

Margaret Catchpole on the Lyrebird.

From "The History of Margaret Catchpole, a Suffolk Girl," by Richard Cobbold (1845). Portion of Letter from Sydney, N.S.W., dated 18th October, 1807, to Mrs. John Cobbold.

" . . . I sent you, by the ship 'Buffalo,' a small case, containing the skins of the rarest birds found in this country, together with an opossum, of a dark colour, and very fierce; also a species of rat, which very much resembles a diminutive hyena. You will find two large, magnificent birds, called here the mountain pheasant; they are only like our English bird in size. The plume of feathers in the tail of the cock bird would form the most graceful ornament for a queen's head-dress. Two noble feathers, somewhat like a peacock's, only more brilliant and various in their colours, surrounded by the most glittering silver lines of curving feathers, fine as the prairie grass, and sparkling like the waves of the ocean, ornament the tail of the male bird, whilst the female is only remarkable for the elegance of her shape, and not for the beauty of her plumage. In my opinion, this bird is the peafowl of this country; and not a pheasant. Early in the morning, I have seen him spring from the thickest brushwood, and wing his arrow-like flight to the tallest tree, and there he appears to mimic the notes of the various songsters around him. But the most beautiful attitude that I once saw him in beats everything I ever beheld of what men term politeness. I have heard and read of delicate attentions paid to our sex by men of noble and generous dispositions; but I scarcely ever heard of such devoted attention as I one day witnessed in this noble bird towards his mate. I

saw her sitting in the heat of the meridian sun upon her nest, and the cock bird seated near her, with his tail expanded, like a bower overshadowing her, and, as the sun moved, so did he turn his elegant parasol to guard her from his rays. Now and then he turned his bright eye to see if she was comfortable, and she answered his inquiry with a gentle note and rustle of her feathers. Was not this a sight calculated to teach us all gentleness? Dear lady, as I looked upon it, the tears came warmly down my cheeks, as I thought of your good husband and yourself; and I dreamed of your writing a poem upon this subject, and reading it to the young ladies in the schoolroom. I had often wondered what use the tail of this bird could be to him. If this be one of its general uses, surely it is truly ornamental and useful. I hope these birds will come safe to hand. Captain Brooks, of the 'Buffalo,' promised me faithfully that he would himself forward them into Suffolk. The thought that they may reach you and give you pleasure will make me happy for many a long day."

Author's Note.—The mountain pheasants, which she speaks of in the following letter (8/10/1809), duly arrived by the "Buffalo." They were splendid specimens, and were in a very perfect state. They were preserved in the author's family for many years, and may now be seen at the Public Museum at Ipswich, in company with many thousands of valuable specimens. The bird itself is now become very scarce. A live specimen has never been brought to England.⁽¹⁾

(1) The specimens in question may be seen distinguished by a label attached to them with the following words:—

"Manura superba,

"Lyra, or Botany Bay Pheasant.

"These beautiful birds were sent to the late Mrs. Cobbold, of the Cliff, by Margaret Catchpole, a female servant, who stole a coach-horse from the late John Cobbold, Esq., and rode it up to London in one night. She was in the act of selling the horse when she was taken. She was in man's apparel. She was tried at Bury in 1797, and received sentence of death, which sentence, owing to the entreaties of the prosecutor, was changed to seven years' transportation; but, breaking out of gaol, she was afterwards transported for life.

"Presented to this Museum by R. K. Cobbold, Esq."