

The Duckling

He was the last of five to hatch out. From the beginning his mother sensed he would be a problem duckling. He was smaller than the other four: he was never very interested in his food: he lagged behind the others when they first left the nest.



The real problem began the morning of the first swim. It was warm and sunny, and the river was low. Mother duck and father duck and five balls of fluff assembled on the grass beneath the great willow." Jump ! quacked mother duck. She jumped first, followed by father duck and four excited ducklings who paddled around in circles emitting high-pitched squeaks. It was some moments before they realised that the fifth duckling was still on the bank. He kept tensing himself to jump, then running back from the edge.

Mother duck swam back and began to coax him gently. 'Come on now. Just jump in. It's perfectly safe. It's easy. Look, we're all doing it !' 'I can't.' he replied with a frightened squeak. 'I can't swim.'

Father duck came across, quacking crossly. He had little patience at the best of times. 'Now stop this silliness. Whoever heard of a duck who can't swim. Jump in the water NOW, and let's have no more nonsense.' Fear of the water, however, was stronger than his fear of threatening words.

Father duck waddled up the bank and started to push the duckling with his beak. Every time he did, the duckling dodged and ran away under the safety of the willows. The angry quacking and frightened squeaks rose in intensity until mother duck, anxious and frustrated by her offspring, intervened. 'Leave him alone. Don't keep pushing him or he'll never do it.' Father duck took offence at that. 'All right then. I'll sit on the bank here and watch him. YOU can teach the others to swim !' The noise had attracted many other ducks in the colony along the river.

Throughout the next few days while the duckling still refused to get into the water, the neighbours gave advice very freely:

'I'd push him if I were you.'

"Coax him with some water cress tit-bits"

"Tell him how lovely the water is"

"Ignore him, he'll come round to it in time"

Finally, mother duck decided to take the duckling to the doctor. He held his surgery under the river bridge every evening. He prodded the duckling with his beak, gave a few thoughtful and fatherly quacks and said, 'I can't find anything wrong with him. Give him some chick-weed and if he's no better in a couple of days we'll ask the psychologist about him.'

The couple of days passed and the duckling was no better, so he and mother duck walked along the river bank to the reed-bed where the psychologist lived. The psychologist lay with his beak buried in his feathers and hardly seemed to listen while mother poured out their troubles. After a very long silence the psychologist asked a few questions about father duck and then made his judgement. '

The duckling is suffering from aquaphobia,' he pronounced. Keep on coaxing him into the water. Be patient and eventually something will happen. He pushed his beak further into his feathers and the interview was over.

Next morning the skies were dark and heavy. All the ducks were on the water. There was excitement in the air. The fifth duckling walked out across the mud and sand and climbed on to a large stone. Soon the rain began in torrents. He watched the other ducklings enjoying every raindrop. He wished he could be like them.

He was so absorbed in their antics that he was unaware how quickly the river was changing. Already the water was flowing round the stones. When he did notice, the water was halfway up the stone on which he stood, and it was still rising. In panic, he flapped and jumped, but no-one noticed. The water rose to the top of the stone, over his feet and up his legs until, horror of horrors, the river was lifting him. 'Help,' he cried, as the water lifted him clear of the stone. He started to paddle. Then, with a squeak that was almost a full-blown quack, he shouted, 'I'm swimming! I can swim!'

Amidst a constant chorus of quacks, the family and neighbours gathered around him in the rain. 'I knew he could do it,' glowed mother duck. 'Me too,' agreed father duck. 'So much for that doctor and psychologist and all the other advice.' 'No, no, chided, mother duck, 'They were not wrong. They all wanted to help. Whatever anyone said, in the end our duckling had to do it himself. He had to let go and swim.'

In the human world they call that the 'leap of faith'