

(Continued from previous page)

The game had scarcely started when the police car slid up the drive.

"Ever with us," groaned David. "Life will seem empty without Brothers Davis and Muir."

* * *

THE two officers waved a greeting to the party of young people and climbed the veranda steps. The eyes of the four spectators were following them lazily when they were startled by a cry from Judith. She had dropped her racquet and was sitting on the ground her hand clasping one ankle. John had leapt the net in a moment and was bending anxiously over her.

"Sprained? Oh, bad luck!"

He put his arm about her but she winced when she tried to rise and David hurried across.

"Not broken, is it? Here, let me have a look."

But for once Judith spoke sharply.

"No, no. Don't fuss, David. Do leave me alone. Oh dear, I'm sorry to be so snappy," she said with a nervous little laugh, "but it's the pain, I suppose. No, it's not broken. There's nothing you can do, David. I've sprained it before. It's rather—rather weak."

"Is it, Judith?" asked Gwen with surprise and concern, "You've never told me that. What a shame."

John was deeply perturbed. "We'll help her into the house, Stephen. The sooner we get hot water and iodine on to that the better."

As Judith hobbled towards the house, Ann suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, you can't go to-morrow if you've sprained your ankle. How splendid—you can't go for a week!"

Stephen happened to glance down; Judith's face had flushed hotly.

"Unfortunately I must," he said rather drily. "And Gwen, too. But it doesn't look as if Judith could travel very far."

* * *

SOMETHING in his tone deepened the blush on Judith's usually pale face and Stephen murmured softly in David, who was walking beside him, "Your turn next, old chap. But do try to be more original."

David dropped behind and said to Ann, "As I don't seem to be needed, let's sit out here in the cool."

She acquiesced at once, as she always did in his every suggestion, for Ann had none of the arts of the coquette. They sat in silence, David profoundly envying Judith for having the wit to think of a sprained ankle. But, Judith! It was incredible. No one had ever connected wiles and deceit with those clear eyes. He wondered what part of his anatomy he could risk in so good a cause.

"Have you got to go, David?" asked a soft voice.

The wide brown eyes that looked so earnestly into his were his undoing; suddenly clasping the hand that still held her racquet, he said gruffly, "Not if you'd like me to stay. Not if you. . ."

A voice cut short his eloquence: "David, David. Come here a moment, will you?"

David glowered. Curse this crowd; they never would let you alone. He had almost done it, too; heaven knew when he'd be able to face up to it again, and in cold blood. And time was short. He glared round, and the voice shouted, "Hurry, can't you?"

This time some urgent quality in the appeal made him get up quickly and run to meet John as he came down the veranda steps. What had happened? Could Judith be really ill after all? It hadn't been at all like her to pretend. John caught him by the arm.

"God, David, come here. Something awful's happened. You've got to tell her. Mrs. Marsden's out and I simply can't. If only my uncle were here! What on earth can we do?"

What's the matter? Is something wrong with Judith?

"Not Judith. Ann."

David caught his breath quickly. "Ann? What do you mean?"

His tone made John say suddenly. "Yes, you must tell her. Thank God you're here. She'll need all the love she can get."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"It's her father."

"What, another attack? Not—not dead, John?"

"No—worse. Listen, David. The most incredible thing has happened. Those beasts of policemen have arrested Mr. Graham for the murder of Collins."

CHAPTER VI.

"I WILL never believe it," said Geo. Murray.

He looked an old man as he sat at the dining-room table, his head resting dejectedly upon his hand. He had returned from a ride to the back of the farm to be greeted with the news of his guest's arrest; now he sat facing David Armstrong over the remains of a scarcely touched meal. In the kitchen Mrs. Marsden and her maid were washing dishes; in the bedroom across the hall Judith sat in an easy chair beside the bed where Anna Graham lay dazed and prostrate. Stephen and Gwen had gone.

"The sooner we get out the better," Stephen had said to the girl, when at last they had recovered their wits after the bombshell. "We're only complicating matters. David's forgotten that he ever had a sister, Judith and John, David and Ann—upon my word, my dear, we'll be forced to fall in love in self-defence."

"Yes; I'm sure they'll be relieved when we've gone. David looks like a man who's badly hit. What an end to a hiking party, Stephen. We must have been living on the edge of a volcano all week. That extraordinary man with his tragic eyes! No wonder we've scarcely seen him these days."

"He was ill," said Stephen mildly. "That's why he kept away from everyone."

His was the instinct of the average and normal human being. Impossible to connect crime and horror with a man you know—a gentleman and the father of a pretty girl.

"Yes, of course," agreed Gwen hastily, for she was fond of Ann. "I'm sure he didn't do it too. But you're right about going. We're no good here and the house is over-full. Let's get out somehow."

"It's quite easy to manage. John's going straight to town for a lawyer and he'll give us a ride. I say, Sergeant, I suppose you don't want us for anything?"

"Not at the moment, Mr. Bryce. We have your evidence given at the inquest and you'll be informed at the time of the magistrate's court proceedings."

SO they had gone, and now David and his host were left, staring at each other blankly across the deserted table which only this morning had been filled with laughing, heedless young people.

"Graham's a good chap," said George Murray stoutly. "A bit silent and reserved, but a gentleman. All nonsense to imagine he's been committing some crime."

David said nothing for a moment, then he swallowed painfully and clenched the hand that was lying upon the table.

"Mr. Murray, we've got to face facts, incredible though they may seem. The police know all about Mr.—Mr. Graham, and he'd given them a voluntary statement. As a matter of fact, his name isn't Graham at all."

There was a silence, then George Murray rose heavily from the table. His eyes looked tired as he turned to his young guest.

"Let's have the whole story, or as much of it as you know. Ah, here comes Mrs. Marsden. Been busy as usual, I suppose? I always think you'll be quietly busy feeding the multitude when the last trump sounds. Takes a lot to fluster Mrs. Marsden, David. Still, I'll wager it was a shock to you, too. . . . Graham, who's been our guest for a month and whom you've been nursing and coddling. Impossible, isn't it? Come along. Tell us what you think of it all."

"At present," said Mrs. Marsden quietly, "I'm thinking most of that poor child. Fortunately Miss Anson is looking after her. Suppose we go into the drawing-room, Mr. Murray, then the sound of our voices won't disturb her. Yes, Sally, you may clear this table. And be sure to shut the safe door properly. That big cat is the most terrible thief."

In spite of his distress George Murray smiled at David as he left the room. "Marvellous creatures, women! Shut the safe door if the heavens fall and your guest is lugged off to gaol. Extraordinary."

David agreed, but without enthusiasm. Truth to tell, there were times when the housekeeper's capable composure irritated him. He thought of the girl crying her heart out in the room across the hall, of the stricken face of the big gaunt men who had driven off so submissively with the two policemen. Had Mrs. Marsden only an efficient machine in place of a heart? Watching her during that week, with the interest natural to a specimen collector, the doctor had decided that she was vulnerable on one point only—that of the young Greek god, John Murray.

"You're the housekeeper's pet," Gwen had said teasingly to the pampered young idol one day, and he had laughed easily.

"Oh, Mar's been here since I was a baby. Many's the good spanking she's given me when I was home from prep. school for the holidays. Women are like that. Once they've had you across their knees they always think they own you, body and soul. Mar's the world's wonder, all the same. She rules Uncle and me so cleverly that we hug our chains. Can't imagine Te Rata without her."

No, she could not be heartless, or these two men would not be so fond of her. To-night, too, although her manner was still serene, it was easy to see that she had been affected by the blow that

had struck the household. It had seemed to them all that she liked Preston Graham, and that she was genuinely attached to little Ann. Also, it had certainly outraged her sense of propriety to have a guest suddenly torn from her efficient care by a couple of policemen. Whatever sentiment was uppermost, her mind was obviously disturbed. For once her strong brown hands lay idly on her lap and her work-basket stood neglected in the corner. She sat in the shadows and turned an attentive face towards David Armstrong.

* * *

"PERHAPS Mr. Armstrong will tell us all he knows now. Then I'll go and see to Ann. I'm worried about the child; it has been a dreadful shock, whether she's had time to grow fond of her father or not. Ah, here comes Miss Anson. Should you be using you ankle quite so much?"

Judith limped quietly into the room, her eyes avoiding David's. "This stick makes walking quite easy. Ann's asleep. She's cried herself to a standstill, poor child. I thought perhaps David would be telling you what he has found out and I would like to hear."

As she spoke, John's car came up the drive, and in a few minutes he joined them.

"It's a queer story," the young doctor said slowly, fingering a pipe he had forgotten to fill. His face was pale in the shaded light and he seemed to have aged in the last three hours. For the first time David was suffering acutely for another. However, he pulled himself together and his voice grew steadier as he talked.

"Graham admitted that the name he is using is not his own. He has been using his real name as a Christian name—Charles Preston, he really is."

He paused and George Murray spoke slowly. "Charles Preston. Charles Preston. Somehow that name is familiar. It seems to have some tragic association in my mind."

"There is a tragic story connected with it. By a queer coincidence, I was talking with Stephen and some law students about the very case the other day and I can tell you all the facts. Charles Preston was at the head of a big string of companies in Australia fifteen years ago. They collapsed and ruined thousands of people."

"Of course," said Murray suddenly. "Now I remember. My cousin Joe lost a fortune in that affair. You remember the cousin I was telling you about the other day, Mrs. Marsden?"

"The one that went to South Africa?"

"Yes. He's done well since. But now I remember all about the Preston swindle. It was a nasty scandal, and the public never felt that the authorities had got to the bottom of it. Preston stood the racket and went to gaol, but there was another man, a secretary or accountant or something, whom the shareholders said was really the controlling brain behind the Chairman of Directors. But this fellow had covered his tracks too well. Now, what was his name?"

"His name," said Armstrong quietly, "was Peter Langley, alias James Collins—the man we found dead—murdered—in the bush."

(To be continued next week)