

“THE FIERY SCARECROW”

By Alexander G. Tozzi

Dusk brought gloom across the corn field, and a cackling murder of crows. From her bedroom window, Allison brewed a cup of tea and set worried eyes upon the scarecrow. It was a rotted pole with tattered clothes and two rusted coffee cans dangling from its arms. It frightened her, but not the crows.

The teapot whistled, startling her. Letting the curling steam tickle her nose, Allison poured the water and then opened the window to shout at the foraging crows. Her shouts fell on deaf, ebony ears.

That corn won't last long, Allison knew. It was just barely an acre, and her family had planted it for the express purpose of putting it in the basement over the winter. Her parents were off shopping for bottles and new cutlery; she was all alone to fend for the farm.

I'll take a rake and chase those crows away!

It was cold outside, the cup of tea like a porcelain stove in Allison's hands. She sipped it with each step, and fumbled with the rake by the door. Lifting it high as those it was a wide, clawed hand of her own, she stomped toward the crows, waving the rake and shouting. They flew away in a mad gaggle, only to return when Allison retreated back to the door.

Allison suspected the crows didn't really fear her; knew that she was all rake-waving and no rake-swiping.

Sipping the last of her tea, she went back inside to light the stove. Warming herself, she couldn't help but look outside and see the crows, flapping feathers all over the field as they pecked and devoured the little yellow kernels.

Angry, Allison considered lighting some torches with the stove. She could plant them all around the corn field, the licking flames frightening the crows from returning. It was a fiendish idea, and she wanted so much to do it. But fire was always dangerous, and the breeze might blow the flames onto the field

and scarecrow themselves.

The scarecrow.

Allison remembered when her family had built that talisman. It was some years back when Allison was little, the farm fairly knew. Her father had chopped a tree and whetted a log into the pole. Mother had sewn the clothes from old rags, and the cans came from the side of the road. For a time the scarecrow had frightened crows and other vermin, but in its weathered state, the thing didn't scare anyone other than Allison.

It's a disgusting scarecrow, she thought. Its clothes were tattered as though that rake she wielded had sliced it, the cans clinking like the chains of a ghost. It all hung from a rotted pole as though it had been impaled. Just thinking about it, she shivered before the hot stove.

Why can't it scare the crows? It scares me plenty.

A germ of an idea started to grow in her mind. Scaring the crows on her own was a fruitless endeavor, but was there a way she could make the scarecrow more frightening to a crow?

Her mind went back to fire, and as she rubbed her hands before the stove, she remembered that corn wasn't the only crop her family plated.

Smiling like a fiend, Allison grabbed a trowel and raced right back outside. Without a cup of tea the cold turned her lips blue. Shivering, she brought herself to another part of the farm, knelt down amongst vines and leaves, and used the trowel to free several turnips.

Hauling the vegetables back to the house, she near collapsed in front of the stove. *If it weren't for the burns, I'd jump inside!*

Through the window came the crows' cawing. As they sang in glee, Allison went to work on the turnips. They were nice and plump, and she was already laughing at the thought of crows flying away like feathered fools.

Pieces of turnip littered the floor when she was through. With metal tongs she added the final pieces to these fiery

vegetables, and reluctantly ventured back outside into the frigid cold.

In her hands the turnips warmed her some, but not as much as the tea. She worried that the cold would extinguish their warmth, but one blustery gust near knocked her down, and she felt that the fires were still intact.

Grinning, she raced toward the corn, managing to shoo some of the crows. Most of them just crowed at her and went back to eating. That was fine. Once they saw the turnips. . . .

When she approached the scarecrow she came to a dead stop. Dusk had given way to dark, and in the blue night the scarecrow looked like a specter, come to take her away to the netherworld. Its cans clinked, and she suppressed a yelp. *I didn't think it would be this frightening.*

She wanted to turn back and huddle in front of the stove.

Crows cawed louder now, and a few feathers fell on her face. Wiping them away, she glared at the invading murder, felt pure ire against their eating her family's corn. *How will we make it through the winter with one crop short?* She wasn't afraid of these birds, and if they knew enough not to be afraid of a hunk of tattered clothes, then why should she?

I'll show them something to be scared about!

She marched up to the scarecrow, and planted a turnip on each of its arms. Standing on tiptoe she placed the final turnip atop the pole. Stepping back she smiled at the turnips, wicked faces carved into them, all aglow by the flame of fiery coals.

All at once the crows glimpsed those fiery faces and cawed as though a monster from the flaming depths had rent through the field. It was a cacophony of crows, and Allison laughed as the murder left the corn field and flew like so many feathered fools off into the night.

When both crow and laughter had left, she turned to look at the scarecrow. All of its heads afire, she was frightened, but felt safe knowing that it kept crows away. Shivering from the cold, she went back inside to brew more tea. From her bedroom window she watched the scarecrow, thankful that the corn was

safe.

THE END