

Dingo

F. Bennett

This is the tale of the Australian outback – that is, the ranching country inland from the cities. ‘Dingo’ is written from experience. F. Bennett is English and lives in Hastings, but spent many years working with sheep and cattle on Australian ranches or ‘stations’. It is a lonely life and it has a language of its own.

From all the dogs roaming the world, unwanted, unloved, I had to give my affection to a half-breed dingo, the wild dog of the Australian outback. This bitch that became mine, gradually digging her way into my heart with her natural skill and loving ways, was not beauty, except in my eyes. She was lop-eared, long-legged, her fur hard, yellow from her dingo and kelpie forebears, and this last breed being the sheep dog reared on so many sheep stations for their working strain. Her golden eyes were her one redeeming feature; their shining depth showed a fine intelligence. As a pup she displayed no sign of the killer instinct of the dingo, the reason they are hated, hunted, trapped and poisoned on the big cattle and sheep stations. One dingo will, in a night, wound many sheep in its desperate chase through a herd, seeking a victim; or a pack of wild dogs will hunt down a new-born calf, separate them from a mob of cattle, and worry the weakened cow until they can part her from her offspring, when they rush in for the kill. Call a man a dingo down under and he’ll feel wounded for life; it’s considered the most deadly insult.

Boundary riding in the Georgia country, bordering the Northern Territory, the far north-west cattle country of Australia, I came upon this pup. Mine was a lonely job but a good one, that is if you find enjoyment in the wide open spaces of outback Aussie, which I did. I got to know and love every tree: the Coolibar, Gum, Box, even the vast, dry, empty paddocks and acres of Spinnifex; tufts of thorny growth that seem to exist without water, for it was drought country, often missed by the yearly monsoonal rains. Flowers would not survive the scorching heat of those vast plains, but flocks of birds, budgerigars, green in undulating flight, huge white cockatoos, vivid parrots, gave colour and life as they flew around or rested like gorgeous blooms on the trees.

Happily I rode the paddocks, repairing broken fences; reporting to the station manager movement of cattle; herding small mobs back to the paddock from whence they had strayed. They say a cow or bull will go through any fence, if it has a mind to do so, and I have often seen them skilfully easing their way through the fencing, built as it is outback with stout posts run through with several rows of wiring.

I carried my tucker in the saddle bag, bread, meat, tea, and at noon, after a hard morning’s riding, boiled my quart pot over a bushman’s fire, a few dry leaves and twigs, soon ignited, enjoying a brief respite from the blazing heat around me.

My home was a hut, not too badly furnished with all the necessities for living, situated ten miles from the station homestead, from whence I rode out six days a week, happy in the freedom of my life, the continual blue skies, the peacefulness of it all.

I'd settled down to enjoy my break, a quick meal and brief shuteye, when I spotted this pup. There was movement amongst some nearby lignum bushes, and a small bundle of fur, all yellow, golden eyes, came wagging through the bush. Apart from the birds and cattle, animal life in that vast countryside was rare, a stray 'roo, a rabbit or so was all you would expect to see, and in the heat of high noon nothing ever stirs in the stillness and silence of outback Australia. I called her to me and after a while she came and let me stroke her. I fed her cooled tea, diluted from a nearby billabong, which seemed to go down a treat. She might have been abandoned by Abos gone walkabout; there were signs of a deserted camp, bag humpy and bower shed, old bones and the leavings of a big camp fire. 'You're lucky,' I told her, 'you wouldn't have survived long in this heat.'

So Lucky she became. I propped her upon the pommel of my saddle, steadied my bay gelding while I mounted, and rode for home. It was Saturday, the heat was past bearing.

I became the devoted slave of my Lucky; I lavished upon her round yellow body all the love of a lonely man, and watched her grow from a hard ball of fur to a lean young bitch. I loved the look of her: golden eyes, slim muscular body, white-tipped tail, held erect like a pennant in movement.

Early morning, when I rode out on the night horse to round up my small string of working horses, yarding them to select my mount for the day, she would run beside me, leaping high, somersaulting with the sheer joy of living; and when it was necessary to check a straying animal she was there, young as she was, heeling them, wheeling them; she was all a cattle dog should be, which is strange considering her lineage, but that's the way it turns out sometimes.

She was always by my side when I rode out on my inspection of the fences, and when she became tired, being not yet fully grown, I would mount her on the pommel, and we rode together in close, happy companionship. My horse made no objection; a boundary rider's horses are dependable animals, quiet, steady, sometimes half-draft; a frisky mount, liable to pull away, is the last thing you need, riding the outback fences.

She was only ten months old when the boss drove out early one morning to my hut. This was unusual, he always contacted me by the station phone every evening after I'd returned from my daily round of inspecting and repairing. Perhaps the lines were down; there'd been a quick, scurrying storm the previous evening, fierce winds, thunder to rock you backwards, early monsoonal rain, heavy, hurtling straight down from the heavens. Lucky had been a little scared and sheltered under the kitchen table; now she growled at this intruder as he stood framed in the doorway.

The boss eyed my pet with distaste as we chatted for a few minutes about the work in hand and then 'get those cleanskins in Adelaide paddock' he instructed me, 'and drown that flaming dingo.' Aussies are like that, especially in the outback; downright, forthright. Station life is hard, serious, there's no time for mucking about. If the boss gives an order it is carried out at once.

I should have known my dingo pup would never be tolerated on that cattle station; I had known and had ignored the inevitable issue; now I had to face and come to grips with the result of my foolishness.

As I saddled up and prepared for my ride, hurt and irresolute, I found my eyes continually straying to my beloved Lucky as she sat before me, erect, eyes on mine. With the infallible sense that all species possess, she knew, she was waiting for my verdict.

Of course I couldn't do it; I could no more hurt her, drown her, shoot her, than jump off Sydney Bridge; my whole recent life had been geared to her care and protection. She was everything to me and a great help too in my daily work. The boss, I told myself, was being very unreasonable. I climbed slowly into the saddle and rode for the Adelaide paddock. Lucky ran beside me, leaping, somersaulting, coming to heel when I whistled.

The clearskins grazed happily in Adelaide paddock; I approached them cautiously, Lucky at heel; one false move and they'd be gone with the wind. It had been a long, hard ride, an early start and now, at full noon, the sun blazed, scorching down. After the big muster, these were the ones missed, unbranded; they had to be rounded up, brought into the stockyard for branding.

I was excited, elated; in that vast country you were not always lucky enough to ride upon them. I cantered towards them, cows, calves, young steers; they bellowed at my approach, left their grazing and moved onwards.

I had them on the go, cantering I moved them homewards. I looked for Lucky, couldn't see her; she was still a pup, it had been a long, hard grind, I was expecting too much from her. My work must come first; it was exhilarating, rewarding to be herding home those clearskins.

But continually my eyes searched the far paddocks as I wheeled and herded the stragglers; I looked for movement, any sign of my pup. Now that the herd was on the go, I'd have galloped to her, let her ride on my pommel as so often before.

The paddock was starkly bare, just browned acres of grassland, no bush or tree to hide her from me. My Lucky never returned. When I'd yarded the clearskins, I rode out to find her, searching the paddocks, longing for a sight of her. I searched until the sudden southern night wiped away all light; she was not to be found; she was half dingo; I could only hope that her natural savage inheritance of self-preservation would protect her. I felt weakened by my physical effort and drained of all life's meaning. Sadly I rode the trail to my lonely hut.

Life went on; station work is demanding, the constant care of animals, fences, equipment. My days were busy; it was the long nights when I felt so lost, lonely, hurt by the absence of my beloved pup. I missed her so much it was torture sitting there, trying to read by my carbide light. I'd find jobs, mend things, but the hours to bedtime were still so long, so empty. Station dogs are always housed in the home paddock adjacent to the night horse or the big garages; their life is severe, forever chained, small kennels, meagre food; they are bred to work, this being the only time they are unleashed and allowed to run. My Lucky had broken all the rules, enjoying the home comforts of my hut, sharing my life; she'd been my consistent shadow; I missed her at every turn.

I was trailing the station milkers, a small mob of Jerseys and Friesians. For reasons of their own they'd gone through the home paddock fences and I'd been sent to find them.

They'd gone through all the fences, I found, heading for that vast wilderness of far west Australia. I tracked them, not easy in that drought country, and after a hard ride had come upon them, still heading westwards.

Being domestic animals they were easy to handle and at sight of me they turned and headed for home. I was fond of them, big lumbering cows, gentle as babies; I knew them all by name and was urging them onwards when I became aware of the yellow shadows skulking behind the stragglers; a pack of dingos who looked lean and hungry enough to attack; there would be little food for them in that bare country.

At a distance they circled now; this was something I'd never experienced before, although I knew the savagery of those wild dogs when hungry. They were circling the herd and me, awaiting the right moment to attack, the cows leaping, bucking and bellowing in fear.

And then I saw my Lucky, leaner, full grown, she ran with the mob, snarling! So she'd gone to the pack! I'd thought so, guessed this must be the reason for her disappearance; I'd known that if she'd wanted to, she'd have found her way back to me.

I whistled fiercely, the old whistle she'd know so well, piercing, commanding her to come to me. I fell from my saddle, embracing her as she leapt into my arms, licking my face, jumping high, somersaulting to show her joy at our meeting.

I fondled her, whispering words of endearment; tears came to my eyes as I felt the warmth of her yellow fur and saw once again the golden gleam of her beautiful eyes. Now I'd never let her go.

The dogs had fallen back a bit, still circling. I clutched my long lost pet to me, hugging her; Lucky moved restlessly, licking my face. I began to form vague plans in my mind, how to hold her, keep her from the pack. It was my responsibility to protect the milkers, to get them safely home, and yet I believe, in that great moment of joy and relief at finding my pet again, I would have abandoned the cows for the love of that bitch.

A big Jersey bellowed high in fear, kicking at the yellow shape that snapped at her heels.

Then the hard ground was echoing with the drumming of hooves; a mob of riders hurtled towards me, galloping hard, scattering dust tree high. They were my mates from the station, I could recognize them as they drew nearer; they were the stockmen and ringers with whom I rode at the annual muster; now, seeing the danger, they were riding to help me.

Alerted and scared by the thundering mob of horses, the dingos scattered in alarm, then, swerving into a tight pack, moving as one animal, following their leader, were off, racing away in a frightened bunch.

The horsemen galloped to my side; I looked for Lucky, whistled frantically as I saw her streaking to join the pack, her long slim body flat out, tail held high like a waving pennant. Soon she was up with the leader, heading for the never-never land of far west Australia.