



The C.K. Thompson Collection

Old Bob's Birds



by

C.K. THOMPSON

OLD BOB'S BIRDS

By C.K. Thompson

(author of "King of the Ranges," etc)



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Chapter I

OLD BOB'S CHILDREN

DOWN along the bank of the reed-fringed creek that wound its way through the bushlands to empty itself into the wide swamp, old Bob the swagman had built a hut. Half-hidden by dense scrub, the hut, a structure of strong saplings and thick bark, had, for many years, served the old man as a kind of rest home in his wanderings.

Nobody knew if old Bob had any other name, neither did they trouble to inquire. He was just "Old Bob" to everyone, large and small, and he was a general favorite in the neighborhood.

A typical sundowner was old Bob, and his home was where he happened to be; but he regarded the old bark hut as his holiday camp—the little peaceful haven to which he returned to relax after many weeks, sometimes months, on the track. Shunning the cities and towns, even the larger hamlets, the swagman invariably followed the river. It was his habit to make his way down the right bank, doing odd jobs at various stations and farms for weeks on end, and then to return along the left bank, until eventually he reached the old bark hut. There, with a sigh of contentment, he would drop his swag in a corner and live quietly until the urge came upon him once more to seek the open road and camp beneath the stars in distant places.

Not far away from the bark hut stood the farm-house where the swagman's young friend Roddy lived. The cultivated paddocks about it stood out sharply against the brown and green of the grasslands and the bush. Roddy was a lively youngster, a true bush boy, and what had first attracted old Bob to him was the lad's passionate love for the birds of the bush. Bob himself was a born naturalist, and one of his greatest joys was to study the lives and habits of the beautiful little creatures with which Nature had so bountifully endowed the creek and scrublands where the bark hut stood.

The old man loved the birds—all of them; but his love was not an unreasoning passion. They were his children, he often told Roddy, and he knew that, like children, the feathered songsters had their little faults, their individual weaknesses as well as virtues, and he was, in his queer old way, very glad of it.

"There is nothing perfect in this world, my boy," he told young Roddy. "If all things were perfect it would be a dull and very uninteresting place to live in. And it would not be natural."

Every bird that dwelt near the hut, and every visiting songster from other regions, enjoyed old Bob's special protection; and when he was away following the rivers, the guardianship was handed over to Roddy, and his sister Susan.

And it was a most important guardianship, too. There were so many birds to watch over. Old Bob insisted that he had no favorites but treated them all alike. Roddy, on the other hand, was inclined to place the kookaburra on a pinnacle.

“I can’t understand why you like old Jack more than the others,” old Bob said one day while they were seated on a log outside the hut discussing their feathered friends.

“I think it is because he is so happy and lively,” replied the boy. “Nothing ever seems to worry him. He is always laughing.”

“Yes; and not always because he is happy,” said the swaggie with some scorn. “He often laughs at other folks’ misfortunes. One day I was carrying some sticks into the hut and I tripped and fell over a stump. That wasn’t very funny, but Jack and his mate laughed so much, you’d think they were at a circus and I was the clown.”

“He might have been laughing at something else,” suggested the boy.

“Mebbe,” said old Bob briefly. “Yes. He might have been laughing at the way some people, human people I mean, praise him to the skies for being such a fine snake killer. He might kill little ones, but in all the years I’ve been on the track I’ve never seen a kookaburra pick up a big snake, fly into the air with it and drop it, and keep on doing it until the thing was dead. What is more, I’ve never met anyone who has seen him do it.”

“That doesn’t mean that kookaburras don’t kill snakes like that,” said Roddy.

“No, I know that,” admitted the sundowner. “I’m just giving you my own personal experiences.”

“However,” he went on after a short pause, “old Jack Kookaburra is a good example of what I told you about no person or bird being perfect. Lots of human people, mostly them that have never been in the bush, look on old Jack as a hero without any faults at all. I like old Jack

because he has a lot of little faults, and I tell you, my boy, that bird is always laughing because of the silly things people believe about him. The fact is, he is no gentleman.”

“Exactly what do you mean, Bob?” asked Roddy. “I know that kookaburras sometimes steal nestlings from the nests of other birds and I know that they often take chickens from farms; but they also eat mice, rats and sparrows, which are pests around a place.”

“You’re right there, Roddy. They eat snakes, lizards, frogs, yabbies and all sorts of things,” said Bob. “What I meant by saying Jack isn’t a gentleman is this: he is a thief. Do you know what I once saw a kookaburra do? A blue crane had caught a fish over in the swamps and before he could swallow it, Jack or one of his mates swooped out of a tree and collared it out of the crane’s beak.”

“But kookaburras go fishing themselves,” protested Roddy. “They are really kingfishers, you know.”

“Ever seen a kookaburra catch a fish?” demanded the old man.

“No,” confessed the boy.

“I did once, and once only,” retorted the swagman. “It was at a waterhole that was nearly dried up. There were some little fish in the mudhole, just tiddlers about two inches long, and this kookaburra collected three of them while I was watching. Don’t try to tell me old Jack is a fisherman!”

As if in complete endorsement of the old man’s words, a sudden burst of hearty laughter rang out from the high branches of the tree under which they were sitting. Glancing up, man and boy observed two kookaburras

—sober-looking, Quaker-like birds whose plumage did not match at all their happy natures.

“What did I tell you?” asked old Bob meaningly, and the boy smiled.

There were many kinds of birds in old Bob’s “family.” They were all very busy, either searching for food or building nests or feeding their youngsters. Apart from Jack Kookaburra, Bluey the parrot and Maggie the magpie—loud notes in the feathered choir with others of their kith and kin sometimes joining in—there were the softer voices. One of the smallest—very small indeed, was Witloo the diamond sparrow. With his tiny comrades, Witloo played among the leaves and branches, feeding on insects and generally conducting himself in innocent fashion. Sometimes he sang “wit-e-chu” in faint, sweet tones, at other times his song was “wit-loo” with a long pause between the two notes, which were clear, yet so tuned that when he was near, it sounded as if he were far away. He stood on his small toes to whistle “wit,” and then turned his head for “loo.”

Then there was Blue Jacket, the kingfisher, a cousin of Jack Kookaburra. He dwelt mostly on branches overhanging the creek, into which he would dive after fish, patrolling the banks and eagerly seeking places where the fishing was good. When he flew along just skimming the water, he was a lovely gleam of color. His cinnamon-tinted breast was reflected in the clear water, while his rich, royal blue back and wings were like a flash of flame.

Another bright dweller in old Bob’s sanctuary was Ring Coachman, the whistler, who came to hunt insects

on the trunks of trees. His clear, bold whistle sometimes ended with a ringing sound like the crack of a whip. His rival, who rarely showed himself, was Ping, the stockwhip bird, who lived away from the farmlands. Sometimes he ventured close in the early mornings and his distinctive note had a real whip-crack at the end.

Perhaps most striking of all was Gorgeous, the flying Coachman. His loud "clink-clank" echoed down the leafy avenues and the flash of his gold and black plumage made rich color among the trees. He was a bird that seemed always to be in a hurry, and he had need to be. Honey and pollen were his favorite foods and as there were many of his species and not much of either delicacy in any one tree, Gorgeous had to cover a great deal of bushland each day. He did so, his noisy voice waking the echoes and the flashing gold of his feathers challenging the sunshine.

Blue Bonnet the wren was a quiet little fellow compared with such noisy folk, but his song was sweet, making real music; and the royal blue of his plumage was like a rich gem in the sombre setting of the scrub. Slow Wings, the peewit, whose song was harsh and flat by day, yet sweet as a bell at dawn, and Friar the leatherhead, added their voices to the feathered choir. They were hardly in the top flight of songsters except that Slow Wings, before dawn was fairly born, would warble "bob-o-link" with wonderfully liquid notes.

One of the worst of old Bob's "children" was Hook-beak, the butcher-bird. All the little finches, wrens and other small fry would have been happy creatures could old Bob have banned this terror, but, as the old man once said, Hook-beak had his place in nature and nature knew

best. Hook-beak was a killer who preyed on the smaller birds, stealing their nestlings and even making a meal out of any unfortunate parent who came within range of his terrible bill. The little songsters could not fight him as did Jack Kookaburra.

But Hook-beak partially compensated for his murderous habits by the wonderful quality of his song. It was one of the sweetest in the bush, rivalling even that of his cousin, the magpie, whose carollings at dawn and dusk, and sometimes on moonlight nights were of magnificent choral splendor. Neither, in old Bob's opinion, did Hook-beak outshine Browneyes the thrush in vocal prowess. His song was a delight to the ear, gentle, and very much like himself. The thrush was no predatory slayer, certainly not like Gar Gar the sparrowhawk, who would swoop from the skies on little birds and young farmyard chickens.

New arrivals, or visitors, to old Bob's sanctuary had no need to provide their own hospitality. They found it in nature's lavish store.

One fine evening there came a flash of green and pale blue among the trees, and a short bird with a long bill alighted on a limb not far from the hut and called very quickly, "Tee-tee-tee!" From another tree a hundred yards away, the call was answered, and the first bird hurried off to join his mate. They were sacred kingfishers, correctly called Halcyon, a name bestowed upon the family in years long past because the birds always arrived in the halcyon days of summer. Soon they would be nesting in old Bob's sanctuary. Then, weeks later, they would lead their young ones away on their endless travelling, for these birds were rovers.

Sometimes from the river pools far away would sound the croaking call of Longneck the crested grebe, who never stayed long in old Bob's domain. He loved a more secluded place in which to nest—amongst long reeds by far-away pools. But the deep voice of Boomer the bittern was often heard after darkness had fallen. It was hard to determine just where Boomer was, for his call seemed to echo far over the swamplands. Brown Wings the harrier would linger in the dusk to try to catch water fowl unawares. There were many living in the swamps, including Bald Coot, a water hen with long red legs, who nested on a small island.

And, as the moon rose, silvering the bush, the swamps and the creek with her soft, white light, far away in the distant hills would sound the quavering call "wee-lo" of the stone curlew. Mournfully would come the ghostly wail of the swamp curlew, which, with his kith and kin, ran about in the moonlight by the marshy shore.

Like a phantom in the still night air, Boo-book the owl flew on silent wings, while Willie Wagtail, safe in the thick sheoaks, taunted him as he passed. Other birds, even Blue-beak the tree martin, who pride himself on being a fighter, were not as bold as Willie Wagtail at night, especially when the sharp, quick hunting cry of White-throat the nightjar told of the presence of another slayer. Woe betide any small birds who, terrified by the cries of the prowlers, sought safer quarters. Yet it was hard to sit still on a tree branch, no matter how secluded that branch was, when the "hoo-hoo-ha-ha" of the screech-owl came like a woman's scream, mingled with sobbing. It was, however, the owl's business to scare small birds from their hiding

places, and if the small birds refused to be scared, the owls went hungry.

Night could be terrible in the bush.

High on a branch, Jack Kookaburra, Maggie Magpie and such aristocrats, heard the calls of the hunters and treated them with contempt. No prowlers would dare to attack them.

As for Jack Kookaburra, who was a bit of a killer himself, his sovereignty ended with the going down of the sun. In daylight he would fight goannas, snakes, butcher-birds and fellow killers. At night he could do nothing—except sleep. Which he did.

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!"*

*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.