

Red Dog 6

Red Dog goes out and about by himself around the mining area of the Pilbara in Western Australia, finding adventures. He rides on buses, or hitches lifts in cars, and everybody lets him do what he wants. Last time he took himself to a dog show and flirted with all the bitches, upsetting the owners and amusing the judges.

This time he's not so lucky.

Red Dog's expensive injury

One morning Nancy, her fingers shaking with anxiety, telephoned the transport section of Hamersley Iron. 'Is John there?' she asked. 'It's really important.'

John came to the phone, and as he listened to Nancy, his face turned pale. 'It's about Red,' said Nancy. 'Look, John, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Red's been shot. I found him, just now. He was dragging himself along the road, near Seven Mile Creek. Someone's shot him.'

What John said next, about whoever it was that had shot his dog, can be left to the imagination. He swore and cursed, and then, realising that Nancy was still on the phone, he said, 'Sorry about that, Nance, I couldn't help it.'

'It's all right, John,' she said, 'I've been feeling the same way. You've got to be sick in the head to go round shooting dogs.'

'Where is he?' asked John.

'Well, I had Patsy in the car and she's stayed with him at Seven Mile Creek while I came to find a phone box. I'll get back there and wait for you, OK?'

John put down the phone and turned to the blokes who had been listening to his side of the conversation, with their cups of tea half way to their lips.

'Where's the nearest vet?' he asked.

'Port Hedland,' said Jocko, who was originally from Scotland, but had been in the Pilbara for several years.

'Strewth, that's four hours' drive,' exclaimed John. 'He could bleed to death before we get there.'

'I'll come with you, mate,' said Jocko. 'I'll do the first aid.' He was a part-timer with the St John's Ambulance Brigade, and there wasn't much he didn't know about staunching blood.

'I'm coming too,' said Giovanni, who was known as 'Vanno'.

'And me,' said Piotr, who was known as 'Peeto'.

John went to see their supervisor, and came back a few minutes later. 'The good news is that we can go, and he's going to organise a whip-round to pay for the vet. The bad news is that we get the day's pay docked.'

The men's faces fell somewhat, but not one of them changed his mind about coming along. Red Dog was special, and this was a genuine emergency. He had ridden around in the buses with each of them. It was worth losing a day's pay for Red Dog's sake.

Jocko 'borrowed' one of the First Aid boxes from the workshop, and they piled into John's Holden. Off they went at high speed.

At Seven Mile Creek they spotted Nancy's car, with Patsy and Nancy kneeling beside it, tending to the sad bundle of red fur that lay in the stones. They

piled out of the car, and John ran his hand over Red Dog's head. 'Hello, mate,' he said. Red Dog wagged his tail feebly at the sound of his master's voice. 'What've they done to you?' asked John. Red Dog laid his head on the ground as if he were too tired to think of anything any more. He felt a terrible stinging and aching in his leg.

'Jeez, look at that,' said Peeto. He gestured towards the dog's haunch. The rusty coat was matted with dark red blood, and fresh scarlet blood flowed from somewhere beneath the fur. John could hardly speak. He thought that Red Dog was bound to bleed to death. He didn't want to shed tears in front of his mates, and they knew how he was feeling because they felt the same. This dog had become a fair part of their lives, and they felt that dread in the pit of their stomachs that comes when you know you are about to lose someone you love.

'What d'you think, Jocko?' asked John.

Jocko opened the First Aid box. He got out a small pair of scissors and began to clip away the fur from around the wounds. Soon he had exposed two small dark holes from which blood was steadily streaming. He cleaned the wounds with antiseptic. 'We've got to stop this so that the blood gets a chance to clot,' he said, almost to himself, and he made two small plugs out of cotton wool, soaked them in surgical spirit, and put them gently into the holes. Red Dog twitched from the pain, but made no fuss. Jocko made two big pads out of gauze and taped them over the area of the wounds. 'Should do the job,' he said.

Nancy said, 'Is it OK if we leave you boys to it now?'

'Should be fine,' said John. 'I can't thank you enough, I really can't.'

'Anything for the old devil,' said Patsy. She ruffled Red Dog's ears. 'You'll be right,' she said.

The two women drove away, and John tossed his car-keys to Peeto. 'You drive, mate, I'm going in the back with Red.' He lifted the dog in his arms and Jocko opened the car door. John struggled in and Jocko got in the other side. Red Dog lay across them, his head in John's lap, with Jocko ready to deal with any emergency that might occur.

Peeto drove a bit faster than he should have. John was just looking down at Red Dog. 'Don't die, daggy dog,' he said. 'Don't die.'

The journey seemed to take forever and John suffered the continual torment of wondering if Red Dog would live long enough to get to the vet at all. He seemed very quiet and still, and his breathing had become light and irregular. When they did finally arrive in Port Hedland after nearly four hours' driving across that harsh landscape, John felt as if he had been to the moon and back.

Peeto stopped outside a newsagent's shop. Vanno jumped out and ran in. 'Where's the vet?' he asked bluntly, and the woman reached under the counter for a Yellow Pages. Vanno leafed through it hurriedly, memorised the address, and ran back out to the car. 'Well, thank you too,' called the woman after him in a very sarcastic tone of voice.

They were fortunate that they arrived in Port Hedland during surgery hours. When John walked in with Red Dog in his arms the vet was just dealing with his last client of the day.

'What have we here?' said the vet, looking at the four worried men in the uniforms of Hamersley drivers. 'Bring him in, boys.'

John laid the dog on the table, and the vet lifted the dressing. 'Nice job,' said the vet. 'Who did this for you?'

'It was me, mate,' said Jocko. 'Hope it was up to scratch.'

'Couldn't have done better,' said the vet. 'You're in the wrong job.'

Jocko looked proud, and Vanno clapped him on the back. 'Good on ya,' he said.

'Will he be all right?' asked John.

'Too early to say,' said the vet. 'First thing is I'll have to get those bullets out.' He looked a little more closely and exclaimed, 'Well, I do believe it's Red Dog.'

'Jeez,' said Peeto, 'how did you know that?'

'This dog,' said the vet, 'everyone knows. The first time I met him, it was at Pretty Pool, and we'd all brought stuff for the barbie, and Red Dog here, he ate my salami, and he got my neighbour's steak.'

'He's been here a lot?' asked John, astonished.

'Every time anything's going to happen,' said the vet, laughing, 'along comes Red Dog in a road-train (an enormous lorry that tows two or more trailers behind it) and then when it's over off he goes. It's my belief he's got a couple of girl-friends hereabouts, 'cause just recently I've noticed some of my youngest clients look just a little bit like him.'

The men sat outside whilst the vet extracted the bullets. After half an hour or so he came out and told them, 'I think he'll be fine. Lucky for him, the bullets missed the bone. He's strong and obstinate, that's for sure. Give him a while to wake up, and we'll see how it goes.' He dropped the two bullets into John's hand.

John shook his head. 'What I don't understand is why anyone wants to go round shooting dogs.'

'It happens all the time,' said the vet. 'The farmers and the station men. They say they're protecting the stock, but if you ask me half of them are trigger-happy morons who think they're starring in a western, blasting away at anything that moves.'

Before long the men were called into the surgery, and found Red Dog lying motionless but awake on the table. The four fellows made a fuss of him and Red Dog sighed happily. 'He can't move yet. I've got to keep him a couple more hours,' the vet told them, 'so why don't you go and get a bite, and come back later?'

The men turned to leave and Red Dog, thinking he was going to be left, struggled to his feet and made to jump down. 'Hey you,' said the vet, 'you're not going anywhere.' He gave him another dose of sedative. 'I've never known a dog as ill as this do anything like that before.'

The friends ate with the appetite of men who have been reprieved. 'What say we find a bar?' said John. The others declared it a fine idea. An hour later they staggered out of the pub, happy and hazy, and made their way back to the vet's. They found Red Dog in spirits almost as good as their own, and such was their state of happiness that they read the sum at the bottom of the vet's bill several times before they appreciated how big it was. 'Would you mind,' asked John, 'if we paid you later? Some of the boys are having a whip round.'

'If we pay it now we couldn't buy enough petrol to get us home,' said Vanno. The vet decided he could risk deferring payment, but he warned, 'I don't think any of you should be driving. You've had a few too many.'

But inspired by alcohol and relief, the four fellows decided to drive home anyway. Somewhere near the Sherlock River bridge, however, they realised that behind them was a car with its blue light flashing.

'Oh, jeez,' said Peeto, 'it's the coppers.'

He pulled in to the side, and the policeman approached, notebook at the ready.

'Hello, Bill,' said Peeto.

'I'm not Bill when I'm on duty, mate,' said the policeman, who was in fact one of Peeto's neighbours.

Peeto couldn't resist saying, 'And when you're on duty, I'm not "mate", I'm "sir".'

That was his big mistake. Never be cheeky with a traffic policeman who's been on duty for six hours and is so bored with sitting at the side of the road that he's in just the right frame of mind for being nasty to someone.

Peeto failed the breathalyser test, and the policeman wouldn't let him off, even though he'd been one of the saviours of the famous Red Dog.

Next day they worked out how much it had all cost. There was the loss of the day's wages, the cost of the petrol, the food and the booze, there was the vet's bill, and the fine for driving under the influence of alcohol.

'Hey,' said Vanno glumly, 'what say the next time we fly a surgeon in? It's gotta be cheaper than this.'

End of episode 6