

Lucky Dog

One day Dave came back to camp with a young kelpie bitch, about eight months old, that he'd bought from a farmer along the stock route. She was an intelligent little creature, with a high inquisitive forehead and sharp yellow eyes. He reckoned she'd make a good working dog with a bit of training.

The other drovers were a bit nervous about the new arrival. Anyone who works with cattle will tell you that an unworked dog around a mob is a recipe for disaster, and the crew weren't backward in making their concerns known. Dave knew his team well enough to take their views seriously, so he agreed to set the youngster up alongside the road, tied to a forty-four gallon drum by a length of chain, to be picked up at the end of each day's drive when the cattle were in.

When he came back to get the kelpie next afternoon, she was crouched low beside the drum, her attention fixed on a car approaching along the straight at high speed. As the vehicle flashed past, she leapt out at it with all her strength. The trouble was, she'd forgotten about the chain, and halfway through her jump she was suddenly jerked in a full half-circle and landed with a heavy thump on the gravel.

Dave roared with laughter. "Silly little bugger", he said aloud. Then he cocked an eyebrow: another car had entered the straight, and the kelpie was back against the drum, readying herself to pounce again. Sure enough, as the car went by, out sprang the dog, this time turning in a perfect somersault at the end of her lead and hitting the ground with an impact that Dave, still a good hundred metres away, felt in his own body.

The young kelpie was obviously thrilled to see him; it took a couple of minutes to get the chain off her wriggling body, with Dave cursing her and laughing at the same time. "Stay still, you crazy bugger! Stay still. Now, Let's have a look at

you.” He ran his hands expertly over the small body. There were several cuts and grazes, a few tender spots, but the dog was apparently still in one piece.

Not much longer though, Dave thought, if this keeps up. He found a bit of rope in his saddlebag and tethered the kelpie to his horse, then ambled back down the road to the agistment, with the dog trotting alongside. That night he decided he’d better keep her with him on the next leg.

They got away early next morning, the air sweet with the promise of another warm day. He kept the kelpie on a light lead, tying the rope around a tree or fencepost whenever he had to direct the drive. The kelpie watched keenly as the other dogs and drovers worked the churning cattle. Occasionally she burst into a series of yelping barks and strained against the lead, looking pleadingly at Dave, who pulled his hat down a little to avoid her gaze.

A few kilometres into the drive, the route turned off the seal onto a red soil track. A mantle of fine ochre dust rose around the mob. From the rear, where Dave was working, the way ahead soon became blurred, until all he could see were the jostling backs of the cattle and a torrent of sharp-tipped horns.

These were Simmental stock, a breed with a reputation for being hard to handle. Every so often a young steer, with a clutch of other cattle in tow, would make a break from the herd, and it would take all the expertise of dogs and drovers to bring them back to the mob.

Dave’s secret weapon on such occasions was his blue heeler. Getting on in years though the dog was, he had a tenacity that Dave had come to admire. He’d seen the blue take a kick from a hoof that would’ve killed another dog, and come up with the beast’s foreleg between his teeth; seen him plunge into a fracas while the other dogs held back. Dave had never been able to work out whether the heeler was stupid

or courageous, but in the end he decided it was a question of honour: the dog was prepared to give everything he did his best shot. Once he'd sized a situation up and committed himself, he was harder to shake than a black snake round a garden fork.

The cattle, too, quickly learned to respect the heeler. Many a time Dave had seen a rogue steer veer and stand trembling at the command in the blue's eye. Yet away from the drive the old dog was a placid animal, amicable enough so long as he was given his fair due, which he generally was. A fight with the heeler, the others seemed to know, might well be a fight to the death.

Towards the young kelpie, the heeler seemed quite indifferent. As far as Dave could tell, the two didn't have much to do with each other. The younger dog nosed around the old blue now and again, but he remained aloof, and after a while she would go back to the other dogs, apparently rebuffed.

The drive continued through long, dusty days and cool, languid nights. In the mornings the air smelled of dew; in the evenings there was talk around the fire and creeping tiredness, the luxury of sleep. The pace of the drive was relentless, the mob shuffling mindlessly on through the choking dust. Usually the men and dogs were content to hang around the fringes of the herd, their eyes as red-rimmed as the cattle's.

A few days out from the end of the drive, a strong wind sprang up, blowing directly into the face of the mob. The dust rose thick around them, persisting and growing ever denser as the day wore on. The men avoided the rear of the herd, crossing well back and only when they had to, letting the dogs bring any stragglers in. The dogs didn't like it much, obeying the men's commands with tails slung low. The drovers, perhaps feeling a little guilty, swore at the dogs but kept their demands to a minimum.

The problem was that the mob kept spreading out, the beasts at the rear baulking then breaking away to avoid the dust raised by those in front. This only spread the dust cloud, forcing the drovers further and further from the core of the drive. Dave worked his way nervously around the cattle, wondering if he ought to pull them in and wait until the wind dropped, even if it meant losing a bit of time.

Suddenly a commotion broke out from the midst of the herd – the unmistakable yelping of the young kelpie. Looking around, Dave knew straight away what had happened: the kelpie had slipped her collar, and was in among the cattle. Cursing, he wheeled his horse and galloped back down the flank of the drive. Through the churning dust he caught a glimpse of auburn hair.

“Get out of there, you bastard! Get out of there!”

The dog disappeared again, and there was another bout of high-pitched yapping. A young steer broke from the mob, charging at full speed away from the herd. Another beast followed, then another and another. The kelpie was splitting the drive.

Dave rarely got angry, but he was angry now. If he could have reached the kelpie, he would have strangled it with his bare hands. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the heeler flash past, racing to get enough distance on the breakaways to turn them back. Dave whipped his horse back into a gallop, trying to catch up.

By the time he got to the back of the mob, the heeler was running diagonally across the front of the stampede; letting the cattle see him, confusing them, dulling their will to run. The instant the dog sensed this hesitancy he turned abruptly, his feet skidding in the powdery dust, growling as he confronted his quarry, every iron-grey hair on end.

The rogue cattle faltered and stopped, quivering uncertainly. The lead steer stood less than a metre away from the heeler, uncertain. It ducked its horns and stamped its feet, but didn't charge.

At that precise moment the young kelpie arrived, yelping around the rear of the breakaways. For a split second the heeler was distracted. The needle-sharp horns of the steer flicked out and the blue, with a squeal of pain, was flipped backwards, landing with a dull thud several metres away.

With a savage "Yaaah!" Dave dug his spurs and cut across the front of the cattle, who turned, lowing with fear, and headed back towards the main mob. The stampede was over. The other drovers took control, and Dave turned back to where the heeler lay sprawled in the red dust.

The dog was dead by the time he got there; the horn had caught it in the chest, right in the heart. Dave knew the whole thing would have been over in an instant.

He was still crouched over the body when he felt a presence at his side: the young kelpie. Blinded by grief and rage, he stood and, without so much as a glance in her direction, walked back to his horse to get his rifle. The dog was useless: worse, an absolute liability, a danger to him and the other drovers. He knew what he had to do, what everyone on the team would be expecting him to do.

But when he got back to where the blue lay, Dave changed his mind. The kelpie was circling the heeler's corpse, nudging it with her nose and whining pitifully, and something in her distress, something the stockman couldn't quite explain, broached the divide between them.

Dave buried the heeler near the campsite. The young kelpie sat nearby, breaking every so often into low, mournful howls. The other drovers kept their

thoughts to themselves; they knew that when Dave made his mind up about something, he was as obstinate as the heeler himself.

When Dave got home, he decided he'd give the kelpie away, maybe as a kid's pet. God knows, he thought, the little bugger's affectionate enough. He took the dog to the vet to be micro-chipped and vaccinated.

The vet looked at him oddly as she completed the examination. "You might have a bit of trouble getting rid of this one," she said.

Dave felt his stomach sink, wondering how he could have missed any sign of illness. He'd become quite fond of the kelpie, and the thought that he might have to have her put down was unexpectedly distressing. "What d'you mean?" he asked.

"You didn't know?" The vet checked her diagnosis again, confirming it with a grin. "She's in pup; a few weeks, by the feel of it."

Dave took the kelpie back home with him. He named her Lucky.

Six weeks later she sprung a litter of four pups, every one an unmistakable kelpie-heeler cross. He kept the pick of the litter for himself, along with the mother. He gave the other three away to mates in the droving game. Everyone who took one reckoned they made the best cattle dogs they'd ever come across.

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