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WARRIGAL the WARRIOR

by

C.K. THOMPSON

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DEDICATION.

To my old school and bush mate DOUGLAS PERRY, of Tenambit, N.S.W.

Dear Doug.,

It is a far cry to the old bush days when we were younger and the world, to our minds at least, was wider. Do you recall those happy times we spent with gun, rabbit trap, rod and reel, in country where the mournful howl of the hunting dingo has long since given way to civilisation and thriving settlement ? Particularly, do you remember that awful Christmas Day we spent helping to save the small settlement from the ravages of bush fire ? It is many years ago, but I still remember vividly that Black Christmas, and the frantic scenes as we fought desperately to save the homes of those good folk who, in between assisting us, piled their worldly goods into heaps in the sole street the little village possessed. There is not much bush there these days, and the village is a prosperous little town. I think it most fitting that you should now be Captain of the Tenambit Bush Fire Brigade, but my devout hope is that your equipment will get rusty through lack of use.

As a poultry farmer, you cannot be expected to love Warrigal; and it is rather anomalous that I should seek

to immortalise him. My mind harks back to those days and nights—in East Maitland and Tenambit, over 20 years ago now, when the killer-dog made life miserable for poultry farmers.

After nine residents had lost fowls valued at hundreds of pounds, didn't you and I sit up, night after night, with rifles, awaiting the killer's onslaught upon my father's poultry run ? And wasn't it positively maddening that when we decided to take a night off and get some sleep, on July 25, 1925, the killer struck, and my father lost 70 fowls, dragged one by one from their perches and left scattered all over the yard ? They got him, but neither you nor I shared in the £20 reward.

I have some old newspaper cuttings telling of those days and nights when the killer stalked abroad, but it is all done with now.

Times change and the world marches on. I am reminded of those nostalgic lines of "Banjo" Paterson —

"I would fain go back to the old grey river,
To the old bush days when our hearts were
light;
But, alas! those days they have fled for ever,
They are like the swans that have swept from
sight.

And I know full well that the strangers' faces
Would meet us now in our dearest places;
For our day is dead and has left no traces
But the thoughts that live in my mind to-night."

There is a new generation that knows little about the bush and the creatures that inhabit it. I have not sought to glorify Warrigal, neither have I condemned him. I have just tried to present him as he really is, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will.

Warrigal is as Australian as are we human beings, and like us human beings, he is not all bad. He is as Nature fashioned him.

Yours for old time's sake,

—C. K. THOMPSON.

CHAPTER I.
THE HOME OF THE DINGO.

HIGH in the heavens the full moon rode in all her majestic splendor, shedding her soft radiance over the rugged mountain range. Around her glittered her uncounted starry companions, set in their dark velvet background as if some joyful sprite had thrown there with a prodigal hand a diamond shower in tribute to the Moon Queen.

The mountain range, under the glare of the noon day sun, showed ugly gashes where deep gorges, walled in by rugged, frowning crags and cliffs, cradled mountain creeks and silent pools; but the quiet lunar radiance softly painted this harshness into a canvas of wild beauty, hiding the ugliness and silvering the surf ace of the creeks and pools with leaf-filtered moonlight.

Out of the depths of a gorge came the mournful call of a tawny frogmouth, a quick run of echoing "ooms" which did nothing to relieve the loneliness. The mopoke kept up his monotonous call for a time and then, feeling hungry, left the limb of the tree on which he had been resting, and flew off, on muffled wings, in search of food.

On a huge, bare, domed rock which literally overhung the chasm, sat an old dingo like a stone idol. Sharp-etched

against the moon, his stiff ears erect and his bushy tail curled slightly round his hind-quarters, he appeared to be waiting for something to happen. Around him the mountains and the bush were quiet. Not even the call of a mopoke, the booming of a bittern or the harsh cry of a wandering curlew, disturbed the peace. It was a rather ominous peace, as if Nature were holding her breath in apprehensive expectation of coming events that might not be pleasant.

Presently the old dingo unfroze. He turned his head this way and that, but saw nothing to interest him. He looked down over the edge of the rock into the chasm beneath and saw less.

Raising his head and pointing his sharp muzzle to the moon, he gave two yelps, paused, and then let out a long sad howl as if the brooding silence were breaking his heart. Away to the north came an answering howl, which was taken up from near and far. It was as if the entire dingo population had been awaiting the signal to commence.

The old dingo was a handsome dog, a purebred Warrigal whose ancient ancestors had roamed south-eastern Asia when the world was very young. A silent and a deadly hunter, his dark yellow body was just five feet long from the end of his pointed muzzle to the tip of his bushy tail. His short, stiff, pointed ears were always on the alert, and his heavy jaws, distinctive for that terrible power that enabled him to tear away completely the flesh gripped in their bite, rarely missed their prey.

In this respect, however, he was not superior to any member of the pack. Each and every dog was an experienced hunter. Usually each hunted alone, or with his mate; only when the game was too big for one or two to tackle did all the wild dogs combine in the adventure.

For many years, the original pack, large in the seasons

when hunting was good, and small when game was not so plentiful, had hunted over prosperous territory in the far north as their ancestors had done before them. They had preyed upon all the marsupials, but chiefly the smaller kinds or the youngsters of the big kangaroos and wallaroos, and had found their living very good.

As time went on, however, hunting parties of white men began to slaughter the kangaroos and wallabies. Other men followed with their flocks of sheep and herds of fat cattle. The men wrought more destruction among the marsupials with guns and dogs and their flocks and herds with grass-hungry mouths. Poison set for rabbits had decimated the ground birds and had accounted also for many dingoes.

With their natural prey gone, the dingoes had to migrate to other country, but it was the same sorry story. No matter where they travelled, they found that men, eager to commercialise the skins of native animals, were depriving the wild dogs of their natural prey. In retaliation, and because they had to eat, the dingoes turned their attention to the sheep, lambs and calves of the human invaders.

Of course, the human settlers could not be expected to regard this with a friendly eye. They persecuted the dingoes ruthlessly with poison, trap and gun. Many men devoted the whole of their time to trapping and shooting dingoes. These men were called “doggers”.

The pack to which the old dingo belonged had now established itself firmly among the rocky and precipitous gorges and bluffs of a mountain range which overlooked wide acres of grazing property. The various members lived in small caves, holes in the rocks, hollow logs and other shelters, rarely venturing out of their secure hiding places during the daylight hours; but as the sun went down, they began to emerge into the dusk, each on hunting business.

Like so many swift and silent shadows, they slipped down from their rocky fastnesses to the open plains, there to range far and wide.

In a small cave overlooking the edge of a rather steep cliff, the old dingo had established his home. His mate was not a true dingo.

Years before, a party of tourists from a distant city had spent a holiday on a sheep station. With them had been a very handsome collie. He was a venturesome dog who had been kept on a chain, but one beautiful warm night in early summer, he had managed to slip out of his collar and, exhilarated with a sense of freedom from restraint, had gone frisking and skipping around the paddocks, bent on an exploration by moonlight.

Down along the creek he had come face to face with a hunting female dingo. The surprise was mutual. The dingo had never seen such a dog before, and was very wary. As to the collie, he had seen nothing strange in the tawny dog. He had met all kinds of canines in his time, and this was just another one to him. Still feeling the exhilarating effects of his freedom, and a little intoxicated by the sweet cool air on the moonlit plains, his attitude was one of complete friendliness. He considered that nothing would be pleasanter than a romp with this newcomer.

His friendly overtures were not received kindly by the lady dingo. She had no desire to romp with the collie or with any other dog. She was hungry and was hunting for her evening meal. Thus, when the collie fawned upon her, she met him with rolled back lip and fierce white fangs, which abashed him. Still, he was ready to make concessions to a lady, so did not press his attentions upon her; but when she slid silently away among the trees, he trotted after her.

Nobody ever saw that handsome collie dog again. His

disappearance remained a complete mystery to the station owner and his city guests, who were forced to return home without their pet.

But, up in the hills where the dingoes lived, the collie and the lady dog he had met on the banks of the creek in the moonlight, became friends. The collie was not made very welcome by the rest of the pack. None of them liked him, and they were not backward in letting him know it. He stayed with them, leading an uneasy existence, for several weeks and fast tiring of the hostility and the hard life.

Life had been hard for him, too. He was no hunter. Before he had run away, food always had been provided for him by his master. He never had to worry where his next meal was coming from. In the dingo country it was different. Each animal had to fend for itself, and those that could not hunt had to go hungry. It is a fact that the collie would have died from starvation had not his dingo mate hunted for both of them.

The male dingoes resented his presence, one animal especially having no time for him. This was a hardy young dog who had long desired the female dingo for a mate. He was not a very courageous animal and did not feel like fighting for the lady; but he found ways and means of making life unpleasant for the poor collie.

Unable to stand the strain and the hard life any more, the collie resolved to return to the cattle station, and one day when the pack was sleeping in its various hide-outs, he slipped away, intent on making his way down from the hills and reaching the station with all possible speed.

Unfortunately, the collie was unused to these rugged places. He could not climb the rocks and slide down the slopes like the agile dingoes. So it transpired that, while attempting to negotiate a particularly treacherous piece

of rocky ground, he missed his footing and fell hundreds of feet, to meet a lonely death at the bottom of the deep valley below.

Time passed, and his dingo mate became the mother of three little pups. One of these was carried off by a marauding wedge-tailed eagle; another, a sickly little animal, did not live. The third, however, a very handsome dog, something like her father, grew and thrived. In due course she mated with a member of the pack—the old dingo now sitting on the rock and serenading the moon.

Though there was as much collie as dingo in her, she was a good hunter and a good fighter, too, if the occasion demanded; but her ways were more gentle than those of her fierce fullblooded dingo sisters.

She had not gone out hunting this night, but had stayed at home in the cave with her young son, Warrigal. She was not feeling very well; in fact she had not felt well for several days, not since eating a dead rabbit she had found down a gorge leading out on to the plains.

So when her lord and master, the old dingo, had slipped out of their cave into the gathering dusk, she had not followed him. She felt quite confident that if the hunting was good, he would bring back something for Warrigal and her.

Squatting on his high rock and still howling dismally, the old dingo was trying to make up his mind whether he would prospect the plains in search of rabbits or small, sleeping ground birds, or try his luck after a lamb on a far distant sheep station. From many points around him came yelps and howls as if other members of the pack, too, were trying to make up their minds.

At last, becoming aware of the fact that a meal was most unlikely to jump up on the rock and into his mouth, the old dingo ceased howling, swung around on his haunches,

dropped lightly to the ground and vanished into the thickets, presently to make his agile way down through the rocks and scrub until he reached the bottom of the gorge. He had no definite plans in mind, but was content to gather in anything that might present itself.

Luck was with him, because he had not gone far along the bottom of the gorge before he came to an open space. It was well grassed and was practically surrounded by stunted bushes. Right in the centre of the clearing was a large rabbit busily dining on the short grass, while another was doing likewise in the shadow thrown by a bush at the edge of the clearing.

The old dingo came to a halt and dropped into his characteristic crouch. Apart from the feeding rabbits, the bush around him was quiet. Without making the slightest sound, he began to creep to the right, seeking the cover of bushes and tufts of grass. Through these he crept, his tawny body pressed close to the earth, the rabbits quite unconscious of his presence—which was not surprising, for there is nothing more silent than the hunting dingo that sees the prey in its grasp.

His objective was the rabbit feeding near the bush, but before he could get to within leaping range, the furry animal moved out into the moonlight towards its companion. Quite undismayed, the old dog reached the bush and crawled under it. There he stayed for a few minutes, his body part of the shadows, his keen, fierce eyes boring into the rabbit's back.

With patience born of long experience, the dingo waited. The rabbit joined its companion and they fed together for a time. Then they separated, both making slow progress to the opposite side of the clearing.

The dingo cast searching eyes around the vicinity and what he saw satisfied him. Withdrawing backwards from

the shelter of the bush, he began a swift, though silent, circuit, taking advantage of every piece of cover, merging his body with shadow where available, becoming part of a patch of sand when crossing a few yards of country devoid of any cover at all, and freezing into immobility when one of the rabbits sat up straight with quivering ears as though disturbed by some alien presence.

Quite satisfied in its own simple mind that all was well, the bunny again set to work on the tasty grass, and before it had moved three feet, the dingo was hidden under another bush exactly opposite the one under which it had first crouched.

As the feeding rabbit came nearer, the dingo shrank more and more into itself, tensing for the spring that would send it like a dart from a blowpipe at its prey.

Blissfully unconscious of impending disaster, the two rabbits, now feeding side by side again, came closer and closer to the bush.

His practised eye told the old dingo that the supreme moment had arrived. Like a yellow streak he flew through the air and, as he seized one rabbit in his terrible jaws, he hurled his body sideways, crushing the other down to earth. Swift bites deprived the first rabbit of its life and, dropping it, he quickly seized the second and it, too, died violently.

Certainly it had been a great stroke of luck for the old wild dog. Though hungry, he did not begin his meal on the spot. He had a marked dislike for open spaces.

Picking up one of the rabbits, he took it and dropped it behind a bush, and then returned for the other. This he also took behind a bush, and commenced to dine at his leisure.

His meal over, the old dingo picked up the second bunny in his mouth and began his homeward trek. Without allowing side issues to detract him, he went, as straight as

geographical circumstances would permit, up the rugged rocky tracks that led him to his home cave. When he got there he deposited the rabbit at the feet of his mate and lay down at the entrance of the cave as she ate her meal.

Little Warrigal was dozing in the background, but instinct told him that food was handy. He became wide awake instantly and waddled forward for his share.

The old dingo did not do any more hunting that night. He paid a short visit to his favorite rock some hours before dawn, and exchanged a few companionable howls and yelps with a distant crony who was squatting on another rock overlooking another gorge. That, however, was a matter of habit.

As the sun peeped above the horizon, he retired to his cave where his wife and son were already sleeping.