

The Girl and the Swan



Jane MEADOW

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Every weekend, Clara walked to the lake with her red canvas backpack and her small binoculars bouncing on their string. She loved the quiet water, the whispering reeds, and the soft breeze. Most of all, she loved the pair of swans who lived at the edge of the lake. They had long, curved white necks and bright orange beaks.



Clara sat on a fallen log and watched the swans through her binoculars. The mother swan sat on a nest of twigs and reeds, keeping four small eggs warm. The father swan glided nearby, his orange beak shining in the sun. Clara smiled, feeling warm and happy inside. She came back every weekend to check on them.



One Saturday, Clara saw four fluffy grey cygnets peeking out from under their mother's wings. They had short necks and tiny dark eyes, and they wobbled on the nest. 'Hello, little ones!' Clara whispered, careful not to get too close. The father swan stretched his long white neck and watched the path. Clara felt like she was part of a secret, wonderful world.



Then some visitors came down the path, laughing and pointing at the swans. They stepped right up to the nest, and one man reached out his hand. The mother swan hissed and flapped her wings, and the cygnets huddled together. Clara's heart beat fast. The swans were scared, and she knew she had to do something.



Clara hurried to the ranger station, her yellow raincoat swishing around her rubber boots. Inside, Ranger Maya sat at a desk with a brown clipboard and a friendly smile. She had a wide-brimmed tan hat and a green shoulder patch on her khaki shirt. 'A family of swans is being bothered,' Clara said. 'People are getting too close.'



Ranger Maya listened carefully, her hazel eyes kind. 'You're right to tell me, Clara,' she said. 'Swans need space to feel safe. When people crowd them, they get frightened and may leave their nest.' Clara nodded. 'Can we help them?' she asked. Ranger Maya picked up her clipboard. 'Let's make some friendly signs,' she said.



They painted signs in bright colors. Clara drew a picture of a swan with a happy, curved neck. Ranger Maya wrote: 'Please watch from the path. Give the swans room to rest.' Clara added a big heart. Then they hammered the signs into the soft ground near the lake, a safe distance from the nest. Clara felt proud of their work.



The next weekend, Clara saw a family walking toward the nest. 'Look at the signs!' she called out politely. The family read the signs and stopped. 'Oh, we didn't know,' the mother said. 'Thank you for telling us.' They stayed on the path and watched the swans from far away. The father swan floated calmly, and the cygnets peeked out from the nest.



Soon, more visitors came to the lake. They read the signs and kept their distance. Some brought cameras with long lenses, and others just sat on the grass and watched. Clara saw the mother swan relax on her nest, and the cygnets waddled around her. The lake was peaceful again, and Clara felt a warm glow inside.



Ranger Maya came by and gave Clara a high five. 'Your signs are working,' she said. 'People just needed a gentle reminder.' Clara smiled, her gap-toothed grin wide. 'The swans look happy now,' she said. 'They have space to live and grow.' Ranger Maya nodded. 'That's what loving animals means,' she said.



Clara kept visiting the lake every weekend. She watched the cygnets grow bigger and stronger. Their grey fluff turned into white feathers, and their necks grew long and curved like their parents. Clara drew pictures in a little notebook and wrote down what she saw. She felt like a real scientist, patient and observant.



One afternoon, Clara saw a boy step off the path toward the nest. 'Wait!' Clara called. 'Please stay on the path. The swans need space.' The boy stopped and looked at the signs. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't see them.' He walked back to the path, and the swans settled down again. Clara felt brave and helpful.



Ranger Maya told Clara that the swan family would soon fly away for the winter. 'They'll come back next spring,' she said. 'And your signs will still be here to keep them safe.' Clara felt a little sad but also happy. She had helped the swans, and she knew they would return. She waved goodbye to the cygnets as they practiced flapping their wings.



When spring came, Clara hurried to the lake. The signs were still there, and so were the swans! The cygnets were now grown, with snowy white feathers and orange beaks. They glided gracefully on the water. Clara watched from the path, her binoculars around her neck. She felt proud of the peaceful place she had helped create.



Clara sat on her favorite log and watched the swans build a new nest. Other visitors stayed on the path, reading the signs and smiling. The lake was full of happy sounds: birds singing, water lapping, and children laughing softly. Clara knew that loving animals meant giving them space to live and grow. And that made her heart feel full.



Ranger Maya stopped by and sat next to Clara. 'You made a big difference,' she said. 'The swans are safe because of you.' Clara smiled, her dark brown eyes shining. 'I just wanted to help,' she said. 'And now everyone can enjoy them.' They watched the swans together, quiet and content. Clara knew she would always come back to the lake.