



Australian Legendary Tales

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AUSTRALIAN LEGENDARY TALES

Folk-lore of the Noongahburrahs
As told to the Picaninnies
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with Introduction by Andrew Lang, M.A.

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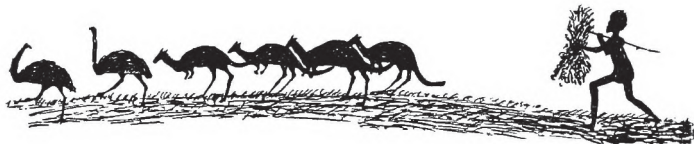
Contents

PREFACE	I
INTRODUCTION, BY ANDREW LANG, M.A.	4
DINEWAN THE EMU, AND GOOMBLEGUBBON THE BUSTARD	9
THE GALAH, AND OOLAH THE LIZARD	13
BAHLOO THE MOON, AND THE DAENS	15
THE ORIGIN OF THE NARRAN LAKE	17
GOOLOO THE MAGPIE, AND THE WAHROOGAH	20
THE WEEOOMBEENS AND THE PIGGIEBILLAH	24
BOOTOOLGAH THE CRANE AND GOONUR THE KANGAROO RAT, THE FIRE MAKERS	28
WEEDAH THE MOCKING BIRD	33
THE GWINERBOOS THE REDBREASTS	37
MEAMEI THE SEVEN SISTERS	41
THE COOKOOBURRAHS AND THE GOOLAHGOOL	47
THE MAYAMAH	49
THE BUNBUNDOOLOOEYS	51
OONGNAIRWAH AND GUINAREY	53
NARAHDARN THE BAT	54
MULLYANGAH THE MORNING STAR	58
GOOMBLEGUBBON, BEEARGAI, AND OUYAN	61
MOOREGOO THE MOPOKE, AND BAHLOO THE MOON	63
OUYAN THE CURLEW	64
DINEWAN THE EMU, AND WAHN THE CROWS	67
GOOLAHWILLEEL THE TOPKNOT PIGEONS	68
GOONUR, THE WOMAN-DOCTOR	70

DEEREEREE THE WAGTAIL, AND THE RAINBOW	75
MOOREGOO THE MOPOKE, AND MOONINGUGGAHGUL	
THE MOSQUITO BIRD	77
BOUGOODOOGAHDAAH THE RAIN BIRD	81
THE BORAH OF BYAMEE	84
BUNNYEARL THE FLIES AND WURRUNNUNNAH THE BEES	94
DEEGEENBOYAH THE SOLDIER-BIRD	95
MAYRAH, THE WIND THAT BLOWS THE WINTER AWAY	101
WAYAMBEH THE TURTLE	103
WIRREENUN THE RAINMAKER	105
NATIVE TEXT OF THE FIRST TALE (APPENDIX)	109
GLOSSARY	112

THE WEEOOMBEENS AND THE PIGGIEBILLAH

Two Weeoombeen brothers went out hunting. One brother was much younger than the other and smaller, so when they sighted an emu, the elder one said to the younger: "You stay quietly here and do not make a noise, or Piggiebillah, whose camp we passed just now, will hear you and steal the emu if I kill it. He is so strong.



I'll go on and try to kill the emu with this stone." The little Weeoombeen watched his big brother sneak up to the emu, crawling along, almost flat, on the ground. He saw him get quite close to the emu, then spring up quickly and throw the stone with such an accurate aim as to kill the bird on the spot. The little brother was so rejoiced that he forgot his brother's caution, and he called aloud in his joy. The big Weeoombeen looked round and gave him a warning sign, but too late, Piggiebillah had heard the cry and was hastening towards them. Quickly big Weeoombeen left the emu and joined his little brother.

Piggiebillah, when he came up, said: "What have you found?"

"Nothing," said the big Weeoombeen, "nothing but some mistletoe berries."

"It must have been something more than that, or your little brother would not have called out so loudly."

Little Weeoombeen was so afraid that Piggiebillah would find their emu and take it, that he said: "I hit a little

bird with a stone, and I was glad I could throw so straight."

"It was no cry for the killing of a little bird or for the finding of mistletoe berries that I heard. It was for something much more than either, or you would not have called out so joyfully. If you do not tell me at once I will kill you both."

The Weeoombeen brothers were frightened, for Piggiebillah was a great fighter and very strong, so when they saw he was really angry, they showed him the dead emu.

"Just what I want for my supper," he said, and so saying, dragged it away to his own camp. The Weeoombeens followed him and even helped him to make a fire to cook the emu, hoping by so doing to get a share given to them. But Piggiebillah would not give them any; he said he must have it all for himself.

Angry and disappointed, the Weeoombeens marched straight off and told some black fellows who lived near, that Piggiebillah had a fine fat emu just cooked for supper.

Up jumped the black fellows, seized their spears, bade the Weeoombeens quickly lead them to Piggiebillah's camp, promising them for so doing a share of the emu.

When they were within range of spear shot, the black fellows formed a circle, took aim, and threw their spears at Piggiebillah. As the spears fell thick on him, sticking out all over him, Piggiebillah cried aloud: "Bingehlah, Bingehlah. You can have it, you can have it." But the black fellows did not desist until Piggiebillah was too wounded even to cry out; then they left him a mass of spears and turned to look for the emu. But to their surprise they found it not. Then for the first time they missed the Weeoombeens.

Looking round they saw their tracks going to where the emu had evidently been; then they saw that they had dragged the emu to their nyunnoo, which was a humpy made of grass.

When the Weeoombeens saw the black fellows coming, they caught hold of the emu and dragged it to a

big hole they knew of, with a big stone at its entrance, which stone only they knew the secret of moving. They moved the stone, got the emu and themselves into the hole, and the stone in place again before the black fellows reached the place.

The black fellows tried to move the stone, but could not. Yet they knew that the Weeoombeens must have done so, for they had tracked them right up to it, and they could hear the sound of their voices on the other side of it. They saw there was a crevice on either side of the stone, between it and the ground. Through these crevices they, drove in their spears, thinking they must surely kill the brothers. But the Weeoombeens too had seen these crevices and had anticipated the spears, so they had placed the dead emu before them to act as a shield. And into its body were driven the spears of the black fellows extended for the Weeoombeens.

Having driven the spears well in, the black fellows went off to get help to move the stone, but when they had gone a little way they heard the Weeoombeens laughing. Back they came and speared again, and again started for help, only as they left to hear once more the laughter of the brothers.

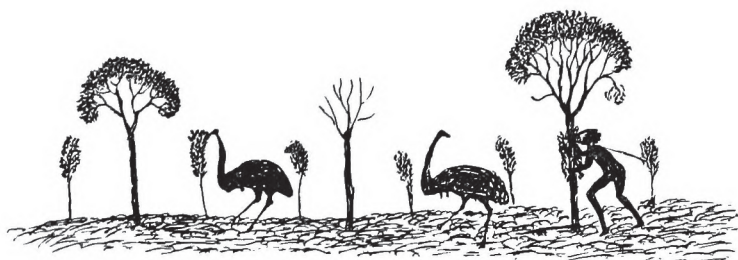
The Weeoombeens finding their laughter only brought back the black fellows to a fresh attack, determined to keep quiet, which, after the next spearing, they did.

Quite sure, when they heard their spear shots followed by neither conversation nor laughter, that they had killed the Weeoombeens at last, the black fellows hurried away to bring back the strength and cunning of the camp, to remove the stone.

The Weeoombeens hurriedly discussed what plan they had better adopt to elude the black fellows, for well they knew that should they ever meet any of them again they would be killed without mercy. And as they talked they satisfied their hunger by eating some of the emu flesh.

After a while the black fellows returned, and soon was the stone removed from the entrance. Some of them crept

into the hole, where, to their surprise, they found only the remains of the emu and no trace of the Weeoombeens. As those who had gone in first crept out and told of the disappearance of the Weeoombeens, others, incredulous of such a story, crept in to find it confirmed. They searched round for tracks; seeing that their spears were all in the emu it seemed to them probable the Weeoombeens had escaped alive, but if so, whither they had gone their tracks would show. But search as they would no tracks could they find. All they could see were two little birds which sat on a bush near the hole, watching the black fellows all the time. The little birds flew round the hole sometimes, but never away, always returning to their bush and seeming to be discussing the whole affair; but what they said the black fellows could not understand. But as time went on and no sign was ever found of the Weeoombeens, the black fellows became sure that the brothers had turned into the little white-throated birds which had sat on the bush by the hole, so, they supposed, to escape their vengeance. And ever afterwards the little white-throats were called Weeoombeens. And the memory of Piggiebillah is perpetuated by a sort of porcupine ant-eater, which bears his name, and whose skin is covered closely with miniature spears sticking all over it.



BOOTOOLGAH THE CRANE AND GOONUR THE KANGAROO RAT, THE FIRE MAKERS

In the days when Bootoolgah, the crane, married Goonur, the kangaroo rat, there was no fire in their country. They had to eat their food raw or just dry it in the sun. One day when Bootoolgah was rubbing two pieces of wood together, he saw a faint spark sent forth and then a slight smoke. "Look," he said to Goonur, "see what comes when I rub these pieces of wood together—smoke! Would it not be good if we could make fire for ourselves with which to cook our food, so as not to have to wait for the sun to dry it?"

Goonur looked, and, seeing the smoke, she said: "Great indeed would be the day when we could make fire. Split your stick, Bootoolgah, and place in the opening bark and grass that even one spark may kindle a light." And hearing wisdom in her words, even as she said Bootoolgah did. And lo! after much rubbing, from the opening came a small flame.

For as Goonur had said it would, the spark lit the grass, the bark smouldered and smoked, and so Bootoolgah the crane, and Goonur the kangaroo rat, discovered the art of fire making.

"This we will keep secret," they said, "from all the tribes. When we make a fire to cook our fish we will go into a Bingahwingul scrub.

There we will make a fire and cook our food in secret. We will hide our firesticks in the openmouthed seeds of the Bingahwinguls; one firestick we will carry always hidden in our comebee."

Bootoolgah and Goonur cooked the next fish they caught, and found it very good. When they went back to the camp they took some of their cooked fish with them. The blacks noticed it looked quite different from the usual sun-dried fish, so they asked: "What did you do to that fish?"

"Let it lie in the sun," said they.

"Not so," said the others.

But that the fish was sun-dried Bootoolgah and Goonur persisted. Day by day passed, and after catching their fish, these two always disappeared, returning with their food looking quite different from that of the others. At last, being unable to extract any information from them, it was determined by the tribe to watch them. Booloorai, the night owl, and Quarrian, the parrot, were appointed to follow the two when they disappeared, to watch where they went, and find out what they did. Accordingly, after the next fish were caught, when Bootoolgah and Goonur gathered up their share and started for the bush, Booloorai and Quarrian followed on their tracks. They saw them disappear into a Bingahwingul scrub, where they lost sight of them. Seeing a high tree on the edge of the scrub, they climbed up it, and from there they saw all that was to be seen. They saw Bootoolgah and Goonur throw down their load of fish, open their comebee and take from it a stick, which stick, when they had blown upon it, they laid in the midst of a heap of leaves and twigs, and at once from this heap they saw a flame leap, which flame the fire makers fed with bigger sticks. Then, as the flame died down, they saw the two place their fish in the ashes that remained from the burnt sticks. Then back to the camp of their tribes went Booloorai and Quarrian, back with the news of their discovery. Great was the talk amongst the blacks, and many the queries as to how to get possession of the comebee with the fire stick in it, when next Bootoolgah and Goonur came into the camp. It was at length decided to hold a corroboree, and it was to be one on a scale not often seen, probably never before by the young of the

tribes. The grey beards proposed to so astonish Bootoolgah and Goonur as to make them forget to guard their precious comebee. As soon as they were intent on the corroboree and off guard, some one was to seize the comebee, steal the firestick and start fires for the good of all. Most of them had tasted the cooked fish brought into the camp by the fire makers and, having found it good, hungered for it. Beeargah, the hawk, was told to feign sickness, to tie up his head, and to lie down near wherever the two sat to watch the corroboree. Lying near them, he was to watch them all the time, and when they were laughing and unthinking of anything but the spectacle before them, he was to steal the comebee. Having arranged their plan of action, they all prepared for a big corroboree. They sent word to all the surrounding tribes, asking them to attend, especially they begged the Bralgahs to come, as they were celebrated for their wonderful dancing, which was so wonderful as to be most likely to absorb the attention of the firemakers.

All the tribes agreed to come, and soon all were engaged in great preparations. Each determined to outdo the other in the quaintness and brightness of their painting for the corroboree. Each tribe as they arrived gained great applause; never before had the young people seen so much diversity in colouring and design. Beeleer, the Black Cockatoo tribe, came with bright splashes of orange-red on their black skins.



The Pelicans came as a contrast, almost pure white, only a touch here and there of their black skin showing where the white paint had rubbed off. The Black Divers

came in their black skins, but these polished to shine like satin. Then came the Millears, the beauties of the Kangaroo Rat family, who had their home on the morillas. After them came the Buckandeer or Native Cat tribe, painted in dull colours, but in all sorts of patterns. Mairas or Paddymelons came too in haste to take part in the great corroboree. After them, walking slowly, came the Bralgahs, looking tall and dignified as they held up their red heads, painted so in contrast to their French-grey bodies, which they deemed too dull a colour, unbrightened, for such a gay occasion. Amongst the many tribes there, too numerous to mention, were the rose and grey painted Galahs, the green and crimson painted Billai; most brilliant were they with their bodies grass green and their sides bright crimson, so afterwards gaining them the name of crimson wings. The bright little Gidgereegahs came too.

Great was the gathering that Bootoolgah, the crane, and Goonur, the kangaroo rat, found assembled as they hurried on to the scene.

Bootoolgah had warned Goonur that they must only be spectators, and take no active part in the corroboree, as they had to guard their comebee. Obedient to his advice, Goonur seated herself beside him and slung the comebee over her arm. Bootoolgah warned her to be careful and not forget she had it. But as the corroboree went on, so absorbed did she become that she forgot the comebee, which slipped from her arm.

Happily, Bootoolgah saw it do so, replaced it, and bade her take heed, so baulking Beeargah, who had been about to seize it, for his vigilance was unceasing, and, deeming him sick almost unto death, the two whom he was watching took no heed of him. Back he crouched, moaning as he turned, but keeping ever an eye on Goonur. And soon was he rewarded.

Now came the turn of the Bralgahs to dance, and every eye but that of the watchful one was fixed on them as slowly they came into the ring.

First they advanced, bowed and retired, then they repeated what they had done before, and again, each time getting faster and faster in their movements, changing their bows into pirouettes, craning their long necks and making such antics as they went through the figures of their dance, and replacing their dignity with such grotesqueness, as to make their large audience shake with laughter, they themselves keeping throughout all their grotesque measures a solemn air, which only seemed to heighten the effect of their antics.

And now came the chance of Beeargah the hawk. In the excitement of the moment Goonur forgot the comebee, as did Bootoolgah. They joined in the mirthful applause of the crowd, and Goonur threw herself back helpless with laughter. As she did so the comebee slipped from her arm. Then up jumped the sick man from behind her, seized the comebee with his combo, cut it open, snatched forth the firestick, set fire to the heap of grass ready near where he had lain, and all before the two realised their loss. When they discovered the precious comebee was gone, up jumped Bootoolgah and Goonur. After Beeargah ran Bootoolgah, but Beeargah had a start and was fleeter of foot, so distanced his pursuer quickly. As he ran he fired the grass with the stick he still held.

Bootoolgah, finding he could not catch Beeargah, and seeing fires everywhere, retired from the pursuit, feeling it was useless now to try and guard their secret, for it had now become the common property of all the tribes there assembled.

WEEDAH THE MOCKING BIRD

Weedah was playing a great trick on the black fellows who lived near him. He had built himself a number of grass nyunnoos, more than twenty.

He made fires before each, to make it look as if some one lived in the nyunnoos. First he would go into one nyunnoo, or humpy, and cry like a baby, then to another and laugh like a child, then in turn, as he went the round of the humpies he would sing like a maiden, corroboree like a man, call out in a quavering voice like an old man, and in a shrill voice like an old woman; in fact, imitate any sort of voice he had ever heard, and imitate them so quickly in succession that any one passing would think there was a great crowd of blacks in that camp. His object was to entice as many strange black fellows into his camp as he could, one at a time; then he would kill them and gradually gain the whole country round for his own. His chance was when he managed to get a single black fellow into his camp, which he very often did, then by his cunning he always gained his end and the black fellow's death. This was how he attained that end. A black fellow, probably separated from his fellows in the excitement of the chase, would be returning home alone passing within earshot of Weedah's camp he would hear the various voices and wonder what tribe could be there. Curiosity would induce him to come near. He would probably peer into the camp, and, only seeing Weedah standing alone, would advance towards him. Weedah would be standing at a little distance from a big glowing fire, where he would wait until the strange black fellow came quite close to him. Then he would ask him what he wanted. The stranger would say he had heard many voices and had wondered

what tribe it could be, so had come near to find out. Weedah would say, "But only I am here. How could you have heard voices? See; look round; I am alone." Bewildered, the stranger would look round and say in a puzzled tone of voice: "Where are they all gone? As I came I heard babies crying, men calling, and women laughing; many voices I heard but you only I see."

"And only I am here. The wind must have stirred the branches of the balah trees, and you must have thought it was the wailing of children, the laughing of the gougourgahgah you heard, and thought it the laughter of women and mine must have been the voice as of men that you heard. Alone in the bush, as the shadows fall, a man breeds strange fancies. See by the light of this fire, where are your fancies now? No women laugh, no babies cry, only I, Weedah, talk." As Weedah was talking he kept edging the stranger towards the fire; when they were quite close to it, he turned swiftly, seized him, and threw him right into the middle of the blaze. This scene was repeated time after time, until at last the ranks of the black fellows living round the camp of Weedah began to get thin.

Mullying, the eagle hawk, determined to fathom the mystery, for as yet the black fellows had no clue as to how or where their friends had disappeared. Mullying, when Beeargah, his cousin, returned to his camp no more, made up his mind to get on his track and follow it, until at length he solved the mystery. After following the track of Beeargah, as he had chased the kangaroo to where he had slain it, on he followed his homeward trail. Over stony ground he tracked him, and through sand, across plains, and through scrub. At last in a scrub and still on the track of Beeargah, he heard the sounds of many voices, babies crying, women singing, men talking. Peering through the bush, finding the track took him nearer the spot whence came the sounds, he saw the grass humpies. "Who can these be?" he thought. The track led him right into the camp, where alone Weedah was to be seen. Mullying

advanced towards him and asked where were the people whose voices he had heard as he came through the bush.

Weedah said: "How can I tell you? I know of no people; I live alone."

"But," said Mullyan, the eagle hawk, "I heard babies crying, women laughing, and men talking, not one but many."

"And I alone am here. Ask of your ears what trick they played you, or perhaps your eyes fail you now. Can you see any but me? Look for yourself."

"And if, as indeed it seems, you only are here, what did you with Beeargah my cousin, and where are my friends? Many are their trails that I see coming into this camp, but none going out. And if you alone live here you alone can answer me."

"What know I of you or your friends? Nothing. Ask of the winds that blow. Ask of Bahloo the moon, who looks down on the earth by night. Ask of Yhi the sun, that looks down by day. But ask not Weedah, who dwells alone, and knows naught of your friends." But as Weedah was talking he was carefully edging Mullyan towards the fire.

Mullyan, the eagle hawk, too, was cunning, and not easy to trap. He saw a blazing fire in front of him, he saw the track of his friend behind him, he saw Weedah was edging him towards the fire, and it came to him in a moment the thought that if the fire could speak, well could it tell where were his friends. But the time was not yet come to show that he had fathomed the mystery. So he affected to fall into the trap. But when they reached the fire, before Weedah had time to act his usual part, with a mighty grip Mullyan the eagle hawk seized him, saying, "Even as you served Beeargah the hawk, my cousin, and my friends, so now serve I you." And right into the middle of the blazing fire he threw him. Then he turned homewards in haste, to tell the black fellows that he had solved the fate of their friends, which had so long been a mystery. When he was some distance from the Weedah's

camp, he heard the sound of a thunder clap. But it was not thunder it was the bursting of the back of Weedah's head, which had burst with a bang as of a thunder clap. And as it burst, out from his remains had risen a bird, Weedah, the mocking bird; which bird to this day has a hole at the back of his head, just in the same place as Weedah the black fellow's head had burst, and whence the bird came forth.

To this day the Weedah makes grass playgrounds, through which he runs, imitating, as he plays, in quick succession, any voices he has ever heard, from the crying of a child to the laughing of a woman; from the mewing of a cat to the barking of a dog, and hence his name Weedah, the mocking bird.

