



## *The Crow and Pretty P*

A small peck of black appeared in the cloudy sky over a grove of bamboo near Patan town. The speck dropped closer, turning into a ball. It fell further, until it was clear that this was a black bird, wings folded and falling out of the sky.

The bird came down like a rock, and just when it seemed he would hit the bamboo, the wings opened up, and he cleared the trees with a swoosh. Slowly, he then glided over the nearby fields and houses and headed for a pear tree next to the bamboo.

As he landed on a branch, the black bird bumped into a pigeon who was already there. The pigeon said, “Ufff!” and moved away. She was not at all amused with the new arrival’s antics.

The black bird, with a band of grey around his neck, was not a shy one. He ignored the pigeon’s show of haughty irritation and introduced himself, “Hi, I am a jackdaw, but my given name is Crow. What do they call you?”

“I would not tell you even if you begged me. Such a rude bird you are!”

Crow played dumb. “Me? Rude? how can that be? Tell me!”

“I certainly will, and at length!” replied the pigeon. “Here I was, quietly enjoying the sunset after a full day

of flying. I have been all over Patan looking for dinner. You flew in from nowhere and nearly pushed me from my perch. We are dainty birds, us pigeons. Not like you jackdaws, coarse creatures always making such a racket with your squawks and *kaa-kaas*. Don't you know that you disturb everyone in this neighbourhood, including the people?"

The pigeon thought she saw a smile lurking on the jackdaw's face. She paused and said to him, "Shall I continue, or have you had enough? I've wanted to say things to your kind for a long time."

"Oh no, do not stop. Please do continue, sister," said Crow with excessive deference in his voice.

"I am no relation to you, mister. I have a name, and it is Pretty P," the pigeon said. "The biggest problem with jackdaws is that you are all carnivores, eating the flesh of others. We pigeons are vegetarians. Also, you are black, the colour of darkness and evil."

The pigeon stopped to take a breath. Crow asked, "Are you done, Miss Pretty P?"

"Not yet, mister. You have to understand why we pigeons are so loved by the people. We are clean, quiet and civilised, which is why they let us live in their houses, under the eaves and on ledges. They think you jackdaws are most uncouth and ill-mannered. Which is why you, Crow, do not have a roof over your head and have to make a nest out in the open. Come to think of it, the people really hate you. Children are always throwing stones at jackdaws, but have you ever seen them targeting pigeons? Why do you think this is so?"

Crow was losing his composure and becoming increasingly exasperated. As Pretty P went on and on with her list of jackdaw defects, he shifted impatiently from foot to foot, frowned, shook his head, and looked this way and that. "Fool pigeon!" he was muttering under his breath. "Dumb bird! Dunghead!"

But crow let Pretty P have her say. His wings said "Let's fly away!" but his head told him to stay and talk to Pretty P, so that at least one pigeon would be left a little more sensible by the time the day was done.

He looked sideways at the pigeon. She had ended her tirade, but was still flushed and angry. Crow took a deep breath and began his rebuttal.

"Miss Pretty P, allow me to say a few words. First of all, you pigeons seem to be unnecessarily slavish when it comes to humans. I say that we are all equal creatures under the planets and the stars. Humans are just a bit luckier. Over the course of evolution their craniums became bigger and bigger so that their brains are today able to hold more information than yours or mine. But all creatures have as much right to enjoy life here on earth as the people do. Size of head is irrelevant."

"Why are you telling me all this about humans? You are supposed to be defending your species," said Pretty P."

"Just listen. This is important. What does it matter if humans are kind to pigeons and nasty towards jackdaws? Our lives are our own, and we all have to do the best we can from the moment we hatch from our eggs. Who knows why humans favour some bird species and



dislike others? Their likes and dislikes have nothing to do with whether pigeons or jackdaws themselves are good or bad.”

“Well, that may be,” Pretty P said, a little thoughtfully. Then she added, “But you shoved me sobadly when your landed. You gave me such a fright!”

Crow replied, “I apologise for that, sister. I am really sorry. You see I have been experimenting with this particular way of descending to my nest, which is in that bamboo over there. I am bored with just flying in like every other bird. This afternoon, I was scavenging over by the Bagmati river. On the way back I decided to go high, very high. Up there, I was above the city’s noise and pollution. The air was cool and clear, and I could see the snow mountains glistening from horizon to horizon. Once I came over our neighbourhood, I decided to try a fast descent. I folded my wings and simply dropped down. I was so excited that I was not careful when I landed on this branch. I am really sorry if I scared you.”

“I accept your apology, as any tolerant pigeon would,” said Pretty P. “But you have much more to answer for. Being carnivorous, for example. How can you eat meat?”

“Firstly, I am not a carnivore, sister, but an omnivore. Sure, I eat any kind of flesh, but I also eat everything that you do as a vegetarian. Put anything before me, a cake, balls of rice, *rotis*, an apricot, an over-ripe banana, I’ll finish it off. Give me a dead rat, or a half-eaten piece of chicken thrown away by a restaurant, and I will gobble that too. My insides are strong, built to digest all kinds of food. In this way, the thousands of jackdaws of Patan

help keep the city clean. Without us. The whole place would be stinking so horribly no one would want to live here. The humans should know all this, with their big heads. but they have just decided they do not like jackdaws. Their minds are shut, just like yours, Miss Pretty P.”

“Please do not compare me with humans!” the pigeon protested. Clearly, her view on people was changing, enough to want to distance herself from them.

Crow continued: “Being liked too much by the people can be a problem, sister. Do you know that humans like pigeons so much that they eat them? if there were not so many broiler chickens for sale in the market, they would be eating even more of you. But birds that humans dislike are safe. At least in this country, the people do not eat jackdaws, ravens, kites or vultures, but they do eat pheasants, turtle doves, peacocks and pigeons.”

He was talking sense, Pretty P knew. People did leave pigeons alone most of the time, but it was true that every now and then one of her neighbours on the ledge would go missing and never return. It was rumoured that, in the darkness, a human hand would reach out and grab a bird. There would be pigeon roast for dinner in the house that night.

Crow then started to recite jackdaw virtues: “We are sociable creatures, we live in a community. When we spot a monkey or a cat sneaking up to a nest, our own or that of another species, we all take to the air and create a hullabaloo. This scares away the predator: We do the same when a kite or eagle comes swooping

down to carry away our chicks. The humans say we are noisy when they see us flying around and making a racket. But do they ever stop to think that there is a method to this? No ma'am."

Crow continued: "You see pretty P, we jackdaws are smarter than most other birds. We know the difference between a cat that is in search of water and one that is stalking a bird in the bush. Another bird might think that the stick on a man's shoulder is harmless, but we know how to tell a stick from an air rifle. You know how the people keep watchdogs? Well, you can call us *watchbirds*.

"As for jackdaws being dark, how does the colour of my plumage reflect my personality, tell me, sister. This band of grey around my neck and these lovely shiny black feathers, and this long and powerful beak, are what make me a jackdaw. I could be just as good or bad as you, with your feathers of bluish-grey."

Pretty P was beginning to consider that she might have been wrong about jackdaws. She said, "You have listed many good things about your own kind, Crow. You must have something nasty to say about us pigeons, I am sure."

"As a matter of fact, I do," replied Crow. "Let me put it in a nutshell. Pigeons are timid creatures. You are not expressive like us squawking jackdaws. All you know to say is "*buku-buku-buku*" over and over, using the same tone. You are individualists, thinking only of yourselves. You do nothing to help other creatures. You rely too much on humans for your survival and you would all die





if they did not throw food around the house and in the temples for you to eat. Rather than build a nest on a tree, you rely on people to give you space. And don't talk to me about cleanliness, sister! We crows keep our nests spotless. But I have seen how you pigeons live. Even the humans are at their wit's end with all that bird poopoo on their window sills!"

"Are we all that bad?" Pretty P asked, mortified.

"Oh yes, yes, sister! Besides, you pigeons all live out you lives in a rut. You never, ever do anything unusual or out of the ordinary!"

Pretty P had to agree with that, For, as long as she could remember, she herself had never done anything unusual. Pigeons just did what pigeons always did; that seemed to be the way with them.

By now, Pretty P was under the spell of this articulate jackdaw. She wanted to learn more from him – anything to make life more interesting. She turned to him and said eagerly, "But I am willing to try something out-of-ordinary, Crow! Let's do something unusual right now!"

Crow thought for a moment, and when he turned to her there was a twinkle in his eye. "How about taking off and going high above Patan, to see the city after dark?"

"Right now?"

"Yes, this very moment!"

Pretty P agreed to this audacious suggestion, and the two took off immediately from their perch on the pear tree.

It was already late; the sun had set some time ago

while they had been busy arguing. Only the occasional straggler bird was hightailing it home, otherwise the avian world had settled down for the night. The two birds, a nearly domesticated pigeon and an untamable jackdaw, headed for a high adventure.

They started by circling over the bamboo grove, flapping their wing energetically to gain height. Soon they were hundreds of feet above the ground. Pretty P looked over her shoulder towards Crow for directions. With a nod of his head he indicated that they had a way to go as yet.

The two companions were now so high up that the city light below began to sparkle like the bright stars above. They must have been more than two thousand feet above the ground when Crow suddenly stopped flapping, opened his wings wide and beginning an easy glide. The pigeon followed his example.

“Have you done this often?” Pretty P asked Crow, trying to catch her breath. Crow, too, was out of breath. Taking some time to reply, he said, “Many times, but never this late. Everything looks so much prettier at this time.”

Up there the air was cool and the noise of the city traffic was left behind. There were no diesel fumes, no dust raked up by passing cars, and no unbearable stink of garbage. There were also no other birds flying this high this late, so the sky was completely theirs. Crow and Pretty P continued their leisurely glide back to the ground.

Pretty P took in the vista beneath her wings, as it

spread out like a glittering carpet. There was Patan city, with its street lamps, its household lights, and the lamps outlining the temples and monasteries. Further along, there were the lights of the Bagmati Bridge. Beyond that, stretching out far away, was the glitter of the larger city of Kathmandu.

“What’s that bright light over there that is constantly blinking on and off?” asked the pigeon.

Crow replied, “That’s the airport, where the big airplanes land. The light is a beacon to help pilots find the runway.”

They glided some more in silence, Crow sensed that the pigeon had had enough excitement for a day. It was time to head back. He said, “Sister, we birds do not need a beacon to find our way home. All we have to do is go straight down.” With mischief in his voice, he suggested, “Let’s do the rock-fall routine that you saw me do over the bamboo grove! I’ll teach you!”

Pigeon replied, a little uncertainly, “Okay, but you tell me how!”

Crow gave the instructions: “First, stop your glide by closing your wings tightly. Remember to tuck your legs in. As you begin to fall, you will feel a bit queasy, but that will pass. Keep your neck firm, so that the wind does not snap your head back. Remember it will be difficult to open your wings when you get to the bottom because of the pressure of the rushing air. You will have to use a lot of force to push your wings out.”

Pretty P decided to go for it. She was having the time of her life, doing things she had never, ever, dreamed of.

How her life had changed within the course of a couple of hours!

As the two flew side by side, Crow turned to Pretty P.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded nervously.

Two birds, a pigeon and a jackdaw, closed their wings and fell out of the night sky. Pretty P felt as if her heart would pop out of her mount, but in a moment her panic vanished. As she fell headlong, the rushing wind forced her to close her eyes to a slit. The pigeon saw the city lights coming up slowly to greet her. She looked to her right, and there was Crow keeping pace, making sure that she did not make a foolish mistake.

They fell a bit farther and then, over the roar of the wind, Crow shouted, “Sister, now open your wings!”

Pretty P tried to do as she was told, but the pressure of the air against her body was too much. Her wings would not budge.

“I can’t!” she cried in alarm.

“Push out! Push hard! Quick!” screamed Crow.

The street lamps on the ground were coming up very fast now, and with Crow shouting at her pretty P tried one more time with all her might. Slowly, the wings opened a bit, and then suddenly they spread out as the wind caught them. In a weep, the pigeon was flying upward. She had broken her fall, and felt immensely relieved.

But it was too late for Crow. Intent on guiding Pretty P, he had not given thought to opening his own

wings. By the time he shifted attention to his situation, it was simply too late. The jackdaw went crashing through the canopy of the pear tree and fell from branch to branch until he wound up on the ground, limp and lifeless.

The spirited creature of just seconds ago was gone.

Pretty P saw it all happened as she flapped over the pear tree. She came to rest on the same branch where the two had argued so strenuously earlier. She tilted her head and looked down at Crow. She did not know how long she sat there, dazed. Maybe she was there for hours, during which time Crow's words kept coming back to her, alive, full of wit and wisdom.

She did not weep. Instead, she tried to bring back to life in her mind the jackdaw who, in one evening, had introduced her to the excitement of living.

In time, Pretty P dozed off. She woke up to the bright light of dawn, and remembered all of what had happened the night before. She desperately hoped that it had all been a dream. "Oh please, make it a dream! I would never want to lose a friend like Crow! Oh, please make it a dream!"

With a trembling heart, the pigeon looked down, and there it was. A heap of black feathers on the grass. Crow had indeed died, but only after giving her the gift of life.

