

The Aboriginal Tracker – Australia

The Aborigines of Australia can be extraordinary trackers. There was a white bushman who led caravans of camels across the western desert, trading goods all along the way. On one trip through remote country, the wife of one of his Abo camel drivers called out in surprise. Their caravan had crossed the tracks of an aboriginal group going toward their water hole. She pointed out a barefoot print among many others and exclaimed, “That fellow be my sister!” She told her husband and the others that she had not seen her sister for 12 years. All the years of her childhood she had followed behind her older sister and her bare footprint was as recognizable to her as her face would have been.


This is a true story. Mitjarra was an expert tracker. He had learned his art in the wilds of the bush with his elders, then on cattle stations where tracking stray cattle is essential. He worked for the police. The white police would never be able to do their job in the bush without someone like Mitjarra.

He could often be seen beneath a shady gum tree with lots of children around him dancing with laughter. He would make prints of animal tracks in the soft red sand and tell the children myths about each animal. He would bunch his fingers together and move his hand to make a wild cat’s tracks as she pads across the ground. He would bend his index and middle finger together to make a goat bounce along. He punched his fist into the earth and put tiny toes to make a baby’s footprint. The children watched and listened and laughed with delight. This was the beginning of their learning to be good observers and trackers.

There was a fellow called Old Crumps who never spent money on anything. He saved his pension money and was supposed to be rich. The rumors were that he had buried his money in tin cans all around his camp in the bush. Now someone in this bush town had beaten and robbed him.

An old white sergeant of police and a young inexperienced trooper and the expert tracker, Mitjarra, were working on the case. There was a heavy rain that had washed out all the tracks. All the sergeant could do was curse and grumble. “This place’s full well been torn apart by some bloke looking for the money and now it’s hopeless looking for his tracks after this rain.” All the land was a dark, wet red.

Mitjarra picked up an old alarm clock and tested the winder. The sergeant growled, “Don’t touch nothing, now. Your tracking is useless here.” Mitjarra picked up a cigarette butt, unrolled it, and put the tobacco into his pouch. “Scavengers...” grumbled the sergeant and began to leave when the tracker held up his hand and walked out of the camp. This was a sign that he was on the trail. The sergeant and trooper followed without a word.



Mitjarra walked on, ignoring the other two, through pools of rain and down a stony road. The sergeant was puzzled and the trooper, fresh from the city, believed all he had heard of Aborigine magic and was quite excited. They all went down the muddy main street and turned off into an alley behind a small hotel. Mitjarra paused, wandered a bit, and then led them to another back alley.

The tracker began to smile as he went on across the sandy bed of the town river washed smooth by the rain. His superiors followed him now with frowns of concentration until Mitjarra told them to wait as he climbed a low stony hill and looked around. Now the old sergeant was sure his tracker was on the right trail and up to one of his mysterious tricks.

On the other side of the hill, Mitjarra saw a wisp of smoke rise beside a tent set among the bushes, and carefully watched the man by the campfire. His name was Scraggs. He seemed restless, and looked nervously about like a dog guarding a bone. Mitjarra saw that he kept looking toward a ledge on the hillside. The tracker returned to the sergeant and trooper and led them quietly to wait by that ledge. Soon they heard scratching sounds and the three moved in to catch Scraggs digging up Crumps' money. "Him the robber one all right," remarked Mitjarra. "Him all time worry about money and want to move it to a safer place."

After Scraggs was taken to jail and the newspapers wrote a story about how clever the sergeant was, Mitjarra told his friends how he knew who had robbed old Crumps. "That old man was good friend to me. Every night he wind-wind that clock. When I pick up clock and see it not run, I think robber came early night-time. Then I look-look, find cigarette butt and pick up to save tobacco. When I unroll it, I see the end turned up and know Scraggs the robber one. Many time I pick up cigarette butt to save tobacco and Scraggs the only one who turn up end like that. I know Scraggs and Crumps fight over woman, so must be cigarette fall when they fight. Easy, ain't it?"

His friends laughed and asked him why all the funny business about tracking through the town and alleys before going to Scragg's camp. Mitjarra laughed at his great joke. "I been doing that to make the new fellow policeman think blackfellow do magic. Whitefellows like that. They crazy that way."