



Gayardaree the Platypus

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Australian

Advanced
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A young duck used to swim away by herself in the creek. Her tribe told her that Mulloka, the water devil, would catch her some day if she were so venturesome. But she did not heed them.

One day after having swum down some distance, she landed on a bank where she saw some young green grass. She was feeding about when suddenly out rushed from a hidden place Biggoon, an immense water rat, and seized her.

She struggled and struggled, but all in vain. "I live alone," he said; "I want a wife."

"Let me go," said the duck; "I am not for you; my tribe have a mate for me."

"You stay quietly with me, and I will not hurt you. I am lonely here. If you struggle more, or try to escape, I will knock you on the head, or spear you with this little spear I always carry."

"But my tribe will come and fight you, and perhaps kill me."

"Not they. They will think Mulloka has got you. But even if they do come, let them. I am ready." And again he showed his spear.

The duck stayed. She was frightened to go while the rat watched her. She pretended that she liked her new life,

and meant to stay always; while all the time she was thinking how she could escape. She knew her tribe came to look for her, for she heard them, but Biggoon kept her imprisoned in his hole in the side of the creek all day, only letting her out for a swim at night, when he knew her tribe would not come for fear of Mulloka.

She hid her feelings so well that at last Biggoon thought she really was content with him, and gradually he gave up watching her, taking his long day sleep as of old. Then came her chance.

One day, when Biggoon was sound asleep, she slunk out of the burrow, slid into the creek, and swam away up it, as quickly as she could, towards her old camp.

Suddenly she heard a sound behind her; she thought it must be Biggoon, or perhaps the dreaded Mulloka, so, stiff as her wings were, she raised herself on them, and flew the rest of the way, alighting at length very tired amongst her tribe.

They all gabbled round her at once, hardly giving her time to answer them. When they heard where she had been, the old mother ducks warned all the younger ones only to swim up stream in the future, for Biggoon would surely have vowed vengeance against them all now, and they must not risk meeting him.

How that little duck enjoyed her liberty and being with her tribe again! How she splashed as she pleased in the creek in the daytime and flew about at night if she wished! She felt as if she never wanted to sleep again.

It was not long before the laying season came. The ducks all chose their nesting places, some in hollow trees, and some in mirrieh bushes. When the nests were all nicely lined with down feathers, the ducks laid their eggs. Then they sat patiently on them, until at last the little fluffy, downy ducks came out. Then in a little time the ducks in the trees took the ducklings on their backs and in their bills, and flew into the water with them, one at a time. Those in the mirrieh-bushes waddled out with their young ones after them.

In due course the duck who had been imprisoned by Biggoon hatched out her young, too. Her friends came swimming round the mirrieh-bush she was in, and said: "Come along. Bring out your young ones, too. Teach them to love the water as we do."

Out she came, only two children after her. And what were they? Such a quacking gabble her friends set up, shrieking: "What are those?"

"My children," she said proudly. She would not show that she, too, was puzzled at her children being quite different from those of her tribe. Instead of down feathers they had a soft fur. Instead of two feet they had four. Their bills were those of ducks, and their feet were webbed, and on the hind ones were just showing the points of a spear, like Biggoon always carried to be in readiness for his enemies.

"Take them away," cried the ducks, flapping their wings and making a great splash. "Take them away. They are more like Biggoon than us. Look at their hind feet; the tip of his spear is sticking from them already. Take them away, or we shall kill them before they grow big and kill us. They do not belong to our tribe. Take them away. They have no right here."

And such a row they made that the poor little mother duck went off with her two little despised children, of whom she had been so proud, despite their peculiarities. She did not know where to go. If she went down the creek, Biggoon might catch her again, and make her live in the burrow, or kill her children because they had webbed feet, a duck's bill, and had been hatched out of eggs. He would say they did not belong to his tribe. No one would own them. There would never be any one but herself to care for them; the sooner she took them right away the better.

So thinking, away up stream she went until she reached the mountains. There she could hide from all who knew her, and bring up her children. On, on she went, until the creek grew narrow and scrubby on its banks, so changed from the broad streams which used to placidly flow between large unbroken plains, that she scarcely knew it. She lived there for a little while, then pined away and died, for even her children as they grew saw how different they were from her, and kept away by themselves, until she felt too lonely and miserable to live, too unhappy to find food. Thus pining she soon died away on the mountains, far from her old noorumbah, or hereditary hunting-ground.

The children lived on and throve, laid eggs and hatched out more children just like themselves, until at last, pair by pair, they so increased that all the mountain creeks had before long some of them. And there they still live, the Gayardaree, or platypus, quite a tribe apart—for when did ever a rat lay eggs? Or a duck have four feet?

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