SPOTTY
The BOWER-BIRD
AND
OTHER STORIES

By E-S-SORENSON-

Spotty the Bower-Bird
AND OTHER NATURE STORIES

E.S. SORENSON

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(A. H. CHISOLM)

THE BOWER OF SPOTTY, THE BOWER-BIRD.

PART I.

SPOTTY was a downy little chap with feathers only on his wings. He was squatting uncomfortably in a flimsy twig nest at the top of a gum sapling, when he took a first survey of his surroundings. The cavity of the nest was so shallow, that he had merely to raise his head to do this. His view in front embraced a mile-width of open forest, with a low sandy rise covered with Cypress pine beyond it. Close behind him were narrow strips of scrub that bordered the Warrego River. The winds came wilting from the stony plains of the Paroo. The landscape shone grey under the summer sun; but, to Spotty, whose eyes had but recently opened, it was all wonderful and beautiful.

There were other nests about, two of which he could see from his higher position. One, containing two baby birds, was in a needle bush at the edge of a thicket. The other, which also contained a pair, was in a pine tree further out. In a third nest, on the other side of the river, the eggs had only just been laid, though it was now December.

Couples had been busy nesting and rearing their tender broods since the beginning of October, not only in that particular neighborhood, but through out the interior parts of Victoria, New South Wales, Southern Queensland, and South Australia. The

Spotted Bower Birds favored always the arid mallee and brigalow country, and the tussocky inland plains that were interspersed with low bushes, small thickets, and scrubby ridges.

There was nothing important in his appearance, except that he looked a little odd with the prominent fleshy bare skin at the corners of his mouth, which, in his parents, was still thick and of a pinky color. For all that, he was unique in ornithology, since he and his dozen relatives, making up the group of Bower Builders, were the only birds that constructed, besides a nest, an ingenious playground or meeting hall. They were, in fact, the champion feathered architects of the world.

Some of the members of the group were more distinguished in certain respects than his own species. One, who lived in deep scrubs away over in Papua and neighboring islands, was the Gardener Bird, so called from the fact that his playground was a charming little garden of green moss, which measured nine feet across, and which was decorated with bright berries and flowers. Behind the garden, and opening on to it, was an elaborate little hut, or gunyah, composed mainly of orchid stems. It was eighteen inches high, built round a conical pile of green moss, and topped off with an orchid.

The Golden Bower Bird (who shared the Northern scrubs with the Toothbill and the Spotted Cat Bird) rivalled the Southern Regent in the golden splendour of his plumage, and, though the smallest of Spotty's relations, he built the largest bower of all, the sticks of which were piled up against two trees. One wall was eight feet high, bent over to form an arch, and the other about eighteen inches. It was adorned only with flowers, leaves, moss, and berries. Scattered immediately around were half-a-dozen gunyahs, each about nine inches high, built with the stems of grass or ferns bent together, and roofed with a horizontal thatch of twigs. The whole resembled a blacks' camp in miniature. Among and around these little cubby-houses, the birds ran when playing their curious games.

The Great Bower Bird (of the Northern Territory and North-west) was the largest of all. He always decorated his bower with sea shells, no matter how far it was away from the coast. The Queensland Bower Bird (of the scrubby regions of the Gulf country) had the worst reputation, for he feasted himself whenever he could on chillies, paw paws, granadillas, guavas and mangoes, and sometimes he stole hen eggs, which he carried off in his claws. The Toothbill (of the North Queensland mountains), whom the blacks called Cherra-Chelbo, a mottled greyish-brown mimic with a serrated bill, who played alone on a leaf-carpeted clearing, which was furnished with a stone anvil for breaking snail-shells on, was the most retiring. His shy little mate laid her two dark-cream-colored eggs in a loose stick nest hidden away in a lofty tree.

Yelgan (the Regent Bird), who in his third year donned a beautiful coat of rich yellow and velvety black, was the most gorgeous and the most pugnacious. He often fought in the mating season until either he or his adversary was blinded or killed. He shared the Eastern scrubs with the Cat Bird and the handsome black Satin Bird. The latter assumed his splendid satiny blue-black coat only after several moults—about his eighth year. This was old age for Cowry, the Satin Bower Bird, for he lived only a year or two after donning his full livery. Before that, he was greyish-green like his lady-loves.

Despite all these wonderful relatives, Spotty could still lay claim to special notice. Among other things, his species was the boldest, and the most widely distributed.

His mother fed him on caterpillars, although her own diet at this season consisted largely of fruits and berries. Though other little bush birds might cry noisily for their meals, he was rarely heard to utter a sound.

He saw very little of his male parent, for that busy variety artist was much of his time at his bower, decorating it with

any glittering trifle he could find, and holding solo concerts or maybe entertaining an odd visitor. Social gatherings were few and unexciting now, for most of the wives were busy with family cares. The big functions would come in the spring time, when the young bachelors would meet the little maidens with the more serious affairs of life in view, and there would be keen competition, much jealousy, and a few combats over the belle of the season.

But there was a lot of fun and gaiety in the bowers before that time arrived. As the young birds became fledged and left the nest, there were "children's parties," at which Spotty and those of his age made their first bow in society.

His youth was plainly shown by his lighter plumage, shorter tail, and his evident dependence on his mother for protection and guidance, as she led him one bright morning towards the assembly hall. The first thing he was aware of was a medley of strange sounds that alarmed him.

They all came from the place of meeting. First, the ring of a splitter's maul, then the chop of an axe, followed by the straining of wire and the hissing, buzzing noise of a captured cicada were heard; next the cries of the Noisy Miner, Babbler, Magpie and Crow sounded in quick succession. He thought many birds and other strange creatures were waiting to receive him. But, when he came to the bower, which consisted of two parallel walls of sticks and grass stuck in the ground, and which formed an arched avenue about nine inches wide, the floor of which was strewn with berries and pieces of glass and china, bits of rag and tin, silvery trinkets, and small sheep-bones, placed at each entrance like a door-mat, and the other objects classified in heaps—he saw only his male parent running through the hall, with his feathers puffed out. He soon realised that the strange medley of sounds were made by that superb mimic. With the exception of the Lyre Bird and his own cousins, Toothbill and the Golden Bower Bird,

no feathered mimic could equal his father in mocking any bush sound that he heard frequently.

Spotty's dark brown eyes bulged with admiration and astonishment when he saw the beautiful ornaments. He pounced upon a brilliant bit of blue glass and ran through the gallery with it as the old birds did, then dropped it, and picked up something else. As the guests arrived, amongst whom were proud matrons accompanied by their sons and daughters, he became more gleefully excited. While the older males met and paid court to the females, he took upon himself the office of showing his young friends the wealth and beauty of the ancestral hall.

There was a period of exuberant mischief among them, which gradually evolved into some degree of order as the old birds, uttering often a scolding note, varied with an occasional stronger display of bad temper, mingled with them. These hysterical youngsters had to be taught the art of playing and dancing.

With a preponderance of youth and inexperience, the play was very much of a go-as-you-please affair. The birds darted among one another and through the gallery, performing all manner of capers and antics, picking up some ornament and running with it, or throwing it over the back while passing through. During these proceedings, one bird occupied an elevated post. He was on sentinel duty. The King of the bower, who was Spotty's parent, sometimes stood in the centre of the bower—to admire and to be admired. He bowed to the ladies as they danced before him.

At its termination, the sentinel dropped down from his perch, and the party broke up.

There were several other bowers in the immediate neighborhood, at one or other of which the parties reassembled from time to time. Some of these bowers were formed by making a passage through the centre of a big tussock of grass, and lengthening the walls, which were bent inwards. In the passage was the usual high platform of tightly-knitted sticks which gave strength to the walls.

The birds usually assembled about 10 o'clock in the morning, and played for an hour. "At Homes" were held daily and the greatest goodwill and friendship existed amongst the whole community.

Early in the morning and in the afternoon, Spotty was taken abroad in quest of food, and in search of new attractions for the playground. He would share the latter and remain with his parents until the following spring. He was partly fed by them for the first couple of weeks. He was heavy and awkward on the wing yet, and a short flight left him panting for breath. But, as his tail lengthened, he acquired more of the grace and speed of his parents, as well as their untiring zeal and almost unconquerable restlessness.

His main ambition these days was apparently to become a great mimic like them. Whenever he heard a new sound, he would listen with rapt attention and endeavour to repeat it, then practise it at every opportunity until he could produce a realistic imitation. One of the first sounds he had picked up was the bleat of a lamb. He had seen mobs of sheep almost every day since he first looked out of the nest in the gum sapling. One day, the boundary-rider heard the bleat as he was passing a clump of needlebush, and turned back to investigate. As he entered the bushes, Spotty greeted him with a resentful quiss-s-s, and flew away.

"Deuce take these birds!" said the boundary-rider. "That's three times they've had me to-day."

His favorite food was wild figs and mistletoe berries. He also frequented the quondong trees, but so much of the fruit was pulled green for decorative purposes that only a thin crop reached the deep rosy tint of maturity. Unlike his cousins, the Satin Birds, who travelled in flocks, his species, when it went to the fruit trees, or returning therefrom, flew one after the other. His companions were never many, except when they met at the bowers.

As he grew older, he roamed about a great deal by himself. He always returned ere dusk to the roosting tree of his parents.

He was the cheekiest of the Bower Builders, and so inquisitive

that he would perch on a traveller's tent, and watch every act, while that person prepared his dinner. Afterwards, he would hop about on the ground picking up crumbs, and would even sample the liquid in the billy-can. If another bird came to share the morsels, he would raise his neck feathers and growl, or scold, like a little bully.

Two miles down the river was a selector's garden, where he found a few cultivated fruits that he relished. They included grapes, tomatoes and chillies. The latter he swallowed whole so that they would not burn his mouth. In the winter months, when he had to do more hunting than usual, this garden provided green peas, cauliflower, and other succulent morsels. In this way he varied his diet of insects and figs.

Here he learnt to crow, and to call up the hens like a rooster, as if he had some dainty to offer them. Then he would suddenly cry like an eagle, at which the deluded hens and chicks would rush for cover.

He was so intent on learning to mew that he got down dangerously close to the first cat he met, and only his inherent alertness and activity saved him from instant death. When, with thumping heart, he joined his parent, who scolded the cat from a safe distance, he had a claw-mark showing redly on his dusky-brown foot.

PART II.

The winter months had been comparatively dull. Now, with the warming spring days there was excitement in the community. Young and old appeared more sprightly, and became more restless and active. The playgrounds were cleaned up, and the

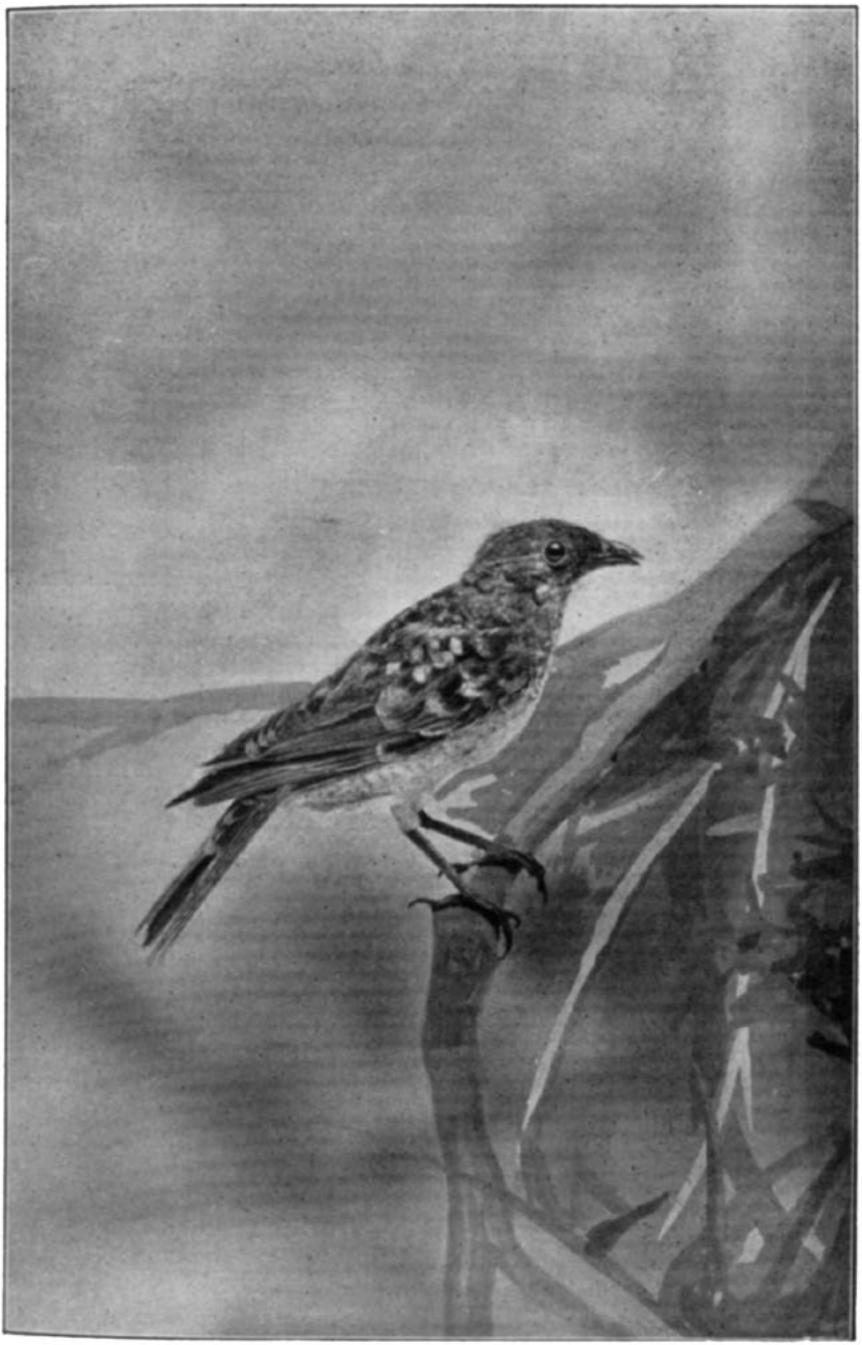
accompanying bowers, damaged by rains and floods, repaired and decorated for the biggest social event of the year.

They assembled one September morning at the parental bower, and at once began a vigorous contest among the males for the favors of the opposite sex. Spotty had mingled with these from his very babyhood, but he had never noticed till now how very attractive they were. His neck-frill was raised with pride as one and another came to coquet with him.

He was a fine handsome fellow, between eleven inches and a foot in length, with a rich brown coat, mottled all over with dusky-red spots or bars, varied with spots of rich buff. The under surface was mottled grey, the primaries and tail were tipped with white. The latter was nearly five inches long. The strong thick bill, measuring an inch, was dusky-brown. The crown feathers were reddish-brown, tipped with silvery-grey. Across the nape was a beautiful band of longer bright lilac feathers, forming a fan-shaped neck crest of metallic lustre. He was not singular in the possession of this head-dress, for the Great Bower Bird, Eastern, and Guttated Bower Birds also had it, and all three much resembled him generally.

The females closely resembled him in feather colours, but they were almost entirely lacking the lilac neck plumes that gave him such a striking appearance as he strutted among them. In place of the friendship and sociability that had existed throughout the year, the bearing of the males towards each other was now stiff and hostile.

After a preliminary bowing and scraping the play or dance began. One picked up a piece from the collection and, with half-opened or trailing wings, tail spread, and head turned first to one side and then the other, like a lady trying to look at her train, danced into the pavilion, then tossed the piece backwards and ran out at the opposite end. Meanwhile the others were circling outside, some with ruffled feathers and dragging wings.



(Teacher's College.)

Spotty, the Bower Bird

Spotty's Bower and Collection of Treasures.

When the plaything was tossed back, another picked it up and entered the hall to go through the same performance. This was presently varied by an old male throwing himself on his back and holding the object up in his claws. Another immediately snapped it from him and bolted, only to lose it in turn to a swift-footed pursuer. Some, between running and dancing, rolled on the ground, jumped up and down, sidestepped and performed other curious antics.

After a while all formed into a procession and ran through and around the bower, chasing each other with the utmost glee and enthusiasm. At the same time they mocked the cries of all other birds with whom they were familiar.

There was a trim little maiden there to whom Spotty had taken a fancy. Unfortunately, she was also admired by another young bachelor. The procession had no sooner ended than they came into collision. They flew savagely at each other. They struck with beak and claw, and tugged hard when either got a grip of his adversary. The others stood by, to watch the vigorous conflict. It did not last long, and Spotty came out victorious.

It was not his only battle, for disputes arose at other bowers. In the end he departed from the old run with the maid of his choice. He had already decided where they should live—a tussocky patch well screened by a bit of brush. He at once began preparations for the bower, for that important edifice had to be constructed before nesting began. It represented a prodigious amount of labor, which was shared by the willing and faithful bride.

First, a playground about six feet square was cleared. Then, in the centre of that, two parallel rows of clay and gravel were laid down, about six inches apart. Along each row tall shafts of silk grass, Mitchell grass and kangaroo grass in bloom were firmly planted, heads uppermost, and the tops bent till they overlapped. At the back of this lining, a dense wall of sticks, also stuck in

the rubble, was built on each side, and immediately surrounded with a light ballast of well-trampled twigs.

This stupendous task accomplished, the inner walls were sparsely decorated with blue flowers and blue and yellow parrot-feathers. A few bones and pieces of blue and green glass, bits of emu shell, and green pine branchlets, formed the beginning of his museum. To bring it to the level of his parents' would require not the gleaning of a month, or a year, but of many years.

The bower was twenty-seven inches long, with an inside width of nine inches. The walls were each nine inches thick and eighteen inches high. When completed, the bone heaps or mats would add another nine inches to each end. These, composed mostly of the back bones of sheep, were put down in four even heaps, one at each side of the entrances and spread thinly over the outer passage. The total number at either end was ninety. Besides these, a mat of twenty-seven small bones, intermixed with quondong seed, was laid down in the centre of the avenue. As will be seen, a remarkable feature about it was the constant application of the number nine. There were variations in other bowers in the neighborhood, but (remembering that the collections were often in process of being added to) they were sufficiently near to show that the bird's favorite number was nine or a multiple of nine. In the choice of decorations he also showed a strong partiality for blue, white, silver, yellow, and green colors. Red he would have nothing to do with.

This bower was their future home, their place of resort at all times, but more particularly at that season when nature prompted them to reproduce their kind. There Spotty displayed himself before his admiring mate, and they had rare gambols together. If another bird appeared on the scene, he rushed at him with a savage gurr-r-r, and drove him off. His love was too strong yet to tolerate the presence of another male, while Mrs. Spotty was too jealous to allow another female to intrude. They were all in all to themselves these days.

At times he would chase her round the playground as if he meant to strip the feathers off her. He ended by picking up one of the materials in the bower, and uttering a soft note of invitation. When she did not respond, he raised his feathers and set off on another Marathon race round the bower. His eyes bulged with the excitement. This over, he stood with spread tail and expanded crest. He opened first one wing and then the other, and uttered now a soft quiss-s-s or a low gurr-r-r, and picked up as a hen does when calling her chicks, till at last the little mate went gently up to him. After a moment's billing and circling together he made a sudden rush, and they flew away into the trees.

The main interest now centred in the trees. Selecting a mistletoe bush, which hung in the branches of a myall tree, she built a frail, loose nest of twigs and sticks, thinly lined with grass and a few feathers. It measured nine inches by four-and-a-half inches over all, with an egg cavity of four-and-a-half inches by two-and-a-quarter inches. In the flimsiness and the simplicity of its construction, it was characteristic of nearly the whole group. It was a poor receptacle for the two wonderfully marked eggs that the little mother shortly produced. Long oval in shape, and measuring one-and-a-half inches by one inch, they were each marked with numerous hair-like lines of rich umber, like fine thread wound round and round the shell, crossing and recrossing, on a ground color of pale green. The inner surface of the shell was blotched with light grey, whilst both ends were comparatively free from markings. They were so singular in appearance, that a stranger would have thought they had been painted by hand. The eggs of the Regent, the Tewinya, or Fawn-breasted Bower Bird, and the Guttated species were similarly marked, but outside the group they were matchless in their curious tracery.

Incubation occupied a little more than a fortnight, and the

twins were about three weeks old when they left the nest. When they could fly tolerably well, they were taken to the bower, which henceforth was the common daily resort.

Spotty had now lost his jealousy. Instead of shooing a casual caller off the premises, he made himself quite agreeable to him. So the old desire for company returned, with the resulting rounds of socials and pantomimes.

Every time he came to play he brought some decoration for his bower, and in the course of time it became quite a little curiosity shop. Flowers, leaves and green berries (placed in heaps like eggs in a nest) were removed as soon as they withered and replaced with fresh ones. He was often to be seen there at daybreak, arranging and rearranging his collection. A great source of annoyance to him was Sandy, the black-fellow, who made it his business to search the bowers for pipes, coins, pocket-knives, gold, opal, diamonds, brooches, pins, rings, and other valuables stolen from camps and houses, or picked up in the bush. In the process of searching, he scattered the bones, glassware and old china, as well as the hakea seed and quondong stones, all over the place—a liberty which Spotty hotly resented. When the disturber had gone, he ran about with ruffled feathers, scolding and growling, then busily set to work and put everything in place again. His numbers, however, were apt to get out of order on account of such interference.

White men occasionally chanced near his bower, and an odd one, out of kindness, would add something to the collection. But all such additions Spotty threw out with scorn, even though they were such as he would gladly pick up if he saw them lying about a camp. He did not vanish, like some of his cousins, at the sight of man, but from a safe branch would frequently utter his saucy scolding note when his haunts were intruded upon.

During a long period of peace, he acquired many choice articles that made his friends' eyes shine with admiration. But,

though they might be envious, no respectable Bower Bird would steal from another. Among the assortment was a silver spoon which he had taken from a bench at the back of the selector's house; a thimble, stolen from a stretcher on the verandah of the same place, where the woman had temporarily put down her sewing, and a small pocket mirror that had belonged to a shepherd. This was his proudest possession, and was allotted a place to itself. A thousand times he had circled round it, trying to solve the mystery of the bird inside that did everything he did. Now and again he endeavored to look under it, and even turned it over. It was a great mystery, a most fascinating thing, and a wonderful treasure.

Still he accumulated things. In a jaunt along the scrub, his roving eye detected a glistening object lying on the bunk in a traveller's tent. The traveller was down at the river washing his clothes. By the time he had finished, Spotty was with his family at the bower, gloating over the possession of a silver watch and chain. When, after the morning's play, he returned to the tent, the traveller was still feeling his pockets, and looking through his things. Still searching up and down, he repeated for the hundredth time: "I'm positive I left it on the bunk." At last he settled down in the tent for a smoke. Almost immediately he heard the chock-clock of dray wheels overhead. This brought him out instantly. He looked all round, and even in the air, but all he saw was a brown bird perched in the tree overhanging the tent. He was unused to the bush, for he had only recently left the city in the hope of picking up a job at the shearing sheds.

He returned to the tent with a puzzled look.

Hardly had he sat down, when he heard the plaintive mee-ow of a cat on his roof. Out he darted again. Still there was nothing but the brown bird in the tree.

He went back, looking worried.

A minute or so later a lamb bleated two or three times over-

head, followed by the barking of a dog. Surely this was no hallucination. Out again; a more careful survey of the surroundings; and still nothing but the brown bird in the tree.

He retired, nervous and desperate-looking.

Spotty, being of a prying, inquisitive nature, was interested in the doings of this person. He had also learnt by long experience that such places were worth watching. It was also too hot to be roaming about. So he remained perched in the shade, and to pass the time he presently gave a realistic imitation of a cock-crow. Chummy started and turned pale.

He held his seat and breathlessly listened. The crow was not repeated, but in a little while he heard a baby crying, followed by what appeared to be a woman saying "sh, sh, shh!" He was outside in two leaps, but his wild, wandering look found nothing but the brown bird in the tree.

That finished him. "This place is haunted," he said.

And out he got at once.

For ten years Spotty led a busy, active life, and no doubt he made a lot of fun out of it. Then, one day, a smothering dust-storm caught him in the open in his old age, and, though he tried bravely to fight his way home, it was too late, and the hot, suffocating, darkening dust clouds swallowed him up. When old Sandy next went along the Warrego, seeking valuables in the treasure houses of the little thieves, the bower was deserted.