

In the duck yard

A duck arrived from Portugal. Some people said she came from Spain, but that doesn't really matter. She was called the Portuguese; she laid eggs, and was killed and dressed and cooked; that's the story of her life. But all the ducklings that were hatched from her eggs were also called Portuguese, and there's some distinction in that. At last there was only one left of her whole family in the duck yard - a yard to which the hens also had access, and where the cock strutted about with endless arrogance.

"His loud crowing annoys me," said the Portuguese Duck. "But there's no denying he's a handsome bird, even if he isn't a drake. Of course, he should moderate his voice, but that's an art that comes from higher education, such as the little songbirds over in our neighbours lime trees have. How sweetly they sing; There's something so touching over their melodies; I call it Portugal. If I only had a little songbird like that I'd be a kind and good mother to him, for that's in my blood - my Portuguese blood!"

While she was speaking, suddenly a little songbird fell head over heels from the roof into the yard. The cat had been chasing him, but the bird escaped with a broken wing and fell down into the duck yard.

"That's just like the cat, that monster!" said the Portuguese Duck. "I remember his tricks from when I had ducklings of my own. That such a creature should be permitted to live and roam about on the roofs! I'm sure such things could not happen in Portugal!"

She pitied the little Songbird, and even the other ducks who weren't Portuguese felt pity for him, too.

"Poor little fellow," they said, and then one after another came up to look at him. "Of course, we can't sing," they said, "but we have an inner understanding of song, or something like that. We can feel it, even if we don't talk about it."

"Then I will talk about it," said the Portuguese. "And I'll do something for this little fellow; it's only my duty." And then she stepped into the water trough and thrashed her wings about the water so vigorously that the little Songbird was almost drowned by the shower he got, but he knew the Duck meant well. "There, that's a good deed," she said. "The others may observe it and profit by my example."

"Peep!" said the little Bird; one of his wings was

broken, and he was finding it difficult to shake himself, but he quite understood that the bath was meant kindly. "You're very kindhearted, madam," he said, hoping she wouldn't give him another shower.

"I never thought much about my heart," said the Portuguese. "But I know this much - I love all my fellow creatures except the cat; nobody could expect me to love him, for he ate up two of my ducklings. Now make yourself at home, for you can be quite comfortable here. I myself am a foreigner, as you can tell from my bearing and my feather dress. My drake is a native of this country; he doesn't have my blood, but still I'm not proud. If anyone in this yard can understand you, I may safely say it is I."

"Her beak is full of portulaca," said a common little Duck, who was considered very witty. All the other common ducks decided the word portulaca was very funny, for it sounded like Portugal. They poked each other and said, "Quack!" He was really so witty! And now all the other ducks began to pay attention to the little Songbird.

"The Portuguese certainly has a great command of language," they said. "For our part, we haven't room in our beaks for such big words, but we have just as much sympathy, anyway. Even if we don't actually do anything for you, at least we will go about quietly with you; and that we think is the nicest thing we can do."

"You have a lovely voice," said one of the older Ducks. "It must be a great satisfaction to you to give so many as much pleasure as you do. I don't really understand singing, so I keep my beak shut; that's better than chattering nonsense to you the way the others do."

"Don't bother him," said the Portuguese. "He needs rest and care. My little Songbird, do you want me to give you another shower bath?"

"Oh, no, please let me stay dry!" he begged.

"The water cure is the only that does me any good when I'm sick," said the Portuguese. "But amusement helps, too. The neighboring hens will soon be coming to visit us; there are two Chinese hens among them. They wear breeches, are well educated, and have been imported, so they stand higher than the others in my esteem."

And the hens came, and the Cock came with them;

today he was polite enough not to be rude.

"You're a true songbird," he said, "and you do all you possibly can with such a small voice as yours. But you should have a little steam power, so everyone would hear that you are a male."

The two Chinese were enraptured at the appearance of the Songbird. He was still very much ruffled up after his bath, so he looked to them like a little China chicken.

"He's charming!" they cried, and then engaged themselves in conversation with him; they talked in whispers and with a p-sound, in elegant Chinese. "We belong to your race.

"The Ducks, even the Portuguese one, are swimming birds, as you must have noticed. You don't know us yet; not very many people take the trouble to know us - not even any of the hens, though we were born to occupy a higher perch than most of the others. But that doesn't bother us; we go our way quietly among the others, whose ideals are quite different from ours. We look only at the bright side of things, and mention only what's good, though it's sometimes difficult to find something like that when there isn't anything. Besides us two and the Cock, there is no one in the whole hen yard who is talented. And honesty does not exist among the inhabitants of this duck yard.

"We warn you, little Songbird, don't trust that one over there with the short feathers in her tail - she's tricky. The spotted one there, with the crooked stripes on her wings, is always looking for an argument and won't let anybody have the last word, though she's always in the wrong. The fat Duck over there never has a good thing to say about anybody, and that is contrary to our nature; if we haven't something good to say, we keep our beaks shut. The Portuguese is the only one who has a little education and whom one can associate with, but she's hot-tempered and talks too much about Portugal."

"How those two Chinese are always whispering!" said one of the Ducks. "They annoy me; I have never spoken to them."

Now the Drake came up; and he thought the little Songbird was a sparrow.

"Well, I don't see any difference," he said. "It's all the same, anyway. He's just a plaything, and if you have one, why, you have one."

"Don't pay any attention to what he says," the Portuguese whispered. "He is a very respectable businessman, and with him business always comes

first. But now I'm going to lie down for a rest. You owe that to yourself, so you'll be nice and fat when the time comes to be embalmed with apples and plums."

And then she lay down in the sun and blinked one eye; she lay so comfortably and felt so well, and so she slept very comfortably.

The little Songbird busied himself with his broken wing, but finally he too lay down, pressed close beside his patroness; the sun was bright and warm; it was a good place to be.

The neighbor's hens scurried about, scratching up the earth, for, to tell the truth, they had come visiting solely for the sake of getting something to eat. The Chinese were the first to leave the duck yard, and the other hens soon followed them.

The witty little Duck was talking about the Portuguese and said the old lady was on the brink of "Duckdom's dotage." At this the other Ducks chuckled. "Duckdom's dotage!" they cackled. "That's unusually witty!" Then they repeated the other joke about portulaca - that was very amusing to them - and then they lay down.

They had been sleeping for some time when suddenly some food was thrown in for them. It landed with such a thump that the whole flock started up from sleep and flapped their wings. The Portuguese woke up, too, and rolled over on the other side, squeezing the little Songbird very hard as she did so.

"Peep!" he said. "You stepped so hard on me, madam."

"Well, why do you lie in the way?" she said. "You mustn't be so touchy. I have nerves, too, but I have never yet said, 'Peep!' "

"Please don't be angry," said the little Bird. "The 'Peep' slipped off my beak before I knew it."

The Portuguese didn't listen to him, but began gobbling as fast as she could, until she had made a good meal. When she had finished, she lay down again, and the little Bird came up and tried to please her by singing:

Tillee-lilly-lee,
Of your heart with glee
I shall sing with love
When I fly above!

"I need to rest after my meal," said the Portuguese.

"While you're here you must follow the house rules. I want to take a nap now."

The little Songbird was quite bewildered, for he had only tried to please her. When she awoke later he stood before her with a grain of corn he had found and

laid it in front of her; but as she hadn't slept well she was in a very bad humor.

"You can give that to a chicken!" she said. "And don't stand and hang over me!"

"Why are you angry with me?" he asked. "What have I done?"

"Done?" said the Portuguese. "Your manner of expression isn't very refined; I must call your attention to that."

"Yesterday it was all sunshine here," said the little Bird. "But today it's dark and cloudy. It makes me very sad."

"You don't know much about weather, I guess," said the Portuguese. "The day isn't over yet. Don't just stand there looking stupid."

"But you're looking at me just as those two wicked eyes did when I fell into the yard!"

"Impudent!" said the Portuguese. "Comparing me with the cat - a beast of prey! There's not a drop of wicked blood in me! I've stood up for you, and I'll have to teach you good manners." And with that she bit off the Songbird's head, and he lay there dead.

"Now what does this mean?" she said. "Couldn't he even stand that? Then he certainly wasn't intended for this world. I know I've been like a mother to him, because I have such a good heart."

And then the neighbor's Cock stuck his head into the yard and crowed like a steam engine.

"Your crowing will kill me!" she cried. "It's all your fault! He's lost his head, and I've nearly lost mine."

"There isn't much left of him," said the Cock.

"You speak of him with respect," said the Portuguese, "because he had a voice and a fine education. He was tender and soft, and that's as good in animals as in so-called human beings."

And all the Ducks gathered around the little dead Songbird. Ducks have strong passions, whether they feel envy or pity, and since there was no one here to envy, they all felt pity, and so did even the two Chinese hens.

"We'll never find such a songbird again; he was almost a Chinese," and they both wept with a great clucking noise. All the other chickens clucked, too, but the Ducks walked around with the reddest eyes.

"We have hearts," they said. "Nobody can deny that."

"Hearts!" said the Portuguese. "Yes, that we have; they're almost as tender as in Portugal."

"Let us now think about getting something in our stomachs," said the Drake. "That's the most important

thing. If one of our playthings is broken, why, we have plenty more of them!"

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