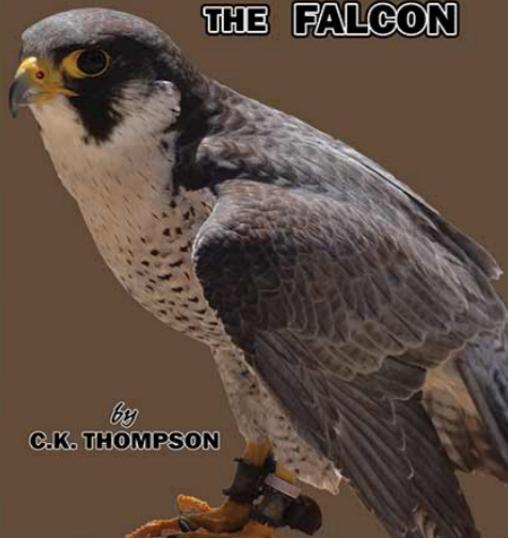




The C.K. Thompson Collection

THUNDERBOLT THE FALCON



by
C.K. THOMPSON

We hope you enjoy this sample of Thunderbolt the Falcon, brought to you by Living Book Press.

To purchase your own copy and for more great living books please visit -

www.livingbookpress.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

Comedians of the Creek

A PRETTY little bird perched on a twig of a weeping willow tree that leaned in tired fashion over the bank of the creek, wiped its beak several times on the twig, fluffed out its feathers and fell into a deep but pleasant reverie. This was Pardalote, the diamond bird. He was a small fellow and very gay in his many-coloured and spotted plumage; and at the moment was indeed feeling rather proud of himself. It was not because of his personal beauty, though Nature had been exceedingly generous to him, her lavish colour brush splashing him with grey, red, yellow, orange and black. He was on good terms with the world and with himself because, in the bank of the creek just below him was his nest, and in that nest was his mate, patiently incubating four pure white eggs.

Mr. and Mrs. Pardalote had accomplished quite a feat of engineering in constructing their nest. They had driven a tunnel into the creek bank for a distance of four feet and at the end had hollowed out a chamber in which they had constructed a cosy home of bark, grass, feathers and other material. These were the two birds that Grandfather had seen taking nesting material into the creek bank tunnel.

Pardalote preened a couple of his wing feathers by running each one carefully through his small bill, and then, for no apparent reason, issued a shrill order: "Pick-it-up, pick-it-up." As there was nobody there to "pick it up" and, in any event, nothing special to pick up, he said "wit-e-chu" six times in succession, left the willow twig and flew off down the creek to see what was doing in the bird world.

There was a great deal doing, for the creek was a very popular place. The willows and gums that lined its banks and the reeds and the water plants that edged its surface were favourite nesting places and foraging haunts for all kinds of feathered residents.

Pardalote's progress downstream was noted idly by many. Sitting on a branch that overhung the water was a willy wagtail, a cousin of the ones living near the waterhole in O'Brien's paddock.

And like the O'Brien's paddock pair who could not keep their beaks out of the affairs of Blue Cap the wren, the creek wagtail was an inquisitive little wretch. As he saw Pardalote passing he felt minded to dart out and engage him in battle; but parental responsibilities prevented him. For, close to where he perched arrogantly swinging his long tail from side to side, his little black and white mate sat tight upon her nest of closely-woven fibre and spider webs. She had laid one cream and brown egg and confidently anticipated adding at least another three to it.

Willy was on guard duty and therefore could not spare the time to go chasing around with diamond birds. He therefore contented himself with screeching at Pardalote.

That small bird eventually decided to have a rest in an ancient spotted gum which leaned tiredly over the creek as if it felt like collapsing on to the water's soft bosom and lapsing into eternal sleep. But it had been there in that same position for many long years and, provided an extra strong gale or an extra special flood did not flatten it, was likely to remain there for a great many years yet to come.

Having given his tail feathers a "lick and a promise" preen, Pardalote lifted one wing and peered searchingly under it. He had felt an itch and desired to find the cause of it. Then his attention was diverted from his wing to a clattering noise which came from further downstream. He could not see what was making the row because there was a bend in the creek, but the fact that he did not flee from the tree proved that he knew he had nothing to fear

from the noise creator. This was true enough, because Biziura the musk duck was quite a harmless comedian.

As Pardalote watched from his tree, Biziura and his mate came clattering into view like a pair of small paddlewheel steamers. Except when travelling from water to water across country, and then only at night, Biziura did very little flying. Swimming was his long suit except when scared or in sheer high spirits. Then he used his wings as paddles and splashed away with more noise than necessary.

The two musk ducks came to a full stop underneath Pardalote's tree and began to fossick for waterplants and aquatic creatures at the creek's edge. With his spiked tail and stiff leathery pouch under his bill, Biziura was a hardlooking bird citizen. His mate had the stiff tail without the "tobacco pouch."

Having made a very light snack out of some pond snails and water-beetles he managed to find among the reeds, Biziura decided put on an entertainment for his mate, and for any other creatures that might be interested.

From his high branch, Pardalote had a grandstand view of the old male musk duck as he propelled himself to the very middle of the creek. There he remained in deep thought for a second or two. Suddenly he swam in a rapid circle a few times and then, with rapid back-kicks of his strong webbed feet, shot out jets of water on each side of his body. As he did so he let out deep honks, which echoed down the creek. Next he inflated his tobacco pouch by means of the opening beneath his tongue, threw back his head, spread out his tail and spun round and round on the water like a top. Ceasing this, he looked across at his mate as if seeking her approval, but discovered that she had turned her back on him and was fossicking among the reeds. Quite unabashed by her lack of interest, Biziura deflated his pouch, swivelled his head, placed his beak on his tail and spun round in the water in the direction opposite to that in which previously he had whirled.

Then, growing tired of his sport, he joined his mate among the reeds and Pardalote, the free show over, left his tree and flitted back up the creek towards his nest and his patient little mate.

As he flitted past the tree in which Willy Wagtail had his nest, Pardalote was subjected to a stream of insults that were quite unmerited. Willy Wagtail was in good form. Pardalote increased his speed a little. He was not exactly afraid of Willy, but he wanted no trouble with anyone. Willy sensed this and decided to give him some.

Darting into the air, the long-tailed little villain streaked after the diamond bird, caught up with him and snapped at his tail. Pardalote changed into high gear and fled wildly. Willy whizzed after him, headed him and, having, with marked contempt, looped the loop around him, deliberately dived on to his back and pushed him down almost to waterlevel. Then, with a screech of pure egotism, he looped the loop again and flew back to his tree. Coming to rest on the branch near his nest, he swayed gently to and fro, fixed a beady little eye upon his long-suffering mate and, hypocrite that he was, whispered, "Sweet pretty creature." Mrs. Willy shut her eyes and ignored him.

Pardalote streaked up the creek like a jet plane. All he wanted was the safety of his tunnel where no crazy wagtails could get at him.

But the little bird's adventures were not over yet; for as he came in sight of home, something large flashed across in front of him and made him swerve sharply, to seek refuge among the thick leaves of a tree on the bank. Peering fearfully round the edge of a broad leaf, he tried to locate the bird that had scared him—a kookaburra—and saw it sitting on a branch in a high tree on the opposite side of the stream.

The diamond bird was very much afraid of the giant kingfisher and had every cause to be; for Laughing Jack was the terror of all small feathered creatures—a slaughterbird as bad as, if not worse than, the butcher-bird. Jacky had a great, though undeserved,

reputation as a snake-killer and fisherman. The number of snakes he killed was few and small, and as for fish, provided they were in shallow water and too slow to get away, he might catch a small one or two. No, Jacky's main occupation was that of a nest raider. He dragged small nestlings to their doom as an easily-won meal and often killed them just for fun.

What a different bird he was to Black-cheek the falcon and Tiercel her mate, who indulged in aerial combat with their enemies and took their captives on the wing. The falcons scorned to kill birds on the ground and as for raiding nests of small songsters for their helpless young, why, that was unthinkable!

Of course, Pardalote did not think such thoughts as these. He was wholly preoccupied with his own personal safety. He knew that no kookaburra could raid his nest in the creek bank.

But as it happened, Pardalote had no cause for alarm on this occasion. Jacky was building his own nest and at the moment was not thinking of dinner. Across the creek from where he sat was another large gum tree and up its trunk fifty feet from earth was a large black lump. This was a termites' or white ants' nest, and Jacky was turning it into a nest for his own brood. As Pardalote watched, the kookaburra launched himself from his limb and flew swiftly across the stream to the termites' nest, his giant, sharp beak straight in front of him like a sword. He did not pull up, but plunged his beak straight into the black lump. Pulling it free, he returned to the other side of the creek, only to repeat the performance. This he would do over and over again until he had excavated a hole in the termites' nest large enough to hollow out a nesting chamber. There his mate would lay her eggs and they would set up house together.

The little diamond bird waited until the kookaburra flew again at the black lump and then darted swiftly up the creek without Jacky seeing him. Reaching his tunnel, he entered it straight away and soon was telling his little mate in bird fashion the adventures

he had encountered. And especially the fact that a kookaburra was taking up residence in the neighbourhood. Those were evil tidings for the wee birds.

On top of the bank, but further back in a patch of scrub, there lived another pair of birds to whom the news that a kookaburra was building a nest nearby was also most unwelcome. Satin the bower-bird and his mate had two fledglings in their nest and they did not want them to form a meal for a hungry kookaburra.

Satin was a beautiful bird in his wholly dark blue-black plumage. His mate was of a more sober greenish colour, but, like him, she was an accomplished architect, actor, painter and decorator.

The two birds had built their bower and playground among some bushes near a big hollow log. After having laid down a platform of sticks, they had erected an arched runway more than a foot high. This was composed of slender sticks which bent over and formed a graceful tunnel. In front of this, and around about it, the birds had arranged a variety of playthings and decorative objects, mostly of a blue colour. They were mad on blue, were Satin and his mate, and had even found on a rubbish-tip some old blue-bags from a human washhouse. There were blue flowers, blue glass, blue string, blue feathers, a blue marble and even a blue cigarette packet. For variety, there were numerous cast-off cicada cases, rusty nails, pebbles, bits of tin, some empty snail shells and even some withered lemon skin.

But blue was their favourite colour. Satin himself had dark blue feathers, or, more correctly, rich violet-blue with various shades of purple. Even his eyes were blue, while his whole coat shone with a satiny gleam. He was always on the lookout for treasures to add to his collection and he was continually arranging and rearranging them for better effect. And he was even a house-painter as well as a decorator. He actually brought charcoal to his bower, chewed it up into a paste and, using a bit of bark as a brush, painted the sticks of the inside walls.

Satin and his mate had their nest in the fork of a gum tree nearby. They were not fools enough to build it on the ground where it would be in handy reach of any marauding bird, animal or human. The nest was fifty feet up the tree and was a shallow affair of sticks and twigs lined with dried leaves. It was drab compared with their bower and playground. But drab or not, it held their two nestlings and if Kookaburra found it, it would be hard luck indeed.

It was at this period of crisis in the lives of the small creek birds that Black-cheek and Tiercel came into the picture. It was after their two eyasses had left home that they decided to look over the creek, a decision which had brought relief to Blue Cap the wren in O'Brien's paddock.

From their high vantage point in the heavens, the waterway stretched out before them like a narrow road flanked by trees. Tiercel dropped down to tree level and began to beat slowly along while Black-cheek followed his progress from higher up. She circled slowly, ready to dive upon anything her mate flushed from cover. She could rely upon him to make short work of birds that were flushed but did not rise. Any that flew above the treetops would be her responsibility.

As she traced her hard, slow circles in the skies, Blackcheek saw everything that went on below her. She saw Satin the bowerbird and his mate darting in and out of their playground and knew that no matter how swift she was, she had little hope of trapping either of them in the open. She saw a magpie making a rapid journey across the stream and she saw the two musk ducks feeding in the reeds.

When the magpie got directly beneath her, she tipped over and dived at him, merely in play. Maggie heard her scream and shot skywards, banked and snapped at her viciously. Black-cheek pulled out of her dive and spiralled gracefully to her former position. She had had no evil designs on Maggie, who had now

resumed his journey unhurriedly. She had just felt, for a moment, like indulging in a bit of fun.

Down below, Tiercel was having a fruitless hunt. There were no birds in the trees at all, except a few little yellow-tailed thornbills, and he could not be bothered with them.

Then he saw the kookaburra. The big bird was still digging holes in the termites' nest by shooting across the creek in a feathered bayonet charge. Tiercel rose above Jacky and circled. Black-cheek, far above, wondered what her mate was doing. She could not understand why Tiercel should want to tackle the kookaburra. She knew that he could probably beat Jacky in a fight, but who wanted to eat a kookaburra? Perhaps Tiercel wanted to have some fun like she had tried to have with the uncooperative magpie. Good. She would be in it, too.

Black-cheek tipped sideways and fell over in a dive-bombing drop. She and Tiercel approached Jacky from different sides. Tiercel checked, then shot upwards, but Black-cheek dealt Jacky a blow on the back that made him squawk loudly and dislodged several feathers, which floated idly to earth. Jacky wheeled and pecked savagely, but Blackcheek whirled away and up, to join her mate. It was all good, clean fun, if not for Jacky the kookaburra, certainly for the falcons.

For a few minutes the peregrines described wide circles over the creek and then moved away, heading for O'Brien's paddock and, incidentally, arriving just in time for Blackcheek to thwart the bronze cuckoo.

Down below, Satin the bower-bird and his mate were hiding out of sight under a low bush, waiting patiently for the falcons to clear out. And as they waited, something dropped on to the ground in front of them. Satin eyed it inquisitively, but did not move. The two birds stayed under the bush for half an hour and then, deeming that the coast was clear, emerged and inspected the buff-colored object closely. It was not blue, worse luck, but variety

was the spice of life, so, picking up the kookaburra's feather, Satin took it and carefully laid it between a piece of withered orange skin and the empty shell of a pond snail.