

It is dark in the bush



by J.E. MARTEN

While tramping in the backblocks, four students, David Armstrong and his sister Gwen, Judith Anson and Stephen Bryce, are forced to shelter in a derelict shanty in a bush clearing where earlier they had witnessed a selling-up sale. The howling of the dog still chained in the yard prevents sleep. The two boys release him, and he leads them a mile into the bush where they find the body of his master hanging from a branch.

Leaving Judith and David in the whare, Gwen and David go for help to the nearest house, five miles away. Here they find George Murray and his nephew John, with their housekeeper, a Mrs. Marsden, a woman whose calm nothing seems to shake. Stephen also meets a Mr. Graham, a tall gaunt man with a tragic face, who with his daughter, is staying at the Murrays.

CHAPTER III.

STEPHEN woke late, for John Murray's bed had proved beguiling. He remembered with pity the pair marooned at the whare. John Murray had announced his intention of going to the spot as soon as it was light; probably Judith and David would arrive shortly for a late breakfast.

But there was no sign of them when he came into the dining-room. George Murray had just left the telephone; the police, he said, would be here any minute. They had been out on urgent business when he rang in the night. They were driving of course, but would have to leave their car there and take horses through the bush road.

As they sat down to breakfast the french door on to the broad veranda opened and a girl came in. Stephen blinked as she stood there in a patch of sunlight, a little dazed by the brightness of her hair, the youth and vitality that seemed to his jaded twenty-five years almost excessive. Ann Graham was small and very pretty, but her attraction lay in her air of youth and gaiety—a gaiety clouded at the moment, but ready to appear on any provocation. Anything less like the gaunt and tragic giant of a father whom he had met last night, Stephen could not imagine.

George Murray introduced the girl with a fatherly air that almost suggested proprietorship. He asked her to bring them more toast and then said apologetically, "Though Ann has only been with us for a month, I take the same liberties as if she were a daughter of the house."

Stephen nodded profoundly, certain that he had scented romance; this girl was intended for the nephew and heir. Well, John was a lucky man. They had begun to eat before Preston Graham entered; at once the girl's chatter was checked; was she afraid of her father? Certainly there was an atmosphere of tragedy and mystery about him, but nothing sinister, nothing that could suggest harshness, least of all to this attractive daughter. Stephen found his mind straying to this problem of human relationship, and was glad that Mrs. Marsden's casual commonplaces from behind the tea-pot made general conversation unnecessary.

THEY had finished when the police officers appeared. Sergeant Davis, in charge of the station at the nearest town, was typical of the force, but with him was a slim, spare man, quick in his movements, with a sharp and questing eye and an unconventional manner. The Sergeant introduced him with some pride.

"Detective Muir happened to be passing through; we'd finished the job he came up for and he has to wait for his train till to-night, so he thought he'd come out for the run. Not that there's anything in his line about this little business."

"Well, come and have breakfast before you tackle that muddy road," said George Murray hospitably. In the dining-room Ann and Mrs. Marsden were already setting out clean plates. Under cover of the general talk she murmured to Stephen, "I think they're disappointing. The big one's all right; he's just like the

ones I've seen walking about in helmets, but the little one isn't a bit like a policeman."

"The more they are, the less they look it," replied Stephen cryptically. "How's your conscience? Have you come over all of a tremble at sight of the police?"

She held out a small brown hand and regarded it gravely.

"Quite steady. I can't have committed any crime lately."

Yes, she was very beguiling, and very young. Stephen wondered how long she had left school.

THE police were still at breakfast when they heard David's voice on the veranda; George Murray was ushering in the last remnants of the hiking party.

"Why didn't you come down as soon as John arrived? You must be starved."

"We thought we'd stick together till there was some chance of the police getting there," David explained.

"And we're just off," said the Sergeant, rising hastily; "but I'd like a word with you first, Mr. — Armstrong, isn't it?"

With an obvious wrench, David removed his eyes from Ann Graham and followed the police on to the veranda. Meantime Ann was talking to Judith with a sort of eager cordiality that showed her to have been a little starved for young companionship lately. They made a queer contrast, he thought—the glowing face and small figure of the younger girl, and Judith's dark, sleek head—incredibly tidy after her adventures — bending gravely towards her. Judith wasn't pretty, the young man thought, but she had an extraordinary personality, an air that they all called "different"—due in part to her unwaved hair, worn long and twisted round her head, and to her whole poise and calmness. Her dark eyes were fine, and her brow broad and serene. Judith, as Stephen summed her up, was the steady, reliable sort; the other? Oh, the other was a charmer.

Judith was apologising for the multitudes. "Do let me help; it's an awful intrusion and we're giving so much work."

"Oh no; Mrs. Marsden is one of those people who are never at all bustled, and she has Sally to help her in the kitchen. This is the sort of house where a dozen people could turn up and there'd be no fuss."

"True backblocks hospitality," remarked David as he came into the room. "We're getting the genuine article at last, Judith. By the way, where's Gwen?"

"We made her stay in bed for breakfast. She's awfully tired. What a time you had! But—till that happened—it must have been great fun."

The three students look at each other. Had it been fun? They supposed so. It all seemed rather long ago.

Judith said so, and at once the younger girl looked contrite.

"I'm afraid I sound horribly heartless. It was awful for the poor man, of course—and dreadful about his dog. But still, if he had to die and you had to find him, I'm so glad you came down this side of the ridge and not the other. It's such fun having you all here."

They all smiled at her, indulgently, as one would at a child, and David said, with unaccustomed warmth, "Of course you're not heartless. You didn't know the man—and he evidently wanted to die."

Stephen's eyes met Judith's in amused understanding. David had always appeared woman-proof; now he seemed to have capitulated very suddenly. Stephen felt older than ever.

PRESENTLY he was climbing stiffly on to a horse provided by George Murray for the trip up the hill. David liked riding but Stephen was gloomily aware that Methuselah would be a youth compared to himself on his return. They waved him a sympathetic farewell and Judith and David went in to a third edition of breakfast. Meantime Ann chatted gaily of their own arrival at this home of hospitality.

"We turned up in the middle of the night, too. Oh, there wasn't any thrill about our coming. We were just stupid and lost our way and then I got awfully tired."

"You were hiking, too?" asked David, helping himself to marmalade.

"Not really. It was a motoring trip but our car broke down."

"I know that sort of motoring trip. They're quite common."

"And there was a broken part; you know—there always is; and they couldn't mend it and had to send away for another one."

"They always do."

"And Father got tired of the funny little town and said, very well, we'd walk on and pick up the car on our way back. He's impatient, I think. You see, I don't know him very well yet. He only came out from England a week before we got here. I've always lived in New Zealand with an aunt—at least, not so much lived with her as lived at boarding schools. So it's been rather queer, getting to know a father I've never seen—at least not as long as I can remember."

"Trips like that have a way of helping the victims to get acquainted."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so." She sounded doubtful and rather nervous now. "But it wasn't at all jolly. Not like your trip. We camped on the road one night and then the rain came and I got tired—oh, and everything went wrong."

"I know," said Judith sympathetically. "Our trip may have started as being jolly but it was pretty grim in the end."

"So when we got here they made us stay; and it was a mercy because father had influenza after that and was in bed for a week. They were all so good to us—Mr. Murray and John and Mrs. Marsden. Mrs. Marsden nursed father just as if she were a trained nurse. He thinks she's the most wonderful woman in the world. I'm afraid he doesn't think that about me. I'm not very efficient though I do try to be. Anyway he's been well for about a week now, but he was seedy again last night. Of course we ought to go away, but they won't let us. Mr. Murray and my father get on so well, and I—oh, I love it here! It's such a change after school or Aunt Margaret's big house in town."

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