

The Long Journey

By Jasmine Mackay

CHAPTER ONE:

The Taylor's black kelpie was well known in the Australian town of Jundah, for every year she competed in the cattle dog trials with 14 year old Mick Taylor. They had won many awards in those early years, and now competed at bigger shows, in Longreach, Barcaldine, and even as far as Emerald. The kelpie was fast and sleek, a definite challenge to beat. And despite being the youngest trainer, Mick was experienced too. But a day came when Nellie didn't run up to the gate of the yard as Mick arrived after school. Mick swung open the gate and immediately knew something was wrong. "Nellie?" he called softly. He turned and looked down the road. Maybe she was asleep. But, no, that couldn't be it. Nellie was never late. Mick began to worry. He called again, louder, "Nellie!" He walked in the gate and looked around. Something must have happened to the kelpie. Fear rose within him and he broke into a run. "Nellie! Nellie!" he called, hoping to see her running to him. But he didn't see her. When he reached the house he burst in, panting from his run and panic.

"Mother, where's Nellie?" Mick's words tumbled out, "What's happened? Where is she?" Nobody turned and started a search of the farm. Nobody seemed worried by the disappearance of Nellie. Mick knew something had happened. "Mum?" Mandy turned slowly from the kitchen. "We've... made a decision, Mick," she said, "I think your father should tell you." Chris was sitting on a chair, staring into the fire. "Dad?" Chris didn't look up, but answered, "Come here, Mick." Mick came over, full of apprehension. Chris took his hand and finally looked at him. "You know times are hard, Mick," he explained,

“Since the dingoes started taking calves, well, you know it’s been tough. We could barely afford to put food on the table and with Nellie as well... So we’ve had to sell her.” Mick gasped. “She was my dog! How could you?” “Mick, that’s enough. What’s done is done.” For a moment Mick couldn’t speak. Then he wrenched free of his father’s touch and dashed out the door.

Tears blurred the track in front him as Mick ran across the paddock. His own dog was gone, sold without his knowing. At last he stopped, at his favourite place; the huge, twisted gum tree that leaned over slightly, providing shelter. Mick sat down under it. “Oh, Nellie... Nellie. Come home.” But he feared the kelpie wouldn’t.

CHAPTER TWO:

Aboard a train bound for Rockhampton, the kelpie rested in her cage. A man opened the cage and offered her water, and patted her. “Good dog,” he said as she drank. When Nellie finished, he rose and took the bowl. Moving away from the door, he commanded, “Stay, girl.” Nellie’s trust in humans had not been broken – four years of training told her to obey. No instinct warned her to flee. No fear rose in her mind. So she calmly accepted this new human’s command and stayed while he left. Soon he returned and closed the door. A wealthy station owner had brought Nellie. A gentle man in his thirties, he collected Nellie from the train station himself. The kelpie was put in a large run, by herself. Somewhere within Nellie’s mind, she felt a faint memory. The call came at first dimly, then with growing clearness. She couldn’t quite understand what it was she wanted. *It is time to go for...* Then she knew. It was time to go for

Mick! Nellie went to the gate of her run and whined. She knew Mick would be walking up the track, swinging open the gate. Years of the same routine had left a deep imprint on her kelpie mind, and she knew it was time.

Jumping on her hind legs, Nellie placed her front paws on the mesh. To her surprise it swung open – her new owner hadn't latched it properly! Nellie didn't know this, but she did



know that her way was now clear. She set out at a steady lope. But yet another barrier was before her! A mesh fence went around the perimeter of the yard. Nellie walked up to it. The fence was nearly six feet high. Nellie whined and paced. Her instinct told her to go on. But

how? Desperate, she ran at the fence and sprang up. But she couldn't jump high enough. She fell back down with a yelp. Nellie got her feet, one hind leg held off the ground. Limping, she backed away from the fence and stared at it. This impassable barrier stood between her and her home. She must get past it! Little did she know that the farm was many miles away. She whined, turned in a circle, and then backed up. Nellie took a running leap and sprang up. Her front paws hooked over the top. Her back feet found grip in the mesh and pushed. Up, up, and nearly over! Nellie was nearly there. She paused at the top, and then leapt down the other side. She was free!

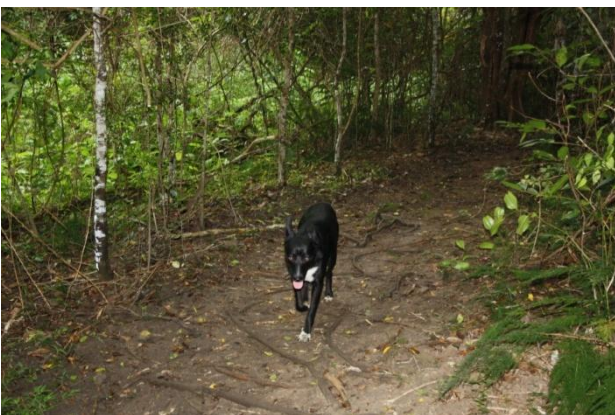
CHAPTER THREE:

Nellie passed through the town of Gracemere, a few kilometres west of the station, in the early evening. “Look at that, Tim,” said a man, standing outside the pub. His friend saw Nellie limping down the footpath in the fading light. “Looks like a kelpie, Joe,” he said, “Didn’t Mr Williams buy a new kelpie this week...?” Joe stepped out and called to Nellie. “Hey, girl. Come here!” Nellie carried on trotting east, only her ear turning to listen as she past him. She had a mission to complete.

Nellie’s walk was less determined now. As darkness came, Nellie stopped. The instinct of time had left her – it wasn’t time to go for Mick anymore. But now she had another instinct rising – the homing sense. Nellie turned east again and broke into a trot.

It was well after nightfall when Nellie lay down under a bush away from the road. She curled up as rain began to fall. Tired from her day, she slept.

Still on the move a few days later, Nellie kept going west. Her limp was worse and caused her to go slower. First she followed the road,



but when it turned north she went through the forest. Here the going was easier – the soft ground was gentle on her injured leg. But here was another barrier – this time it was a rushing river, flowing fast through the forest. Nellie stopped, her head raised to look across the wild waters. The other bank was

steep, but now the driving call inside her had risen again. *Go west! Go home!* Nellie whined and limped to the left. But that wasn't the right way, she knew. Home was west, over the river. She turned again, looking across the river. She hesitated. Then she gathered herself and jumped. Her leap carried her far, but when she hit the water it pushed her downstream and she couldn't swim against it. Her forelegs paddling hard, Nellie tried to swim to the bank. But the current was too strong. Despite her efforts, Nellie was carried downstream. Weakened from lack of food, she soon had no strength left. Nellie was whirled about and tossed against the bank. With a last effort, she dug her claws into the bank and heaved herself out. Panting, she didn't have enough strength to get to her feet. Her eyes closed and she was still.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Old Dave and Colleen Warlock had owned many kelpies over the years, and they currently owned a male red and tan kelpie named Prince. Dave was walking in the fields with Prince, when suddenly the young dog stopped, barked, and ran towards the river. "Prince! Here boy!" called Dave. Prince barked again, stopping to look back. "What is it, boy?" Prince hurried on and Dave followed. Lying on the bank of the river was a black kelpie. Prince whined and sniffed at it. "Back, now, Prince!" ordered Dave. Prince stepped back and barked at Dave. Dave knelt down and felt for the kelpie's heartbeat. "Yeah, she's alive," said Dave, "But barely." Prince ran ahead as Dave carried the kelpie home. "Colleen!" he called, reaching the house. Colleen came out and saw the kelpie in Dave's arms. "What on earth...?" Dave carried Nellie inside and laid her beside the fireplace. "Fetch some warm milk and a blanket." Colleen came with an old blanket.

She put it over Nellie and said to Dave, "Poor thing. I reckon she's a stray, Dave." Dave shook his head. "No, Colleen. Someone will be offering a reward for the return of her." Colleen hurried to fetch the milk. Dave patted Nellie's head. "It'll be alright, girl," he said softly. Colleen soon returned and Dave held the kelpie's head while Colleen dribbled some milk into her mouth. Nellie didn't swallow. The milk trickled out the other side of her mouth. "She's too far gone, Colleen," said Dave. But Colleen shook her head. She lifted the kelpie's head so that the dry nose pointed up. She put some milk in her mouth and then stroked her throat, until at last, Nellie swallowed. As the morning wore on, Colleen and Dave continued to care for the sick kelpie. When evening came, Nellie finally lifted her head. Seeing her surroundings – Dave sitting in a chair nearby, reading a newspaper and Colleen cooking dinner – her tail wagged slowly. "So, you're awake, now?" said Dave. Colleen turned and came over, holding a bowl of warm meat and gravy. She offered it to Nellie, who gratefully ate it.

Nellie stayed with the Warlocks for a week, before the instinct stirred again in her mind. While she was weak, she had forgotten, but now she sensed she must go again. The Warlocks noticed her limp, and took her to a vet who said it was only a sprain. By day ten, her leg had healed. And now she wanted to continue her journey. Every afternoon she'd pace the house, whining and scratching at the door. At last Colleen said, "She's not happy here, Dave." Dave nodded. "She's a working dog, and we're just not giving her enough exercise." "No, that's not it. It's like she needs to be somewhere else, like she has an appointment somewhere." "An appointment? Come now, Colleen." Nellie now stood at the door, her ears erect. It was time. "See? She wants to leave us, Dave." Colleen rose and patted Nellie.

Nellie whined, turning her head slightly towards Colleen. “Do you think we should let her go, Dave?” “It’s up to you, Colleen.” Colleen hesitated and then opened the door. Nellie paused and looked at Colleen questioningly. Prince rose from his place by the fire and whined. In the short time that Nellie had been with him, he had become friends with the female kelpie. “You’ve been a good dog to us,” said Colleen, “and we’ll miss you, little girl. But you’re free to go. Good luck, where ever you’re going.” Nellie heard the word “go” and trotted out the door. She was on the road again.

CHAPTER FIVE:

A few more weeks past, and Nellie continued to trot west, now nearing Emerald. Burrs were tangled in her coat and one paw was badly cut. Nellie ignored these things, her mind set on one thing – *Go home!* Suddenly she stopped. There was a warm, tantalizing scent in the air. Nellie scented it and followed the smell. The smell came from a freshly dead baby rabbit, lying on the track ahead. Her ears became erect as she stepped closer. All her life, she’d been taught not to eat dead things. But she was very hungry. She paused, one ear turned back to catch the sound of Mick’s voice calling, “No, Nellie, leave it!” But not a sound came. She stepped closer, and lowered her nose. Her ear still turned, Nellie paused again. Then her jaws opened and she lifted the limp rabbit from the ground. Her ears erect again, she limped through the bushes. Finally she stopped and lay down. The rabbit was still warm in her mouth, and she ate hungrily.

Now Nellie caught rabbits. Her strength renewed, she could now travel faster. For a few



days she crossed the plains, then skirted Emerald. But now there were less rabbits. Nellie lost the shine from her coat and her eyes became dull. Her ribs showed through her coat. At nights she curled up beside rocks, taking shelter the best she could as the rain fell.

The road was narrowing. Nellie loped towards it, not hesitating. Halfway across, a truck appeared out of nowhere. Nellie jumped forward to avoid it, but it was too late. The road train, with the amount of wheels equivalent to fifteen cars, struck Nellie across the shoulder and side with its bull bar. Nellie was thrown into the ditch, badly hurt. The driver never saw her and drove on. Nellie lay barely alive in the ditch. She had to get up, to get away from here. But she couldn't. She could only lie gasping in the spinifex, feeling the end was not far off. And she would have died there if a Ute hadn't been following the truck, and pulled over to help. Nellie felt gentle hands over her side, lifting her head, and then being carried somewhere. She heard a soothing voice as she was laid in the Ute. Then she heard no more.

It was warm and Nellie could hear voices around her. She opened her eyes. Nellie was in a cage, lying on blankets. A drip was attached to her foreleg. She didn't know that she was in Barcaldine, at the vet's, and had come so near to death in the days she was unconscious that no one thought she would live. She only knew she was still alive, and

safe. "How is she?" asked a woman's voice. "Better," came the reply, "She might make it after all." The voices came nearer and then Nellie saw a young lady, barely out of her teens, crouch by the cage. "Hey, girl," she murmured. Nellie's ears twitched and she raised her head slowly, taking in her surroundings. "Does she have a microchip?" asked the girl. The man in the white coat shook his head. "No, I think she's a working dog," he answered, "Farmers don't often microchip them." "How will we find her owner then?" Nellie rested her head on her forepaws, still weak. "We'll look around, but I don't hold much hope," said the man, "She's got no collar either."

CHAPTER SIX:

So it turned out that Nellie went to live with the girl who rescued her, Sandy, who lived in a cottage just out of Barcaldine. But Nellie knew she had to continue her journey west. Only three weeks after she got home with Sandy Nellie began to pace and whine. She put her paws on the windowsills and barked. She scratched the paint off the bottom of the door. "Down, girl!" said Sandy, trying to pull her away, "Stop that!" Nellie pulled free and dashed to the window again. "Come here! What's wrong with you anyway?" Sandy ran after Nellie. But before Sandy reached her Nellie backed away, and then took a running leap. The window smashed under her weight and she fell through, rolled, then was up and trotting away. Sandy rushed to the window, shaking her head in amazement, and watched the kelpie head off.

Jacky Cooper was checking the fence on his property near Longreach when his horse's foot caught in a rabbit hole. The tall chestnut

stumbled and tripped. Jacky, good rider though he was, was thrown. When he tried to stand up he realized his ankle was hurt badly. The sun was high, and at the hottest point. Jacky had no water and no way of getting help. The nearest house was three kilometres away. Then he heard a sharp bark, an unmistakable kelpie bark. He turned his head and saw a black kelpie trotting over the paddock. It was Nellie, still heading west towards Jundah. Jacky's heart leapt. "Here, girl!" he called. Nellie turned, her ears forward to listen. "Come on, it's ok." Jacky whistled. Nellie trotted over to him. Jacky patted the kelpie's shoulder and rubbed her chest. Nellie wagged her tail. Then her eyes went to Jacky's foot. She whined. "Go get help!" said Jacky, "Go on!" Nellie backed away and barked. "Get out of here!" shouted Jacky, trying to scare her away, "You have to get help, girl." Nellie trotted away, then circled Jacky and came back. "No, girl, go away." Nellie whined and looked towards Jacky's horse, still standing a few meters away. Jacky suddenly had a better idea. "Ok, get 'em." Nellie barked and wagged her tail. She trotted over to the horse and took hold of the reins that were hanging down. Then she pulled, leading the horse over to Jacky. "That'll do," Jacky told her, and took hold of the reins himself. Pulling himself up on the horse's bridle, he turned to his rescuer. "Thanks, girl," he said, "Come on, I'll take you home." With some effort he mounted the horse and whistled to Nellie. Nellie barked, backed away, and then barked again. "Come on!" Nellie whined and turned in a circle. Then she turned and trotted off. "Hey, come back!" yelled Jacky. But Nellie was back on her mission.



CHAPTER SEVEN:

It was a hot day, about a week later, as Nellie loped through

the spinifex. She never saw the wild dog. There was a snarl, and flashing teeth. Nellie swerved too late, and the dog grabbed her neck. It took her down easily and tore at her throat. Nellie fought off her attacker, only to have it leap at her again and grab her hind leg.

Nellie went down under the larger dog, yelping. Her own teeth flashed and buried in her attacker's foreleg. The dog yelped in pain and ran off. Nellie lay in the sun, bleeding and panting heavily. Flies buzzed about her face and wounds. At last she rose slowly, limping badly on her hind leg, and headed west.

It had been six months since Nellie had escaped from the cattle station in Rockhampton. Nellie had a bad limp from the dog fight. She walked slowly, her tail hanging down. She stopped often to rest. She didn't travel as far now. Her body was covered in cuts from her jump through the window and from her fight with the dog. At last Nellie couldn't go any further. Her back legs gave way under her and she fell in the sand. Immediately she tried to get up again, but found she couldn't. Her hindquarters wouldn't move. With her last strength, she used her forelegs to drag herself under the shelter of a large tree. Here she was sheltered from the sun. Breathing heavily, the kelpie let herself sink to the ground. A shudder ran through Nellie and she stretched out on her side, her eyes closed.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Mick Taylor had given up most of the hope he had for the return of his kelpie. But a faint glimmer remained. People who didn't know that Nellie had been sold sent reports of a kelpie, for people all over knew Nellie – first from two men who saw a kelpie pass through

Gracemere – they owned a pup each, then from a Dave and Colleen Warlock who looked after a sick kelpie for a few weeks – they were old friends of the Taylor’s, after that a report came from a girl in Barcaldine who saw a kelpie get hit by a truck and then cared for her – she owned Nellie’s brother. All reports said the kelpie was heading towards Jundah. Mick headed up to his favourite place every evening, and now he trudged up there through the spinifex. Reaching the sheltering tree, Mick stopped abruptly. For a moment he stared, and then his voice rang out, “Nellie! Nellie!” His kelpie had reached the end of her endurance – but she had made it to a place where she knew Mick would find her. Nellie’s once shining coat was dirty and tangled. Deep, infected cuts covered her body. Her eyes were closed and she was barely breathing. Mick knelt and took Nellie in his arms. The kelpie was like skin and bone. Mick got to his feet, staggered slightly under the weight of the kelpie, and then started out for home. Nellie was limp in his arms, her tongue hanging out and her eyes closed. Mick finally burst in the door, his arms aching. Chris didn’t hesitate. Taking Nellie from his son, he laid her on the rug by the fireplace. The kelpie opened her eyes and raised her head. Her tail thumped the floor weakly. Mandy offered her some cool water. Nellie drank thirstily. “We won’t give her back to Mr Williams, will we?” asked Mick anxiously. Chris sighed. “If he comes for her, we’ll have to give her back.” “But if he doesn’t?” Mick persisted. Chris looked at Mandy, who shrugged. “Then we’ll keep her,” said Chris at last, “A dog that will travel that far for us is worth keeping. Now that I’ve shot those dingoes, we’ll be able to make ends meet.” Overjoyed, Mick hugged Nellie. Nellie licked his face, her tail wagging stronger. “You’re a great dog.”

A month of rest saw Nellie back on her feet. Her hind leg was massaged every day until the limp was barely noticeable. A visit to the vet once a week for a shot cleared up her infected cuts. Daily combing saw to her tangled coat. Two meals a day, of the finest meat available, built up her condition and soon she was again waiting at school every afternoon. But a few weeks later Nellie wasn't waiting at school. Surprisingly, Mick wasn't worried. He jogged home. Entering the house, he greeted his mother with, "It's happened, hasn't it?" Mandy nodded. "Your father's out in the shed with her." Mick ran out to the garden shed. Inside the dimly lit shed, he stood beside Chris, watching Nellie feeding her newborn puppies. "I wonder who the father is," said Mick. Chris smiled. "Remember Dave and Colleen Warlock?" he asked, "They looked after Nellie for a few weeks, and they own a male kelpie." "So they're purebreds?" "They sure are." Mick crouched down and hugged Nellie. After a while he looked up. "Will we give one to Mr Williams?" "No. He's wanted Nellie back, but when I said she was having pups by a farm kelpie, he didn't want her or a pup. You see, he breeds show quality kelpies, not working ones. And after Nellie's journey, she'll always have a limp. She'll never make it to the show ring." Mick turned back to Nellie, burying his fingers in the kelpie's silky fur. "Good dog, Nellie." And Nellie wagged her tail, happy because her master was happy.

THE END