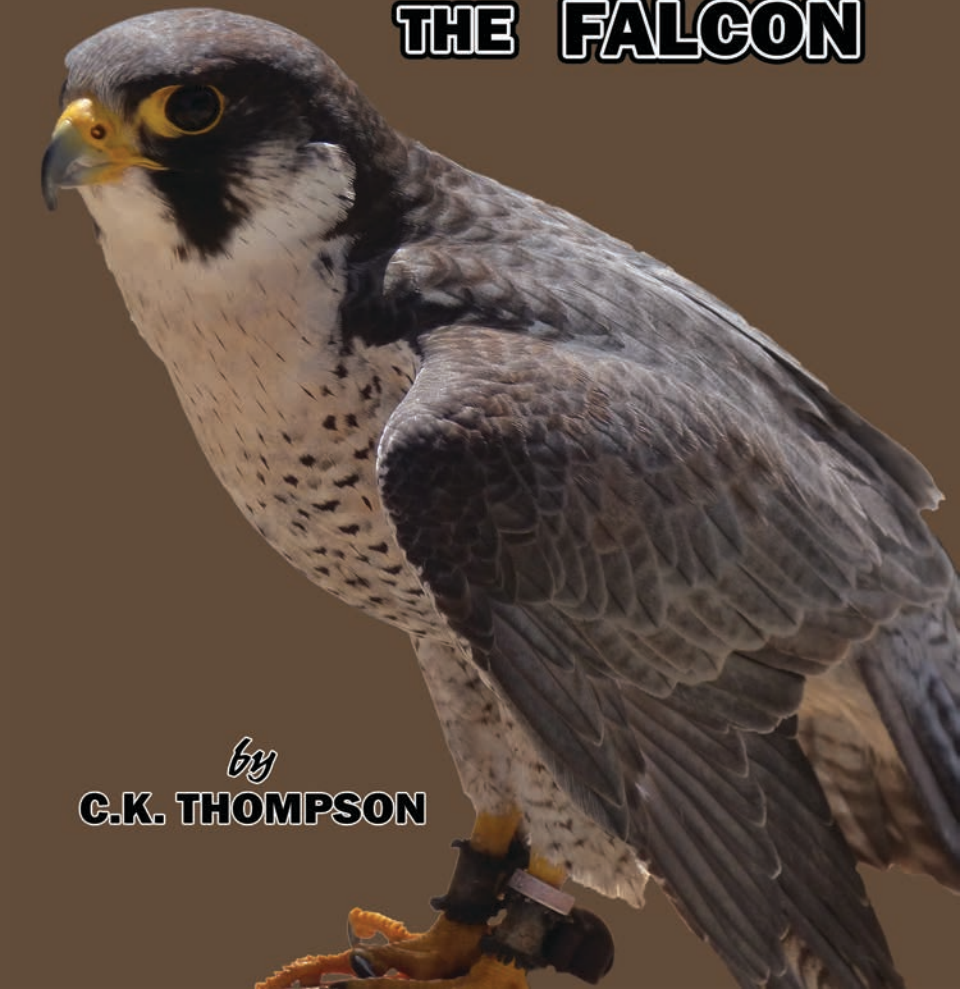
The C.K. Thompson Collection

THUNDERBOLT

THE FALCON



by

C.K. THOMPSON

THUNDERBOLT
the
FALCON

By

C.K. Thompson, R.A.O.U., J.P.

(Member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union and the Royal Zoological Society of N.S.W.)

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

A Pair of Peregrines

HIGH up the side of a precipitous rocky cliff in a deep crevice hollowed out by time and weather, a pair of peregrine falcons had built their nest of sticks and twigs lined with soft bark, bits of wool and stray feathers. The sticks and twigs were collected from the summit of the cliff itself, while the bits of wool had come from fences and stumps against which idle sheep, grazing in paddocks, had rubbed their fleecy hides. The stray feathers had once belonged to certain pathetic victims of the predatory falcons.

For Black-cheek the falcon and Tiercel her mate were killers: the fastest, strongest and most fearless of all the Australian hawks. They were up before daylight hunting and they were still at it when the last rays of the setting sun heralded the darkness that brought safety, or at least a breathing space, to their potential victims.

The two falcons were proud of their nest, which was their own, unaided work. Unlike their cousins the kestrels, the sparrow-hawks, the kites and certain other birds that made shift with the deserted nests of crows and ravens in high trees, the peregrines always built their own homes. Second-hand dwellings were beneath their dignity.

Just above the crevice in which their nest had been built, a gnarled and twisted gum tree jutted from the face of the cliff. How it obtained enough sustenance to live in that rocky eminence was a secret of Mother Nature; but it was a puzzle that did not bother the falcons. They were content that it was there, because from its

few scraggy branches they could obtain a panoramic view of the whole of the vast open country spread out before them.

They were a handsome pair of birds, those peregrines. Blue-grey backs, black heads and cheeks, whitish throats and fine barrings on their breasts made a combination of colour that was most attractive—except to the birds and small animals they hunted.

There were very few birds upon which Black-cheek and Tiercel did not prey. They took their victims as they came from ducks to larks; and there was quite a number of human pigeon-fanciers who had cause to regret the existence of the peregrines when their treasured racing birds failed to return to their home lofts. The falcons also enjoyed rabbits, particularly young ones.

A proverb that Black-cheek and Tiercel could have adopted as their family motto was "the early bird catches the worm"—but with the substitution of something much more attractive and satisfying than the worm. The falcons were not interested in worms but they were definitely in favour of early starting times.

It was their invariable custom to leave their roosting place when there was just enough light for them to see what they were doing. Sometimes they hunted together, but quite often they went their separate ways, one not caring what the other did.

Both were very wise and experienced birds. They started to hunt at daybreak because at that hour most other birds were still asleep or only half awake on their roosts. This was a good thing for Black-cheek and Tiercel who, cruising slowly among the open trees with deadly keen eyes raking the twigs, leaves and branches, often picked up early breakfasts. Balls of feathers huddled in sleep never knew what happened to them, for the falcons struck like lightning, the victims dying violently without the least chance to escape. Occasionally, however, a luckless parakeet, snatched off its perch and carried away in the fierce clutch of the falcon's talons, screamed its dying protests until the slayer, irritated by the noise, landed with it on a convenient branch or on the ground

and made short work of it. Black-cheek had been known even to make a meal in mid-air.

Out in the centre of a paddock some miles from their nest there stood a long-dead tree with one lonely branch. The trunk was straight up and on the very top of this Black-cheek had her favourite spotting perch. Tiercel generally occupied the lone branch, which was ten feet below. This was their chosen hunting area for, apart from the bushes and trees from which small birds could be taken, rabbits were plentiful. Both falcons liked rabbits very much, especially kittens. From their lofty lookout they could easily locate the unwary young animals and in their fast powerdives they rarely missed. The victim secured, it was always carried away to an open place and devoured on the ground.

Black-cheek and Tiercel built their nest in early August, beating most other birds to it by some weeks. Their young ones would be ready to hunt when the nesting season of other birds was in full swing. Nestlings provided an easy harvest for young falcons not yet fully experienced in the art of taking their victims on the wing.

Black-cheek had laid three eggs in the nest in the crevice in the cliff. They were buff-colored and covered all over with reddish-brown marks. Only two hatched, both female birds, and hungry young eyasses they were.

It was not, of course, the first family of Black-cheek and Tiercel. Several broods had been raised and sent forth into the world by the two falcons. In between breeding seasons they did not always keep together. They were wanderers, these peregrines, as their name implies, and though neither strayed very far outside a ten miles' radius of their nesting place, sometimes they did not see each other for weeks on end. Often they hunted singly and often in pairs; but when they were together, occasionally they did not even prey as a combined team but went into independent action when game was sighted.

Though Black-cheek and Tiercel sometimes strayed to the

coast and sometimes inland, their decided preference was for the heavily-timbered and rugged mountainous country. Bold and fearless and in flight easily the strongest of all the Australian hawks, excepting, of course, their giant kinsman, the wedge-tailed eagle, the peregrines preyed on anything and everything.

Black-cheek was by far the larger bird. She was twenty inches in length and had a wing-span of something over three feet. Tiercel was shorter in body by fully five inches and his wing-span was not quite three feet. In flight, both were swift and undulating, their long, pointed wings capable of deep, powerful strokes, propelling them through the air as fast as they desired to travel. And though their deep but wheezy call, kra-kra-kra, when hunting, was enough to strike fear into the boldest of birds, it was nothing to the terror their harsh scream created when they threw themselves into their swift killing swoop.

The two eyasses, as young falcons are called, grew apace. They were like their parents in appearance, having similar black heads and cheeks and white throats, also blue-grey backs, but whereas the adult birds had fine barrings on their breasts, the eyasses were marked with broad stripes. As they grew older, these would give way to the barrings of their parents.

When the young falcons were old enough to leave the nest, they stayed for some time on a narrow rocky platform which jutted out in front of the nest crevice. Six feet above their heads was a branch of the gnarled and twisted gum tree which their parents used as a look-out. And it was from the platform to this branch that they each made their first uncertain flights.

As time passed, Black-cheek and Tiercel conducted their offspring down out of the hills and over to the paddock in which their other look-out was situated-the long-dead tree with the one lonely branch and the bare top. Here, perched side by side on the branch, the eyasses watched their parents hunting and learned a lot. Naturally they were most eager to join in the hunt, but they

were told sternly to stay where they were and their food would be brought to them. In the meantime, between snacks, they were to watch their parents and pay strict attention to what was going on. And they did so.

The old birds adopted a technique that was easy for the eyasses to follow. On leaving the tree, both birds soared up and up to about one hundred feet, keen eyes raking the ground. Suddenly Tiercel saw a half-grown rabbit emerge from a burrow near an acacia bush and sit in the mouth of it. Like an arrow from a bow he threw himself into his power-dive and flashed earthwards. Black-cheek watched his progress with a keen, professional eye and saw him spoil things by screaming harshly when within a few yards of the rabbit. Quick as Tiercel was, the bunny was quicker, and though terrified, it had just sufficient wits to tumble into its burrow, out of which Tiercel had no hope of dragging it.

Black-cheek soared upwards and circled and then became aware of something still higher. She did not know what it was except that it was a bird of some kind. The sound of wing-beats of course told her that. In a wide upward spiral, she projected herself above what turned out to be a large blue crane.

This slow-moving bird had been fishing in the swamp a few miles away and was now making its way to a small creek where it hoped to get a feed of fresh-water yabbies. If it knew of the presence of the falcon it made no sign but continued on its way, uttering its loud, croaking call and flapping its big wings as if it were sheer hard work to do so.

Black-cheek easily followed its flight, circling high above it. She did this while the crane flew about fifty yards and then suddenly tipped over and fell downwards. With a harsh and savage scream she struck the unfortunate crane on the neck with one of her talons and sent it tumbling to earth. It was dead before it hit the ground and seconds afterwards Black-cheek was tearing away the feathers preparatory to making a meal.

Black-cheek was lunching quietly when suddenly she paused and cocked her head on one side. She had heard something. Leaving the body of the crane she shot into the air and took by surprise a graceful little Nankeen kestrel that had been hovering overhead. The kestrel took to its wings and fled. Black-cheek did not follow it but dropped back to earth to resume her interrupted meal. She had had absolutely nothing to fear from the kestrel either as a mealstealer or an antagonist, but she didn't want the other bird around.

Nankeen kestrel was a relation of Black-cheek's but a very different type of bird. Known generally as the sparrowhawk possibly because it hovered for long periods with rapidly beating wings looking for its prey, it fed mostly on grasshoppers, crickets, small reptiles, mice and sometimes the young of ground-nesting birds.

Black-cheek had plenty of relations and except for Grey Falcon, which was a rather timid bird and slower in its flight than the other falcons, all of the peregrine's relatives were swift and tireless slayers.

Take Little Falcon for example. Here was a small kinsman of which the peregrine might well be proud. Its laboured flight and awkward hovering with rapidly-beating wings when searching for food was a snare and a delusion for, the game in sight, it was as swift as a dart and, taking into consideration its size, was as bold, if not bolder, than some of its larger relations.

Black Falcon, which, when fully grown, was about the size of a crow, was another hawk to be treated with the greatest respect. Swift on the wing like the rest of the family, its favourite sport was hunting quail and larks, soaring and diving on them from a great height. It also preyed upon any other bird which was unfortunate enough to encounter it in open country, dealing with its victims in the same ungentle manner as its peregrine cousin. It was a vecy dark brown bird, almost black, thus bearing a close resemblance to Brown Hawk. But Brown Hawk preferred to pounce on any small birds to which he took a fancy instead of seizing

them in the air. In addition, he did not despise a meal of beetles, caterpillars or mice. A bit of a comedian, at times he indulged in aerial acrobatics, flying erratically and doing flips and side slips like a stunting aeroplane pilot.

But Brown Hawk was not such a stunt artist as Crested Hawk, who, after soaring to a great height, often fell earthwards like a tumbler pigeon, whistling loud and clear as he did so. Crested Hawk, a most graceful bird, was not a killer. He lived mainly on insects, but blotted his copybook by occasionally dining off a dead animal.

Collared Sparrowhawk, a kinsman of Nankeen Kestrel, was a true "sparrow-hawk." A lively little chap, he lived almost wholly upon small birds.

Black-cheek's other relations included the goshawks, the kites and the harriers, all of which competed with each other for food. Among her larger kinsmen were the little eagles, the sea eagles, the ospreys, the buzzards and, noblest of them all, the mighty wedged-tailed eagle.

Neither Black-cheek nor Tiercel had any family pride in so far as their hawk relations were concerned. The law of the wild laid down survival of the fittest. The peregrines attended strictly to their own business and that, at the moment, was the training of and subsequent launching into the feathered world of their lusty eyasses. The survival of the fittest! If the youngsters could not stand up for their own rights and wrest a good living from the bush, the mountains and the plains after they had outgrown their home ties, then so much the worse for them. Their parents would not care; they had their own lives to live.

But the eyasses were apt pupils, the fierce children of fierce predatory parents and they could face the future with full confidence.

CHAPTER TWO

Introducing a Knightly Sport

NOT a great distance from the paddock in which stood the old dead tree taken over by Black-cheek and Tiercel as their watch-tower, was the modest home of young Joe McKenzie and his parents. Joe's father was a timbergetter and, consequently, a very hard worker. Young Joe, like most boys, liked work about as much as he enjoyed going to school or washing his feet. He was, however, a great reader of books, mainly of the adventure type, but he was rather conservative in his choice.

In this modern age when small boys think more of spaceships and interplanetary travel, mowing down Martians with ray guns and disintegrating demons from Venus with hydrogen pistols, Joe stuck stolidly to the six-gun in fancy and the catapult in reality. Let others blast whole planets to smithereens with ultra-atomic artillery if they liked. A pair of six-shooters in the hands of Billy the Kid or Bloodstained Basil terrorising a western American cow-town gave him all the thrills he wanted. For one thing, cowboys and Indians, cattle rustlers and the Wild West actually existed, whereas the authenticity of life on the other planets has yet to be established.

It was his inability to procure the latest Buffalo Bill novel during his last trip into the township that had driven him to read the book he now had.

Wandering restlessly around the house and disdaining to attend to certain small jobs listed for him by his mother before she left home that morning to spend the day with her married sister, Joe saw the book lying on the floor in a corner. Using it as

a football, he sent it flying across the room, shedding a few leaves in flight. It was an ancient and battered volume with only one cover, which bore in very faded lettering the austere title, "Flower of Knighthood." It had been lying around the house for as long as Joe could remember. It had been used in its time as a doorstop and a prop to keep a window open. He had seen his father tear pages out of it to use as spills to light his pipe from the fire. As far as he knew, neither of his parents had ever read it. He himself had never even thought of it.

Then, in sheer desperation, he decided to give it a go, so, retrieving it from under the kitchen sink, he mooched out into the yard and settled himself under the shade of a tree.

Joe did not expect to derive much instruction or enjoyment from the battered volume. He yawned before he even opened it. He noted that the first seven pages were missing and when he glanced at the end to see how the story finished, discovered that the last eighteen pages were not there. Ah, well, he told himself philosophically, there might be something worthwhile in the middle of the thing.

There was. And that something, strangely enough, had a most important bearing, not only upon the future careers of a pair of peregrine falcons at that moment lunching off a small rabbit in the paddock over the way, but upon another falcon as yet unborn.

Though he had to commence the story in mid-air as it were, Joe soon grasped the fact that it was set in the reign of King Edward III, when knights, yeomen and scurvy knaves rushed around with bows and arrows and went forth to battle in tin suits. The only firearms Edward and his men appeared to possess were things called bombards—very primitive cannon which fired iron balls a few yards or so. That is, when they behaved themselves. Mostly it seemed that they exploded when fired, blowing themselves to bits and killing everyone on their own side within a radius of a hundred yards.

Joe grunted and felt inclined to throw the book away. After all, it was historical tripe and he got enough of that at school. He read a few more pages and was thus engaged when he received a visitor. This was a small boy with fair hair and a dreamy expression on a face the main feature of which was a snub nose. He wore a dirty shirt and had a hole in the seat of his pants—standard uniform for all Joe McKenzie's mates. He did not announce his arrival in the accepted social fashion. Instead, the dreamy expression still on his face, he stooped down silently, collected a large pebble and shied it at Joe. The pebble landed on the back of that earnest reader's head, causing him to suspend his literary researches and emit a sharp howl.

"What are you reading, Joe?" asked the visitor mildly.

"You silly looking Pommy coot!" howled Joe, rubbing the back of his head. "What the dickens do you think you're up to, donging me like that with a dirty big rock. A man ought to drop you."

"Drop me, huh? And where can you get ten men in a hurry to help you?" asked the newcomer, young David Burton. "Don't lose your excitement, Joe. And by the way, if you don't knock off calling me a Pommy, I'll drop you, not you drop me."

"Well, you are a Pommy, ain't you?" snorted the aggrieved Joe. "Coming here and pelting me with huge rocks. Why didn't you stay in England?"

"Too many bombs around," replied David cheerfully.

In spite of the rather rough greetings exchanged, these two boys were the very best of friends. David Burton had come to Australia as a baby with his mother towards the end of World War II, and they now lived with his grandfather in a cottage not very far from Joe's home. David's father had been one of the heroes of the Battle of Britain and later had been shot down in action during a bombing raid over Berlin. When his wife had migrated to Australia with her young son David, her father, old John Mannering, had come with them. Joe and David had become firm friends from their

very first meeting. Joe rarely used the insulting name "Pommy" when referring to David unless he was particularly annoyed and even then there was no real sting in the epithet, as David knew.

"What are you reading, Joe?" the English boy repeated. "That doesn't look much like a cowboy yarn."

"It isn't," said Joe as David dropped to a seat on the ground at his side. "It is a book about knights and other balmy jokers when Edward the Third was King of England."

"Oh, history tripe?" asked David in disgust. "Chuck the thing away and let us go shooting birds with our catapults. Come on."

"That's a good idea, Dave," nodded Joe. "But there are bits of this yarn that have got me tricked. You come from England, so you ought to know all about it. Help me out."

"Here, break it down!" protested David. "I come from England all right, but I wasn't knocking around in the reign of Edward III. Better see Grandfather. He saw out the reigns of Edward VII and Edward VIII, the bloke who is now Duke of Windsor. Will that do you?"

"Oh, don't be a bigger goat than you have to," begged Joe. He paused and snorted. Then, "From what I can make out so far in this yarn, this joker Edward the Third wasn't satisfied with owning England, but wanted to clout on France too and be king of both. The French birds objected, so Edward the Third carted an army to France, also his son, a bit of a prawn about 16 years old, and also an Aboriginal."

"An Aboriginal?" exclaimed David. "What do you mean, an Aboriginal?"

"Well, it says here that he was called the Black Prince," Joe pointed out seriously.

"Stone the crows, he wasn't an Aboriginal," laughed David. "He was called the Black Prince because he always wore black armour."

"Is that so? Well, anyway, there was a lot of swordfighting and arrow-shooting at some joint or other in France called Crecy,

where this Aboriginal, I mean, this Black Prince joker, won a pair of spurs. That is one part that has me tricked. It doesn't say how he won 'em, whether in a raffle or playing cards or what."

"They were knight's spurs," put in David.

"So what? I don't care a continental red cent if he wore them in the daytime. That's not the point at all. This Black Prince joker was given part of the army to command by his old man and looked like collecting the father of a belting off the Froggies. Somebody stuck his beak in—some earl or duke-by telling the old man—Edward the Third, I mean—that his silly son was copping a rough trot and he'd better hop in and help him or England would be short one Black Prince, also a few thousand archers and knights; and he himself would probably do in his chances of swiping the crown of France."

Here Joe paused for a few seconds and rapidly thumbed through the pages of the book.

"Listen to this, Dave," he went on. "'When the noble told the king that the Black Prince needed assistance, the royal Edward III replied proudly, "No. Let the boy win his spurs."' I don't get it, Dave, do you? You'd think it was a battle he wanted to win, not a pair of rusty old spurs which he could buy in any second-hand shop; or, if he wasn't too fussy, could pinch off a dead soldier."

Joe McKenzie, it would seem, had little conception of, or regard for, the ancient laws and usages of chivalry.

"You've got it all twisted, Joe," said David scornfully. "The king meant that the Black Prince had to win his spurs of knighthood-that he had to prove his bravery as a true knight."

"Well, it all sounds so dashed silly to me," said Joe. "A prince is much higher than a knight, isn't he? Right. Now, if this Aboriginal prince was already a prince, what the heck was the sense or use of his winning knight's spurs? I mean to say, he was sliding down the scale a bit, wasn't he? And apart from all else, couldn't he have got a pair of blessed spurs from his old man for nix without having to go and fight a war against the French fellers?"

"He was born a prince but that didn't make him a brave knight," said David patiently. "In those days a man had to prove he was brave. He had to win his spurs by heroic deeds on the battlefield. Then, if he were of gentle birth or noble blood, he became a knight. There were even cases of ordinary soldiers being knighted for outstanding services to the king and the country. In these days they make anybody a knight whether he is brave or not."

"All right, all right, don't give me a lecture," said Joe impatiently. "Just kindly explain to me how a prince who is higher than a duke, an earl, a lord, or a knight, wanted to become a knight by winning a pair of spurs? It's all haywire and whangdoodle."

"The spurs were made of gold and were the badge of knighthood, just like a returned soldier gets an R.S.L. badge when he joins the Returned Soldiers' League. Your old man has one, so you ought to know that," said David.

"Oh," said Joe, light breaking on him. "But that doesn't explain about a prince wanting to be disrated to a knight."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," exclaimed David. "A knight really meant a brave man. If the Black Prince was a coward, he'd still be a prince, but not a true knight. Do you get it now?"

"No," said Joe.

David saw that it was plain useless trying to explain the niceties of chivalry to the earthbound Joe and he was not going to try any more.

"It's all as mad as a snake," said Joe.

"Too silly for words," agreed David.

"Absolutely ratbag," added Joe.

"Plain daft and the height of stupidity," supplemented David.

What was the use?

There was silence for a moment or two as Joe idly turned the pages of the battered volume to look at the illustrations. One caught his eye. It was the picture of a knight dressed in the fashionable attire of the day, sitting on a horse with a bird perched on his gloved wrist.

"Wonder what this goat is up to?" Joe grunted.

"Give me a look. What does it say underneath the picture?" asked David.

"Edward III was a great lover of falconry. In between battles in France he went hawking with his knights,' " read Joe.

"A lot of nobles did it in the Middle Ages." remarked David.

"Did what?"

"Went out hawking" said David.

"Hawking? Hawking what?" demanded Joe, squinting at the illustration. "Don't tell me he was trying to sell that parrot squatting on his fist! He must have been pretty hard up to go around hawking parrots like a drunk hawking bootlaces on a street corner! Still, I guess wars cost a lot of dough. All the same, he wouldn't raise much by selling flea-bitten parrots, would he?"

"That's not a parrot, Joe, you silly goat. It's a falcon," exclaimed David. "Stone the wombats, don't you know anything?"

"I know enough to lay you flat on your back if you get too cheeky, young Dave" said Joe darkly. "Anyway, what is a falcon?"

"It's a kind of hawk. In England the kings, earls and knights used to train them to hunt other birds."

"Look, don't let us get on that knight argument again," begged Joe. "Anyway, how did they train them?"

"They got them young in the nest and taught them. Then they took the birds into the fields and set them on to other birds. The falcons chased the birds and caught them for their masters. A bit like greyhound dogs are trained to hunt hares and rabbits."

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Joe with great animation. "Say, what a great lurk that would be! Wish I had lived in those days! I'll bet I'd have had the best trained falcon in the world."

"Naturally!" murmured David in a tone which made Joe look at him suspiciously. David's face, however, was an innocent blank.

"I wonder if any of the hawks we have here in Australia could

be trained to hunt birds?" asked Joe after a few moments' deep thought. He heaved a regretful sigh. "Guess not. Anyway, even if they were trainable, I suppose nobody would know how to do it now. I'll bet nobody has trained a hawk or a falcon for hundreds of years."

"Now that is where you are wrong, as usual, young Joseph," said David. "My grandfather says that there is still a lot of it done—in England, China, India and America. He did it himself when he was a lad."

"Don't give me that line of tripe," scoffed the doubting Joe.

"It's a fact. Grandfather Mannering used to be a gamekeeper on the estates of the Earl of Rockvale in England and he knows all there is to know about falcons and hawks and so on. I'll bet, too, that he knows as much about Australian birds as he does about those in England. He is always out in the bush watching and studying them."

"Gosh!" breathed Joe. He was entranced with the vision he had conjured up. "I wonder if he would tell us how to train a hawk? But I don't suppose he knows anything about it, in spite of what you say."

"There is one sure way to prove that," said David. "You come over to our place and have a yarn with him. I don't know if any of the Australian hawks can be trained, but if they can, grandfather will know. Of course, whether he would train one for you or show you how it is done, is a bird of a different feather."

"Clever coot, aren't you? Bird of a different feather!" said Joe.

He jumped to his feet, hurled the book into the nearby fowlyard, nearly skittling a half-grown duck, and announced himself as being ready to make the pilgrimage to the Burton home.

"What, straight away?" asked David. "I thought we were going out shooting with our shanghais?"

"That can wait. We can go shooting any old time," said Joe. "Let's go and see what your dopey grandfather knows about training hawks."