

WHY BLACKY THE CROW WEARS MOURNING

by Thornton W. Burgess

Grandfather Frog sat on his big green lily-pad in the Smiling Pool. Grandfather Frog felt very good that morning, very good indeed, because—why, because his white and yellow waistcoat was full of foolish green flies. It is doubtful, very, very doubtful if Grandfather Frog could have swallowed another foolish green fly to save his life. So he sat with his hands folded across his white and yellow waistcoat, and into his eyes, his great goggly eyes, there crept a far, far, far away look. Grandfather Frog was dreaming of the days when the world was young and the frogs ruled the world.

Pretty soon the Merry Little Breezes of Old Mother West Wind came over to the Smiling Pool to rock Mrs. Redwing's babies to sleep in their cradle in the bulrushes. But when they saw Grandfather Frog they forgot all about Mrs. Redwing and her babies.

"Good morning, Grandfather Frog!" they shouted.

Grandfather Frog awoke from his dream with a funny little jump.

"Goodness, how you startled me!" said Grandfather Frog, smoothing down his white and yellow waistcoat.

The Merry Little Breezes giggled. "We didn't mean to, truly we didn't," said the merriest one of all. "We just wanted to know how you do this fine morning, and—and—"

"Chug-a-rum," said Grandfather Frog, "you want me to tell you a story."

The Merry Little Breezes giggled again. "How did you ever guess it?" they cried. "It must be because you are so very, very wise. Will you tell us a story, Grandfather Frog? Will you please?"

Grandfather Frog looked up and winked one big, goggly eye at jolly, round, red Mr. Sun, who was smiling down from the blue sky. Then he sat still so long that the Merry Little Breezes began to fear that Grandfather Frog was out of sorts and that there would be no story that morning. They fidgeted about among the bulrushes and danced back and forth across the lily-pads. They had even begun to think again of Mrs. Redwing's babies.

"Chug-a-rum!" said Grandfather Frog suddenly. "What shall I tell you about?"

Just then a black shadow swept across the Smiling Pool. "Caw, caw, caw!" shouted Blacky the Crow noisily, as he flew over toward Farmer Brown's cornfield.

"Tell us why Blacky the Crow always wears a coat of black, as if he were in mourning," shouted the Merry Little Breezes.

Grandfather Frog watched Blacky disappear behind the Lone Pine. Then, when the Merry Little Breezes had settled down, each in the golden heart of a white water-lily, he began:

"Once upon a time, when the world was young, old Mr. Crow, the grandfather a thousand times removed of Blacky, whom you all know, lived in the Green Forest on the edge of the Green Meadows, just as Blacky does now, and with him lived his brothers and sisters, his uncles and aunts, his cousins and all his poor relations.

"Now Mr. Crow was very smart. Indeed, he was the smartest of all the birds. There wasn't anything that old Mr. Crow couldn't do or didn't know. At least he thought there wasn't. All the little meadow people and forest folks began to think so, too, and one after another they got in the habit of coming to him for advice, until pretty soon they were bringing all their affairs to Mr. Crow for settlement.

"Now for a while Mr. Crow showed great wisdom, and this so pleased Old Mother Nature that she gave him a suit of pure, dazzling white, so that all seeing him might look up to him as a shining example of wisdom and virtue. Of course all his brothers and sisters, his uncles and aunts, his cousins and all his poor relations at once put on white, that all might know that they were of Mr. Crow's family. And of course every one showed them the greatest attention out of respect to old Mr. Crow, so that presently they began to hold their heads very high and to think that because they were related to old Mr. Crow they were a little better than any of the other little meadow people and forest folks. When they met old Mr. Rabbit they would pretend not to see him, because he wore a white patch on the seat of his trousers. When old Mr. Woodchuck said 'good morning,' they would pretend not to hear, for you know Mr. Woodchuck wore a suit of dingy yellow and lived in a hole in the ground. Old Mr. Toad was ugly to look upon. Besides, he worked for his living in a garden. So when they happened to meet him on the road they always turned their backs.

"For a long time old Mr. Crow himself continued to be a very fine gentleman and to hold the respect of all his neighbors. He was polite to every one, and to all who came to him he freely gave of his advice as wisely as he knew how. Of course it wasn't long before he knew all about his neighbors and their private affairs. Now it isn't safe to know too much about your neighbors and what they are doing. It is dangerous knowledge, very dangerous knowledge indeed," said Grandfather Frog solemnly.

"To be sure it would have been safe enough," he continued, "if Mr. Crow had kept it to himself. But after a while Mr. Crow became vain. Yes, Sir, that is just what happened to old Mr. Crow—he became vain. He liked to feel that all the little meadow people and forest folks looked up to him with respect, and whenever he saw one of them coming he would brush his white coat, swell himself up and look very important. After a while he began to brag among his relatives of how much he knew about his neighbors. Of course they were very much interested, very much interested indeed, and this flattered Mr. Crow so that almost before he knew it he was telling some of the private affairs which had been brought to him for his advice. Oh, dear me, Mr. Crow began to gossip.

"Now, gossiping is one of the worst habits in all the world, one of the very worst. No good ever comes of it. It just makes trouble, trouble, trouble. It was so now. Mr. Crow's relatives repeated the stories that they heard. But they took great care that no one should know where they came from. My, my, my, how trouble did spread on the Green Meadows and in the Green Forest! No one suspected old Mr. Crow, so he was more in demand than ever to straighten matters out. His neighbors came to him so much that they began to be ashamed to ask his advice for nothing, so they brought him presents so that no more need Mr. Crow hunt for things to eat. Instead, he lived on the fat of the land without working, and grew fat and lazy.

"As I have told you, Mr. Crow was smart. Yes, indeed, he certainly was smart. It did not take him long to see that the more trouble there was among his neighbors the more they would need his advice, and the more they needed his advice the more presents he would receive. He grew very crafty. He would tell tales just to make trouble, and sometimes, when he saw a chance, he would give advice that he knew would make more trouble. The fact is, old Mr. Crow became a mischief-maker, the very worst kind of a mischief-maker. And all the time he appeared to be the fine gentleman that he used to be. He wore his fine white coat as proudly as ever.

"Matters grew worse and worse. Never had there been so much trouble on the Green Meadows or so many quarrels in the Green Forest. Old Mr. Mink never met old Mr. Otter without picking a fight. Old Mrs. Skunk wouldn't speak to old Mrs. Coon. Old Mr. Chipmunk turned his back on his cousin, old Mr. Red Squirrel, whenever their paths crossed. Even my grandfather a thousand times removed, old Mr. Frog, refused to see his nearest relative, old Mr. Toad. And all the time old Mr. Crow wore his beautiful suit of white and grew rich and fat, chuckling to himself over his ill-gotten wealth.

"Then one day came Old Mother Nature to visit the Green Meadows. It didn't take her long to find that something was wrong, very wrong indeed. Old Mr. Crow and all his relatives hastened to pay their respects and to tell her how much they appreciated their beautiful white suits. Old Mr. Crow made a full report of all the troubles that had been brought to him, but he took great care not to let her know that he had had any part in making trouble. He looked very innocent, oh, very, very innocent, but not once did he look her straight in the face.

"Now the eyes of Old Mother Nature are wonderfully sharp and they seemed to bore right through old Mr. Crow. You can't fool Old Mother Nature. No, Sir, you can't fool Old Mother Nature, and it's of no use to try. She listened to all that Mr. Crow had to say. Then she sent Mr. North Wind to blow his great trumpet and call together all the little people of the Green Meadows and all the little folks of the Green Forest.

"When they had all come together she told them all that had happened. She told just how Mr. Crow had started the stories in order to make trouble so that they would seek his advice and bring him presents to pay for it. When the neighbors of old Mr. Crow heard this they were very angry, and they demanded of Old Mother Nature that Mr. Crow be punished.

"'Look!' said Old Mother Nature, pointing at old Mr. Crow. 'He has been punished already.'

"Every one turned to look at Mr. Crow. At first they hardly knew him. Instead of his suit of spotless white his clothes were black, as black as the blackest night. So were the clothes of his uncles and aunts, his brothers and sisters, his cousins and all his poor relations.

"And ever since that long-ago day, when the world was young, the Crows have been mischief-makers and have worn black, that all who look may know that they bring nothing but trouble," concluded Grandfather Frog.

"Thank you! Thank you, Grandfather Frog," shouted the Merry Little Breezes, jumping up to go rock the Redwing babies.

"Caw, caw, caw, caw!" shouted Blacky the Crow, flying over their heads with a mouthful of corn he had stolen from Farmer Brown's cornfield.

Source:

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