

## OUR JACK

In Memoriam for a close friend, and a Jackdaw.

Mike Disney 2016

In those days my parents lived in an isolated cottage in Worcestershire. Though much renovated and extended the original cottage was very old with roof-beams made out of entire oaks and an ingle-nook fire-place where once upon a time roasts must have turned on a spit. In the summer weird noises, sticks and small avalanches of soot would come down the chimney suggesting that birds of some kind must be nesting up there but, try as we might, we never managed to catch a glimpse of the culprits either coming or leaving the chimney-pot. Mum thought they must be starlings because starlings are mimics and once she spotted a starling on the roof-ridge close to the chimney whistling the theme-tune of her favourite radio program 'The Archers'. In summer time Dad inserted a large electric fire into the grate to provide warmth in cold snaps and to prevent the mysterious soot-falls from spoiling the carpet.

Alone in the cottage one morning I heard weird noises emanating from the lounge – evidently coming from behind the electric fire. I pulled it out and there was an almost fully grown jackdaw looking rather cross and not a little ruffled. He looked at me, tilting his head from side to side to get a better view. Suddenly he focussed down behind me. And no wonder for there was our cat Sooty, a famous hunter, his tail swishing, metaphorically licking his lips. I chased him out and locked the door behind.

Jack jumped out of the grate, shook himself and then strolled across the room to inspect his new domain. Jackdaws don't hop they stride demurely like well-fed aldermen, swinging a little in each direction as they go. He looked under the arm chairs, went behind the sofa, hopped onto the coffee table and then down again to inspect the electric plugs as if he might shortly have a use for them.

What on earth could I do with him – if he was a him. I couldn't put him back up the chimney – at least not very far. He couldn't wander round the house – Sooty would get him – or one of our Labradors Jet and Chumples when Mum brought them back from their morning walk. Since he showed no fear of me I grabbed him and locked him in the

bathroom where at least he could come to no harm for now. When Mum and the dogs returned they were mystified by the loud, not to say imperious cries emanating from behind the bathroom door. A council of war was held and Mum decreed that I should build a small cage for Jack to save him from being murdered by one of our pets.

“We can leave him out in the garden” she said “And if his parents show any interest – which I doubt now you’ve handled him – he can go back with them. He looks old enough to fly if you ask me. He can then look after himself.”

“Yes he’ll be better off in the wild.” I agreed, and so that became our plan.

Easier said than done. Jack had a very strong personality indeed and if there were any plans to be made about his future he’d make them himself thank you very much.

The urgent problem was to find him something he would agree to eat. Worms and caterpillars weren’t easily obtained. He wouldn’t touch rice, bread, dog-biscuits, porridge-oats, cat-food, bacon-rind or any number of other readily available comestibles. Then I had a brilliant idea: hard boiled egg. He gulped it down and eventually settled for a mixed diet of egg, stilton cheese, raw mince and fruit cake – and only high quality home-made fruit cake at that – none of your shop-bought stuff.

We couldn’t leave him in the bathroom; he liked company did Jack and screamed blue murder when I carried his cage back into solitary confinement. We left it in the garden sometimes in the hope that his parents would show an interest, but they’d evidently flown the chimney with the rest of their brood.

“He’s our responsibility now.” Mum announced with some relish; she loved animals of any kind, preferred them to people. “We, or rather you Michael are going to have to teach him to fly. The poor thing can’t stay in that tiny cage. He’ll be safe once he can fly.”

Jack would perch on my wrist and beat his wings vigorously but he never took off. He’d flap down to the ground and continue his exploration of the world, both outside and in. We needn’t have worried about the pets because Jack, by sheer force of personality, dominated them. If Jack strolled into the dining-room Sooty would slink out in disgust. As for the two dogs he made it clear that to them that four

legged creatures were totally inferior to the two legged imperial family which included corvids and some, but only some, human beings. To rub the point in he would jump on them when they were lying down. He would stroll up on top of their heads, peer into their ears and, on one occasion walked along Jet's nose to inspect his nostrils. All went well, apart from a low growl, until Jack tweaked one of the poor dogs eyebrows. The big jaws snapped but Jack was far too nimble and escaped. Boundaries were set in our little animal world and armed neutrality gradually settled into studied indifference. Jack was not allowed to eat the dogs' food, or get within two feet of Sooty, otherwise the house was his -- except that he couldn't get upstairs because he couldn't fly. If I went up he would stand at the bottom infuriated, squawking at the unfairness of life.

Endlessly curious Jack had to go everywhere and see everything. The one place he wouldn't fit was under the sagging armchairs where he'd get stuck and swear abominably until somebody rescued him. He talked a great deal, often to us, but mostly to himself when he was engrossed in a task. He was a great imitator. For instance Jack realized that newspapers were important because Dad frequently had the Times on his lap to do the crossword. One day I heard squawks of delight emanating from the next room. The newspaper had flowed from the sofa onto the floor and Jack was using it as a snow-slope. He'd jump off the summit of the sofa and slide on his bottom all the way to the floor before hopping back up again to repeat the feat. When tobogganing palled he started tearing the Times into narrow strips, gratified by the tearing sounds it made. Alas I only found out when the crossword had been ripped into a dozen shreds. Dad would be incandescent when he got home from work. In fact he's go berserk. His crossword, as everyone but Jack knew, was sacrosanct.

Jack appeared to have few instincts – he seemed to learn by experiment or imitation. To our surprise he showed little interest in flying although his siblings had long since taken to the air. Eventually I hurled him high into space like a cricket-ball. He did indeed open his wings but all he managed to do was flap feebly round and round in a circle, his crest erect, crying out feebly in alarm. You couldn't mistake his words:

“Oh my God! I daren’t look down! The height is terrifying! And I’m going upwards . I tell you I’m going upwards! Oh God. I’m going to die! What have I ever done to deserve this?”

And it was true. With each clumsy circuit above the lawn he was mounting ever higher – quite unable to descend.

“Now look what you’ve done Michael. The poor poor creature.....”

“But Mum it was your idea...”

Whether by accident or design Jack crashed into the tiles of the old stable roof and perched on the roof-ridge calling piteously for help.

We fetched the ladder but before I could grab him he’d taken off again into an ever-ascending death spiral.

In those days Worcestershire was dominated by great Elm trees, now alas all gone, and we had two in our garden so colossal that they had Preservation Orders on them issued by the Urban Council. Jack disappeared into the very top of one of these colossi from which his piteous and accusatory calls echoed all day long.

“He’s weakening.” Mum announced at tea-time “You’ll have to climb up there and get him down.”

“But it’s at least a hundred feet tall.”

“You’re supposed to be a mountaineer aren’t you?”

“But this is a tree Mum, and a very smooth one at that. Anyway my gear is back at university. I’m definitely not going up there! Not on your Nellie.”

“Of course he won’t!” Dad agreed when he got back from work to find the wreckage of his crossword. “Let the little bastard take his chances. What’s he got wing feathers for anyway?”

But it was no good. Darkness fell. The stars came out. The cries for help from the top of the giant Elm grew more pitiful than ever. I couldn’t eat my supper whilst Jack was starving to death – or more likely dying of thirst.

I’d done some hard climbs in my time but nothing so death-defying as that great Elm. The branches seemed miles apart; the trunk smooth and hold-less. By the time I got irretrievably stuck, unable to go either up or down, only the darkness which concealed the huge drop beneath me prevented total panic. And all the time that wretched bird protested the unfairness of his life to the pitiless stars.

About midnight Mum, who'd been watching television, came out with a dish of food – for Jack.

“Jack! Jack! Jack!” she called up. There was a whisper of wings, a black shadow swooping among the constellations, and Jack was enjoying his supper.

“You can come down now Michael” Mum called up. “Jack’s fine and we’re off to bed.”

Freed from gravity Jack came and went as he pleased. He'd sleep on top of my bedroom door where Sooty had no chance of getting him. He mostly fed himself too – largely on beetles and grubs I found. Jack was a generous soul who liked to share with his friends. He'd swoop out of the sky, land on my shoulder and thrust a usually dead grub deep into my ear. He was fascinated by eyes and didn't like people to close them in his presence. Early in the morning he'd dive in through my parents' bedroom window, land on Dad's chest, and prise open his sleeping eye-lashes. I'd catch the first bellow of rage just before Jack swooped through my bedroom doorway to seek protection on my shoulder.

A young Jackdaw's life is a perilous one. With few protective instincts they must learn from unforgiving experience. I ran the numbers. If each couple raises two broods of four a year, and Jackdaws can live for fifty years, only one fledgling in 200 can make it to maturity. Jack was going to need the very best start in life – and it was very doubtful whether he'd get it living with humans.

It was clear that like us he was designed to learn primarily by imitation. For instance he learned to wash up – sort of. Whenever he heard the clatter of dishes he'd swoop up onto the draining board then dash in and out of the water jets emanating from the taps. Just about everything and everybody got very wet indeed—except the dishes.

Once he did something that literally made the hairs on my neck stand on end. He was in the garden watching Mum picking runner-beans off the vine and throwing them into a colander. Mum was called to the phone so Jack thought he would have a go himself. He fluttered up into a vine, grabbed a bean with his beak, and went through a terrible struggle to break it free from the vine. It must have taken him two whole minutes – but he succeeded eventually. Then he dragged his

prize across the garden and heaved it into the colander. He ruffled his feathers with pride, shook himself, then flew up to tell me what he'd done.

When he was about three months old we gathered from the noises in the chimney, that his parents must have returned to raise a second brood. We wanted to see them flying to and from the chimney-pot but they were far too cunning for us. We tried the trick of N going into the garden shed, but only N-1 coming out, leaving one behind as the spy. N reached 14 before they were eventually fooled. I played the same kind of game with Jack, concealing sultanas—which he loved, in a match-box. He was rarely fooled until the numbers reached above 10. Could you do that?

Jack's undoing was likely to be his fearlessness of people – understandable in his circumstances. If we had guests in the garden he'd land on them indiscriminately – usually on their heads – but he did prefer smokers. He would snatch the cigarette from their lips and drop it onto the grass in order to watch the smoke curling upwards. But one morning he went too far. I was sitting in the garden swatting for my finals when there was a squeal of brakes in the steep lane outside, and a succession of loud oaths. I guessed what had happened before a very angry farmer burst through our gate:

“It were your bloody pet crow I suppose!”

Jack had flown in through the window of the man's Landrover and snatched his cigarette. It took two large glasses of Mum's lethal Elderflower Champagne to calm the poor man's nerves.

“He's got to go.” We all agreed “If he doesn't he'll only get shot – or worse.”

Not long afterwards Jack was sitting on my shoulder when a flock of fifty jackdaws flew overhead. When they saw him they swirled round and round calling out frantically. The hackles rose on his neck. He looked at me as if asking what he should do.

“Go boy!” I stood, shaking him off into the air. “They're your kind! Live your life with them!”

He rose up to join them, soon becoming just another speck in the tumbling flock as it made its way off South-West towards Alvechurch. Then I sat back down and cried my heart out.

He did come back three days later, famished and evidently stressed. He took a huge meal and slept on my door one last time, as if he had come to say goodbye. That was only fifty years ago – so he could still be alive. The chances are against it of course, but you never know. Jack was one smart creature, smarter than most of the people I've met. More importantly he was my closest friend – and I was his. I only wish he'd remained my friend – for ever.