

Harry the Swan & Other Stories is a collection of humorous short stories from rural life in the Great Lakes during the twentieth century, featuring mischievous animals, eccentric relatives, and amusing neighbors.

Harry the Swan & Other Stories

By Elle Rambo

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Harry the Swan
and
Other Stories



ELLE RAMBO

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. The exception to this disclaimer is the tribute to Peggy Gale, a lovely Cornish woman, who indeed emigrated to the U.S. from England, and Harry the Swan, who lives forever.

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1. HELEN AND HARRY

Their friendship began five years ago. He swam by her dock each day, as she weeded flowers and moved about the yard. She had noticed him as well, but they kept a distance, and wondered about each other. He was graceful and at ease. She was purposeful and focused upon her task at hand. Day by day, he came ever closer to watch her, while trying to maintain an aloof appearance. Affairs of the heart often start quietly and build through such admiration.

She entered the yard early on a dewy May morning to attend a neglected portion of the flower border. It was too early for his daily swim. She knelt to care for the flowers and soon the feeling of being observed came over her. As she turned to see what was there, he stood directly behind her. He was magnificent in his white coat. They glanced at each other, and she said quietly, "Well, hello. Do you want something to eat?"

The large swan waddled along beside her to the back door of the cottage, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. She spoke to him as they walked, and he followed along as though they were comfortable acquaintances. She brought out bread for him. He took one slice, and then two. He went to the bird bath to drink between slices. He was so tall that when he extended his neck he could drink from the bath without difficulty. She kept the conversation going to encourage him to trust her, but it was hardly necessary. One old soul can recognize another. Their meetings became daily after that, with Harry always insisting on two slices of bread.

Now, when he is out on the lake and she calls, "Harry," he comes to visit. How does Helen know that Harry is a boy? She says, "His behavior gives him away. When he wants food, he wants it now. He is persistent and won't go away until he gets his way. Doesn't that tell you something?" she says with a quiet smile. Why

is his name Harry? “My family and I decided that he definitely looks like his name should be Harry.” She doesn’t explain more than that, except for murmuring something about a person that they had known in the past who was kind-hearted, but bossy.

Soon Helen discovered she would have to lure him down to the lake, since Harry left “calling cards” on her lawn. She now takes the bread in her hand, and says, “Let’s go down to the lake.” He walks along beside her to the beach, which is quite a distance on swan legs. She leaves the bread and goes back to the house. Harry isn’t easily fooled, though. As soon as he finishes the bread, he is back at the door again. This goes on until he has eaten a half loaf of bread.

When asked where she buys the day-old bread for the swan, she said, “Oh, no, he doesn’t eat day old bread. He wouldn’t stand for that. I eat fresh bread every day and Harry does also. Some things are worth the price.” She now wets the bread a bit before she gives it to Harry to help him swallow it.

Helen says the neighbors are amused at the sight of her and Harry walking side by side down to the lake. But she thinks nothing of it.

Harry now patrols and controls Helen’s lakefront. Set on a smaller inland lake that feeds into Lake Michigan, there is an abundance of geese, ducks, and swans coming and going with the seasons. When other swans come in front of Helen’s home, Harry swoops over them honking and squawking until they go away. He will tolerate no competition for his lady’s attention, nor for the treats that come with it. Intruding swans come upon hard times when Harry is riled, and he has been known to peck them halfway across the lake as penance for their misdeeds. Helen can hear him in action against his competitors while she is inside, even with the doors and windows closed.

As Harry gained familiarity with his new friend, he would sometimes peck on the large picture window on Helen's front porch. There are two porches, but he is clever enough to choose the one with the biggest windows so he can watch her from the outside. If she does not come to the window, he comes around to the side door so he can see farther into the house. The pecking starts again. If she is gone for a day, she often finds him cuddled up sleeping against the door upon her return. She wonders if he may have lost his mate, because he is always alone when swimming in the lake.

Helen knows that Harry would willingly come into her house if she gave him the chance. He tries to put his head inside the door to look around, but she gently nudges him back. "If he gets inside, how will I get him out again?" she asks.

It's easy to understand why Harry chose her yard as his sanctuary. It has a massive green lawn leading down to the lake, abundant shade, and is fenced in except for the lake side. There are no dogs, cats, nor children to disturb him. There are tall pine trees swaying in the wind and other wildlife skittering through the yard. Three gray squirrels and one black squirrel play in the grass. There are a dozen bird feeders across the grounds with lots of action. The many shrubs offer the smaller birds protection in case an intruder dares to trespass into Harry's domain. Harry lives in this splendor convinced that surely all of it was made just for him.

Time flows seamlessly at the lake. Helen and Harry have enjoyed each other's company for five years now, with no change in routine. Harry is bossy and affectionate, while Helen is patient and gently laughs at his eccentricities. In the late autumn he signals his seasonal departure for warmer climes by leading Helen to the dock and putting on a great display by flapping his wings to their full breadth. He then calms and cocks his head toward Helen while lowering his neck, as if seeking permission for his plan. "You go, Harry," encourages Helen. "I'll be fine and warm in the

cottage. I'll see you in the spring." With that, he turns and lifts himself into the sky with powerful beats, arching across the lakefront and disappears over the pines.

4. THE DEPRIVED CHILD

There comes that moment in every young mother's life when the joy of her life, the pure delight of her being, that sweet-faced angel to whom she gave life, is driving her nuts. And so came the day in early May when Ellie knew that it was time to escape for a few precious hours of mental health time, where she did not have to constantly police her little darling from painting the dog, filling the bathtub with Alka-Seltzer, or playing his favorite game of "the bad guys broke in and did something naughty."

Knowing her four-year-old's boundless energy and imagination, she had arranged a babysitter for Saturday morning. She'd get him breakfast and then slip out at 8:30. The Saturday morning cartoons would occupy him until 11 AM, then there would be quiet time for an hour, lunch, and she would be back from her shopping trip downtown before he missed her or could get into any trouble. Her nephew, Larry, would watch the boy for a short period of time. He was a conscientious young man, with a good way with children, having seven of his own brothers and sisters.

The city bus stop was right in front of their two-level rental on the town's main east-west corridor, so it was easy to slip out, catch the ride five miles downtown, shop, enjoy a meal brought to *her* by someone else on real china, and be back refreshed and ready to resume her motherly duties. The thought of four hours of time belonging to herself had kept her energized all week, even when the boy came running in from the neighbor's yard with a small fistful of stunted carrots, declaring that Mr. McGregor was going to kill him with his rake.

That adventure had triggered the need for heartfelt apologies to her retired neighbor, Mrs. Bagwell, who reciprocated with condescending advice, delivered with a self-satisfied smile, about

the need for today's mothers to keep their attention on their children, and not the daily soap operas.

But that humiliation was quickly set aside, as she stepped aboard her escape pod wearing a real dress, stockings, and big girl shoes. Cinderella's carriage had nothing on the worn city bus in her mind, as the brakes screeched and the exhaust belched, while it carried her to the land of adult interaction.

The plan worked like clockwork right until the Looney Tunes characters strutted off the stage to the rousing chorus of their theme music. By then Larry was a little bored with his childcare duties and switched to the pregame for that day's Tiger's game. "Hey, Craig, go color or something, OK?" he said, dismissing the child from his immediate thoughts.

"OK, Larry," the child happily complied, settling down on the dining room floor with his coloring book of knights and the prestigious Crayola big box of 64 crayons. *This was a good one*, he thought. The knight had found a treasure chest full of gold under a boulder, and a fierce dragon was coming down the hill to take it. *Yellow and red fire*, he mused to himself, focusing with the intensity of DaVinci, as he scribbled away, humming a knightly tune. *Now the treasure chest – grey for the locks and metal bands*. He looked at the chest and thought - *that looks like that big box in the back yard. It's square and grey too. I bet there's treasure in there too*.

The fact that the lad had been by the concrete septic tank two dozen times previously, without the slightest indication of dragon treasure, did nothing to dissuade the burning imagination of the four-year-old.

I need a sword, the child pondered, knowing that adventures must be carefully planned—in case of dragons. *I think there was one on the table in the kitchen*. He toddled off through the Dutch

door to the kitchen and sure enough the long butter knife from breakfast was still there. *Now, a shield...there's shields on those metal cans by the side gate*, he remembered. "Larry, I'm gonna' get a shield for the dragon" the boy informed his baby-sitter, as he headed toward the back door leading into their fenced yard. "OK, don't go far, we're gonna' eat soon," the bored teenager replied, not taking his eyes from the Al Kaline highlight reel.

Armed with his trusty sword, the butter having been wiped off on the front of his T-shirt, the boy turned down the short sidewalk toward two gleaming tin trash cans, their glistening 'shields' fixed on top. Across the yard, in the far corner beyond the sandbox, sat the concrete treasure septic tank calling the boy to untold riches in concealed dragon treasure.

Excited by the thought of his adventure, the boy reached up to the top of the nearest can, grabbing the metal handle, and tugged. Nothing happened. He pulled again, but the top was tightly sealed. *This is like Wart and the sword in the stone*, he calculated, mixing his stories together with growing excitement. *It's only moments until the dragon appears*, he reasoned with certainty. *I need to hurry to get my shield before then*. Visions of yellow and red flames being deflected by his bravely wielded trash can lid poured through the boy's mind.

The cans sat against a metal link fence, on which he had climbed many times while testing the boundaries of his kingdom. It varied from being the wall of a spaceship, to the netting leading to a landing craft, to a jail cell, depending upon the needs of the moment. On the opposite side of the fence was the driveway that belonged to Mr. and Mrs. McGregor. *I can climb the fence and get onto one can*, he calculated. *That will let me pull the shield off the other with both hands*.

Setting aside his magic sword, as it had now naturally become a magic dragon-slaying sword during the evolution of this

adventure, Sir Craig scrambled up the precarious three feet of cyclone fence, carefully crawling onto the nearest trash can. The metal links bit into his pudgy fingers during the climb, but as a knight he knew that such things must be disregarded.

It is at this point in the adventure that the Bagwells, whom the boy called the McGregors from his Peter Rabbit fantasy the day before, returned from their Saturday morning chores. They had stopped on the way home for McDonalds take-out. McDonalds then, was not McDonalds today. It was an event. It was The Ritz on a bun. Thick shakes. Golden, salty fries. The employees wore clean white uniforms. If you had McDonalds, it was something for the neighbors to envy.

As the Bagwells pulled into their driveway in their old Hudson, they saw the young boy next door crawling onto the top of his dad's trash cans next to their fence. He was tugging energetically at the lid, as if his life depended on it. Although a small boy, he had a focus and intensity that made it clear he was using every ounce of his energy to get inside the can — almost as if his life depended on it. Mr. and Mrs. Bagwell looked at each other in shock.

Mrs. Bagwell exited the car's passenger side, the irresistible smell of the Golden Arches wafting free and diverting the boy's attention from his quest. "What are you doing, dear?" Mrs. Bagwell gently asked the child across the fence. His big round eyes gazed out from beneath a mop of curly hair at the precious bags she clutched to her side.

"I'm hungry!" He declared, cutting to the chase, as he eyed their bags.

"Oh my God! George! The child is looking for food in the trash." she declared, as the strength left her knees. "Well, that'd explain why he was stealing my carrots," the husband grumbled, walking stiffly away toward their side door. Ignoring him, Mrs.

Bagwell asked the boy, “Honey, didn’t your mommy feed you?” “Nope,” the boy responded cheerfully. “She went away. I’m all alone, fighting. I need to get this top off here before I die,” he responded matter-of-factly. Knights are not known for hyperbole, you know.

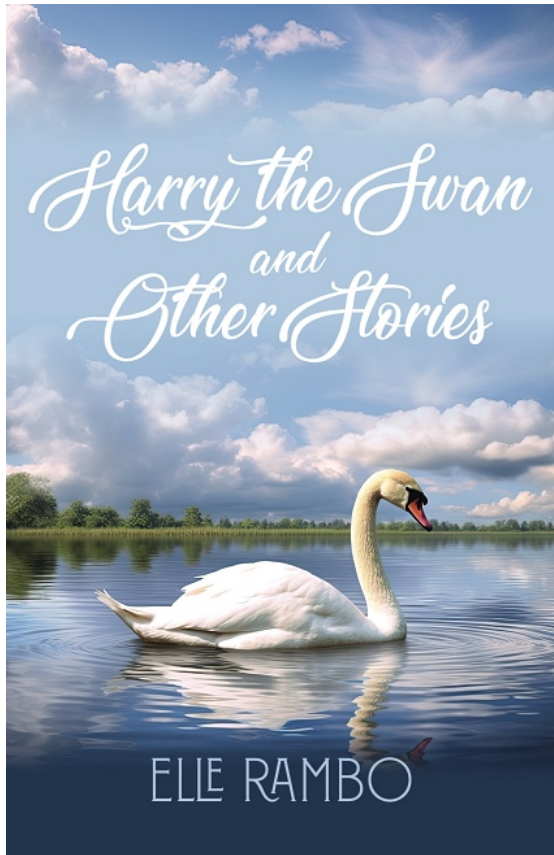
“You are so brave,” Mrs. Bagwell choked, as tears welled. “Would you like some McDonalds?”

“Yes, please,” the boy replied happily, swinging his legs down off the trash can and jumping onto the grass. The thoughts of fearsome adventure quickly dispelled with the proximity of salty fast food. “Can I bring my sword?” he asked, picking up the butter knife.

“You bring anything you want, you lovely child,” Mrs. Bagwell gushed, opening the side gate, and taking the boy by the hand to the magical realm of burgers and fries.

And so it was, an hour later, when Ellie stepped off the bus, momentarily relaxed and refreshed, that she found her darling child seated on the lap of a tight-lipped Mrs. Bagwell positioned on her front steps. Hamburger wrappers were still greedily clutched in her son’s little rubber fists, as his legs swung to-and-fro happily. Nearby, Larry stood at a respectful distance, plaintively trying to explain the inexplicable to the judgmental neighbor.

Motherly instinct barely, just barely, beat out Ellie’s temptation to jump back aboard the bus and keep moving.



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