

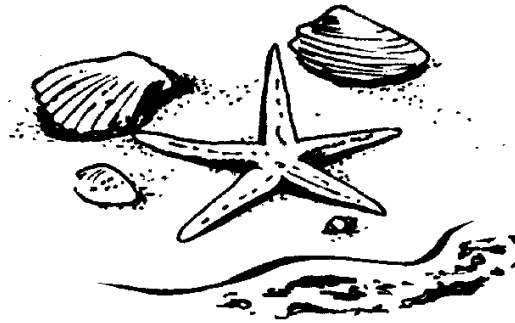
TALES OF TROSS

*Book One*

# The Enchantment of Albert

by Geoff Dennis

Illustrated by John Kinnear



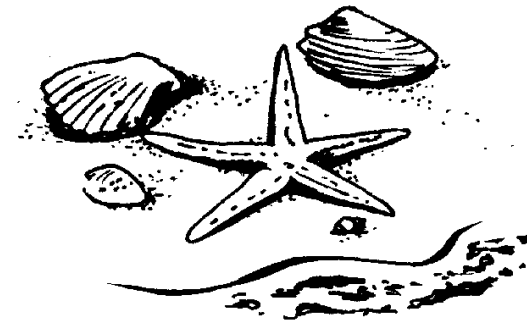
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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-publication entry

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## 1. The Twisted Tower

In anyone's language, Albert Tross was a remarkable bird. The fact that he was a wandering albatross, a breed of bird who would happily fly across oceans to bring back a certain type of krill, is remarkable in itself. But that wasn't the reason Albert was so remarkable. Had Albert been a crow or a toucan, a budgerigar, a sparrow or even a masked booby-bird from Lord Howe Island, he would still be regarded as a most remarkable bird.

Albert Tross was such a remarkable bird, because he was also a really remarkable boat.

Albert's tale began many years ago, on a very cold

island that was just a speck in the immensity of what is the windblown Southern Ocean.

At that time he was not called Albert, or anything else for that matter. He had left his mate and his young chick on the cliffs of that cold, windblown island. This was something both he and his mate did frequently and when a wandering albatross goes out for food it can be many weeks before they return.

His take-off was typical. He ran, rolled and stumbled, in a most ungainly fashion, down the hill and off the edge of a cliff. However, once in the air, with his huge black-edged wings fully extended, all traces of awkwardness disappeared. Albert dropped towards the sea, catching the up-drafted air beneath his magnificent wings.

He then lifted himself on to the air currents and, propelled by the winds, quickly left the island, and his small family, far behind. For days he was buffeted and blown as he rode the southerly winds, known as the 'Roaring Forties', until he finally reached the calmer seas of the Southern Pacific.

The sun was high in the deep-blue, mid-morning sky and Albert was cruising just above a gently rolling swell. There was not so much as a puff of cloud anywhere to be seen and it was a good day for flying.

Albert had spent the night before floating on the water. He hadn't had a choice in this as the breeze had dropped not long after nightfall. A wandering albatross' wings are designed to ride the wind more so than fly. So without the wind, wandering albatrosses can't fly.

So they rest and they wait.

The breeze had picked up with the sunrise and if Albert had looked ungainly taking off from the island then he most certainly looked a sight launching himself, from a standing start, on the water. He had run across the surface, causing a monumental amount of splashing while at the same time flapping his huge wings. But his grace and his swift beauty had reappeared with flight.

Throughout the morning Albert had alternated between flying on the high winds or cruising just above the surface with his wing-tips occasionally touching the water. At these times his attention could be caught by the variety of interesting things like seaweed, bits of driftwood and general flotsam and jetsam that, having been torn up by storms and such, now littered the otherwise smooth surface.

Then he would again soar high into the sky from where he could see the horizon.

Now, with the mid-morning sun much higher in the

sky, and far from where he had spent the night floating on the surface, Albert had, for the first time, seen the tower.

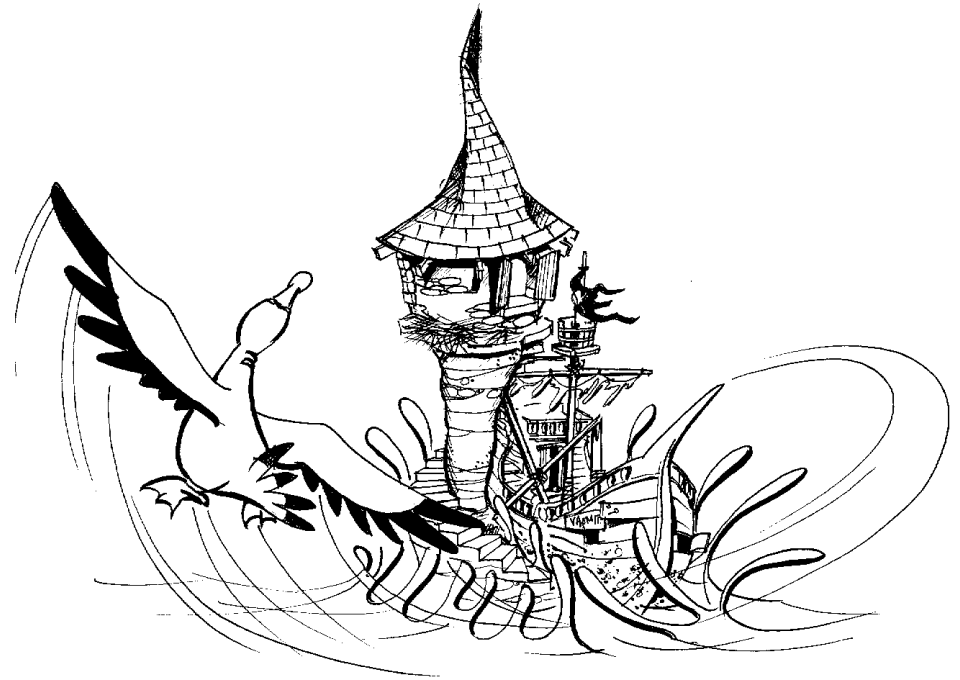
Initially he hadn't realised it was a tower. It was just a speck on the ocean where normally a speck wouldn't be. But as he drew nearer the actual shape of the speck became clearer.

Up ahead, on a solitary outcrop of rocks, a twisted tower sat all alone, surrounded by the limitless blue of the sea. Albert leaned into the wind and turned to investigate.

The tower's base had been made of roughly cut stone and was topped by a small room with a tall, twisted roof. White salt stained the stone and quite a few of the tower's bricks were missing. The gaping holes left by the missing bricks had become, over the years, nesting spots for numerous seabirds. Just above the waterline the seaweed and barnacles created a mess of thick brown-green wrapping.

Moored among the rocks at the base of the tower, was a run-down, derelict old pirate ship with a torn and limp Jolly Roger hanging from the mast.

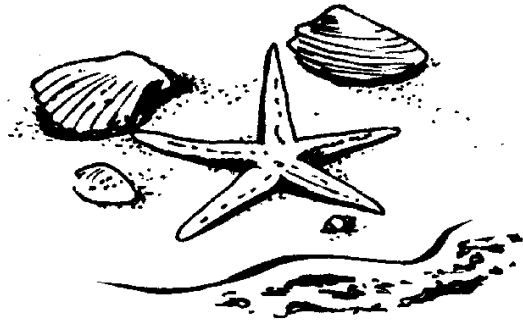
The general feel of the place was one of desolation, yet smoke rose from the old, bent chimney atop the twisted tower.



Being inquisitive, Albert flew closer so he could see better. This was far more interesting, to an albatross of the southern oceans, than stuff floating on the water.

He banked down, dipping his head for extra speed, then levelled off as he neared the surface. He cruised close and low past the weather-beaten old hulk. Loose planking with ripped sails and tarnished brass topped a barnacle-encrusted hull.

He circled the tower as he gained altitude. He flew past the variety of deserted sea-bird nests in the hollows and shortly, with wings fully spread, he approached a window opening in the small room atop the twisted, old tower.



## 2. Luzinda the Sea-Hag

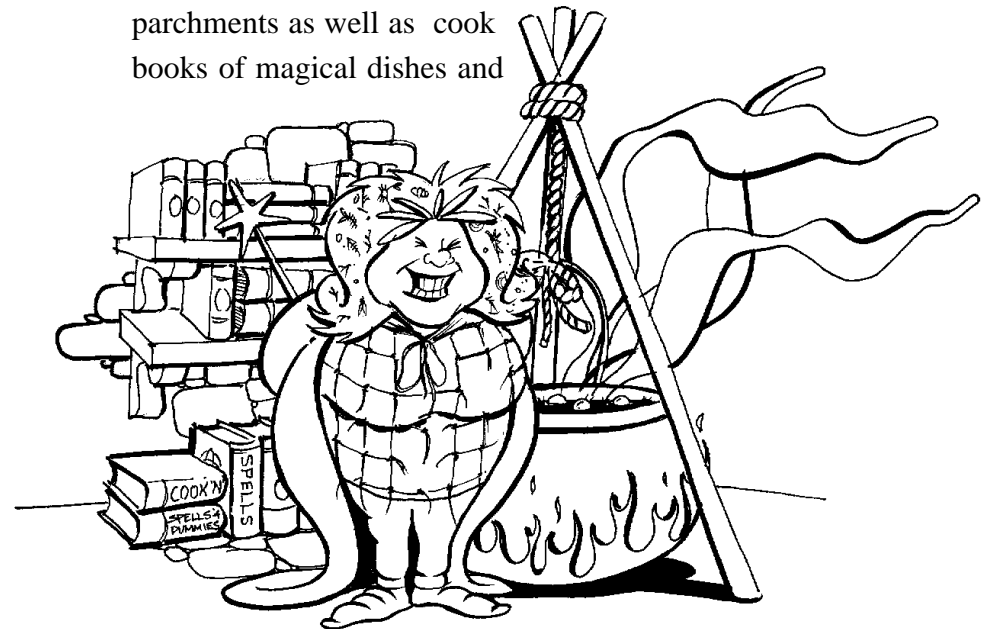
At that same time, inside the small room a clumsy old sea-hag with a chubby face, piggy eyes and matted hair was giggling to herself about puffer fish and squid brains. As she muttered away she churned a large wooden paddle through the contents of a iron-grey cauldron. The matted hair that bounced out of her head was encrusted with sand, pieces of shells, bits of coral and scraps of seaweed. It was also the home to various species of small sea creatures. There were tiny crabs in there and prawns and even some small octopusses. They all happily scrambled through her hair eating away at the plentiful supply of tasty things they found there.

She was dressed in a long cloak made from tattered

canvas, held together with old bits of fishing nets and seaweed. She wore no shoes and her left foot was missing its little toe—the result of accidentally bringing back to life a barracuda she was once roasting for her supper. Little mix-ups with spells were kind of common with her.

Her name was Luzinda and her hag's cauldron was suspended from three poles above a fire that burnt without wood. In the cauldron a luminous broth of bubbling green and smoking blue reflected in her mad eyes as she bent to her task.

The crumbling, broken-brick walls, surrounding her and her cauldron, held a gallery of broken magical dreams. There were old spell-books that were dog-eared from use, rolled and unrolled parchments as well as cook books of magical dishes and



encyclopedias of charms and potions. They lay haphazardly on the wooden shelves that were loosely attached to the crumbling mortar of the wall or in untidy piles scattered across the floor.

On one shelf, next to the window, was a small square mirror that could reflect whatever would be happening at the exact same time on the very next day. If you looked into it at midday today it would reveal to you what would be happening at midday tomorrow. This could come in very handy, but Luzinda could never quite get it to work right. At the moment it was only showing a sort of grey mist with intermittent flashes of what happened five minutes earlier.

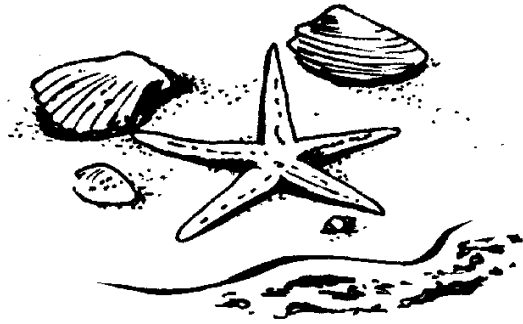
Although the sea-hag desired more than anything to be a great sea-sorceress—and she really did try very hard at it and had dedicated her life to the pursuit of the dark magic of the deep oceans—she just wasn't all that good at it.

But over the years she had had some successes. Like keeping her cauldron boiling on a fire without wood and having various items hanging around the place that showed no visible means of support. But generally, for all the time and effort she put into it, she really didn't have a lot to show for it.

On this day however, as Albert flew around

investigating the tower, it was with confidence that she churned her large wooden paddle through the bubbling and smoking contents of her cauldron. After all, she'd done this little enchantment before, many years before, during the Yukon Goldrush in Alaska. Although it hadn't worked exactly as she had planned that time, it had worked. It involved a little rat-faced fur trapper and his barge, and it did exactly what it was supposed to do—it had joined two totally, separate items together.

However, at that time, further complicating the situation was an otter that happened to be scurrying across the barge when the bolt hit. The result of this ill-aimed joining spell upset the little rat-faced trapper no end when he saw what had happened to his barge and, as you can imagine, left one very confused and physically altered otter.



### 3. The Enchantment of Albert

But many years had passed and Luzinda hadn't tried this simple joining spell since. That is, until this day, the very day that Albert was flying past the tower and having a harmless look around. The old sea hag's favourite vase had broken in two and hey, what could go wrong? It wasn't like there was anyone around out here in the middle of the ocean. Nobody out here at all. That is, of course, except for Albert.

'A pinch of dehydrated urchin and a smidge of puffer fish poison ought to do,' she cackled in a witchy screech. She was glad that she had practised so hard, over the years, to get the screech just right.

As she hunched beside the cauldron reaching out over

it and turning her withered old hands up towards the ceiling, she couldn't resist a small peek at herself in the normal mirror that hung directly across from the window.



She liked to look her witchy best when conjuring and with the reflection of the broth, and the shadows of her curled up hands, she looked great and she knew it. Then, with a last insane cackle and a sideways glance at the two pieces of vase that were lying near the window, she drew her claw-nailed fingers across the top of the cauldron, scooping the smoke into her cupped palms.

'Bloater fish laugh as lung fish run, what is two now make one!' she shrieked. Then she turned. With her hands raised high she whipped the bubbling smoke,



along with a surprisingly large bolt of lightning, directly at the two pieces of broken vase lying near the window.

Well . . . it definitely was heading in the right direction—but it missed, though not by much—but a miss is a miss all the same.

The bolt of lightning, with the magic smoke from the cauldron still clinging to its edges and leaving a trail across the room, hit the window-sill behind the two pieces of broken vase and ricocheted back into the room and straight at the old hag. She was still standing, by the cauldron, wide-eyed in disbelief at the size of the bolt she had created.

She dived sideways just in time to avoid the bolt as it shaved over her head, scattering the hair-dependant crabs and prawns as it did. It then crashed into the wall on the far side of the room, rebounded on to the floor, another wall, the lip of the cauldron and various of the book-strewn shelves. From here it veered up into the ceiling where it fried numerous cobwebs before flying out the window—and straight into a completely unsuspecting Albert.

The poor albatross didn't know what had happened. The spell hit him square in the chest. It

singed his feathers and enshrouded him in the blue-green smoke from the cauldron. He began to choke and cough. His head was spinning and the flash had left him unable to see. His wings were all askew and his legs twisted. He fell heavily, dragging with him the smoke and the bolt on to the deck of the old, derelict pirate ship.

But Albert didn't seem to hit the deck very hard at all. Although it sounded to him like he did, he seemed to sink into it more than crash into it.

He felt his chest, his legs and his head begin to swell. It was as though he was about to explode. He cried out in pain. He didn't know if he could see or not. His eyes were too tightly shut to tell.

He momentarily blacked out.

When he came to, his head still spinning, he slowly opened his eyes and at first was amazed to see that everything around him had shrunk.

The tower was definitely smaller.

But then he realised that nothing was any smaller than before. It was himself that had changed. He was bigger, much bigger and that wasn't all.

Luzinda climbed up from the floor and peeked cautiously out the window. She had seen the spell hit the

albatross and had seen him fall. She hadn't seen him hit the boat but realised, by the sound of bird hitting wood, that that must have been what happened.

When she saw what her waywardness had caused her eyes opened wide with shock.

She had done it again.

She had made another one.

She quickly looked from side to side to see if anyone else had seen it.

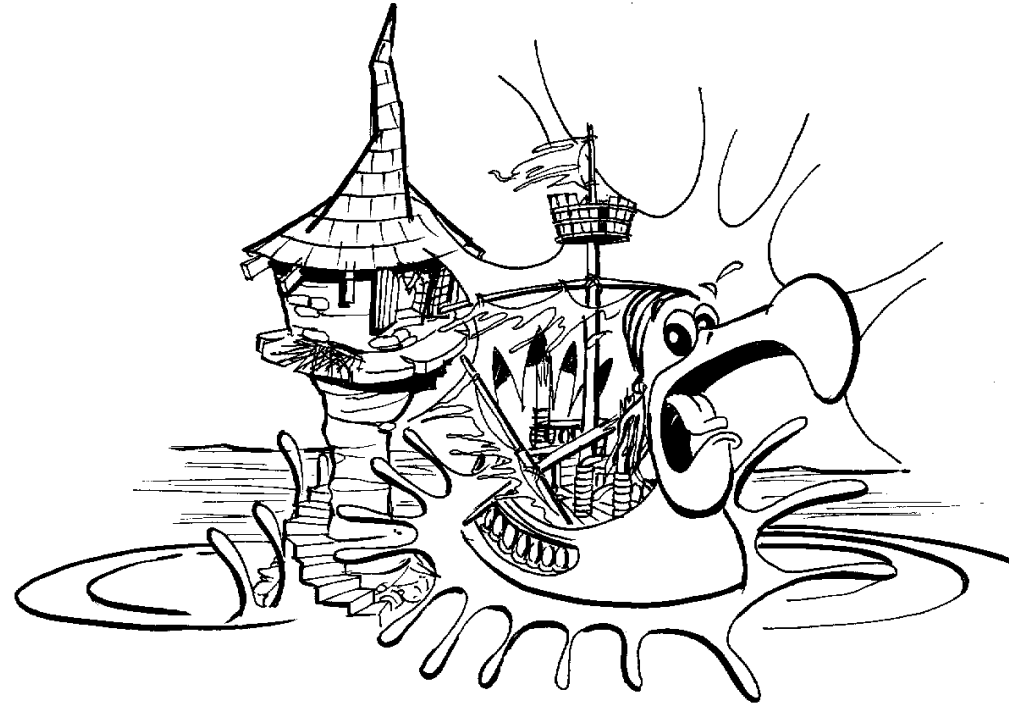
Then she slammed the shutters closed.

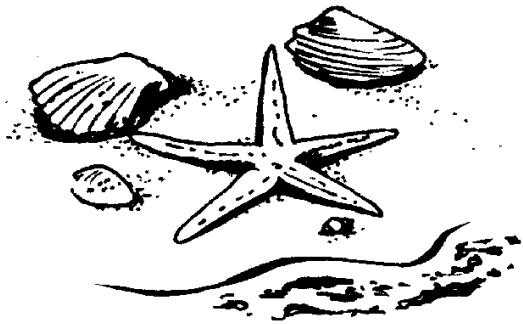
The old hag's spell had worked all right, but it wasn't the two pieces of broken vase that had been joined. The two that had become one were the old pirate hulk and Albert.

Albert's head was much larger now and the old ship was his body. He bobbed up and down on the waves not knowing where, or what, he was. Confused, dazed and bewildered, he sat on the water aware only of an excruciating pain in his right side. Of course, this was now really his starboard side, on account of his body being a boat.

Soon the dizziness and confusion were replaced by

fright. It was then that he realised that he still had his legs. Like his head and neck they were much larger than before but they still worked and with their aid he fled swiftly, across the sea and away from the tower.





#### 4. The Myth of the Great Bird

Albert travelled many nautical miles before finally allowing his powerful new legs to slow down. They weren't sore or even weary. He was just sick and tired of running away. He was in a poor state. Physically and mentally! Fears and tears had been his only companions on his flight from the tower.

He had time and time again tried to launch himself into the air but of course, to no avail, as he no longer had wings. What he had in their place was buckled and peeling wooden planking with loosely attached fittings of green, stained brass. Hardly a fair swap for his wings, Albert thought. And he had this pain—this really, really bad pain, down his starboard side.

The feeling that he was about to explode had gone, along with the spinning head, and his eye-sight, out of his now hula-hoop sized eyes was as sharp, if not sharper, than ever.

He twisted his huge neck and looked back at his new body. He had two masts, one with a broken cross-bar. Little remained of the sails and rigging except for a few rotted scraps of canvas hanging here and there.

'By the curse of a cantankerous she-squid! Little chance there be of them ever catching the wind again,' Albert muttered out loud. Then after a couple more strokes of his legs he stopped dead in the water.

He had just made the strangest sounds out of his beak he had ever heard an albatross make. Not only that—he knew what he had said.

He had spoken the Queen's English.

And he didn't like it.

Pain in his side notwithstanding, he pushed his legs powerfully through the water, trying to ignore the flood of memories and realisation that threatened to overwhelm his very being.

'I be keel-hauled before I take this!' he screamed into the wind, bowing his head as he pushed his huge legs even harder.

Since he'd fled the tower in terror, Albert's course had zig-zagged. But now he set a firm course, following his albatross' inner compass.

For days he ploughed through the ever-roughening swells of the southern seas. And then in the distance he saw the island he had always called home. It was here that he allowed himself to accept both the reality and the futility of his situation.

He was too different and he knew it.

He sat in the swells off the island  
and looked upon the rookery.



He could see his mate waiting there for his return and guarding their down-covered chick.

No doubt she could see him too. But she would never recognise him. And even if she did, what would be the point.

He turned himself and set a course away from the island. A tear formed in Albert's eye. He shook his head and the tear flew off.

But the feeling of loss didn't

For many years, *Albert Tross*, the mighty half-bird, half-boat crossed the oceans of the world, friendless and afraid. The loss of his family and his wings, combined with the never-ceasing pain in his side, made him a bitter soul. He shunned contact. He knew he was a freak and he didn't want anything more in life than to be left alone.

And for the pain in his side to stop.

But from time to time he was seen. And the legend of the great half-bird, half-boat grew.

People who lived on the shores of the world's oceans and seas would hear tales from deep-sea mariners or rescued castaways. These tales, told around countless fires, would keep both adults and children wide-eyed

with amazement as the seafarers spoke of the great half-bird, half-boat.

Some stories described him as fire-breathing, while others said he was a huge sea-serpent that would drag a ship and all aboard her to a watery grave—to the depths of Davy Jones Locker.

The stories of what Albert had done or would do, or what he would look like if actually seen, changed from village to village and coast to coast. Mostly the tales were scoffed at or sometimes used by exasperated mothers as threats to naughty children—but still the myth of the great half-bird, half-boat grew.