



The C.K. Thompson Collection

King of the Ranges

the story of a grey kangaroo

by

C.K. THOMPSON



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THE SAGA OF A GREY KANGAROO

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Contents

I.	Early Days	1
II.	The White Men	12
III.	The Mountains	23
IV.	The Kangaroo Drive	30
V.	The Lonely Kangaroo	45
VI.	His Domain	53
VII.	The Killer of Dogs	59
VIII.	The Hunt	66
IX.	King of the Ranges	76
X.	Waning Days	84
XI.	Joey Comes Home	92

CHAPTER I.

EARLY DAYS

IT was somewhere in the woody country on the western side of the Great Dividing Range that Joey first saw the light of day, but his earliest recollections were of a little reed-edged creek many miles to the east of his birth-place, on the opposite side of the range.

He was almost twelve months old before his mother would allow him to remain out of her pouch for long. One balmy spring day, when the air was filled with the songs of birds and the chirping of insects, and flooded with warm sunshine which penetrated his fur coat and made him feel that he could hop along by the side of his old grey mother all day, she allowed him his longest freedom. As yet his legs were not strong enough to support his growing body for any length of time, but he was getting stronger each day.

The old kangaroo had not stirred far from the banks of the creek or the surrounding bush since she had arrived there with Joey months before. The grass was long and green, and the stream itself would be trickling merrily over its pebbles for sometime to come. In the middle of summer it would dry up, and

its bed would become cracked and hard, but the winter rains had converted it now into a bubbling, running, little torrent.

Yes, time enough to move on when the hot summer withered the green grass and turned the creek into a chain of dry holes.

Under his mother's ever-watchful eye, Joey skipped along the creek bank, pausing now and then to nibble a tasty shoot. When he attempted to stray beyond her sight, the old grey mother hopped after him and gently turned him back.

As the balmy spring days fled, Joey and his mother slowly moved along the stream, lazing away the time during the day, feeding at sundown, and when night came on, retiring to some secluded woody glen where Joey, warmly snuggling deep down in the maternal pouch, would listen to the breeze stirring the branches of the high gums, and prick up his ears at the mournful cry of the wandering mopoke or the angry chattering of some vagrant opossum, before he finally buried his little black nose into his mother's warm fur and drifted off to sleep.

It was early in the summer when they finally left the little stream. The sun was getting hotter every day, and already the stream was beginning to dry up. Joey did not want to leave the creek at all. It was the only world he knew, and it was good enough for him. It was a rebellious little kangaroo that snuggled into

his mother's pouch as she progressed through the scrub in the direction of the distant belt of woods which divided the range from the plains.

They did not make much progress during the days that followed. Joey was growing fast, and was becoming a burden to his mother. It was not long before she forced him to use his own legs quite a lot and, after the first few days, Joey did not mind in the least.

At the end of a week they were many miles from Joey's little creek, making for the open plains, near which his mother had spent most of her time before Joey came. She had left the plains in the winter for the little creek, knowing by instinct that nature would make ample provision there for her while Joey was a baby.

It was not only the knowledge that Joey was coming that had driven the old kangaroo from the plains at that particular time. Nor was it on account of lack of food and water, of which there had been sufficient. These things happened in the normal course of events. She was thankful that the real cause—the advent of a party of white human beings, with their terrible guns, dogs and horses, bent on depriving every kangaroo of its winter fur—did not happen in nature's ordinary round. It had been the second occasion on which she had had experience of white men, and she had no wish to repeat it.

Joey's mother did not know that kangaroo drives were very popular just then among the white men with their dogs and horses. Had she known, she might have felt apprehensive of returning to the plains so soon, especially as she now had Joey; or she may have merely twitched her ears disdainfully, and placed full reliance in her native instincts to care for herself and her little one.

Three weeks after leaving the creek, Joey saw his first human being. By this time he and his mother were approaching the mountains that divided the plains beyond from the bush on their side, and the old mother kangaroo knew that it was here that blacks might be encountered. She was extremely cautious during the daytime, never allowing Joey to stray at all from her side for fear that he should encounter some prowling blackfellow, whose cruel spear or swift boomerang would quickly end her little one's life.

Joey could not understand the restraint. Before this, he had been allowed to hop about by himself to forage for tender leaves and young shoots, but now that his mother insisted on his remaining at her side, his joy in life was dampened considerably. He decided to put an end to this state of affairs as quickly as possible.

His chance came sooner than he had anticipated. They had reached a small waterhole in the midst of a clearing, and his mother, thirsty after her long

journey under the hot sun, pricked up her ears eagerly. She did not hop to the water at once. Such a course might be fraught with danger, as she did not know who or what might be lurking in the bushes.

Cautiously she made her way round the pool, with Joey following. Satisfied that all was well, and giving Joey a warning glance to impress upon him that he must not stir from the shelter of the friendly little shrub under which he was crouching, she hopped silently to the edge of the water and eagerly dipped her lolling tongue into it.

Back in the bushes, Joey knew that his chance had come. A few swift little hops carried him back the way they had come, and then he turned and went through the trees at a tangent.

It was at the edge of another clearing that he got his big surprise. Sitting around a curious, gleaming, darting object were several queer, two-legged creatures, with long paws, in which they were holding long sticks of wood. Joey's little ears quivered with excitement, while he sat back on his tail with his little black nose in the air.

There were four blackfellows in the party, and they were arguing loudly on the merits of the boomerang when matched against the spear. They were oblivious of Joey, who instinctively slipped out of sight and hid in some bushes from where he had an uninterrupted view of the proceedings.

As he watched, he saw a fifth blackfellow come

through the bushes on the opposite side of the clearing and join his companions. He was followed by a curious four-legged animal which was sniffing the air suspiciously. Joey was excited. Human beings, fires, dogs! He did not know what they were, of course; but he did not regret having left his mother when he could have such adventures as this.

The dog, too, was excited, but the cause was different. A wild-looking, half-tamed dingo, it was running round the clearing with its nose to the ground. It had scented Joey.

And it was just when Joey had decided to return to his mother that the dog saw him, and gave tongue. The blackfellows stopped their argument and sprang to their feet as one. Following the dog, they dashed at Joey with loud shouts.

Thoroughly scared, the little kangaroo fled through the bushes and over the logs with the shouting and barking pack after him, a terrified look in his brown eyes and his little tongue lolling out in his fright. It was the fastest he had ever moved in his short life, and he was not used to it.

Hopping madly through the trees and scrub, he hurled himself into an open space and then, with a cry of almost human joy, flung himself to the side of his mother, who stood erect near a blackened stump on the opposite side.

Louder shouts came from the pursuers when they

saw the old kangaroo, which stood, a proud and fiercely defiant figure, reared up to her full height. The dog made an immediate rush at her, and the men hung back to see the fun. They had witnessed several encounters in the past between their curs and kangaroos at bay, and, even though their brutes were invariably worsted in the contests, they were always willing to witness another bout.

Joey shrank panting to the ground behind his mother, who stood rigidly awaiting the onslaught. One excited blackfellow levelled a spear, but it was rudely knocked aside by another, and then the five of them egged on the dog with encouraging cries.

The brute went to its task enthusiastically, but its enthusiasm was rudely shattered when a sharp blow from a flying front paw knocked it head over heels.

The old kangaroo sprang backwards, trampling on the terrified Joey as she did so. The dog, with foaming jaws and snapping fangs, gathered itself for another leap, and flew straight at her breast. Once again the flashing paws sent him flying backwards, and this taught him caution. He began to circle round the panting kangaroo, his wicked little blood-shot eyes watching for an opening. It came, and it was Joey who unwittingly provided it.

The little kangaroo tried to wedge himself between his mother's legs and was flicked aside by her big tail. As she did this, she turned her head ever so

slightly as if in apology, and in that instant the cur sprang again, effectually to bury his fangs into the old mother's furry chest.

A spasm of pain shot through the gentle creature and roused her to great anger. Seizing the dog with her front paws, she held him tightly, and then, raising herself on her huge tail and using each leg, armed with that single razor-sharp claw, she ripped the maddened brute from throat to tail and hurled him from her. The brute fell gasping to the ground and writhed in his death agonies.

With her ears upraised and her body trembling, the old kangaroo stood panting and awaiting the next onslaught. The five blacks redoubled their yells, and then hurled their spears as one. Three found their marks in that furry chest, already blood-red from the dingo cur's assault, and from his own life's blood which had gushed on her as she dealt the fatal blow.

With a shuddering sigh, she slipped sideways and sank to the ground, while the blackfellows, with shouts of glee, gathered around her to complete their deadly work.

Joey, knocked sideways by his mother's tail, had fallen into a dense patch of bracken where he now lay hidden. Disregarding his whereabouts, and forgetful for the moment that it had been he who had led them to the old kangaroo, the blacks were engrossed in the task of making sure that she was quite dead.

Silently and fearfully, Joey slipped from the bracken and hopped swiftly away into the bush. He did not pause until he had put several miles between him and the scene of death. It was not until much later that the blacks remembered him, but, after discussing briefly the chances of running him down, they resolved to console themselves with his mother. Food was not scarce, and the average blackfellow does not kill just for the sake of it.

As yet, Joey did not understand the full meaning of what had occurred in the glade. In his dim animal way he sensed that all was not as it should be, and decided that, after waiting around a bit, he would return and join his mother.

Nightfall found him several miles from the spot, but he was sure of the way back. A faint glimmering among the trees met his gaze as he hopped along towards where he expected to find his mother. The blacks had made a fire on the spot and were regaling themselves with kangaroo steaks before moving off to pick up the rest of their tribe.

Before Joey reached the fringe of the bushes around the glade, he raised his head and sniffed the air. He could detect that scent with which he had become acquainted for the first time that day—the scent of man, and, although he could not see them, and did not know the meaning of the glare from the fire, he realised instinctively that where that scent was

there was danger—danger from those awful two-legged black creatures and their four-legged animal.

Terrified now that he could not find his mother, and not daring to approach closer, the little kangaroo turned round and hopped off among the trees. He felt terribly lonely. An offensive opossum swore at him as he passed, and a mournful mopoke croaked dismally. These noises were familiar to him, but they merely emphasised his loneliness and fear. Hitherto he had been able to afford to treat these night creatures with disdain, safe in the knowledge that his mother was there to protect him. Now that he was alone, however, he did not know what might happen to him.

Once or twice, as he progressed, he caught the faint scent of man on the night breeze and, after hesitating each time he smelled it, always turned in the opposite direction. It was the first time in his life he had travelled at night; in fact, it was the first time he had ever been alone at night. He was afraid—and he was lost.

The rising moon at length made things a little easier for him and, after travelling a few more disconsolate miles, he entered a patch of bracken fern and dropped down, on the ground, tired, lonely and frightened. Far to the left of him a bittern boomed, while in a high gum over his head two opossums fought and held high revel. One of these commenced

to chase the other, which ran down the tree trunk to the ground, swearing horribly. Joey sprang up and hopped away until he came to another fern patch, into which he sank exhausted.

The risen moon flooded the quiet bush with a soft light. No longer were the noisy opossums disturbing the neighbourhood, while the bittern had moved on. Joey's tired little ears drooped, and he sank into a fitful slumber.