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WILD CANARY



by
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CHAPTER FIVE

Bush Busybody

FROM his point of vantage in the air above the flooded country side, Nankeen Kestrel had a grandstand view of everything that went on below. Floods might bring ruin and devastation to all manner of living things, but they had not affected him to any material extent.

This was not Nankeen Kestrel's usual hunting ground. That was the paddocks, the farms and the crops over which he loved to skim and to hover in his search for grasshoppers, crickets and other insects, mice and other vermin. It was a good life, and useful, too. He was a friend of the farmers, because he helped to keep down pests of various kinds and never made a nuisance of himself in the chicken runs like his cousins, the collared sparrow hawk and the goshawk. Goshawk was a true chicken fancier, and, in consequence, was not loved by those human beings who kept poultry.

Kestrel, though driven from his usual hunting grounds by the floods, had nothing to complain about as regards food. The rising waters had driven all kinds of prey from their hiding places, and as these creatures thought only of saving themselves from death by drowning, they had scant time to think about death from any other cause — such as prowling hawks. Kestrel, therefore, by hanging around the edge of the waters, found many banquets ready for him as half-drowned mice, grasshoppers, crickets, spiders and many other delectable items sought safety on the unflooded ground.

Kestrel, whose habit was to dart down from the sky and capture

his prey on the ground, uttering his excited chattering cry as he did so, was making his leisurely way over the treetops from the water when he noticed a slight disturbance down below. Two small birds seemed to be having a dispute about something. He paused in his flight and hovered over the disputants—a yellow bird about the size of a sparrow and of a type that was strange to him, and a larger bird with black and white plumage and a ridiculously long tail. The yellow bird was perched on the top of a fence post and the black and white one was flying around it in circles and chattering loudly.

Kestrel did not know the yellow bird, but he did recognise the black and white one. It was, of course, Willy Wagtail. There was no doubt about *that* bird. He was constitutionally incapable of keeping his beak out of other birds' affairs. He was troublesome, impudent and inquisitive and it was time that somebody took him down a peg. Kestrel felt like doing just that. He was well fed and inclined for a bit of sport. But before he interfered in the dispute it would be judicious to see what it was all about. So, ceasing his hovering, he flew on to the limb of a nearby gum tree, the better to watch the affair.

If Boofie had been at all wise in the ways of the bush creatures he would have known that Willy Wagtail would not do him the slightest harm. The long-tailed little villain with the black coat and white waistcoat did not have one tinge of viciousness in him, although, in the nesting season he could put up such a bold front that larger birds thought twice about molesting him. That, however, was merely Willy's courageous bluff. His little beak could not do much harm to anyone.

Boofie, sitting on the fence post, his wings half-raised and his beak open, was in fear of his life. The wagtail flew around him in circles, climbed into the air above him and dive-bombed him without pause, at the same time uttering his harsh challenging cry of "did-ja-did-ja-did-ja-did." Boofie had done nothing, and had

not the faintest idea what it was all about. He wished heartily that he had stayed in the safety of the privet hedge.

Having had his nap, the canary, hunger again upon him, had remembered the thistle near the wall of the School of Arts. He had returned to it and was chopping fresh triangles from the leaves when he had been startled by something addressing him as “sweet pretty creature.” He dimly recalled human beings talking to him in some such terms, but this was not a human voice. Whatever it was, he did not like it, so, deserting the thistle, he had headed back towards the privet hedge. But before he was half-way to that sanctuary he was knocked sideways in the air, and as he recovered himself, became aware of another bird flitting around him, the “sweet pretty creature” sentiments having given place to terms that were downright insulting!

The blow he had received was not severe, but it had the effect of forcing him to change direction, and instead of reaching the hedge, he found himself heading for the fence. He got to a post, and perched on the top, wondering what was coming next. He soon found out.

Willy Wagtail knew all the bush birds in his district and also most of the imported rubbish—the house sparrows, the starlings, the Indian turtle doves and the bulbuls, but he did not know any canaries. There were, of course, several so-called canaries among the bush birds, but their names had been bestowed by human beings who had little imagination.

First of all, there was the white-plumed honeyeater, a happy little green bird with a small tuft of white feathers behind his ears. He was, for some reason, called the Australian canary, in spite of the fact that he lived mostly on nectar taken from the flowers of the red gum, flower pollen, and, occasionally, insects. A lively little chap, he was never still, constantly flitting through the flowers and leaves and kicking up a great row as he did so. His loud, chattering song of “chick-o-wee” was nothing like a canary’s melody. Apart

from being miscalled the Australian canary, he also owned aliases of “Greenie,” “linnet,” “chickowee,” “ringeye,” and “ringneck.”

Another alleged canary was the orange chat which dwelt mainly in the dry regions of the interior. This little bird was a sociable soul and belonged in a flock. He never got around on his own. Unimaginative humans had called him the “saltbush canary,” and while they were about it had also pinned on him the label of “yellow tintac.” His song was very mediocre, consisting of a rather metallic “ting-ting-ting-ting.” He, too, favoured insects at meal time.

Third of the so-called canaries was the white-throated warbler. He masqueraded under several names—“bush canary,” “native canary,” “fly-eater,” and “bush warbler,” and was a swagman among the birds. His usual home was in the far north, but in the springtime he “humped his bluey” southwards to N.S.W. and Victoria. Whitethroat did possess a very sweet song, but nothing like a genuine canary. His lunch basket, too, was packed with insects and grubs.

The fourth Australian “canary” was the mangrove warbler, who rarely strayed further afield than southeastem Queensland. In addition to being nicknamed the Queensland canary, some folk called him the “singing fly-eater.” He dwelt among the mangroves and scrub, and existed upon insects of all kinds. As for his voice, it was really beautiful—in fact, some folk regarded it as the sweetest song of all the warblers. But he was not a canary.

All these alleged canaries lived on insects, whereas Boofie and his family preferred seed. Insects would have given them a pain under the breast feathers.

Of course, Willy Wagtail knew all about these birds. He knew all about everything. In any case, he had nothing to preen his own feathers about as far as names were concerned. Established custom had labelled him Willy Wagtail, but certain folk knew him as “black and white fantail,” “shepherd’s companion,” “morning

bird” and “frog bird.” Why the latter, when he had no use at all for frogs, was not clear.

There was, however, one thing on which he could pride himself if he cared. He was the only bird in the whole of the Australian bush who had what might be termed a family name. He was “Willy Wagtail.” One of his relations, the brown flycatcher, was known as “Jacky Winter,” but “Winter” was a poor old surname. Willy was a wagtail, but Jacky was not a “winter.” Then there was “Micky Miner” the soldier bird, who certainly was not a toiler in the bowels of the earth. Jacky Winter, however, was as friendly a bird as cousin Willy, and had the same habit of swaying his big tail from side to side. His sweet song, however, was spoiled at times by his yelling out, “Peter, peter, peter.” Not that he knew anyone named Peter, but because Nature had wished that call on to him. And, like so many of his feathered friends and relations, he had almost as many aliases as a burglar — “Peter-peter,” “postboy,” “post-sitter,” “white-tail,” “stump-bird” and, for goodness’ sake, “spinks”!

But Willy Wagtail at the moment had no interest in the names and habits of other bush birds. His attention was concentrated upon this strange yellow bird and he intended to beat it up just because it was strange. It was bad enough having to put up with the ordinary birds in the district without strangers like this invading the place. Let him go back to where he came from, and permit the established birds to live their lives in peace and in their own territory. There was too much of this business of migrants trampling upon the vested interests of the native inhabitants.

And as he proceeded to make Boofie’s life miserable, Willy Wagtail did not for a moment pause to consider what an inconsistent hypocrite he was. For Willy Wagtail, when he felt like it—and that was from dawn until dusk—would attempt to beat up any native resident bird he saw, from a diminutive emu wren to a mighty wedgetailed eagle. He was courageous beyond belief, and a plain,

unvarnished nuisance, and yet, among human beings, was one of the most popular and lovable little birds in the bush. Nobody could help but feel affection for Willy Wagtail.

Boofie, not being a gullible human being, could not see one thing to love about the long-tailed little wretch who darted at him and past him with snapping beak. Boofie did a bit of snapping back, and had Willy been another canary, Boofie promptly would have sailed into him, for the canary was no coward; but the wagtail was a strange-looking bird and might possess many unknown and dangerous qualities. So Boofie decided to play it safe.

Willy could see that he had the canary bluffed, and was greatly pleased. He lighted on the fence a few feet away and eyed Boofie speculatively. Strange-looking object—like a sparrow, but different. A sparrow would not have put up with the ragging he had dished out to Boofie. Willy swayed from side to side, his long tail waving like a signal flag, and then he edged along the rail a little closer, at the same time chattering loudly. Boofie watched his approach with apprehension, raised his wings and chirped loudly. Willy accepted the challenge and darted at him—at exactly the same moment that Boofie lost his head and darted at Willy. They met chest-on, and Willy gave back a little in sheer astonishment. Then, before he realised what was going on, he found himself being pushed earthwards with Boofie on top of him. Willy gave an extra loud screech that did him no good at all. Boofie, fed up to the bill with being pushed around, began to peck and scratch at the wagtail, and Boofie's beak was really sharp. Willy felt several feathers detach themselves from his body, and when the canary peeked him right in the eye he felt it was time to throw the sponge in. He had caught a Tartar.

It was not lack of courage that caused Willy to withdraw from the engagement. The wind had been taken completely out of his sails. Leaving Boofie on the ground, he streaked off as fast as he could fly, and did not stop until he reached the highest twig of the

highest gum tree in the neighbourhood. Here he took stock of himself and tossed up whether he should return to the attack. He had his mind made up for him when he heard a loud chattering call in his ear. He turned sideways and looked straight into the eyes of Nankeen Kestrel. In ordinary circumstances, Willy would have chattered back his defiance, but after the encounter with the strange yellow bird his nerve had been shaken.

So, handing over complete occupancy of the tree to the hawk, Willy streaked off.

Peering downwards, Nankeen Kestrel saw the canary fly up on to the top of the post again and examine its feathers. This done, the yellow bird flew to the next post, where it paused for a few moments. Then it took off again and flitted down the fence. Kestrel felt half-inclined to follow it, but changed his mind and, leaving the gum tree, flew leisurely towards the floods and the easy banquet he hoped to obtain.