

Red Dog 11

Red Dog, now officially 'The Dog of the North West', with his own bank account, pays a visit to old friends Nancy and Patsy at the caravan park.

Red Dog and the Dreaded Cribbages

Red Dog liked to call in on the caravans in Karratha that belonged to his many friends and providers. He would expect to be washed, de-ticked and fed, and then he would stay a couple of days until he felt like setting off on his travels once more.

Red Dog particularly liked one of the caravan parks, because that was where his mate Red Cat lived, as well as Nancy and Patsy, but, and it was a big BUT, there was one small problem. Actually, the truth is that there were two big problems, and they were married to each other.

Mr and Mrs Cribbage were the caretakers of the caravan park. They lived off pigsnout sandwiches, sweet milky tea, and cigarettes, and it was their duty to keep the place tidy and neat. They would sort out difficulties with the water supply or electricity. If the bulbs blew in the dunnies, Mr Cribbage would sigh with irritation and change them. If Red Cat raided a bin and overturned it, it was Mrs Cribbage who would sigh with irritation and set it upright. This is all to say that they were fairly typical caretakers, who were seldom pleased when their leisure was interrupted by their jobs, or when their cups of tea had to be abandoned in mid-sip.

The unfortunate thing about the Cribbages was that they were pernickety about enforcing the rules, even the stupid ones that any normal person would ignore, and one of these rules was 'NO DOGS'.

The first time that Mrs Cribbage met Red Dog, he was just about to scratch on the door of Patsy's caravan. 'Hey, you!' she called, rushing up to him and waving a dishcloth in his face. 'Be off with you! Shoo! Shoo!'

Red Dog looked at this fat woman and her dishcloth, and decided that she was probably mad. He ignored her politely, and scratched on Patsy's door.

'Off! Away!' shouted Mrs Cribbage, and at that moment Patsy opened her door. She looked from the dog to the woman, and asked, 'What's up?'

'NO DOGS!' announced Mrs Cribbage.

Patsy regarded her pityingly and told her, 'This isn't any old dog. This is Red Dog.'

'A dog's a dog,' replied Mrs Cribbage, 'and I don't care if it's one of the Queen's bloody corgis. This is a dog, and that's that. NO DOGS.'

'Red Dog has privileges,' said Patsy. 'Everyone knows that.'

'If you don't get rid of that dog,' said Mrs Cribbage, her voice rising, 'you'll have me and Mr Cribbage to answer to.'

'If you try to get rid of Red Dog, you'll have the whole of the Pilbara to answer to,' replied Patsy, 'so if I were you I wouldn't get my knickers in a knot.'

Mrs Cribbage huffed, 'And if you don't get rid of that dog, we'll shoot it, and evict

you too. So don't say you didn't get warned.'

Mrs Cribbage turned her back and walked away importantly, confident that she, and only she, was queen in this little kingdom. Over the next few days, however, she kept thinking that she saw Red Dog out of the corner of her eye, and she mentioned it several times to Mr Cribbage, who was a small man with a toothbrush moustache rather like Hitler's. His moustache and his fingers were a nasty shade of yellowy-brown, rather like a pub ceiling, because he smoked all the time, rolling himself tiny, tight little cigarettes.

The couple went into Dampier and bought a stencil from the stationer's in the mall, and then they spent a happy morning making lots of notices that said 'NO DOGS'. These they stuck up on every available tree in the caravan park, after which they felt they had done a good day's work indeed. The people in the park shook their heads, and agreed that from now on they would have a coded alarm, so that the caretakers would never catch them out when Red Dog was about.

Patsy proposed that their code-word should be 'pussycats', and this was soon adopted. The Cribbages wondered why it was that people shouted 'pussycats' every time that they passed by with their buckets and bins. 'I reckon they're all barking mad,' observed Mr Cribbage.

'Talking of barking, I still keep seeing that dog,' said his wife.

Now it so happened that both Patsy and Nancy were scared of the dark. Back then there were almost no lights to make the sky glow orange, and you could see every star in the sky as brightly as if it were sparkling on the tips of your fingers. If it was cloudy, however, you would not be able to see anything at all if your torch batteries ran out.

Red Dog could smell his way around in the dark, as if his nose were an extra pair of eyes, but he did seem to understand that Patsy and Nancy were scared. Accordingly, when they needed to go to the dunny at night, he would turn up at their sides as if by magic, and then escort them back to their caravans again. Before Red Dog's arrival, Red Cat had been the official protector of the site, but he had never provided as good a service as this.

As mischance would have it, one night Mrs Cribbage needed to go at the same time as Patsy, and she caught her with Red Dog, strolling out of the dunny in the moonlight. She stopped in her tracks, puffed out her cheeks, and worked up a good head of anger, until she had made herself as mad as a cut snake. 'What's this?' she cried, 'You've still got that dog. It's eviction for you, my girl, that's what.'

Patsy knew that if she was evicted she would have nowhere else to go, but at this moment she didn't care. She had had enough of the Cribbages and their anti-dog campaign. She was cold, and she just wanted to get back to bed. She heard herself saying, 'Aw, get lost, why don't you?'

'Cow!' exclaimed Mrs Cribbage. 'Bitch! Just you wait!'

'I'll wait,' said Patsy. She looked down at Red Dog, whose yellow eyes were glowing in the moonlight. 'Come on, Red, let's go back to bed.'

She turned her back on Mrs Cribbage and coolly walked away.

The next morning, whilst she was having breakfast, she saw a note being

pushed under her door. It was written in tiny, neat handwriting:

Due to you're being persistantly and unreasonably in vyalation of the rules with respeck to dogs, you are hearby noterfied that as from tomorrow morning you are deklared evicktad from this park and tomorrow morning at 9.30 I shall be ariving with a vehcle to tow you out of it. Sincerely, Mr and Mrs Cribbage.

Patsy read this twice, and then took it round to Nancy's, saying 'What am I going to do? Where am I going to live? They're going to make me homeless, just because of a dog!'

Nancy shook her head. 'What a pair of dingbats. And just look at that spelling! Don't you worry, and don't start packing either, 'cause I'm going to make sure that you don't have to go anywhere at all.' She took the note and went from caravan to caravan, showing it to everyone she could find.

The following morning at 9.20, Mr Cribbage straightened his greasy old tie, combed his Hitler moustache, and arranged the few strands of his hair across his bald patch.

'There's an awful lot of people driving around this morning,' observed Mrs Cribbage, who was standing at the window. 'I wonder what they can all be up to.'

Mr Cribbage, feeling satisfied and fulfilled because he was just about to exercise his power and authority, squared his shoulders and opened the door.

Once he was outside, his pleasure quickly turned to gall.

He could hardly believe what he saw. Some of the inhabitants of the park had left their cars all around his, so he was completely boxed in. People were standing around, smiling and gloating over his discomfiture.

'Reckon on towing Patsy out, do you?' called one.

'Reckon you might have a problem,' called another.

Sweat broke out on Mr Cribbage's forehead. 'That dog's a stray. I'm calling in the ranger and it'll be put down.'

'Red's the ranger's mate,' called someone. 'And he ain't a stray. He's registered.'

The caretaker stood quite still, then turned on his heel and marched back into his office. He re-emerged with a twelve-bore shotgun. 'When I see that dog,' he announced, 'he's getting both barrels of this.' He turned around and went back inside, trembling with anger and spite.

'I'm calling the RSPCA,' announced Patsy.

'I'm calling the boys at Hamersley Iron,' said Nancy.

That afternoon the RSPCA officer arrived and threatened the Cribbages with prosecution. Later still, a bus arrived from Hamersley Iron. The workers had just finished their shift, fierce, hard men who were very angry indeed. They burst into Mr Cribbage's office without knocking, and the caretakers' cups of tea stopped midway to their lips. Jocko put his hands on the desk and leaned forward; 'Now would you be the wee scumbag that we've been hearing about?'

The next morning, very early, Patsy knocked on Nancy's door and told her, 'You

won't believe this, but the Cribbages have gone.'

It was true. They had left their jobs without notice, and without collecting their pay.

'I feel terrible,' said Patsy later. 'We've gone and run them out of town. It's not what you might call civilised, is it?'

'It's too late to regret it now,' said Nancy, 'they've gone. No-one's going to miss them, either.'

'All the same,' replied Patsy, 'I don't feel too good about it.'

It was true; their victory had a bitter taste, and even Red Dog did not seem to derive much pleasure from it. He went looking for John one more time, hitched a lift to sweet Adelaide on a trailer and came back two months later on a road-train. By the time he next scratched on Nancy's door there were new caretakers and new rules.