

The following extracts are taken from Ion L Idriess, "In crocodile land: Wandering in Northern Australia" (Halstead Press, Sydney, 1946). (For easier reading, the places where omissions have been made are not indicated.) "Old Mitchemore" is believed to be Peter Hilton Mitchelmore, head of family 0420 in Tree 08. Peter (1876-1938) deserted his wife to wander the Top End about 1920: He was recorded on the electoral roll in Darwin as a mariner in 1922 and on Grose Island as a planter in 1929 and 1934.

From Chapter 20

One late afternoon, the tip of a little mast, then the bows, then a little cutter seemed to waft through the seaward trees and come gliding up the river mouth. In the stern sat a big old white man gazing upstream. He waved a hairy arm and in a bull voice shouted surprised greeting as the cutter glided by. The Skipper waved in reply.

"Mitchemore," said the Skipper, "in the *Pumpkin*. In such a place as this who'd have thought we were going to have company."

After the evening meal Mitchemore came aboard by canoe. A heavily built, twinkly-eyed, grizzled man of sixty odd. Easy to tell he had lived hard; his face, the stoop of his even now powerful body told it plainly. He was living hard now, on damper and boiled crocodile meat, fish, and a very little jam and watery tea. He ate slowly but ravenously of our own good fare, putting every mouthful where it would do most good.

Most of the nondescript crowd aboard the *Pumpkin* rowed towards the bank to gossip and camp with the tribe ashore. "I don't trust that crowd ashore too much," said Mitchemore in his slow, hoarse voice. "But Willie will look after the boat—a good boy, Willie, he can handle a gun and he's got the eyes of an owl that see in the night."

Mitchemore, like many men of the far bush, was a listener more than a talker. When he did speak it was in short, slow sentences. And there were no waste words.

We yarned for hours about life such as these men know it on the lonely coasts. As they yarned, old Mitchemore hardly took his eyes off the precious *Pumpkin*, and those fires ashore. Should the fires die down, Mitchemore would hasten aboard lest other canoes drifting downstream rush the cutter. Such things have happened in those waters.

Next morning life commenced lazily. The first to show aboard the *Pumpkin* was the little half-caste Japanese girl, Wagis. Old Man Mitchemore had adopted Wagis after saving her life. When she was a baby her parents were about to strangle her just when Mitchemore came along. They didn't want her. She was "too much trouble." So he bought the trembling baby, reared her, and she had wandered with him ever since. Life aboard the little craft revolved around her. She was the spirit of the *Pumpkin*.

The "under below" of that tiny vessel was packed with the little five-horse-power engine, salted crocodile hides and smell, a medley of firearms, cartridges, harpoon poles, native weapons and dillybags, a few stores, and the old bags Mitchemore slept upon.

His prize shooter was Willie, the half-caste Chinese. But he had several other very good half-caste shooters too, a few hefty aboriginals expert with the spear and harpoon, while the rest were canoemen and women and skimmers. With this variously coloured team Mitchemore had secured a hundred and six good crocodile skins this month.

From Chapter 21

Each shooting morning Mitchemore's little flotilla would start upstream, with Wagis in her canoe singing as she led the *Pumpkin*. The quiet, efficient Willie would stand by the tiller, Mitchemore would sit on the tiny deck crowded by sundry helpers while the large canoes would follow behind with their hefty harpooners and skimmers.

Old Mitchemore had averaged three good skins each day for the last three months (not counting the poorer-class skins), which was a good average for his team. Many crocodiles, though badly hit, get swept out to sea and others become entangled under submerged trees and fail to rise again. At low tide we would prod the waterholes for dead bodies. Mitchemore's boys were past masters at this.

From Chapter 25

Mitchemore shot out creek after creek. Like our Skipper he did no shooting. His full-time job was to look after his cutter, the *Pumpkin*, and arrange that his chief half-caste shooter kept a ceaseless eye on the little girl, Wagis.

Suddenly a violent harangue broke out from the *Pumpkin's* deck, the shrill voice of an old gin screeching invective. That old lubra was an unusual character amongst natives. Years ago, wandering and alone and in terror of the night, she had boarded Mitchemore's craft just at sundown, and had been with him ever since. She was a capital lubra aboard ship, looking after things and bossing everyone, old Mitchemore included. She had proved invaluable to Mitchemore and he knew he would never lose her because she never roamed at night. She lost her sight exactly as the sun set, and regained it an hour before sunrise. Just before sundown the old gin became very fretful and hurried the others up to finish their tasks so that she could be safely camped before her sight failed. And that was what she was doing now, hurrying up her wayward charges and waking the river about it.

Next morning Mitchemore weighed anchor and left with the tide *en route* for Darwin, well satisfied with his last month's bag—a hundred and six hides. As the tiny vessel drew away, the river echoed to the long-drawn farewells of the natives. Little Wagis waved to us from the stern, standing beside her toy canoe.