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# Monarch of the Western Skies



*by*  
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CHAPTER IV  
*THE STEALER OF EGGS*

EXCEPT for one high peak, that reared its summit skywards like the upraised finger of a reclining giant, the mountain spur was nothing more than a straightened necklace of rocky hills. Unlike the Great Dividing Range of the east, where towering peaks kiss the clouds and shady gullies with cool liquid pools and graceful ferns beckon invitingly to the bush lover, this western range was hard and unpicturesque.

The proud and majestic wedge-tailed eagle, brooding in his lookout post—a high tree that jutted from the side of the lone peak—had no interest in scenery, grand or desolate.

Thirty feet beneath him was his eyrie, a great mass of varied material, mostly sticks, the accumulation of years. It was built on a ledge of rock that protruded several feet from the side of the peak and about fifteen feet from its summit.

Wedge-tail gazed down at the eyrie with savage agate eyes, his whole being, from his dark brown plumage to his wickedly hooked beak, permeated with cold fury. At the moment the eyrie was empty, except for one large egg. His beloved mate, feeling in need of exercise after a long period of brooding on the nest, was away hunting for her morning meal. A rabbit perhaps, a small wallaby maybe—yes, and even a young lamb.

That was in the natural order of things. It was not with his mate that Wedge-tail was angry. Something of major importance had upset the great bird to such an extent that, instead of accompanying his mate on her search for food, he was perched on his lookout limb like the very statue of doom itself.

Sweeping the sun-warmed plains beneath with eyes as keen as any microscope and seeing nothing to interest him, he glared at the sky. Far up and to the west, he noted several specks, like minute ink spots on an azure vase. One of them might be his mate and it might not. Wedge-tail was not interested in his mate just then.

Fluffing out his feathers and then settling down again, he dropped his gaze to the eyrie. When his eyes noted that single egg, they blazed; and the blaze was not one of pride of achievement.

On the previous morning at this very hour, there had been two eggs in that eyrie. Now there was only one, and it was that fact that filled Wedge-tail with cold fury.

He had little doubt that a detestable crow was the culprit, but was not wholly convinced of that. Some prowling creature had taken the egg while he and his mate had been away seeking their breakfasts. It was a loss, and an insult, that the eagle would not tolerate. What manner of impudent creature was this that had desecrated the regal home of the mighty monarch of the western skies?

Passionately, Wedge-tail desired to know, and he intended to find out. He had lost an egg on a previous occasion and

though he suspected a crow, he meant now to establish the identity of the thief once and for all.

Wise in the ways of the wild and of nature's fellow-creatures in the great Australian outback, he felt certain that the culprit would return. This time there would be no empty nest awaiting the easy tooth or claw of the despoiler. Wedge-tail was resolved to catch the thief if he had to sit up there all day and all night.

It would not be correct to say that Wedge-tail was a conceited bird. His majestic dignity lay upon him unconsciously as a birthright. But he was fully aware of his great prowess in battle and in the hunt, and was equally conscious of the fact that his species was the greatest flying bird in Australia. He knew, too, from experience, that he and his kind ruled the skies and most of the animal kingdom beneath.

And, knowing all this, Wedge-tail felt the loss of that egg very keenly. He knew exactly what he intended to do to the creature that had stolen it—if he could get his beak and claws into it. Not for a moment did he weigh the possible results of the encounter. Though he did not know what he was likely to meet, neither did he care a jot, nor count the possible cost.

Wedge-tail was a bird of the highest courage. There was not one ounce of fear in the whole of his great body; neither was there much sweetness or benevolence.

Suddenly he stiffened into immobility, his unwinking eyes fixed on a piece of rock that stuck out from the mountain-side some feet below the ledge which bore his eyrie. He

had seen a movement—just a faint flurry of something indeterminate, but certainly a movement.

The next half-minute passed without incident, and then he saw a snake-like head appear around a small corner. It was followed, very cautiously, by a pair of claws and then a chest. Wedge-tail, his agate eyes glued to the spot, saw that it was the front-quarters of a large goanna.

The ledge that the goanna was negotiating in its laborious, upward climb, was about 35 feet from where the vengeful eagle watched, a distance too short for him to swoop with that great speed he knew so well how to employ.

Wedge-tail recognised that he must amend this. He had perched on his lookout to watch for whatever had desecrated his eyrie, knowing that had he been aloft and circling, probably he would have been seen from the ground and the unknown visitor would not have paid the return visit for the other egg.

As he watched, he saw the goanna claw his way up a foot or so and then sneak into a cleft in the rock, from which his tail depended. Presently the reptile disappeared altogether and at that moment the eagle launched himself on silent wings—not at the disappearing goanna, but upwards in a swift ascent.

He had to risk the goanna seeing him, but that reptile was having enough trouble negotiating the rocky side of the cliff without star-gazing. Just below the eyrie were some small tufts of grass and these gave him enough foothold to

haul himself aloft after he had crawled up the small fissure into which Wedge-tail had seen him vanish.

His wicked head was just over the edge of the eyrie ledge when Wedge-tail struck. From the sky he screamed and, with talons outstretched, tore the goanna from the cliff face. Rising swiftly to just above the top of the lookout tree, Wedge-tail released his hold. The goanna went hurtling to earth, to strike the rocks hundreds of feet below.

Screaming with vindictive triumph, Wedge-tail whirled aloft, hung in mid-air, with never a wingflap, for several seconds, and then volplaned to earth, alighting within a few feet of the slowly writhing goanna.

Leaning forward, he seized it in his powerful beak, shook it a few times and then cast it from him. For a few seconds he watched his dying enemy, and then, without disdain to convert it into a meal, rose from the ground at a low angle and slowly soared into the blue. Quite satisfied that the menace to his remaining egg had been disposed of for good, he did not return to his lookout, but sailed rapidly in the direction his mate had taken some time earlier.

It was high over the lightly-timbered country that he found her. Evidently she had not found the hunting good, for she was circling widely, keen eyes fixed on the ground. Ascending many feet above her, Wedge-tail started to circle also. There was no need for either bird to compare notes or plan out the method of the hunt. Their strategy was instinctive, born of a long line of predatory eagles.

In addition to this ingrained characteristic, Wedge-tail and his mate, through years of intimate association, were perfect hunting partners. They knew and anticipated each other's moves. Not every eagle keeps a partner for life. Some flighty birds tire of each other after one or two seasons, while others are content with their first choice, and keep together for years.

So it was with Wedge-tail and his noble mate. She was a bird not so darkly-coloured as he, and with not such a wide span of wing; but as a huntress she had no peer in his eyes. He could always depend upon her for intelligent co-operation, and she upon him.

When Wedge-tail, soaring on unmoving wings above his mate, saw her descend at terrific speed, he immediately plunged down after her. He had not seen their intended prey. He had no knowledge what they were to attack. It might be a wallaby, a young kangaroo, a dingo, or just a scared rabbit or two. She might need his help and she might not. No matter what the position was, he was there ready.

As the ground rushed rapidly to meet him, Wedge-tail saw the victim. It was a wallaby which, becoming urgently aware of the menace from the skies, was hopping frantically towards some rocks between which he hoped to slip for sanctuary.

His mate flew at that wallaby with the speed of a falling star and, like an aeroplane piloted by the hand of a master ace, pulled out of the dizzy dive as it struck the terrified animal. Wedge-tail was a split second behind her, and as

she struck the wallaby on the shoulders, he, swooping low enough almost to touch the ground, struck it in the back. With her claws sunk in its shoulders, she began to beat the wallaby with her wings about the head and face, while Wedge-tail fell to work with both beak and claws.

Though he had been thrown down under the weight of the attack, the wallaby was a powerfully-built one. Terror and the overwhelming urge of self-preservation forced him back on his legs, but again he was overthrown. Refusing to give in without a passionate struggle, the wallaby flopped his tail and his front paws flailed and beat at the feathered furies. A sharp blow managed to dislodge the female eagle, and for a moment the wallaby was able to bring into play his powerful hind legs each of which was armed with a sharp claw. He was now lying on his back and as he kicked upwards, he got home a slash on Wedge-tail's breast. The sleek plumage, however, did not lend itself to easy ripping, and the blow, apart from depriving Wedge-tail of a few feathers, made him angrier.

The end was not long in coming. Two huge curved beaks and two pairs of sharp talons were weapons against which the wallaby's armory was not proof.

Wedge-tail and his matchless mate breakfasted off tasty marsupial that morning.