

*Steve Dingley*

*Never things happen to all of us sometimes, and the very greatest happened to Puddleduck, a drake mallard. In the twinkling of an eye, he became almost a human being, and had to be a wild duck.*

Puddleduck was worried. He couldn't find his playmate and he was always restless and unhappy without him. He waddled across the lawn on his short legs with the rolling gait of Pop-eye, the sailor, his neck stretched, his bright eye alert. Happening to pass the gardener digging <sup>out place</sup> a hole to put a <sup>young</sup> plant in, he stopped so short that he sat back on his tail feathers, thrust his paddle-shaped bill down into the <sup>hole</sup> ~~mud~~ and gobbled up an angleworm. He couldn't pass up angleworms and before he knew it he was so interested in watching the shovel turn over the brown dirt that he forgot completely what ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> had had on his mind the minute before. When it came to angleworms, he really lost his self-control *and manners.*

Puddleduck was a handsome drake mallard with a satiny, showy coat. He wore a rich iridescent green cap that fitted down close to his pure white collar. His vest was a glowing chestnut brown, contrasting with his brownish-gray back, and on his wings were violet-green bars bordered with black ones like officers' ~~st~~ stripes for distinction. But the thing that made his whole attire jaunty were two stiff <sup>black</sup> ~~little~~ curls at the sides of his tail. He <sup>and he just couldn't help strutting</sup> was slick and stream-lined, ~~and no one knew it better than himself.~~ sometimes.

A slim police dog came around the corner of the house, and Puddleduck jerked himself out of the muddy hole and paddled *as fast as he could* over the grass on his flat webbed feet to meet him. He hustled and fussed about the dog's legs, stood up on his tip-toes and pulled an ear down, ~~and~~ nibbled at it, ran his bill over the dog's face, and acted as if he had found a long lost <sup>brother</sup> child and couldn't half express his relief. When the dog lay down in the sunshine, the duck cuddled ~~down~~ beside him, all the time caressing him and shaking his little black tail curls in satisfaction.



The queer and perhaps unnatural friendship between Puddleduck and Fike, the police dog, had begun a year before. One stormy afternoon ~~night~~ in September a man came to the door with a little box in his hand. He said he understood that this was a home where birds and animals of all kinds were loved, and ~~taken in~~ asked if a downy duckling could be taken it. <sup>hatched in a marsh near the seacoast</sup> It was one of a very late brood and all the rest had been caught by prowling animals or died from cold.

That night the storm howled around the house and the rain splashed against the windows. But the little duckling cuddled comfortably on some cotton in an apple box with an electric reading lamp ~~over~~ leaning over it for a little stove. ~~In such strange~~ He was homesick and lonesome for his mother's wild nest near the reeds of the marsh, and kept peeping continually. Fike was curious at this strange visitor and sat fascinated with his eyes glued over the edge of the box. ~~The lamp was kept at a height above the box to give just enough warmth, but not to much.~~ The yolk of a hard-boiled egg crumbled up, some bits of lettuce, and a cup of water were put in one corner ~~of the box.~~

And so the days of the calendar were tabbed <sup>off</sup> through the winter months. Puddleduck went through the stages of fuzzy infancy, pin-feathered childhood, and gangling youth. Fike watched <sup>his charge</sup> over him constantly. Many a time ~~the duck reached up from his box and nipped at his nose~~ he had his nose nipped <sup>for his pains</sup> as he leaned over. When the sunny days of spring came, both were outdoors and together constantly.

One day in summer Fike and Puddleduck were down on the river bank with the children, who had their bathing suits on. Children and dog swam out, leaving the duck standing bewildered



He had never been near the water before, although he <sup>for he had</sup> ~~lived~~ <sup>in a</sup> ~~on the shore.~~ He stood stiff-legged, craning his neck out toward <sup>human</sup> ~~this~~ feathers were water-proof and he was built to float and live <sup>water and told him this</sup> on it. He stood stiff-legged, craning his neck out toward the <sup>slowly</sup> swimmers. Finally he walked ~~gingerly~~ down over the pebbles, stepped gingerly in the edge of the water, tasted of it, ~~and~~ then moved out <sup>short</sup> a little way. <sup>He was surprised to find that he floated and</sup> sat rocking like a little boat. <sup>freedom</sup> The native freedom and feel<sup>ing</sup> of <sup>freedom</sup> it came to him. He dipped his bill into it, flapped his wings, and started out where the rest were.

When Fike saw the duck paddling out toward the group, he pricked up his ears and started for shore. Then a funny thing happened. He took hold of the tail feathers of Puddleduck and gently pulled him back on shore- out of danger.