

# *The Language of Animals*

## *(Italian Folk Tale)*

Thomas Frederick Crane

Italian

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A father once had a son who spent ten years in school. At the end of that time, the teacher wrote the father to take away his son because he could not teach him anything more. The father took the boy home and gave a grand banquet in his honor, to which he invited the most noble gentlemen of the country. After many speeches by those gentlemen, one of the guests said to the host's son: "Just tell us some fine thing that you have learned." "I have learned the language of dogs, of frogs, and of birds." There was universal laughter on hearing this, and all went away ridiculing the pride of the father and the foolishness of the son. The former was so ashamed at his son's answer and so angry at him that he gave him up to two servants, with orders to take him into a wood and kill him and to bring back his heart. The two servants did not dare to obey this command, and instead of the lad they killed a dog, and carried its heart to their master. The youth fled from the country and came to a castle a long way off, where lived the treasurer of the prince, who had immense treasures. There he asked for and obtained a lodging, but scarcely had he entered the house when a multitude of dogs collected about the castle. The treasurer asked the young man why so many dogs had come, and as the latter understood their language he answered that it meant that a hundred assassins would attack the castle that very evening, and that the treasurer should take his precautions. The castellan made two hundred soldiers place themselves in ambush about the castle and at night they arrested the assassins. The treasurer was so grateful to the youth

that he wished to give him his daughter, but he replied that he could not remain now, but that he would return within a year and three days. After he left that castle he arrived at a city where the king's daughter was very ill because the frogs which were in a fountain near the palace gave her no rest with their croaking. The lad perceived that the frogs croaked because the princess had thrown a cross into the fountain, and as soon as it was removed the girl recovered. The king, too, wished the lad to marry her, but he again said that he would return within a year and three days. After leaving the king he set out for Rome, and on the way met three young men, who became his companions. One day it was very warm and all three lay down to sleep under an oak. Immediately a great flock of birds flew into the oak and awakened the pilgrims by their loud singing. One of them asked: "Why are these birds singing so joyfully?" The youth answered: "They are rejoicing with the new Pope, who is to be one of us."

And suddenly a dove alighted on his head, and in truth shortly after he was made Pope. Then he sent for his father, the treasurer, and the king. All presented themselves trembling, for they knew that they had committed some sin. But the Pope made them all relate their deeds, and then turned to his father and said: "I am the son whom you sent to be killed because I said I understood the language of birds, of dogs, and of frogs. You have treated me thus, and on the other hand a treasurer and a king have been very grateful for this knowledge of mine." The father, repenting his fault, wept bitterly, and his son pardoned him and kept him with him while he lived.

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