

SKY PILOT NEWS

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"The shadow of a great Rock in a weary land."

The Sky Pilot's car at Ayers Rock, Central Australia, 1957.

RIVERS AMONG ROCKS: A Story From The Sky Pilot's Log (2CH Broadcast)

It was a very dry year. The ground nuts and yams had failed, and most of the native game had left the district. The blacks were forced away from the drying waterholes and, weak and thin, had set off across the desert in a long march for food and water. Many of them perished by the way; it was a case of survival of the fittest. To let the strong die for the weak is not nature's way, and these people lived very close to nature.

George and I crossed the desert south of the range. It was not all sandy country—

much of it consisted of rough, barren sandstone with stretches of gibber country like Sturt's Stony Desert. It was hard on the horses, especially some of the pack horses that had not been shod. Firewood was scarce and we had to pack water in canteens, even for the horses. We reached a waterhole just about dusk, and I rode ahead to stop the pack horses stampeding and making the water unfit to drink. I might have saved myself the trouble; the waterhole was bone dry. When George arrived a few minutes later,

he sat rather still on his weary horse and stared at the cracked and dry claypan that should have contained water.

I turned and looked at George. "Looks like another dry camp, mate. No use digging a soak here — only be a waste of energy."

"Well, Smithy, we'll have to give the horses a drink to-night; that'll about empty the canteens. We must find water to-morrow, or else" George broke off and looked round in the gathering dusk. Around us were great hills of shifting sand and a few outcrops of rock. There was practically nothing in the way of vegetation, except the hardy porcupine grass, or false spinifex. A little earlier a blood-red sun had set behind the great sand dunes of this desert wasteland. There was not a sign of life as far as the eye could see. A short distance away the skeletons of a few stunted desert oak and mulga bushes stretched their leafless branches above the drifting sand. There even the spinifex was dead. No sign or trace of bird or beast; no crows or lizards; no flies; not even an ant. No breath of wind to break the awful silence.

George pulled out his tobacco tin, hacked a few junks from his plug and filled his pipe, ramming the tobacco into the carbon-caked briar with square, calloused fingers. He spoke very quietly: "Well, Smithy, it's no use us meeting trouble half-way. We've been in worse jams than this before now. One thing, there's plenty of firewood just here."

"That's something to be thankful for," I replied. "I'll cook enough salt junk to last us a couple of days. It always seems wicked to me to use mulga for a fire; down south it's worth a lot of money polished up a bit; here we use it to boil the billy."

"Right now I'm more worried about what we put in the billy than what goes under it. I don't like the desert. No, give me the north, with the open eucalyptus forest and a few pandanus along the river banks."

"George, don't talk about rivers. Not here."

"Oh, well! I'll see to the horses while you get the fire going. No need to hobble them—they won't go far to-night."

"Look, George! Over in the west. I'm sure I saw a flash of lightning! There may be a storm'."

George swung around and stared into the gathering darkness. "No, I can't see any-

thin'. Your eyes must be playing tricks; there's not a cloud in the sky. You can't have a storm without clouds."

But it was a storm. Late that night we lay and watched the lightning playing about the horizon, and we knew rain was falling. The sight only depressed us. There was no sound of thunder; the storm was too far away to be of any use to us.

Long before dawn we saddled up and started along the track, hoping to get as far as possible while it was comparatively cool. All too soon the sun rose and we pushed on over the burning sand, hour after hour, till it seemed as if our blood vessels would burst in the heat. We were making towards a huge outcrop of rock. It seemed only two or three miles away, but distances are deceiving in the desert, and we travelled ten times that distance before we reached it late in the afternoon. The horses were nearly done; we had to punch them along. I was too stiff to get off my horse without help; hard riding is not much good to a man with a false hip-joint.

George steadied me with his strong arm. "There now, take it easy, Smithy, and lie down for a few minutes. You can see to the horses later; they're too knocked up to move. I'll just poke about a bit and see if I can find water."

"Thanks, George. I saw a wallaby track going to the left a little way back."

"Yes, I saw it, too; I'll follow it up. I noticed a few fresh signs of wallabies about, so there must be water somewhere about."

The old stockman mounted his horse, and in a harsh voice tried to sing, "Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye."

"George," I told him, "if you find water I'll let you sing all night."

It was dark when George returned. He was not singing. One look at his face and I knew he had failed. He threw himself on his swag that I had unrolled ready for him. After a few moments he raised himself on one elbow and spoke in a weary voice:

"Sorry, Smithy, but it's no go. It's got me beat. I found the main track and followed it for a couple of miles till it branched away in all directions and finally petered out."

"You must have been following in the wrong direction. Tracks always get stronger as you approach water."

"Oh, I know that! I turned round and followed it the other way, but it leads right up the side of the rocky outcrop. It was gettin' dark, and I lost it in the rocks; but you don't find rock pools at the top of a fifty-foot rock wall. No, Smithy, there's something I can't figure out. I'll have another go at daylight. How are the 'orses?"

"I gave them the last of the water in the canteens; it was hardly enough to wet their lips. We've only got our water bottles left, George. They're full, but a quart won't last long; I could drink it all right now, and then come back for more."

"Well, as soon as we've had a bit to eat we'd better turn in and try to sleep. We'll need all our strength to-morrow."

Before turning in I read a couple of chapters from my pocket Bible. In the Book of Job I found a passage that seemed to me most appropriate. It read: "There is a path that no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen. . . . He putteth forth His hand upon the rock; He overturneth the mountain by the roots; He cutteth out rivers among the rocks; and His eye seeth every precious thing." All that night, even in my sleep, the words "rivers among the rocks" kept ringing in my ears. I have always found it well worthwhile to take notice of any text that seems to echo in my mind in a time of emergency, and the next morning I said to George: "Let's climb those rocks. I'm sure we'll find water there somewhere."

George shook his head. "It don't make sense, Smithy; water always finds the lowest level. How would it get to the top of a tor of rock like that?"

"I don't know; but you tried the other way. Let's try the rock."

"Well, all right, if you say so; but it's a long climb and we haven't any time to waste. Anyhow, we might be able to see something from the top; there may be water on the other side."

We followed the worn pad of the wallaby track and an hour later reached the top. There was no water. George looked round in every direction, but there was no sign of water on the other side of the tor, either. George remarked on the obvious. "Well, there's nothing here, Smithy; we'll have to go back and try the other way."

"But," I asked, "why would all these wallabies climb this rock?"

George laughed. "Don't you remember that poem that says:

'Tis true there's very little grass,
But this a fair exchange is,
The sheep can see a lovely view
By climbing up the ranges."

"No George, that doesn't make sense, either. I know animals, and if I were a wallaby I wouldn't climb this steep rock in the heat just for fun. I'm sure there's water here."

We retraced our steps, passing a rugged ledge of rock worn smooth by the feet of countless wallabies. A little to the right a tiny green shrub was growing out of a crack in the rock. There was nothing unusual in this; but somehow I felt there was something wrong about that bush. While George walked on I waited back to puzzle it out. All at once I realised what it was; the bush was green and every other shrub was silver-grey. I scrambled across the rock, and there at the base of the shrub was a tiny hole, no bigger than a quart-pot, but it was full of clear, cool water.

George's impatient voice reached me. "Come on, Smithy, we can't waste any more time here."

"In a minute, George; first I'm going to have a long, cool drink."

George came back up the side of that tor quicker than any rock wallaby. We found later that no matter how much water we bailed out, that tiny pool remained full. We were able to water the horses and fill the canteens. Where the water came from, we could never find out; it seemed to spring from the centre of the rock. It certainly was as good as "rivers among rocks."

Some time later I found these words, written by an unknown writer: "We never know where God hides His pools. We see a rock, and we cannot guess it is the home of the spring. We see a flinty place, and we cannot tell it is the hiding place of a fountain. God leads me into the hard places, and then I find I have gone into the dwelling-place of eternal springs." God knows our need of the wilderness experience. He knows where and how to bring out that which is enduring. The soul has been idolatrous, rebellious; has forgotten God, and with a perfect self-will has said, "I will follow after my lovers." But she did not overtake them. And when she was hopeless and forsaken, God said, "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness,

and speak comfortably to her." Yes, the way to the Promised Land is through the wilderness.

"The word of God came to John in the wilderness." Luke 3:2.

SPECIAL NOTE: SEPTEMBER, 1957.

No doubt many subscribers will wonder why these issues have been delayed for so long. The absence of Mr. Langford-Smith in Central Australia and Arnhem Land caused some delay; but after his return it was intended to have them printed immediately. However, there came a sudden influx of dark children, which brought our dark family to 15. In fact, the accommodation position became so acute that no less than 10 other children had to be refused admission. It had never happened before that any needy child was refused admission; however, our rooms were completely filled, the children even using double-decker beds to conserve space. Much as we would have liked to crowd the extra children in somehow, it has to be remembered that it is necessary for us to satisfy inspectors that our accommodation is not overtaxed and that the children are housed in suitable quarters. Plans were made immediately to add at least one extra room as soon as finance was available. But in the meantime the extra children that HAD been admitted had to be fed and clothed, and funds that had been set aside for printing and other costs had to be used for that purpose.

A circular was sent out to a few friends and supporters explaining the position, and the response was immediate and gratifying. Sufficient funds were made available for printing costs; and a fund was started with donations earmarked for the purpose of adding a room for aboriginal boys to our temporary quarters.

Then, just as these papers were being prepared for the printers, further complications arose. First, Mrs. Langford-Smith unexpectedly had to undergo a major operation at Parramatta Hospital. Ruth Langford-Smith, her second daughter, arranged to stay at home to help with the management of the Home and children, but unfortunately she cut her right hand so deeply when opening a tin that she had to be rushed to a doctor to have four stitches inserted. On the same day the Mission van broke a crankshaft and was put out of action. These events threw a tremendous additional strain on Mr. Langford-Smith, Mrs. Norma Warwick (the secretary), and Miss

Isabelle Thorne, our assistant. However, neighbours and friends rallied to our assistance, and the work carried on. In due course, Mrs. Langford-Smith returned home, and it is now known that the operation was completely successful, and she will not have to undergo further treatment, as was feared.

A few days later, Mr. Langford-Smith, who has been overworking for many years, suffered a coronary occlusion and was rushed to hospital in a critical condition. Christian friends everywhere joined in prayer for his recovery, and we thank God that already his progress has been remarkably good. The doctors now express confidence in an ultimate and complete recovery, though it will be some months before he is able to resume his more strenuous activities.

It is hoped to complete and print the remaining overdue issues of this paper at short intervals until once again they are up-to-date. The May issue will include a report on Mr. Langford-Smith's recent trip to Central Australia and the Northern Territory, but it will not be possible to use many of the photographs taken by him until he is sufficiently recovered to complete them. However, the cover photo of this issue is one which he developed before his illness.

We have been encouraged by the vast number of letters, enquiries, good wishes and assurances of continued prayers that have been received recently. Amongst the tributes paid to the past work of the "Sky Pilot" perhaps the following verses by Beatrice Cleland, which were forwarded by one who has been helped by his ministry, most perfectly express the feeling of most of us:

"Not merely by the words you say,
Not only in your deeds confessed,
But in the most unconscious way
Is Christ expressed.

Is is a beatific smile?
A holy light upon your brow?
Oh, no—I felt HIS presence while
You laughed just now.

For me 'twas not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me still dim,
But when you came to me you brought
A sense of HIM.

And from your eyes HE beckons me
And from your heart HIS love is shed,
Till I lose sight of you, and see
The CHRIST instead."