

The Clever Foursome

An Advent Story
First Sunday of Advent

M. Manenti and A.G. Forgiarini



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"What's that?" On a thick, gnarled branch in the old chestnut tree, a crow scurried to the right. Flump, another clump of dirt landed in front of his claws. He shook his dark feathers and dirt enveloped him like a brown curtain.

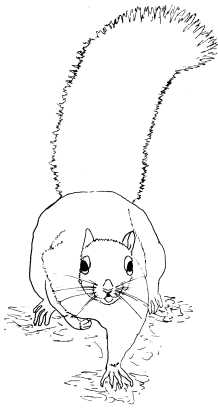
His eyes, flashing with anger, searched the ground. The cloud of leaves and clumps of soil was hard to miss. It spread out from a flutter of dirt-caked fur. "Hey! You down there! What on earth are you doing?"

The noise penetrated the squirrel's frenzy. Bewildered, she stopped and looked around. All she saw were a few weeds – struggling to keep their heads above the sea of autumn leaves that covered the ground – and the rough bark of the massive chestnut trunk. "A talking tree?" She sighed. "I knew it. I'm losing my mind."

Forlornly, she stared into the hollow at her feet. Small clumps of dirt rolled down to its center but there was no sign of the acorns she could have sworn she had buried here.

A shadow fell over her. Her heart missed a beat, she drew back, overbalanced and landed on her rear. Black wings barely missed her face and a crow landed inches before her on the ground.

"What do you think you are doing?" The crow gave her a dark look and ruffled his feathers.



She scrambled to her feet and fluffed up her tail. "Good God! Where did you come from? You gave me such a fright!"

The crow tilted his head and looked her up and down. "Me? I was sitting peacefully up there on a branch, looking for a morsel of food when you, you pelted me with dirt!" He clacked his beak accusingly.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry!" The squirrel stared up into the branches far above her. "Did I really dig that hard?"

"You still haven't told me what you are doing!" The crow glared at her.

Her misery raised its ugly head again and turned the world around her into a sea of wavering gray shapes. "I can't find my nuts and acorns." She sniffled and rubbed her paw over her eyes. "I will starve this winter."

The crow looked up at the sky leaden with heavy clouds. "Soon the first snowflakes will dance from the sky. When that happens, you will truly have a problem."

"I know." The squirrel sobbed and wrapped her arms around her empty belly.

The crow slowly lifted his wings and stared at her. "Mhh, maybe I can help you. I know a place that is a true cornucopia of nuts and other treats."

"What? Where?" The squirrel sat up straight and hope dulled her hunger.

Impatiently, she watched the crow strut up and down in front of her. What was there to think about?

Either he knew where to find the bounty or not.

Finally he stopped and turned around.

"I have a proposal," he said. "I'll show you where you can find the nuts and, as a reward, I get half of your haul."

Her arms relaxed and slid off her belly. "Whatever you want!" She jumped over the hole and landed next to him, ready to be gone.

"Just tell me where I can find this treasure trove!"

"It is bundled up in a hut at the edge of the forest. It really is not far from here and there is a window just below the roof. It is frequently open, you know, and easy to reach."

The eagerness in these words gave the squirrel pause. "And why don't you get the prize yourself if it is so easy?"

The crow hastily tucked a feather into place and cleared his throat. "Well, it is easy to get inside. But the rooms are too small for me to fly around in." The next second he pulled himself together and challenged her. "Now what do you say? Do you want to get the nuts or not?"

What was he hiding? She didn't trust his words. But what was there to lose? If she did not find something to eat soon, it would all be over.

And so the squirrel followed the crow through the trees.

