

# THE OLD BLACK DINGO

THE OLD BLACK DINGO crept toward the tiny opening in the cave, high in the red rocks overlooking the wide plains of Havasak Station.

He was tired. Tired of hunting, running, skulking and having to look for food in a land now full of danger. Men were combing the hills and gullies, baiting and setting traps. Aeroplanes took over where the trucks couldn't go, dropping innocent-looking meat which could mean almost instant death to the unsuspecting dingo. He sighed. His teeth were nearly all gone and he was slow. His feet, which had carried him hundreds of kilometres, were scarred and crooked; his bristly hair was falling out. His tongue was rough and dry.



by M. SHIPLEY©

Illustrated by NOELA YOUNG©

His fading yellow eyes searched the plain below. It was quiet now, in the early dawn, the air fresh and crisp. He licked his lips, tilting his old head to one side as he imagined the cool water of the creek against his nose. He shuffled himself about, straightened his back and stepped out into the pale light.

Moving from bush to bush, he found his way to the edge of the gully, a place that was partly hidden by tall trees. When he reached the creek he sank to his chest and gulped slowly. After several minutes, he stood up and shook himself. He felt better.

A short distance from the water he came to the remains of a dead calf, but did not hurry to eat, remembering the poisoned meat he had greedily eaten a month ago, a meal that had nearly killed him. He walked around the carcass a few times before taking a bite. It tasted good. Sun-dried and sweet. He kept chewing, forgetting the danger of poison baits.

An hour later he was back in his cave, asleep.



A faint ticking sound woke the dingo. He lay still, wondering what it could be. It was a gentle movement, close by. He opened one eye, trying to look about without moving. Nothing. Then he raised his head very slowly, looking in the direction the sound had come from. He was suddenly alarmed, for sitting near the mouth of the cave was a small black and white dog. He seemed unaware of the dingo, for he continued chewing away at an upraised toe, his teeth clicking against the nails, making the soft ticking sound.

The dingo rose, trying not to show his stiffness. He flattened his ears, his yellow eyes fierce and his lips drawn back. If this was a station dog, then the owner must be close by. The dingo felt a great anger pass through his body as he walked towards the busy dog.

Instead of yelping and leaping out of the cave in fright, the little dog only lowered his foot, pricked up his ears and rose to sniff the angry dingo, his short, stubby tail wagging. The dingo raised his ears and tried to look friendly. He was not sure what to do, so he walked about the little dog. The intruder was small, with foolish, drooping black ears and such a silly tail. He did not look very dangerous and there did not seem to be any humans about.

When both animals felt that everything was in order, they stretched out together on the floor of the cave, to gaze out on the afternoon light.

Time passed, stars came out and birds called in the bush below. A cow bellowed. The dog rose, stretched again and, looking down at the dingo, nosed him, inviting him to leave.



Together they trotted down the stony hill towards the water. After a quick drink, the dog took the lead down a winding path at the base of the hills. It was cool in the evening and the going was easy. Suddenly the dog stopped, alert.

The dingo, following, stopped also. The sound and smell of sheep were heavy on the air. The dingo felt a thrill of pleasure run through him as he remembered all the times he had hunted euro, duck and turkey, and the fun he had had in the long chases. That was before sheep had come to the high country. Those first sheep had been so easy to take. They did not seem to sense danger. After a few killings the men had come, and now they hunted the dingo. It had become a very dangerous game. Only the old knew how much skill was needed to survive.

The dingo looked about for the little dog, and was surprised to see him dashing around in the mob of woollies, sending them in all directions, breaking them up. The lambs were bleating in terror. The dingo did not waste any time. He ran in, grabbing and ripping. He went for the kidneys, tearing at the fat, leaving the animals gasping on the field. He felt young again, his senses tingling with the last surge of his desire to taste the warm sweetness of fresh meat.



Suddenly a bright light lit the plains. Engines started up. He forgot his small friend. This was deadly danger. Off like a streaking shadow he flew towards the timber at the edge of the paddock. He ran with all his strength, forgetting his old paws and his weariness. He was once more running from men with guns and bright lights.

Not till he really felt safe did he stop. Then he flopped down beneath a wattle tree, its spreading branches almost hiding him from sight. His heart was pounding.

When all was quiet again he slunk back to the cave.

\*\*\*

The next evening he was back in the paddock, taking care that there was no sound except the rustling grass and the quiet movements of the sheep. He took three woollies, feeling keen for the kill again, then ran off towards the station outhouses.



Suddenly he picked up another scent. Looking up, he was stunned to see the small form of the black and white dog hanging from the fence. It was quite dead. He knew then why the men had stopped hunting him. They had blamed his friend for the killings.

The black dingo raged with anger. *How could they have made such a mistake?*

He shivered as he turned and ran for his hide-out.

\*\*\*



Next day was full of noise and shouting. Men came on horses and in trucks and hunted through the hills. He heard one man's voice saying, "All the time I blamed Domino and wouldn't listen to you, Jack. Now I know it wasn't him at all. I'll do my darnedest to get the dingo that did it. I reckon he has to be here somewhere. Great, intelligent animals, though, dingoes. Men will never beat them."

The voice faded away. He heard the sound of horses' hooves striking the rocks close by. He waited, fearful, but finally the sounds grew fainter till the cave was silent again. The dingo went to sleep.

\*\*\*

A deep yellow moon rose over the station, outlining the roof of the shearing shed against the horizon. The dingo found that he could not keep away from the place. He entered the paddock, avoiding the sheep as he ran towards the chicken pen. He looked for the little dog hanging from the fence but it was not there.



He stood for a moment, wondering. Then he sniffed the ground. The familiar scent took him to a small mound of newly turned earth. He scratched quickly in the soft ground. *Drag, drag, drag* with his old claws till he could see some black and white hair. As he gazed at the remains, a deep sadness came over him. It had been such a short friendship.

He raised his head and gave a long, mournful cry.

Straight away, lights flashed on, feet pounded close at hand and an engine started up. He heard a familiar voice shout in the darkness. "It's that dingo again. He must be right here in the yard. Quick! Bring the gun!"

The old dingo didn't care any more. Remembering his old trick — keep to the shadows, don't rise till you're clear, then GO — he clung to the ground, deep in shadow, edging toward the side of the shed.

Into the moonlight the black dingo streaked, shadowed, became lost and appeared again. Then he was gone. He bounded over rocks, into the dense bush, through water-worn gullies, till he felt he was far enough away from the station to slow down. At last he stopped and, dropping to the soft ground, he felt his head bursting with red, whirling pain. He was out of breath; he could not reach the cave.

He closed his eyes to ease the pain, and slept.

Clouds of green and blue silken fields crossed his mind; fields full of fat sheep, euros and turkeys. He dreamed on. Once more the little dog came to him, his head tilted in a friendly way, and there was that faint ticking sound again. The old black dingo breathed deeply.

Then he gave one heavy puff, and his old lips were almost smiling.

\*\*\*

Jack found the remains. He was surprised. There was hardly any hair left on the gaunt body, and ants were busy moving about the glazed eyes and into the toothless mouth.

But it was the feet of the old black dingo that drew Jack's attention. They were ancient, battered, ragged, torn. He wondered how the animal had managed to stand, much less hunt. He felt almost ashamed as he looked at the animal.

"It took four men, three trucks and many guns, baits and goodness-knows-what, and *still* we couldn't get you, you old devil," he said aloud. He remembered his friend's words from the day before: "Great, intelligent animals, dingoes. Men will never beat them!"

"Maybe not men, but a little dog," he murmured to the empty air, as he turned towards the station track. 🐾

