



The C.K. Thompson Collection

Monarch of the Western Skies



by

C.K. THOMPSON

MONARCH OF THE WESTERN SKIES

The Story of a Wedge-tailed Eagle

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CHAPTER I.
THE DESERT EYRIE

OUT on the fringe of the vast western plains a pair of wedge-tailed eagles had built their eyrie high in the branches of a massive desert oak. It was over thirty feet above the ground, a large structure of sticks lined with leaves, which had braved the desert winds and dust storms for many years.

During those years, the two eagles had seen the swimming gold of the sun at dawn; had watched with unappreciative eyes the rich red sunset painting the sandhills and frowning, rocky mountain peaks and gullies in ever-changing colours of breath-taking beauty. They had seen dream creeks and waterholes fading into elusive mirages; and, at night, when disturbed in their sleep, their dreamy eyes had chanced to note and dwell upon the millions of silver desert stars suspended in space like glittering diamonds against a background of the richest and costliest velvet.

But these fierce and fascinating beauties of a fierce and fascinating land meant nothing to the eagles. The only beauty their majestic hearts appreciated was the beauty of the hunt and the glory of the kill. This land provided them with food and with drink, and that satisfied their physical and spiritual needs. The big birds knew where to find their natural prey, how to hunt down the rabbit, the wallaby, the

young kangaroo and the lizard, and, generally, they lived well. When the breeding season was over, and their young ones were ready to face the world with their own beaks and talons, the parent birds ranged far and wide, hunting, ever hunting. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles they might cover ere the breeding season instinctively lured them back to their favourite desert country and their ancient eyrie.

Many families had been raised and launched into the world by these two old eagles. Sometimes the seasons were bountiful and the birds lived well; sometimes drought made game scarce and life was hard for them. The present season, however, had been a good one. That arid country upon which rain might not fall for years, had been favoured by the Rain God, who had transformed it into a pleasant land on which to prey. Apart from the ever-present rabbit, the two eagles had found good hunting among the cockatoos, the galahs and other birds, and as they cleaned out their eyrie in preparation for their latest family, they were as happy and contented as savage birds of their kind were ever likely to be.

They were proud and haughty birds. Each could boast a wing-span of over seven feet, and there was nothing on the earth or in the sky of which either was afraid. Of man they had very little knowledge. Sometimes from the rare heights of the sky they had observed those curious two-legged creatures, but not often. This was not the country frequented by the human race; except a few wandering blackfellows on a walkabout to favourite yam patches or secret desert waterholes.

The Australian wedge-tail is the second largest eagle in the world. It is exceeded only by that magnificent bird which is found in the Philippine Islands and which lives on monkeys. Perhaps, unconsciously, the two old eagles realised this; certainly their dignity when in the air tended to prove that they knew they were no common birds.

Having cleaned and relined their eyrie, the wedge-tails set about the serious business of family life. Presently, two large mottled eggs occupied the nest, and in course of time produced two fluffy young eaglets.

The old birds were most attentive to their children, and many were the tit-bits brought to the eyrie to tempt their lusty appetites. Food was plentiful and the eaglets thrived mightily.

They were brothers, but not very friendly brothers. Wedge-tail, the larger of the twain, showed from the outset that he would not be content with second place; and had not his parents seen to it that the fruits of the hunt were distributed evenly between the youngsters, the smaller bird often would have gone hungry.

Wedge-tail was an aggressive and over-bearing young eagle, and his table manners left much to be desired. He wanted everything. There were occasions when the parent birds, in a hurry to return to the hunt when rabbits were plentiful, would fly to the eyrie, deposit a limp rabbit on the feeding platform, and depart immediately. It was then that Wedge-tail showed his true nature. He would appropriate the carcass to himself, disregarding his brother's frantic pleas for a share of what should have been an equally-divided meal.

But Wedge-tail was no gluttonous drone content to laze away his days in the eyrie while his parents waited upon him.

As the brother eaglets grew, and grow they did, in rapid fashion, he was the first to try his young wings. With his father, he travelled, at first unsteadily, but with ever-increasing confidence, over the wide plains in search of prey, while his smaller brother was left to the tuition of their mother.

Now, before the births of the two eaglets, the old birds had been accustomed to hunt in company after the fashion of their kind, but young Wedge-tail insinuated himself into his father's good graces and ousted his mother as hunting companion. Not that the old mother minded this at all. She knew that Wedge-tail could have no better teacher than his father and she was quite content to impart to her smaller son all the wisdom she had learned during her long and exciting lifetime.

And Wedge-tail learned many things during those interesting hunting days. At first his father would not permit him to join in the kill. There would be time enough for that later, when his young wings were stronger and he knew how to use them properly.

During Wedge-tail's school days his father at first preyed upon such small animals and birds as he could handle alone. Sometimes he had to be stern with his son. The eaglet had been given to understand quite definitely that his part, for a time, would consist merely of watching and learning. His role was to circle slowly above the ground and note what went on. Later he would be permitted to join in.

As time passed, so did the lessons progress. Like a child at school, Wedge-tail was taken step by step and from class to class.

There were many needful things that the old eagle taught him: how to dive from a great height, descend with terrific speed and force and pull out of his dizzy, headlong dive as he struck his prey; how to seize a small animal, such as a rabbit, and soar upwards again without touching the ground; how to swoop upon a young kangaroo, bury his talons into the animal's shoulders, and beat it to the ground with his powerful wings; how to drop unexpectedly from the clouds upon a swiftly-moving cockatoo or galah; and many other things.

In this arid land there were no rivers or creeks where they were needed for the creatures of the wild to drink their fills of life-giving water at any hour of the day. Here and there were water-holes, some large, but the majority all too small. Dotted over the plains, too, were numerous claypans, varying in size from several acres to several square feet; but, as all the wild things knew, these claypans were not to be depended upon, except for a brief period after rain.

Continuous winds in days long past had blown the sands away, leaving the heavier clay particles to form shallow depressions which held any rainwater while the thirsty country round them quickly absorbed it. Being no more than a few inches deep, the claypans were only transient water-containers, the hot sun quickly evaporating the water and then baking their surfaces to a concrete hardness.

Wedge-tail and his brother were shown all the waterholes and claypans within flying distance. They soon learned to distinguish between a claypan that held water and one that, reflecting the fierce heat of the molten sun, would render a downward swoop a sheer waste of flying time.

While it lasted, however, the water in a claypan was delicious, even though whitened with dissolved clay.

Routine journeys to one or another of the waterholes were taken early each morning by the wedge-tail family, and though invariably the selected hole teemed with small bird life, no other creature dared dispute the rights of the great eagles.

Wedge-tail remembered vividly his first visit to a waterhole. As he and the other three members of the family sailed into view, thousands of smaller birds, budgerigars, finches, grass-parrots, galahs and many other kinds, rose in clouds, protesting shrilly.

Wedge-tail had never before seen so many birds at one time. This waterhole was the only one for many miles around, and it lured to it many thousands of the smaller birds. Not possessing the strength and long range of eagles, these little creatures had to stay near the water, or perish trying to reach the next hole, many long and thirsty miles over the horizon.

As the young eagle drank, he was conscious of the wheeling thousands above him. In gigantic flocks the little green and yellow budgerigars almost blotted out the morning sun as they circled all together, swooping, turning and wheeling, wave after wave in perfect time.

The four eagles had hardly risen into the air before the myriads of their smaller brothers were again at the water's edge. Later, their thirsts quenched, they would fly off to their nearby haunts until the next day's sunrise brought them back again.

And so Wedge-tail's education proceeded under the careful tuition of his wise old parents. He learned the ways of the wild creatures as well as the ways of his own kith and kin.

The first occasion on which his father allowed him to share in a kill was a red-letter day for the eaglet. The old bird considered it judicious not to allow the youngster actually to attack the prey in conjunction with him. That would be a later lesson, in which close co-operation would be most essential.

Circling high in the blue one morning, the parent eagle saw, far below, a small kangaroo feeding. Wedge-tail also saw it, and looked to his father for guidance.

Like a falling star, the old eagle dropped from the sky and, reaching the kangaroo, sunk his claws into its back, buffeted its head with his powerful wings, and then soared off into the air again. Young Wedge-tail, close behind him, did not understand the move. He pulled out of his dive and soared back after his father, but that bird made no attempt again to attack the kangaroo, which was now hopping wildly towards a belt of distant scrub.

Greatly puzzled, Wedge-tail circled round and kept an eye on the animal. He did not know what was expected of him. He got no hint or assistance from his father, who continued to float high above him.

Indecision was driven from Wedge-tail's head by a daring

idea. Why not tackle the kangaroo on his own? His father had never before allowed him to do such a thing, but always there had to be a first time. Perhaps this was it.

The idea had no sooner taken shape in his head than he dropped down swiftly upon the fleeing animal, striking it savagely with his hooked beak and sharp talons as he had seen his father do.

This kangaroo was young, but it was large, and though Wedge-tail was an inexperienced bird, he had enough intelligence to realise that he alone could not hope to subdue it. His father's apparent disinterest, therefore, puzzled the youngster.

Clinging to the kangaroo and beating its head with his wings, he saw that he was making little impression on it. His inherent savage nature prevented him from giving up the struggle, so he hung on, hoping for the best, while the kangaroo bounded for the safety of the scrub.

Presently Wedge-tail heard the beating of wings above him. Instinct told him it was his father, but why didn't the old bird come to his assistance? He must surely have appreciated his son's predicament!

It was then that he lost his grip on the hide of the fleeing kangaroo, and tumbled to the ground. Jumping and wobbling around, his air-born dignity quite lost on solid earth and his pride not a little wounded, he glared with hard agate eyes after the kangaroo, to see his father swoop down on it and repeat the clawing and buffeting for a few seconds ere he once again soared upwards.

Swiftly Wedge-tail was in the air too, realisation flooding his intelligent brain. His father had not let him down, neither was the old eagle playing some stupid game to make him look foolish. No. It was all part of a careful plan. The kangaroo was too big for them to kill, either alone or in concerted attack, so his wise old parent had planned that each should chase it and attack it in turn until it was worn out. Then the kill would be simplified.

And so it proved. Now that Wedge-tail knew what was expected of him, he joined his father in the air and then, swooping and striking and soaring in turn, they had that kangaroo tired out and near to exhaustion long before it could reach the sanctuary of the distant scrub.

The kill came swiftly. With the unfortunate animal hardly able to drag one leg after another, both birds, old and young, attacked together, ripping and tearing with beaks and talons until they had deprived the kangaroo of its life.

Wedge-tail really enjoyed that meal. It was his first large prey. In after years he was to do greater deeds than this; but the deep thrill of that first great moment in his career never entirely left him.

Their feast concluded, they rose majestically, the old bird in the lead, and sailed off slowly and with dignity towards their distant lookout, leaving the remains of the kangaroo to those dark scavengers of bush, plains and desert, the crows. A flock of these had been assembling from far and near since the attack on the kangaroo had begun, and their karking voices had sounded a harsh requiem for the slaughtered marsupial.

It was now very close to the time when Wedge-tail and his brother would have to leave the parent eyrie to fend for themselves.

And so it happened that one bright morning as the four birds were perched in a large bloodwood tree, the old eagles, without the slightest hint to their sons, soared away into the heavens. Wedge-tail and his brother looked at each other with surprise and then Wedge-tail took off. With his brother close behind him, he flew swiftly after his parents, who were now dots against the white morning clouds.

But the old birds were not travelling fast and the youngsters caught up with them.

Then a most disconcerting thing occurred for, without any hint of their intentions, the parents turned on their sons, the old male selecting Wedge-tail and the female the smaller brother.

Surprised and hurt by the sudden attack of his father, Wedge-tail dropped several yards towards earth, recovered his poise, and was climbing again when he saw his father, a wheeling, menacing figure, circling above him, wings out-stretched and wedge-tail stark against the sky. At the same time he noticed, out of the corner of an eye, his small brother fleeing southwards, their mother in full chase.

His uncertainty as to what he should do quickly changed into consternation as his father swooped at him and attempted to claw his head. Wedge-tail dodged and fled. There was nothing else to do. He did not stop and he did not look behind, until he was back among the branches of

the bloodwood tree. Here he discovered his woebegone brother disconsolately sitting on a branch and looking ruffled. Wedge-tail noticed that he had lost several breast feathers. Mother, apparently, had been rough and unkind to small brother!

Far away in the western sky, the two youngsters saw their parents—two fast-vanishing specks which soon disappeared altogether.

The breeding season had come round again and they were returning to their old eyrie on the fringe of the desert. Wedge-tail and his brother were not wanted any longer. Their education had been completed and the world was theirs to make the best they could of it.

Wedge-tail and his brother realised that from now on it was to be each bird for himself.

CHAPTER II.
AN EAGLE PASSES ON

AS the sun climbed higher into the heavens, hunger urged Wedge-tail to cease pining for his lost parents and to devote himself to the all-important task of earning his breakfast. As the morning meal was most unlikely to come to him, he must go in search of it.

Hitherto, he had never hunted alone, but there was nothing else to do this morning, because his brother as a partner of the chase was an unknown and untried quantity.

Leaving the bloodwood tree, he rose majestically into the air. High he climbed and still higher, before making towards a distant patch of lightly-timbered country over which, under his father's leadership, he had hunted on many occasions. Reaching the desired area, he began the usual wide circle, his eyes keenly alert for the slightest movement on the earth below. The only moving thing he saw, however, was his own shadow, but as he watched he saw a similar shadow.

Removing his gaze from the sun-warmed ground, his keen eyes raked the surrounding air. There, not far away, flew his brother, also describing the preying circle.

Instinctively the two eagles became one concentrated hunting machine. Each maintaining his own wide sweep

and gradually covering a wider stretch of country, not one square foot of ground remained unexplored.

It was Wedge-tail who first saw a victim. Far below lay a small group of ironwood trees and in the shade cast by their small and narrow leaves, his quick eye had detected movement. He knew what caused it—a rabbit, or rabbits, lying in the shade to escape the heat of the sun.

There was no need here for his brother's assistance! Swiftly he dropped and as he did so, he noticed that there were four or five rabbits in the group. So much the better for both birds. If his brother was as alert as he, breakfast for each was there for the taking.

That Brother was equally alert was quickly demonstrated for, as soon as he saw Wedge-tail fall, he, too, threw himself into the downward plunge, planing speedily towards the shade of the ironwoods. The rabbits were taken completely by surprise. One moment there were five of them. Suddenly the sky became overcast. There was a flurry of giant wings and three terror-stricken bunnies gazed with horror at their feathered visitors who towered over them with fierce eyes and menacing beaks. The other two rabbits took no interest in the proceedings. Lifeless they lay, flattened under the talons of Wedge-tail and his brother.

But the eagles were not interested in the terrified trio, and scarcely noticed them as, freed from the hypnotic spell cast on them by the birds' arrival, they fled into the open and down their burrows like three furry bullets.

Their meal over, Wedge-tail and his brother ascended

into the upper air and proceeded slowly eastwards. The rabbits had not been large ones and it was not long ere each bird again felt the urge to eat.

A flight of several miles brought them into country that was unfamiliar to them. They had left the desert fringe and had passed over the low rocky range. Here the earth was not so bare, and as they floated easily along, Wedge-tail noted several moving objects. He could not determine what they were, so planed down to obtain a closer view.

It was his first encounter with sheep and the first thought that entered his feathered head was, were they good to eat? Their size, he saw, precluded a lone attack. Would his brother and he, in combined adventure, be able to cope with one of them?

Before doing anything rash, however, he deemed it wise to investigate these strange animals at close quarters.

Dropping earthwards, not in the hunting dive, but in a slow and cautious circle, Wedge-tail alighted within a few yards of half a dozen sheep. Tensely cautious, and ready to spring into the air if they should attack him, he studied them closely. They were fully grown and, at close quarters, looked much too large for him to tackle.

Brother had not followed Wedge-tail to the ground when he had seen he was not on a killing hunt, but circled uncertainly a hundred feet up, watching and waiting.

On the ground, Wedge-tail was a far different bird from the noble creature of the air. His big wings and thick feathered legs made his movements clumsy. If he were slow in

his movements he could walk with some dignity, but any tendency to hurry turned him into a hopping, flopping ridiculous bird.

Standing like a grave statue, he could not make up his mind what to do, and was on the point of joining his brother in the heavens when Brother, impatient to learn what was going on, planed down and joined him on the ground.

Brother was hungry, and was minded to try conclusions with a sheep without counting the consequences, but he received no encouragement from the cautious Wedge-tail. As for the sheep, they regarded the two birds with some concern. They had seen their kind before and associated unpleasant things with them.

None of the sheep were over-burdened with brains, and as long as the eagles made no attempt to interfere with them, the woolly animals were content not to initiate any moves. Not for a single moment would any of them have considered attacking these visitors from the clouds. Being sheep, they were not built that way. But one or two of them did vaguely associate these eagles with something unpleasant, though they did not know what caused the mistrust. Deep thinking is not a characteristic of one of nature's stupidest animals. They live for to-day. Yesterday is as if it has never been, while to-morrow is something that might never be.

An old ram ceased grazing for a moment to stare at the eagles who stood like frozen statues and returned the stare. The old ram in his dim brain tried to catch some elusive thought, some intangible thread of recollection, but it was

too much for him, and he resumed his grass munching with a slight headache.

The elusive something that had escaped the animal was that just after he had been born, a wedge-tail eagle had tried to carry him off, but had been detected in the act and scared away by a human boundary rider. Such an experience would have scarred deeply the memory of an intelligent human or beast, but that old sheep was not distinguished for its sensitive reasoning powers.

Deeming it profitless to remain there longer, Wedge-tail took off. Before leaving the vicinity he wheeled slowly over the paddock, taking stock of the countryside. Then he noticed that his brother was not with him. A glance earthwards revealed him still on the ground.

As Wedge-tail watched, he saw his brother jumping and wobbling over the stubbled earth towards what looked like a rabbit. In an instant Wedge-tail was planing swiftly back to the ground. If there was any food about he intended to share it-or appropriate the whole lot if possible.

He reached his brother to find him standing over a dead rabbit. Wedge-tail had never before eaten anything he had not himself killed; nevertheless, he had a keen appetite and meant to have a share of this morsel.

Brother had quite a different idea. He intended to eat the lot. As Wedge-tail jumped at him, he uttered a harsh scream and prepared to do battle for the trophy, now held firmly beneath his talons.

Wedge-tail made a vicious peck at his brother and beat his

wings threateningly. Brother pecked back just as viciously and then threw himself at Wedge-tail. Knocked temporarily off his balance and unable to recover quickly, Wedge-tail was considerably chagrined to observe his brother take to the air, the rabbit firmly held in his talons.

It was a matter of seconds before Wedge-tail, too, was on the wing, but he disdained to follow his brother, who was flying rapidly towards a tall gum tree half a mile away. Here, perched safely on a big branch, he proceeded to lunch off the dead bunny, scattering the bones and unwanted portions on the ground below.

In the meantime, Wedge-tail was searching for any other rabbits, dead or alive, that might be around, but, except for the sheep, he could detect no life below.

He was still circling when he was joined by his brother. He made no sign, because he was not pleased with that brother.

Taking up a position about 50 feet below Wedge-tail, the other eagle began to circle also. Wedge-tail watched him with dislike, half-inclined to dive down and peck him on the neck. He was a selfish and unbrotherly bird in Wedge-tail's opinion; which showed that Wedge-tail had a memory that, if not short, was at least convenient, for, had not he, himself, in their eaglet days, been the glutton of the eyrie, ever ready to appropriate to himself the food that belonged equally to both?

As he watched his brother wheeling below, his sharp eyes noticed that something was wrong with him. No

longer was he sailing in graceful circles, but was flapping his wings as if in distress. A wedge-tail eagle can sail in the sky for a long time without a single wing-beat, and Brother was quite capable of that, as Wedge-tail knew. What then, was the trouble?

Wedge-tail paused in flight as an agonised scream floated up to him and he saw his brother flap his wings in wild flight. Across the plains he went, making for the waterhole just visible in the distance. Suddenly his speed slackened and he began to lose height. Slowly at first, and then with gathering momentum, he started to drop.

Forgetting his dislike of a brother who had not shared a meal with him, Wedge-tail planed swiftly after him and so fast was he that they reached earth at exactly the same moment.

Without question, the other eagle was in sore distress. He lay on the ground with feebly-beating wings and making harsh, croaking noises which startled the grazing sheep, causing them to rush swiftly from the vicinity. Then two crows began a mournful, but anticipatory karking from a low bush, which made Wedge-tail glare with hate-filled eyes in their direction.

His brother was dying. Of that there was no question. And he was dying a pitiful death, for the rabbit he had eaten had been poisoned. At sundown the previous day, stockmen had laid poison baits for rabbits. Among the unlucky animals that had eaten a bait was the rabbit off which Brother had lunched. Feeling the poison taking ef-

fect, an overpowering thirst had come to him and he was making a frantic effort to reach water when the poison did its deadly work and he crashed to earth.

There was nothing Wedge-tail could do about the matter, but the great eagle stood there somberly watching his brother, whose struggles were becoming fainter and fainter. No more would he range the open skies, hunting for his meals over desert, plains and bush.

Wedge-tail's brother and companion was dead. A short ten minutes earlier, that magnificent bird, filled with the joy of the hunt and so vitally alive, had been with him high in the blue. Now he was just a pathetic mound of feathers—food for the scavenger crows that waited, like impatient harbingers of doom, in the low bush nearby.

On heavy wings and with a heavy heart, Wedge-tail soared into the clouds. The crows left the low bush and hopped towards the dead eagle . . .

During the days and weeks that followed, Wedge-tail prospected many miles of country. He did not return to the desert fringe where he had been born, neither did he again visit the sheep country where he had lost his brother.

And so his life went on.

It was several seasons before he found a mate. The delay was not occasioned through any desire on his part to live alone, but merely because his species in his new area was not plentiful. Occasionally he met others of his kind, but did not co-operate with them in the hunt, mainly because they were in pairs and in the life of an eagle, as in the lives

of many other species, human or animal. two is company.

Now, had Wedge-tail known the reason for this dearth of his species in this stretch of country, he might have felt some concern for his own safety.

A hungry wedge-tailed eagle had stolen a lamb from a paddock. He had been detected in the act by a stockman. The lamb had been but a small weak thing whose expectation of life in any case, was not bright. This, however, was beside the point. It was a lamb, and an eagle had killed it. What was more, the eagle had flown off with it in its talons.

The story gained in the telling, as a lot of stories do, and so exaggerated did it become that stockmen and boundary riders, without any evidence to support their stories, were telling each other that scores of lambs were being eaten by eagles, and that something would have to be done about it. Something was done. War was waged against all eagles with poison and with rifle.

Wedge-tail's brother had been unfortunate in eating the poisoned rabbit, because it had not been left there for a passing eagle. It had been killed by a bait deliberately left for rabbits.

In blissful ignorance of these sinister occurrences which had so reduced the number of eagles in this part of the country, Wedge-tail lived serenely on, hunting and killing his meals as he had done since he had made his first kill under the critically-watchful eyes of his veteran father.

And kill his meals he did always. He never stooped to eating dead things. Something deep down inside him

warned him against that practice. Perhaps it was the recollection of what had happened to his brother; perhaps it was because he thrilled too much to the excitement of the hunt to descend to the questionable habit of eating carrion like a common crow.

Wedge-tail did not like crows. He regarded them as so many parasites that hung around an eagle after he had caught his dinner, hoping to collect the scraps, and so win a meal without having to work for it. There actually had been occasions when, lurching off a young kangaroo or wallaby, or perhaps a large lizard, he had had to chase away impudent crows which had attempted to sneak portions from under his very beak. One of these fine days, Wedge-tail told himself savagely, he would attack some of these wretched birds and teach the survivors such a lesson that they would be glad to hunt their own meals and leave a hardworking and conscientious eagle in peace.

Most of the crows in those parts had a healthy respect for Wedge-tail, but there were other hardened villains who had not.

Floating high above a patch of mulga, Wedge-tail noticed a small flock of galahs leave it and fly, screaming loudly, towards another group of trees, about a mile away. He had not tasted galah for some time.

Like an arrow from a powerful bow, down he went travelling with such speed that the galahs did not see him until he was among them.

Selecting one plump bird, with accuracy timed to the

fraction of a second he soon had it tightly gripped in his talons, his whirling wings knocking its companions right and left. A small cloud of feathers floated away on the faint breeze as Wedge-tail gained height again.

The galah, however, was not quite dead, and with one last effort managed to give Wedge-tail a sharp nip on the toe. Surprised, the eagle loosened his grip and like a ball of tattered feathers, the galah went tumbling downwards. Quite unperturbed, Wedge-tail poised himself for an instant, and then dropped like a bullet. He had that galah firmly in his talons long before it reached the earth, and went off to finish his meal in the peaceful foliage of a big stringy-bark tree.