

THE HUNTING BIRD

by Chris Rose

In the small piece of dry land behind the house where Samir lived with his family, there was a bird. It was an old bird which sat on its perch all day, every day. Samir had never seen the bird fly. Samir's grandfather told him that once, a long time ago, the bird had been a famous hunting bird. It was famous not only in their village, but in many of the other nearby towns and villages too, he said. People came from all over just to see this bird fly. Now there were very few hunting birds left, said his grandfather. Nobody knew how to hunt with them anymore.

Samir looked at the old bird on its perch, and tried to imagine how it had been when it was younger, and famous, and when people came from all over just to see it fly. It was difficult to imagine. Now the bird did nothing but sit on the wooden perch on the dry land behind their house. It looked tired. The bird's long beak was yellow with age. Its long brown feathers were starting to fall off. There were now only a few dark feathers in the bird's tail.

When he gave the bird something to eat it jumped down off its perch and ate slowly. Other than that, it never moved. But sometimes the bird looked at Samir, and Samir could see that the bird's eyes were still bright and clear and awake and alive.

Samir was fascinated by the look in the bird's eyes, and he liked the way the bird had nothing to do with anyone else. He liked the bird's independence and its mystery.

"It can't fly anymore" said Samir's uncle to him one day. "There's no point in keeping it anymore. It costs us money to feed it. We're not rich people. We can't keep pets. What's the point of a hunting bird that can't hunt? We'll have to get rid of it."

Samir went to bed that night and thought about how he could persuade his uncle to let him keep the bird. The next morning he spoke to his uncle.

"We've had the bird for a long time" said Samir.

"Exactly! It's old and useless" replied his uncle.

"It's part of the family!" tried Samir.

"Hmmm ...t hat's not a good reason. I would like to get rid of your grandfather too! He's just as useless!" laughed his uncle.

"It only eats mice. It doesn't cost us money to feed it" continued Samir.

"Yes ... and now there are dead mice all over the place! It's not healthy to have dead mice all over the garden!"

"It's a hunting bird."

"Hunting!? That bird can't hunt anything!"

"If I can show you that the bird can still hunt, can I keep it?"

His uncle stopped and thought for a moment.

"Very well then, yes. Show me that the bird can still hunt, and you can keep it."

Samir was pleased but also worried. He didn't know if the bird could still hunt or not. He went to his grandfather and asked him what to do. That evening, Samir and his grandfather went to the piece of dry land behind their house. His grandfather put on a big leather glove and took the bird off its perch. The bird stood on his grandfather's hand. Together, Samir, his grandfather and the bird walked away from their house, out to the edge of the village where they lived. The bird didn't move while they walked. Eventually, they came to the open land at the end of the village. Samir's grandfather stretched out his arm straight. The bird sat on his hand at the

end of his arm. Then, very quickly, he took his arm away. Samir thought that the bird would fall to the ground, but it didn't. Instead, in less than a second, it opened its huge wings and flew upward, up into the sky so quickly that Samir could hardly see it. It flew so high that it was difficult to see. It went so high it almost vanished in the bright late afternoon sky. Samir could just see it - a tiny black dot against the sky. He watched the dot move until he was sure it was the bird, his bird. The bird seemed to stop in the middle of the sky. Samir wondered how it was possible. The bird held its huge wings open and floated in the sky like a duck on water, moving slowly from one side to another. Sometimes, it moved its wings gently up and down, then was still again, as if he was on his perch in the middle of the sky. Then, in a second, the bird turned, moved its head down and fell like a stone out of the sky. Samir had never seen an animal move so fast.

His grandfather pointed to the place not far from them where the bird landed. They walked over to it and found the bird next to the dead body of a small rabbit. The bird had cut the rabbit open with its old but sharp beak. It was already eating.

The next morning, Samir persuaded his uncle to come with him. Samir took the bird on his arm as he had seen his grandfather do. Together, they walked to the open space at the edge of the village. Samir held the bird out on his hand, then quickly moved his arm away.

The bird fell to the ground. It opened its wings, then stood still. It didn't move again. Samir's uncle laughed and laughed.

"See! I told you it was useless! Come on, Samir, I know you like animals, but you need to grow up a bit. You have to learn that we can't keep things just because you like them."

Samir went back to his grandfather and told him what had happened. His grandfather told him that a bird wouldn't hunt in the morning. The sun was too bright. He told him to persuade his uncle to go out again with him, in the late afternoon, when the light was less strong, when it was cooler. At that time of day, said Samir's grandfather, the bird could see a mouse from 50 metres up.

Samir had to work hard to persuade his uncle to come out with him a second time.

"No way, Samir" said his uncle. "I'm a busy man. I haven't got time to waste on a stupid old bird."

"Uncle, I promise you. If the bird won't hunt this time, then you can get rid of it, and I won't say anything ever again."

His uncle thought for a moment, then sighed. "Very well, then, last chance."

Again Samir took the bird from its perch. Again they went to the open space at the end of the village. The sun was beginning to set over the hills in the distance. The air was already a little cooler. Samir stood with the bird at the end of his arm. He took his arm away. The bird flew up into the sky like a rocket. It went so high that it almost vanished. Samir could see that his uncle was quiet with surprise.

"Where's it gone?" said his uncle. Samir pointed to a tiny dot in the sky. They both watched the dot, as it rested in the middle of the sky for a few minutes, then turned, circled a couple of times, and began to fall like a stone. They watched as the bird came closer to them. It came closer and closer and closer, very quickly. For a moment, Samir thought it was going to hit them. His uncle ran out of the way. They heard a *swooooosssh* and then a quick *thummmpp* and looked to where the bird had touched the ground. His uncle was impressed. The bird sat there on the ground before them. It had caught a mouse.

When they saw that it was a mouse, the expression on Samir's uncle's face

changed. He started to laugh again.

“A mouse! A mouse! A tiny little mouse! That’s all? Very good, I’m sure, but a bird that can only hunt mice isn’t much use, is it? We can’t eat mice!” He laughed. “Why can’t your wonderful hunting bird catch a goat, at least? Or even better, why can’t it go and catch twenty frozen pizzas!!?? Hmmm???” He laughed again. “Come on Samir, I’m not a bad man, you know. But there’s no point in having that old bird anymore. Hunting is a thing of the past.”

Samir walked home alone, taking the bird with him.

The next morning he woke up and when he went out, he saw that the bird had gone. His uncle came home at lunch time. Samir asked his uncle what he had done with the bird.

“Look” sighed his uncle. “It doesn’t matter what happened to the old bird. We didn’t need it anymore. We couldn’t keep it. Now I don’t want to hear any more about this story! Is that clear?”

Samir said nothing.

That evening two men came to their house in a big car. They banged on the the door and started shouting to see Samir’s uncle. “We know you’re in there!” they shouted. Samir didn’t know who they were. “Let us in!” shouted the men. Samir saw his uncle behind the door. His uncle looked worried. Eventually, his uncle opened the door and the men came in.

“You said to us that the bird was a hunting bird!”

“You told us it could catch anything!”

“You sold us that bird and it won’t even fly!”

“It’s not a hunting bird! It just lazy, or stupid, or perhaps both!”

“Like you!”

“We want our money back!”

Samir’s uncle looked very worried. “Look” he started to say, “I can’t give you your money back I’ve already spent it ... but don’t worry!” He pointed at Samir. “Samir here knows how to make the bird fly! He’ll show you how to do it! If Samir shows you, the bird will do anything! It’s a great bird, that’s right, isn’t it Samir???”

The men stopped shouting at Samir’s uncle, and turned to look at Samir.

“Well then, “ said one of the men, “Is that true? Can you make the bird hunt? Show us!!!”

Samir looked at the men. Then he looked at his uncle. Then he turned and walked out of the house. The bird was in the back of the car. Samir opened the door of the car and took the bird on his arm. He held his arm out, then quickly moved it away. The bird flew high, high up into the sky, until they could hardly see it anymore.

THE END