

## Red Dog 10

Red Dog lost his best friend, John, and became a wanderer, visiting people and moving on. Last time we heard how he made a relationship with a cat while he was visiting John's friends, Nancy, Patsy and Ellen, at the caravan park where they lived.

### Episode 10

#### Red Dog, Don and the Ranger

Red Dog had travelled for about five years after John's death before he got to know the men at the Dampier Salt Company, and this only happened because of an accident.

He had hitched a lift with Peeto from Port Hedland back to Dampier, and had begun the journey sitting in the front seat with his head out of the window as usual. The trouble was that he had eaten three sausages, a lamb chop, the remains of a steak and kidney pie, some baked beans and a bowl of cabbage with gravy at a hotel where he had befriended the cook. The consequence, of course, was another of his famous attacks of evil-smelling wind, and so Peeto had transferred him to the small trailer that he was towing behind his car.

This trailer was heaped with camping gear, because Peeto had been on a fishing trip, and so Red Dog had been obliged to sit on top of that swaying mound, trying not to get flung off when the vehicle braked or went round a corner. When they reached the junction where they turned off towards Dampier, however, Peeto tried to get out in a hurry to avoid an approaching car. Red Dog was unprepared, as at that moment he was daydreaming about rabbits, and quite suddenly he went flying into the road, landing heavily and painfully, and twisting one of his hind legs. The car disappeared into the distance, Peeto unaware that his famous passenger had parted company with him, and Red Dog hopped on three legs back to the side of the road.

Red Dog was quite used to falling off trailers, and he knew that he would feel better before long. If necessary, three legs would be quite sufficient for walking on for the time being.

It was a man called Don who spotted Red Dog limping towards Dampier. Don worked for Dampier Salt, the company that had transformed the landscape by digging out huge, shallow rectangular pits that they filled with seawater. The water then dried away, leaving gleaming white carpets of salt that sparkled and shimmered in the bright sunshine.

Don knew all about Red Dog, and had often seen him round about, but they had never until now been introduced, which was why Red Dog didn't leap out in front of Don's car to stop it. Red Dog only stopped people he knew, or vehicles that he recognised.

Don stopped, however, and got out of his car. Red Dog lay down with his tongue hanging out. Don felt the injured leg gently, and said, 'Well, mate, I can't find

anything wrong, but I reckon it's a trip to the vet for you.'

'Ah,' said the new vet, when Don brought the casualty in, 'it's Red Dog again.'

'You know him then,' said Don.

'I do now,' said the vet. 'For a long time I thought he was several dogs who all looked the same. Then I realised it was one dog with nine lives who belonged to everyone. Never heard of anything like it. Actually, I know him pretty well. He took a fancy to my little bitch and decided he was going to camp out on my verandah. Whenever another male dog turned up, Red tried to see him off, and one day there was a dog that only came in for his jabs, and when he left he had five stitches. So, I had to tell him to leave, 'cause I can't have him assaulting my customers. Off he went, and now he just comes back to say hello. He gets some tucker and a snooze on the porch, and then he's off.' The vet ruffled Red Dog's ears, and added, 'No hard feelings, eh mate?'

The vet examined Red Dog's leg but couldn't find any breaks, so he decided it was probably badly bruised. 'I just want to see something,' he said to Don, and took out a syringe.

'What are you gonna do, doc?' asked Don. 'Give him an anaesthetic?'

'No,' replied the vet, 'it's just that I've noticed that Red isn't quite his old self any more.'

'Well, he's getting on a bit, isn't he? Grey hairs on his snout. Does anyone know how old he is?'

'About eight, I think.'

'Well, what do you think might be wrong?'

The vet looked thoughtful, and said, 'He's spent his life travelling, and roughing it when he has to, so he's got a right to be tired. But he's a tough fella, and just recently he's been losing fights and getting hurt more than he ought to. I'm going to check him out for heartworm.'

'Oh, yuk,' said Don, 'what's that?'

'Just what it sounds like,' said the vet. 'A worm that circulates in the blood when it's a larva, and lives in the heart when it grows up. I've got a feeling that's what's up with Red. The trouble is I'm going to have to keep him for quite a while, and this clinic isn't even finished. I haven't had the cages put in yet. Can you keep him under lock and key until I get the results?'

'No worries,' said Don.

Later on the vet made a slide of a tiny sample of Red Dog's blood, and placed it under a microscope. There, sure enough, were dozens of the heartworm microfilaria swimming about in Red Dog's blood. 'Gotcha,' he said.

The vet did not particularly want to have Red Dog living with him whilst he underwent treatment, because it was a bad idea to have him biting his other customers. He also realised that Don would be unable to keep Red Dog confined, because he would escape at the first opportunity. Then he had a brainwave, and he rang the ranger.

The ranger was responsible for rounding up stray dogs and keeping them in a pen until their owners came to collect them.

'Right, mate,' said the ranger, when the vet had told him what he wanted, 'but you see, Red Dog isn't really a stray, is he? He's a sort of professional traveller.'

'But he doesn't belong to anyone, so he must be a stray.'

'I see your point, but I can only hold dogs in the pound until the owner comes for them, and then they have to pay for the upkeep. So who's going to pay for Red Dog?'

The vet was shocked: 'Red Dog doesn't have to pay! Red Dog's in common.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line, and then the ranger sighed.

'Well, I dare say,' he said, 'I can keep him in the pound while you do the treatment. Since it's Red Dog we're talking about.....'

So it was that Red Dog was confined to the dog-pound, and he seemed quite happy about it. He appeared to know that whereas the other dogs were captives, he was an honoured guest. For the time being he gave up his yearning for constant travel, and relaxed as if he were on holiday. He was so good that he even went out with the ranger to look for strays, sitting up in the front seat of the ranger's wagon, whilst the strays were tied up in the back. In the meantime he submitted to all the tests and injections as if he were good-naturedly humouring the vet.

Back at Dampier Salt, Don told the others that Red Dog was confined to the pound whilst he was being treated. Someone from Dampier Salt told someone else that Red Dog was in the pound, and then someone told Vanno at Hamersley Iron.

Peeto, Vanno and Jock were horrified. 'Jeez,' said Peeto, 'ain't that where they kill the strays?'

'Only if they can't find the owner,' said Jocko.

'Red Dog, he ain't got no owner,' said Peeto. 'Only Red Dog owns Red Dog.'

'They wouldn't put down Red Dog,' said Vanno.

'The world's full of people who would,' said Peeto. 'The world's a bad place, and it's only getting badder.'

The men thought about it for a while. 'There's only one thing to do,' said Jocko at last.

That night, at two in the morning, the three men drove to Roebourne. Outside the ranger's pound they put on gloves, and Vanno took a large pair of boltcutters from the boot of the car. They felt like commandos as they crept towards the wire.

Vanno cut the hasp of the lock, and slipped inside. He flashed his torch from one dog to another. They were barking like crazy, making a terrible noise and fuss. It occurred to him that not only might he get caught, but any one of these mutts might give him a good biting. 'Red,' he whispered, 'Red, where are you?' He felt a muzzle nudging his hand, looked down, and there was the unmistakably robust shadow of Red Dog. He picked the dog up, tucked him under his arm, and ran out, making sure that none of the other captives escaped with him.

His co-conspirators patted him on the back and whispered their congratulations. They piled back into the car and sped away, whooping with relief and happiness, and Red Dog licked their faces and nipped at their hands. Back in Dampier they went to Peeto's hut and drank a few stubbies to celebrate.

'Hey,' said Vanno, patting Red Dog on the head, and cupping his chin in his

hand, 'just look what your mates are prepared to do for you.'

The next morning the ranger glumly rang up the vet and told him that Red Dog had been kidnapped during the night.

'Oh no,' said the vet, 'it's a disaster. I've only done half the treatment.'

'We'll have to find him and bring him back,' said the ranger.

'Yes, but how? You know what he's like. He could be anywhere by now.'

The two men resigned themselves to having lost their patient, and to leaving him full of the lethal worms until he showed up again. The ranger hung up, finished his coffee, got into his vehicle and drove off. He stopped for petrol and went inside to pay the cashier.

When he came out he could hardly believe his eyes, because there was Red Dog sitting next to the passenger door of his yellow truck, asking to be let in.

So it was that Red Dog finished his treatment and took on a new lease of life.

He went to find Don at the Dampier Salt Company and made friends with the men there.

He was allowed to stay in whichever hut he liked; all he had to do was scratch at the door and he was welcomed in. The blokes made him a member of the union and the sports and social club, and gave him a book of canteen tickets. His job was to polish off the leftovers. Don opened a bank account for him, under the name 'Red Dog', and money was paid into it whenever the lads had a whip-round to raise funds for his vet's bills. Don also registered him with the shire so that he would no longer run the risk of being classified as a stray, and his official title became 'The Dog of the North-West'.

But at Dampier Salt he acquired another name altogether. In Australia anyone with red hair shares the common fate of being called 'Bluey', and that's what they called him, too.

End of episode 10

needs 1915 words (long,  
short poem)