

Frank Roberts

The Inheritor

The man was unable to stay between the two animals without danger and at any time now the dog would jump straight at his throat.

The man and the ewe and the dingo and a few crows wheeling above were the only visible living creatures in all that desolation.

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They were on the only high land for miles around, a peaked hill known as Lone Pine because it had one tree on it. The tree was a very ordinary eucalypt but the words Lone Pine have such an historic association, even now, half a century afterward that any hill with one tree on it is apt to be known locally by that name.

This tree had suffered intense dry heat in its summers and withering dry cold in its winters and now, dead, its bare and gnarled and twisted branches made as good a monument as any to inland life, which is a longer war.

But the man saw it with a practical eye merely as the marker to a final refuge from the flood. The ewe and the dingo had no feelings at all about the tree, but the crows had. It was their natural roost and they had been there, conscious of the ewe cropping grass below them, and of the flood, and always prepared to wait patiently for the main chance when the dingo had appeared slinking along a low ridge, equally afraid of the rising water and of being silhouetted so plainly.

The dog scouted around the shrinking perimeter of Lone Pine, returned to the point where ridge met hillside, and stood sniffing the wind and waiting for a flash of instinct. It had come, and then he had walked up to the highest point of the hill and settled down near the tree to watch and wait.

He had seen the ewe but was not in a killing mood just then. And the crows flapped away from the tree, wheeled back to it, perched, and flapped away again. They

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214 were restless but not afraid of the dingo. He was a good provider.

But when the man appeared, walking along the ridge-top with the floodwater soaking his boots and running through the eroded dip where the ridge came to the hill, the crows left the tree and wheeled continuously.

The man had leaped from the ridge to the hillside and walked up the hill. He didn't see the earth-colored dog until it snarled. Then he saw its white teeth and blazing eyes. He looked down at the ridge and then up at the branches of the tree which he could reach with a good jump. But could he pull himself up quickly enough - or would the dingo prop at the sudden movement and slash at his legs? The essential habits of dingos were not in his experience, and the flood was another factor.

Then the ewe scented the wild dog. It was unlikely that she saw him. But she turned to run downhill and found the flood in front of her and bleated and ran around the hill, and the dingo crawled a few inches, watching her.

The man felt relieved. Presently the dog would attack the ewe, and he would hoist himself into the tree. He had only to remain still, and not divert the dingo from its instinctive passion for the ewe's throat.

The sheep ran about until it lost the dog scent, and then it noticed a new patch of grass and resumed cropping, moving on and up as the flood nudged its hoofs. It was stupid, even as sheep went.

The man stayed very still, watching the dingo stir an inch every time the ewe moved, hackles up and the skin along its spine quivering.

And then, God help him, the man began to feel pity for the sheep.

He was sure that the dingo had forgotten him, closed him out, but any simple move-

ment would restore him. That might save the ewe.

He reasoned that the dog would not attack one creature while conscious of another that might attack it. Dingo had become a vernacular for a coward, but the wild dogs had survived from an age earlier than man by caution and cunning. Courage was a last resource.

He reasoned further that the ewe was unimportant, born to be killed by dog or man, but another thought came obliquely across this reasoning. If their isolation on the hill encouraged the dingo to have its anticipation to the full, letting the flood bring the ewe to it, he might be unable to hold his motionless pose and movement might turn the impassioned dog to him. He reasoned that this was unlikely and the idea false to his interests, but it persisted.

He knew it was compassion seeking to force him into foolish action by perversion of logic, suggesting that he divert the dingo now, before its exquisite desire became madness.

All this worrying to save a sheep? Damn the sheep and damn the dingo, let them continue the drama according to their natures, and let him get into that tree.

Then he knew that he could not. It was in his nature, too, to come down from trees and be master on the ground. He felt that if he should abandon the ewe and leap to safety he would diminish his own kind on the face of the earth. He must stay on the ground while ground remained.

Besides, the only low branch was too directly above the dingo.

He realized that this kind of thinking was more than foolish, it could be fatal. Soon their island would be so small that he and the dingo inevitably would be at one another's throats.

That image needed correcting. It was too

dramatic. The dingo could only attack with its jaws and its weight, probably much less than his. He had defensive and offensive power in his hands, arms, legs and booted feet. So the dog had more to fear from him. He was afraid because it was wild, alien, capable of savagery, vicious, indomitable.

In a tight corner it might attack him and then it would fight to the death, and he would be lacerated terribly. This was really what he feared. It was still a question of the sheep or him.

The water was rising quickly and soon all three would be forced into a propinquity in which anything might happen. Unfortunately, while he could attract the dog's attention and perhaps save the ewe, he could not take the opposite line and disengage from the danger. He must act or submit to chance. This was the choice he faced.

Now he could feel pity for the ewe again, because he had made it reasonable. He felt sorry for the two inimical animals and himself, thrown together on this curious island in the flood. Only the wheeling crows were above pity. They were infinitely patient, nerveless, secure.

He realized that he had moved.

He had inclined his head and now the dingo's furious eyes were turned on him. He felt his heart respond to alarm. Then as if dismissing him as a potential danger, the dog turned back to the ewe, and he felt this was the moment. The sheep caught it, too, and stood bleating.

Even as the dog prepared for its charge to knock the ewe down and expose its throat to incisors, the man jumped and shouted. He knew it was wrong, that the whole argument had been opened again, when he had been free to jump for safety. But he was beyond reason and doing what he must.

The dingo hit the sheep and it fell over but the man was in reach before the teeth

went in and booted the dog aside. It seemed to go with the kick, turning once in the air and landing on stiffened legs, facing him and snarling.

He heard the sheep scramble up and run away, and each wild bleat drew a response from the dog, a snap and snarl at the man.

He was going to kick again if it sprang at him, and he was more afraid of a dash at his legs. But suddenly the dingo swung away and ran up to the tree where it turned, hacked and savage and in command of the high ground.

Now the man knew he was where he deserved to be, with the sheep. Gradually the water would force them up toward the dog, who held all the advantages and who now recognized his prime enemy.

The man walked around the little island, looking for a stick or a stone, even searching the flood for debris, but there was nothing of the slightest value.

"A man can be a fool," he said.

His voice sounded loud and made him realize how silent everything was, particularly their common menace, the flood.

"Just a stone," he asked of the stoneless ground.

He walked around the island again, moving slowly, watching both the ground and the ewe, which might be panicked into dashing straight to the tree and its death. Now that the issue had been made, he had to protect that animal or forever be a fool.

He looked at the squatting dingo, and the tree and the crows, and the ochre flood that covered the land. He was hoping for boats, but there were none in sight and sight extended for many miles from the top of Lone Pine.

No, there were no boats. And even if there were, even if some miracle brought one, the men in it would see what against the sky? A dead tree with some crows on it and a dingo

216 sitting under it, and they would turn away.

The man knew that he could not let the dingo maintain control of the high ground for too long. But he also knew that if he approached it now it would almost certainly fight. In a while it might become more conscious of the flood, and afraid or at least troubled enough to accept if not welcome company. He had heard or read that animals so threatened forgot all other instincts. He decided to follow his reasoning this time, and be patient.

As the flood consumed the remaining ground, the man tried to stay close to the ewe without alarming it. By moving slowly and carefully he managed to drive it around the island and keep it more aware of him than of the dog. He felt this roundabout way was better than gradual direct approach to the dingo. But nothing was better or best with this wild thing.

Stiff-legged and snarling, it turned as the man and the ewe circled, always with its hind to the tree. And as the distance between them shortened its fury increased and it snapped and snarled at both man and the ewe.

Now the sheep began to make short dashes up and down the slope, afraid of the water, terrified of the dingo, and inevitably about to sacrifice itself to one death or the other. The man was unable to stay between the two animals without danger and at any time now the dog would jump straight out at his throat.

And he had to make this happen so that he would not be surprised.

He stood in front of the dingo, almost eye to eye with it. He remained quite still, and then suddenly threw up his hands and shouted.

And the dog sprang and the man dropped to his hands and knees and sprang up again,

meeting the expected midair turn and descent with the broad of his back.

He heard ground impact when he had hoped for a splash, and the dingo was back and had torn his leg when he was still turning downhill.

He kicked at it with the other foot but it danced out of his reach and in again for another slash, then aside when he kicked ahead, and in again for a tear at his flank.

And then the crazed ewe blundered into them and the dingo rolled over and the man fell on it and got both hands around its neck, lying on the dog while he strangled it.

It gagged and frothed and tried to get his wrists and dug and writhed and howled once and his hands and arms ached and his mind was torn and outraged by the act of murder. But he maintained his grim purpose.

When he stood up, perhaps a long time later, his forearms and wrists were bleeding freely and there were many gashes on his stomach and chest from the dog's paws. Both legs and one hip were badly gashed, but he had saved his hands and face.

The sheep stood a few feet away, cropping a tuft of grass under the dead tree.

It shied away when he put a hand out toward it, and ran around to the other side of the tree.

The man sat down and tore two long strips from his trouser leg. He strung them on his belt and went around one side of the tree and then doubled back quickly and caught the ewe before it could turn again. He threw it on its side and tied its legs. Now he had only to find some way of getting it up into the tree.

He did that by going up and breaking off part of one of the gaunt limbs and using it to dig the earth around the tree, making a mound on which he was able to stand and heave the trussed ewe across the lowest fork.

She struggled, bleating terribly, and nearly fell before he could clamber on to the branch and hold her in place. But once he was in the tree it was all right.

He was sighted from an Army helicopter next morning, a bloodied, injured and demented man who refused to be taken off unless he could bring a trussed sheep with him.

"I can't do that, it's too risky, but I'll send one of the ducks to you," the pilot told him. "Can you hang on a while longer?"

"I'll hang on all right," the man said.

As they climbed away the pilot laughed and shook his head.

"That beats everything I've seen," he said

to one of the rescued in the cabin. "He must be crazy about sheep."

His passenger looked down at the desolation and said, "It gets some like that, out here. That must be the only live sheep anywhere in all this."

The pilot could see that, although it had no special impact on him. He had seen all kinds of desolation. And he said, "Oh, well, I suppose that gives it some value. I guess it makes sense from his point of view."

But he couldn't help smiling again at the memory of that wild-looking man sitting astride a high branch, with his feet in the flood, and hanging on to that trussed sheep with both hands as though it had a golden fleece.