

It is dark in the bush

SYNOPSIS

While seeking a short cut through back-blocks bush, David Armstrong discovers the body of a near-by shanty owner, James Collins, strung up on a tree. With Judith Anson he seeks help at the nearest homestead, where he finds George Murray and his nephew John, and their housekeeper, Mrs. Marsden. Guests at the house are Mr. Graham and his daughter Ann, to whom David is instantly attracted. Their growing attachment has its counterpart in the love which gradually develops between Judith and John Murray.

At the inquest on James Collins the doctor's evidence reveals that death was due to luminal poisoning, and that the body was afterwards hanged. Ann's father is arrested. 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, the man really responsible being the company secretary, Peter Langley, alias James Collins. Graham, a man of exceptional strength, is one of the few people who could have hoisted the dead body on to the tree, and Ann unwittingly reveals that on the night of the murder her father went to bed early, complaining of a slight heart attack following over-exertion.

CHAPTER VIII. (cont'd)

OVER the lunch table Mrs. Duncan met David Armstrong, and it needed but one glance of her shrewd and worldly eyes to sum up the situation. This quite presentable young doctor was obviously in love with the girl. If only he wanted to marry her! What an amazing piece of luck that would be! Ann had her own small income; there was no reason why they should stay in New Zealand. Mrs. Duncan's mind saw herself rid once and for all of the endless train of anxieties and responsibilities in which her younger sister's marriage many years ago had involved her. Over Charles Preston's ultimate fate she did not waste too much heart-burning; she would see that no expense was spared; she had already provided that through her lawyer. The rest was not in her power to control. In any case the wretched man had always brought all this trouble upon himself.

After the meal David followed her into the drawing-room and broached the matter with a simple directness that took her somewhat by storm and almost pierced through her veneer of hard and polished worldliness.

"Mrs. Duncan, you are Ann's guardian, are you not?"

"Yes. That was arranged after her mother's death and still holds good."

"THEN it's to you I must speak. I want to marry her and she's under age."

"I see. You want to marry her in spite of all—all this?"

"All the more. No, that's not true. I was in love with her before I knew anything about her father. There's no pity in it. It's the merest chance I didn't speak the very afternoon he was arrested.

I wish to God I had now. No, it's not because of this, but naturally enough it's made me want to marry her right away—if she will. I want to protect her and look after her in a way I can't do unless she's my fiancée or my wife."

Sudden moisture flooded Mrs. Duncan's hard eyes and her voice was less steady than usual. "She's a lucky girl. Yes, in spite of all this, she's lucky. Lucky to rouse such a love—and to return it. Oh yes, she loves you—it's in her face every time she looks at you. Poor little Ann. She was meant for love and laughter and somehow she's made them for herself. Little enough in her circumstances. Motherless and fatherless. Some people would say that I should have filled the gap. Well, I couldn't. I'm a widow and I never had any children. The last thing I wanted was the care of one that was not my own—above all, one that was Charles Preston's. I loved my sister and I suppose Ann should have been to me her child and hers only. But you can't govern these things or regulate them. I did my duty—little more."

"Still, she'd had a happy life. That was the first impression I ever had of her—a laughing, golden, carefree little thing."

"That's her own nature—no credit to me. Yes, she's made her own happiness, and now this wretched man. . . ."

"Mrs. Duncan, you don't believe him guilty?"

"Don't I? Do I? I don't know. I can't tell. What do I know of him after all? I hadn't met him for twenty years until the other day. I never liked the marriage; I never trusted him. I loved my sister—and look what he made of her life. She was like Ann—a golden girl. I can never forgive him. I know that he was rather the victim of fate than a criminal. But he was weak. He ruined Mary's life. Now he turns up again, just in time to blight Ann's future."

"He won't do that. If Ann loves me as you think, her future is safe."

"I believe it is."

"Then try not to be too bitter against her father. He will want all the help and kindness there is to give."

"I'll not spare help; you know that already. More I can't promise. It was a horrible blow when he arrived the other day, looking like some tormented soul out of hell."

"He had come out of hell."

"A hell of his own making. No, I'm not naturally a vindictive woman, but you see how it is. I loved my little sister, and for her sake I tried to do my best for the child. Now he turns up and ruins it all. Well, my poor Mary was happy not to see this day. As for his guilt or innocence, who can tell?"

"We're doing all we can; you must believe that."

"I do. Don't spare money. Ann has her own. Draw on me. I'm a rich woman, and, though I confess I'd rather spend my money in any other way than on Charles Preston, still, for Mary's sake as well as the child's, I'd give a great deal of what I rather like to possess."

"That's awfully generous of you. Now, about Ann."

"You have my consent, of course. I'd be glad if you could support her, but I suppose you're just starting in life?"

"In my profession, yes. But I have a small income—enough to keep us both. Not much more."

"Excellent. If you can provide the bread and butter, she has enough for the jam. Have you spoken to her?"

"Not yet. As I told you, I was on the point of speaking when the news of her father's arrest came. Now—well, it's going to be more difficult."

"Yes. She won't marry for a protector. I'm sure of that. And she won't marry to bring disgrace on her husband. Well, if I can help you, let me know; but I've no doubt you'll find a way. Young love usually does."

AN hour later Mrs. Duncan was gone.

She would do all she could with money; she would help his own cause in any way she could. Beyond that she was not sorry to shelve her responsibility.

"I'm too old for tragedy. I lived through it once. It's hard on you young people, but worse for the middle-aged. The scars don't heal. Frankly, that look on Ann's face would give me the blues—and I hate the blues. It's not so bad at a distance. Forgive my frankness. I always was a selfish woman and I'd much rather be honest about it."

David saw her to her car and stood watching as it slid smoothly down the drive. That was well over. On the whole he liked Mrs. Duncan. Hard and selfish, certainly, but honest. Also, she would obliterate herself—first virtue in a relation-in-law.

It only remained now to tackle Ann, to compel her to follow her heart and marry him at once. In spite of Aunt Margaret's encouragement and his own optimism, David was vaguely aware that it wasn't going to be as easy as all that.

CHAPTER IX.

MEANTIME, there was the question that was in all their minds—what was going to happen at the preliminary hearing of the case, now only a few days distant? Preston's defence seemed to lie in a total denial of his presence near Collins's farm. He had sat on the veranda till four o'clock and then gone for a walk in the paddocks near the homestead. He admitted frankly that he had seen no one from the time Ann went for her ride. He supposed Mrs. Marsden had remained in her room; the men were away.

Had he met any casual passer-by? Had no one taken a short-cut from the clearing sale across the spacious fields of Te Rata? No one. He had met no one in the paddocks, and, from his momentary glimpses of the road, it had appeared deserted. That seemed probably enough. The men with their stock had passed

by at three o'clock; the road was only a side one, often without a traveller all day. There was no living person to confirm his alibi.

Nor, as far as his friends could see, was there anyone to refute it. That, they knew, was bothering the police. Murder in the backblocks, as Muir had said, could prove maddeningly baffling. The detective had sent men to search carefully for foot-prints, both upon the road and upon the track that led across the hill to the boundary fence between Murray's farm and the bush at the edge of Langley's section. The rain had converted the clay road into a quagmire, even if it had in any case been possible to trace foot-marks amidst the innumerable tracks that would have been left by men, horses and stock after the sale. In the paddocks the path had been turned for the night into a little torrent of muddy water, sufficient to have obliterated the tracks of a dozen men. No, the clearing sale and the weather had combined to make the tracing of foot-marks almost an impossibility.

THE five men sat late over the dinner table that evening, weighing carefully every bit of information that they had yet been able to gather.

"At any rate," said Morgan thoughtfully, "no one can prove that Preston paid a visit to the farm, either on that or any other occasion, or that he even knew of the presence of Langley in the neighbourhood."

"Then on what grounds exactly are they basing their accusation?"

"Substantial grounds enough," said the lawyer gloomily as he nervously rolled the bread that lay beside his plate into a row of little pellets. "First, Preston's very presence here, which it will be hard to make any jury believe was accidental. Second, the fact that he made straight here from the boat—again rather too long a coincidence, although possible enough to those who know the tricks that fate can play. Third, the knowledge that he is the only man in New Zealand, so far as anyone knows, who is acquainted with the man Langley's past or who had any motive for bearing him ill-will. All pure assumption, you'll say. Granted—but then there's the matter of the poison. No getting over that."

"The poison?" asked David. "What about that?"

"I had another interview with Preston last night and then he gave me a shock. He said that he had better tell me at once that he had bought a bottle of luminal as soon as he landed in New Zealand."

"Luminal?" gasped David. "What on earth for?"

The lawyer shrugged. "He says he'd been suffering from headaches and neuralgia ever since his release and he'd not been able to sleep."

"But luminal—it's such an uncommon drug!"

"Exactly. Aspirin or even veronal would have been credible enough. But he says he heard the passengers on the boat discussing drugs and a chemist among them mentioned luminal as being very effective in certain cases."

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