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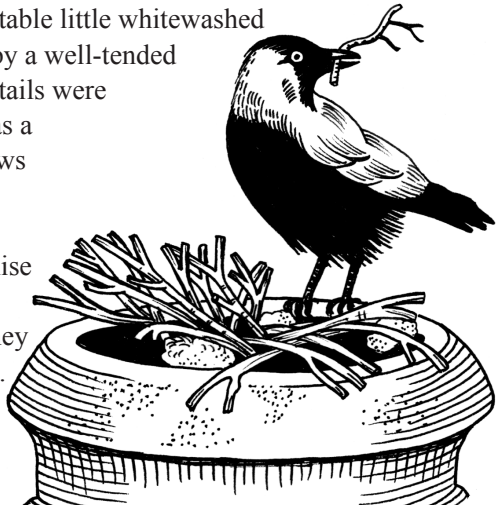
## CHAPTER 1

# DOWN THE CHIMNEY

ONE beautiful spring morning, Ka's father fell down a chimney.

It was nesting time, and although he had been using the same nest for several years he liked to add something new to it each spring – ‘just to freshen things up a bit,’ as he would say. He had been gliding idly through the still air, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his feathers, and the way he could change direction with little twitches of his wings and tail, when he spotted a loose pile of sticks, dried moss and sheep's wool, entirely unattended, balanced on top of an abrupt stone pillar. The pillar was, in fact, a chimney stack, and it was attached to a comfortable little whitewashed cottage surrounded by a well-tended garden. But such details were lost on Kos. Kos was a jackdaw, and jackdaws don't really know what houses are.

They can recognise a nest when they see one, however, and they are remarkable fliers. In a moment he had changed direction and, with a deft flick



‘At once?’ said Ka.

‘Why not? While everything is quiet. Do you have anything better to do?’

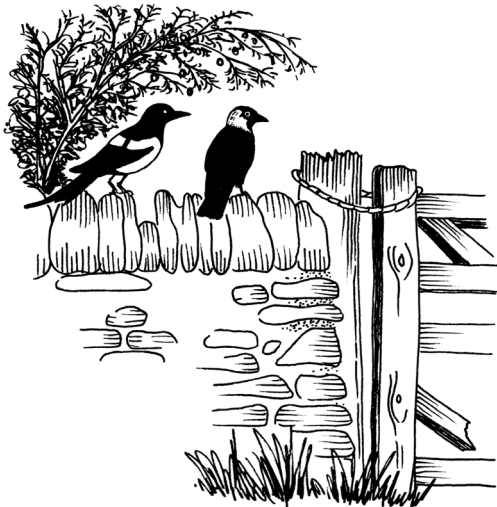
So they edged out of the bush then flew up to the top of the wall.

‘Ready?’ asked the magpie.

Ka nodded, then he took one last look back in the direction of the church before closing his eyes tightly and repeating the promise privately in his head.

‘One day,’ he said, ‘I *will* come back.’

Then he turned to the north and took off in pursuit of the flashing blue and white wings of the magpie, already disappearing into the mists beyond the wall.



So he took one last look around the wood then set off once more, but this time he didn't hop over each hedge. He climbed high into the pale blue sky and headed north unwaveringly, aiming straight for the white-topped mountains.



hind. Nevertheless, he stayed where he was at first – until a cold shower of rain arrived from the sea on a sharp breeze, at which point he began to resent the fact that the other birds were under cover in the trees.

‘This is ridiculous!’ he said to himself. ‘I have made it this far on my own, and now I am left standing on a draughty roof under the orders of a complete stranger! I don’t even think there is that much of a risk. Besides, shouldn’t I help out, if I can?’ And he fluttered down from the roof and perched on a wall. But the wall was no better protected, and his view of the wood was a good deal worse.

‘Oh well,’ he thought. ‘I’ve moved now. It won’t make any difference if I go a little further.’ And with that he flew across to a scrubby willow tree on a low rise between the barn and the wood. But it was little better, so he flew on twice more: once to a gate a short way from the trees, and then to the branch of a large sycamore, a short way into the wood.

His relief at being out of the wind and rain was considerable, but he quickly became aware that the wood was eerily quiet. In particular, he could hear no birdsong at all. He peered into the gloom of the trees, but could see nothing moving. Then his eye was caught by a patch of colour: the grey and blue of a pile of feathers near the foot of an old ash tree, a short distance ahead. It was what remained of a pigeon! Ka began to wonder if he might not be better off returning to the barn, after all. He even began to look around to check if it was safe to move. But even as his head turned he caught sight of another patch of colour. Directly below him, through a gap in the network of twigs and branches, he saw a circle of gold with a black circle at its heart, and in the

flapping over a desolate stretch of sodden moorland through a shower of freezing rain. The mist broke for a moment and, looking ahead, he saw a patch of green behind the shore. After the peat and heather he had been crossing it looked almost fertile, but as he drew closer he realised that it was no more than a few acres of reedy grazing land, criss-crossed by crumbling stone walls, with a few cottages and crude sheds – all empty and most roofless – scattered around the edges of the fields. There was a bleak little lochan in the hollow behind the mass of shingle washed up behind the shore, and two or three others, filled with dark peaty water, scattered throughout the fields.

In a moment he realised that his search was over. Not only was the area exactly as described, but Ka noted a soli-

