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Marella Mission Farm

Sky Pilot Fellowship Ltd., Marella Mission Farm

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SID EVERETT AT THE MICROPHONE

FROGS: From the Sky Pilot’s Log 2CH Broadcast

It was the beginning of the wet season, the time of the North West Monsoon in Arnhem Land. As if by a miracle, thousands of frogs appeared, and the noise of their croaking made sleep impossible till one became used to them. George was camped at the Mission with us, and for greater coolness we had unrolled our swags on the garden path instead of inside the house. Mosquitoes were bad, and so we lay on our groundsheets under the cheese-cloth nets, and sweated through the hours of night, getting very little sleep. Joe groaned, and we heard him turn over and start fanning himself with a hat that he had taken to bed for that very purpose.

“Phew!” he exclaimed, “it’s hot. I say, are you fellows asleep?”

“Asleep?” George asked. “What chance have we got of getting any sleep when you start talkin’ every few minutes? I don’t know which is worst, you or the frogs. You both make the same noise, only you’re closer than the frogs, and you expect an answer to your noise.”
"Well," said Joe, "at least I don't snore, thank heaven. There's nothing more aggravating than lying here trying to go sleep while you're snoring like an old dugong."

"That ain't true," complained George. "I don't snore. I was only breathin' heavy-like. There ain't no air in these here cheese-cloth nets.

Well, it's the heaviest breathing I've ever heard; it shakes your net every time you breathe out."

"Stop arguing, can't you?" I put in. "I have put up with frogs and Joe's groans and George's snores, but when you start arguing, that's the end of sleep for me."

"You weren't asleep," Joe asserted, "you were only kidding. No one could sleep in this heat."

"Well," said George, "let's listen to the song of the frogs in the billabong; they've got a regular orchestra down there, with bass and tenor and what-not."

"You mean a choir, not an orchestra," Joe was particular.

"I mean frogs; I don't care what you call it. If you listen close, you can imagine 'em playing the fiddle and kettle drum, and I don't know what."

"They kick up a row, all right," Joe agreed. "Until the first storm, there wasn't a sign of them; now there are millions. I wonder where they all came from?"

"They came down in the rain," George assured him. "It's the same every year. They must be in the clouds — probably they breed there — and when the storm breaks they come down with the rain."

"I don't believe that!" Joe exclaimed. "It's not true, is it, Smithy?"

"No, it's not true; but we'll never convince an old bushman, like George. For generations, the bushmen have believed that fairy tale, and nothing will convince them."

"It is true," George insisted. "I've seen 'em with my own eyes. I've been ridin' along in the bush and a storm caught me, and before I had time to get under me 'orse for shelter there was the frogs, landin' all over the ground."

"Did you see the frogs in the air?" I asked.

"Of course not! How could I see anythin' in blinin' rain from a tropical storm? But I seen 'em land on the ground in dozens all round me."

"You don't always tell the truth," Joe said, reproachfully. "What about the yarn you were telling me this afternoon about boilin' your billy on spinifex?"

"That's the dinkum truth, Joe; you don't believe me?"

"No, I don't!"

"What was that yarn?" I asked.

"I was tellin' Joe about the time I camped in the spinifex country. There weren't no wood to boil the quart pot, so I had to set fire to the spinifex and hold the billy over it till it boiled."

"But you can't boil a quart pot in that way! A clump of spinifex flares up, and in a few seconds it burns away, like any other grass."

"That's what I was tellin' Joe. I had to follow the fire as it ran through the spinifex. It kept me movin', I can tell you. I ran close on three miles before the quart pot came to the boil."

"You must have enjoyed the tea after a run like that."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't. As soon as the water boiled I felt in my pocket for the tea leaves, and I found I'd left 'em behind at the camp. By the time I got back, the water had gone off the boil. Don't you believe me, Smithy?"

"Of course I do. That story has been told in the bush for 50 years or more, so it must be true. But what has it got to do with frogs?"

"Yes," said Joe. "we were talking about frogs, weren't we? George said they bred in the clouds. You may be a 'George', but you're not George Washington."

"Who's he?" asked George. "I ain't heard of no one of that name — not about these parts, anyways."

"He never lived here, George; he couldn't. He'd have died of a broken heart. He was a man who couldn't tell a lie."

"He'd of soon learned if he lived in this country, especially if he had Joe to listen to him."

"We were talking about frogs," Joe reminded him. "Where do they breed, Smithy?"

"In the water, of course. They start life as tadpoles."

George chuckled. "Wasn't it tadpoles you strained out of the goat's milk, Smithy?"

"Only when Johnny increased the milk supply by filling it with billabong water."

"I've seen blobs of jelly," said Joe, "with a black dot in the centre, floating in the water. Are they frogs' eggs?"

"That's right. The tadpoles hatch out of the eggs, and they have gills, like fish, to enable them to breathe."

"What do they feed on?"

"They are vegetarians; but when the legs appear they change their way of breathing, as well as their diet. They develop lungs, and they eat flies, beetles, grubs and snails."

"I've seen tadpoles," said Joe, "with four legs and a tail."

"Yes, they all go through that stage. Then they come ashore and live on the land."

"What happens to the tail?" George asked.
"Does it drop off?"

"No. During the period of change, when the tadpole leaves off being a vegetarian and takes to meat, it is unable to feed at all; and during this time it lives on its tail, which is absorbed as food."

"Like a camel livin' on its hump in the desert," suggested George.

"Frogs eat mosquitoes, don't they?" Joe asked.

"Yes; and a pet frog was seen to eat fifty mosquitoes in a minute, according to Gillies and Hall. A frog is a very useful friend to man."

"I thought frogs was one of the plagues that worried Pharaoh?" George said, as though proud of his knowledge.

"You're coming on, George. We'll make a Bible student of you, yet," Joe interrupted.

"Yes, George." I ignored Joe and kept to the point. "And you can imagine what it must have been like with thousands of frogs in the water and in the houses and getting mixed up in the cooking. They'd die by thousands, and . . . . well, a dead frog isn't very pleasant."

"They'd stink the place out," said George, cruelly. "I seen a waterhole once with hundreds of dead frogs in it. Even the blackfellows wouldn't drink the water, though our tongues were hangin' out for a drink."

"If you don't mind, let's stick to live frogs, George."

"All right, Joe, all right; I was only tellin' you."

"The frogs feed at night. Toads, which are cousins to the frogs, also feed at night. I had a pet toad for years, and it was a most useful friend in the garden."

"But aren't toads supposed to be poisonous?" asked Joe.

"People once thought so; but, like George's story of frogs coming down in the rain, there is no truth in it."

"I hate toads, anyhow," said George. "They're ugly creatures, and make a man feel all creepy."

"But they have beautiful eyes, George," I said, in defence of the toad. "Shakespeare says: 'Sweet are the uses of adversity which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in the head.'"

The poet was wrong about the toad being venomous, but right about the jewel in its head.

"I still don't like toads," George insisted.

"But frogs ain't so bad. But why is it that when a frog sits quiet he always seems to wobble under the jaw? Would it be fright makes him do that?"

"No, it is the way it breathes. The lungs are small, and the frog has no rib or diaphragm, so it cannot breathe as we do. It increases the body-cavity by lowering the skin under the chin while keeping the nose open. Then, by raising the throat skin while the nose is closed, the air which has entered the mouth is forced into the lungs. By a reverse process, the air that is spent is forced out."

"That seems a terribly complicated way of breathing," Joe complained.

George chuckled. "It's just as well you don't have to breathe that way, Joe. You'd be sure to get mixed up in the process, and would probably die from suffocation."

"Probably it doesn't seem complicated to the frog. But the frog cannot get enough air this way, so it also breathes through the skin. Frogs are wonderful creatures; they can do without food or water for long periods."

"When we was sinkin' a well . . . ." George began.

"You don't mean to tell me YOU were doing the digging?" asked Joe.

"No, no," George hastened to assure him. "I was only givin' the orders; it's agin' my religion to dig. I don't mind any work I can do on a horse, but I bar diggin'. Anyway, as I was sayin', we was sinkin' a well, and we found live frogs in solid rock over 20 feet underground."

"Aren't there frogs in the desert?" Joe asked.

"I've heard you speak about them."

"That's right," said George. "I've seen 'em. They lie buried in the sand, and when the blacks is doin' a perish they dig up the frogs, put the frog's mouth in their mouth, and give a good squeeze — and they've had a drink."

"Shut up, George," Joe ordered. "I was just going to get a drink of water myself, and you've put me off it. Last time I went to the waterbag there was a frog sitting on it."

"I've watched frogs catchin' flies," George went on, ignoring Joe, "and they seem to be able to throw out their tongues a long way."

"Yes," I agreed, "the tongue has its root in the front of the mouth and points downwards or backwards into the throat, so it can use the full length. The tip is as sticky as glue, and only has to touch a fly to trap it. If one frog can eat 50 mosquitoes in a minute, you can work out how many flies and mosquitoes are destroyed by the millions of frogs we can hear now."

"I never knew that frogs were useful," Joe observed. "I've always hated the cold, slimy things; but I won't kill a frog again."

"No, it is a shame to kill them; they're most useful friends to man. It's a great pity that people once thought them dangerous and venomous. When I was a boy the other boys used to say that if you touched a frog you would get warts! Utter nonsense, of course, but it will take the poor old frog a long time to live down the prejudice against him. There's a lot in the old saying: 'Give a dog a bad name and you might as well hang him.'"
“This applies to men, too,” said George, “especially in this country. Once a man gets a bad name, it ain’t easy for him to live it down.”

“It proves how necessary it is for us to be careful not to misjudge anyone. Christian people are often too ready to condemn a man without waiting to find out if he really is as black as he is painted. Very often we drive away from our Churches the very ones who most need our help.”

“Well,” said Joe, “when I have tried to get some men into Church, they have said that the day they entered a Church the roof would probably fall in.”

“It is a pity to joke about it like that, because in time the people begin to believe it themselves. I don’t mean about the roof; but I mean that they take it for granted that they are not wanted by the Church, or by God.”

“But,” Joe insisted, “I thought everyone knew that Christ came to save sinners. I’ll read the exact words. The moon is so bright I can see it quite clearly. It’s in the 9th chapter of Matthew. It says: ‘The Pharisees (that is, the Church leaders of that day) said unto His disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, He said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

THE LATE MR. SID EVERETT: The passing of Sid Everett, who died on 26th October, was a blow to us all. When the Radio Session, “Sky Pilot’s Log”, was commenced by Keith Langford-Smith just 15 years ago, Sid Everett was an Announcer at Radio Station 2CH. He kindly offered to help in any way he could, and modestly remarked: “I can change my voice to take different parts.” And that was the commencement of a run of about 2,000 quarter-hour sessions of dramatized stories in the “Sky Pilot” series on 2CH and other Radio Stations.

As “George,” Sid became known and loved by thousands of people; so real was his impersonation that people wrote in and asked his advice about horses and cattle! It is strange that the real-life George died in the Northern Territory this year.

Mr. Langford-Smith said: “There will never be another Sidney Everett. He never had the opportunity of reading a script over beforehand; it would be handed to him, and the session would go on in the air ‘live’, without rehearsal. If (as has happened!) there was a sheet missing from his copy, he would carry on, using his own imagination until handed the missing sheet, and the listeners would never know that anything had gone wrong. Many times people have said to me: ‘You must be amused at the things George says,’ quite overlooking the fact that I had previously written the script myself! I take this as a great tribute to Sid’s ability to make a part live. But Sid not only took the part of ‘George’; he was also ‘Left hand’, ‘Jacob’, and a dozen other characters.

“But quite apart from his ability as an actor, it was impossible to work with Sid for any length of time without coming to love him for his character, his personality, and his innate goodness. I feel that I have lost a very real friend; one to whom I owe more than will ever be known.”

The Sky Pilot Fellowship was represented at the funeral by the Permanent Director and his wife (Mr. and Mrs. K. Langford-Smith), and the Secretary (Mrs. N. K. Warwick). We extend our deepest sympathy to Mrs. Everett and son John.

SALE OF WORK: The Sale of Work on 26th of this month proved to be a record in every way, and we continue to praise God for His very evident blessing. Firstly (as usual), it proved to be a perfect day regarding the weather, about which we had been praying; secondly, we had crowds of people coming and going all day, in spite of the fact that we clashed with the Parramatta Pageant; and last, it proved a day of happy fellowship, and was a financial success. After deducting expenses, the total net profit was over £725, and the members of our Women’s Auxiliary, and our many voluntary workers, are to be congratulated. Our thanks are also due to Mr. Armitage, M.H.R., who presented a National Flag to the children on behalf of the Government.