



The Budgerigar That Sang Bass

★
(Written for
"The Listener"
by
ASQUITH
MORRELL)
★

COFFEE was being served in the boarding-house lounge, and the conversation had turned to the oral ability of budgerigars. Miss Grogan, who sat bolt upright, had just declared that of course budgerigars could talk, that her sister Annie in Dunedin had one that used to talk all the time.

No one denied the statement, but Mr. Phaltney, a new boarder, having drained the coffee pot and lifted the lid to make quite certain, thoughtfully enquired, "What did your sister Annie's budgerigar say?"

"What did Annie's budgerigar say?" echoed the astonished Miss Grogan, "Why, he said heaps of things."

"But what were they?" repeated Mr. Phaltney.

"I don't remember exactly," said Miss Grogan, "it's over twelve months since I was in Dunedin, but he knew heaps of phrases." She then shut her mouth firmly and stared hard at Miss Swaddle who worked in a Government department.

It was a devilish awkward situation. No one ever questioned what Miss Grogan said. For one thing she was the oldest surviving boarder and for another she was Miss Grogan. Mr. Chaffington was particularly embarrassed. Nervously he lighted a cigarette, trusting this action would exonerate him from any part in the conversation.

Mr. Phaltney, however, was unperturbed. "Surely you must remember something the budgerigar said," he persisted.

"I don't see why I should," replied Miss Grogan stiffly, "but—well, yes I do. He used to say 'God Bless Mr. Churchill.'"

"Clearly?" asked Miss Twinney.

"Clearly," answered Miss Grogan. Mr. Phaltney made no comment and the boarders breathed more freely. Then somewhat unexpectedly Mr. Wingrod spoke up.

"We had a budgerigar once," he said, "his name was Dynamo and . . ."

"What a delightful name," beamed Miss Twinney. (She was the boarding house pacifist and liked everyone to agree with everyone).

"He could talk very well," added Mr. Wingrod, ignoring the interruption.

"Saying what, for instance," suggested Mr. Phaltney.

"Oh, he used to say, 'Good morning, Joe'—that was my brother's name—and he used to say—oh, he was a scream—he used to say 'Joe Loves Margie'—that was Joe's girl. They're married now. Got two kids. Live at Parapram," Mr. Wingrod concluded rather vaguely.

Heartened by Mr. Wingrod's ornithological experiences, Miss Grogan said, "Don't you believe budgerigars can talk, Mr. Phaltney?"

"I didn't mean to suggest that, I only wanted to know how they compared with a budgerigar I remember in Wanganui."

"Was it a good talker?" asked Miss Twinney, thankful that Mr. Phaltney agreed.

"Wonderful vocabulary," said Mr. Phaltney, blowing a smoke screen over the coffee wagon.

It was too obvious. Miss Grogan pounced.

"What did it say?" she asked curtly.

"Well one night just as I was leaving the kitchen, that budgerigar said, 'Just a moment. I want you to do something for me.'"

Miss Grogan adjusted her back so vertically it didn't seem possible. Miss Twinney opened her eyes wide.

"I went over to his cage, expecting he would continue with some stock



"Miss Grogan breathed hard like a train in an uphill tunnel"

phrases," went on Mr. Phaltney, "but he didn't."

Miss Twinney's coffee spilled with excitement.

"No," declared Mr. Phaltney, "that bird said, 'Turn the wireless up, I want to hear Paul Robeson.'"

Miss Grogan breathed hard like a train in an uphill tunnel. Even Miss Twinney blushed and studied the flowers on the carpet. But Mr. Phaltney continued.

"You see that bird had a good bass voice and liked to sing whenever he heard Paul Robeson. Mind you, he was never too sure of the words, but once I heard him sing 'Old Man River' right through."

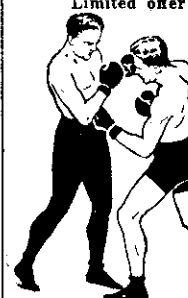
At that Miss Grogan shot to her feet, left the room, and slammed the door. Miss Twinney ran away. Mr. Wingrod murmured something about a lodge meeting.

Mr. Phaltney seemed disinclined to continue and for some time no one else spoke. Then hesitantly the conversation turned to Hollywood stars.

So to this day we don't know whether or not Mr. Phaltney was exaggerating. You see, at the time Mr. Phaltney was six feet three, and then, shortly afterwards, he left the boarding house.

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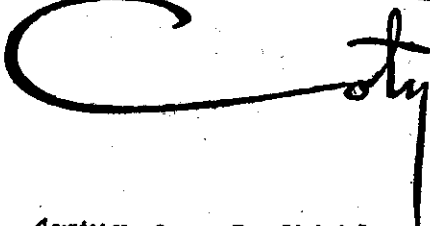
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