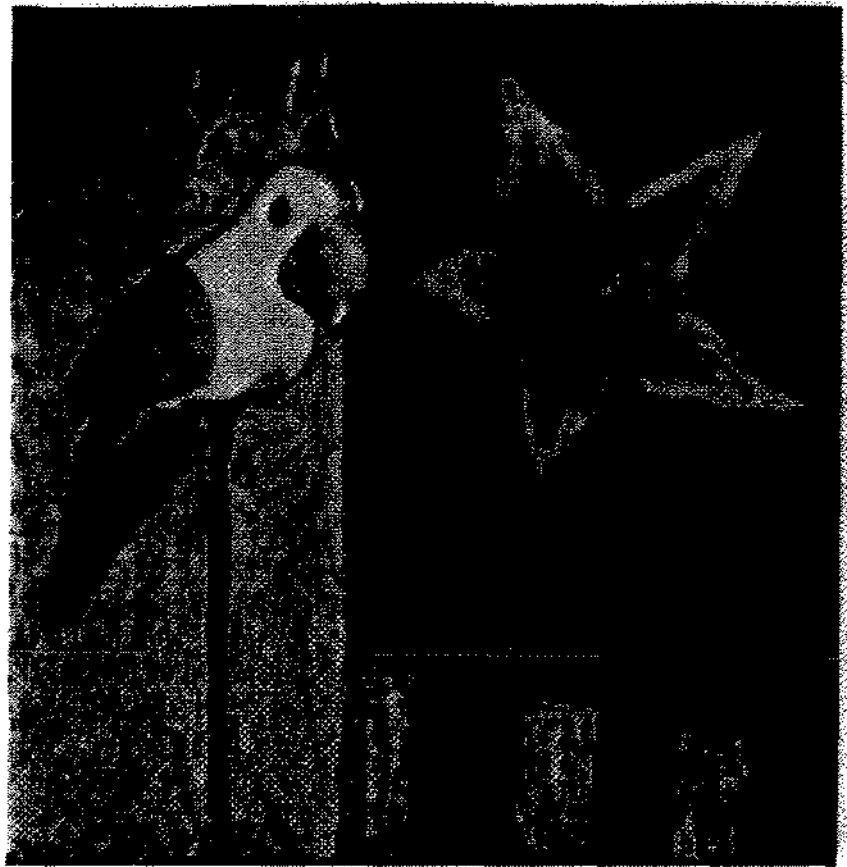


IDA BESS' BIRD



by Barbara M. Franklin

Illustration: Richard Titus

I was new in town, but, "thank God for the Americans, I always say." The first frustrating, difficult weeks of locating yourself in a new city were over and I was ready to meet new friends. We were more or less settled in an interesting house on Brix St in Wembley Downs—a suburb of Perth, West Australia. As usual I checked our mail box hoping for a letter from Mother, but found instead an invitation, I was warmly invited to attend the American Women's Club luncheon the following week.

I dressed carefully the day of the luncheon and with my street map in hand, walked down the lane with banks of red and yellow pointsettia trees, to my car, I had of course allowed extra time for getting lost on one way streets, but had underestimated the accent problem, I had asked a kind Aussie directions and finally realized the Hyul Road he was referring to was the Hale Road on my map.

Priscilla Tale's house on Acacia Dr. in Ardross looked lovely; set amid well groomed gardens, Many other women were arriving as I approached the front door. Most wondered who I was, some smiled and introduced themselves.

Our hostess graciously welcomed us, and a barman offered sherry or white wine to take along into the living room, I've never been a shy person or if I had hoped to be at one time for purposes of appeal, I'd certainly discarded reticence by my fifth move. You learn you've got to make friends quickly because it is loneliness that is the enemy of the rootless person. No one had ever heard of Ottawa, my home town, but they all knew who my husband was and that his job was to be the new manager of a British backed oil company.

I was drawn to one woman with lovely deep blue eyes and a slow drawl. She told me about her family and I told her about mine; our children

were near of an age. She was from Dallas, Texas and had been named Ida Bess after her father's sister. Her father she confided was a mixture of Lyndon Bains Johnston and Slim Pickens and liked names like that.

As the months passed Ida Bess and I developed many common interests. Our favourite one was poking through the junk stores on a regular basis—the treasures we found still fill my rooms as I write. The beautiful city on the Swan was at that time full of fantastic buys if you had a good eye and a limited pocket book. Aussie dealers adore the game of bargaining and, if you could endure the colourful folklore that accompanied every sale, everyone involved in the deal could go away happy.

Now apart from all her wonderful characteristics, Ida Bess had one very disagreeable side. She hated Perth, she hated the Australians and most of all the shopping in the stores! Everytime we went in to buy groceries she bemoaned that they were fifty years behind the States—"... do you realize they do not have angel food cake mixes, Dr. Pepper's nor chunky peanut butter." I tried to tell her that Perth was an easy overseas posting compared to those I had experienced, but she could not accept my wisdom. One night at a barbecue on the banks of the beautiful Indian Ocean, where the stars are so bright and close you can almost read by their light, Sam Bailer tried to straighten Ida Bess out. He presented her with a wooden box he had built, painted and named "Ida Bess' Soap Box." In his gentle but succinct way Sam suggested she spout off on her soap box early each day and then keep quiet about Perth's faults for the rest of the day. We all laughed and, to her credit, Ida Bess laughed also. There was hardly another expatriate who did not love this city with its Mediterranean climate and its delightful inhabitants, for we all knew that, as a foreign posting, this was close to the ideal, unless of course you could not live happily without servants.

At mixed social gatherings Ida Bess kept tactfully silent and our circle of friends grew to include many Australians. However, when in the seclusion of a group of North American women, the medical services, the schools, the traffic regulations and the fashion industry were ruthlessly attacked by Ida Bess' sharp tongue. Many times I wondered how Dallas could be so

perfect by comparison. After one coffee klatch session, when I was ashamed of my own lack of courage where I had just kept quiet instead of defending my belief in Perth, I confessed to my husband. I said, "I'm sick and tired of hearing about back home and its unbelievable qualities. I think Ida Bess would hang in her living room a Texas flag if she had one." He replied that he thought she would at that, and perhaps after her first home leave she'd return with a case of flags.

The months flew by and at last the time came when the Hall family could return to the beloved U.S. of A. Ida Bess asked me if I would keep her Australian pet galah for the month that they would be in Dallas. I replied that I certainly would and hoped my friend would enjoy every minute in Paradise.

The parrot was a handsome creature about the size of a pigeon with soft grey plumage capped by a pink neck and head. "Bird" proved to be a menace to feed, his nasty nature, I'm sure, had been encouraged by Tommy Hall's tormenting; I soon learned to guard my fingers from a lightning quick attack from his vice-like beak.

As I fed my house guest and filled his water dish, a mischievous thought sprang to my mind. Could I teach "Bird" to say "To Hell With Texas" in four weeks? The more I considered this challenge the more I enjoyed the opportunity to make a sneaky but justified attack on Texas and Ida Bess' attitude. I told my family of my plan, wondering what their reactions would be. The girls thought I was being really mean to my friend to even consider doing such a thing and my husband philosophically shrugged his shoulders knowing his wife and her ways.

Bird was a dumb parrot, many a time I felt like wringing his scrawny pink neck. I spent hours the first week saying distinctly "To Hell With Texas" over and over again—Bird would in no way deign to even glance my way. I made a tape recording and played it nightly by his cage in a remote section of the house, hoping to brain-wash the stupid fowl. The parrot accompanied me all my hours at home and the lesson continued as I baked, as I did my house work, as I sewed and as I gardened. The teaching ceased when the girls returned from school, otherwise they would have been very vocal about expressing their disgust with me and my stupid scheme.

One day, when I was beginning to feel my task (could never be achieved, Bird turned a beady red I eye upon me and said "Hello Texas". I was j shocked, had I heard right? He repeated this J statement from that day each time I approached] his cage. Yippee, maybe there was hope of \ success! I realized I said those words to him as I j passed the cage usually before I started the daily j programming so I began to hope the next phrase j would follow. Bird would not say a word if j anyone else was near just to exasperate me, so the I girls figured I was going off my rocker. I am sure i they were telling their friends how glad they'd be | when the Hails took the darn bird home and j Mother would return to normal. j

The deadline was rapidly approaching and the t final week of Bird's visit was upon me. Although | I was disillusioned about his brain power, I had j grown to like the little creature, often wishing he j could join his mates that flew among the trees \ everywhere. Ida Bess was to return on Saturday j and, as luck would have it, Thursday morning j after the girls left for school I heard loud j screeching, I tore to the cage expecting to find j Pansy our Siamese cat on top of his cage but, \ instead, Bird was screaming "To Hell With ! Texas." I leapt for joy and rushed to the phone to j tell my husband of my success. Funnily he did j not seem to consider my news world shattering j and got on with drilling his oil wells as quickly as (he could. But I knew the joy of accomplishment, \ I made a cup of coffee and wallowed in the bird's j peculiar song. !

Ida Bess came over for dear Bird on Saturday. We j heard about the glories of Dallas and how) depressing it was for her to have to return, except j of course that friends like us make Perth bearable, j because we were stuck out here too. j

She presented me with a lovely cook book on \ Southern cooking as a thank you gift for keeping | "lil ole Bird". I thanked her warmly and said | facetiously, "He was no trouble at all." \

Fifteen minutes later as I sat by the phone I answered its ring. A very distraught woman with a Texas drawl declared—"You damn Canuck. You've ruined my Bird!" Yes, we're still friends, but Bird mysteriously escaped from his cage through the open door someone left ajar. I like to muse that somewhere in the Australian bush he screams his message, perhaps educating other galahs about Texas.