

A Giant in a Cave—An Australian Legend

R. H. Mathews

First published in *American Antiquarian*, vol. 29, 1907, pp. 29-31.¹

Among the remote ancestors of the Girriwurru tribe there was a man of great stature, whose body was covered with hair. He dwelt in a cave in a rock on the bank of the Hopkins river, in the vicinity of Maroona. The natives aver that, in the olden days, if any person went to this place, during Murkupang's absence, the water in the river would surge up into the cave's mouth, and prevent intruders from going inside. During the day he used to go out hunting around about Mount William, Moorabool, Kirk's Mountain, and Mount Ararat.

Murkupang's mother-in-law resided near him, and one day she sent her two grandchildren to see him and ask him for some food, because in accordance with tribal custom she could not herself approach her son-in-law. As he had not been successful in the chase for the past day or two, he killed the children and devoured them. Fearing the retribution of his mother-in-law's friends, Murkupang left his habitation at daybreak next morning and journeyed down the Hopkins river to a place near Wickliffe, where he tried to make a cave in a rock by pulling loose pieces off with his hands, but did not succeed.

He next went on to Hexham, where the country opens out into plains, which enabled him to see in the distance Mount Shadwell, with its rocky sides. He accordingly bent his steps in that direction and on approaching the mountain he saw a suitable cave in one side of it, but it was up near the top where the ascent was difficult. Being a great conjuror or sorcerer, he commenced 'bouncing' or scolding the mountain, and commanded the portion containing the cave to come down nearer to the plain on which he was standing. He stamped his feet and made passes or signs with his hands, while he sang a magical song. Presently, in obedience to his incantations, a large portion, containing the cave, parted from the rest of the hill.

Murkupang turned around and ran away across the plain, shouting to the fragment of mountain to roll after him. After a while, when he thought he had reached a good camping place, he faced round again, stamping his feet and using other menaces, which caused the mountain fragment to stop. It then settled down and became what is now known throughout that part of the country as 'Flat-top Hill'. At the present day the aborigines point out a depression in one side of Mount Shadwell from which Flat-top Hill was disrupted. Markupang

then selected a part of it which was sheltered from the weather by an overhanging rock—a sort of cave—and made his camp there.

In a few days' time his mother-in-law tracked him to his retreat. She had with her two young warriors, who were clever 'doctors' and had some knowledge of magic. When Murkupang went out hunting, these fighting men hid themselves a little distance from the cave's entrance—one on each side. Before taking up their positions they were smoked by the wily old mother-in-law, to repress or overpower the smell of their bodies. The men moreover covered themselves with stringy bark, softened by beating, so that they could roll it round and round their bodies to make them resemble the boles of trees. These precautions were taken to prevent Murkupang's dogs from scenting them.

While these treacherous proceedings were going on, Murkupang was away hunting as far as Ngurit or Black's mountain, where he filled his bag, *muka-muka*, with kangaroos which he caught, and started homeward. On nearing his cave, he dragged a dry tree after him to provide wood for cooking the game. On coming within sight, he observed the smoke of someone else's fire not far from his own, from which he concluded that his mother-in-law had found him out. He advanced cautiously, and 'sooled' his dogs to search around. He had eight dogs, comprising the soldier-bird or maina, magpie, black jay, crow, white cockatoo, eagle-hawk, and quail-hawk; some being very watchful and noisy, whilst others were very swift and voracious.

These dogs ran smelling everywhere about the camp, baying and uttering their various calls. Murkupang was so alarmed at this that he concluded he had better be generous to his mother-in-law, so he took one of the kangaroos out of his bag, and laying it on the ground, he called out to her to come and get it. He then continued his careful search about the camp, expecting to find some enemy, but his old mother-in-law had planned everything so well that he discovered nothing.

He now broke up the tree which he had carried home and made a good fire, with which he cooked a large kangaroo, and he and his dogs had a hearty evening meal. By and by he again went all round the camp, in the light of the blazing fire, jumping and assuming very obscene postures in the hope of making any hidden onlookers laugh, and so discover themselves, but there was not a sound audible in any direction. Feeling quite satisfied, he went into his cave and soon fell fast asleep, and so did all his dogs, being weary after a long day's hunting.

As before stated, the two warriors who were assisting the mother-in-law, had coiled stringy-bark around their bodies from head to foot, and being somewhat of magicians, they had then given themselves the appearance of real boles or high stumps of stringy-bark trees. There being plenty of other trees of that species growing in the locality, they were not noticed by Murkupang. After a while, upon receiving a sign from the old woman that all was quiet, the men

divested themselves of their covering, and walking to the cave, stopped up the entrance with the stringy-bark. A fire was then applied to this inflammable material, which made a great flame and suffocated Murkupang and his dogs. His spirit flew out through the blaze and became a mopoke, called by the natives *mumgatch*, a bird which goes about at night. His dogs also emerged from the cave and assumed the forms of the birds whose names have been already mentioned.

ENDNOTES

¹ An abstract of this legend was published in 'The Native Tribes of Victoria: Their Languages and Customs', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 43, 1904, pp. 67-8.