

THE FLYING DOGTOR AND THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS' SECRET

I

If you travel deep into the lonely outback of Australia, going two hundred miles beyond the black stump and taking the third turn to the right past Murphy's Creek, you will find a white wooden building with a veranda all round resting on a yellow grass rise. It is the hospital and home of a hero of the outback, a helper of the bush creatures, a scientific dog with an aeroplane who is known far and wide as the Flying Dogtor.

One night last summer the lights in the private laboratory at Hilltop Hospital burned from dusk till dawn as the Dogtor experimented with scientific chemicals to make a new medicine. At last, as the sun was rising, he was about to put down his notebooks and test-tubes and take a little nap before breakfast, when he heard the flutter of a helicopter approaching.

He saw from the laboratory window that it was the bush airmail, and it was making a special delivery, so he knew that the letter must be important.

Sister Spaniel collected it from the letter box and brought it to the Dogtor. It was not a big envelope, but it was marked with red and blue stripes, and it had official-looking printing across the top and a coat of arms on the back. The Dogtor opened it and saw that it came from the Government, from the Ministry of Fishery in Canberra.

"Dear Dogtor", he read "The Government and the people of Australia urgently need your help ..." There followed a lot of official sort of government language and then the letter finished, "... please come to Canberra quickly. Yours very sincerely, The Honorable Sir Thomas Persian, Minister for Fishery."

"What could they want you for?" asked Sister Spaniel.

The Dogtor said he had no idea, but he asked the Sister to send a telegram at once, telling that he was coming. Then he packed his little black bag, ate a quick breakfast, went down to the airstrip, and within a few minutes was in the air, headed for the national capital.

The dogtor flew over open paddocks and twisting creeks. Then the trees below grew thicker and he had to gain height as he reached the foothills of the Australian Alps. Soon he was high in the cold air above the Snowy Mountains, and below him passed one of the artificial lakes of the Snowy hydro-electric scheme.

Across this lake, on the far bank, a bright reflection caught the Dogtor's eye, and out of curiosity he turned and dipped down low to see what it was.

It turned out to be a lookout, newly built on the side of the lake. But it was a funny-looking lookout, the Dogtor thought, and then he saw a sign tied to its side: "See the Monster of the Lake," it said.

"Tickets five cents each ..."

The Flying Dogtor flew on. He was puzzled. But soon he forgot the strange lookout, for now he was flying over the tall buildings of Canberra. He put his plane down on the lawn in front of Parliament House, and went to meet an important-looking Secretarial gentleman who was waiting to greet him.

Shortly afterwards he was shown into the office of Sir Thomas Persian. Sir Thomas was a very elegant, grey gentleman with handsome white whiskers, who spoke in a purring voice. He explained why he had called the Dogtor to Canberra. The mighty Snowy Mountains Scheme was in danger!

"And we believe that no-one can help us as you can," he said. The Flying Dogtor was proud but surprised. He knew quite a lot about the Snowy Scheme, of course: how rivers were turned back from the sea to run through long tunnels into the dry inland. But he could not imagine how he could help. He asked what the danger could be.

Sir Thomas looked fearful. "Sea Serpents are invading us!" he said.

He rose slowly from his chair, stretched, and took the Flying Dogtor over to a model of the whole Snowy Mountains scheme, pointing out the rivers and the new artificial lakes and the underground tunnels where scientific machinery made electricity out of the rushing water. Then he pointed to the big lake in the middle.

"Here," he said, "Is where the trouble started."

A few weeks ago, he explained, someone driving past one moonlit night saw something strange moving across the centre of the lake. It looked to him like a sea serpent, but no one believed him when he told them afterwards. Later, however, early one morning, an engineer going to work at the Snowy also saw what looked like a large sea serpent. He tried to take a picture, but by the time he had his camera out, all that was left to photograph was the end of the serpent's tail as it dived under. When the picture was developed all it showed above the water was a little black thing that might have been a floating stick. Then the scariest thing of all happened. Someone saw the serpent for a moment in a branch of one of the tunnels, near the big machinery. "We've called for your help, Dogtor," said Sir Thomas, "because this serpent could destroy the whole Snowy Scheme, and we rely on your great scientific knowledge of animal life to tell us what to do."

Sir Thomas called his secretary and his chauffeur and asked for the ministerial car to be brought to the door. He packed a thermos of warm milk into a picnic basket, and then they all went off in the big black car to look at the lake. They drove on a winding road through thick gum-tree country while Sir Thomas poured out milk for everyone. Presently they came to the edge of the lake, and stopped. The Flying Dogtor looked, but all he could see was smooth, blue, calm water. "You sometimes have to wait a long time before the serpent shows himself," said Sir Thomas, and he pulled out a travelling rug and curled up comfortably for a nice little nap in the back seat. The Dogtor kept looking for a long time, his eyes searching the wide expanse of water. He could see nothing but a pleasure boat or two. And then ...

The Flying Dogtor could not believe his eyes. For he thought he saw

something moving under the surface of the water, far away near the other side, with loops breaking the surface of the water at intervals - loops that seemed to have fins on the back ... but it was so far away, he could not be sure, and from the beginning to the end whatever it was must have been at least as long as a house. "I must be dreaming," said the Dogtor to himself. "There's never been an animal as big as that in Australia." But as he looked it disappeared below the surface. The Minister opened his eyes. "You've seen it?" he said. "Then no doubt you'd like to see it closer?" And he told his chauffeur to drive down to the lakeside. They stopped by a shiny new blue submarine. "There!" he said to the Dogtor. "Er - you won't mind if I don't come with you, will you? Water gives me the creeps." And so the Flying Dogtor boarded the submarine alone, to investigate the secret of the lake.

He turned the submarine's nose out to the centre of the lake and drove for a while on the surface. When he was out near the centre he closed the sub's top and turned the controls to: 'Dive' Blue water closed over the glass top of the submarine and the Dogtor found himself in a weird world of water, and fish, and the tops of dead trees that were buried when this valley was filled with water some years ago. He taxied around for a few minutes, and then, ahead of him, over on his port side, he saw dimly through the water the outline of roofs and a church steeple. He knew that it was one of the little towns that were buried when the lake was formed, and he headed the submarine towards it. The Flying Dogtor was fascinated as he sailed through the deserted town, down empty streets that once were busy with traffic and now were filled with still, green water. Fish swam in and out of empty shop windows, and explored the smooth tiled bottom of a swimming pool. The Dogtor was so interested in the strange sights that he did not notice that he, in turn, was being watched from behind a row of posters that had once faced tourists on a highway.

A giant, scaley form slipped slowly, silently, along behind the hoarding, keeping just a few yards behind the Dogtor's submarine, watching every

move it made.

The Flying Dogtor, having explored the water-logged town, turned the nose of his submarine up again, and travelled on, floating through the trees of a motionless forest, the light growing brighter as he neared the surface.

Gradually the Flying Dogtor grew uncomfortable. He had a funny feeling that he was being watched. He began to feel very much alone in the little submarine, down in the green depths of the silent lake. He stopped the engine of the submarine, so that he could listen. He floated on, in dead silence, listening. He looked behind him. Did he see something move behind the dark dead tree trunks back there? He could not be sure. He could hear nothing. Then suddenly he felt the submarine give a little lurch forward. He knew he was not alone in the depths. He guessed the serpent, the monster, must be near. The Dogtor turned on the submarine's motor again. He turned it round and looked back towards the deserted town. There! He was sure he saw a swirl in the water coming from behind the old shire hall. He pressed down the accelerator and the submarine shot forward. But when he got to the corner and looked around he could see nothing but swirling water. And then, suddenly, roughly, he felt himself tossed backwards in his seat. The sub shot forward like a torpedo, as if a giant hand had knocked it. It shot up, out of control, then nose-dived down, down, and with a dull thud buried itself in the mud at the bottom of the lake.

II

The Dogtor was bruised though not hurt, but mud covered the plastic windows of the sub, and muddy brown water swirled above him, and worst of all, a trickle of yellow water ran through a nasty-looking crack in the metal casing at the side and was forming a sticky puddle under his feet. The Dogtor's years of scientific training helped him now, and he kept calm as he pushed the driving lever over into the reverse position. Then he accelerated. There was a muffled roar under the water and the whole submarine shook like a vintage car, but nothing else happened. Its nose seemed to be firmly stuck. The Dogtor looked over the control board and he found a button marked: Emergency Signal. He pressed it. There was a scraping sound and a trapdoor on the sub's tail opened and a float with a flag released from it, shot up to the surface of the water in a cloud of bubbles. From his car on the shore Sir Thomas Persian saw a disturbance on the water and then the signal flag popped to the surface. "Oh Dear!" he said, "The Dogtor appears to be in trouble," and he leant across and told his secretary to ring the rescue squad. "And do hurry," he added. The sticky water was rising round the Dogtor's feet, but at last he saw a big hook lowered through the water just in front of him. It caught hold of the front of the submarine and next instant the Dogtor found himself being hauled up to safety on a rescue boat. Two hours later the Flying Dogtor was sitting in Sir Thomas Persian's comfortable office. "It's really most disappointing, " Sir Thomas said. "We had hoped, Dogtor, that you with your great knowledge of nature study would have been able to speak with the serpent and find out where it came from and what it wanted." Sir Thomas led the Dogtor again to the big model of the Snowy Mountains Scheme. "Let us hope you may be more successful on dry ground, or rather, under dry ground," he said. "This is where I would like you to go next. It is the main tunnel from Power House No. 3. This is where the serpent has been seen twice, late at night. We thought you might care to wait

there tonight till it shows up again ..." And so that evening the Flying Dogtor prepared himself for a lonely night in the tunnel. He had been supplied with quite a cosy bed hidden behind some air-conditioning machinery, and supper on a tray, and one or two interesting pamphlets on fish breeding to while away the time. It was very quiet in the tunnel, and pitch dark except for the single light from the Dogtor's shaded reading lamp. 10 o'clock came. Then 11. Then midnight. The Dogtor read his pamphlets but kept listening. Some of the pamphlets really were not very exciting, and once the Dogtor dozed off for a moment. Goodness knows how long later he suddenly sat bolt upright, his ears pricked and his eyes wide. A sound of heavy breathing came from the darkness in front of him. The one light, coming from his shaded reading lamp, was not bright enough to let him see further than a few feet from the end of his bed. Somewhere just beyond his feet the breathing continued, slow and wheezy, as from a huge animal. The dogtor reached out for his torch. But in his haste he knocked the reading lamp off the box - and everything went pitch dark. He fumbled for his torch among the dishes on his supper tray on the box beside his bed. He heard scuffling in the tunnel.

At last his hand closed on the torch and he switched it on. The beam cut through the darkness and lit the side of the tunnel. He swung it round to the place where he had heard the breathing sound. But by this time whatever had been there was gone and the torch beam lit up a long dark tunnel empty except for machinery and ventilation pipes. How could anything have disappeared so quickly? The Dogtor was very puzzled. Then he noticed for the first time a black hole in the roof of the tunnel a few yards away. This must be where the serpent came from, and returned to, thought the Dogtor. There was no other place for it to have gone. Tumbling out of bed, he hurried to the spot. The hole was about a yard across. He shone the beam of his torch up into it. It was twisty and rough, and as dark as pitch. It was quite out of reach and the Dogtor had no ladder. It looked like a giant snake-hole.

The next morning the Flying Dogtor went for a long walk by himself around the shores of the lake. He looked for signs of the serpent and he puzzled over the mystery. What sort of a serpent was this the Dogtor asked himself. Once it attacked him; next time it ran away from him! No-one had ever seen it clearly. He wished he could see it, and find out what it was, and try to speak to it. As he continued his walk around the shore the Dogtor kept glancing at the lake, in case the serpent appeared again. But he saw nothing but the flat, blue, calm water, broken occasionally by nothing more mysterious than a speed boat. Then suddenly the Dogtor stopped in his tracks. Straight ahead of him stood that strange lookout that he had seen before when flying over the lake. "See the Monster of the Lake," the sign said. "Tickets five cents each." Seen at close hand, the lookout was a very rickety, wobbly sort of thing, made of crooked sticks, with lots of cobwebs about and yet it looked quite new. The Dogtor walked to the hut at the base of the tower. He saw a slot marked "Drop your five cents here", and a ladder reaching up to a rather crooked platform which held an old telescope. "Up here to the lookout," said another sign. The Dogtor dropped into the slot a five cent piece. From somewhere inside the hut he heard, faintly, a nasty sound of eerie, spidery laughter.

III

The Dogtor climbed to the top of the strange lookout tower, dodging cobwebs as he went. On the platform at the top he found an old telescope, and he looked into it, swinging it round the view of the lake. All he could see was the smooth blue water, with a fishing boat or two in the distance, and an occasional outboard whizzing past. The Dogtor kept looking but something was worrying him. Of course! The driver of that last speedboat! Somehow he seemed familiar: that snakey look. The Dogtor swung the telescope after the boat, but all he could see now was the white spray behind it. But he was certain now that the driver had been none other than Crafty Carson Carpetbag, the sneaky snake who, with his awful friend Old Man Redback Spider, who had been the enemy of the Flying Dogtor in many past adventures. So the Dogtor resumed watching the water, and some time later he abruptly straightened up and stared harder. For he saw a great loop of shiny black skin rising out of the water. Then another loop, and another, and they seemed to have come out of a black hole in the side of the bank, almost overgrown by bushes. "Humm," mused the Flying Dogtor. "There's something familiar about those loops. Can it be Crafty in disguise?" He left the platform, hurried down the ladder and over to the shore. He was able to get a closer look at the end of the serpent's tail before it disappeared under water. Was it real, or was it Crafty? The Dogtor could not be certain. But now he had an idea how he could find out. He hurried to the office of Sir Thomas Persian, the Minister of Fishery. "Sir Thomas," the Dogtor said, "I believe I may have solved the secret of your lake. But I need your help to prove it."

"Anything, my dear Dogtor!" said Sir Thomas.

So the Dogtor asked for a number of things: a team of fishermen, the biggest fishing net they could find, two fast fishing boats, and an enormous canvas bag. And later that afternoon all these things were made ready at the side of the lake, waiting for the Flying Dogtor's orders. The Dogtor described his plan to Sir Thomas Persian by drawing on a map. Each fishing boat, he explained, would take one end of the fishing net and drag it across the lake. The Dogtor would direct them from the air. They would drive the Serpent back into the hole in the side of the bank. This hole connected with the opening in the roof of the tunnel which the Dogtor had found, and the enormous canvas bag was now being placed over the opening, so that the Serpent would fall into it and be trapped.

Then the Dogtor could examine the monster. Sir Thomas was pleased.

"Splendid," he said. "Do call me when it's all over."

The Flying Dogtor flew over the lake, back and forth, searching the water, and at last he saw, deep under the rippled surface, the long wavy form of the giant Serpent. He radioed to the fishermen, who pulled their net slowly around.

"Gently!" the Dogtor almost whispered into the radio. "If we frighten it, it may do anything!" The fishermen slowly sailed each side of the Serpent, dragging their net. The Serpent swam to escape the net, and as planned by the Flying Dogtor, disappeared into the big black hole beneath the bushes on the bank. Now the Dogtor knew that the Serpent would go straight down this burrow and would fall into the canvas bag that had been fixed over it at the other end. So he landed his plane and a few minutes later was hurrying down the underground tunnel towards the spot where the trap was laid. As he approached, he heard the groans and cries of the guards: "Ouch! Ooo! Hold tight! Tie the knot! Quick!" and other remarks like that, while a fearful hissing and fuming came from an awful, bulging, wriggling, writhing, enormous canvas bag. "We've got him, Dogtor!" panted the chief guard. "Splendid!" said the Flying Dogtor, "Now please leave me with him." The guards were amazed. "He'll eat you!" they said. "Your black bag and all!" But the Dogtor insisted, and when he was at last alone, in front of the heaving, hissing canvas bag he spoke: "Crafty! It's you, isn't it," he said. From inside the canvas a muffled, snakey voice said: "No!! I'm a sea serpent. I'm a monster. Let me out of this or I'll breath on you and burn you up with one flaming breath!" "You can't get out, Crafty," said the Dogtor. "But I'll let you out if you promise to tell me why you did it."

"I'm not me, I mean I'm not Crafty," said the bag. But gradually the heaving and hissing quietened down, and then the enormous canvas bag began to take on a sneaky sort of ingratiating shape. Presently the muffled voice said: "Good Dogtor, Sir ... It was all that ratbag Redback's idea. He dressed me up as a serpent and was going to make lots of money showing me to tourists. Let me out and I'll go home and cause no more trouble ..."

The Dogtor nodded. "I believe you're telling the truth! he said, "but I want to know more." Then a wheezy cough came from the bag.

"Help, I'm choking in here! Give me air!" it said.

So the Dogtor stepped on to the edge of the bag and reached up to loosen

the ropes which the guards had tied around its mouth. And just at the moment that he loosened the ropes he felt the bag jerked away from under his feet, and he fell, head-over-heels backwards, and his head struck a rock at the side of the tunnel. At the same moment Crafty Carson Carpetbag sprang from the opened bag, shedding pieces of fins and serpent disguise right and left.

The Flying Dogtor lay silent and still, stunned, on his back on the floor of the tunnel. "At lasssst! Successsss!" crowed Crafty, towering over him. "I've got the Drongo Dogtor in my power at last."

The guards who were waiting near the mouth of the tunnel wondered why they did not hear from the Dogtor. After a long time they went back cautiously. They found an empty canvas bag. But nothing else. The "serpent" was gone. And so was the Dogtor. They sent the news to Sir Thomas Persian, The Minister of Fisheries. The Flying Dogtor, they regretted, appeared to have been swallowed by the serpent.

Sir Thomas was sad. "The Flying Dogtor will be remembered with respect," he sighed. "That in the cause of duty he lost his life for the nation's good is to be much regretted. He shall be given a glorious State funeral." Sir Thomas closed his eyes and imagined a magnificent ceremony in front of Parliament House. "I shall attend to it personally," he added.

But the Flying Dogtor was not really ready for a funeral. He was, however, not at all safe, and far from comfortable. When he awoke after being stunned from his fall in the tunnel, he found himself bound up, lying in the corner of a damp cave. Water dripped from the roof, and a glimpse of moonlight outside the mouth of the cave told the Dogtor that it was night and that he must have been stunned for a long time.

He heard low voices nearby, and by straining around he could just see a nasty little group huddled round a lamp. He could make out Crafty Carson Carpetbag, Old Man Redback and one or two other little snakes and big spiders. Old Man Redback's whispery, spidery voice came to him:

"You stupid snake! Nothing has changed. Only the dopey Dogtor knows you were the "serpent". No-one else saw you. Once we get rid of that mournful medico, we'll be back in business." Crafty nodded wickedly and

Old Man Redback gave a horrible laugh: "He-he-he: to think how we have succeeded in tricking all those fools: they really think you are a sea-serpent! Now we can go further and really scare that priggish Persian..." Old Man Redback's voice went lower as he described some awful new mischief he was planning. The Dogtor strained his ears but he could not hear. But then Crafty spoke: "But how are we going to get rid of the dismal Dogtor?" "He-he-he. That's how!" said Old Man Redback, and by twisting his neck around the Dogtor could see that the old spider was pointing to the back of the cave. From where the Dogtor lay the slippery wet floor of the cave sloped down to a dark well of water. "That well is so deep, they say it connects with the ocean, giggled Old Man Redback. "And even flying dogtors don't swim very well when they are all tied up with rope ..." He could say no more, he was so convulsed with fiendish laughter. The Flying Dogtor lay helpless. He tried to move, but the ropes held him powerless. He heard a scuffling, slithery, snakey sound and he knew that Crafty was coming closer. He gave another violent wrench at the ropes that bound his legs, and as he did so he felt himself starting to slide on the slippery floor of the cave. He slid faster and faster. He could do nothing to stop himself. He slid right into the dark well, and the icy water closed over his head.

The Dogtor found himself falling through the icy water, and there was nothing he could do to stop himself. But within moments to his astonishment he felt himself swirling around, and changing direction, as a great wave of water seemed to mount up from the bottom of the well. Soon he was shooting upwards and the next second he burst from the top of the well in a flood of water that swept, splashed, swirled around the cave, knocking over the plotters' lamps and their camp fire, scattering snakes and spiders everywhere. The Dogtor caught a glimpse of Old Man Redback shooting on a wave out the mouth of the cave, legs all a-tangle and a look of astonished dismay on his face. The Dogtor's ropes were loosened in the turmoil and he landed on a ledge in the cave.

Then he saw Crafty. The sneaky snake was tangled around some rocks in the cave, trying to get free while he stared with amazement and terror at something behind the Dogtor.

The Dogtor looked around. Rearing out of the well was a most enormous sea-serpent - a real sea-serpent, with flaring nostrils and long sea-weedy whiskers. "GRR-r-r-r" it roared at Crafty. The snake went so pale he lost his carpet pattern. He trembled to the tip of his tail. Then he slipped free, shot out of the cave, and disappeared over the ranges of the Snowy Mountains so fast that local residents tell that he broke the sound barrier down the second valley.

The Flying Dogtor turned to the sea-serpent, and introduced himself.

"So there really was a real sea-serpent in the lake all the time! he said.

"I regret that is so," replied the serpent in excellent English with a slight Indian accent. "And I must apologise if I have inconvenienced anyone. But I lost my way about a month ago when moving from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific for the summer holidays. It's much calmer there, and I prefer the class of fish." The serpent threaded himself back into the well. "If you will excuse me," he said, "I really must go now. I was just leaving when I saw you falling down towards me."

The serpent lowered himself till only his head was visible.

"I enjoyed visiting here, until that snake started mocking me," the serpent said. "Goodbye," he added; and then, with a great sucking sound that seemed to come from the depths of a distant ocean, the water swallowed him and he was gone.

Sir Thomas Persian was so delighted when he learned that the mystery of the lake was solved that he held a big parade through the streets of Canberra in honour of the Flying Dogtor. There were Mounted Policemen, and Marching Geckoes, and very important representatives from other nations. The Flying Dogtor rode in an open car with the Minister while crowds lined the streets and cheered and cheered and cheered.