



Australian Legendary Tales

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THE WI-OOMBEENS AND PIGGI-BILLA

Two Wi-oombeen brothers went out hunting. One brother was much younger than the other and smaller, so when they sighted an emu the elder one said to the younger, "You stay quietly here and do not make a noise, or Piggi-billa, whose camp we passed just now, will hear you and steal the emu if I kill it. He is so strong. I'll go on and try to kill the emu with this stone."

The little Wi-oombeen watched his big brother sneak up to the emu, crawling along, almost flat on the ground. He saw him get quite close to the emu, then spring up quickly and throw the stone with such accurate aim as to kill the bird on the spot. The little brother was so rejoiced that he forgot his brother's caution, and he called aloud in his joy. The big Wi-oombeen looked round and gave him a warning sign, but too late, Piggi-billa had heard the cry and was hastening towards them. Quickly big Wi-oombeen left the emu and joined his little brother.

Piggi-billa when he came up said, "What have you found?"

"Nothing," said the big Wi-oombeen, "nothing but some mistletoe berries."

"It must have been something more than that, or your little brother would not have called out so loudly."

Little Wi-oombeen was so afraid that Piggi-billa would find their emu and take it, that he said, "I hit a little bird with a stone, and I was glad I could throw so straight."

"It was no cry for the killing of a little bird or for the finding of mistletoe berries that I heard. It was for something much more than either, or you would not have called out so joyfully. If you do not tell me at once I will kill you both."

The Wi-oombeen brothers were frightened, for Piggi-billa was a great fighter and very strong, so when they saw he was really angry they showed him the dead emu.

"Just what I want for my supper," he said, and so saying dragged it away to his own camp.

The Wi-oombeens followed him and even helped him to make a fire to cook the emu, hoping by so doing to get a share given to them. But Piggi-billa would not give them any; he said he must have it all for himself.

Angry and disappointed, the Wi-oombeens marched straight off and told some blackfellows who lived near that Piggi-billa had a fine fat emu just cooked for supper.

Up jumped the blackfellows, seized their spears, bade the Wi-oombeens quickly lead them to Piggi-billa's camp, promising them, for so doing, a share of the emu.

When they were within range of spear-shot, the blackfellows formed a circle, took aim, and threw their spears at Piggi-billa.

As the spears fell thick on him, sticking out all over him, Piggi-billa cried aloud, "Bingge-la, Bingge-la. You can have it. You can have it."

But the blackfellows did not desist until Piggi-billa was too wounded even to cry out; then they left him a mass of spears and turned to look for the emu. But to their surprise they found it not. Then for the first time they missed the Wi-oombeens.

Looking round they saw their tracks going to where the emu had evidently been; then they saw that they had dragged the emu to their nunnoo, or humpy made of grass.

When the Wi-oombeens saw the blackfellows coming they caught hold of the emu and dragged it to a big hole they knew of, with a big stone at its entrance, which stone only they knew the secret of moving. They moved the stone, got the emu and themselves into the hole, and the stone in place again before the blackfellows reached the place.

The blackfellows tried to move the stone, but could not. Yet they knew that the Wi-oombeens must have done so, for they had tracked them right up to it, and they could hear the sound of their voices on the other side of it. They saw there was a crevice on either side of the stone, between it and the ground. Through these crevices they drove in their spears, thinking they must surely kill the brothers. But the Wi-oombeens too had seen these crevices and had expected the spears, so that they had placed the dead emu before them to act as a shield. And into its body were driven the spears of the blackfellows intended for the Wi-oombeens.

Having driven the spears well in, the blackfellows went off to

get help to move the stone, but when they had gone a little way they heard the Wi-oombeens laughing. Back they came and speared again, and again started for help, only as they left to hear once more the laughter of the brothers.

The Wi-oombeens finding their laughter only brought back the blackfellows to a fresh attack, determined to keep quiet, which, after the next spearing, they did.

Quite sure, when they heard their spear-shots followed by neither conversation nor laughter, that they had killed the Wi-oombeens at last, the blackfellows hurried away to bring back the full strength and cunning of the camp, to remove the stone.

The Wi-oombeens hurriedly discussed what plan they had better adopt to elude the blackfellows, for well they knew that should they ever meet any of them again they would be killed without mercy. And as they talked they satisfied their hunger by eating some of the emu flesh.

After a while the blackfellows returned, and soon was the stone removed from the entrance. Some of them crept into the hole, where, to their surprise, they found only the remains of the emu and no trace of the Wi-oombeens. As those who had gone in first, crept out and told of the disappearance of the Wi-oombeens, others, not believing such a story, crept in to find it was so.

They searched round for tracks; seeing that their spears were all in the emu it seemed to them probable that the Wi-oombeens had escaped alive, and if so, their tracks would show whither they had gone. But search as they would no tracks could the blackfellows find. All they could see were two little birds which sat on a bush near the hole, watching them all the time.

The little birds flew round the hole sometimes, but never away, always returning to their bush and seeming to be discussing the whole affair; but what they said the blackfellows could not understand.

But as time went on and no sign was ever found of the Wi-oombeens, the blackfellows became sure that the brothers had turned into the little white-throated birds which had sat on the bush by the hole, in order, they supposed, to escape their vengeance.

And ever afterwards the little white-throats were called Wi-oombeens. And the memory of Piggibilla is perpetuated by a sort of porcupine ant-eater, which bears his name, and whose skin is closely covered with miniature spears sticking out all over it.



FIGGI-BILLA THE PORCUPINE

Piggi-billa lies asleep face down and the Daens gather round to spear him. The other part of the picture is after he has crawled away full of the spears that have remained in his back ever since.