

## The Rail's Tale\*

"Mummy, look: cute!"

"No, sweetheart, that's a moorhen."

I'm a water rail actually, and *that's* the sort of nonsense I have to put up with every day.

Not yesterday, though; yesterday was a whole different canal of carp. It's never good when the boy from the barge is around. What was it last week? Oh yes: Hans casting a net for froglets and sticklebacks. A bird's gonna starve at this rate. Anyway, yesterday he'd found an old tyre, tied it round the branch of the oak and was swinging from it.

"An accident waiting to happen," I said to Mr. Rail. He wasn't listening; too busy watching Mrs Mallard squabbling with other Mrs. Mallard.

Eventually, Hans got bored, started throwing the tyre around, and that's when it happened. Out of nowhere this great big rubber ring looped through the air.

"Duck!" he shouted. Old Mallard, floating around aimlessly, did just that: head straight under water, missing all the action. The tyre flew across the reeds and crashed into Mrs. Swan's nest. Well, you can imagine the kerfuffle; feathers, reeds, rushes. Mr. Swan got a right cob on and chased the boy off, while Mrs. Swan tried to save what she could. It was all in vain. I've never seen anyone look quite so distraught. The Swans flew off towards, er ... well, *that* way. They've not been back since.

This morning, I found one of their eggs, still warm in the morning sun. I didn't know what to do; it was too big for me to sit on. Mr. Rail help me scoop it up the bank into Mrs. Mallard's nest. She's always talking about fostering community spirit, so it makes sense. She's not the brightest bird around here either, so she probably won't even notice.

\*A prequel to The Ugly Duckling