

5 It was blazing hot outside and inside the weather-board and iron shanty at Dead Dingo, a place on the “cleared road”, where there was a pub and a police station, and which was sometimes called “Roasted” and other times “Potted” Dingo – nicknames suggested by the everlasting drought and the vicinity of the one-pub township of Tinned Dog.

10 From the front veranda the scene was straight cleared road, running right and left to outback, and to Bourke (and ankle-deep in the red sand dust for perhaps a hundred miles); the rest blue-grey bush, dust, and the heat-wave blazing across every object.

15 There were only four in the bar-room, though it was New Year’s Day. There weren’t many more in the county. The girl sat behind the bar – the coolest place in the shanty – reading. On a worn and torn horsehair sofa, which had seen cooler places and better days, lay an awful and healthy example, a bearded swagman, with his arms twisted over his head and his face to the wall, sleeping off the death of the dead drunk. Bill and Jim – shearer and rouseabout – sat at a table playing cards. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon, and they had been gambling since nine – and the greater part of the night before – so they were, probably, in a worse condition
20 morally (and perhaps physically) than the drunken swagman on the sofa.

Close under the bar, in a dangerous place for his legs and tail, lay a sheepdog with a chain attached to his collar and wound round his neck.

Presently a thump on the table, and Bill, unlucky gambler, rose with an oath that would have been savage if it hadn’t been drawled.

25 “Stumped?” inquired Jim.

“Not a chance!” drawled Bill.

Jim drew his hands from the cards, his eyes went slowly and hopelessly round the room and out the door. There was something in the eyes of both, except when on the card-table, of the look of a man waking in a strange place.

30 “Got anything?” asked Jim, fingering the cards again.

Bill sucked in his cheeks, collected the saliva with difficulty, and spat out on to the veranda floor.

“That’s all I got,” he drawled. “It’s gone now.”

Jim leaned back in his chair, yawned, and caught sight of the dog.

“That there dog yours?” he asked, brightening.

5 They had evidently been strangers the day before, or as strange to each other as bushmen can be.

Bill scratched behind his ear, and blinked at the dog. The dog woke suddenly to a flea fact.

“Yes,” drawled Bill, “he’s mine.”

10 “Well, I’m going outback, and I want a dog,” said Jim, gathering the cards briskly. “Half a quid agin the dog?”

“Half a quid!” drawled Bill. “Call it a quid?”

“Half a quid!”

“A whole quid!” drawled Bill desperately, and he stooped over his swag.

But Jim’s hands were itching over the cards.

15 “All right. Call it a quid.”

The drunkard on the sofa stirred, showed signs of waking, but died again. Remember this, it might come in useful.

Bill sat down to the table once more.

20 Jim rose first, winner of the dog. He stretched, yawned “Ah, well!” and shouted drinks. Then he shouldered his swag, stirred the dog up with his foot, unwound the chain, said “Ah, well – so-long!” and drifted out and along the road towards outback, the dog following with head and tail down.

25 Bill scored another drink, shouldered his swag, said “So-long, Mary!” and drifted out and along the road towards Tinned Dog, on the Bourke side. A long, drowsy half-hour passed – the sort of half-hour that is as long as an hour in the places where days are as long as years, and years hold about as much as days do in other places.

The man on the sofa woke with a start, and looked scared and wild for a moment; then he brought his dusty broken boots to the floor, rested his elbows on his knees, took his unfortunate head between his hands, and came back to life gradually.

He lifted his head, looked at the girl across the top of the bar, and formed with his lips, rather than spoke, the words: "Put up a drink?"

She shook her head tightly and went on reading.

5 He staggered up, and leaning on the bar, made desperate signals with hand, eyes, and mouth.

"No!" she snapped. "I means no when I says no! You've had too many last drinks already, and the boss says you ain't to have another. If you swear again, or bother me, I'll call him."

10 He hung sullenly on the counter for a while, then lurched to his swag, and shouldered it hopelessly and wearily. Then he blinked round, whistled, waited a moment, went on to the front veranda, peered round through the heat with bloodshot eyes and whistled again. He turned and started through to the back door.

15 "What the devil do you want now?" demanded the girl, interrupted in her reading for the third time by him. "Stampin' all over the house. You can't go through there! It's privit! I do wish to goodness you'd git!"

"Where the blazes is that there dog o' mine got to?" he muttered. "Did you see a dog?"

"No! What do I want with your dog?"

20 He whistled out in front again, and round each corner. Then he came back with a decided step.

25 "Look here! That there dog was lyin' there agin the wall when I went to sleep. He wouldn't stir from me, or my swag, in a year, if he wasn't dragged. He's been touched, and I wouldn'ter lost him for a fiver. Are you sure you ain't seen a dog?" Then suddenly, as the thought struck him: "Where's them two chaps that was playin' cards when I wenter sleep?"

"Why!" exclaimed the girl, without thinking, "there was a dog, now I come to think of it, but I thought it belonged to one of them chaps. Anyway, they played for it, and the other chap won it and took it away."

He stared at her blankly, with thunder gathering in the blankness.

30 "What sort of a dog was it?"

Dog described; the chain round the neck settled it.

He scowled at her darkly.

“Now, look here,” he said, “you’ve allowed gamblin’ in this bar – your boss has. You’ve got no right to let people gamble away a man’s dog. Is a customer to lose his dog every time he has a doze? I’ll go straight across to the police and put you away, and I don’t care if you lose your licence. I ain’t goin’ to lose my dog. I wouldn’ter
5 taken a ten-pound note for that dog! I...”

She was filling a pewter hastily.

“Here! for God’s sake have a drink an’ stop yer noise.”

He drank with satisfaction. Then he hung on the bar with one elbow and scowled out the door.

10 “Which way did them chaps go?” he growled.

“The one that took the dog went towards Tinned Dog.”

“And I’ll haveter go all the way back after him, and most likely lose me shed! Here!” jerking the empty pewter across the bar, “fill that up again; I’m narked properly, I am, and I’ll take twenty-four hours to cool down now. I wouldn’ter lost that dog for
15 twenty quid.”

He drank again with deeper satisfaction, then he shuffled out, muttering, swearing, and threatening louder every step, and took the track to Tinned Dog.

Now the man, girl, or woman, who told me this yarn has never quite settled it in his or her mind as to who really owned the dog. I leave it to you.