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Marella Mission Farm

Sky Pilot Fellowship Ltd., Marella Mission Farm

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George and I were travelling in the jungle country far from the Roper River. Only that morning we had run the bow of the dinghy onto the pure white sand of a little tropical beach. It was quiet and calm with nothing to spoil the colourful beauty of the scene. George sighed with content as the boat grounded.

"You know, Smithy," he said, "What I like about this country is that there are no people to spoil the place. What I mean to say is you don't see any empty jam tins or beer bottles scattered about. I don't know why white people like to make a mess, but they do. But you don't get that here."

"No," I agreed, "it certainly is unspoiled by man. I wish it were possible to let busy city people catch a glimpse of this spot. Photos look flat, and even a painting only tells part of the story, for you can't catch the sweet jungle scent from a painting. Look at these pale lemon spikes of blossom on the paper-bark trees! The air is just saturated with the odour. What does it remind you of?"

George sniffed. "It's hard to say, but there's something familiar about it." He sniffed again. "Say, it's somethin' like treacle warmin' up in a camp oven."

"Someday," I said, "I'll tell you a story about the syrup from those trees, but we haven't time now. Let's make the dinghy secure above high tide. The lugger will be all right where we anchored her. Anyhow, Lefthand is aboard and he'll look after her. Come on, we'll have to get moving."

We walked into the jungle, admiring the trees as we went. There were the glossy-leaved, dome shaped native cabbage trees, the graceful pandanus palms; here were hibiscus bushes with their pretty yellow, funnel-shaped flowers. Whispering beech oaks, red stringy-barks, a great variety of wattles and beautiful bloodwoods were but few of the trees that delighted our eyes. As we penetrated deeper into the jungle we noticed a number of tall trees that
raised bare, dead branches to the blue sky far above the tangled tropical undergrowth of the jungle. George remarked about the number of them.

"Say, Smithy, we seem to be in a cemetery of trees. I wonder what killed them? It isn't shortage of water as it rains every second day here? Do you think it's old age? Yet some of them don't seem that old, compared with a lot that are still alive and healthy. This reminds me of the place where elephants are supposed to go away to die. I read about that in a book once that I borrowed from the mission library. I've never seen so many dead trees in a livin' jungle before. Somehow I can't make it out."

"They were murdered," I told him. "That's what it was. Cold blooded murder."

"Murdered? Oh, come on, Smithy, how could a tree be murdered? If they had been ring-barked by some selector I could understand it, but there ain't a white man within a hundred miles as far as I know."

"Al the same," I continued, "they were murdered all right, George. This is the deadly work of the strangler fig."

"The strangler fig? What on earth is that? I ain't never heard of it before."

"It's a parasite like the mistletoe, or at least it starts life in that way. The strangler fig bears immense crops of small purple figs and birds and a lot of them become lodged in the bark. These germinate and a weak rootlet begins to work its way to the ground while a tender shoot explores the trunk of the tree upwards."

"Is it a very strong plant?" George asked. "It must be, to kill big trees like these."

"At first it's not. As a matter of fact it is so weak and frail that it couldn't support itself without the help of the tree against which it leans and clings."

"Well, how does it kill the tree?"

"Well, soon it sends out a second shoot at a different angle, and then another and another. They are grey-green in colour and look very harmless, and so they are—at first."

"But how does the strangler fig live? I mean do the roots go down in the soil for nourishment?"

"Not always. At least not for a long time. The fig lives on the life sap of the tree. But it is not content to drink the sap of the tree, it is a born murderer and is not satisfied until it has killed the tree."

"You haven't told me how it kills the tree. Does it poison it or what?"

"I thought you would guess from the name. It is called the strangler fig because it slowly strangles the tree to death. The shoots grow out in all directions and cover the trunk of the tree in a fine network. As the fig gets older the shoots become flat on the surface next to the tree. When the tree is covered with the network, the fig seems to contract—or maybe it is the tree that gets larger and the network refuses to stretch. Gradually the meshes of this net close up, squeezing like a python squeezes its prey."

"And yet it could not live only for the tree? What I mean to say is it's a pretty rotten thing to kill the tree that feeds it."

"Well, that's what happens. Gradually, where the tight network squeezes, decay begins to set in. You can see trees with part of the branches and leaves already dead. They look as if they were gasping for breath, as the few withered green leaves that remain thrash about in the wind. But the strangler fig has no mercy. Slowly but surely it kills its host."

"No wonder they call it a strangler fig. Does it grow very big, this here fig tree?"

"Yes, before long its branches reach the top of the tree and spread out in the sunshine above the jungle. That's when it begins to bear its crop of figs. And as the tree gradually dies the fig seems to be able to feed on the decaying body of the tree that once had supported it. But the birds are very fond of the figs that it bears and they come in thousands to feed on them when ripe. That's the way the strangler fig is able to go from place to place and attack new trees."

"It gives me the creeps to think of it. Let's go over and see what it looks like. You've got me interested."

"Well," I said, "we'll have to cut our way through the undergrowth. Look out for the barbs of the lawyer canes, they'll give you a nasty wound."

"Too right they will. These 'Come back quicks' are well named. They fetch up a man with a jolt all right. But a man can't cut a path through the jungle without losin' a bit of blood. Good job they ain't poisonous."

I followed George as he used his jungle knife to good purpose and we soon stood at the foot
of a giant tree. It was quite dead, but it had an appearance of life because of the great mass of leaves and stems of the strangler fig that had done its deadly work only too well.

"Say, just look at this, Smithy! The fig has made a net so fine you could hardly put your finger in the holes between the stems. It looks like a great big spider's web. It covers every inch of the tree from the root up to the top branches. Pity help the tree when one of these murderous things gets a hold. I feel like cutting it off at the roots just to pay it out for the murder it's done."

"It wouldn't be any good, George. You can't kill it that way. It can live without contact with the ground. The only way would be to cut off every inch of the network. Anyway that would take a week and the tree is already dead. But look at this tree behind you. It has a tiny strangler fig just beginning to grow. Do you see the delicate shoot that seems to cling so lovingly to the beautiful tree it is going to murder?"

"But that little plant ain't one of the strangler figs is it? It looks too soft and harmless to be a murderer."

"It certainly looks harmless, but it will eventually kill the tree."

"No it won't. Not if I can help it anyway, I'll chop it out by the roots and save the tree."

George set to work with his knife, but he found that, small as the strangler fig was, its roots had already taken a firm hold of the host. It left an ugly scar on the tree when George had finished.

"Well, that's that! I had to cut pretty deep, but better that than lose the tree. You know, Smithy, I must be gettin' soft hearted or somethin', but I could spend a week going round the jungle and killin' off these beastly murderers."

"You always were soft hearted. You pretend to be hard and tough, but underneath you're just a silly, sentimental old man. All the same, I can understand how you feel about it. But if you could imagine a strangler fig getting a hold on a human being and slowly strangling him to death, how would you feel then?"

"Don't talk like that, Smithy, you'll give me a nightmare. Even now every time I brush against a twig I feel a cold shiver run down my spine. I'll be dreamin' of the strangler fig for weeks after this."

"Well, George, you've often said that you couldn't understand why I wanted to be a missionary. But I can see a more deadly strangler fig already getting a grip on the hearts of men. Men and women everywhere are being slowly strangled or choked to death by sin, and I know the cure because I've tried it myself. Do you wonder why I want to help them? If you can have sympathy for a mere tree that is in the grip of a deadly enemy, how much more should I have sympathy for my fellow men? We read in the second chapter of Hebrews: 'Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, Christ Himself likewise took part in the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage... For in that He Himself suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted.'"

THE HOLIDAYS: As in previous years all the dark children spent a little over three weeks in the homes of various friends. They had a wonderful time and returned fit and well. We had no complaints from their temporary foster parents and are pleased that some have asked for the same children again next Christmas. The staff members also had their annual holidays which were again made possible by the generous action of Mrs. Onslow, the Secretary of our Women's Auxiliary, who acted as caretaker in their absence. The Farm Manager and the Land Girl remained and looked after the livestock and the farm. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Mrs. Onslow and our other voluntary workers who, over the years, have done so much to keep this work going, not only in fund raising but in many different ways, THE DARK CHILDREN: Several of our children left Marella after the holidays and went out to work or returned to parents or other relatives now in a position to care for them. It is, of course, the ideal situation when children can be brought up in their own homes; even if they have some privations and lack some of the amenities in a Children's Home. However, not all parents are able to cope with them and when new children are admitted we often find a history of them being taken from place to place and Home to Home before they reach us.
Each month new children seek admission to Marella and beds are not vacant for long. We expect that lack of accommodation will again be a problem this year.

MRS. K. LANGFORD-SMITH: Since this work commenced, Mrs. Langford-Smith has been a tower of strength in many different ways. She has been a real mother to the children, all of whom call her “Mum”, but for many years she did all the cooking as well as supervise the children. In years gone by we admitted several ailing children whom the doctors thought we had no chance of saving. Mrs. Langford-Smith treated these little ones as if they were her own children, nursing them constantly and refusing to let them die. Sometimes she sat up all night nursing such a child by the open, log fire in the Mission House.

In spite of several major operations and a failing heart caused by rheumatic fever in childhood, she has carried on by sheer will power. However, the Heart Specialist has now told her that she has reached the end of most of her active work. Two valves in the heart are not working properly, she has an enlarged heart and her lungs have also been affected. She has to enter Sydney Hospital this month for at least two weeks for further tests and to determine if an operation is necessary. We would value your prayers for her quick and complete recovery. She does not want to have to give up any of her work for the children; but this may be necessary in the near future. Her illness will throw a great strain on the rest of the staff and on her husband, but God has said: “As thy days so shall thy strength be.”

HOME OFFERING BOXES: Many of our friends have Home Offering Boxes in which they place odd small coins from time to time. It is surprising how these add up at the end of a quarter. They are not really missed and it is a way of contributing to the Marella funds in a less regular way. We have spare boxes and will be pleased to send one to anyone who would care to help us in this way. The boxes are usually opened by the boxholder at the end of every quarter and the contents are forwarded to us.

DARWIN DISASTER: We were all shocked and grieved to hear of the dreadful disaster to Darwin. The public response has been wonderful and we trust and pray that those who have suffered such loss will be compensated, at least in part. But no financial compensation will restore lost lives. Amongst those who died as a result of the cyclone was a retired sergeant of police known as “Sandy” McNab.

Constable McNab (as he was in 1930) was a firm friend of Mr. Langford-Smith when he was stationed in Arnhem Land with his aeroplane. Many of the stories from the “Sky Pilot’s Log” featured Sergeant McNab who was involved in incidents recorded in the stories. When Mrs. Langford-Smith was in Darwin in 1937, a few months before her first child was born, Constable McNab took her under his wing, conducted her to the wharf, found her cabin on the “Marella”, and carried her luggage. The “Sky Pilot” and his wife have lost a very true and loyal friend in Sergeant McNab.

Mr. Langford-Smith has received a letter from “Connie”, the widow of another friend who was associated with the “Sky Pilot” from the early 1930’s till his recent death. She writes from Darwin: “I am one of the fortunate ones whose life was spared in the Tracy tragedy. I am still at the old address—but was a very frightened woman facing Tracy alone—and why I was spared I have yet to discover. However, one does discover the good that exists in the worst of us; and at eighty years of age I was able to do a good job. I stayed put and refused to be evacuated; and very glad I had the courage to do so as I have been able to do something useful acting as postmistress to the work force of 500 men housed in these blocks of flats. The anxiety of these men whose wives and families had been evacuated was very confusing and as the only woman amongst them I was able to help them greatly. I was treated like a Queen.”

OUR OLDER CHILDREN: Recently we have been contacted personally or by phone or letter by several of our older children who are now in the community. Christine, who was with us for over 20 years, came to tell us that she and her husband were expecting a little one; Anne phoned to know how we were and to give us her news; Geoff and his brother Greg phoned and Tracey and her young sisters, Doreen and Lyssa, have phoned almost every week—sometimes two or three times—as they are very homesick. Only eternity will show what influence we have been able to have on the lives of these Aboriginal children.

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