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TRACKS IN THE NIGHT: SKY PILOT'S LOG, 2CH BROADCAST

Those who do not know the bush may find it difficult to understand this story. It is the story of a night in the bush. Day time belongs to man and the birds; we could live in the bush for years without realising that the night brings another creation into being; that is, unless we like to take the trouble to find out something of this night life of the bush. Many a small animal lives only for the night, and those who are content to sleep through the hours of darkness may never know the little bush creatures who live in the night.

When the moon rises it brings to life many a small furry creature that shuns the bright light of the day. I often listened to the voices of the night—little whisperings, squeakings, sometimes clear notes that might be taken for those of a bird—yet all these came from little furry creatures that play in the moonlight.

George and I camped one night near the...
source of the Rose River in Arnhem Land about 45 years ago. We had talked about the animals that came out at night and George had quite a good knowledge of many of them; but as most of his learning came from the Aborigines it was mainly about animals that were good to eat. I told him about many of the smaller animals but I could see that he only half believed me; so one night we swept clear a patch of sand near our camp so that we could tell by the tracks in the morning what visitors we had had during the night.

George was not fond of sweeping; he mopped his forehead and remarked: "That ought to be enough, Smithy. It's too hot to go sweepin' half the Northern Territory. You won't get many tracks here—you may not get any at all. There don't seem to be many animals in this desert country near the coast."

"It is surprising," I replied, "how many small creatures there are in the desert. I've found most interesting things away on the Nullarbor Plains that one would never dream could exist in such a desert."

"Well," George agreed reluctantly, "I suppose there are animals even in the desert, though what they find to live on beats me. Anyway, it's interestin' findin' out all we can about the animals. Might come in handy when we get real hungry, you know. If we find out what animals are about it ought to be easy to trap 'em later."

"George," I told him, "you have lived too long amongst the Aborigines; you are always thinking of things to eat. We've plenty of beef and we don't need to do any hunting for food. It's purely a matter of scientific interest to me; I want to learn all I can about the little bush creatures that only come out at night."

"Then why don't you ask the Aborigines? They seem to know all about the animals in the district, and it would be a lot easier than experimentin' on your own."

"I am always ready to learn from the Aborigines, George, but I have to see for myself. I can't record observations that are second-hand; that is one of the first laws of scientific research."

"Well," I don't want to stop you, but it seems like a lot of wasted effort to me. The trouble is you always drag me into it. If my old mother could see me now sweepin' the sand ridge with a bit of a branch for a broom she would think I wasn't right in the head."

"Don't be silly; you're just as interested as I am and you wouldn't want to be left out. Anyhow, you go to sleep now; this sand should show all the tracks of our night visitors. I'll tell you about them in the morning."

"As long as you leave it till mornin' that suits me; but for heaven's sake don't wake me up in the middle of the night to say you saw a possum or a rat or somethin'."

"All right, George; I won't wake you before dawn. That's a promise."

That night I slept as soundly as George, but I awoke at dawn and went to examine the ground that we had swept clear the night before. In spite of all that he had said, George joined me, and together we read the story of the tracks left in the night.

"Here's a dingo track," George announced, as he scanned the sand. "Look, it goes right up to our nets and then back again."

"Yes; and you can see it walked more slowly as it got nearer—the tracks are closer and closer together as if our visitor was afraid and walked very softly and slowly as it got near to us."

"It came pretty close to my net," George said. "I wish I'd heard it; it would have made a sitting shot."

"Probably the dingo knew it would be dangerous to wake us as you can tell by the way it backed off. But what are these tracks, George? Look, these ones here."

"I'm hanged if I know. Looks as if someone tried to brush them out. Oh, wait a minute... yes, I guess it was a porcupine."

"That's what it is," I agreed. "But don't call it a porcupine, George—it is a spiny ant-eater, though people used to call it an Echidna. It's the nearest living relative to the platypus which is the only other furred animal that lays eggs."

"You said the only other furred animal—the porcupine is not a furred animal."

"The spines are developed from greatly enlarged hairs, as is the horn of the rhinoceros;
"Anyhow," said George, changing the subject, "here is the track of a bird. I wonder what bird would be wanderin' about at night. Maybe it's a curlew; what do you think?"

"Probably, I had a pet curlew once. It broke its wing in a storm and I set it, but when it could fly again it wouldn't go away. It used to wander about my room at night and scream like a half-murdered child, I called it 'Murder'."

"Yes, I remember it," said George, feelingly. "It scared the daylight's out of me the first night I camped in your room and it screamed under my bed. But what are those tracks? They are big, compared to the others, almost like a young wallaby."

"They are the tracks of a tree kangaroo. He must have come down from his tree during the night and had a walk round the camp—or a hop round the camp—whatever you prefer."

"A tree kangaroo," George repeated. "I once caught hold of one and it gave me an awful kick. I would sooner try to hold a wild bull than one of those tree kangaroos. What do they feed on, Smithy? Do they eat grass like other kangaroos?"

"No, they eat the leaves of the white cedar and other trees, but in captivity they eat fruit and bread quite readily."  

George was examining the ground closely and he did not speak for a time, then he said: "Look, Smithy; what are these small tracks? It looks as if the fairies have been dancing on the sand in the light of the moon."

"Those are the tracks of the kangaroo rats. They wait till the moon rises and then they dance and play about as if all the time were their own. Sometimes I have lain awake and watched them. They enjoy life and they seem to dance just with the joy of living."

"Here," George continued, "are little tracks like those of tiny birds—what are they?"

"They are the tracks of the marsupial mice—little brush-tailed creatures with tiny delicate feet like those of a fairy. They dance in the moonlight from the sheer joy of life. Yes, those are the tracks that you see all over the sandy ground."

"There's no doubt this is interestin', Smithy. You've got me with these here tracks. I'm beginnin' to be able to read 'em myself. See here, this twisted trail, I suppose it is the track of a snake?"

"Yes, George, that is a snake's track; you can see it quite clearly in the sand. But it doesn't appear to be very hungry. As you see it has not paused but has gone right across the sand patch as if it had urgent business elsewhere. If it was hungry it would have stopped to wait for frogs or mice. A snake looks just like a dry branch or stick when it doesn't want to be seen."

"Say," exclaimed George, "There's the tracks of an old man kangaroo over here on the edge of the clearin'. I nearly missed it as he only touched the ground once and cleared the rest of the sand you swept with his next jump. He must have been a beauty—one of them old red, ridge-kangaroos."

"Yes," I agreed, "He must have been over six feet high at the very least. And look! Just beside his tracks are those of his tiny cousin the Northern Hopping Mouse. Perhaps I should not call it a cousin to the kangaroo as the only thing they have in common is the habit of hopping or jumping instead of running."

"You don't mean a Kangaroo Rat, do you?"

"No. It's only as big as a mouse; a kind of sandy-brown in colour with whitish underparts. It's a pretty little thing, but very lively and hard to catch. If you dig up its nest there are so many openings that it is almost impossible to stop them escaping. It has a graceful tail with a brush on the end which it seems to use as a rudder and balancer when it is hopping."

"Well, who would have thought that all these animals would have come by in the night? Even if we had been lyin' awake we wouldn't have heard 'em—except maybe the thump of the old man kangaroo. They've all disappeared now that daylight's come. I don't suppose they know they left their footprints behind for us to read!"

"They wouldn't be worrying about their footprints, George, but they're there just the same.
The poet spoke about 'footprints on the sands of time' that we all leave behind us. We live our life for a brief space and then pass on, but whether we wish to or not we all leave our footprints behind for others to follow.

"If we could look back," George observed wryly, "and see all the footprints we had made I guess some of 'em would be a bit wobbly."

"I'm afraid so, George. And those wobbly footprints may be the very ones that will upset someone who follows after us. What we do today will affect someone tomorrow either for good or bad. Many a good man has helped and inspired thousands of others long after his death by the tracks he has left in the sands of time. We say that we live our own life and it's nobody's business but our own, yet all the time it is impossible for us to live to ourselves. Other people will be affected. The only safe thing for us to do is to follow some reliable footprints ourselves. We could all echo David's prayer in the 17th Psalm: 'Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not'."

WAITING TIME: By K. Langford-Smith

We have now entered into the year 1975. As we look back we can see how much God has done for us during 1974, and this gives us confidence to face the new year. But if there is a key word for this year it seems as if it is the word "Wait".

Waiting is not easy. Even scripture tells us that "hope deferred maketh the heart sick" (Prov. 13.12). We humans are by nature impatient. The devil plays on this weakness and he promises us something now while God often asks us to wait. But the devil's gifts are vastly inferior and bring their own dreadful consequences, while "The blessing of the Lord it maketh rich and He addeth no sorrow with it." (Prov. 10.22).

Noah built an ark but had to wait a long time before there was any sign of a flood, though he never doubted, Abraham had already begun to lose heart about the promised Isaac; and he even suggested that Ishmael should take his place, but he waited, hoping against hope till the true heir appeared. Joseph, told by dreams of his future exalted position in the family, had to go through prison and wait for many years before the fulfilment came. Moses who failed God and murdered an Egyptian, had to wait until he was eighty years of age before God used him to deliver his people.

David, a man after God's own heart, was promised the kingdom but he was hunted by Saul for years before he received the promise. Some years ago, when I visualised a New Marella on the Cottage System, I was given the text: "I will do better unto you than at your beginnings" (Ezk. 36.11). I claimed this promise and know that someday it will be fulfilled. But instead of the promise came trouble and delay and our work was set back some years, not least by the action of our solicitor (now in Brazil). God was not taken by surprise; He knew and planned a delay and we must be prepared to wait.

At the last Katoomba Convention I heard Bishop Chandu Ray say, most emphatically: "When in doubt don't move". This is the position we are in at the moment at Marella. Our work continues, Aboriginal children are being cared for, routine carries on but we are waiting for God's word before we move forward to the New Marella. I well remember words written many years ago by Amy Carmichael, of the Dohnavur Fellowship: "Pray that you will not grieve the love that trusted you to wait".

Because of the 1930 depression and other factors I had to wait until my 30th year before being married. The waiting time was not easy—it never is—but God has promised that: "No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psalm 84).

Today the work of Marella is progressing slowly and steadily under the old system; children are being cared for and helped spiritually but we are ready to move forward in new ventures as soon as the "All clear" sounds; and in God's time and His way this work will expand in a way that I am sure will astonish our friends.

CONCLUSION: As we enter on a new year with its planned activities we would like to thank all our supporters for what they have enabled us to do in 1974; and we pray that all may experience God's continued blessing throughout the year upon which we have now entered.