



# *Deegeenboyah the Soldier- Bird*

K. Langloh Parker  
Australian

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*Intermediate*  
*11 min read*

Deegeenboyah was an old man, and getting past hunting much for himself; and he found it hard to keep his two wives and his two daughters supplied with food. He camped with his family away from the other tribes, but he used to join the men of the Mullyan tribe when they were going out hunting, and so get a more certain supply of food than if he had gone by himself. One day when the Mullyan went out, he was too late to accompany them. He hid in the scrub and waited for their return, at some little distance from their camp. When they were coming back he heard them singing the Song of the Setting Emu, a song which whoever finds the first emu's nest of the season always sings before getting back to the camp. Deegeenboyah jumped up as he heard the song, and started towards the camp of the Mullyan singing the same song, as if he too had found a nest. On they all went towards the camp singjoyously:

Nurdoo, nurbber me derreen derreenbah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah.

Garmbay boan yunnahdeh beahwah ah, ah, ah, ah, ah.

Gubbondee, dee, ee, ee, ee.

Neah nein gulbeejah, ah, ah, ah, ah.”

Which song roughly translated means:

I saw it first amongst the young trees,

The white mark on its forehead,

The white mark that before I had only seen as the emus moved together  
in the day-time.

Never did I see one camp before, only moving, moving always.

Now that we have found the nest

We must look out the ants do not get to the eggs.

If they crawl over them the eggs are spoilt.

As the last echo of the song died away, those in the camp took up the refrain and sang it back to the hunters to let them know that they understood that they had found the first emu's nest of the season.

When the hunters reached the camp, up came Deegeenboyah too. The Mullyans turned to him, and said:

"Did you find an emu's nest too?"

"Yes," said Deegeenboyah, "I did. I think you must have found the same, though after me, as I saw not your tracks. But I am older and stiff in my limbs, so came not back so quickly. Tell me, where is your nest?"

"In the clump of the Goolahbahs, on the edge of the plain," said the unsuspecting Mullyan.

"Ah, I thought so. That is mine. But what matter? We can share—there will be plenty for all. We must get the net and go and camp near the nest to-night, and to-morrow trap the emu."

The Mullyan got their emu trapping net, one made of thin rope about as thick as a thin clothes line, about five feet high, and between two and three hundred yards long. And off they set, accompanied by Deegeenboyah, to camp near where the emu was setting. When they had chosen a place to camp, they had their supper and a little corroboree, illustrative of slaying emu, etc. The next morning at daylight they erected their net into a sort of triangular shaped yard, one side open. Black fellows were stationed at each end of the net, and at stated distances along it. The net was upheld by upright poles. When the net was fixed, some of the blacks made a wide circle round the emu's nest, leaving open the side towards the net. They closed in

gradually until they frightened the emu off the nest. The emu seeing black fellows on every side but one, ran in that direction. The blacks followed closely, and the bird was soon yarded. Madly the frightened bird rushed against the net. Up ran a black fellow, seized the bird and wrung its neck. Then some of them went back to the nest to get the eggs, which they baked in the ashes of their fire and ate. They made a hole to cook the emu in. They plucked the emu. When they had plenty of coals, they put a thick layer at the bottom of the hole, some twigs of leaves on top of the coals, some feathers on the top of them. Then they laid the emu in, more feathers on the top of it, leaves again on top of them, and over them a thick layer of coals, and lastly they covered all with earth.

It would be several hours in cooking, so Deegenboyah said, "I will stay and cook the emu, you young fellows take moonoons—emu spears—and try and get some more emu."

The Mullyan thought there was sense in this proposal, so they took a couple of long spears, with a jagged nick at one end, to hold the emu when they speared it; they stuck a few emu feathers on the end of each spear and went off. They soon saw a flock of emu coming past where they were waiting to water. Two of the party armed with the moonoon climbed a tree, broke some boughs and put these thickly beneath them, so as to screen them from the emu. Then as the emu came near to the men they dangled down their spears, letting the emu feathers on the ends wave to and fro. The emu, seeing the feathers, were curious as to how they got there, came over, craning their necks and sniffing right underneath the spears. The black fellow tightly grasped the moonoons and drove them with force into the two emu they had picked. One emu dropped dead at once. The other ran with the spear in it for a short distance, but the black fellow was quickly after it, and soon caught and killed it outright. Then carrying the dead birds, back they went to where Deegenboyah was cooking the other emu. They cooked the two they had brought, and then all started for the camp in great spirits at their successful chase. They began throwing their mooroolahs as they went along, and playing with their bubberahs, or returning boomerangs. Old Deegenboyah said, "Here, give me the emus to carry, and then you will be free to have a really good game with your mooroolahs and bubberahs, and see who is the best man."

They gave him the emus, and on they went, some throwing mooroolahs, and some showing their skill with bubberahs. Presently Deegenboyah sat down. They thought he was just resting for a few minutes, so ran on laughing and playing, each good throw eliciting another effort, for none liked owning themselves beaten while they had a mooroolah left. As they got further away they noticed Deegenboyah was still sitting down, so they called out to him to know what was the matter

. “All right,” he said, “only having a rest; shall come on in a minute.” So on they went. When they were quite out of sight Deegeenboyah jumped up quickly, took up the emus and made for an opening in the ground at a little distance. This opening was the door of the underground home of the Murgah Muggui spider—the opening was a neat covering, like a sort of trap door. Down through this he went, taking the emus with him, knowing there was another exit at some distance, out of which he could come up quite near his home, for it was the way he often took after hunting.

The Mullyans went home and waited, but no sign of Deegeenboyah. Then back on their tracks they went and called aloud, but got no answer, and saw no sign. At last Mullyangah the chief of the Mullyans, said he would find him. Arming himself with his boondees and spears, he went back to where he had last seen Deegeenboyah sitting. He saw where his tracks turned off and where they disappeared, but could not account for their disappearance, as he did not notice the neat little trap-door of the Murgah Muggui. But he hunted round, determined to scour the bush until he found him. At last he saw a camp. He went up to it and saw only two little girls playing about, whom he knew were the daughters of Deegeenboyah.

“Where is your father?” he asked them.

“Out hunting,” they said.

“Which way does he come home?”

“Our father comes home out of this;” and they showed him the spiders’ trap-door.

“Where are your mothers?”

“Our mothers are out getting honey and yams.” And off ran the little girls to a leaning tree on which they played, running up its bent trunk.

Mullyangah went and stood where the trunk was highest from the ground and said: "Now, little girls, run up to here and jump, and I will catch you. Jump one at a time."

Off jumped one of the girls towards his outstretched arms, which, as she came towards him he dropped, and, stepping aside, let her come with her full force to the ground where she lay dead. Then he called to the horror-stricken child on the tree: "Come, jump. Your sister came too quickly. Wait till I call, then jump."

"No, I am afraid."

"Come on, I will be ready this time. Now come."

"I am afraid."

"Come on; I am strong." And he smiled quite kindly up at the child, who, hesitating no longer, jumped towards his arms, only to meet her sister's fate.

"Now," said Mullyangah, "here come the two wives. I must silence them, or when they see their children their cries will warn their husband if he is within earshot." So he sneaked behind a tree, and as the two wives passed he struck them dead with his spears. Then he went to the trapdoor that the children had shown him, and sat down to wait for the coming of Deegeenboyah. He had not long to wait. The trap-door was pushed up and out came a cooked emu, which he caught hold of and laid on one side. Deegeenboyah thought it was the girls taking it, as they had often watched for his coming and done before, so he pushed up another, which Mullyangah took, then a third, and lastly came up himself, to find Mullyangah confronting him spear and boondee in hand. He started back, but the trap-door was shut behind him, and Mullyangah barred his escape in front.

"Ah," said Mullyangah, "you stole our food and now you shall die. I've killed your children."

Deegeenboyah looked wildly round, and, seeing the dead bodies of his girls beneath the leaning tree, he groaned aloud.

“And,” went on Mullyangah, “I’ve killed your wives.”

Deegenboyah raised his head and looked again wildly round, and there, on their homeward path, he saw his dead wives. Then he called aloud, “Here Mullyangah are your emus; take them and spare me. I shall steal no more, for I myself want little, but my children and my wives hungered. I but stole for them. Spare me, I pray you. I am old; I shall not live long. Spare me.”

“Not so,” said Mullyangah, “no man lives to steal twice from a Mullyan;” and, so saying, he speared Deegenboyah where he stood. Then he lifted up the emus, and, carrying them with him, went swiftly back to his camp.

And merry was the supper that night when the Mullyans ate the emus, and Mullyangah told the story of his search and slaughter. And proud were the Mullyans of the prowess and cunning of their chief.

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