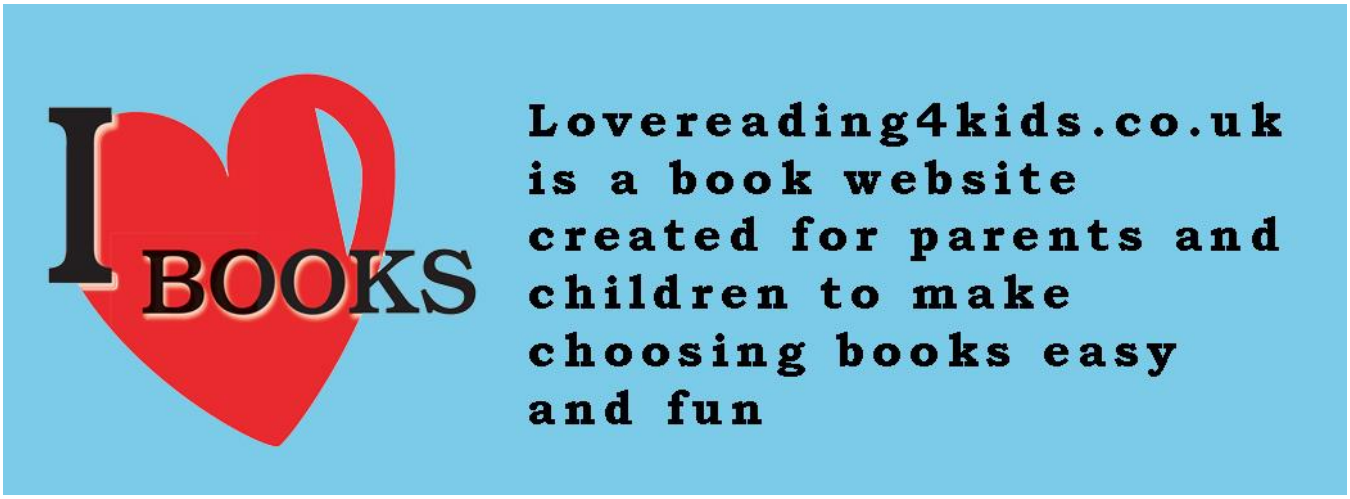


Opening extract from

The Ravenmaster's Boy

Written by

Mary Hoffman

Published by

The Greystones Press

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by

The Greystones Press Ltd Greystones 37 Lawton Avenue Carterton Oxfordshire OX18 3JY

Copyright © Mary Hoffman 2017

The moral right of Mary Hoffman to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright,

Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

PB 978-1-911122-13-5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed and typeset by Nigel Hazle Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clay's Ltd, St Ives plc.

1

A New Queen for an Old King

NINE YEARS LATER

‘More blood?’ asked Bran hopefully.

‘Not today,’ said Kit. ‘Don’t be greedy.’

Only Kit Wagstaffe, the Ravenmaster’s boy, could get away with addressing the biggest of the ravens like that. But then only Kit could speak fluent Raven.

It had begun not long after he got his first breeches and his new father took him to meet the big black birds. Bran had shed a tail feather, long and glossy, and Kit picked it up from the grass on Tower Green. Something about its perfection struck him as magical: it seemed wrong either to leave it on the ground or take it for himself.

He knelt and proffered it back to the bird like a knight offering his sword to a king.

But what happened next was beyond human understanding.

‘That big old bird took the feather in his beak and brushed Kit’s mouth with the plume,’ the Ravenmaster told his wife. ‘And then he did the same on both his ears! Then he dropped it at Kit’s feet and they both bowed. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

And from that day, Kit and the ravens understood one another perfectly.

Kit had almost forgotten his other life; it felt as if he had always lived within the thick honey-coloured walls of the Tower of London. He knew that Thomas and Marjorie weren’t really his parents but he could no longer remember the faces of his first mother and father and had been content to take the Ravenmaster’s name.

As for the Wagstaffes, they might have got their son when he was nearly seven but he was to them all they had ever wanted in a child. He grew and thrived and learned his letters and was as loving as any natural son could have been. And to them he was a miracle: not just a son but a child who had survived the plague. And one who could speak with ravens.

The only time Kit remembered his first life was when the smell of fresh loaves reached him from the bakery in the palace and he would drift over to talk to Isabel, the baker’s daughter.

Now, at sixteen he had become the Ravenmaster’s apprentice and was highly likely to succeed him in the job. No one else had ever had such an understanding with the birds.

‘No more blood?’ asked Bran. ‘Bread dipped in blood?’

‘Not today,’ said Kit firmly. ‘You’ve had all you’re getting. But maybe there will be a hen’s egg for you later.’

Bran preened his wing feathers. ‘All well, lad?’ asked the Ravenmaster. They had finished cleaning out the cages the ravens used at night.

‘Bran wants more bread soaked in blood,’ said Kit. He was used to acting as interpreter between his father and the birds. The older ravens sometimes said words like ‘Good morning’ that all could understand but no one had conversations with them the way Kit did. And only Kit knew that Bran was the King Raven.

‘There’ll be blood enough to satisfy even old Bran soon,’ said the Ravenmaster. He looked grim, as he often did these days. Then he shook his head.

‘Take no notice of me, son,’ he said. ‘Things haven’t been right ever since they took those two old men out to the hill and lopped their heads off.’

Kit looked round uneasily. Even at his age he knew there were things it wasn’t wise to talk about when others might be listening.

He remembered the two old men last summer: John Fisher and Thomas More. They had been prisoners in the Tower for months but his father hadn’t been able to explain properly why. Something to do with the new queen.

They were kept in the Bell Tower, one on top of the other, the older one in the upper room and the younger on the ground floor.

The ground floor prisoner was called Thomas, like Kit's father, and had once been a great man and chancellor of England. He walked in the gardens every day and had often given Kit a nod of greeting on his way to Mass in the chapel.

The other one was even grander – he was made a cardinal soon after being imprisoned in the Tower, but Kit's father said it was bad news, that the king was against all cardinals now, even against the Pope, so it would do old Bishop John no good to be given a scarlet hat.

'The king said he'd send Fisher's head to Rome, sooner than have his new hat sent here.'

Kit hadn't understood that; there was no sign of any red hats in the Bell Tower, only pious old men saying their prayers. Perhaps the king had stopped the hat arriving? But Kit couldn't see what would have made him so angry about a hat.

Anyway, it wasn't long before old Fisher had no need of any hat. Kit couldn't see how the two men could be traitors to the king. They seemed so harmless and dignified. But one after the other last summer, with less than three weeks between them, they were taken out of their prison cells and o to Tower Hill, where their heads had been chopped off.

Kit had not been allowed to go, though his father

had been on duty in the crowd that gathered to see both executions. Since then he had often been gloomy and grim, like this morning.

But Kit had seen the heads. First Fisher's was put on a spike on London Bridge but once the other old man had been killed, the rst head was tossed down into the river and Thomas More's put in its place. People said that these grisly relics had to be displayed to stop others committing treason but Kit always shuddered and hurried past quickly if he had to cross the bridge.

It was a bitterly cold January day and, when the birds were done, father and son walked over to the bakery to warm their hands and stomachs with a new-baked loaf.

Isabel was up early as always, helping her father.

'Good morrow, Ravenmaster,' she said, dropping Kit's father a quick curtsey. All the Tower workers showed respect to the warders; it made Kit feel proud of his father, even though Isabel showed little respect to a boy like him.

She was very flushed this morning and not just from the heat of the ovens.

'Have you heard the news?' she whispered to Kit.

He warmed his numb fingers on the small hot loaf. But before Isabel could impart her news, they heard the baker telling it to the Ravenmaster.

'The queen is dead?' said Kit, nearly dropping the bread.

‘Shh! Not “the queen”. We aren’t allowed to call her that. The “dowager princess” is what you have to say if you want to keep your head on your shoulders.’

‘But the one who used to be called Queen Katherine?’ asked Kit. He wanted to be sure to get it right. ‘The king’s first wife?’

‘Not according to the king,’ whispered his friend. ‘But yes, the one who *was* old Queen Katherine. She’s dead.’

‘So there really is only one queen now,’ said Kit.

‘You are so slow sometimes, Kit Wagstaffe,’ said Isabel. ‘It makes me long to box your ears! Yes of course there is only one queen. How could there be two? Don’t you remember Queen Anne’s coronation?’

Kit thought he would never forget it; it had been the best day of his life. The guns all ring and the barges covered in gold leaf and tinkling with bells! Heralds and minstrels all playing and the beautiful young queen with her black hair loose down her back.

There weren’t many young ones living in the Tower and even Isabel was a year older than him and well on the way to being a woman. She often scolded him these days and didn’t play as many games as she had when they were younger.

Then there was Alice, the lieutenant’s daughter, who was Kit’s age and so beautiful that she seemed to Kit far above the likes of him and the few children of Yeoman Warders. But all the young ones – and they had been three years younger then – had been allowed to watch the

queen's procession as the barges came up the river from Greenwich.

Kit's father, who had been part of the welcoming party, told them how Queen Anne had been greeted by the king:

'He put his hands on either side of her face and kissed her right heartily,' he said. 'No doubt but the king and queen are much in love.'

'Ay, and she six months gone with his baby,' said Marjorie, who had lost so many of her own.

But there had been something in the room that Kit couldn't quite identify – some feeling that his parents were not completely happy about the way things were.

Kit and his father walked back across the green, the grassy area where the ravens spent a lot of their time. Thomas had told Kit that once a man had been beheaded there, on the orders of King Richard the Third. It made Kit shiver to think of someone's life oozing out along with the blood from his neck. It must hurt such a lot. He was glad that the two old men last summer had lost their lives outside the Tower walls.

'We will go and say a prayer in the chapel for the old queen's soul,' said his father. 'And then we will never speak of her again.'

There were five ravens at the Tower for Kit to talk to. Bran was the king of them but had no queen since his mate had died the year before. Then there were two pairs: Huginn and Muninn, known as Hugh and Moony –

only Kit knew their real names. The younger pair were Thomas and Bess, named for the king's secretary and Henry's little daughter by Queen Anne.

Although Kit could talk to them all, he knew that Thomas and Bess were just ordinary birds, even though he found nothing ordinary about ravens. The other three had special qualities.

He was talking to them and feeding them their disgusting bloody pieces of meat three days later when there was a sudden startling sound of heralds' trumpets from the main gate. Kit's parents came rushing out towards the green, Marjorie drying her hands on her apron.

'What is it?' asked Kit. e ravens seemed agitated.

'That, my lad,' said the Ravenmaster, 'is the sound of a royal visit.'

'And you with crumbs in your beard,' scolded his wife.

'Well, they aren't very likely to come here,' he said, brushing off Marjorie's attempts to smarten him up.

'They are,' Bran croaked to Kit. 'The king is coming to see me.'

'Bran says the king is visiting him,' Kit translated.

'That bird has ideas above his station,' said the Ravenmaster. But he was used to Kit's superior understanding of the birds and straightened his tunic all the same.

And 'that bird' was right. The sound of trumpets and minstrels was getting nearer. Soon they could see the

constable of the Tower, Sir William Kingston, leading a great party of well-dressed courtiers towards the green.

‘Too much bright finery so soon after the old queen’s death,’ grumbled the Ravenmaster. ‘They’re wearing yellow!’

‘Shh!’ hissed his wife furiously. ‘Do you want to be dragged out on Tower Hill and your foolish head taken off you for a traitor? If the king comes here you are to say nothing about Queen Katherine!’

Kit was alarmed, because the king’s party definitely *was* heading for the green. And because his father had already broken his resolution to speak no more about old Queen Katherine. Bran started to preen his tail feathers. He looked comically like Kit’s father brushing crumbs from his beard.

‘There’s a raven with them!’ said Kit.

And there was: one of the king’s attendants carried a tethered and hooded raven on his arm. The Tower ravens were all excited to see another of their kind and flapped and cawed till Bran silenced them with a look.

As the party approached, Marjorie whipped off her apron and curtseyed low to the ground, somehow managing to dig both her son and husband with her elbows at the same time, to force them into a respectful bow.

‘Ah, Ravenmaster!’ said the king. ‘I am pleased to find you here. We have brought you a new recruit.’

Kit heard the rich sonorous voice rolling out around

the green but could see nothing of his monarch but his legs in white silk stockings and boots. He was petrified; he had never met the king before. And beside the king's ne leather boots was a small pair of figured velvet slippers.

Fancy wearing such flimsy shoes outdoors in January, thought Kit. He dared to raise his eyes.

And there was the queen! She was little, not as tall as sixteen-year-old Kit, her long black hair coiled up in a coif this morning. And so beautiful! She smiled at Kit and he felt himself blushing like a fool.

Meanwhile King Henry had motioned the man with the raven forwards and Kit saw his father take the handsome black bird from him and bow again to the king.

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' said the Ravenmaster. 'How very kind.'

'It is a female, I'm assured by the Welsh lord who gave it to me,' the king was saying.

'That is most welcome, sire, since our oldest bird has lost his mate.'

Bran was staring hard at the new bird. He raised his head feathers.

'She is called Blodwen, I believe,' said the king.

Then he seemed to lose interest in the ravens and their master and turned to the constable.

'We shall take refreshment with you now, Kingston.'

The party moved off and were gone as quickly as they came, like a vision of Fair Folk in a dream.

‘Did that really happen?’ asked Kit. ‘The king came and talked to you?’

‘Well, here is Blodwen to prove it,’ said his father. He talked soothingly to the bird.

‘Another mouth to feed,’ said Marjorie, not unkindly. She was still shaking from the shock of the royal visit and tied her apron tightly back round her middle to settle herself.

Kit realised he was still clutching a strip of meat and had been all the time he was bowing to the queen. He held it out to the new arrival, who took it in her beak and swallowed.

‘She’s a beauty,’ he told Bran in Raven.

‘So elegant and delicate,’ said Bran admiringly.

‘Well, I’d better keep her in a cage till she gets used to us,’ said the Ravenmaster.

He settled Blodwen, who had not yet said anything, on a perch in one of the big raven cages and fastened it shut. Bran immediately flew into the cage beside hers and started to make soft welcoming noises through the bars.

‘Look how pleased old Bran is to have a new mate,’ said Thomas. ‘He’s like the king. Thinks it’s easy enough to get a new young queen when the old one dies or doesn’t suit any more.’

‘Qu’aark!’ cawed Bran.

‘You’ve offended him,’ said Kit. ‘He was really fond of his old wife and sad when she died.’

‘Yes, he’s worn black ever since as a mark of respect,’ said Marjorie. ‘Come along the pair of you. Stop treating

those birds like people and get yourselves spruced up and down to the gate. You must be there to make reverence to the king and queen when they leave or they'll think you're ungrateful.'