

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

"I don't believe you've left school very long," said Judith; David was surprised that she should show such a friendly interest.

"Only last year, though I'm twenty. Wasn't it awful staying there till I was nineteen? But you see nobody knew what to do with me. That's the worst of aunts—they can't be expected to bother much."

There was a pathetic reasonableness about the statement that made Judith smile with real friendliness. As for David, it had obviously gone straight to his heart. Judith told herself that there was something absolutely irresistible about golden hair and brown eyes.

"I can understand why you like it here."

"Yes, it's beautiful, isn't it? And then, Mrs. Marsden's such a dear. She's quiet of course, but she's absolutely understanding. And I love Mr. Murray. I feel just as if he were my father."

Not a very happy way of putting it, they thought as her own father was here too. She saw it at once and flushed, glad that Mrs. Marsden entered at the moment.

"Ann, your father seems rather unwell. Oh, nothing to worry about. I've given him some brandy. I suppose I let him get up too soon. This seems rather like a slight heart attack. Is he liable to those?"

"He never said so. He seems so strong. Oh, Mrs. Marsden, what had we better do? Couldn't we ring up a doctor? But I suppose he'd take hours to get here and father mightn't like it."

"Can I be any use?" asked David, pushing back his chair. "I'm only newly qualified, but..."

"Oh, thank you," the girl said, her heart in her eyes. "I'm sure you'll be absolutely splendid."

And that, thought Judith, watching the three of them go quickly out of the room, would certainly finish it. What man could withstand her?

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN MURRAY came to meet the police as they descended stiffly from their horses. The heavy rain had passed as quickly as it had come. In a cloudless sky the sun shone brightly and within the safe shadow of the bush a little riro challenged the world. Already the pools of water were drying in the yard and the whole sordid place seemed to be washed and purified in the morning sunlight.

The detective stood looking about him and Stephen imagined that for him, too, the scene held an appeal. But when he spoke it was in a grumbling undertone: "Not a blessed foot-mark left anywhere."

The young lawyer grinned; evidently the detective was no mere lover of nature; but the Sergeant was surprised.

"But what does that matter?" he asked. "It's only a suicide."

"Maybe; but I like foot-marks," said the other obstinately.

The sergeant shrugged as he introduced John Murray to his companion. He and the young farmer were obviously on friendly terms.

"This is Detective Muir, Mr. Murray. He's just through for the trip, not because we think this is anything out of the way."

"Good morning, Mr. Muir. Nothing out of the way? Well—I'm not so sure."

* * *

HIS face was puzzled, and Stephen thought he looked older this morning. His head was bare and, as the sun caught his fair hair, the other thought whimsically of some young god of the woodland. His height, the freedom of his carriage, the candour of his blue eyes—the tired student thought, made John Murray obviously one of the best, one of Fortune's favourites. All the more so if he was going to marry the attractive little girl at the homestead.

But the Sergeant was studying John's face, entirely blind to its aesthetic appeal.

"What do you mean, Mr. Murray? Only the suicide of another down-and-out, isn't it? I always wonder why they have to go and do it in these out-of-the-way places. You'd think they'd find plenty of nice trees nearer town."

"Suicide? Well, I don't know. Not that I've been looking at the body. We carried it into the house, you know, but the face was covered and I haven't had the nerve to lift that handkerchief. You'll think I'm pretty soft, but the truth is I don't happen to have come across a dead body before. No, it wasn't that I was thinking of, it's something in the bush. But come and see the place where they found him."

They followed him down the patch which the young men had cut that morning between the tall trees.

"Well, he went deep enough into the bush," grumbled the Sergeant. "He mightn't have been found for a month."

"Or so long that no one would have noticed anything when they did find him," said the detective; he was looking closely at a curious mark on the tree, and John joined him.

"Yes, that's what I mean," he said excitedly.

Muir didn't answer but straightened up and looked about him at the soft mould. "A real downpour you had. Even in here the ground's soaked. Queer piece of luck his being spotted like that. Wonder how long he'd have hung here. No one would want a poor little farm like this and up this muddy road."

* * *

HE seemed to be talking to himself, and all the time his sharp eyes were scanning the strange scene. Round the base of the tree a strong rope had been tied and over a branch about twelve feet up hung its other end, still held in place by the groove that the rope had cut for itself in the soft wood of the tree. The detective turned to John Murray.

"You're right; it's pretty queer. Why choose such an uncomfortable method? Strenuous, too; look at that groove!"

Stephen was looking from one to the other.

"It's curious, certainly, but I don't see what you're getting at."

Light broke on the Sergeant, "Jove, yes! Look at the length of that rope! The body must have been hanging only about a foot below the branch. And see that groove. Only one thing could have made that."

"Great Scot! Then..." Stephen's voice trailed into silence as his eyes searched the detective's face.

"A determined chap. He seems to have tied the end round the bottom of the tree, leaving plenty of spare, as you can see. Then he climbed up to the branch and dropped down. But why all the bother? Why crawl along the branch with his neck held right down to it because of the shortness of the rope? And what made that groove? No gentlemen, it's high time we took a look at that corpse."

Five minutes later John was cantering quickly down the road. "Ring through for a doctor," Muir had said. "Take a look at that face. That man didn't die by hanging."

* * *

THE sun of late afternoon was struggling through the dust and cobwebs of the window when the doctor straightened himself above the pathetic figure upon the bunk and nodded across to the police sergeant. David, who had stood silently watching, spoke defensively:

"You realise that I didn't see the face? It was pitch dark in the bush and the lantern blew out. It—it didn't seem necessary. But I'm awfully sorry. If I'd examined him at all—as I ought to have done—we could have got you out hours ago."

The doctor was bluffly reassuring. "Nonsense, my boy. You acted as any other man—doctor or not—would have done. A body hanging in the bush—first instinct, cut it down. Second instinct, get the police. The poor bloke's dead as a door-nail—natural inference, he's hanged himself."

"I was a fool, all the same."

"Not at all," said Muir shortly. "In the pitch dark, what could you do? A hell of a storm, too. No, no. It's a bit of bad luck, but it can't be helped. Anyway, we don't want a lot of amateur sleuths hanging round. Come to that, he'd be there still if you hadn't happened along."

That settled, and David's misgivings relieved, the detective turned to the doctor. "No doubt, I take it, that death wasn't due to strangulation?"

"No doubt at all. There are none of the symptoms."

"Then, what about the hanging?"

"The body was dead when it was hanged on that tree," said the doctor briefly, closing his bag with a snap.

"What killed him?"

"Can't say till the p.m. Poison, perhaps."

"But," began David in a dazed voice, "Why hang him? If he was dead, what was the point? Surely only a devil would do that?"

(To be continued next week)

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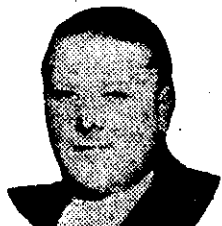
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