

It is dark in the bush



SYNOPSIS

While seeking an elusive short cut through backblocks bush, David Armstrong comes across the body of the owner of a nearby shanty strung up on a tree. With Judith Anson, another member of the tramping party, he seeks help at the nearest house. Here they find George Murray and his nephew, John, with their housekeeper, Mrs. Marsden, a woman whose calm nothing seems to shake. Guests at the house are Mr. Graham and his daughter Ann, to whom David is instantly attracted.

Hastily summoned by George Murray, Detective Muir and Sergeant Davis investigate the case. A doctor's evidence reveals that James Collins died of luminal poisoning, and that the dead body was afterwards hanged. Meanwhile the growing attachment between Ann and David has its counterpart in the love springing up between Judith and John Murray. But a blow falls when John brings word that Ann's father has been arrested for the murder of Collins. The damning evidence comes to light that Graham's name is really Preston, that he was involved in a financial swindle, and as chairman of the company received a heavy jail sentence. But the man really responsible was Peter Langley, alias James Collins.

DEAD silence fell upon the pleasant room. Presently Murray spoke hoarsely, "James Collins was Peter Langley. And Preston Graham is Charles Preston. Then—then God help the poor chap—and Ann too."

In the complete silence that followed they all heard the opening of Ann's door and her step in the hall. But the step was no longer quick and light-hearted; it dragged, and when she came in the girl stood hesitating just outside the circle of light. But only for a moment, then David got up quickly and took her hand with a gesture of protection, drawing her down on to the couch and saying gently, "Ann, dear, we hoped you were asleep. Did we talk too loud?"

"No, but I knew — knew you were talking about my father. Please, will you tell me about it? I—I don't know anything."

"No, no," said kind John Murray, leaning over to pat her hand. "No need

to discuss all that to-night, my dear child."

But she moved impatiently, pulling her hand from David's strong clasp. "But you must tell me. Oh, don't treat me as if I were a spoilt child. Perhaps I was—but I'm grown up now."

They looked at her and saw that it was true. Judith got up and went quickly across to her, and Mrs. Marsden spoke automatically, "Be careful of your ankle."

Judith gave a curious little laugh. Then she very deliberately aimed a kick at a foot stool that stood near.

"That's my sprained ankle. I'm sorry, Mr. Murray. You see, I didn't want to go and when I hurt my ankle—oh, not badly, only for a minute—I made the most of it. I think Stephen and David both guessed." In the awkward pause she lifted her grave eyes to John, and though the colour mounted again in her face she did not falter as she repeated "I'm sorry. It was rotten of me."

"It doesn't matter a bit," John said, furiously embarrassed.

"No," she agreed calmly, "nothing matters now—except proving that Mr. Graham's innocent. That's what we've got to do."

CHAPTER VII.

THE facts looked damning enough, as pieced together by the lawyer Morgan, whom John Murray had engaged to look after Preston's interests.

Charles Preston was an Englishman who had come to Australia with his young wife more than twenty years before. It had been a perfect love match and Ann the golden daughter born of it. Charles Preston had done well; he had brought considerable capital with him and presently was head of a large and wealthy syndicate. Partly because he

grudged too much time spent away from his ideal home life, the young man relied greatly upon the opinion of his secretary and allowed a great deal of power to rest in the hands of Peter Langley. Mrs. Preston had never liked him; it was almost the only subject on which she differed from her husband.

She was right. The fortunes of the Preston syndicate soared high and as suddenly crashed, involving the Chairman of Directors in their fall. Preston went to jail for five years; nothing was proved against Langley; he disappeared from Australia and the shareholders cursed his name in vain. Against Preston the feeling was less bitter; everyone realised that he had been a mere tool and was paying for his folly. When he had served a little more than three years of his sentence a fresh tragedy overwhelmed him, leaving him something of a hero in the eyes of the sentimental public.

During his imprisonment, Preston's wife never wavered in her devotion; she lived not far from the jail and saw her husband whenever it was allowed. Nothing else mattered to her; she scarcely seemed to feel the parting with her child, whom she sent to New Zealand to order to spare her the effects of the tragedy. Mrs. Preston had an income of her own so that she had no worries on that score. When Charles was released they would make a new start in New Zealand.

But fate seemed to have a grudge against Charles Preston. When not much of his sentence remained his wife was suddenly stricken with severe illness. When word of this reached the prisoner he became like a man possessed. He must see his wife again before she died. One night he escaped and reached her side. She died in his arms, but his guards were hot on his heels. There was a fight and Preston struck one of the warders a knock-out blow. He hit his head as he fell and died at once. When the escaped prisoner stood in the dock again it was to face a charge of murder.

THE Grand Jury threw out the bill and eventually a verdict of manslaughter was returned. In view of the tragic circumstances, the sentence was comparatively light, but the broken man returned to prison for another ten years. He had little expectation and no wish to out-live his sentence.

Meantime in New Zealand little Ann Graham — for she had been given her mother's maiden name—danced through life entirely unaware of the dark cloud that brooded over past and future. The unexpected and undesired happened, and when she was twenty her father was released from jail.

"Ann, your father arrives from England next week by way of Australia," her aunt said, folding up the chaplain's letter.

The girl was excited and dismayed at the thought of seeing the father whom she had never met and who had never even troubled to write to her. She never forgot their meeting. Being familiar with photographs of her father in his happy and handsome youth, she was little prepared for the encounter which shattered for ever that idyll. As Ann stood gazing up at the hugely tall, dreadfully gaunt

man, a shadow of fear fell across her gay young path. It seemed that that shadow was never to leave it again.

"I simply hated the whole trip," she told David. "My father was not a good driver and didn't understand the new kind of cars—of course I see why, now that I know his story. He was so silent all those long hours except when he would make violent efforts to talk or to get me to talk—to find out something of what I was like. But all the time he didn't seem really to listen, really to know I was there. His thoughts seemed always to be on something else."

"Ann dear," interposed David gently. "Don't say that to anyone else. You haven't, have you?"

"Haven't said what?"

"That your father's thoughts seemed to be on something—not on you. You see why, don't you?"

THE girl shook her head, her wide and inquiring eyes fixed on the young man with an innocence so untouched that he found himself very near to cursing fate. This child, to be bamboozled by the questions of a prosecuting counsel, subjected to a battery of eyes, to a row of mystery-mongering cameras, to an endless succession of bright young journalists. Well, he would be there; they should see that they had to deal not only with an unsophisticated girl.

"You see, dear, they—the accusers—want to prove that your father landed in New Zealand with just one thought in his mind—to kill Collins, or Langley, as his name really was. If you're going to tell people that your father was abstracted, his mind dwelling on his own private thoughts, they'll say that that points to a mind absorbed in the crime it had planned."

"But they can't say that," cried the girl indignantly.

"Why, he didn't even know the man was there."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it was just pure chance we came here. We just took any road we fancied."

"Can you prove that?"

"But I know it. We just fixed on a certain way whenever we came to a sign-post; once I tossed up and my father laughed. He didn't often laugh, you know, but this time he threw back his head and said 'The toss of a coin! Free to go where I like, to do what I like. Oh, Mary, Mary!'"

"Mary was your mother's name, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He often used to mutter her name like that. I was never quite sure whether he really meant me and had just got the names mixed up."

"I see."

Should he tell her to suppress that too? He could see the headlines. "Symptoms of a deranged mind." It depended, of course, on which way the case went; they might be glad to fall back on that excuse yet. But the girl was still talking.

"It's all nonsense to say he came to look for that man; the whole thing was nothing but chance from beginning to end."

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