

# The language of birds

A traditional Russian tale retold by Judith Harries

A long time ago in Russia, there lived a man and woman and their precious son called Ivan. He was a bright, brave boy who loved all the birds and animals in the forest. A sweet nightingale sat in a cage in their house and Ivan would sit each day and listen to the silvery notes, wishing he could understand what the bird was singing.

One day Ivan went out for a walk and was caught in a fierce storm. The sky darkened, wind blew and rain poured down. A tiny baby bird landed at his feet, flushed out of its nest from the high trees above. Ivan picked it up carefully and gently placed it in his pocket for safe keeping while the storm raged. When the storm was over he climbed up the tree and returned the bird to its nest. Just then the mother bird returned, sat on the branch next to Ivan and spoke to him.

'Thank you Ivan for your kindness to my baby. What can I do to repay you?'

Ivan answered, *'If you would and if you could, teach me the language of the birds?'*

Ivan stayed in the forest for three days and learned how to interpret the birds' singing. He went home and sat next to the nightingale and as he listened he began to cry. His parents were worried when they saw the tears on their beloved son's face and asked him what the matter was. Ivan explained that he could understand the nightingale's song and that it was so sad. He told them that one day soon he would no longer be their son but would become the son of a king, and his father would serve him. The couple were so upset by their son's words that they began to distrust him and wondered what to do.

One night when Ivan was asleep, they put him in a small sailing boat. Ivan woke up and found he was alone and lost at sea. By good luck he was rescued the next morning by a large ship. High above the ship the sailors saw three cranes flying. Ivan listened carefully to the birds' cries and told the sailors what the cranes had said.

'The birds are predicting that a storm is coming. It will be bad, the sails will be torn and the mast will break. We must go to the nearest harbour.'

The sailors scoffed at Ivan's words and sailed further on. Suddenly the storm hit and sure enough, the sails were torn to shreds and the mast broke and fell into the water. It took three days to repair the ship.



## The language of birds (continued)

High above the ship the sailors saw three wild swans flying. Ivan listened to the birds' cries and again told the sailors what they had said.

'There is a pirate ship approaching. The terrible pirates on board will jump aboard and rob us of all our possessions. We must sail quickly to the nearest harbour.'

This time the sailors listened to Ivan's words and steered the ship to a nearby harbour. There they waited and watched as a pirate ship passed by and attacked three other sailing ships.

By now the sailors were impressed by Ivan's gift and agreed to sail him to the next harbour where they had heard that the King was being pestered and annoyed by three noisy crows. The birds perched on the windowsill of the royal bedroom and the King could not sleep. He had put up notices all round the town declaring that anyone who could get rid of the pesky birds would be rewarded by marriage to the youngest princess.

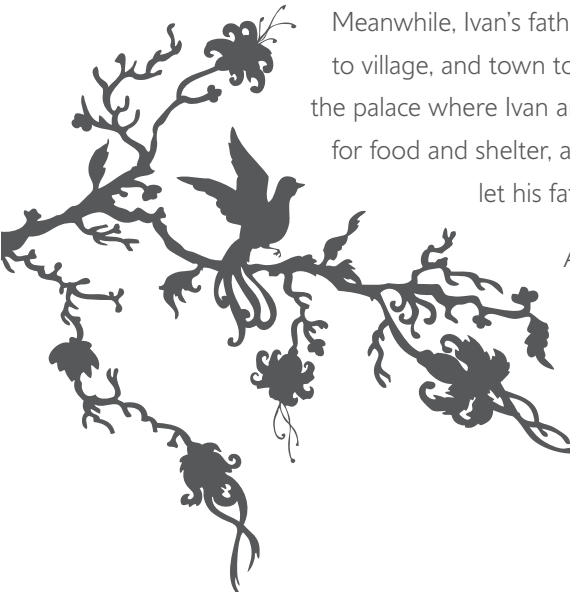
Ivan read the notice three times and said,

'Open the window wide and let me listen to these birds.' He listened carefully and then asked to be taken to the King.

'Let me explain, your highness. There are three crows; father, mother and son. They wish you to tell them which of the parents the son should follow?'

The King answered without hesitation, 'The son should follow the father crow.' On hearing these words, the father crow flew away followed by the son, and the mother crow flew the other way. The King didn't see or hear the noisy birds ever again!

The King was delighted and the wedding between Ivan and the princess was arranged immediately.



Meanwhile, Ivan's father, who now lived alone and in poverty, journeyed from village to village, and town to town, begging for food and shelter. One day he arrived outside the palace where Ivan and his beautiful bride lived. He didn't recognise his son and asked for food and shelter, and the opportunity to serve at the palace. Ivan happily agreed to let his father work for him.

After a few days, Ivan revealed himself to his father and reminded him of the nightingale's words all those years before. The two men were so happy to be reunited and lived happily ever after in the palace.