



Beereun the Mirage Maker

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Australian

Easy
15 min read

Beereun the lizard wanted to marry Bullai Bullai the green parrot sisters. But they did not want to marry him. They liked Weedah the mocking-bird better. Their mother said they must marry Beereun, for she had pledged them to him at their births, and Beereun was a great wirreenun and would harm them if they did not keep her pledge.

When Weedah came back from hunting they told him what their mother had said, how they had been pledged to Beereun, who now claimed them.

“To-morrow,” said Weedah, “old Beereun goes to meet a tribe coming from the Springs country. While he is away we will go towards the Big River, and burn the track behind us. I will go out as if to hunt as usual in the morning. I will hide myself in the thick Gidya scrub. You two must follow later and meet me there. We will then cross the big plain where the grass is now thick and dry. Bring with you a firestick; we will throw it back into the plain, then no one can follow our tracks. On we will go to the Big River; there I have a friend who has a goombeelgah, or canoe, then shall we be safe from pursuit, for he will put us over the river. And we can travel on and on even to the country of the short-armed people if so we choose.”

The next morning ere Gougourgahgah had ceased his laughter, Weedah had started.

Some hours later, in the Gidya scrub, the Bullai Bullai sisters joined him.

Having crossed the big plain they threw back a firestick, where the grass was thick and dry. The fire sped quickly through it, crackling and throwing up tongues of flame.

Through another scrub went the three, then across another plain, through another scrub and on to a plain again.

The day was hot; Yhi the sun was high in the sky. They became thirsty, but saw no water, and had brought none in their haste.

“We want water,” the Bullai Bullai cried.

“Why did you not bring some?” said Weedah.

“We thought you had plenty, or would travel as the creeks run, or at least know of a goolahgool, or water-holding tree.”

“We shall soon reach water. Look even now ahead, there is water.”

The Bullai Bullai looked eagerly towards where he pointed, and there in truth, on the far side of the plain, they saw a sheet of water. They quickened their steps, but the further they went, the further off seemed the water, but on they went ever hoping to reach it. Across the plain they went, only to find on the other side a belt of timber, the water had gone.

The weary girls would have lain down, but Weedah said that they would surely reach water on the other side of the wood. Again they struggled on through the scrub to another plain.

“There it is! I told you so! There is the water.”

And looking ahead they again saw a sheet of water.

Again their hopes were raised, and though the sun beat fiercely on them they marched, only to be again disappointed.

“Let us go back,” they said. “This is the country of evil spirits. We see water, and when we come where we have seen it there is but dry earth. Let us go back.”

“Back to Beereun, who would kill you?”

“Better to die from the blow of a boondee in your own country than of thirst in a land of devils. We will go back.”

“Not so. Not with a boondee would he kill you, but with a gooweera, or poison stick. Slow would be your deaths, and you would be always in pain until your shadow was wasted away. But why talk of returning? Did we not set fire to the big plain? Could you cross that? Waste not your breaths, but follow me. See, there again is water!”

But the Bullai Bullai had lost hope. No longer would they even look up, though time after time Weedah called out, “Water ahead of us! Water ahead of us!” only to again, and again, disappoint them.

At last the Bullai Bullai became so angry with him that they seized him and beat him. But even as they beat him he cried all the time, “Water is there! Water is there!” Then he implored them to let him go, and he would drag up the roots from some water-trees and drain the water from these for them.

“Yonder I see a coolabah; from its roots I can drain enough to quench your thirst. Or here beside us is a bingahwingul; full of water are its roots. Let me go; I will drain them for you.”

But the Bullai Bullai had no faith in his promises, and they but beat him the harder until they were exhausted. When they ceased to beat him and let him go, Weedah went on a little way, then lay down, feeling bruised all over, and thankful that the night had come and the fierce sun no longer scorched them.

One Bullai Bullai said to her sister: “Could we not sing the song our Bargie used to sing, and make the rain fall?”

“Let us try if we can make a sound with our dry throats,” said the other.

“We will sing to our cousin Dooloomai the Thunder; he will hear us, and break a rain cloud for us.”

So they sat down, rocking their bodies to and fro, and, beating their knees, sang:

“Moogary, Moogaray, May May,

×Eehu, Eehu, Doongairah.”

Over and over again they sang these words as they had heard their Bargie, or grandmother, do. Then for themselves they added:

“Eehu oonah wambaneah Dooloomai

×Bullul goonung inderh gingnee

×Eehu oonah wambaneah Dooloomai.”

Which meant:

“Give us rain, Thunder, our cousin,

×Thirsting for water are we.

×Give us rain, Thunder, our cousin.”

As long as their poor parched throats could make a sound they sang this. Then they lay down to die, weary and hopeless. One said faintly: “The rain will be too late, but surely it is coming, for strong is the smell of the Gidya.”

“Strong indeed,” said the other. But even this sure sign to their tribe that rain is near roused them not; it would come, they thought, too late for them. But even then away in the north a thundercloud was gathering. It rolled across the sky quickly, pealing out thunder calls as it came to tell of its coming. It stopped right over the plain in front of the Bullai Bullai. One more peal of thunder, which opened the cloud, then splashing down came the first big drops of rain. Slowly and few they came until just at the last, when a quick, heavy shower fell, emptying the thundercloud, and filling the gilguy holes on the plain.

The cool splashing of the rain on their hot, tired limbs gave new life to the Bullai Bullai and Weedah. They all ran to the gilguy holes. Stooping their heads, they drank and quenched their thirst.

“I told you the water was here,” said Weedah, “You see I was right.”

“No water was here when you said so. If our cousin Dooloomai had not heard our song for his help we should

have died, and you too.”

And they were angry. But Weedah dug them some roots, and when they ate they forgot their anger. When their meal was over they lay down to sleep.

The next morning on they went again. That day they again saw across the plains the same strange semblance of water which had lured them on before. They knew not what it could be, only they knew that it was not water.

Just at dusk they came to the Big River. There they saw Goolayyahlee the pelican, with his canoe. Weedah asked him to put them over on to the other side. He said he would do so one at a time, as the canoe was small. First he said he would take Weedah, that he might get ready a camp of the long grass in the bend of the river. He took Weedah over. Then back he came and, fastening his canoe, he went up to the Bullai Bullai, who were sitting beside the remains of his old fire.

“Now,” said Goolayyahlee, “you two will go with me to my camp, which is down in that bend. Weedah cannot get over again. You shall live with me. I shall catch fish to feed you. I have some even now in my camp cooking. There, too, have I wirrees of honey, and durrie but ready for the baking. Weedah has nothing to give you but the grass nyunnoos he but now is making.”

“Take us to Weedah,” they said.

“Not so,” said Goolayyahlee, and he stepped forward as if to seize them.

The Bullai Bullai stooped, filled their hands with the white ashes of the burnt-out fire, which they flung at him.

Handful after handful they threw at him, until he stood before them white, all but his hands, which he spread out and shook, thus freeing them from the cloud of ashes enveloping him and obscuring his sight.

Having thus checked him, the Bullai Bullai ran to the bank of the river, meaning to get the canoe and cross over to Weedah.

But in the canoe, to their horror, was Beereun!— Beereun, to escape whom they had sped across plain and through scrub.

Yet here he was, while between them and Weedah lay the wide river.

They had not known it, but Beereun had been near them all the while. He it was who had made the mirage on each plain, thinking he would lure them on by this semblance of water until they perished of thirst. From that Dooloomai, their cousin, had saved them. But now the chance of Beereun had come.

The Bullai Bullai looked across the wide river and saw the nyunnoos Weedah had made. They saw him running in and out of them as if he were playing a game, not thinking of them at all. Strange nyunnoos they were too having both ends open.

Seeing where they were looking, Beereun said: "Weedah is womba, deaf. I stole his doowee while he slept and put in its place a mad spirit. He knows naught of you now. He cares naught for you. It is so with those who look too long at the Eer-dheer, or mirage. He will trouble me no more, nor you. Why look at him?"

But the Bullai Bullai could not take their eyes from Weedah, so strangely he went on, unceasingly running in at one end of the grass nyunnoos, through it and out of the other.

"He is womba," they said, but yet they could not understand it. They looked towards him and called to him, though he heeded them not.

"I will send him far from you," said Beereun getting angry. He seized a spear, stood up in the canoe, and sent it swiftly through the air into Weedah, who gave a great cry, screamed "Water is there! Water is there!" and fell back dead.

"Take us over! Take us over!" cried the Bullai Bullai. "We must go to him, we might yet save him."

"He is all right. He is in the sky. He is not there," said Beereun. "If you want him you must follow him to the sky. Look, you can see him there now." And he pointed to a star which the Bullai Bullai had never seen before.

"There he is, Womba."

Across to the grass nyunnoos the Bullai Bullai looked, but no Weedah was there. Then they sat down and wailed a death song, for they knew well they should see Weedah no more. They plastered their heads with white ashes and water; they tied on their bodies green twigs; then, cutting themselves till the blood ran, they lit

some smoke branches and smoked themselves, as widows.

Beereun spoke to Goolayyahlee the pelican, saying: "There is no brother of the dead man to marry these women. In this country they have no relation. You shall take one, and I the other. To-night when they sleep we will each seize one."

"That which you say shall be," said Goolayyahlee the pelican.

But the sisters heard what they said, though they gave no sign and mourned the dead Wedeah without ceasing. And with their death song they mingled a cry to all of their tribe who were dead to help them, and save them from these men who would seize them while they were still mourning, before they had swallowed the smoke-water, or their tribe had heard the voice of their dead. As the night wore on, the wailing of the women ceased.

The men thought that they were at length asleep, and crept up to their camp. But lo! it was empty! Gone were the Bullai Bullai!

The men heaped fuel on their fire to light up the darkness, but yet saw no sign of the Bullai Bullai.

They heard a sound, a sound of mocking laughter. They looked round, but saw nothing. Again they heard a sound of laughter. Whence came it? Again it echoed through the air.

It was from the sky. They looked up. It was the new star Womba, mocking them. Womba who once was Weedah, who laughed aloud to see that the Bullai Bullai had escaped their enemies, for even now they were stealing along the sky towards him, which the men on earth saw.

"We have lost them," said Goolayyahlee. "I shall camp alone," and he turned to go to his dardurr.

"They shall not escape me," said Beereun. "I shall make a roadway to the skies and follow them. Thence shall I bring them back, or wreak my vengeance on them."

He went to the canoe where were his spears; having grasped them, he took too the spears of Goolayyahlee, which lay by the smouldering fire.

He chose a barbed one. With all his force he threw it up to the sky. The barb caught there, the spear hung down. Beereun threw another which caught on to the first, and yet another, and so on, each catching the one

before it, until he could touch the lowest from the earth. This he clutched hold of, and climbed up, up, up, until he reached the sky. Then he started in pursuit of the Bullai Bullai, and he is still pursuing them.

Since then the tribe of Beereun have always been able to swarm up sheer heights. Since then too, his tribe, the little lizards of the plains, make, just like he did, the mirages to lure on thirsty travellers, only to send them mad before they die of thirst. Since then Goolayyahlee the pelican has been white, for ever did the ashes thrown by the Bullai Bullai cling to him, except where he had shaken them off from his hands, where are a few black feathers. The tribe of Bullai Bullai are coloured like the green of the leaves the sisters strung on themselves, in which to mourn Weedah, with here and there a dash of whitish yellow and red, caused by the ashes and the blood of their mourning. And Womba the star, the mad star, still shines; Canopus we call it. And Weedah the mocking-bird still builds grass nyunnoos, open at both ends, in and out of which he runs, as if they were but his playground.

And the fire that Weedah and the Bullai Bullai made spread from one end of the country to the other, over ridges and across plains, burning the trees so that their trunks have been black ever since. Deenyi, the iron-barks, smouldered the longest of all, and their trunks were so seared that the seams are deeply marked in their thick black bark still, making them show out grimly distinct on the ridges, to remind the Daens of Beereun the mirage maker for ever.

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