



Vaucanson's duck

This story is true, and it took place in a village in France.

There, as in so many other villages, there were two little houses that were exactly alike.

The only thing that isn't exactly alike is their gardens - can you see?

In one there are piles of scrap metal scattered about all over the place. A very odd stranger lives there, and no-one knows what he does, because he doesn't speak to anyone - and he never comes outside.

The other house has a very tidy vegetable garden, which is home to a duck called Quack-quack, who Madame Matilde, the mistress of the house and the garden, loves more than any other person or thing in the world.

By day, Quack-quack the duck fills his tummy, while Madame Matilde goes out to sell the vegetables from her garden at the market, and on the way there she sings

*I'm off to the market, but I'll soon be back,
to spend some time with my duck Quack-Quack.*

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And when night falls, Madame Matilde calls Quack-quack, they go inside, and keep each other company, while the lights go in in the house next door... and the mysterious neighbour starts to make all kinds of strange and maddening noises!

VAUCANSON'S DUCK

Can you hear? Each and every night of the week, as Madame Matilde strokes and pets her beloved duck, the neighbour starts to make a terrible din: Clang! Bam! Bam! Squeak! Screech!

"Artichokes!" exclaims Madame Matilde. "What a noisy neighbour I have! In the village they say he's a clockmaker, but I don't believe it! / Nobody can sleep through that! And I have to get up very early to go to the market! Bundles of broccoli! I've had enough! What about you, Quack-quack, can you sleep? / I have to find a way to put a stop to this racket... hmm, let me have a think..."

Next morning, Madame Matilde knocks on her neighbour's door. Knock-knock! She had a proposition for him:

“Listen, Monsieur um... Whatever-your-name-is, I've come to make a deal: You sir, make far too much noise at night, and you keep me and Quack-quack awake! And I have to get up early, because I have to sell the vegetables from my garden at the market. So I'm going to make you a proposal: / (04:01) every day I'll cook you a tasty lunch and a tasty supper with the very best produce the market can offer. / And in return, you stop hammering and banging at night. What do you say?”

“My dear lady: first of all I must beg your forgiveness if I have disturbed you. Forgive me. Secondly, you must also forgive me for not having introduced myself sooner: my name is Jacques de Vaucanson and I am an inventor. (4:33) And thirdly, I would be delighted to accept your proposal. I can make all kinds of machines - but I can't cook... I promise I will never again work at night.”

And they shook hands to seal the deal.

Time went by and Madame Matilde was as crisply content as a well-watered lettuce, with the deal she had made with her neighbour.

Early in the morning she went to market, where everyone bought radishes, carrots, spring greens and lettuce from her garden. And in the evening, with the very best of the crop, she made lunch and supper for Monsieur Jacques, who licked his lips, and grew fatter by the day, because Madame Matilde was a first-class cook.

My garden is growing so I'm very lucky.

But the light of my life is my little ducky. Is my little ducky.

And what about Quack-quack? Ah! Things were going well for the duck too, because he had permission to go scratching and pecking around the inventor's workshop, as well as in the garden, where he also did his poos.

But old Quack-quack was just a silly, greedy duck, and he didn't know the difference between the spiral shell of a snail creeping among the cabbages and the spiralling thread of a screw. And so, one fateful day, Quack-quack swallowed a great big, thick, black, rusty, bolt... and he died! Ooooohhh!

When Madame Matilde found poor Quack-quack dead, she got the most terrible shock of her life. Who would keep her company now? Who would fertilise the garden? What would she do in the evenings now that she was all on her own? She cried and cried until she thought her heart would break. (07:09) And every evening, with tears in her eyes, she placed flowers round a portrait of the duck, because she missed her old friend so much:

“Radishes and artichokes - sniff!” said Madame Matilde in surprise. “Who can be calling at this time?”

“It's me, your neighbour. I have a present for you.”

“Sniff! I’m in mood for presents, Monsieur Jacques...”

“My dear neighbour, you and your duck have kept me company for many a month now. You in particular have cooked me delicious meals, and that has allowed me to finish my inventions.”

“And my inventions are so extraordinary that the engineers in Paris want to buy them all. So I’ll be leaving the village, but before I go, I want to give you a present. A good present, I think. It’s an automaton, a metal duck that will neither rust nor die, nor swallow the nuts, bolts and cogs of which it is made. Just like Quack-quack, Jacques de Vaucanson’s mechanical duck will keep you company, and eat - and - the most extraordinary thing of all -it will also do poos! Please accept it, Madame Matilde. I don’t want to leave you alone, without a duck at your side.”

And he set out, heading for Paris, leaving Madame Matilde marvelling at that remarkable duck, that not only walked, quacked and ate exactly like a real duck, but could also do little poos, as round as marbles.

Quack-quack is now gone and that’s very sad,

But I have a new duck and that makes me so glad! Quack-quack!

I wish I had a duck like that to call my own, but the fact is, in this story which is as true as the day is long, there will never - ever - ever be another one like it, because there will never be another inventor like Monsieur Jacques de Vaucanson.

Script: Teresa Duran