

## The Fox Simile

1.

Fabian the Fox was out walking when he spied Scroop the Squirrel curled up in a chestnut tree.

"Hi Scroop," said Fabian.

"Hi Fabian," said Scroop. "Where are you sneaking off to?"

"I'm not 'sneaking' anywhere!" said Fabian angrily. "I was just out taking a morning stroll."

Later Fabian saw Balthasar the Badger burrowing for worms in a hollow.

"Hi Balthasar," said Fabian.

"Hi Fabian," said Balthasar. "Where are you creeping off to?"

"I'm not 'creeping' anywhere!" said Fabian, crossly. "I'm just taking in the marvellous scenery."

Further up the road, Fabian spotted Palamon the Pig rooting out truffles under an oak tree.

"Hi Palamon," said Fabian.

"Hi Fabian," said Palamon. "Where are you slinking off to?"

"I'm not 'slinking' anywhere!" said Fabian. "Nor am I 'creeping', Nor am I 'sneaking'."

"Sorry," said Palamon. "I just assumed you'd be up to no good. After all, you are a fox. And everyone knows that foxes are 'sly'. It says as much in the book."

"And what book would that be?!" demanded Fabian.

Palamon reached into his day pack and pulled out a well-thumbed volume.

"Why this one, of course," he said, handing the copy to Fabian.

The fox read the title aloud, "*Similes and Sayings for Beginners.*" Then he opened the book and flicked through the pages.

The book was ordered alphabetically. On page fifteen he found the Fs. Falcon . . . Ferret . . . Finch. When he got to the Fox section, he read aloud again. "As sly as a fox."

"Just as I said," said Palamon. "It couldn't be any clearer."

"Well that is just ridiculous," said Fabian. "I know many foxes that are kind, some that are helpful, and many others that are witty, brave, and friendly. Of course, there's the odd sly one amongst us. But to call us all sly is most unfair. I'd love to know who published this hogwash. I'd have them change it in an instant."

"It should give the publisher details on the inside cover," grunted the pig.

The fox flicked to the third page. Sure enough, there in big bold letters was the name of the publisher: *The Ministry of Similes and Sayings.* The address was printed a little further down the page: *Shottery House, Birnam Woods.*

"I know that place," said Fabian. "That's not too far away from Romeo Rabbit's warren. I'll pop in there this very morning and give them a piece of my mind."

Palamon returned the book to his day pack.

"Would you mind awfully if I come with you?" he asked. "To tell you the truth, us pigs are fed up of being called 'fat', when we're simply big-boned, or 'greedy' just because we have healthy appetites."

"The more the merrier," said the fox. "Let's go and sort out these sinister simile setters once and for all."

2.

The two companions set off along Falstaff's Lane, then cut across country through Puck's Meadow. After a while, they came to a large linden tree. Sitting in the tree was a tired and forlorn-looking jay.

"Good morning to you, Mrs Bird," Fabián chirruped.

The bird sat up and stretched its wings.

"I'm a 'jay'," it said testily. "And my name is Juliet." "I don't know why you think you can get away with calling anything with wings, 'Mr' or 'Mrs' Bird. How would you like it if I greeted you with 'Good morning, Mr Mammal' or 'Good morning, Mr Canine'?"

"Somebody's in a foul temper," said Fabian.

The jay fluttered down from the tree. "Of course, I'm in a foul temper," it said. "I've been sitting here since before dawn, waiting like a fool for the early worms to show their faces. But since the worms read that preposterous *Similes and Sayings for Beginners*, they sleep till midday to avoid being eaten for breakfast."

"That book is full of utter bunkum," said Fabián. "And you shouldn't stand for it a day longer. We're marching to Shottery House right now

to put those slipshod saying scribblers in their places. We'd be delighted if you'd join us."

3.

The jay accepted Fabian's offer, and the three set off across Beadle Hill. At the crest of the hill, they came across a cat sitting on a milepost.

"Good morning," Fabian purred in his best cat.

The cat didn't answer.

"Good morning!" Fabian repeated.

Still, the cat didn't answer.

"How rude to ignore common courtesy!" said Fabian. "The least you can do is to return a greeting to a fellow traveller."

The cat looked right past them as if they weren't there.

"Well I never," Fabian continued. "What is the world coming to? There was a day when cats were considered the most courteous of creatures."

The cat licked its paws and cleaned behind its ears.

"Come," said Fabian to the others. "Let's be on our way and leave this frosty feline to his ill manners."

The three travellers turned on their heels. They hadn't taken more than a step when the cat spoke.

"I don't mean to be rude," it said. "It's just that I don't want to appear unduly interested."

"Why on earth not?" asked Fabian. "There's certainly no shame in being curious about others."

"But, you know what they say?" said the cat.

"No. What do they say?" asked Fabian.

"That curiosity 'killed' the cat."

"And just who exactly says that?" asked Fabian.

"Why, those ever so clever owls down in Shottery House, in that book of similarities and saying things." Since I read that book, I've been terrified to show the slightest interest in anything or anybody."

"That book is full of the most utter claptrap," said Fabian.

"But everyone believes it, because it's a book," said the cat.

"Well that's going to change," said Fabian. "We're marching to Shottery House to fix those malevolent metaphor makers once and for all. By all means, do come along."

4.

The animals set off with Fabian out front. Down Beadle Hill they went. Across the River Sticks. Into Beadle Wood. And up to Shottery House.

Fabian gave a loud rat-a-tat-tat on the door. After a short while, an impeccably dressed owl appeared.

"I'd like to make a complaint," said Fabian.

The owl directed the companions along a corridor to the complaints department.

There was quite a queue before Fabian got his turn. In front of him were a coot, a bat, a dog and a mule. When he was eventually called, it was the same owl that had opened the door three hours earlier that beckoned him forward.

"So, you have a complaint?" said the owl.

"I do indeed," said Fabian. "It's about the fox simile on page fifteen of your book. It's unjust, untrue, undeserved and unacceptable. I demand it be revised or deleted immediately."

"I assure you that all of our similes are thoroughly researched by our expert team of simile specialists," said the owl.

"You mean a team of owls?" said Fabian. "Please pray tell how it is that owls know so much about foxes?"

"Haven't you heard?" said the owl.

"Heard what?"

"Owls are wise," said the owl.

"And who says that?" demanded Fabian.

"Why the book, of course."

"But you owls wrote the book," said Fabian. "Did you ask anybody else whether they thought owls are wise? You certainly didn't ask me."

"I beg your pardon," said the owl. "But it is not the owl simile that is under discussion here; it is the fox simile. So can you please explain what you believe is wrong with it?"

"Well, for a start, foxes are not sly," said Fabian.

"But don't you 'sneak' around at night?" said the owl.

"You mean do we go for midnight strolls? Why yes, of course, we do. But so for that matter do many other animals. What about hedgehogs? Or badgers? They're up and about well before sunup. But you don't call them 'sly' in your book, do you?"

"But hedgehogs and badgers do not go in other people's bins, said the owl."

"I admit ransacking bins may not be our most appealing habit," said Fabian. "But it has no bearing whatsoever on whether we are 'sly' or not."

The owl frowned.

"Look," it said. "'Sly' wasn't just our opinion. You may be reassured to know that we did a poll. In that poll, we asked several animals to choose one word that best describes foxes. And the word they chose was 'sly'."

"Really?" Fabian exclaimed. "And which animals completed this poll of yours?"

The owl rustled through a pile of papers on his desk.

"Chickens," it said after a while.

"Chickens!" laughed Fabian.

"Yes," said the owl. "Six hens and a cockerel to be exact."

"You asked seven chickens what they thought about foxes, and you thought you'd get a fair and balanced answer?" You may as well have asked a fly what it thinks about spiders. Or a sparrow what it thinks

about sparrow hawks. Why don't we ask some less obviously biased animals?"

"Like who?" quizzed the owl.

"How about a pig, a jay and a cat?" said Fabian beckoning forward his three newly found friends.

Fabian had made such a good impression on his companions with his friendly, helpful and determined nature that they found it hard to pick a single quality that summed him up. In the end, however, they chose 'friendly' because of the alliteration with 'fox'. But when Fabian said he preferred 'trustworthy', they were happy to revise their choice.

The owl reluctantly changed the entry on page fifteen to 'As trustworthy as a fox', and handed a revised version of the book to a grinning Fabian.

Fabian thanked his three companions. But said that he would not be able to stay around to support their complaints, as he had a dinner appointment that evening. He bade everybody good luck, and set off with his copy of the book tucked snugly under his arm.

5.

In the weeks that followed, word got round the animals of the woods and meadows that foxes had been reclassified as trustworthy. There was some disbelief, particularly amongst the rabbits the chickens and the ducks. But none of them had any reason to doubt the wisdom of the owls.

6.



It was some three months later that Palamon the Pig encountered Fabian traipsing along the byway that led from Romeo Rabbit's place.

"Greetings," said Fabian.

"Greetings," said Palamon. "How goes the new simile?"

"Very well, indeed," said Fabian. "It's so refreshing to be seen in a positive light wherever I go."

"You've certainly put on a few pounds in weight since I last saw you," said Palamon.

Fabian patted his midriff. "There have been so many party invites of late," he said. "And perhaps, I have been a bit of a glutton."

Palamon looked up the road from where Fabian had come.

"And was there a party up at Romeo Rabbit's place?" he asked.

"Not exactly," said the fox. "Just a small gathering with Romeo and his family."

"And how was old Romeo?" asked Palamon.

Fabian grinned from ear to ear then licked his lips.

"Why, just perfect," he said.