

The winter had been especially cold. The snow lay thick and heavy on the ground. The squirrels, the badgers and the hedgehogs had vanished into their snug winter homes to sleep away the cold, dark months. The swifts and the swallows had left for warmer countries long ago. Even the slugs and snails had disappeared, hiding away in some dark, warm patch of woodland to wait for the spring. The woods and fields were silent and empty. Only a big, black Crow was hunting for her evening meal.

The Crow had flown all day in search of food. But she had found nothing, not even a tiny mouse or a piece of someone's leftover lunch. Now she was tired and hungry. She cawed sadly.

"I will have to go without dinner tonight," she thought as she flapped slowly across the sky in one last desperate search for something to eat.

She was on the point of turning back when she saw a thin column of smoke coming up into the sky, far away in the distance.

"Smoke means fire and fire means cooking and cooking means food!" thought the Crow. She flew as fast as she could, towards the curling smoke. The smoke came from the chimney of a large farmhouse where the farmer's wife was cooking dinner for her family. A delicious-smelling stew was bubbling in a large pot over the fire and loaves of fresh-baked bread were on the table, ready to be cut into slices. A pat of butter and a chunk of cheese lay in their platters on the window sill. The farmer's wife had left the window open so the cold air would keep the butter from melting and the cheese from sweating.

The Crow saw the cheese by the open window. Quick as a flash, she flew down to the window sill, picked cheese in her big black beak and flew off. The farmer's wife was stirring the stew, with her back to the window. She did not see the Crow. The Crow was very pleased with herself. 'Nothing like a piece of cheese on a cold winter afternoon!' she thought.

She flew towards a clump of tall trees and perched comfortably on a bare branch high above the ground to enjoy her meal in comfort.

A wily old Fox lay hidden among the bushes in the farmer's garden. He had roamed the woods and fields all day in search of food. But he had found nothing to eat, not a bird nor a mouse nor even the scraps from someone's picnic. Now he was tired and hungry.

"I will have to go without dinner tonight," he sighed.

He was on the point of turning back, when he saw the Crow perch on the bare branch with the piece of cheese in her beak.

"What a lovely, smelly piece of cheese!" thought the Fox. I must have that piece of cheese for my dinner. Now, if only I can take that cheese away from the Crow..."

The Fox watched the Crow settle herself comfortably on the branch. He smiled slyly to himself. Strolling up to the foot of the tree, the Fox called out.

"Good evening. Mrs. Crow! You look well today!"

The Crow looked down at the Fox in surprise. She had never heard him speak so politely before.

The Fox continued. 'Oh Mrs. Crow, how beautiful you are! Your feathers are so black! So smooth and shining! Truly. I have never seen such feathers before!'

The Crow was even more surprised. No one had ever called her beautiful before! Of course, she had always known how pretty she was. But it was pleasant to be admired by some one else.

The Fox looked up at her and sighed. 'How graceful you are. Mrs. Crow, how elegant! You fly so wonderfully well too and higher than an eagle!'

The Crow held herself taller. She had always known how graceful and elegant she was. Of course, she could fly most wonderfully high! How clever of the Fox to know that. She flapped her wings just a little bit so he could admire them again. What a charming creature he was!

The Fox took a deep breath and continued. 'Your claws, ahem, I mean your talons. Mrs. Crow! They are stronger than steel!'

Ah... her talons! She had always been proud of her talons. She hopped clumsily on the branch so that the Fox could take another look at her claws. Really, he did say the nicest things!

The Crow was by now quite sure that she was the prettiest, most graceful and the strongest bird of all.

The Fox smiled secretly to himself. He looked admiringly at the Crow and said. 'Dear Mrs. Crow. I have not heard your voice. It must be the sweetest voice in the world, as beautiful as you are. Dear Mrs. Crow, won't you sing for me?'

The Crow was flattered. All the other birds had told her that she had an awful voice. And here was the Fox begging her to sing for him! Of course, she had always known what a lovely voice she had...

The Crow took a deep breath and opened her beak in a loud and raucous Caw!' Down dropped the piece of cheese! The Fox snapped it up as it fell and swallowed it before the Crow realised what had happened.

The Fox walked off chuckling. 'Next time, Mrs. Crow, be careful what you believe!' he cried as he vanished through the trees.

The Crow was left feeling foolish. How could she have been so vain and so silly, as to be taken in by the Fox's clever words and to lose her lovely dinner!

The Crow ruffled her feathers sadly and got ready for a hungry night.