

The Cheese, the Fox and the Magpie

Stephen William ROWE



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The fox was immersed in profound fox-like thoughts, concerning environmental matters, when he was unexpectedly stopped short in his tracks.

'Help!'

Although unexpected, it was unquestionably a timely interruption.

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

This particular oak tree was popularly known as "The old gnarled oak tree", to help single it out amongst the younger or less gnarled ones. If one was searching for it, that is, which wasn't the fox's case.

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He looked around but could see nothing which, in his experience, might have been expected to say "help".

'Help!'

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

The fox squinted sideways, up the gnarled trunk, and into the leafy canopy above.

I say squinted, because this is what he actually did, due to an uncommonly painful headache. Yes, foxes have migraines too, whatever old grandmothers might declare.

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

This particular crow was not all that clean and not very engaging to look at if the truth were told.

He was not really sitting either. It is worth reminding the reader that due to their rigorous upbringing, Crows never ever sit down in public. This fact can be easily verified by simple observation.

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. However, there is a first time for everything, even for talking cheeses, as I'm sure you'll admit.

Anyhow, the slightly dishevelled crow looked down and sneered at the fox. He would have preferred to make that sneer more darkly ominous. However, he could only manage it with half a beak, the other half being fully occupied with the cheese.

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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. It is also why it is not something shown, or even described, to children.

If one wishes 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 untidy 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, however, this full sneer was less impressive than the half one.

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

'Untidy Magpie 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.'

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'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 splendid one too even 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 on special occasions.'

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

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

'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 all 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.

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Now our cheese, inexperienced as he was, had 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.'

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'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.

The cheese was slinking off sideways along the branch again but 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, Cnow, let the poor little fellow go. His parents will be worrying.'

'Crow! You idiot.'

'Yes, they will,' chimed in the cheese, 'mum will get horribly nervous 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.'

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'What!' squawked the crow.

'Careful with that un magpie-like noise 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 pressure of course.'

'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 gnarled oak 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, 'Don't they? I didn't think of that.'

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'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 around and around in circles because of the horrible stomach pains.'

'Oh, God! can't you two 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 balloons.'

'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 happens to be one of their principal characteristics.'

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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 do you mean, what about foxes?'

'Don't Foxes like cheese?'

'Foxes!' exclaimed the fox, 'Like cheese?' he laughed, 'Are you mad!?''

'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.'

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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 toppled backwards, off the branch. He landed smack on top of the fox.

Even the leaves on the tree wilted, and the smaller branches backed off 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 off 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 hind 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 simply not on the cards, so an alternative method was collegially chosen. 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.

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The Splot is well known by the countries' fly fishermen. This is 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. Below the point, the waters rushed off, torrent-like, downstream.

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

It shot up the other bank and disappeared homewards.

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

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

'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.'

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'They called me smelly foreign muck, mum.'

'Yes, they do that sometimes. One has to be tolerant, though, because neither of them have travelled much.'

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

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

'Perspiration mum!'

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

Well now , that was a pretty ridiculous tale, wasn't it?

I suppose that I ought to finish with a moral. How about “Even smelly foreigners, have souls”.

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

I had thought of naming the cheese “Bert”. This would have enabled me to work in the pun “Come on Bert”, for Camembert but that would have been stretching things a bit too far, wouldn't it.

Anyway, if you enjoyed reading this, let me know : swr-music@orange.fr or via

Facebook : <https://facebook.com/stephenwilliam.rowe>

I have ideas for plenty more ridiculous tales like this one...

I'm not sure that's good or bad news.

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