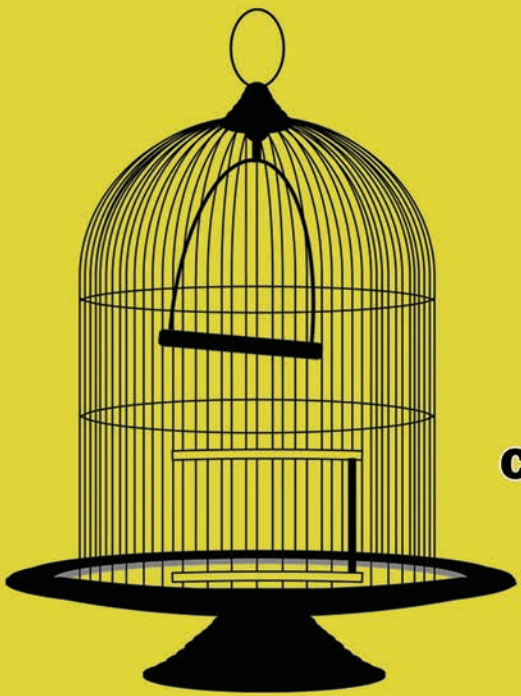
The C.K. Thompson Collection

WILD CANARY



by

C.K. THOMPSON

WILD CANARY

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(Member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union)

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DEDICATION

To my good friend, MISS NOLA WILLIAMS, of Teralba, N.S.W. whose terrific energy on the golf course would leave the most active canary breathless, and for whom my personal regard alone prevents me from smashing my recording of Smoky Mokes."

FOREWORD

During the disastrous floods that swept the Hunter Valley of N.S.W. during February 1955, an old friend of mine who lived just out of the danger zone, saw five canaries in his backyard one morning. They were feeding off some pieces of stale bread my friend had thrown out for the local sparrows. He could not catch them, and presently they flew away. Where they had come from and what happened to them eventually, nobody can tell, though one can hazard a rough guess.

It was that rather sorrowful episode, together with another that I have mentioned elsewhere in this book, that inspired me to write this saga of a free canary.

When a canary escapes from a cage, what are its chances of prolonged existence in a world filled with deadly perils for even the hardy, bush-wise birds, hatched and reared in complete freedom? Canaries are the development of Man. They have no native initiative, no inborn experience, no instinctive knowledge upon which to rely. They are at the mercy of everyone and everything. By the very nature of its breeding, a canary has small chance of living out its normal life span outside the protection of its cage, but with a great deal of luck—and it would have to be exceptional luck—it *might* make it. Who can tell? Even the most experienced ornithologist cannot claim to know everything about every bird. Given a fair chance, might not a canary be able to relearn the native lore bred out of him by Man?

I should mention that none of the episodes in this book had any parallel, as far as I am aware, during the 1955 Hunter River floods. The names of the human characters are purely fictitious, and if I have inadvertently mentioned the name of a living person, it is purely coincidental and certainly not deliberate. I definitely would not run the risk of having any of my old friends and former fellow-townspeople of Maitland (where I was born) seeking me out, thirsting for my blood!

C. K. THOMPSON.

CHAPTER ONE

Flood Threat

IT had been raining steadily for over a week, and more than one farmer in the valley had shaken his head despondently. It was flood rain, and every one of them knew it.

That river valley had been devastated by floods before even the first white settlers, lured by the promise of better land beyond the distant horizon, had battled their way through bush and scrub with their assigned convict servants, to carve for themselves a home on the rich land agriculturally unappreciated by the wandering aboriginal tribes whose hunting ground it was.

That had been more than one hundred years ago. The valley now was covered with prosperous farming settlements on land that could produce almost every kind of crop known to man. Seasons, uniformly, were good.

Certainly there had been poor years when the rainfall was below average, but these invariably were followed by many bountiful times—years which made the valley one of the most prosperous in the whole of Australia.

But periodically came the floods, and farmers who deemed themselves most fortunate saw, in a few soul-shaking days, the wealth and labour perhaps of years, swept away—submerged, wrecked and ruined under a fast-moving torrent of swirling flood water.

They clung, however, tenaciously to their land, as their fathers before them had done. It was their home and their heritage, and nothing could change the mode of living that tradition and inclination had made a very part of them.

It was thoughts such as these that occupied the mind of John Westwood as he sat with his wife, his small son and small daughter in the family kitchen that night, listening to the persistent drumming of the rain upon the farmhouse roof. The latest reports on the radio had been that the river in its upper reaches was rising fast, and that the lower valley could expect big floods. Residents of all low-lying land had already been advised to move.

"I just can't see why we should have to shift," Westwood said to his wife. "After all, we have been through floods before and we have made out all right. They're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"We lost nearly everything we possessed last flood, John," Mrs. Westwood pointed out. "The whole of our crops were ruined and so was most of our furniture. We could have saved that if we had got out in time."

"Yes, if we had got out in time," retorted her husband. "We didn't. The river was inside the back door before we knew it was over the bank."

"That was before they installed the radio flood warning system," said Mrs. Westwood. "The regular reports they put out now tell us everything we want to know and well in advance. They reported only half an hour ago that this was going to be a record flood, and that everyone should move to higher ground before the water from up-river reached here. I think we should pack up and go. I for one do not want to spend another night in that hayshed loft as we did in the last flood because we were too pigheaded to move."

John Westwood looked obstinate.

"I'm not pig-headed and you can go if you want to," he said. "I'm sticking by the house. I can't shift it and the farm with it. I can't sweep back the river with a broom as King Canute did with the sea."

"He didn't do that, dad," put in young 12-years-old Jack

Westwood. "He tried to order the sea to go back, but it didn't work."

"It wouldn't work with me, either, my lad," said his father.

"I'll stick by you, John," said his wife, "but I think you should take the children to safety. It is not fair to risk their lives."

"Who's risking anyone's lives?" exclaimed the farmer. "I won't have it said that I risked the lives of my family! All I'm saying is that the false-alarmists over the radio are scaring people into leaving their homes when there isn't sufficient cause."

"Now how can you possibly say that? You are here in one spot in the lower valley, while the reports are coming in from all over the place. Those people would not put out scare stories. The reports are coming from the police and the Local Government authorities. They are not scare-mongers."

"Our teacher said at school today that the river is so silted up that even a little bit of rain can cause a flood, because the bed of the stream is not deep enough to carry away all the water," remarked young Mary.

"So the school teachers are in it, too, with their panic talk," snorted the farmer. He looked sternly at his ten-years-old daughter.

"It is time you were in bed," he said. "That goes for your brother, too."

"But it's only eight o'clock, dad!" exclaimed the girl. "We'd like to stay up and listen to the flood bulletins on the wireless."

John Westwood groaned aloud. "Flood bulletins! Flood warnings! That's all I hear from morning to night!" he complained. "We are nearly two miles from the river and it is not yet a banker. Added to that, there are the embankments between us and the stream. It would take the father of all floods to reach us here now."

"It has happened before, John," said his wife. "I think you are being just plain obstinate. We can't do any good by staying here. I think we should pack up and go as soon as we can. We can easily load our furniture on to the lorry and take it to my sister's place

on the hill. We could shift the lot in a couple of trips."

"And what about the horses and the cows? Your sister won't want them cluttering up her backyard."

"They can be turned loose on the high ground. In a state of emergency like this, maybe the council won't impound them."

Westwood pondered the matter, irresolute. He realised that there was a great deal of common sense in his wife's argument, but he was disinclined to leave the property. He turned the matter over in his mind and decided to compromise.

"We will wait and see what the morning brings," he said. "If things look bad then, we can discuss the question of getting out."

He stood up and yawned. Outside the wind howled mournfully and the patter of rain on the roof went on unceasingly.

"I'm half-inclined to drive across to the bridge and see what the river-height gauge says," he remarked. "I might also hear some late news from up-river."

"May I come with you, dad?" asked young Jack eagerly.

"Your place is in bed," replied his father. "See that you are between the blankets before I get back from the bridge. Oh, and by the way. Why is that bird-cage hanging on the wall? Didn't I tell you to leave it outside on the verandah? That useless canary makes more mess than he is worth. He's always chucking seed over the floor and splashing the place with water when he has a bath. Outside is the place for him."

"It's too wet on the verandah tonight, dad," protested the boy. "Anyway, his cage is covered up and he can't throw seed out."

"That bird could throw seed through a Russian Iron Curtain," retorted his father. He shot a half-annoyed glance at the covered canary cage hanging on the wall a few feet away.

"Oh, leave the kids and their pet alone, John," said Mrs. Westwood impatiently. "The canary isn't doing any harm there. And it is too cold and wet outside for him. Don't make a song and dance about nothing!"

"It's not too cold and wet outside for the cows and horses and fowls," retorted the farmer. "Do you suggest that we bring them all into the house and make a menagerie out of the place?"

"You're just talking rubbish now. Horses and cows and fowls are different," said Mrs. Westwood. "The fowls are in a covered shed and the animals are used to being out in all weathers. Leave the canary alone and go across to the bridge to see the river height, if you are going to."

"But it's such a ratbag of a bird," went on the farmer, taking no notice of his wife's remarks. "It won't whistle if you look at it, or if it is whistling and it sees you looking at it, it stops. Instead of sitting on a perch and eating its seed from the tin like a sensible bird, it clings to the wire and eats upside down. It lies in a corner of the cage in the sun like a dog having a snooze. Did you ever hear of such a stupid boofhead?"

"He isn't stupid at all; he's just sensitive," said young Mary. "And don't call him Boofhead. It's such a silly name."

"A silly name for a silly bird," nodded her father. He then left the room in search of his oilskins and knee boots.

Mary went over to the cage and, gently lifting a corner of the cloth that covered it, gazed affectionately at the yellow ball crouched on a perch in the corner. "Boofhead," quite unconscious of the criticism so recently levelled at him, was fast asleep, his head buried in the soft feathers of his right wing. He had no worries. A tin of seed, a frequent thistle, an occasional apple core, drinking water and a dish in which to have a bath-—give him these and life had nothing more to offer. In return, he filled the farmhouse with gay song all day long—providing nobody looked at him too closely.

For Boofie, although, like all healthy canaries, he took a keen and lively interest in everything that went on around him, was a trifle shy. He detested anyone fooling around with his cage, even the Westwood children. He should have known that they would do him no harm, but he was in a state of panic every time his cage

was cleaned out or his seed and water changed. Such a fluttering from perch to perch, a frantic clinging to cage wires and protesting chirps ensued, that an onlooker would have gained the impression that an attempt was being made to murder him.

In appearance, Boofie was undistinguished. Plain yellow, with one black spot as big as threepence on the back of his head and a touch of buff on his right wing, he was of that popular breed known as Border Fancy.

The Westwoods had had him for two years, and, in spite of Mr. Westwood's criticisms, the whole family was attached to him.

"Old floods do not worry you, do they, boy?" asked Mary softly. The yellow ball made no reply. The little girl blew gently, causing the feathers to ruffle slightly. Then she blew a little harder and out of the fluffed-up plumage shot a small head, bright little eyes regarding her with some indignation. Mary did not move, and Boofie, having opened and closed his beak three times, plunged his head back into his shoulder feathers. The game, as far as he was concerned, was over. Mary smiled at him and returned to her seat.

At this moment her father entered the room, clad in thick oilskins and wearing an ancient felt hat. Outside the wind howled louder and the rain drummed on roof and windows like a hail of gunshot.

"I shouldn't be long, mother," he told his wife. "I'll have a look at the river gauge and see if I can pick up any information about the up-river rain. I really don't think we have anything to worry about, though."

"I hope not, John," she replied. "Still, it is better to be sure than to be sorry. Look after yourself, my dear."

"I'll do that, never fear, old girl," said the farmer, and kissed her.

Mrs. Westwood accompanied him to the door and quickly closed it against the howling elements as he disappeared into the rain-swept night.

CHAPTER TWO

Flood Refugees

THE Westwood farmhouse lay about a mile and a half from the river bank and on its eastern side. On the western bank stood the township, the main street of which followed the meanderings of the stream in an irregular curve for perhaps half a mile. The town was on a higher level than the farms, but the curve in the stream caused the floodwater continually to dash its great force against the western bank. The authorities were alive to the fact that should the rising torrent sweep away the embankment and take a straight course through the town instead of rounding the bend, disaster would be swift and terrible.

Hour by hour the water rose and it was quite apparent by the morning that nothing could prevent a most disastrous flood. This was brought home even to the stubborn John Westwood, whose visit the previous night to the river gauge on the bridge that spanned the stream between farmlands and township, had convinced him that he must remove his family and household goods as quickly as possible.

As he could see no sense in having the two children remain at home that day, he sent them off to school as usual, with instructions not to return home that afternoon, but to go to their aunt's home on the high ground outside the town.

With the children safely out of the way, he set to work energetically to "shift camp," as he put it. Westwood owned a big motor lorry, and he and his wife spent the whole of the morning packing their movable household goods and, with the

help of a couple of neighbours, loading them on to the vehicle. He made trip after trip to the aunt's home and by early afternoon the whole job was completed, a fact that caused Mrs. Westwood to sigh with relief. Horses and cattle and fowls were removed to safety and now the floods could do their worst! It was a source of satisfaction that the rain had eased off, but the gravity of the situation was increasing every minute. Already the river was over its banks in several places, and a lot of low-lying land had been inundated. The Westwood farmhouse, however, was still untouched, as were a number of other homes in the same area.

It was this fact that persuaded Westwood, when his own job was done, to place his lorry and his own services at the disposal of his friends and neighbours.

Darkness was falling as the last load of furniture was transported to safety and Westwood drove off with a light heart to rejoin his family at their relations' home. The evening meal was on the table when he arrived and he announced heartily that he could eat a horse. He was immediately provided with a large meal.

It was a subdued family that sat around the table that night. Mr. and Mrs. Grahame (Uncle Bert and Auntie Maude) and the four Westwoods sensed the tragedy in the air and they all knew, even the children, that terrible events were going to happen.

"We can thank God that we are safe," said Uncle Bert. "But I fear for the families who have not moved from the low land. And if the town embankment gives away . . ." He paused significantly and was silent.

"Er, I hope your fowlhouse isn't too crowded, Bert," said Westwood, bridging an awkward gap in the conversation. "It's pretty full now of birds, what with yours and all mine."

"It won't hurt 'em to rough it for a few days," said Grahame. "They're all tough birds."

"You've said it!" exclaimed Westwood. "I find that out every time I kill one for Sunday dinner!"

That raised a laugh, a laugh which was stilled when young Mary gave a subdued scream.

"Birds! Birds!" she cried out. "Oh, dear!"

"What's wrong with you, girl?" demanded her father. "Been bitten by a bull-ant?"

"Boofie!" the girl cried. "Boofie! Where's Boofie?"

"Boofie? Who on earth is Boofie?" asked Auntie Maude.

"My canary!" cried Mary, bursting into tears. "Where is he? Oh, daddy, you forgot all about him! Oh, he's left all alone in the house and I know he'll be drowned."

"Oh, my gosh! I did forget all about him!" muttered Westwood. "As far as I know, he's still in the cage hanging on the kitchen wall. How in the name of heaven did I manage to leave him behind when we were doing all the shifting today?"

"Please save poor Boofie, daddy," wept Mary, who was now joined in her lamentations by her brother Jack.

"Listen, I'm tired out and it's raining cats and dogs outside," protested their father. "It's a long way back to the farmhouse. I'll get him in the morning. Maybe the flood won't reach him . . . "

"Stop it, John," his wife cut in sharply. "Don't make things worse. You know that the farmhouse won't be flooded at all." She gave him a good kick on the shin beneath the table and he shut up abruptly.

"Oh, of course he'll be as safe as the bank," he said with spurious heartiness. "I'll pop over first thing in the morning and collect the old chap."

"You'll pop over right now, John," said Mrs. Westwood quietly. "He is the children's pet and it's your fault that he is still at the farm."

"How do you make that out?" demanded the farmer. "Never mind answering that. Naturally I'm to blame for everything that happens around the place. It has always been the same. But as for going over there at this time of the night in the rain to get him, I'm not that nutty."

"You'll go over right now, John, or there will be a first-class row," said his wife sharply.

"Okay, okay, but get off my back, will you?" grunted Westwood. He could not understand all the fuss over a worthless canary which, in any case, would probably be safe until the morning. But he would have to go and rescue the thing or he'd never hear the end of it. Ah, well, it would be a chance to have a last look round the farmhouse and see what its chances were of escaping destruction.

Bert Grahame offered to accompany him for the ride, but the farmer would not hear of it. "One goat is enough out in this weather," he snorted as he left the house. Within a few minutes he had the lorry on the road and was driving swiftly towards the township.

When he reached the bridge he stopped the lorry and spoke to one of a group of men who, huddled up in raincoats and knee boots, were anxiously watching the debris-laden torrent of swirling water rushing swiftly under the structure.

"Yes, mate," said the man in answer to Westwood's query, "she's still rising. Another few feet and the bridge decking will be under water."

"H'm, that doesn't sound so hot," mused the farmer. "Embankments still holding?"

"So far. The gangs are working on all of them, strengthening them with sandbags. The trouble is, it's still raining heavily upstream, and all that water's got to come down, you know. Guess we'll all be floating out to sea by morning." He laughed shortly, but there was no mirth in the laugh.

"Any reports from the farms over the river?" asked Westwood.

"Nothing new. They've all shifted off the flat, at least that's what I've heard. Of course, there might still be a few mugs left—you know the sort, mate: the dills who think the flood won't reach their places and the other ratbags who insist on sticking to their homes, come floods, fires or atom bombs. They're an utter

nuisance. They put their own lives in peril and also force other people to risk theirs to rescue them."

Westwood did not answer that. The thought occurred to him that only for his family's persistence he himself might have been classed among the "dills," the "mugs" and the "ratbags."

"My place is over on the flats," he said. "It's about a mile or so from here and I'm just slipping over to pick up the last bit of stuff."

"Take my advice, mate, and don't risk it," said the man earnestly. "The river is over its banks in some spots and the flats might even now be under water. Fair dinkum, I wouldn't risk it if I were you. Matter of fact, the police will turn you back if they spot you."

"I can't see any of them around," said Westwood. "I'll take a chance on it. A man can always turn around and come back if he runs into trouble."

"Yes, unless one of the embankments happens to go while you're over there," said the man darkly.

Cheerful cove, that, Westwood told himself as he drove across the bridge. It was a stout structure that had withstood many assaults by the river in the thirty years it had been standing, but the force of the waters of this Old Man flood beating against its piles caused it to shudder and tremble. Westwood felt it as the lorry rattled across. "Don't try to make it unless it is urgent," that man back there had said. Urgent? What would the fellow have said, Westwood thought with a grim smile, had he known that this crazy trip in the howling dark was to rescue one undistinguished canary—a bird that would throw the judges into fits if anyone were silly enough to exhibit it in a bird show.

At the other side of the bridge there was another group of people anxiously watching the river and discussing the possibilities. He did not speak to them nor take any notice of their hails, but drove steadily onwards. A few hundred yards the other side of the bridge he swung to the left and followed a good road for a quarter of a mile. This brought him to the track that led to his own

house. There was a rather deep dip here, a depression that ran at right angles to the river, and it was filled with water. Westwood stopped the lorry, leaving the headlights on, and tested the water with a stick. It was a foot deep and visibly rising. If that depression were completely filled it would be three feet under in the middle impossible for his truck to cross. At the rate the water was rising this should not happen for half an hour or more—time enough for him to rescue the canary and return home to Uncle Bert's place.

Back in the lorry, he splashed across the depression and soon was rattling towards the farmhouse. It looked wet and forlorn in the darkness.

Stopping the lorry outside the back door, Westwood jumped down and quickly made his way into the kitchen. Switching on the light, he saw, sure enough, the open-wire cage hanging on the wall. Inside, head buried in his shoulder feathers, squatted Boofie, sleeping the sleep of the untroubled.

"Come on, you fool bird, we've got no time to waste hanging around here," said the farmer, and lifted the cage from the wall. The movement awakened the canary, which fluttered from perch to perch in its excitement.

"This isn't the time for you to be putting on your act, Boofhead," admonished Westwood. "Calm down and let us get out of here, unless you want to go floating down the river."

He was walking towards the door when a thought occurred to him.

"I'd better have a look around the place before I leave," he told the indignant canary. "There might be something we left behind this afternoon."

Still carrying the cage, he walked from room to room, switching lights on and off as he did so. Except for a few odds and ends of no value, the place was bare. Everything had been removed that day.

"Okay, Boofhead, let's go," he said briskly. "We'd better be

getting back to Uncle Bert's. The kids will be anxious, I know, about your precious safety."

Putting out the kitchen light, he left the house, closing and locking the door behind him. Climbing into the lorry, he placed the cage on the seat at his side. Boofie, of course, objected to the whole proceedings and did a bit of fluttering around the cage and acrobatics on the perches to indicate that fact. His attitude showed quite plainly that he thought it was a bit thick. Why couldn't a decent, respectable canary, who did no harm to anyone, be allowed to catch up on his sleep? What was the idea of dragging him around the countryside at dead of night in wind and rain and flood?

It was just as well for Boofie that he did not know just how little sleep he was going to catch up on that particular night!

Westwood received his first warning that all was not as he hoped it would be, when he got to within a hundred yards of the water-filled depression. In the glare of the headlights he saw water where it had no right to be. He had estimated that it would take at least half an hour for the depression to fill completely; yet, within a bare ten minutes, not only was the depression filled, but it was actually flowing over—and fast. He stopped the lorry, got out and ran towards the approaching water. It swirled around his feet and rushed on towards the lorry behind him. This was serious! What could have happened? He thought quickly. It could mean but one thing—the embankment had given way and the river itself was pouring into the depression, turning it into a creek that would run right through the farmlands and quickly inundate them completely.

It was impossible for him to cross the water in the lorry and there was no other road back to the township. Westwood realised that he was marooned—trapped by the rising floodwaters with no chance of reaching safety, at least before morning, and that was many hours away.

By this time the water was up to his ankles. And above the sound of the rain that was falling again steadily and relentlessly, he could hear the dull roar of the racing river, a substantial portion of which was swiftly covering his farm in an ever-deepening flood.

Squelching through the water which was running into the tops of his boots, Westwood reached the lorry, started the engine, and backed until he could turn. Then he drove headlong back to the farmhouse, the tyres sending cascades of water outwards like the bows of miniature steamers. He beat the water to the house, but only just. For as he leaped to the ground it caught up with him.

The farmer was in a dilemma. He knew that he could not stay on the sodden ground. The flood water was racing across the flat to rejoin the river where the bend straightened out. There it would encounter another embankment and would back up swiftly. That meant that as long as the embankment held, the water would continue to rise and rise fast. He had to reach the highest peak he could. Swiftly he looked at the homestead and then at the hayshed. The hayshed it was. There was a ladder inside that led up to a loft from which a trapdoor gave access to the flat platform on which was installed a small block and tackle set used for lifting bales of hay and stowing them on to trucks in the lucerne season. This platform was twenty feet from the ground and he should be safe there. No flood in the history of the valley had ever reached that height!

Westwood acted quickly. Pausing only long enough to grab an electric torch from the lorry seat, he rushed into the hayshed and quickly scaled the ladder. Opening the trapdoor, he emerged on to the platform in the wind and rain. Visibility was not too good, and as he could see no sense in getting wet unnecessarily, he retreated into the loft again. He would be safe there until the morning. He might even get a little sleep. There was a bundle of hay on the floor and that would make a sufficient bed. The

absence of a light would not trouble him. He had his flashlight for eventualities.

"All for the sake of a useless canary," he muttered. "What a mug a man can be!" Suddenly he gasped. That canary! Where was it? Oh, starve the lizards, it was still down there in the lorry!

Switching on the torch, Westwood shone it down the ladder and what he saw appalled him. Already there was over a foot of water tearing through the shed. He would have to hurry. Stowing the torch in his overcoat pocket, he quickly shinned down the ladder and landed with a splash into the water—to be almost swept off his feet. The lorry was only a yard or two away and he managed to reach it, but only by throwing himself at it and grabbing the edge of the table-top with one hand while he held the lighted torch in the other. He edged his way along to the driver's door, wrenched it open and hauled himself inside, collapsing on the seat alongside Boofie's cage. He paused for a moment to get his breath back and then got ready for the return journey. He would have to make this without the aid of the flashlight. He could not carry the cage in one hand and the torch in the other. He would need one hand free to steady and guide himself.

It was as dark as pitch, and though he could not see Boofie, he could hear him. The canary was once again registering its protests against this night filled with such unprecedented occurrences, by fluttering around the cage.

Westwood stepped gingerly into the rising water and had to keep a firm grasp on to the door of the lorry to prevent himself being swept away. The hayshed ladder was only a few feet off, but he was going to have a hard job reaching it .

Facing the flow of the stream, he edged himself sideways, inch by inch, the water tearing at his legs, trying to hurl him over. Bit by bit he progressed and bit by bit he won his way. It was with a grunt of thankfulness that his free hand touched the ladder

and then it took him only a few seconds to scale it and reach the safety of the loft.

Placing the cage on top of an old kerosene case, he produced his torch and shone it upon Boofie. That ungrateful bird eyed him balefully. It was sitting on the end of a perch as far away from Westwood's side of the cage as it could get. Its look said, quite plainly, that it did not like Westwood. At that moment Westwood did not like Boofie, and did not hesitate to tell him so. Boofie opened and closed his beak three times in complete contempt, and then shoved his head into his shoulder feathers to indicate that the episode was concluded. Westwood put out the torch and sought the heap of hay in the corner.

It was, of course, at this stage, quite impossible for him to go to sleep. The night was not very cold, but he was practically wet through. His clothes clung to his body, causing discomfort, but it was not that that worried him. His thoughts were with his family. Admittedly, they were safely beyond reach of the flood, but as the night wore on and he failed to return home, they would become very worried and anxious. Possibly they would not expect him home immediately. No doubt they would, in the early stages, attribute his absence to a desire to remain in the township to gather the latest news and to render assistance in the thousand and one tasks that could be found for an able-bodied man in such times of distress; but as the hours passed they could not fail to be overcome by worry.

Westwood stirred restlessly on his heap of hay and at length decided to inspect his surroundings. The rain, which had eased off temporarily, had started again and was drumming ceaselessly upon the iron roof just over his head.

Emerging on to the platform, he looked towards the township, the lights of which were faintly visible through the mist caused by the rain. He saw the lights reflected in a vast sea of hurrying water. Glancing downwards, he could still see the roof of the