



Brälgah the Dancing Bird

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Australian

Intermediate

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Brälgah Numbardee was very fond of going out hunting with her young daughter Brälgah. Her tribe used to tell her she was foolish to do so. That some day the Wurrailberoo would catch them.

It was not for old Brälgah Numbardee that the Daens cared, but all the camp were proud of young Brälgah. She was the merriest girl and the best dancer of all her tribe, the women of whom were for the most part content to click the boomerangs, beat their rolled-up opossum-skin rugs, and sing, in voices from shrill to sweet, the corroboree songs, while the men danced; but not so Brälgah. She must dance too, and not only the dances she saw the rest dance, but new ones which she taught herself, for every song she heard she set to steps.

Sometimes, with laughing eyes, she would whirl round like a boolee, or whirlwind. Then suddenly she would change to a stately measure. Then for variety's sake perform a series of swift gyrations, as if, indeed, a whirlwind devil had her in his grip.

The fame of her dancing spread abroad, and proud indeed was the tribe to whom she belonged, hence their anxiety for her safety, and their dread that the Wurrailberoo would catch her.

The Wurrailberoo were two cannibals who lived in the scrub alone.

But in spite of all warnings Brälgah Numbardee continued to hunt as usual with only her daughter for companion.

One day they went out to camp for two or three days. Nothing hurt them the first night, but the next day the Wurrailberoo surprised and captured them. They gave Brälgah Numbardee a severe blow. She fell down and feigned death, lest they should strike her again and kill her. The Wurrailberoo picked her up to carry her off to their camp. They did not wish to hurt young Brälgah; they meant to keep her to dance for them. They told her so, and gave her their muggil, or stone knife to carry, telling her to fear nothing, and come with them.

She went with them, but when they were not looking she threw the knife away.

As soon as they reached the camp the Wurrailberoo asked her for it. They wanted to cut up Brälgah Numbardee before cooking her. Brälgah said she put the muggil down where they had rested, some way back, and had forgotten it.

They said: "We will go back and get it. You stay here."

They started. When they were some way off the mother said: "Are they out of sight yet?"

"Not yet. Wait a little while."

Brälgah watched them go right away, then told her mother, who immediately jumped up. Off then went both mother and daughter as fast as they could to their own tribe, whom they told what had happened.

When the Wurrailberoo came back they were enraged to find not only the daughter but the mother gone, even she whom they had left, as they thought, dead. No feast, no dance for them that night unless they recovered their victims, from whose tracks they found that Brälgah had actually been able to run beside her daughter.

"She only feigned death,' they said, "to deceive us. We will hasten and overtake them before they reach the tribe. Yea, even if they are with the tribe we will snatch them away."

But the Daens were looking out for them, fully armed, seeing which the Wurrailberoo turned and fled, the Daens after them in quick pursuit, but they failed to overtake them; and, fearing to follow them too far lest a trap lay ready for them, they returned to the camp. But so wroth were they at the attempt to capture their prized Brälgah that a council was held, and the destruction of the Wurrailberoo determined upon. Two of the cleverest wirreenuns said they would send their Mullee Mullees in whirlwinds after the enemy to catch them.

This they did. Whirling along went the boolees with the Mullee Mullees in them. Quickly they went along the track of the Wurrailberoo, whom they soon headed, turning them back towards the camp whence they had fled.

“We will go,” said one of the Wurrailberoo to the other, “back to the camp, ahead of these whirlwinds. We will seize the girl and her mother, and fly in another direction. The whirlwinds will miss us in the camp and seize others. We will not be baulked. Young Brälgah shall be ours to dance before us, and her mother shall make our supper to-night.”

On, on they fled before the whirlwinds, which gained both size and pace as they followed them.

The Daens were so astonished at seeing the Wurrailberoo returning straight towards them, the whirlwinds after them, that they never thought of arming themselves. Into the midst of them rushed the Wurrailberoo. One seized Brälgah the mother, the other young Brälgah, and before the astonished Daens realised their coming they had gone some distance along the edge of the plain.

“Bring your weapons,” roared the Mullee Mullees in the whirlwinds to the Daens as they swirled through the camp after the enemy.

The Wurrailberoo carrying young Brälgah was ahead. The other, finding the whirlwinds were gaining on them, dropped his burden, Brälgah Numbardee, and ran on. Just in front of them were two huge balah trees. Feeling that the whirlwinds, which they now knew must have spirits in them, were already lifting them from their feet, the Wurrailberoo clung to the balah trees, the one who had captured young Brälgah still holding her with one arm while he grasped the tree with the other.

“Let the girl go,” shouted the other to him. “Save yourself.”

“They shall never have her,” he answered savagely. “If I have to lose her they shall not get her.”

Then as the whirlwinds howled round them, tearing up everything in a wild fury, the balah trees now in their grasp creaking and groaning, Wurrailberoo muttered a sort of incantation and released young Brälgah. As she slipped from his grasp came a shout of joy from the Daens, who were just in the wake of the whirlwinds; they had their spears poised, but had been frightened to throw for fear of injuring Brälgah.

Now that she was free they called aloud: "Gubbah youl gingnee! Gubbah youl gingnee!"

But their joy was short-lived. The whirlwinds wound round the balah trees to which the Wurrailberoo clung, and dragged them from the roots before the men could leave go. Up, up the whirlwinds carried the trees, the men still clinging to them, until they reached the sky; there they planted them not far from the Milky Way. And there they are still, two dark spots, called Wurrailberoo, for the two cannibals have lived in them ever since, being dreaded by all who have to pass along the Warrambool, or Milky Way. Where are camped many old Daens, cooking the grubs they have gathered for food, and the smoke of their fires shows the course of the Warrambool. But only can any one reach these fires if the Wurrailberoo are away, as sometimes happens when they go down to the earth, and, through the medium of boolees, or whirlwinds, pursue their old enemies the Daens.

When the Daens saw their enemies were gone, they turned to get Brälgah; her mother was already with them.

But where was young Brälgah? She had not been seen to move away, yet she was gone. All round the plain they looked. They saw only a tall bird walking across it. They went to the place whence the trees had been wrenched. They scanned the ground for tracks, but saw none of Brälgah going away. Only those of the big crane-like bird now on the plain. Wurrailberoo must have seized her again and taken her after all, they said.

As soon as the Mullee Mullees, which had animated the whirlwinds, returned from placing the balah trees and the Wurrailberoo in the sky, the Daens asked them if they had left her there.

No Brälgah they said had gone to the sky. Surely the Daens had seen Wurrailberoo let her go.

Then where was she?

That no one could say, and none thought of asking the big bird on the plain. All mourned for Brälgah as for one dead. Her spirit, they said, would haunt the camp because they could not find her body to bury it, though they knew she must be dead, otherwise would she not return to them?

They moved their camp away to the other side of the plain.

After a while they noticed that a number of birds, like the one they had seen on the plain at the time of Brälgah's disappearance, came feeding round not far from, their camp, and after feeding for a while these birds would begin to corroboree; such a strange corroboree, of which one bird taller than the others was

seemingly a leader.

This corroboree was so human and like no movements of any other birds, like indeed nothing of the sort that the Daens had ever seen, unless it were the dances of the lost Brälgah.

Out on to a clear space the leader would lead her troupe, There would be much craning of necks, and bowing, pirouetting, stately measured changing of places; then gyrating with wings extended, just as Brälgah had been wont to fling her arms, before she madly whirled around and around as these birds did now, seeing which likeness the Daens called: "Brälgah! Brälgah!"

The bird seemed to understand them, for it looked towards them, then led its troupe into wilder, and more intricate, figures of the corroboree.

As time went on the leader of the birds was seen no more, but so well had her troupe learned the corroborees that they went through the same grotesque performances as in her time.

The old Daens died who remembered the dancing girl Brälgah, but all these dancing birds were known for ever by her name.

When Brälgah Numbardee died she was taken to the sky, there to live for ever with her daughter Brälgah, both known to us as the Clouds of Magellan, to the Daens as the Brälgah.

There Brälgah Numbardee learned that the Wurrailberoo by his incantation had changed her daughter into the dancing bird, which shape she had to keep as long as she lived on earth.

Afterwards, if ever the Daens saw a boolee speeding along near their camp the women would cry, "Wurrailberoo," clutch their children and bury their heads in their rugs; the men would seize their weapons and hurl them at the ever-feared and hated capturers of Brälgah.

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