

# **HOW THE SELFISH GOANNAS LOST THEIR WIVES AUSTRALIAN LEGEND**

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Soon after the events that are recorded in the previous story a great drought visited the country. There was no rain, and all the dams and rock holes became dry. The porcupine and the emu tribes did not know what to do, because among their members there were many aged and infirm. Some were sick, and a great many had little children; so they were in great difficulties. They were not able to move down to the River Murray, where they would have been well and comfortable.

The drought did not affect the goanna tribe, as they had a secret reservoir with a supply of water that would last them for very many years. The cries of the little children, and the distress of the aged and sick, touched the hearts of the wives of the goannas, and they would secretly go among the other tribes and do all they could to supply their wants and relieve their sufferings. One day they asked their husbands to tell them where the great rock hole reservoir was, as they were anxious to supply water to the aged and the sick and the children of the porcupine and emu families. But the selfish goannas refused, and, what was worse, they said to their wives, "Since you are taking such an interest in the needs of others, we will give you only just sufficient water to slake your own thirst."

The wives found that it was useless to plead with their obstinate husbands; but they were determined that, although they had given way to many objections before, and had willingly suffered the indignity of refusals, they would not let this insult pass. So they began to search for the reservoir. They would take up their yam-sticks that their husbands should believe that they were going to dig yams and roots of plants and shrubs. But they would track the footprints of their husbands, which led them to the mountain. At the foot of the mountain they would lose all trace of the footprints, so they would return to the valley and gather a few yams and herbs, and then go to their homes. They would cook the yams in the hot ashes, and then sit down with their husbands and families to eat. Sometimes a goanna would ask his wife where she had been for such an unusually long time. He would say, "I notice a speck of dirt that comes from the mountain. Have you been there?" The wife would reply, "What do you think, you silly? Do you imagine that we go searching for yams on the mountain-top? We find and dig yams in the low, flat country, not on rocky mountains. Now why do you ask such questions?" The goanna, without another word, would lie down upon his opossum-skin.

In the morning, just as the sun rose over the eastern range of mountains, the men of the goanna tribe were out looking for food, and their wives were up too. They had met to discuss what to do in order to discover the secret of the reservoir. One, more thoughtful than the others, said, "It would be a wise plan to go up the mountain and make a mia-mia, and camp there and make observations. Now who among us has courage? Let us sit a while and think who will go."

So they sat in silence for a few moments, and then one rose. All eyes became fixed on her. She was the wife of the chief. She said, "Sisters, I take the responsibility. I offer to go. I consider it is my duty as wife of a chief. Who will come and help me with my camp necessities?"

Two young wives stood up, and said, "We will go with you."

So they made haste and rolled up the belongings of the chief's wife, and the three women hurried away to the mountain before the chief and the other goannas returned from their hunting. Half-way up the side of the mountain there was a spot which gave a good view of the surrounding valley, and especially of the goanna camping-ground. After making the mia-mia the two young women returned home, leaving the chief's wife on the mountain.

In the evening the young chief summoned the goannas to his mia-mia and asked them whether anyone had seen his wife, or had any knowledge regarding her disappearance. All expressed great sorrow, and said they had no knowledge of the matter, nor could they suggest any reason why she should leave the camp. They told their chief that they would do all in their power to assist him to recover his wife if she had been taken a captive to some other home.

Then the chief summoned the teal teal, the wives of the goannas. They were closely questioned by the chief and the elders, but they remained standing with their heads bowed, and would not make any reply. The questioners tried by threats to make them speak, but they shook their heads and remained silent. The chief of the goannas then ordered that the wives should return to their mia-mia. When the teal teal were safely home the chief said to the men, "I have a suspicion that the emus have come to our home while we were out hunting, and have taken my wife, and have given her to the young chief of the tribe. So to-morrow, before the sun rises beyond the mountain-peak, every one that is able to fight will take with him three kaikes, four waddies, four panketyes, and a nulla-nulla, and we will

march into their land and seek my wife. Then, if she be not there; we will return and march into the land of the porcupines. So to-night let every one go to his mia-mia and wait for the cry, 'Rise at once!'"

So every goanna man went straight home to bed and slept soundly. They rose early, and marched into the country of the emu. As soon as the goannas had left home the teal teal rose and met to consider what they should do. One thought it would be well if the two young women who had accompanied the chief's wife hurried away and told her that her absence had caused a stir. So while the chief with his army was marching into the land of the emus, thinking that it was they who had captured his wife and made her the wife of the young emu chief, the young teal teal girls were running to the mountain to tell the chief's wife what was taking place. She sat quietly and listened to what they had to tell, and then in reply she said, "Now is our deliverance. We have been given in marriage to these beings who are not of our race and kind. I have made a discovery. At the dawn of day I was fast asleep, and a Tuckonie came into the mia-mia and sat beside the fire warming himself. Suddenly I awoke and saw him comfortably seated there. I became so alarmed that I shrieked with fear; and he turned his eyes upon me and said, 'Do not be afraid. I am your friend, and the friend of all that are in trouble or distress. I and my companion saw you and the two others come up from the plain, and some of my brothers have visited your camping-ground and know all about you. You are in search of a water-hole, and you have been guided by the mind of my tribe to this spot. You have been sleeping. If you will follow me when I come again I will show you the opening on the top of this mountain.'"

When the Tuckonie returned the wife of the chief of the goannas rose and followed him up the mountain. When they arrived at the top he bade her sit down and rest. The little spirit man went away a few paces and gave a call somewhat like the coo-ee, and like a flash out of space there came many little men. Their bodies were striped with red ochre and white pipeclay. They had white cockatoo feathers decorating their heads and tied round their wrists like bracelets.

In their hands they held their spears, about two feet long. Each one wore a belt of opossum-skin round his waist, and in this belt there were placed three tiny boomerangs and waddies. They circled round their leader, eager to receive his instructions. After a little talk they made way for him, and he came out from their midst and walked toward the wife of the goanna

and stood beside her. They followed him, and he addressed his bodyguard thus, "Hear, O my brothers we have been appointed by the unseen beings that are about—the Spirit of Good, the Spirit of Water, the Spirit of Food, the Spirit of Pleasure, the Spirit of Lightning and Thunder and Wind and Rainstorm, and lastly the Spirit of Sunshine. The goannas have withheld from the tribes that inhabit this country the long-needed water that is locked up in this mountain; they have used this gift for their own selfish ends, and have refused to share it with the aged and the infirm and the children of other tribes. And, what is more, they have refused to supply the necessities of their own wives. Give this woman the help she requires in order to let loose the water that is contained in the mountain." The little spirit man turned to the wife of the chief and took her a few paces farther on to a basin-like hole in the rock. He asked her to look into it. She looked and saw sparkling water, clear as crystal. "Drink," he said, and she drank until she was satisfied. "Now," he said, "you must descend, and when you reach the foot of the mountain you will meet two young women. You must ask them to hurry back to their camp and instruct the others that they must all stand on the northern side of the valley toward the porcupine boundary and await your coming."

So she went and did as she had been told. The two young women also hurried back to the camp to deliver their message, and the other teal teal, as they were asked, stood waiting on the northern side of the valley. Meantime the chief's wife stood at the base of the mountain, waiting for further instructions. Presently the Tuckonie stood beside her, and said, "O woman, these good and great spirits have given you the privilege of letting loose the waters that are anxious to be freed from the bonds that have held them prisoner these many, many years. You shall be a blessing to all the animal, bird, reptile, and insect tribes. You must keep this great event in remembrance. Tell your children of the privilege that the Spirit of Water conferred on you. Take this." He handed her a grass-tree stick, and said, "At a given signal thrust it into the mountain-side, and the water shall be let loose."

Again the Tuckonie disappeared. The chief's wife stood there alone, thinking over this strange happening. She pinched her arm and struck her leg to see whether she was asleep. She felt the pinch and the blow. "I am very much awake," she said. "What a wonderful experience!" Then a voice said, "Thrust the stick into the mountain." She placed the point of the stick

against the mountain-side, and pushed hard. It gradually went in farther and farther, until it had gone its whole length. Then the voice of the Tuckonie said, "Now flee for your life to where your sisters are." She sped down the valley as fast as her feet could carry her. When she had gone half the distance a loud noise, as of a mighty wind, broke the still air. It was the sound of the water leaping forth out of its prison and thundering down the valley with the speed of a mighty wind.

The chief's wife arrived among her teal teal sisters, and breathlessly told them that the water from the mountain would be flowing down the valley. While she was speaking they saw dust rising from the hill-side, and the water tearing its way through the valley, and huge trees being uprooted and carried along. They looked with amazement as the water rushed past them on its way to join the Murray River. When it reached the Murray it settled down to be a flowing river. The teal teal came to its bank, and sat in the shade of the trees, watching their children sporting and splashing in the water.

Next day the goannas returned, and were making their way to the camp when they beheld with wonder that a river separated them from their wives and children. They were greatly annoyed. The chief called to the women across the river and asked where this flowing stream of water came from. He was answered by the familiar voice of his wife, "From the rock hole that you and the goannas have kept secret from us and the other tribes, and used for your own selfish purposes. But I, O chief, your wife, discovered your secret, and let loose the water, this great gift and blessing that belongs to all beings. So we, who were your wives, have decided that we shall no longer belong to you. Henceforth our home will be in the trees. And we do not wish to be, and we will not be, your wives."

So this separation came about through the selfishness of the goannas, and since that time the teal teal have refused to become the wives of the goannas. To keep in memory that long, long ago event of the release of the water they make their homes in the limbs or branches of the gum-trees, and they make their nests of mud or clay shaped like the mountain that contained the water. And in these small mountain-shaped homes they lay their eggs, and when these are hatched and the little birds come to see the light and the home the mother in bird-language tells them of the long, long ago when she was in distress, seeking water to quench her thirst, and how a little man helped her in her search and showed her where it was to be found,

and promised that their tribe should throughout their generations have a home as a memorial, and rear their children in it.

As for the goannas, because of their rough natures and their stealing from others who endure the difficulties, hardships, and dangers of hunting they are doomed not only to carry upon their bodies the marks received as a punishment for their misdeeds, but to endure a much more grievous punishment for their selfishness to all around them, and more especially to their wives, the teal teal, in that they have lost that great pride of their heart, the wonderful rock hole which contained a lasting supply of clear and refreshing water. And, beyond this, their strictly guarded prize has become a great barrier, separating them from their wives and children for ever. And in sorrow they have wandered to all parts of Australia, and in certain seasons of the year they dig a hole in the ground and bury themselves in it, and weep during the dark, cold wintry nights, until they fall into a deep sleep, which lasts until spring calls them forth to take up their burden of life once more. And, in revenge for the loss of their wives, they rob the nests of the teal teal of their eggs, thinking that by devouring the eggs they may put an end to the existence of their former wives.

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