

# It is dark in the bush

## SYNOPSIS

While seeking a short cut through back-blocks bush, David Armstrong discovers the body of a nearby shanty owner, James Collins, strung up on a tree. With Judith Anson, he seeks help at the nearest house, where live George Murray, his nephew John, their housekeeper, Mrs. Marsden, and their guests, a Mr. Graham and his daughter Ann.

The inquest reveals that Collins died of luminal poisoning, and that the body was afterwards hanged. Graham is arrested. Evidence against him is (1) He suffered a heavy jail sentence in Australia for a crime for which his secretary Peter Langley, alias Collins, was responsible. (2) He is one of the few men strong enough to have hoisted Collins' body on to the tree, and on the afternoon of the murder, complained of over-exertion. (3) He claimed to have gone for a solitary walk that afternoon. (4) He is known to have bought a bottle of luminal.

Ann refuses to marry David till her father's name is cleared. But Judith and John are more fortunate in their love, for not even Mrs. Marsden, who has devoted her whole life to John, disapproves. It must be some other worry that keeps Mrs. Marsden awake at night.

### CHAPTER XI (Cont'd.)

"YOU don't remember her?"  
"No, and my uncle never saw her. He didn't get on with my father, you know."

"Yet your father left you with him?"

"It was only supposed to be for a year—till I was old enough to be sent to school."

"Surely they didn't send you to school at six?"

"No, because my father had died in the meantime and my uncle had become my guardian. He thought six was a bit young to be launched in the world, so he decided to get a suitable housekeeper—a lady and all that—and keep me with him for a few years."

"AND that was the beginning of Mrs. Marsden?"

"Yes. She came out of the blue and as far as I remember she has never looked any different. What battles we had at first! You see, I'd had a heavenly year alone with my uncle and an old Maori housekeeper who spoilt me like mad. I can tell you I hated Marsy for the first few weeks. No wonder, for I'd grown into a regular little savage and Mar was always calm and civilised and unemotional. She must have come just a few months after my father died."

"And she's been here about twenty years. How marvellous!"

"Oh, she's a good old soul. A bit like a capable sofa cushion."

"Not in figure. She's still a very handsome woman."

"No, not in figure. Her boney angles were the only thing I ever had against Marsy. They hurt when you sat on her knee. Not that Mar was ever one for cuddling. No, what I meant about the cushion was that I don't think I ever saw anyone so superbly negative."

"I think she's got very positive virtues. She's the most competent and loyal person I've ever seen, and she's a lady."

"Yes. I suppose she is, though I've never thought very much about her before. She's always been just Marsy. As for being loyal, well, this is her home and her life. She can hardly be persuaded even to go away for a holiday, you know."

"She won't leave you, that's what it is. Did she ever have any children of her own?"

"Good lord, no. Fancy Marsy doing anything so indelicate as bear a child. I suppose she must be a widow but she seems terribly virginal, not to say old-maidish to me. I believe I've heard, ages ago, that her husband was killed on the honeymoon, and, if you ask me, it was on the first day."

"Who's laying down the law about people now? I shouldn't be surprised if there's more in Mrs. Marsden than you've ever dreamed of."

"Pooh! You're looking for some paradox. You won't find it in her. Anyway, when you've known a person all your life you may be trusted to know something about them, more even than an aspiring young B.A."

"Don't be rude. What was her husband like? Have you ever heard?"

"Don't know a thing about him. She never speaks of him, at least not to me. It's an old story, you know, and I think she's forgotten all about him. Her passion is this house and this family."

"Especially you. You don't think she'll mind me, John?"

His answer was emphatic, though not in words.

"I'd hate her to mind," said Judith presently.

"Mind? Who? What? Not Marsy again? My darling girl, do let's talk of something a little more interesting. For example, the first moment we can decently slip away from all this drama and get married."

"Decently—that's the trouble. It wouldn't be decent just now. You do feel that, don't you? Besides, it would be too hard on David."

"Oh, damn David."

"Well, too hard on everyone. Somehow, it would feel all wrong. No, I simply couldn't do it just now, John. Yes, yes, of course, you know I want to. Oh dear, here comes the others, and I look the most awful fright."

David stared for a minute at his old college friend, and then whistled softly.

"Well! For the last four years I've watched those plaits in storm and calm. I've seen them in the midst of a capping rag and of a debate on Freedom of Speech; seen 'em in the stress of the

exam. room and at a cocktail party. But this is positively the first time I've ever seen them ruffled. Now, my dear, come clean with Brother David."

But Judith had recovered her poise and merely remarked kindly, "How bright we're getting! Acting the sleuth had sharpened those wits we once thought so dull."

David sighed heavily. "That's right—bite the hand that fed you. Who's idea was the hiking party in the beginning? Mine. And now you turn on me—you who once for a brief spell—a very brief one. I'm happy to say—I actually thought I was in love with."

Ann laughed and interposed. "When you two have finished being rude to each other—please, may I say how awfully glad I am, Judith?"

David had a sudden inspiration; now was the moment to carry his love by storm. "Ann, let's have a double wedding. What a lark! Come, come, none of this hanging back. Coyness is out of date. Take a lesson from Judith. There's a girl who never hesitated to lay her natural truthfulness—and her ankle—on the altar of love."

WHEN Mrs. Marsden came in presently, the dining-room was in an uproar, and even Ann had forgotten her tragedy for the minute.

David, who was getting the worst of it, immediately took shelter by her side. "Help, help! Mrs. Marsden, do be peace-maker. You might make a better job of it than you have of chaperoning."

Mrs. Marsden did not seem to hear him; her eyes were fixed upon John, and in them was an inscrutable expression. He came forward quickly and put an arm about her waist.

"Marsy, old dear, congratulate me. Come here Judith, and get the parental blessing, so to speak."

For a moment the reserve on that quiet face quivered and broke; then she took Judith's hand quietly in hers and said with all her usual composure, "I am so glad." The two looked at each other with a steady glance of friendliness, but John broke the curious tension of the moment by saying heartily, "Good for you, old girl." Had Judith's words sunk deeper than he had admitted? Certainly there was something of relief in the tones, and stooping, he gave the housekeeper a hearty kiss; the salute was half in jest, but only half. Some current of feeling between the three of them lent the moment a seriousness which he scarcely understood. So they stood for a second, the other two mere spectators; to Ann, who watched the little scene in astonishment, it seemed as if Mrs. Marsden for one brief moment was a different person—vivid, alive, filled with a strange passion.

It was only a moment. The next, she stooped and began methodically picking up the welter of scraps that covered the floor.

"Dear me, it's like a Dorcas meeting where there's been a quarrel," she said mildly.

Ann sighed with disappointment. She had been wrong; nothing could really alter Mrs. Marsden. But Judith, who had

seen the woman's expression when John kissed her, would not have agreed, and her face was very thoughtful as she folded away her neglected work.

### CHAPTER XII.

AS David and Ann walked across to the tennis court, they glanced in at the kitchen window. Judith's sleek head was bent over the table on which a litter of material was scattered; at the other end Mrs. Marsden was busily ironing. There was a complete and understanding silence.

"Those two get on well," David remarked after they had passed. "I suppose Judith's making a point of being friendly with the powers-that-be."

"Not she. She wouldn't bother about other people if she didn't want to. None of us ever do nowadays. It's because she really likes Mrs. Marsden; she did, right from the first—and she's been getting more and more interested all the time."

"Oh well, I suppose the old girl's reign is over."

"Over? Why?"

"Judith's not likely to keep her on once they're married."

"Not keep her on? Why, David, no one would ever dream of Mrs. Marsden leaving Te Rata. She belongs here just as much as the Murrys do. Mr. Murray looks to her for everything—John too. She's much more like the mistress of the house than a housekeeper."

"H'm. . . All the more reason why she shouldn't stay. Two mistresses in one house wouldn't be much fun."

"It won't be like that with Mrs. Marsden and Judith. They're both far too wise."

"Don't you believe it. It'll be just like having a mother-in-law in the house all the time."

"I think you're wrong. Mrs. Marsden never makes any claims on anyone. I believe it's the house she loves just as much as the people. Besides, she's so awfully impersonal. I'm sure she and Judith will get on splendidly; they're both so quiet and so wise. Quite different from me, I'm afraid."

"Thank goodness! Those strong silent women seem to me to go right agin nature."

"Oh David! And you admitted that you were nearly in love with Judith yourself once!"

"Nearly. Besides it was a century ago—before I met you. Who would be in love with a super-woman when there was a little creature like you about?"

She laughed, her eyes bright for the moment, their shadow forgotten. "John is. He never looks like that at me."

"He'd better not. Come and play tennis and don't be provocative."

"What long words! I wish you weren't so clever, David. I never once got a prize at school."

"I'm sure you didn't. But it's being made up to you now. Just think, you've got me."

"After that, I'm going to beat you in a single. Oh dear, there's Mr. Misson. David, how wicked and light I am. Do you know, for the moment I'd almost forgotten and was being happy."

(Continued on next page)