

CHAPTER XXIX

MARY ANN

MARY ANN was the house gin and our nurse when we were children. She was quite a different type to Sally in every way, especially as far as colouring and facial characteristics were concerned, taking more after her ancestors, the invaders of long ago. Her skin was a coppery colour and her features inclined to be aquiline, her hair straight and black. In intelligence she was a little above the average aboriginal on the station and made a very faithful, painstaking servant, a splendid children's nurse.

When we were young she used to take us out hunting among the sandhills after rains, for the great green frogs which only came to the surface after rains had fallen. We were easily able to tell where their holes were by the tiny cracks on the smooth surface of the sandhills. As we dug them out, Mary Ann would string them on to a pointed stick or put them in a dilly bag which she carried slung across her back.

Although gins make many things, such as fish nets, mats, and baskets of sorts out of the river grass, their most treasured possession is the dilly bag made of woven grass or reeds and usually carried on the back. Into this *mung-kora* go all the odds and ends, food and the accumulated treasures of a lifetime.

Another day she would take us digging for roots,

yams—*mootchery*, as she used to call them. These yams grew like sweet potatoes in the sandhills and along the sandy banks of the watercourses. Or perhaps we would go and gather wild oranges from thorny trees near the old sheep yards at the two-mile waterhole.

Woombun-ye trees were stunted and thorny with little cream flowers in clusters, with golden-red centres and in soft trails like bridal wreaths of old gold rosebuds. When crushed the leaves emitted a faint odour of orange blossoms.

The fruit these trees bore once every two or three years was round like an orange and smelled faintly of over-ripe oranges on a summer's afternoon. Here the resemblance ended, for the skin was reddish black, speckled green in colour, and the fruit itself full of pips with a taste resembling that of aniseed. How they acquired the name of orange no one seemed to know. The gins called them by various names; they were not bad to eat and seemed popular among the blacks.

In the vicinity of Teeta Lake, eight miles from the homestead, was the home of a species of ant, called *eerumba teeta* by the blacks, which secretes honey in its nest. The entrance is a gap about one-and-a-half inches in diameter, extending four or five feet into the ground. At the base of the tunnel lie the burrows or storage chambers. Tightly packed in rows six to eight deep, were large ants of the same species, acting as storage vats for the honey, which was made from material gathered by teams of worker ants from the spinifex, flowers, and trees. The posteriors of the ant bins, stuffed taut with honey, stand out in even rows, glistening like tawny marbles.

Following the trail of the worker ants, Mary Ann

and Judy soon located the tunnels, tearing up the ground with their sharp yam sticks. As soon as the storage chambers were reached, they stopped corroborating, downed tools, and got to work with their fingers, tearing out the living marbles, scooping them into a billy-can or coolamon.

Eerumba can be made to disgorge their sweets without such drastic treatment. Ordinarily, in places where blacks wish to cultivate the ant for edible purposes, they are most careful in their methods of tapping the vats. Breaking the crumbly sap, a black grasps an ant by the head or where its shoulders should be, and inserts the posterior between his lips, sucking ever so gently, milking the ant by a caressing movement. When sucked dry, the vats are released to store more honey and busy workers repair the tunnel during the night.

Late August or September saw the gins carrying coolamons and billys of transparent amber sweet into camp. The delicacy was available until about November, when the head man of the camp put a ban on the nests:

"To give the ants a chance. These gins are so dam greedy," said Moses to Sandy one day, as a line of laden gins passed across the flat to the chief's gunyah placing the "goodies" at his feet.

Parties searched in the red sandhills and found a truffle, called *wiididna*, which grew like a soft spongy plant beneath the sand. The growth barely breaks above the sand's surface, and is so rich that if gathered and left exposed for a minute, the flies "blow" it. It has a smell not unlike that of steaming cauliflower and was eagerly sought after by the gins, who would trudge miles on a hot day in search of it.

When the claypans were drying off, we used to go

with the gins to gather the seeds of the nardoo and *kooni* Pigweed, and *karapari*, seed of the *karabadi* (coolabah) trees. The seeds of the nardoo, little bulbous, brown, shiny things about the size and shape of the bean seed of the bauhinia, were sun-dried before crushing; the seeds from the Pigweed resembled linseed. *Karapari* was tedious to gather, as it took so many trees to provide sufficient seed for crushing; they were very small, and cakes or *pattis* made from the powder tasted strongly of eucalyptus.

Mary Ann would pulverize the yield between two ovate flattened stones, called nardoo stones, the upper of which had indentations for finger-grips, one on each side for thumb and second finger, and one in front for the first finger. The seed was placed on the bottom slab and ground to a fine powder.

After crushing, the gin caught the powder in her coolamon and *yandied* the husks from the edible portion, pouring it into a deeper coolamon called *koor-do*, a wooden vessel cut out of the wood of the coolabah and resembling somewhat in shape a miniature canoe, which the blacks used to prepare their food in.

When the grinding and sifting process was over, the powder was stowed away in small dilly bags of grass until it was required. To convert this powder into bread or meal the blacks mixed it to a stiff paste with water, rolled it into a ball or roly-poly, and placed it in hot ashes to cook.

Any witchetty grubs or titbits were brought home to the old people of the camp. Blacks treated their old folk generously—only necessity forced them to do otherwise; in times of drought and war the younger, stronger members of the tribe took a back seat until it came to a pinch, then the old and decrepit and the

new-born were knocked on the head to give the more useful members a chance.

Mary Ann's mother (old Mootch-choo-choo, meaning old or married woman) was a cranky old thing, her voice a shrill cackle, her hands like claws, and her legs like sticks. As was usual with most camp gins of full degrees, her body was covered with tribal weals; in addition to those on her thighs and body, she had four beautiful stripes about three inches apart running across her buttocks like a boundary fence; like a wire fence neglected with age, the once firm weals sagged; in her nose hung the nose-pin ornament.

During the latter part of her life she became totally blind; her constant companion was an old yellow dog, Toorie. One end of a leash of kangaroo hide was fastened to the dog's broad collar and the other to Mootch-choo-choo's hand, so that everywhere she went the dog accompanied her. She also had a Ringed Gidgee spear, pointed at both ends and about fourteen feet long. With this spear the blind gin felt her way down creek banks, across water and sandhills and through scrub; anywhere she wished to go, spear and dog were her staff and guide.

Mootch-choo-choo seemed to have sight and feeling in her fingers and toes. The old hag would walk slowly up to a lone individual, address him by name, and point to where someone else was sitting and reading. The blacks appear to have some psychic sense that Europeans do not possess—a prevision of coming events, and thought-reading.

In the old gin's possession were two Ringed Gidgee "come back" boomerangs. One of the rarest and highest of blackfellows' arts was the fashioning of these implements. They were cut only by specialists;

many of the carvings were symbolic of hunting and ceremonial rites; weapons with certain "thumb marks" or key-signs carved upon them were very highly valued by hunters and warriors.

These belonged originally to her benjiman, Billiah, or Bully-yea-ah, a famous warrior and hunter of the Emu totem. When he died the gin, by some miracle, kept the boomerangs. Alas, they were soon snapped up for a few shillings by collectors or bartered for white man's goods.

We did not realize in the days when the blacks numbered hundreds what faithful creatures the black servants were. Now that they are almost all scattered and gone from us, we realize what treasures we had, what a gap their passing has left, and how utterly impossible it is to replace them.