pause, and then the niece said: "You speak as though he were dead. Is he?"

"No — and yes. I saw him in West Ripley last week — the first time since those days. I had not even heard of him, I was so busy those first years with my new and beautiful duty of caring for you little ones. I only heard that his father died soon after I left, but that was all till I saw him!"

"What is he like now, Auntie?"

"Old and fat and bald. I felt positively sick when I learned that the pallid, fat old man with puffy hands who took up the collection in church was all that was left of my joyous, youthful genius, singing his heart away at the piano.

"He is a pillar of the church, the prominent citizen of West Ripley, a member of the State Senate. His mother

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— still a vigorous old lady — told me with thankful and remorseful tears in her eyes how she had misjudged Daniel. 'I used to think he might go wrong or queer, when he was a boy. Maybe you remember how odd he was, but the minister and I kept working with him, and praying for him, and then when his father died and he had me to take care of and the factory to run he seemed to sober down. He worked like a madman for three or four years, and then once he told me he was trying to make enough to stop and learn some more music. That upset me so as I can't say. It just seemed to me as though I couldn't bear it, when I'd thought he was all cured of that nonsense. And I thought anyway 'twas time for him to be settling down with a family of his own, and so I sort o' engineered him toward my cousin's step-daughter. She was an awful pretty girl and dead in love with Dan. After they were married, he did really and truly sober down and I've never heard him say a word about music since.

"It's queer, he swung right t'other way and never would touch the piano, not even to play hymns of a Sunday evening, as we'd like to have him. He won't stay in the room where one of his girls is practisin' — seems to despise it now as much as he used to love it. Unreasonable, ain't it? She's a real, practical, sensible woman — his wife is — and anyway there's nothing so settling for a young man as being married and having a family. He's been the best son and husband and father you can think of — he's a good man, Daniel is, if he is my son.'

"She told me all this while we were waiting for dinner in Dan's house. A little later his rosy, buxom daughters came in, talking animatedly of a church fair. Dan was late, through some extra business at the factory and had to hurry through his dinner.

"Afterwards, old Mrs. Marvin asked me to play, and with all my soul torn between pity and sorrow and content, I played the 'Sonata Appassionata.' When I finished I looked at Dan. He was paler than usual and the big pouches under his eyes hung down heavily, but for one instant he looked at me with the eyes of the boy under the pine trees — eyes filled with tears. And then it was all over — like the last flicker of a dying candle. He puffed his big black cigar, played with his youngest daughter who sat on his knee, repelled good-naturedly the importunate demands of the others for his purse, and looked at me and the world with the keen and shallow eyes of the successful business man. The ugly duckling had developed into no useless swan, but had satisfied the reasonable and loving demands of the duck yard. How could I do anything but sorrow? How dared I do anything but rejoice?"

Her niece rose to her knees and threw her arms about the older woman. "You've been telling me two stories," she cried, "yours as well as your boy's. Dear Mother-Aunt, I never knew before that you, too, were an ugly duckling who was not allowed to develop into a swan! I never knew what you were sacrificing for all the loving service that made our childhood so sweet. But dearest, I cannot regret it — there is no life but that for you, the best life can give you — love in a home, and children. Why, when I think of my own children!" her face all alight with a soft fervor of domesticity, "would I give them up for all the music in the world. And think how we love you! You may not have grown to be a beautiful swan, but you have grown to be something better — to be an angel!"

Her aunt smiled at her affectionately, "you are right dear, — love is best — of course you are right, — and yet — "