

Dance of the Lyre

By Ross Parsons

Of all the bush creatures, none is more beautiful than the lyrebird. I say this with some reservation, as I am yet to see a single living specimen. You could be forgiven for thinking that growing up in the bush would make me privy to such creatures, but sadly, I must confess, this was not to be the case. What is more, to this day, I am yet to sight a single koala, wombat or numbat, let alone a platypus – not for the want of trying – bandicoot or bilby. I have of course seen countless kangaroos, almost as many wallabies, and to a lesser extent numerous emus. In fact, as a lad of seven years of age, and perhaps too inquisitive for my own good, I was set upon by an irate emu – a lesson I will never forget.

Beauty aside, the lyrebird is without doubt one of the rarest and most elusive of all bush creatures. Inhabiting only a tiny enclave of the east coast, this reclusive creature can only be found in the deepest and darkest recesses. The only lyrebird I have ever been fortunate enough to sight was in a museum – the Australian museum in fact. Poised to sing, his lyre shaped plumes, hence the name, were presented to the most superb advantage against the accompanying web-like feathers, which concealed his eyes like a silver veil.

To hear the lyrebird sing is equally as rare, or so I have read, for he is a master of mimic. What may first appear to be the call of the robin may well be his indistinguishable rendition. As a matter of fact, the lyrebird can mimic all matter of sounds from the cry of a baby to the tooting of traffic. The only way you can be absolutely certain you are within earshot is by his unforgettable love song. For when

the lyrebird seeks the hand of love, it is by far the loveliest and most memorable song of all. So unique in fact, some say it is composed of sounds no longer even present in the bush. How fitting it seems that his namesake derives from the Greek instrument, the lyre, which originally accompanied ancient song. But what is even more remarkable is his ability to isolate single notes from a tempest of harmony and faithfully reproduce them without misrepresenting the individuality of any constituent note. I once read that when the lyrebird sings his love song, it is hard to imagine there is anything wrong in the world.

So lifelike was the lyrebird at the museum, it was as if he had been captured mid step on the rise to the toe. For not only is the lyrebird a superb singer, he is also the most charming dancer. High upon a mound of bracken, which is built solely for the purpose of wooing his sweetheart, he performs the dance of love. In what may best be described as a tango of sorts, he steps abruptly forward and back again, then crosses his path at periodic intervals. What a marvellous sight it would be to see the lyrebird dance – composed at all times while the legs do different things – ending in a dramatic pause, followed by the slow lowering of the plumes and drawing of the veil.

The female lyrebird is said to accompany her lover wherever he roams and attends his every performance. The moment he begins to sing, she will stop scratching about and leap onto a low hanging branch from which to marvel her master. When not perfecting his vast repertoire, her incredibly vain lover spends his day attending to his toilet. But her love never falters; rather, she is said to be unable to endure life without him. And should ever fate befall him – as fate can befall even the most masterful –

she will retreat to the deepest and darkest recesses where she dies of loneliness and grief.

How is it that a single lyrebird can make the world a better place just by being in it?

The same could be asked of some people. Those people who, as if by magic, have the ability to make the world a better place. I have written about one such person previously – Earnest Henry Morris (1881- 1933). From humble beginnings, Ernest was to become one of Sydney’s most popular mine hosts and amass a considerable fortune by his fiftieth birthday. To celebrate his success, he would go on to pursue his innermost passion – Westend – one of Sydney’s finest hotels.

Earnest is best remembered as cheerful and enlivening man who befriended everyone he met. He loved being the fun-loving host and was a lot of fun to be with. Others remembered him for his charming manner, particularly around married women who found him somewhat irresistible. None were more charmed than his housekeeper, Caroline Spencer, so much so, she would bestow her life savings to Westend. Like most people in the 1920s, neither believed the boom times would ever end. But as history would have it, Earnest would touch success one last time before he would lose his entire fortune. Almost as soon as the doors of his beloved Westend opened, the winds of the Great Depression slammed them shut. At opening night, even when the creditors were afoot, Earnest would give his most impressive performance of all, probably holding the view that, after all, it would be his last before he entered the dark recesses of history.

Nothing makes our hearts beat faster than blind passion. But passion will not assure one of success any more than being in love will ensure a long-term relationship. When passion wanes, persistence takes over, that invisible determination that draws one from one's bed each morning to face yet another day. People driven by persistence, dare I say, invariably lack sincerity and authenticity. One can easily distinguish such people through their determination, doggedness, pushiness, diligence and resolution. Perhaps they have lost their passion, perhaps taken a wrong path, or worse, wooed the wrong lover. I too have beared the weight of persistence, but somehow, I have always found reason enough to regain my passion. Why else would I choose to spend day after day perfecting prose that, at best, will probably never receive a second glance? For what other reason would I forego life's pleasures such as beer and cheese to afford a new notebook? These are but some of the costs of pursuing one's passion. Yet, oddly enough, I consider myself fortunate, and although my life has taken some extraordinary paths of – joy, sadness, spirited debate, anger, lust, pride, zeal, conviction, love and compassion – I have remained true to my heart and followed my passion.

On the other side of the coin there is always failure. Just as some leave our hearts pounding, others, regardless of how hard they try, will not. When the lyrebird fails to woo the hand in love he resigns himself to a life of solitude in the deepest and darkest recesses. To accept one's failure is by far the most painful admission of all. I have witnessed such pain many times in my lifetime, none more apparent than one afternoon in Newcastle. As to what business I had up north I cannot remember, but I do recall the empty sky and the motionless railway station. By the time I arrived everyone had already boarded the train except a rakish lad still aloof on the platform

as if some sort of puppet devoid of strings. Inside the carriage an older fellow, nursing a shopping bag stuffed with flannelettes and whatnots, was sitting by door – just discharged from hospital by all accounts – stones from memory or something equally as painful. Immediately opposite sat a pretty young lady gazing into the empty sky. I studied her for some time before turning my attention to her rather large case. I speculated where she might be going. A holiday perhaps? Returning home perchance?

The conductor's whistle interrupted my thoughts. All of a sudden the couplings took up the slack and we began to pull away from the station. Then, as if by magic, the puppet appeared at her window. In an unspoken gesture he appeared to seek silent forgiveness from her eyes. Shielding his heart he took a step forward into a gradual rise to the toe and then returned back on to the heel, as if to say, can we dance one more time. She redirected her gaze to the empty sky. She was leaving him. The hand of love had closed without as much as wave goodbye. What became of them I often wonder? Would he woo another or would he surrender to life's deepest and darkest recesses and live a life of solitude?

For some the fear of failure is so great they never dance again, while others like me, a shy boy from the bush, are never invited. Why is it that some are destined for the floor while others for the bench? Some would argue that I have chosen my destiny, and I concede, perhaps I have spent too much of my life procrastinating rather than participating in life itself. What compels me to write down all that I see no matter how mundane? As a writer, I believe every living moment is worthy of recording. Perhaps someday I will find reason enough to reflect on my own life and create a portrait of

myself that is proof I too lived in this world, a life that can be relived with each and every reading and remain long after I am gone.

Why would one choose to be a writer when life has so much more on offer? Because writing penetrates your defences and arouses your soul in ways you cannot ignore. It awakens passion – that innermost voice that speaks in riddles and makes no sense whatsoever – and calls upon others to piece together possible answers and interpret my meaning. And then, of course, there is the craft of writing itself. Searching for the right word where no other will do, listening for rhythms from one sentence to next until each melds into the other like a lyric. Incidentally, the word lyric also derives from the word lyre. And until such times that my words began to dance upon the page, like so many great writers before me, I too will have made the world seem a better place. For then I too will have danced.