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Old Bob's Birds



by
C.K. THOMPSON

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Chapter II

THE ROCK WARBLERS' NEST

OLD BOB had been away for several weeks on one of his periodical walkabouts, but Roddy, expecting him back any day, had got into the habit of strolling over to the hut to see if his old friend was again in residence.

Thus it was that, noticing the door of the hut open one morning, the boy gave a joyful shout and ran over. Sure enough, the old man was there, eating his breakfast and in a happy mood. He waved a fork in welcome to his young friend, who immediately sat down on an old box and began to ply Bob with questions about his adventures on the track.

"Nothing of interest this trip, young feller," replied Bob, "Nothing to report or make a song about."

"Gee, Bob, talking about songs," said Roddy eagerly, "I've got a song about you!"

"About me?" exclaimed the swagman, laying down his knife and fork in surprise.

"Well, er, it's not exactly a song, Bob. It's a piece of poetry I made up about you," said the boy. "Leastwise, Susan helped me a bit. So did Dad."

Old Bob looked at him sternly.

"Been writing poetry about me, huh?" he asked. "I don't hold with poetry. I think them poet fellers are all mad."

Roddy blushed and looked confused. Old Bob immediately saw that he had hurt the boy's feelings and was quick to make amends.

"Only pulling your leg, Roddy," he mumbled. "Matter of fact I like poetry."

"Do you really, Bob?" asked the boy eagerly. "Would you like me to read this one of mine to you?"

"I'm all ears," Bob assured him.

"No, you're not, Bob," laughed Roddy. "Your ears are a nice size."

"Don't get funny, young feller-me-lad," said the swagman sternly. "Read your poetry."

Roddy fumbled in his pockets, produced a rather grubby piece of paper which he had been carrying around with him for some time, smoothed it out on the table, and then glanced up at the old man.

"It's called, 'Old Bob,' " he announced.

"Go ahead," said the swagman and Roddy did so-

*What is it sets the wild birds singing—
The magpies' call and the peewits' notes,
The joyous song of the wild thrush ringing—
A chorus sweet from a hundred throats?
A whisper has gone through bushland, thrilling
Each songster's heart in sun or rain;
To greet their friend they all come trilling:
"Old Bob's back in his hut again!"*

OLD BOB'S BIRDS

*The swagman's back from the rivers sweeping,
From breezy ridges and shining plain,
Where the men and teams are busy reaping
The heavy heads of the golden grain.
Far and away has Old Bob been roaming,
A wanderer ever in life is he;
Yet he'll be happy today in coming
Back to the realm of swamp and tree.*

*The swallows know him and pass the word on,
The parrots cry, "Bob's here once more."
Surely in this is a bushman's guerdon,
Meeting his birdland friends of yore!
He will sleep tonight with happy dreaming,
While his fire burns red and the smoke will be
Blue in the golden morning gleaming,
For every bird in the bush to see.*

There was silence in the hut for a few moments after the boy had finished reading. Then:

"Roddy, my lad, that was really fine. That was really beautiful," said the old swagman in a sincere voice.

"I'm glad you liked it," replied Roddy in tones of happiness.

"I did and I want a copy of it, too," said Old Bob nodding his head vigorously. "Boy," he went on, "that's the second great thrill I've had since I've been back this time. The first happened when I landed here only last night."

"Is that so? What happened?" asked Roddy. "Did some robber get in while you were away and steal your things?"

Old Bob laughed loudly.

“Robbers wouldn’t find much here to steal, Roddy,” he grinned. “No, I ain’t been robbed. It was something in the hut itself that gave me the thrill, lad. Can you see anything different about the old place?”

Roddy stared about him, examining every part of the hut, and then had to confess that he could see no alterations or additions.

“Of course you can’t!” said the old man with a chuckle. “You looked everywhere except in the right place. You’re sitting right under it. Look upwards, son!”

Roddy did so. At first he saw nothing and then his keen eyes alighted upon a roundish ball of bark fibre, grass, cobwebs and the old egg-sacs of spiders.

“A nest!” he exclaimed in delighted surprise. “What kind is it, Bob?”

“Rock warblers’,” the old man answered. “They must have built it just after I went away. Found a safe place in here, I reckon, away from butcher-birds, hawks and other feathered robbers. Have a look inside, Roddy, and you will see Mrs. Rock Warbler at home.”

The excited boy stood up on the old box and peered into the hooded side-entrance of the nest. There he could just make out the tiny rufous-brown head of the little bird, which stared back at him with fearless bright eyes.

“Isn’t it wonderful how they have built it?” he said. “See how they have woven the bits of bark and string and cobwebs and how neatly it is fixed to the bark roof of the hut. Did you see them doing it, Bob?”

“No,” replied the swagman. “It was built while I was away, as I told you. But I’ve seen plenty of these nests in

other places and have watched the little birds at work. They certainly know their jobs."

"What are rock warblers?" asked Roddy, resuming his seat on the box. "I've never seen them before, that I can remember."

"They are a sort of wren, or robin," replied Bob. "I don't know much about the book part of it, or how those scientist fellers would describe them. All I know is that they are friendly little souls, like blue wrens and old Jacky Whiter. Rock birds often nest in trees and old huts like this one, but most of them fancy caves."

"Yes," he added, after a short pause, "I've seen many of 'em in that wild country up around the Hawkesbury River. They like to build their nests in the sandstone caves."

He broke off as a small bird flew in at the door, clung to the side entrance of the nest and passed an insect from his beak to his mate.

"See that?" exclaimed Bob in delight. "Notice how he feeds her? I reckon those two birds will always nest in here now."

"They're not a bit afraid of us, are they?" said Roddy.

"Not a scrap," replied Bob. "No birds in the bush are afraid of me because they always know somehow that I'll never hurt them. They ain't afraid of you either, my lad. Just look at that, now!"

The little male bird, after fluttering around the hut, had perched fearlessly upon Roddy's shoulder. The lad stood perfectly still, his young soul thrilling. He felt the slight breeze from the little wings as the rock warbler suddenly left him and darted through the doorway.

“Lovely little creatures,” said the old swagman. “And to think that there are people living in this here country who have no love for the birds. I can’t understand some of ’em, Roddy, really I can’t.”

“Neither can I,” the boy replied.

“Of course, it is mostly the young boys who never think what they are doing who cause the greatest damage among the birds,” went on the old man. “Thoughtless young fellers with their catapults and their bird traps and so on. Thank goodness, when they grow up they alter, or else there wouldn’t be any birds left in the bush.”

“The birds sometimes kill each other, Bob,” pointed out Roddy.

“So they do, so they do,” nodded Bob.

Suddenly the old man paused, his eyes fixed on the doorway. A big, handsome bird, silver-grey, with a black cap and throat, had winged to the door. It saw Bob and Roddy, swerved and clung to the bark of the old chimney. From this precarious perch, its sharp, fierce eyes glared at the nest for a moment, and then the bird vanished among the trees outside.

“Did you see that?” breathed Roddy.

“Yes, a dashed butcherbird,” said old Bob briefly.

“What do you think he would have done?”

“Done? What do they do?” growled the swaggie. “Do all the other birds if they get the chance. One of the worst robbers in the bush, that butcher-bird. Real bushrangers, they all are. Lucky we were here or he’d have got that little rock warbler.”

He looked at Roddy sternly.

“Now let this be a lesson to you, my lad,” he said. “If

you are ever in this hut, never leave the door open when you go out. Them birds built here when the place was shut up. They believed they were safe. It is up to us to see that they are safe.”

“I like that,” said Roddy indignantly. “It is not me who leaves the door open. Just mind that you don’t.” He said that, because old Bob was inclined to be forgetful and absent-minded at times, just like most old sundowners who spent all their lives in the bush and on the track, carrying their swags and camping wherever they happened to be when night fell.

“Me?” exclaimed old Bob, with equal indignation, “Don’t you worry about me, youngster. It’s you young blokes who forget things, not old men like me. No, sir!”

He then announced his determination to remain in the hut until the warblers had reared their family. He would not go away again on the track until this had been done.

During the days that passed, the old man spent a lot of his time watching the birds and their nest and he appeared to get quite a lot of fun out of it. Sometimes Roddy, visiting the hut, found the old chap lying on his bunk reading, or sitting at his table, while the little birds flew in and out as if he were not there—or as if he were a very old and intimate friend.

One day the boy arrived at the hut to find the old man holding a wee object in his work-hardened hand. When he saw Roddy he said:

“Just you look at that. Found it on the floor. Something hit me on the shoulder. I looked up and then at the ground, and there it was.”

“What is it, Bob?” demanded the boy.

"Young 'un, just hatched. Them careless birds must have shoved it out somehow."

"You don't think they did it on purpose, do you, Bob?" asked Roddy anxiously. He hated to think that a bird could be so callous.

"Shouldn't think so. Probably rolled it out as one of them was leaving. Anyway, we'll soon see, because I'm going to put it back again with its mate. Only two of them hatched out of the eggs. If the birds throw it out again I'll know it was deliberate and I'll have something to say to 'em."

"What?" asked the boy with a smile.

"You'll see."

At the moment both birds were absent from the nest. With their eggs hatched, they could afford to have a spell from setting. Gently the old swaggie replaced the fallen nestling. The small body was still warm. He and Roddy then sat down again to watch what would happen.

It was not long before one of the parent birds returned and entered the nest. Nothing happened.

"Do you think the poor little thing will die?" asked Roddy.

"Don't know. I'm not a bird doctor, but I reckon not. Careless things, some birds are. Almost as bad as some human beings. Fancy them dropping a young one out of the nest like that."

"Perhaps they meant to. Maybe it was sick," said the boy.

"Well, that bird that went into the nest just now didn't throw the nipper out again, so I guess it was an accident," said Bob.

A few days later when Roddy called again at the hut, old Bob beckoned him over to the nest.

"Guess I can answer your question for sure now," he said. "Stand on the box and have a peep into the nest," he invited.

Roddy did so and when his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he saw two very healthy-looking little fledglings sitting there with beaks wide open hissing softly for food. They were not the least bit afraid of their human watchers.

As Roddy stepped down from the box, one of the parent birds flew into the hut and, clinging to the nest with its claws, deftly fed an insect to one of the voracious youngsters. Hardly had it vanished outside the hut again than the second parent arrived.

"They're doing that all day," commented old Bob. "Regular hungry pair of young 'uns they've hatched."

He broke off and grinned.

"Won't there be some fun when mum and dad toss the kids out of home," he said with a chuckle.

Roddy looked startled.

"But I thought you said it was an accident last time?" he asked.

"So it was, but it won't be an accident when the young 'uns have all their feathers. They'll be tossed out all right."

"But why?"

"To teach them to fly, of course, me lad," old Bob told him. "In about a week, they'll do it, you'll see. Come back here next week and watch the fun."

"Will you be here?" asked Roddy.

“Will I be here? Of course I’ll be here. Do you think I want the rats or owls or butcher birds to get them there young ’uns when they fly out?” said the swaggie indignantly. “Maybe they wouldn’t be able to get back to the nest; then they’d make a first class meal for some thieving rat or bird.”

After that, Roddy made it a point to call into the hut each day. At last the great moment arrived—the morning he was greeted by old Bob with, “It’s happened, young feller.” The old chap was very excited and so were the birds who were dashing hither and thither and chirping to their young ones.

“They’ve tossed them out, Roddy!” shouted old Bob. “The youngsters are around here somewhere. See if you can locate ’em.”

Roddy had trouble in finding the young birds. Eventually he ran one to earth outside in a lean-to. The other had managed to get into the low branches of a tree. He tried to catch them both, but they eluded his outstretched hands, to flutter uncertainly back into the hut. One aimed for the nest, missed the direction and was heading straight for the fire when the old swaggie shot out a hand and grabbed the bird in mid-air.

“Holy snakes!” he yelled. “That was close!”

He carried the little bird carefully to the nest and replaced it. Roddy chased the other and bailed it up in a corner. Picking it up he, too, put it in the nest. The parent birds seemed to be pleased to have their young ones back safely and fluttered around Bob and Roddy as if they were twin Saint Francis, the patron saints of birds.

“Look what would have happened if I hadn’t been here,” said the swaggie. “That little beggar would have been burned as sure as eggs is eggs.”

“But,” Roddy pointed out, “if you hadn’t been here there wouldn’t have been a fire.”

“Maybe not, but there would have been hawks and butcher-birds.”

“Hawks and other robbers couldn’t have got in with the door shut,” said Roddy, teasing the old man.

“Dash me buttons, lad, you looking for an argument?” snorted old Bob. “Hang it all, I’m glad I was here anyway, if only to stop you getting up to some funny business with them little birds.”

In a few days the young birds could fly quite well and as soon as he was satisfied that they could look after themselves, old Bob announced his intention of going off “on the wallaby”—a trip away on the track.

“Always keep the door of the hut shut,” he warned Roddy before he left. “Those rock warblers will nest there again, you mark my words!”

He was right for, when Roddy visited the hut one day long afterwards, there were three fresh eggs in the nest.

Chapter III

WILLIE WAGTAIL

IT was a warm, moonlit night and, the milking done and the evening meal over, Roddy considered that it would be a shame to spend the hours before bedtime reading or loafing around the farmhouse. It was just the night for a short stroll and he decided to walk over to old Bob's hut to see how the old man was faring. It was almost a week since he had been at the hut, and found old Bob still away.

His mother raised no objection so, whistling to Tiger to come along if he wanted to, the boy hurried along the old bush path, Tiger racing ahead and investigating hollow logs and clumps of bushes. Tiger had the fixed impression that he was a hunting dog and that the creatures of the bush were in existence wholly for his benefit and as a tribute to his sporting tastes. In the whole of his rather short life he had never accomplished anything more outstanding than chasing a rabbit up a hollow log and a goanna up a gum tree; but he was a true optimist and forever hoped that one day a grand adventure would befall him.

The swagman greeted Roddy warmly.

"Well, sonny-me-lad, you're almost a stranger," he said. "Come on in, you and Tiger, too. You're just in time for a good feed of damper and roast duck. And maybe there'll be a bone or two for Tiger."

"Where did you get the duck, Bob?" asked Roddy curiously.

"I never stole it, anyway," retorted the swaggie. "It came from the swamp. I was down there this afternoon and it was silly enough to get in the way of my rifle. Come on, my lad. Sit down and wire in!"

Tiger, who didn't care a scrap where the duck came from as long as he got some tasty portions of it, barked and wagged his tail. Old Bob rewarded him, not with a bare bone, but with a generous helping of delicious meat. Tiger, who had no manners, swallowed it whole and demanded more. He got it.

Though Roddy had had his tea, boy-like he was still hungry and he needed no second invitation to "wire into" the duck and damper. For some time the only sound heard in the hut apart from the crackling of the fire, was the champing of three sets of jaws as man, boy and dog did justice to the meal.

After the things had been cleared away, Bob and Roddy sat down to talk. Tiger retired to the old hearthstone and even though the night was warm, stretched out and promptly went to sleep—to dream of bigger and better bones and of that great hunting adventure he hoped to have some time.

"Summer's going," old Bob commented as he lighted his battered old pipe by thrusting a stick into the fire and conveying the blazing end to the bowl.

"Saw some black swans on the swamps today and the swallows are massing ready to depart. I've seen 'em."

"So have I," nodded Roddy. "It won't be long before all the visiting birds go."

“All I wish is that one little devil would depart and forget to come back again,” exclaimed the old swagman. “It’s bad luck that he never shifts much. Kept me awake most of last night, singing out and chattering away, just like a shearers’ delegate.”

“What’s a shearer’s delegate, Bob? Some sort of a bird?” asked the boy, and the old man chuckled heartily

“No, Roddy. He’s a bloke who represents the shearers at meetings and they never select a cove unless he can talk the leg off an iron pot.”

“But what bird was it that kept you awake? What did he say?” Roddy asked.

“He kept screeching out ‘It’s a political question’. I roared back that I was tired and wanted to go to sleep, and he screeched ‘did-yah-did-yah-did-yah,’ ” grunted Bob.

“Oh, you mean Willie Wagtail!” laughed Roddy. “But what he says is ‘sweet pretty creature.’ ”

“He might to you, but never to me,” declared Bob. “I don’t know what I’ve done to that bird, but he’s always trying to get me into an argument. All night he kept it up and I threw a drayload of stones at him, I did.”

“Did it make him keep quiet?”

“No, it didn’t,” exclaimed old Bob in disgust.

“But he wasn’t just calling out to annoy you, Bob,” said the boy. “He was just warning the owls and other night birds that he was awake and ready to protect his nest if they felt like attacking him. I don’t suppose he even knew you were here.”

“No, I don’t suppose he did. He thought it was the owls who threw all those stones at him,” said the swagman sarcastically.

"I suppose he prefers dodging the stones to dodging the owls," grinned the boy.

"Listen here, young feller, I don't care why he sings out. All I know is that if he doesn't shut up, I'll move on somewhere else. A man has got to have some sleep, you know!"

"Why don't you shoot him?" asked Roddy, knowing quite well what the answer would be.

"Shoot him? Me, shoot a harmless little bird that is only protecting his nest?" roared Bob. "What do you think I am?"

Roddy grinned, but did not answer, and presently he announced that it was time he was going home.

"Well, good night, son," said the old man. "When you pass Willie Wagtail's tree on the way, you tell him what I said, won't you?"

"I will," promised Roddy and, whistling to Tiger, said a cheery good-night and left the hut. Tiger, who had been dreaming that he had killed a pack of wild dingoes on his own, was pulled back into the humdrum old world; and, with a little whine of disappointment, he followed his young master.

Roddy did not know where Willie Wagtail's nest was, but as he walked along the old bush track, the little black and white bird hurled a shrill insult at him. He stopped and examined the tree nearest to him. In the leaf-filtered moonlight, he could just make out a small nest wedged in the fork of a sheoak.

Willie was nearby and on sentry duty.

"Sweet pretty creature," said Roddy, but Willie ignored his blandishments.

“You’d better keep quiet tonight, Willie,” said the lad “Old Bob wouldn’t hurt you deliberately, but if he does throw stones at you, one of them might find a mark. What are you going to do?”

The little black and white bird swayed on the twig in silence for a moment and then:

“That’s a political question,” he screeched.

“It’s a question I’ll answer with a brick if you don’t shut up,” came a roar from the hut. Roddy laughed and went on his way, leaving his old friend Bob and his feathered friend Willie to settle the argument between themselves.

As he walked steadily along, his ears were assailed by the deep-throated croaks of bull-frogs from the creek that ran near the hut and the wagtail’s nest. The thought crossed his mind that old Bob would have to put plugs in his ears if he wanted absolute quiet in which to sleep.

Picking up a few stones, the boy tossed them into the creek, causing a sudden hush of the froggy chorus.

Willie was silent for the time being, so if the swagman could drop off quickly, all would be well. But it was not to be; for, hardly had the boy walked a few yards than the frogs started up again in full voice and Willie commenced a new political debate with himself—and the owls.

It was very late at night ere the frog-chorus died away. Old Bob, his blankets wrapped round his head to keep out the nocturnal noises, slept peacefully.

Even Willie Wagtail, tired after so much vocal argument, was half-asleep near his nest. The whole bushland seemed to be at rest.

But appearances are deceptive. The preying creatures

of the night do not advertise their presence and their intentions. On soft ghostly wings the owls and nightjars were abroad, hunting and preying, their small victims dying violently in their sleep; those spotted menaces, the tiger cat and his smaller brother, the native cat, were stalking and obeying the laws of the bush—the weak must go down that the strong may survive.

It was a slight scratching sound on the trunk of the tree in which his nest was placed that brought the sleepy wagtail into complete wakefulness. Peering down through the needle-like leaves he saw yellow eyes shining up at him. They belonged to a brown animal with white spots all over his body except his tail—a native cat.

Like others of its kind, this wildcat was completely fearless and possessed a bold intelligence. In its time it had preyed upon mice, rats, rabbits and large birds and a mere wagtail meant nothing to it. It knew the nest was there and it hoped that there were young ones in it. It knew, too, that Willie was on guard and his mate was on the nest. If there were two young ones in the nest, that would yield a meal of four birds with a bit of luck. Of course, Willie, being awake, might escape, but a quick spring would easily dispose of the mother bird and then the nestlings would be there for the eating.

The native cat had it all planned out. It treated with complete contempt any suggestion that the wagtail might prove a doughty antagonist. A momentary nuisance, possibly, but nothing more.

Willie sat there watching as the cat commenced to climb the tree. Steadily it came on, but the bird made no sign until the animal reached the first branch.

With a terrific screech that made old Bob turn in his blankets, Willie hurled himself at the spotted intruder, aiming for its eyes. He was so quick that the cat felt the brushing of little wings before it knew it was being attacked. Alarmed by her mate's cries, the mother bird left the nest and joined in the fray. As they both dived and pecked and fluttered around the cat's head, that annoyed animal waved a wicked clawed paw in an ineffectual attempt to tear them out of the air. They were far too agile for him, however, so he gave it up to concentrate upon the main business of the night—an investigation of the nest and its contents.

The cat had had to revise his first estimates of his likely bird meal. He knew that it was most unlikely now that he would have either Willie or his mate. He must, therefore, depend upon the nest and if that were empty, then he would go hungry. This thought spurred the cat on. He decided to waste no time in fending off the parent birds. After all, they could do him but little damage, he considered. So, in a deadly-purposeful way, he resumed his climb.

Again and again the two wagtails attacked like dive-bombers and in spite of his determination to allow nothing to distract him, the cat was forced now and again to freeze to the tree and hang on with three paws while he fended off the attacks with the fourth.

Willie's blood was up under the excitement of the affair, but his mate was distracted. Her small bird mind was divided. It was urging her to stay at the nest and protect the young ones from this cat and any hunting night birds, and also urging her to take direct action against the spotted menace climbing upwards.

Her mind was made up for her when she heard the hooting of an owl nearby. She flew to the nest and crouched on it in fear and trembling, allowing Willie to bear alone the brunt of the battle with the native cat.

At length the animal reached the branch on which the nest was situated. The spotted terror crouched on the limb and snarled at Willie who had come to rest near the nest. It was about six feet from where the cat crouched ready to rush along the limb and the Wagtail knew that it was now or never. If he could not get rid of the menace, then his home and possibly his mate, would be gone for good.

With a chirp of desperation, Willie sprang into the air and with a continuous screech hurled himself at the cat. That animal saw him coming and raised a wicked paw. Willie struck him right between the eyes, but the blow was nothing to the tough animal.

Round and round flew the little bird, its loud cries echoing through the silent bush. Old Bob, who had been awakened by the row, lay still in his bunk, until he could stand it no longer.

Leaping from the bed, he rushed to the door, threw it open and hurled a string of abuse at the bird. Then, stooping down, he picked up a huge stone and flung it madly in the direction of the bird uproar. The stone soared high, crashed through twigs and leaves and, catching the native cat fair in the ribs, dislodged it from the branch. Scrambling, snarling and clawing at the branches and the trunk, the animal lost its balance completely and fell to the ground. It was up immediately and away through the scrub.

“Shut up, you noisy wagtail, or I’ll come over and

wring your neck for you!” howled old Bob, who knew nothing of the native cat.

“Sweet pretty creature, sweet pretty creature!” screeched Willie in high delight.

“Shut up, I tell you!” the swaggie bellowed. “It ain’t a political question at all. The question is, do I get any sleep to-night? Shut up!”

And when a stone sang past the nest, Willie did shut up. He went and sat near his mate, who, woman-like now that the danger was past, scolded him for being half-asleep when on sentry duty. Willie, in his bird way, let her know that he had not been asleep. This she rejected and told him that he was a poor sort of nest guardian to allow a native cat to come so close before he detected its presence.

Willie screeched back, not unreasonably, that even if he had detected the cat two miles away, it would not have improved him as a warrior. The cat was big and he was little and only for the old human being in the hut, heaven knows what would have happened.

But Mrs. Wagtail had a grouch and insisted on airing it.

“Oh gosh, the two of them are at it now,” groaned old Bob, as the screeches assailed his ears.

“Will you shut up, you two?” he roared. “For two pins, I’d climb that tree and stick a match in your nest!”

Willie and his mate lapsed into silence and with a grunt old Bob returned to his bunk and was soon asleep again.

“I ought to pull the feathers out of your tail and then you’d have nothing to wag, vain creature that you are,” Mrs. Wagtail suddenly screeched at Willie.

“Sweet pretty creature,” sang Willie softly and soothingly.