

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

"Can you prove that? Where are the passengers?"

The lawyer shrugged. "In America by now, probably. He says they were none of them New Zealanders. Oh, it all looks too fishy for words."

"But luminal," murmured John Murray in a dazed voice. "Luminal was the drug they found in Langley's stomach."

"Yes. He'd had over twenty grains—probably thirty. Yes, if Preston's speaking the truth, then he's a victim of the most amazing set of circumstances that ever snared a man and dragged him to—to. . ."

The lawyer hesitated. "To the gallows," said David quietly. "That purchase of luminal is going to hang him. Of course the police know about it?"

"That's a sure thing," replied the lawyer heavily. "The drug is an uncommon one. You don't have to sign for it, but it is sufficiently unusual for a chemist to notice the man who buys it, particularly if he asks for it, as Preston did, without a doctor's prescription."

"Didn't he mention to the chemist what he wanted it for and ask his opinion? Lots of men do when they're buying a drug."

"No. He didn't say a word. Just bought it and paid for it."

"Nothing very surprising in that," said David hastily. "Preston wasn't the sort of man to volunteer information about himself or ask a stranger for help or advice."

"That is true," said the lawyer thoughtfully. "But I'm afraid it's all going to tell against him. You must admit it to be the longest arm of coincidence you ever heard of."

"So long," said David slowly, "that it savours of a very weak excuse. Surely, if he was going to make up something, he'd spin a better story than that? I'm sure I could."

* * *

THE lawyer shrugged. Did he really believe in the innocence that his client protested? Did lawyers ever allow themselves the luxury of personal convictions in such cases? The three men who searched his face found themselves hopelessly at sea.

Presently David spoke slowly and thoughtfully, his face puzzled.

Eut, if Preston were determined to kill Langley, he need not at the same time have put a rope round his own neck. Why not commit suicide at once?"

"What do you mean?" It was George Murray's voice, sharp and incisive, strangely different from his usual tones.

"Great Scot, sir! Look at the clues he made a present of to the police! He's a released prisoner with a story that's well known both here and in Australia; therefore, he knows he's a marked man. He nevertheless goes openly and buys a poison that's very unusual—enough so to make it a certainty that the chemist will notice the man who asks for it. Then he makes straight for the place where his old enemy is living, goes as hard as if a demon were goading him on. Last, he poisons the man with the very stuff he bought a few days before. It's suicidal madness."

"You mean. . .?"

"I mean that the man who does that is either mad—or innocent."

There was a moment's complete silence, then John Murray's voice, "By jove, you're right."

Morgan smiled. "Sound deduction, Mr. Armstrong. I congratulate you on hitting upon the one weak spot in the prosecution's case. In my opinion a premeditated crime is not committed like that, unless, as you say, the criminal's mad—and Preston's sane enough. No, if he sticks to his plea of utter innocence and ignorance, goes into the box and swears that he didn't even know Langley

was in New Zealand, and if no evidence comes to light whereby the police can prove him wrong—then I think they will have some trouble in proving their case to the jury. Of course our counsel, Ashton, will harp on that."

"On the clumsiness of the crime?"

"Exactly. On the sheer impossibility of any sane man setting about a murder like that. Short of advertising his intentions in the paper, he couldn't have been more explicit. Well, Ashton's a good man with a pretty turn for irony. I can hear him getting every ounce of that. We were lucky to brief him."

(To be continued next week)

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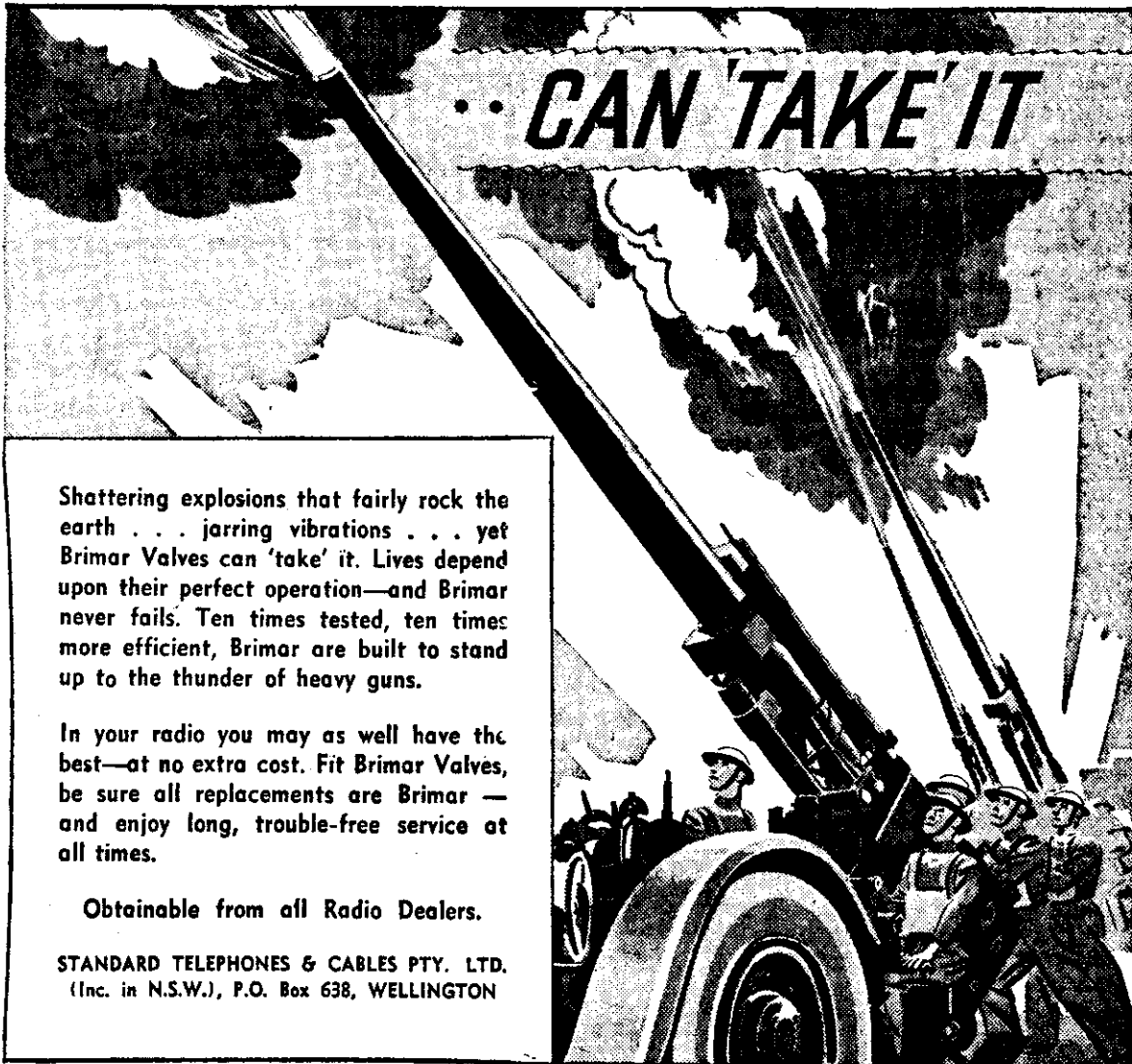
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