

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) As Charles 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 is one of the few men strong enough to have hoisted the body on to the tree. (3) He is known to have bought a bottle of luminal.

Ann refuses to marry David till her father's name is cleared, and Judith, though in love with John Murray, feels that for the same reason immediate marriage is undesirable. John tells Judith something of his early life. His mother died when he was two, and when he came to live with his uncle, Mrs. Marsden took her place. Knowing Mrs. Marsden's devotion to John, Judith is glad that the older woman approves of her as John's future wife. The two become fast friends, and Judith stays behind to help Mrs. Marsden with a patchwork quilt while the other three go clue-hunting at the scene of the crime. If there is evidence of another person's presence there, Preston's name may yet be cleared.

NOW READ ON.

CHAPTER XII. (Cont'd.)

IT was mid-day when Judith heard the thud of cantering hooves upon the gravel drive; something in the pace made her lift her head quickly from her work and listen. In a moment there were raised voices. Judith ran to the window. Yes, it was the three searchers and she was right. Something had happened.

They were in the house almost before she could call Mrs. Marsden. "Come quickly. They've found something. Yes, what is it?"

"At last," cried David. "A clue at last, I believe."

Ann was white and trembling. "It was a piece of stuff. But we mustn't hope too much. Detective Muir's got it."

"Amazing to think it could lie hidden there. Of course the bit of bark had fallen from the stump right on top of it," said David. "Makes one absolutely certain there must be other things there."

"Anyway, someone was there," cried Ann.

They were all talking at once, breathless, eager, excited. Judith stood apart, watching the scene, her eyes turning every minute to John's handsome face. How splendid and triumphant he looked—almost an Adonis, despite his entire lack of self-consciousness. Yes, for all his kindness and sympathy, his natural modesty and unselfishness, his was a life that grief and disappointment had never touched. For a moment there was a sharp pang of warning at her heart. What lay ahead?

PEOPLE IN THE STORY

David Armstrong	}	Students
Stephen Bryce		
Judith Anson		
James Collins, alias Peter Langley:		the murdered man.
George Murray—a sheepfarmer.		
John Murray, his nephew, in love with Judith.		
Preston Graham, alias Charles Preston: accused of murdering Collins.		
Ann Graham, his daughter: engaged to David.		
Mrs. Duncan, Ann's aunt.		
Mrs. Marsden, housekeeper to George Murray.		
Detective Muir	}	Members of the Police Force.
Sergeant Davis		
Detective Missen, engaged by George Murray to help prove Preston's innocence.		
Morgan, lawyer engaged to defend Preston.		

Judith told herself that she was letting her imagination run away with her. What peril could possibly be threatening John? Still the tiny fear rankled and teased, obliging her to face it. She did so with steady eyes, vowing that no pain should touch him if she could ward it off. And she would do so; always she would be there. Into her love there flowed a maternal tenderness, a protective eagerness that might have made an onlooker smile—so strong and magnificent did he appear, so fragile and slender his protector.

Mrs. Marsden spoke in a voice quieter than usual.

"Please tell us what you've found."

SHE was sitting down, breathing hurriedly and very pale; evidently their noise and vitality exhausted her sometimes. John leant over her, a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Poor old Marsy! What a racket we make—and you all fagged out with that beastly tooth. Shut up everyone, and let the young medico speak. After all, he's the hero."

"Well, we'd just about given up," began David eagerly, "when I saw it suddenly—a little scrap of something that wasn't fern or leaf. It was tucked between the roots of a big stump by the track and a piece of bark had fallen down and almost covered it. It was a bit of stuff, a sort of grey-green colour—linen, Ann says—and it must have come from a woman's dress."

Judith's voice sounded unnaturally loud in her own ears.

"Where is it? Have you got it here?"

"Rather not. We know our place. We called Missen and Muir and let them get busy with their cameras and gadgets. Then we left it to them."

"And what did you say it was like?"

"A piece of greenish stuff evidently torn off a woman's skirt. There was a

jagged bit of the stump sticking out that had caught it. It was practically invisible because of the bark on top of it."

"You don't think it might have lain there for months?"

"No, not by the look of it. The police say it's only been there for a few weeks. Anyway, they seem to be quite excited about it. They're going to make a search for the dress it came from. Look out, Mrs. Marsden; what secrets have you got hidden in your wardrobe?"

"Now, now," said John in mock concern, "I won't have you teasing old Marsy. I know all her dresses as well as I know my own shirts, and she's never worn that colour in her life. You're not a criminal, are you, old dear?"

"I hope not, John. Certainly not, if that piece of material is to be the test, for I've no frock of that colour in my wardrobe. Ah, here are the police. May I see the stuff, Mr. Muir? No, I'm afraid I can't help you. I've never seen a dress like that worn in this neighbourhood."

"No? But of course the women may have many frocks."

"Not here. Not in the backblocks, Mr. Muir," said the housekeeper with her quiet smile. "But of course you will want to satisfy yourselves. You'll search in the houses round, I presume? Would you like to begin with my room? Nothing is locked and all my possessions are in the wardrobe, the chests, or the big cupboard. I won't come with you because these young people are hungry and want lunch."

"Did ever you see a woman like that?" cried John in mock pride. "Gives up the secrets of her toilet and her life to a couple of bobbies and goes quietly setting lunch. There's innocence for you. Where are you off to, Judith, come along and feed the conquering males."

"In a moment, you spoilt boy. I'm just clearing away my work."

"Ah, the fabulous quilt. Come along and show it to us."

"Not just now," said Judith calmly. "I told you that I'd show it when it was done."

"You said it would be done this morning. Come along, let's see the thing. What a rude girl! Marsy, tell Judith not to pull it away from me like that. I'd hate to use brute force."

Mrs. Marsden smiled placidly. "Don't be a bully, John. You'll tear it. It isn't finished, is it, Judith?"

"No. I've got one bit to alter. There's a colour scheme that I don't want."

The girl folded the quilt, tucked it under her arm, and walked sedately from the room. Not for one moment did her eyes encounter those of the housekeeper who was unconcernedly setting the table.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was ten o'clock when Judith came up the veranda steps with John that night.

"But why must you go in so soon? Remember, we'll be gone early to-morrow morning."

"I must go in, John. I'm worried about Ann."

"Poor kid! I wish to Heaven she wouldn't insist on coming up to-morrow! She can do no good."

"What exactly will happen to-morrow?"

"It's more or less of a formality. The Crown only has to produce enough of its case to show the need for a Supreme Court trial. They'll have no bother about that, I'm afraid."

"You won't have to give evidence?"

"No, but David will—about the finding of the body. Nothing for or against Preston. They'll reserve all the defence."

"I see. Isn't it queer and disappointing that nothing has come of that find of yours? The police haven't found any clue as to who tore their frock on the track that day—if it was that day."

"It's queer—but it's not disappointing. What I was afraid of was that they would find straight away that it was some woman who'd taken a walk up to see the clearing-sale that day or make sure her husband wasn't getting tight on Langley's beer. But there wasn't any beer, was there?"

"Not as far as we saw. Then you think that their not finding the owner of the dress is rather hopeful than otherwise?"

"I think so, because it must mean one of two things. Either the wearer of the dress had no right to be there and has hidden or destroyed the dress—rather a far-fetched theory in this law-abiding and ill-clad neighbourhood. Or else it was some outsider—and that's what we're dying to be able to assert. Once prove that someone—anyone—was there that day who didn't belong to the district and we open up a whole series of possibilities, even if we never get any farther with them. Anyway, it seems our best chance."

"Yes. What exactly did Mr. Preston say in the statement he made to the police?"

"He admitted his identity and the connection he'd had before with the man Langley. He also didn't attempt to deny that he'd bought the luminal—for sleeplessness, he said. The rest of the statement is a total denial of any connection with the murder. He swears that he wasn't at the cottage that day—had never been at it."

"He sticks to it that he didn't even know Langley was in the neighbourhood?"

"Absolutely. It was all nothing but coincidence, according to him."

"John, what do you really think?"

"I don't think Preston murdered the blackguard. I suppose it sounds jolly feeble, but I just feel he couldn't have. I got to know him pretty well, and there are some things you feel sure of about a man. Preston couldn't commit a murder in cold blood any more than—than my uncle could."

"I feel just the same. But, oh John, what's the good of feeling it, if we can't prove it?"

HE stooped and kissed her. "Dearest, don't break your heart over this business. It's beastly, but we can only do our best. I suppose it sounds idiotic, but I never seriously believe that we're going to fail—but I suppose people always do feel like that."

His arm about her, Judith felt a moment of indecision. He was so dear,

(Continued on next page)