THE BUNYIP.
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EVERY one who has lived in Australia has heard of the Bunyip. It is the one respectable flesh-curdling horror of which Australia can boast. The old world has her tales of ghoul and vampire, of Lorelei, spook, and pixie, but

¹ While looking through files of the Sydney Morning Herald for 1848, I came across the following paragraph, under date August 1st of that year. It was headed ‘The Bunyip again.’ ‘A Mr. R. Williams, of Port Fairy, a correspondent of the Portland Gazette, reports the discovery of a real Bunyip in the Eumeralia. Mr. W. says: ‘A stockman in the employ of Mr. Baxter was fishing in the Eumeralia, when he was suddenly startled by what he at first imagined to be a huge black fellow swimming in the river, but which I think must be the Bunyip. I went with the stockman the next day, and was fortunate enough to get a good view of him. He was of a brownish colour, with a head something the shape of a kangaroo, an enormous mouth, apparently furnished with a formidable set of teeth, long neck, covered with a shaggy mane which reached halfway down his back; his hind quarters were under water, so that we could not get a full view of him, but if one may judge by what was seen, his weight must be fully equal to that of a very large bullock. On trying to get a closer examination, he took alarm and immediately disappeared; and although a strict watch has since been kept, he has never again been seen, but it is hoped that the exertions now being made by Mr. Baxter to catch him will be crowned with success,’—Ed.
Australia has nothing but her Bunyip. There never were any fauns in the eucalyptus forests, nor any naiads in the running creeks. No mythological hero left behind him stories of wonder and enchantment. No white man's hand has carved records of a poetic past on the grey volcanic-looking boulders that overshadow some lonely gullies which I know. There are no sepulchres hewn in the mountain rampart surrounding a certain dried-up lake—probably the crater of an extinct volcano—familiar to my childhood, and which in truth suggests possibilities of a forgotten city of Kör. Nature and civilisation have been very niggard here in all that makes romance.

No Australian traveller ever saw the Bunyip with his own eyes; and though there are many stockman's yarns and black's patters which have to do with this wonderful monster, they have all the hazy uncertainty which usually envelops information of the legendary kind. Some night, perhaps, when you are sitting over a camp fire brewing quart-pot tea and smoking store tobacco, with the spectral white gums rising like an army of ghosts around you, and the horses' hobbles clanking cheerfully in the distance, you will ask one of the overlanding hands to tell you what he knows about the Bunyip. The bushman will warm to his subject as readily as an Irishman to his banshee. He will indignantly repel your insinuation that the Bunyip may be after all as mythical as Alice's Jabberwock; and he will forthwith proceed to relate how a friend of his had a mate, who knew
another chap, who had once in his life had a narrow escape from the Bunyip, and had actually beheld it—and in a certain lagoon not a hundred miles from where you are squatting. He himself has never set eyes upon the Bunyip, nor has his mate, but there is not the smallest doubt that the other chap has seen it. When facts come to be boiled down, however, 'the other chap's' statements will seem curiously vague and contradictory; and if the details are to be accepted as they stand, a remarkable contribution to natural history must be the result.

The Bunyip is the Australian sea-serpent, only it differs from that much-disputed fact or fiction in that it does not inhabit the ocean, but makes its home in lagoons and still deep water-holes. For rivers and running creeks it appears to have an aversion. No black fellow will object to bathe in a river because of the Bunyip, but he will shake his woolly head mysteriously over many an innocent-looking water-hole, and decline to dive for water-lily roots or some such delicacy dear to the aboriginal stomach, on the plea that 'Debil-debil sit down there.'

Debil-debil and Bunyip are synonymous terms with the black fellow while he is on the bank of a lagoon, though 'Debil-debil' in the abstract represents a much more indefinite source of danger, and has a far wider scope of action than most mythological deities. 'Debil-debil' is a convenient way of accounting, not only for plague, sickness, and disaster, but also for peace, plenty, and good fortune. Accord-
ing to the religious code of the Australian aboriginal, Ormuzd and Ahriman do not work at opposite poles, but combine and concentrate themselves under one symbol. The supremacy of Debil-debil is uncontested, and he deals out promiscuously benefits and calamities from the same hand. A medicine-man professing to be in confidential communication with Debil-debil, may kill or cure a black fellow according to his pleasure. The natives have a superstition, in common with many primitive nations, that if an enemy possesses himself of a lock of hair from the head of one to whom he wishes ill, and buries it in the ground beneath a gum tree, the despoiled person will sicken and die as the hair rots away. In that case Debil-debil must be 'pialla-ed' (entreated) by the sick person to unbury the hair and cast it in the fire, when the charm will be dissolved. The medicine-man, therefore, has but to assure his patient that Debil-debil has refused or acceded to his request, and death or speedy recovery will be the consequence.

The blacks have an impish drollery and love of mischief, and they delight in imposing on the credulity of their white auditors. Thus the stories of their superstitions must not be accepted too literally. But it is certain that when they show a distinct reticence in regard to any reputed article of faith, it may safely be looked upon as genuine. The blacks never will volunteer information about the Bunyip; it has always to be dragged out of them. When a black fellow disappears, it is generally under-
stood that the Bunyip has got hold of him, and the particular water-hole in which the monster is supposed to live becomes more than ever an object of terror, and a place to be avoided. The water-hole may have been hitherto uncondemned by tradition, and the blacks may choose to disport themselves in it; but if one of them, seized with cramp or enmeshed in weeds, sinks to rise no more, the terrible cry of 'Bunyip' goes forth, and those waters are from henceforth shunned.

The Bunyip is said to be an amphibious animal, and is variously described: sometimes as a gigantic snake; sometimes as a species of rhinoceros, with a smooth pulpy skin and a head like that of a calf; sometimes as a huge pig, its body yellow, crossed with black stripes. But it is also said to be something more than animal, and among its supernatural attributes is the cold, awesome, uncanny feeling which creeps over a company at night when the Bunyip becomes the subject of conversation; and a certain magnetic atmosphere supposed to envelop the creature, and to spread a deadly influence for some space around, rendering even its vicinity dangerous, is particularly dwelt upon. According to legend, it attracts its prey by means of this mysterious emanation, and when sufficiently near, will draw man or beast down to the water and suck the body under, and without sound or struggle the victim disappears, to be seen no more. It is silent and stealthy, and only very rarely, they say, and always at night, has
been seen to rise partially from the black water which it loves, and utter a strange moaning cry like that of a child or a woman in pain. There is a theory that water is a powerful conductor for the kind of electricity it gives out, and that a pool with dry abrupt banks and no outlying morass is tolerably safe to drink from or to camp by; but a lagoon lying amid swamp has always an evil reputation, and in some districts it is very difficult to persuade a black fellow to venture into such a place.

One of the most famous haunts of the Bunyip, round which all sorts of stories gathered, though I never could really authenticate one of them, is a lagoon that we all knew well, and which used to furnish my brothers with many a brace of wild-fowl for our bush larder.

This lagoon is about four miles long, in some parts very deep, in others nothing but marsh, with swamp-oaks and ti-trees and ghostly white-barked she-oaks growing thickly in the shallow water. The wild-duck is so numerous in places that a gun fired makes the air black, and it is impossible to hear oneself speak, so deafening are the shrill cries of the birds which brood over the swamp.

We were none of us very much afraid of the Bunyip, though I confess to many an anxious shudder, and to having stopped and switched a stick behind me in order to make sure that all was right, when I found myself at dusk walking by the banks of the lagoon. A curious fascination, which was assuredly not the
magnetic attraction of the Bunyip, used to draw me there; the place was so wild and eerie and solitary, and appealed so strongly to my imagination. I liked nothing better than to go with my brother on moonlight nights when he went down there with his gun over his shoulder to get a shot at wild-duck; the creepy feeling which would come over us as we trod along by the black water with dark slimy logs slanting into it, and reeds and moist twigs and fat marsh plants giving way under our footsteps, was quite a luxurious terror. There were such strange noises, the faint shivering sound made by the spiky leaves of the swamp-oak, the flapping of the she-oaks' scaly bark, the queer gurgling 'grrur-urr-r' of an opossum up a gum tree, the swishing of the ducks' wings when they rose suddenly in the distance, the melancholy call of the curlews,—all these, breaking the silence and loneliness of the night, were indescribably uncanny and fascinating; but I am bound to say that during these expeditions we never saw a sign of the Bunyip.

We were travelling once up country,—my brother Jo and I,—and had arranged to camp out one night, there being no station or house of accommodation on the stage at which we could put up. The dray, loaded with stores and furniture for the new home to which we were bound, had been started some days previously, and we had agreed to meet the drivers at a certain small lagoon, known as the One-eyed Water-hole, and camp there under the dray tarpaulin. We
were riding, my brother driving a pair of pack-horses with our swags, and we were unable to carry any convenience for spending a night in the bush.

It was the month of November, and the heat was overpowering. The red gum oozed from the iron-bark trees and fell in great drops like blood. The deafening noise of the forest was in strange contrast to the night silence and loneliness of the lagoon I have described. All the sounds were harsh and grating—the whirring of grasshoppers and locusts, the chattering of parrots and laughing-jackasses, the cawing of cockatoos and scuttling of iguanas through the coarse dry blady grass. It was a relief to the heat and monotony, when, as the sun set, we left the timbered ridges and came down upon a plain, across which a faint breeze blew, and where we could see, at the foot of a distant ridge, the One-eyed Water-hole and our dray beside it, loaded high, and covered with a huge tarpaulin that hung all round it like a tent.

The men were busy making a fire and watering the bullocks. They had got down their blankets and the rations and tin billys and quart pots from the dray, and Mick, who had been hut-keeper to a party of shearers, was mixing Johnny-cakes on a piece of newly-cut bark, ready for baking when the logs had burnt down into ashes and embers. Some of the others had cut tufts from the grass trees on the ridge, and strewn them on the earth under the dray for us to lie upon. Very soon we were all comfortably camped, and as night closed in and the stars shone
out, the scene became more and more picturesque. Our fire had been lighted a few yards away from the lagoon, which, deep and black where the banks were high, widened out at the lower end into a swamp of she-oaks, their white lanky stems standing out against the darker background of ridge, densely covered with jungle-like scrub.

We had eaten our meal of beef and hot Johnny-cakes all together by the dray, and there was something striking about the appearance of the men, in their bright Crimean shirts and rough moleskin trousers and broad-brimmed cabbage-tree hats, as they lounged in easy attitudes, smoking their pipes and drinking quart-pot tea, while they waxed communicative under the influence of a nip of grog, which had been served out to them apiece.

They were telling shearing stories—how Paddy Mack and Long Charlie had had a bet as to which could shear a sheep the fastest; how Father Flaherty, the priest from the township, who had come over to see the shearing in full swing, timed them by his watch; how at the word 'off' the shears slashed down through the wool, and how the quickest man sheared his sheep in less than a minute, and the other a second and a half later. Then Mick had to tell of a man who used to shear his hundred and twenty sheep in the day, and on his way from the wool-shed to the hut jump over a four-foot-six post and rail fence, which after having been bent double all day was a feat he might be proud of.
Then somehow—perhaps it was the wildness and loneliness of the place, or the wind across the plain, or the sighing of the she-oaks, or the weird 'poomp' of the bullock bells—the talk got on to eerie things, and from the authentic story of Fisher's Ghost it was an easy transition to the Bunyip and all its supernatural horrors. Most of the men had some Bunyip tale to relate; and as we talked a sort of chill seemed to creep over us, and one could almost fancy that the horrible monster was casting its magnetic spell upon us from the dark swamp close by. After a bit, when it was discovered that the billys were empty, and that we wanted more water to make some fresh tea, no one seemed inclined to go down to the lagoon to fetch it, and Mick, taking a firestick to light his pipe, said slowly,—

'Begorra, Charlie, we must look out here for the Bunyip. You ask old Darby Magrath if he'd like to camp down by the swamp of the One-eyed Water-hole all night by himself. I remember Darby telling me that when he was riding across this plain one night after shearing, his horse stopped of a sudden and trembled all over under him—just like a bullock in the killing yard when you drop the spear into his neck. Darby says he felt cold all through his bones; and then a queer sort of noise came up from the water,—a kind of sound like a baby moaning,—and he just clapped spurs into his old yarraman (horse), and never pulled up out of a gallop till he had got over the range and was at the "Coffin Lid" public,
five miles on. The horse was all dripping with sweat, and poor old Darby as white as a corpse.'

'Well, I don't know much about the thing myself—never had no Bunyip experiences myself; but unless Gemmel Dick is the most almighty liar'—began Long Charlie, taking out his pipe in preparation for a blood-curdling yarn and then stopping suddenly, for at that moment there came a curious sound from the lagoon, or the swamp, or the plains to our left, we could not tell whence—a wild, thrilling sound, which at first seemed scarcely human, but which, when repeated after the interval of a moment or two, struck my heart as if it were the cry of some dying animal, or of a child in dire distress and agony.

We all started and looked anxiously at each other, waiting until it came again, and not quite liking to confess our tremors, when one of the men exclaimed nervously,—

'Say, what's that?'

'Wallabi bogged,' pronounced Long Charlie oracularly, and was beginning once more,—

'Well, as I was telling you, if Gemmel Dick ain't the most'—

But that strange, horrible cry from the lagoon—yes, it must come from the swamp end of the lagoon—broke the night silence again, and stopped Long Charlie a second time. It was more prolonged, more certain, than it had been before. Beginning low, a sort of hoarse muffled groan, it swelled into a louder,
shriller note, which we at once imagined might be the strained broken coo-ée of a child in pain or terror.

Every one of us rose.

'By Jove! I'll tell you what I believe it is,' said my brother Jo excitedly. 'That's some free-selector's kid lost in the bush. Come along, you fellows. Don't be funky of the Bunyip.'

He darted down towards the swamp, which lay some little distance from our camp, the dark heads of the she-oaks rising above a thick veil of white mist, that shrouded completely the less lofty and more straggling branches of the ti-trees. The rest of us followed him closely. It must be said that we were not deterred at that moment by any thought of the Bunyip and its supernatural atmosphere. Long Charlie, the most practical of the party, waited to detach a rough lantern which hung from one of the staples of the dray, and caught us up as we reached the borders of the swamp. The sound had ceased now. Coo-éeing loudly, we peered through the cold clinging mist among the brown twisted branches of the ti-trees, which shook their scented bottle-brush blossoms in our faces. Under our feet, the ground, which had been trodden into deep odd-shaped ruts by the cattle coming down to drink, gave way at every step. We could hear the soft 'k—sssh' of the displaced water, and we shivered as the slimy ooze mounted over our insteps and trickled down through our boots, while the pulpy rushes sprang back as we
forced ourselves through, and struck our hands with clammy touch.

It was a dreary, uncanny place, and even through our coo-ées the night that had seemed so silent on the plain was here full of ghostly noises, stifled hissings, and unexpected gurglings and rustlings, and husky croaks, and stealthy glidings and swishings.

'Look out for snakes,' said Long Charlie, flourishing his lantern. 'And don't all of us be coo-éeing all the time, or when the little chap sings out we shan't be able to hear him.'

We stopped coo-éeing, and presently the wail sounded again, fainter and more despairing, we fancied, and urging us to greater energy. Though we tried to move in the direction of the voice, it was impossible to determine whence it came, so misleading and fitful and will-o'-the-wisp-like was the sound. Now it seemed to come from our right, now from our left, now from the very depths of the lagoon, and now from the scrub on the ridge beyond.

I don't know how we got through the deeper part of the swamp without getting bogged; but we did at last, and reached the scrub that straggled down to the water's edge. Here was dense, and in places impenetrable foliage; rough boulders were lying pell-mell at the foot of the ridge, and creepers hung in withes from the trees, with great thorns that tore our hands and our clothes. We did not know which way to turn, for the cry had ceased, and the dead silence of the scrub was like that of the grave. We
waited for a minute or two, but it did not come again.

'I believe it was the Bunyip after all,' said Mick, with a shudder. 'And look here, I shall head the lagoon, I ain't going to cross that swamp again. It's all nonsense about the little 'un, not a child nor a grown man or beast could have forced theirselves down here.'

Long Charlie flashed his lantern along the wall of green, and, stumbling over stones and logs, we walked as well as we could, skirting the scrub and making for the head of the lagoon. We paused every now and then, straining our ears for the voice that had led us hither, and once it sounded faint but thrillingly plaintive, and guided us on.

At last there came a break in the jungle, a narrow track piercing the heart of the scrub, and then a wider break, and a warning cry from Long Charlie in advance,—

'Hello! Look out! It's a gully—pretty deep. You might break a leg before you knew it. Keep along up the track.'

We kept along up the track, waiting to let Long Charlie go first with his lantern. Suddenly the moon, which had risen while we were in the swamp, sent a shaft of light down through the opening, and showed us, a little way ahead, where the track widened out and then stopped altogether, a tiny plateau, in the centre of which stood a great white bottle tree, its trunk perfectly bare, bulging out in
the centre like a garment swelled by the wind, and looking in its fantastic shape like a sentinel spectre.

It gave one a strange creepy feeling to see this huge white thing rising up so solemnly in the midst of the gloom and the solitude. There was something else white on the grass—something almost the same shape as the bottle tree lying across at its foot. The moon was dim for a moment or two. Nobody spoke, we pressed up the ridge side, then a hoarse smothered ejaculation burst from Long Charlie's lips, and as he spoke the moon shone forth again, and he shifted his lantern so that its gleam fell athwart the white prostrate form and upon a snake, brown and shiny and scaly and horrible, which uncoiled itself, and with a swift, wavy motion disappeared into the depths of the scrub.

It seemed to us, we said afterwards, as though we could hear each other's hearts beating. The men were too horrified to utter a sound. At last Long Charlie said, in a deep, awe-stricken voice,—

'By God! that beats me.'

And then Mick, moving a little nearer, cried, with a sob in his brawny throat,—

'It's Nancy—little Nancy—Sam Duffy's girl from the "Coffin Lid," and it was only the other day she came out and served me with a nobbler.'

Paddy Mack was sobbing too, they all seemed to know and love the child.

'She wur so fond of looking for chuckie-chuckies in the scrub, and quantongs and things. And she
might have knowed, poor little Nancy! that if she wanted quantongs, I'd have got 'em for her; and didn't I string her a necklace only last shearing! But she was always a child for roaming,—she wasn't afraid of snakes, nor blacks, nor nothing,—she said she liked to hear the bell-bird call, and that it seemed to be always calling her. I've heerd her say that—poor little Nancy!—always smiling when she carried a chap out a nobbler. And now the bell-bird has rung her home.'

Long Charlie only said again, 'That beats me.'

They couldn't account for it; the child had been dead some hours, they said. They couldn't believe it was that snake which had bitten her, and they declared that the cry we heard must have been the Bunyip, or little Nancy's ghost.