

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

AND OTHER STORIES

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Reformation
Lightning

FOLK STORIES

I love reading folk stories. They refresh our minds, keep us entertained, and they can remind us of very important truths. This book contains ten stories all first written down by the famous Danish storyteller Hans Christian Andersen. He lived 200 years ago and was, perhaps, the best collector and teller of folk stories that has ever lived. You may not have heard of him, but the chances are you have seen or read or heard one of his stories. In fact, his stories seem to be as popular as ever, and even though they were written a long time ago, they have the same ideas and values that we have today.

There is, of course, a very simple reason why stories that are old still speak to us today. It is because every single person who has ever lived on

earth is made in God's image. The people who read Hans Christian Andersen's stories all those years ago were people who are just like us. That means that these stories show us the truth that the Bible says that we all know: that God is our creator and that there is a difference between right and wrong. So we can put on the glasses of Scripture and read old stories and see what they are saying and enjoy them all the more.

The Bible tells us that God speaks to us through his creation. If we could look at the galaxies in the Milky Way, or at creatures in the depths of the ocean, we would discover reflections of God's wisdom because there is nothing that Jesus Christ did not design and make. He has left his fingerprints on everything. When we read textbooks at school we are really reading how other people understand the thought patterns of Jesus Christ, because he created everything. Nature, creation and science all declare the goodness, wisdom and power of God.

The same is true for stories that tell us about different aspects of the world. So folk stories—like Hans Christian Andersen's—are all on our side as Christians because they help us to understand the world that God has made. When the apostle Paul was explaining the Christian faith to Greek philosophers

in Athens he quoted from one of their own writers. Even if you do not yet know God as your Father, or Jesus as your Saviour, or the Holy Spirit as your Counsellor, I hope that by reading these wonderful stories you might be helped to understand why you need rescuing by God's grace and that you come to see that the best way to live is in a relationship with him.

THE UGLY DUCKLING

Have you seen the video of the six ducklings who had to jump down from their nest on a high ledge onto some grass and then walk across a busy road to get to a lake? As the ducklings crossed the road people stood to the side blocking cars, buses, trucks and even bikes until the ducklings all followed their mother waddling over the road and across the grass. They then all plopped into the lake and swam after her. Millions of people have watched the video. We all love to see the deliverance of ducklings from danger.

There was once a mother duck who was sitting on seven pretty blue eggs, keeping them warm and waiting for them to hatch. But in the nest there was also a slightly bigger white egg. I don't know how it

got there. One by one the seven eggs hatched, but the larger egg remained in the nest.

One day an old friend of mother duck called to see her.

“I wish it would hurry up and hatch,” mother duck complained.

“I think you have enough ducklings already,” her friend said. “I would leave that one, or push it out of the nest into the river.”

“Oh no,” she said. “I am tired but not *that* tired. It will hatch in good time.”

So mother duck sat on the egg until finally, one day, she heard the sound of a beak pecking at the inside of the egg. She looked down and the beak appeared through a little hole, and then a head and finally a sound, “Peep, peep, peep!” before finally, standing on broken egg shells and looking around, there was a very large and very ugly duckling.

Mother duck’s husband came along to look at his brood. He was happy with the seven ducklings but took an instant dislike to the latest, largest and, what he described as, “the ugliest duckling I have ever seen”. He despised the little bird, turning his beak up at him as the other ducklings watched, and making fun of him so that all the other ducklings, without exception, took every opportunity to copy their dad.

They didn't invite him to play games with them. They spoke to him as little as they could.

The ugly duckling swam around the lake by himself getting bigger and bigger and increasingly lonely. How he wanted a friend. Just someone to talk to and laugh with. The other ducks all hung around together, or they went around in twos. But the ugly duckling went around on his own. The farm dog barked at him, and even the farm girl tried to kick him.

He soon learned to fly and one day he flew to another lake nearby where some wild ducks lived, but he did not get much of a welcome from them.

"Who are you?" they asked. "Where do you come from? What do you think you are doing here?"

It was not the welcome he was hoping for. He did not fit in. So he swam to the other side of the lake but then the sounds of the wind and the quacking of the other ducks was shattered by gunfire and dogs barking. Three men suddenly stood up on the side of the lake and began firing away at the ducks. They tried to escape by flying away, but they were shot out of the sky and fell into the water while the hunting dogs dived in to bring back the dead birds to their masters. One dog came very close to the ugly duckling, but the dog glanced at him and went on to

another floating duck. Even dogs don't want me, he thought.

When the hunters had gone the ugly duckling flew away. From the air he saw a farmyard. There were cows and sheep, chickens and turkeys, cats and dogs. They all seemed to be getting on with one another, so he glided through the air and landed in the yard. No one paid any attention to him at first. But when he walked near the cows they kicked out at him, then the dogs barked at him and the cats hissed and thrust out their claws. Finally the cockerel came strutting up to him and said, "There is no food here for you. If you know what's best for you get cracking out of here pronto!" There was no one at all who wanted to be his special friend.

He flew off again until he spied a cottage and an old woman in a little garden where there were no other animals at all. He landed in the garden and looked helplessly at the woman.

"My, you're a fine bird!" she said. "Come here. You look hungry. I have food for you."

The ugly duckling's heart jumped for joy. At last he had found a friend. He swallowed the food she gave him and the old lady took him to a doghouse next to the garden.

“You will be safe here,” she said and she locked the ugly duckling in.

The bird was very happy and settled down to sleep, but then he was surprised to hear through the open kitchen window the old woman speaking. She seemed to be talking to a friend.

“Hello Gertrude. I have had a bit of luck. A big plump bird flew into the garden a few hours ago. It was quite tame. I gave him some food and have locked him in the old doghouse. I think I am going to get a tasty meal out of this one! You must come over this Sunday and we will have a nice roast together.”

The ugly duckling was horrified. This woman was no friend at all. She wanted to fatten him up, kill him and eat him. He did not have much sleep that night. The woman came with a bowl of food that morning and then carefully closed and locked the door behind her. That evening the same thing happened and the ugly duckling wondered how he could possibly escape.

Later that day, the old woman peered into the darkness of the doghouse but couldn't see the ugly duckling. She leaned forward, and with that the ugly duckling jumped down as heavily as he could on her shoulders. Down she sprawled on her face, the door open behind her, and the bird sprang out of the

doghouse and waddled down the path, with the women, who was surprisingly agile, in pursuit. But the ugly duckling spread his wings and up, up and away he flew, the curses of the woman sounding in his ears. What hostility, from everyone, everywhere, he thought, as he soared through the air. With no one to trust, life did not seem to be worth living.

What could he do? He flew towards the sunset until he spotted an ornamental lake with a fountain and fine gardens all around it. He glided down to a quiet spot near an island and swam to the bank. He hid himself away, sheltering under some bushes and soon he fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, from the shelter of the reeds he looked across the lake where he saw a most wonderful sight. He saw six large white birds with long necks swimming in a squadron across the water. He had never seen anything more majestic in his whole life. What grace! What beauty! Oh that he could be as those birds instead of being ugly!

I will go to them, he thought, and if they hiss at me I will ask them to end my life. It will be a noble way to die.

So out from the bushes he swam heading for the swans. They all stopped and turned to him.

“Look! Another swan! What a beauty! Hello!

Where have you come from? Welcome to the Estate. You'll stay with us for a while? We've not had any new swans for so long."

They surrounded him and spoke with a classy grace and intelligence. He was quite overwhelmed, and did not understand what they said to him. After all, he was a young ugly duckling. Just then he bowed his head before them and saw a reflection of himself in the clear water. He did not recognise himself at all, but as he moved his head from side to side his reflection moved from side to side in perfect sync. The reflection was not of an ugly duckling but a beautiful swan! Could he be a swan? He was a swan! He couldn't believe it. He glanced down at the reflection again and the head of a swan looked back into his eyes. There they were, his brothers and sisters welcoming, smiling, wanting him to be with them.

"I am not an ugly duckling any longer. I ... am ... a ... swan."

Did you know that one of the first things that God said about the first human, Adam, was that it was not good for him to be alone. Even though Adam met with God every day, Adam was incomplete until he