

no 9

NGILGEE

W. J. rough copy

Published in "The Western Mail", Feb. 8, 1908 <sup>to</sup> 1909.

Picked up when <sup>newly born</sup> an infant in the potato <sup>patch</sup> field of some early Vasse settlers <sup>at the Bussell farm</sup>, where her parents had abandoned her in their haste to escape the consequence of their crime of stealing potatoes. Ngilgee made her first entry into civilised life and became one of the most interesting native personalities ~~that can be met with in the south.~~ <sup>West Australia</sup> ~~At an early age she was presented to the care of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Bussell,~~ <sup>found to</sup> who had a dairy farm in the Vasse district. Here Ngilgee lived during her childhood and girlhood, receiving instruction not only in dairy and housework, but also in the rudiments of education, which Mrs. Bussell endeavoured to impart to her own children in the intervals of her multifarious domestic duties. Ngilgee occasionally shared the lessons, and at one time was supposed to have acquired the art of reading and writing, but with her departure from the Bussell farm, which occurred when she was about 16 or 17, in consequence, according to Ngilgee's account, of a broken promise with regard to the gift of some heifers, her education came to a standstill, and beyond being able to spell a few printed words of one or two syllables, she now appears to have entirely lost whatever proficiency she had gained in the art of reading and writing. Shortly after her departure from the Bussell farm, Ngilgee, after some preliminary adventures, married a half caste named Whitey-brown George, with whom, however, she lived but a short time.

During her <sup>Family</sup> service with the Bussell ~~Ngilgee~~ <sup>Ngilgee</sup> was kept apart from the other natives about the place, and seemed to have adopted the manners and usages of the white people with whom she lived. Even now, leading the life of a native amongst other natives, Ngilgee will occasionally startle me by coming along the path towards my camp singing clearly and distinctly, and to its correct tune, the words of the hymn :

Awake my soul, and with the sun  
 Thy daily course of duty run.  
 Shake off dull sloth, and early rise,  
 And make thy morning sacrifice.

And then, on her return journey suddenly changing the tune for one of the wildest of her own native ditties, the sound having much the

same effect as bagpipes harshly droned after some sweet pleasing melody. I have been told that Ngilgee was of cleanly habits in her youth, but judging from the habits of the Ngilgee of today, the assertion is very much open to question. Ngilgee was the first native placed on the Government reserve near Cannington, where for <sup>the first</sup> two years she lived entirely alone, receiving Government rations weekly, either through Mr. Brockman at Cannington, or by train from town. Her career between the interval of her departure from Bussell's and her settlement on the reserve, was a varied one. Ngilgee has a strong masterful personality, and wherever she abode, her path was marked with altercations and affrays, either with the natives or with the white servants of successive mistresses. She took up shepherding occasionally, then domestic service, then relapsed into Native Camp life, but wherever she went she "made her mark", so to speak. One incident in her career will show how completely she mastered the "niceties" of English. A fracas of the usual kind had occurred at some native camp where Ngilgee as usual was the central figure. Official inquiries were made into the matter, and Ngilgee, who was then well known in the South West, was asked the relationship of a certain man towards herself. "Oh, he is my acting-husband," said Ngilgee.

Her last "nomadic" camp was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Highgate Hill, <sup>Perth.</sup> and here the disturbances became so constant and obtrusive that public attention was frequently drawn to them. Ngilgee, however, with her superior knowledge of the white man's tongue, could always so explain matters as to leave herself void of the smallest blame in the matter of these constant quarrellings, and so, eventually, arrangements were made for the removal of Ngilgee to the native reserve near Cannington. After a time Timbal, also a Vasse Tondarup, came to share her solitude and lived with her for some four years. When he died, Baabur, another Vasse Tondarup, took Timbal's place for a short period, and he also died, but Ngilgee, whose strength equals that of a coalheaver, promises to live for many years yet.

At one period of her stay on the reserve, Ngilgee states that she had a white man working for her and Timbal, cutting wood into

cords, which she sold to the surrounding settlers. Today Ngilgee can cut a couple of cords of wood in a day without feeling the least fatigue, but she does not do so, being entirely content with her weekly supply of rations. She is, for an elderly woman, remarkably strong and muscular. Judging from her appearance alone, the charges of insufficiency of Government rations supplied to the natives is a gross libel. Ngilgee possesses over 20 dogs, about 6 cats, and 11 goats, the dogs, cats and goats literally sharing her bed and board. Every one of these dogs - known in the surrounding district as the "Cannington pack" - has some deformity or other that, amongst more humane people, would entail their speedy destruction, but Ngilgee clings to her deformed pets, and so far from seeking to limit their numbers, continues to breed the sorriest-looking set of mongrels that even a native could possess. Hairless, blind, deaf, crippled, mangy, barkless and earless, many of them are, but they have the saving virtue of absolute devotion to their mistress, and when at times Ngilgee departs on one of her mysterious expeditions (for no one knows whither she goeth at certain times), those of the dogs that are left behind, as soon as they have realised her absence, raise a series of howls that for variety and ear-piercing volume could not be equalled. The screeching, high-toned and prolonged, is almost human in its intensity, and it does not cease until Ngilgee's return, no matter how far into the night her absence may have extended.

Sometimes the caretaker, to whom complaints will be made of the depredations of the pack, will, on his weekly visit with the rations, make some remark anent an "official" visit, and a consequent enforced limitation of the number of depredations. Next day, and for many succeeding days, until the agitation has died down, Ngilgee may be seen in the early morning, accompanied by every one of her pets, making for the hills, or for some spot where she and they will be secure from inspection. On these journeys, the crippled and blind dogs are carried in a bag slung over Ngilgee's shoulders, the smaller and still more feeble being accommodated in the ample bosom of their mistress. One absolutely hairless dog, with a wrinkled face that suggests a prehistoric age.

having a pig-like appendage, indicative of a much and curiously mixed ancestry, rejoices in an overcoat whose texture is judiciously selected according to the season. In winter the overcoat is of thickest tweed; as the spring advances a lighter material is adopted, and in the hot days of summer a thin lustre or calico covering is assumed. ~~Only the "piggy" tail and the end of Yungar's summer dress are visible on the left in the illustration.~~

Ngilgee's hut on the reserve is a 10 x 12 structure of corrugated iron, and is divided into two compartments, in one of which Ngilgee and her dogs and cats and some of her goats, sleep; the other room being occupied by the "overflow". Hubble-bubble, a mixture of flour and water, is given the dogs while the weekly supply of flour lasts, but towards the end of the week their food is generally "expectancy" and at these times all food that is "hangable" must be either hung up well out of their reach or placed in a heavy-lidded box, as constant periods of hunger have developed in the animals an almost human ingenuity in thieving. They have been known to tilt a pot off the fire, upset it, and remain quietly beside it until the contents have cooled sufficiently to permit of their being eaten. The dogs are as fully alive to the approach of the weekly ration-cart as their mistress, and not only appreciate its contents, but one can almost imagine them turning up their noses at times at the quantity and quality of the meat supply.

Thus Ngilgee passes her days, sleeping and eating, and occasionally wandering about among the settlements near the reserve, but feeling no desire for town delights so fatal to the rest of her kind. Having no taste for the white man's drink, the principal inducement that town life possesses for the average native, has no charm for her, and so she remains contented with her surroundings. Were she willing to work she would always be employed by the settlers who have long known her strength and <sup>capacity</sup> ~~capability~~, but she naturally prefers her life of ease and indolence to the, to her, doubtful advantages accompanying occupation of any kind. Her English is <sup>almost</sup> perfect, and her manner of speech at times highly imaginative. Her vituperations, directed towards those who offend her, whether they are natives or white people, cannot be

questioned on the score of brilliancy and scope, her range of epithets, both in English and native "Billingsgate" being unsurpassed. Like the famous Biddy Moriarty of Dublin fame, Ngilgee is always victor in any wordy war by whomsoever conducted. Ngilgee wisely refuses to take on any more "permanent" husbands, much preferring the constant company of her devoted "~~Jack~~" *Jack*. According to native law, if a man or woman makes a wrong class marriage in the beginning, they are, so to speak, "turned" for all time, that is, they cannot make a "proper" class marriage afterwards, they must remain "mootchoo" as it is called. As Ngilgee was a Tondarup, her husbands were all tribal "brothers" marriage with whom in the "native" days would have merited death, but the extinction of all the old "upholders of aboriginal laws" has, in the native's own words, "turned the natives into dogs" ("dwerda mookin") and unions that would have once been impossible are now of common occurrence. Mothers "marry" their sons, fathers their own daughters, brothers their sisters, and so on, and it is certain that this licence is not the least amongst the many causes to which their rapid extinction may be attributed. Amongst the many natives of the South West with whom I am personally acquainted there is not one couple who are, according to native law, "legitimately" married, and there are no full blooded products of any of these unions. The natives themselves say a "mootchoo" child cannot live, and so as the years pass, and the few aboriginal survivors pass away with them, conjecture after conjecture will continue to be made as to the reason of their rapid extinction, without touching upon the prevalence of wrong-class marriages which to my mind, constitute one of the main factors in the extinction of the South Western aborigines.

Following are the names of some of Ngilgee's dogs :-

Flossie, Tanner, Anna, Minnie, Letty, Smut, Anna II, Lucy, Nellie, Maato, Pannikin, Fanny, Friday, Rosie, Julia, Nabbut, So Many, Sailor, Biddy, Roly, Charlie (Rooster), {Nyun<sup>g</sup>gar, Rosie II.  
*husbands & much loved*