

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 named James Collins strung up on a tree. With Judith Anson he seeks help at the nearest house, where live George Murray, his nephew John, the housekeeper, Mrs. Marsden, and their guests, a Mr. Graham and his daughter Ann, to whom David is immediately attracted.

At the inquest, James Collins's death is found to be due to luminal poisoning, the body having been afterwards hanged. Ann's father is arrested. Evidence against him is (1) As Graham Preston he suffered a heavy jail sentence in Australia for a crime for which his secretary Peter Langley (alias James Collins) was responsible. (2) He claimed to have gone for a walk, meeting nobody, on the afternoon of the murder, but that evening appeared to be suffering from over-exertion. (3) He confessed to buying a bottle of luminal for sleeplessness.

But in the very weakness of Preston's case lies its strength, as David points out, for a man guilty of premeditated murder would have invented a better story to account for his actions.

CHAPTER IX. (Cont'd.)

DAVID ARMSTRONG'S face was haggard as he listened. The news of Preston's purchase of poison had overwhelmed him. The case seemed to his despondent eyes at the moment almost hopeless, and something in the lawyer's professional aloofness bordering on callousness goaded him.

"Mr. Morgan," he said abruptly, and his voice was harsh and strained, "What is your real opinion of our chances?"

The lawyer shrugged.

"Who knows? Who can ever tell with twelve jurors each with his individual complex and reactions? It depends on so much—the judge, the witnesses, the very demeanour of the prisoner. Fifty-fifty. I should have said until I heard this luminal story. Now, I'm not sure. Of course the girl is our strongest card. She's a pretty appealing little thing, and after all jurors are only human."

David got up suddenly, pushing back his chair with a grating sound.

"It's hot," he said in a stifled voice. "I think I've heard all the latest news, haven't I? Well, then, will you gentlemen excuse me?"

On the veranda he found Ann, and taking her arm drew her down the steps.

"The house is like an oven. Come for a walk."

HE hardly waited for the shadow of the trees to rush into his incoherent proposal. "Ann, will you marry me? I—I can't talk, but I've loved you ever since I first saw you. Marry me now. At once. You do love me, don't you Ann?"

She never thought of denying it. "Oh yes, David, from the first minute, too."

But, if he thought the victory won, he was soon disillusioned. She loved him; because she loved him, she wouldn't marry him. She was gentle but perfectly inflexible.

"But, why on earth? Ann, you're talking nonsense."

"No, David, you know I'm not. Don't let's pretend with each other. You know why I can't marry you—not now, and perhaps not ever."

MRS. DUNCAN had been right. He argued and pleaded in vain. Ann wept and clung to him, but her resolve did not weaken. When he left her, the young man told himself that he loved her more than ever, but that, whatever happened, who ever was sacrificed, her father's name must be cleared. Then her answer would be different.

CHAPTER X.

IF David had had time to spare from his own affairs, he would have spent much thought over the change in Judith. It was sufficiently marked for even so pre-occupied a lover to cast a speculative eye in her direction at times. Evidently they had none of them known the real Judith, even after four years of the casual intimacy of College life, or else falling in love had worked an amazing change in this cool and reserved young woman. She had always been a pleasant person, easy to live with and amiable; but that, they had all been dimly aware, was partly because she kept herself so aloof, so detached. Now, she was not merely passively kind to everyone; she was warmly sympathetic and almost demonstrative.

Particularly to Ann. With David incessantly occupied with Preston Graham's affairs, interviewing Morgan, ceaselessly hunting for any clue to establish his innocence, and with both the Murrays helping him and also busy on their farm, the womenfolk were left much together and alone. Mrs. Marsden remained in the background, with her many duties and her busy, practical mind; but the two girls worked and played and walked together. The inevitable result was that the younger and weaker girl turned more and more to Judith for help and stability.

It was a strange household, thrown together by the merest chance and now closely bound in one vital interest. No one now spoke of the students' departure, and Mr. Murray made it quite clear that Ann was to stay where she was.

"Of course I'm far happier here than anywhere, but should I stay?"

"You should. You belong to Te Rata now."

"I can't believe it's only six weeks since we met."

"I've never measured friendship by weeks. This is your home and here you stay."

"Yes, but doesn't it make far too much work for Mrs. Marsden?"

"Here she comes; we'll ask her. Mrs. Marsden, this child seems to think she's too heavy a burden on you."

The housekeeper said staidly, "Ann is a very great help." It was the usual tone, kind and pleasant, but remote.

"But you're looking tired, Mrs. Marsden," the girl persisted. "And you're sleeping badly. I know, because I often hear you moving about at night."

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GEORGE MURRAY glanced quickly at his housekeeper and she met his eyes with her placid, level gaze; but it was to him she spoke rather than the girl. "I've had toothache. The same tooth that worried me in the winter. It's nagging again. I suppose I must have it out—but I do so hate parting with my teeth."

John Murray said, with a strange emphasis, "I always think that a nagging tooth is best out—and quickly."

She smiled and said lightly, "It's easy to prescribe for others."

Ann rallied to her side. "Yes, it's all very well for other people isn't it? I'm terrified of dentists myself, but perhaps the tooth will only need stopping."

"I'm afraid it's beyond that," was the calm reply, "It's a case of desperate remedies—but I keep putting them off."

"What a shame—and you've had so many bad nights. I've got quite used to hearing your light step next door."

"That's only habit. I was always a night-bird."

"Then you should rest in the day. Do let me help more."

Judith entered to hear the last words. "As a matter of fact, I'm the one to blame. I ought to go home. I've no excuse at all for staying on here."

"Of course you must stay," said George Murray with his unfailing courtesy. "We made a pact that night; we're working in the same cause—so you've got to stay."

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TO himself the old man said, "She has every right to stay. One has only to see John watching her to know that some day she'll be mistress here. Am I disappointed? Did I imagine it would be Ann? Well, perhaps I did—but I was the only one to make that mistake. She has no thought but for David—and here's John head over ears in love with a college girl, a highbrow, a clever, quiet, experienced girl, the very opposite of Ann. Still, she's got real stuff in her."

Something of his thoughts must have shown in his face, for Judith smiled, and that tell-tale flush crept up in the clear pallor of her cheeks. George Murray's eyes rested on her approvingly, and Ann, watching her two friends, drew closer and leant against the old man's shoulder. A little glow of warmth and friendliness enveloped them. They were fighting shoulder to shoulder. Only the calm, detached figure of the housekeeper stood apart and untouched by sentiment.

"Miss Anson is the greatest help," she said placidly, bringing them all to earth with a thud. "She's taken over the animals and the telephone—and that saves me a lot of time."

"By the way, how are you getting on with that poor devil's dog?" asked George Murray.

"Rough's made friends with me at last," Judith replied. "He wouldn't trust

me at all at first, said quite plainly that he didn't like the look of me."

"I suppose he'd hardly seen a woman before. Hardly seen anyone but his master. Langley brought him here when he came two years ago. He was a pup then. He and the poor chap were inseparable."

"If only he could speak," sighed Ann. "He's the only one who knows what happened that night. If only he could tell us!"

The others avoided each other's eyes. If the dog could speak—was it not as well, perhaps, that he could not? Judith spoke hastily. "He went for a walk with me to-day for the first time. I like him. I hope they'll let me keep him. Do you think any relations will turn up and want him?"

"Not a chance. The police haven't traced any relatives in New Zealand—and, if they had, they wouldn't want the dog."

"Not if he behaved as badly to them as he did to the police. Oh, there's that telephone again."

Mrs. Marsden looked after Judith as she left the room. "Training is an interesting thing. That telephone has been going about every quarter of an hour; Miss Anson takes all the messages and never mixes any of them up. She can deal with anyone—you should hear her handling those nasty reporters."

"Nothing much this time," said Judith as she returned. "Just a message from the Secretary of the Women's Institute for you, Mrs. Marsden; they would be glad if you would send your quilt in by the end of the week so that they can forward them all together—whatever all that means."

"Dear me!" for once the housekeeper sounded almost perturbed. "It means that I'd promised to make them a wretched quilt and I've forgotten about it. It's only half done."

"What is it? Some good work?"

"Yes—a sop for never going to their meetings."

George Murray smiled. "She never goes to any meetings. This woman's an anomaly, Judith. She doesn't want to go to tea parties, she doesn't want to sit on committees, she doesn't want to hear herself speak."

"And she certainly doesn't want to make this quilt. It just shows how silly it was of me to get involved. It's a patchwork quilt, only cot size, thank goodness! We all agreed to make one each to send to some home in Auckland. That was weeks ago."

"Before you knew you were going to adopt a large family," said Judith.

"Well, this is where the family comes in. Bring it all out and let me do it. Then you go and rest. I'm the world's worst dressmaker, but I rather like some easy hand sewing once in a way."

"And I'll help," said Ann meekly.

"No, you won't," retorted Judith. "It was only yesterday you were telling me how you hated sewing at school. You run away and leave me and the quilt alone together."

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