

The Borah of Byamee

K. Langloh Parker

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Word had been passed from tribe to tribe, telling, how that the season was good, there must be a great gathering of the tribes. And the place fixed for the gathering was Googoorewon. The old men whispered that it should be the occasion for a borah, but this the women must not know. Old Byamee, who was a great Wirreenun, said he would take his two sons, Ghindahindahmoe and Boomahoomahnowee, to the gathering of the tribes, for the time had come when they should be made young men, that they might be free to marry wives, eat emu flesh, and learn to be warriors.

As tribe after tribe arrived at Googoorewon, each took up a position at one of the various points of the ridges, surrounding the clear open space where the corroborees were to be. The Wahn, crows, had one point; the Dummerh, pigeons, another; the Mahthi, dogs, another, and so on; Byamee and his tribe, Byahmul the black swans tribe, Ooboona, the blue tongued lizard, and many other chiefs and their tribes, each had their camp on a different point. When all had arrived there were hundreds and hundreds assembled, and many and varied were the nightly corroborees, each tribe trying to excel the other in the fancifulness of their painted get-up, and the novelty of their newest song and dance. By day there was much hunting and feasting, by night much dancing and singing; pledges of friendship exchanged, a dillibag for a boomerang, and so on; young daughters given to old warriors, old women given to young men, unborn girls promised to old men, babies in arms promised to grown men; many and diverse were the compacts entered into, and always were the Wirreenun,

or doctors of the tribes consulted.

After some days the Wirreenun told the men of the tribes that they were going to hold a borah. But on no account must the innerh, or women, know. Day by day they must all go forth as if to hunt and then prepare in secret the borah ground. Out went the man each day. They cleared a very large circle quite clear, then they built an earthen dam round this circle, and cleared a pathway leading into the thick bush from the circle, and built a dam on either side of this pathway.

When all these preparations were finished, they had, as usual, a corroboree at night. After this had been going on for some time, one of the old Wirreenun walked right away from the crowd as if he were sulky. He went to his camp, to where he was followed by another Wirreenun, and presently the two old fellows began fighting. Suddenly, when the attention of the blacks was fixed on this fight, there came a strange, whizzing, whirring noise from the scrub round. The women and children shrank together, for the sudden, uncanny noise frightened them. And they knew that it was made by the spirits who were coming to assist at the initiation of the boys into young manhood. The noise really sounded, if you had not the dread of spirits in your mind, just as if some one had a circular piece of wood at the end of a string and were whirling it round and round.

As the noise went on, the women said, in an awestricken tone, "Gurraymy," that is "borah devil," and clutched their children tighter to them. The boys said "Gayandy," and their eyes extended with fear. "Gayandy" meant borah devil too, but the women must not even use the same word as the boys and men to express the borah spirit, for all concerning the mysteries of borah are sacred from the ears, eyes, or tongues of women.

The next day a shift was made of the camps. They were moved to inside the big ring that the black fellows had made. This move was attended with a certain amount of ceremony. In the afternoon, before the move had taken place, all the black fellows left their camps and went away into the scrub. Then just about sundown they were all to be seen walking in single file out of the scrub, along the path which they had previously banked on each side. Every man had a fire stick in one hand and a green switch in the other. When these men reached the middle of the enclosed ring was the time for the young people and women to leave the old camps, and move into the borah ring. Inside this ring they made their camps, had their suppers and corroboreed, as on previous evenings, up to a certain stage. Before, on this occasion, that stage arrived, Byamee, who was greatest of the Wirreenun present, had shown his power in a remarkable way. For some days the Mahthi had been

behaving with a great want of respect for the wise men of the tribes. Instead of treating their sayings and doings with the silent awe the Wirreenun expect, they had kept up an incessant chatter and laughter amongst themselves, playing and shouting as if the tribes were not contemplating the solemnisation of their most sacred rites.

Frequently the Wirreenun sternly bade them be silent. But admonitions were useless, gaily chattered and laughed the Mahthi. At length Byamee, mightiest and most famous of the Wirreenun, rose, strode over to the camp of Mahthi, and said fiercely to them: "I, Byamee, whom all the tribes hold in honour, have thrice bade you Mahthi cease your chatter and laughter. But you heeded me not. To my voice were added the voices of the Wirreenun of other tribes. But you heeded not. Think you the Wirreenun will make any of your tribe young men when you heed not their words? No, I tell you. From this day forth no Mahthi shall speak again as men speak. You wish to make noise, to be a noisy tribe and a disturber of men; a tribe who cannot keep quiet when strangers are in the camp; a tribe who understand not sacred things. So be it. You shall, and your descendants, for ever make a noise, but it shall not be the noise of speech, or the noise of laughter. It shall be the noise of barking and the noise of howling. And from this day if ever a Mahthi speaks, woe to those who hear him, for even as they hear shall they be turned to stone."

And as the Mahthi opened their mouths, and tried to laugh and speak derisive words, they found, even as Byamee said, so were they. They could but bark and howl; the powers of speech and laughter had they lost. And as they realised their loss, into their eyes came a look of yearning and dumb entreaty which will be seen in the eyes of their descendants for ever. A feeling of wonder and awe fell on the various camps as they watched Byamee march back to his tribe.

When Byamee was seated again in his camp, he asked the women why they were not grinding doonburr. And the women said: "Gone are our dayoorls, and we know not where."

"You lie," said Byamee. "You have lent them to the Dummerh, who came so often to borrow, though I bade you not lend."

"No, Byamee, we lent them not."

“Go to the camp of the Dummerh, and ask for your dayoorl.”

The women, with the fear of the fate of the Mahthi did they disobey, went, though well they knew they had not lent the dayoorl. As they went they asked at each camp if the tribe there would lend them a dayoorl, but at each camp they were given the same answer, namely, that the dayoorls were gone and none knew where. The Dummerh had asked to borrow them, and in each instance been refused, yet had the stones gone.

As the women went on they heard a strange noise, as of the cry of spirits, a sound like a smothered “Oom, oom, oom, oom.” The cry sounded high in the air through the tops of trees, then low on the ground through the grasses, until it seemed as if the spirits were everywhere. The women clutched tighter their fire sticks, and said: “Let us go back. The Wondah are about,” And swiftly they sped towards their camp, hearing ever in the air the “Oom, oom, oom” of the spirits.

They told Byamee that all the tribes had lost their dayoorls, and that the spirits were about, and even as they spoke came the sound of “Oom, oom, oom, oom,” at the back of their own camp.

The women crouched together, but Byamee flashed a fire stick whence came the sound, and as the light flashed on the place he saw no one, but stranger than all, he saw two dayoorls moving along, and yet could see no one moving them, and as the dayoorls moved swiftly away, louder and louder rose the sound of “Oom, oom, oom, oom,” until the air seemed full of invisible spirits. Then Byamee knew that indeed the Wondah were about, and he too clutched his fire stick and went back into his camp.

In the morning it was seen that not only were all the dayoorls gone, but the camp of the Dummerh was empty and they too had gone. When no one would lend the Dummerh dayoorls, they had said, “Then we can grind no doonburr unless the Wondah bring us stones.” And scarcely were the words said before they saw a dayoorl moving towards them. At first they thought it was their own skill which enabled them only to express a wish to have it realised. But as dayoorl after dayoorl glided into their camp, and, passing through there, moved on, and as they moved was the sound of “Oom, oom, oom, oom,” to be heard everywhere they knew it was the Wondah at work. And it was borne in upon them that where the dayoorl went they must go, or they would anger the spirits who had brought them through their camp.

They gathered up their belongings and followed in the track of the dayoorls, which had cut a pathway from

Googoorewon to Girrahween, down which in high floods is now a water-course. From Girrahween, on the dayoorls went to Dirangibirrah, and after them the Dummerh. Dirangibirrah is between Brewarrina and Widda Murtee, and there the dayoorls piled themselves up into a mountain, and there for the future had the blacks to go when they wanted good dayoorls. And the Dummerh were changed into pigeons, with a cry like the spirits of "Oom, oom, oom."

Another strange thing happened at this big borah. A tribe, called Ooboan, were camped at some distance from the other tribes. When any stranger went to their camp, it was noticed that the chief of the Ooboan would come out and flash a light on him, which killed him instantly. And no one knew what this light was, that carried death in its gleam. At last, Wahn the crow, said "I will take my biggest booreen and go and see what this means. You others, do not follow me too closely, for though I have planned how to save myself from the deadly gleam, I might not be able to save you."

Wahn walked into the camp of the Ooboan, and as their chief turned to flash the light on him, he put up his booreen and completely shaded himself from it, and called aloud in a deep voice "Wah, wah, wah, wah" which so startled Ooboan that he dropped his light, and said "What is the matter? You startled me. I did not know who you were and might have hurt you, though I had no wish to, for the Wahn are my friends."

"I cannot stop now," said the Wahn, "I must go back to my camp. I have forgotten something I wanted to show you. I'll be back soon." And so saying, swiftly ran Wahn back to where he had left his boondee, then back he came almost before Ooboan realised that he had gone. Back he came, and stealing up behind Ooboan dealt him a blow with his boondee that avenged amply the victims of the deadly light, by stretching the chief of the Ooboan a corpse on the ground at his feet. Then crying triumphantly, "Wah, wah, wah," back to his camp went Wahn and told what he had done.

This night, when the Borah corroboree began, all the women relations of the boys to be made young men, corroboreed all night. Towards the end of the night all the young women were ordered into bough humpies, which had been previously made all round the edge of the embankment surrounding the ring. The old women stayed on.

The men who were to have charge of the boys to be made young men, were told now to be ready to seize hold each of his special charge, to carry him off down the beaten track to the scrub. When every man had, at a

signal, taken his charge on his shoulder, they all started dancing round the ring. Then the old women were told to come and say good-bye to the boys, after which they were ordered to join the young women in the humpies. About five men watched them into the humpies, then pulled the boughs down on the top of them that they might see nothing further.

When the women were safely imprisoned beneath the boughs, the men carrying the boys swiftly disappeared down the track into the scrub. When they were out of sight the five black fellows came and pulled the boughs away and released the women, who went now to their camps. But however curious these women were as to what rites attended the boys' initiation into manhood, they knew no questions would elicit any information. In some months' time they might see their boys return minus, perhaps, a front tooth, and with some extra scarifications on their bodies, but beyond that, and a knowledge of the fact that they had not been allowed to look on the face of woman since their disappearance into the scrub, they were never enlightened.

The next day the tribes made ready to travel to the place of the little borah, which would be held in about four days' time, at about ten or twelve miles distance from the scene of the big borah.

At the place of the little borah a ring of grass is made instead of one of earth. The tribes all travel together there, camp, and have a corroboree. The young women are sent to bed early, and the old women stay until the time when the boys bade farewell to them at the big borah, at which hour the boys are brought into the little borah and allowed to say a last good-bye to the old women. Then they are taken away by the men who have charge of them together. They stay together for a short time, then probably separate, each man with his one boy going in a different direction. The man keeps strict charge of the boy for at least six months, during which time he may not even look at his own mother. At the end of about six months he may come back to his tribe, but the effect of his isolation is that he is too wild and frightened to speak even to his mother, from whom he runs away if she approaches him, until by degrees the strangeness wears off.

But at this borah of Byamee the tribes were not destined to meet the boys at the little borah. Just as they were gathering up their goods for a start, into the camp staggered Millindooloonubbah, the widow, crying, "You all left me, widow that I was, with my large family of children, to travel alone. How could the little feet of my children keep up to you? Can my back bear more than one goolay? Have I more than two arms and one back? Then how could I come swiftly with so many children? Yet none of you stayed to help me. And as you went from

each water hole you drank all the water. When, tired and thirsty, I reached a water hole and my children cried for a drink, what did I find to give them? Mud, only mud. Then thirsty and worn, my children crying and their mother helpless to comfort them; on we came to the next hole. What did we see, as we strained our eyes to find water? Mud, only mud. As we reached hole after hole and found only mud, one by one my children laid down and died; died for want of a drink, which Millindooloonubbah their mother could not give them.”

As she spoke, swiftly went a woman to her with a wirree of water. “Too late, too late,” she said. “Why should a mother live when her children are dead?” And she lay back with a groan. But as she felt the water cool her parched lips and soften her swollen tongue, she made a final effort, rose to her feet, and waving her hands round the camps of the tribes, cried aloud: “You were in such haste to get here. You shall stay here.

Googoolguyyah. Googoolguyyah. Turn into trees. Turn into trees.” Then back she fell, dead. And as she fell, the tribes that were standing round the edge of the ring, preparatory to gathering their goods and going, and that her hand pointed to as it waved round, turned into trees. There they now stand. The tribes in the background were changed each according to the name they were known by, into that bird or beast of the same name. The barking Mahthi into dogs; the Byahmul into black swans: the Wahns into crows, and so on. And there at the place of the big borah, you can see the trees standing tall and gaunt, sad-looking in their sombre hues, waving with a sad wailing their branches towards the lake which covers now the place where the borah was held. And it bears the name of Googoorewon, the place of trees, and round the edge of it is still to be seen the remains of the borah ring of earth. And it is known as a great place of meeting for the birds that bear the names of the tribes of old. The Byahmuls sail proudly about; the pelicans, their water rivals in point of size and beauty; the ducks, and many others too numerous to mention. The Ooboos, or blue-tongued lizards, glide in and out through the grass. Now and then is heard the “Oom, oom, oom,” of the dummerh, and occasionally a cry from the bird Millindooloonubbah of “Googoolguyyah, googoolguyyah.” And in answer comes the wailing of the gloomy-looking balah trees, and then a rustling shirr through the bibbil branches, until at last every tree gives forth its voice and makes sad the margin of the lake with echoes of the past.

But the men and boys who were at the place of the little borah escaped the metamorphosis. They waited long for the arrival of the tribes who never came.

At last Byamee said: "Surely mighty enemies have slain our friends, and not one escapes to tell us of their fate. Even now these enemies may be upon our track; let us go into a far country."

And swiftly they went to Noondoo. Hurrying along with them, a dog of Byamee's, which would fain have lain by the roadside rather than have travelled so swiftly, but Byamee would not leave her and hurried her on. When they reached the springs of Noondoo, the dog sneaked away into a thick scrub, and there were born her litter of pups. But such pups as surely man never looked at before. The bodies of dogs, and the heads of pigs, and the fierceness and strength of devils. And gone is the life of a man who meets in a scrub of Noondoo an earmoonan, for surely will it slay him. Not even did Byamee ever dare to go near the breed of his old dog. And Byamee, the mighty Wirreenun, lives for ever. But no man must look upon his face, lest surely will he die. So alone in a thick scrub, on one of the Noondoo ridges, lives this old man, Byamee, the mightiest of Wirreenun.

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