

The Cheese, the Fox and the Magpie

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The fox was immersed in profound fox-like thoughts, of considerable value to humanity, when he was unexpectedly stopped short in his tracks.

'Help!'

This was an unexpected but particularly timely interruption.

He was lucky that it occurred when it did because, in another two profound and thoughtful steps, he would have collided head-on or more precisely 'muzzle-on', with a sizeable gnarled oak tree.

Now, this particular tree was popularly known as the "old gnarled oak tree", which helped to recognise it amongst the other less old or less gnarled ones. If you're looking for it, that is, which wasn't exactly the case here.

The fox looked around but could see nothing which, in his experience, would normally have said 'help'.

'Help!'

There it was again, and the call seemed to originate from the celestial sphere of things.

The fox squinted sideways, up into the leafy canopy of the oak.

I say squinted, because this is what he actually did, due to an unusually painful headache. Yes, foxes have migraines too, whatever your grandma says!

On one of the massive lower boughs sat a big black crow.

This particular crow was not all that clean and not very engaging to look at if the truth was told. He was not really sitting either, because crows, due to their rigorous upbringing, never ever sit down in public, a fact that can be verified by simple observation.

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The 'Help' call seemed to be emerging from a fat round cheese, which was clamped in the crow's beak.

Now, you may not be all that used to talking-cheeses, but you must agree that there's a first time for everything, even talking cheeses.

Anyhow, the slightly dishevelled crow looked down and sneered at the fox. He would have like to make that sneer more ominous, but he could only manage it with half a beak, the other half being occupied with holding the cheese tightly in place.

Now a crow is, at the very best of times, not one of the worlds loveliest birds, but a half-beak-sneering one is not at all agreeable to observe. This is why one rarely finds photos or drawings of this in wildlife books and why it is especially not something shown, or even described, to children. If one's desire is to avoid endless sleepless nights, assuring one's offspring that there are no sneering crows under the bed or behind the rock-star posters on the wall, heed my words.

'Hey, Crow!' called up the fox, 'stop molesting that cheese.'

'Who are you call a crow? I'm a magpie, can't you tell the difference?'

'A magpie! Pull the other one. It's got bells on it crow.'

'Which other one, Hyena, there are three others in your case.'

'Who are you calling a hyena, you dirty old crow.'

The crow carefully extracted the cheese from his beak and pinned it to the branch with a blunt-ended, and embarrassingly dirty claw.

This action freed up his entire beak, and he proceeded to sneer with the whole of it.

Disappointingly, this was, in fact, less impressive than the half-sneer.

Of course, the Crow couldn't know this, being on the wrong end of the sneer, but he did feel better about doing it this way, so I suppose the full sneer carried more conviction, than the half one.

'Dirty Maggie if you please hyena.' retorted the crow. 'Typical of a dirty old hyena to almost walk straight into the tree'.

'Tree! what tree? Oh, that one. Hum! It's because of my glasses.'

'You haven't got glasses?'

'See. That's what I mean, I'll have to see the eye specialist.'

'As I thought. Not only a hyena but an illiterate one at that... You mean an ophthalmologist, which is, in fact, the correct term for what your lack of vocabulary leads you to term an eye specialist.'

'I am not a hyena. I am a Fox, and a pretty splendid one if I do say so myself.'

'A drunk, narcissistic, vain Hyena and that's why you nearly walked into the tree.'

'I happen to know that hyenas don't drink, Crow. Foxes, however, are sometimes known to take a drop or two from time to time on special occasions.'

'So, you admit to being a drunk Fox rather than an un-drunk Hyena then.'

The fox weighed all this complicated stuff up and decided that a compromise was required, in order to close this phase of negotiations and move firmly forward to a satisfactory win-win conclusion.

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'Ok, I agree to being a fox, having had a drop or two, if you agree to being a Crow.'

The crow, in turn, sifted through this information.

'Ok, but a good-looking crow, with certain magpie-like features.'

'All right.'

During this exchange the cheese had been edging away along the branch, keeping a watery eye on the crow.

Now, those of you new to this should bear in mind the natural reluctance of any good camembert to stay in a fixed place for long. With age and experience, the more agile of the species are known to go as far as running.

Now our cheese, inexperienced as he was, had already learnt that better distances could be covered by subtle sliding rather than attempting an outright sprint.

'Don't try to run before you can spread,' his mother hand oft scolded.

Anyway, the crow spotted the slow movement, 'Hey, come back here, you slippery customer!' he hopped along the knotty branch and stabbed the cheese with another dirty and cracked claw.

'Ouch,' squealed the cheese, 'That urts.'

'Hurts, if you please.' corrected the crow.

'Let me go.'

'Yes, let him go crow.'

'Yes, let me go cnow.'

'CROW, not Cnow, illiterate cheese. Didn't your parents teach you anything?'

'My mum always says; "winter is safe because you can see the cnows in the snow".'

'Your mum said What!' stared the fox.

'She always said...'

'Yes, we heard, we heard. What absolute rubbish.'
squawked the Crow.

'That squawking is not very magpie-like, crow.'

'Oh, shut up fox.'

'Just trying to be helpful.'

'Well, don't.'

'As you like it. But you could definitely improve that point.'

'Don't quote Shakespeare at me please.'

'Isn't that an Iranian prince.'

The crow sighed and shook its head.

Once again, the cheese was slinking off sideways along the branch and was once more harpooned by a crow claw.

When I say slinking sideways, you might be led to the conclusion, erroneously, that this was a cheap modern industrially made square cheese. But no, this was a lovely round disk-shaped one.

My use of the term 'sideways' was simply because that's the first word that comes to mind, which is due to my limited vocabulary and power of description I suppose.

SO, the cheese was once more taken prisoner.

'Ouh, hey! that urts.'

'Hurts, for God's sake, with an H!'

'That's painful, then'.

'Come on, Crow, let the poor little fellow go. His parents will be worrying.'

'Yes, they will be,' chimed in the cheese, 'mum will get ill and be sick in the sink'. He hesitated, 'If you let me go, I'll make her promise not to tell the police and not to take you to court.'

'What!' squawked the crow.

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'Careful with that un magpie-like stuff cnow.'

'Shut up fox!'

'Now, don't get irritable.'

'No one is taking me to court, because they'll have no evidence, ha!'

'I'm here.' corrected the fox, 'I might be induced to give evidence under some circumstances.'

'But there'll be no hard evidence.'

'I'll tell them everything that happened.' squeaked the cheese, not at all sure of himself if the truth were told.

'No, you won't because I am going to eat you.'

The cheese turned white, which was quite a feat for a ripe camembert.

'Oh!' said the fox, 'That's not the way to behave before immature cheeses.'

'Will you two stop talking rubbish.' said the now irate crow.

'I'm going to stuff myself with this little chap and not leave a scrap of evidence.'

'Excuse me.' remarked the fox, polishing his razor-sharp claws on a bit of bark, 'There is just one small difficulty.'

'And what, pray, is that?'

'Well, Crows don't like cheese...'

'Ah!' The crow was perplexed and gave a correspondingly perplexed look, 'Didn't think of that.'

'No, Crows don't like cheese.' cried the cheese, 'it gives them indigestion and makes them vomit all over the place.'

'Now you stop that,' squawked the crow. 'Yes, I know, I know. Stay dignified and magpie-like...'

'Yep.' contributed the fox, 'They vomit and vomit and fly round and around in circles because of the horrible stomach pains.'

'Oh, God! can't you lot just shut up.'

'Then they fall over and lie on their backs with their legs sticking up in the air, blown up like horrible feathery footballs.'

'Yes,' agreed the cheese, 'and they squawk and squawk and make horrible smells.'

'Not very Magpie-like, all that.' concluded the fox, warming to the subject.

'Why not Just let the little fellow go home to his parents like a real classy, educated Magpie would.' The crow cocked his head on one side, and the cheese gave the fox a sideward glance.

'Really?'

The cheese blew out its cheeks and whistled, 'Oh yes sir. That's exactly what happens with educated Magpies, every time. We mess about a bit. Then they let me go home. Dignified I call that.'

'And that's Magpie-like behaviour?'

The fox, as smooth as a buttered crumpet, added, 'That just happens to be one of their principal characteristics.'

Now I don't know if you have ever seen a cheese blowing out its cheeks, but this one did it very convincingly, having recovered a little of its original dappled colour

'That poor little cheese has a soft heart, same as his good old mother, let him go Crow.'

'Well!' the crow hesitated but cocked its head on one side.

'Hey, wait a minute! What about foxes, though?'

'What, what about foxes?'

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'Don't foxes like cheese?'

'Foxes!' exclaimed the fox, 'Like cheese?'

'Oh!' exclaimed the cheese, 'I hadn't thought of that.'

The crow sniffed, in a very unpleasant uneducated crow-like manner.

'I might have known it. All this nonsense is just a nasty foxy trick to get this poor little fellow and eat him yourself.'

'Oh, my sainted aunt!' cried the cheese, going white again and losing his blotches.

'Now that really is a dirty Hyena-like trick, Fox.' sneered the crow.

'Oh my god, help!' added the cheese.

'Come on, come on. Now, who do you take me for? I wouldn't touch that horrible runny foreign muck with a bargepole.' exclaimed the fox.

'Foreign!?' The crow jumped back, shocked, 'foreign?'

'Muck? who's calling me foreign muck?' The cheese went even whiter but with anger this time. 'I'll show you foreign muck.'

And the little cheese let off one of the most terrible of stinks that the planet has ever known, far beyond the usual standard camembert level.

So overpowering was the stench, that the crow fell backwards, right off the branch and landed on top of the fox.

Even the leaves on the tree wilted momentarily, and the smaller branches backed away to protect themselves.

The little cheese freed, shot off the branch like a rocket and plummeted to earth, landing softly in the deep grass, which immediately turned brown and withered. The cheese then let of another vaporous

blast and trundled, white-lipped, towards the crow-fox pile

'Foreign muck!' he screamed, 'I'll show you...'

The fox, who by now was feeling peckish, had sunk his teeth into the crow's leg, but finding this rather unpalatable, decided that crow was no-go.

However, the crow not appreciating this subtle point, dug his beak deep into the fox's rear quarters.

The fluttering and howling ball suddenly froze as its four eyes spotted the furious cheese wheeling towards them at unprecedented speed.

Getting untangled fast enough was just not on the cards, so the alternative method was collegially chosen, and the feathery-furry ball went rolling down the grass slope, followed closely by the cheese, fuming with rage.

At the bottom of the slope, flowed the calm river Splot. The Splot is well known by the countries' fly fishermen, because you could and still can, spend a marvellous relaxing week there with no risk whatever of catching anything at all. The temperature of the water is also just right for keeping a bottle of good white wine within arm's reach.

How our two animal friends managed to avoid a ducking, is not on record, but as the fuming spinning cheese approached something incredible happened.

The stench was such that slightly above the probable impact point, the ordinarily languid river abruptly stopped flowing while below it, it rushed off, torrent-like, downstream.

The cheese thus shot across the momentarily dry riverbed where even the greasy mud parted to let it past.

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It shot up the other bank and disappeared homewards.

Some scholars suspect that this may be the true origin of certain biblical events, but that's another story, and I am not competent enough to comment on this point.

Reaching home, at last, the cheese flopped down panting.

'Now where have you been all day', scolded his mother, 'and just look at you! sweating like cheddar in a hot shop window'.

'I had a fight with the crow and the fox'.

'The Cnow, not crow. Such an ignorant, conceited, vain bird.'

'And the fox.'

'Oh, that drunkard, you should keep clear of him.'

'They called me smelly foreign muck, mum.'

'Yes, they do that sometimes. One has to be tolerant, though, because they have not travelled much you see'.

'I showed them what I was made of though, ha ha.'

'Yes, I thought you might. Now run in and mop of all that sweat.'

'Perspiration mum!'

'Get on with it, or you'll be late for dinner.'

Well, that was a pretty ridiculous tale, wasn't it? I suppose that if we need to finish with a moral how about 'it is probably best to be polite to smelly foreigners, at least to their faces'.

Yes, I know, a bit lame, but the best I could do off the cuff.