

# IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

so unspeakably beloved to her, that she hated to keep secret from him the strange and perturbing incident to-day. Why not tell him about the little patch of grey-green linen which she had taken out of the quilt as soon as she reached the privacy of her bedroom?

But she did not tell him. It was not in her to betray another woman's secret, and something in Mrs. Marsden's face checked any real desire to confide, even in John. Judith had been loyal to women all her life; she had never understood why there was a general and cynical belief that you couldn't trust any married woman with a secret. "Anyway, I'm not going to start betraying my friends till I am married," she told herself with a private shrug. In any case, if this piece of information could not be withheld she would ask Mrs. Marsden herself to tell it. It was not needed for the first hearing in the Magistrate's Court. If necessary, it could be produced later.

WHEN Judith looked into Ann's room she found her lying, flushed and bright-eyed, hopelessly awake.

"My dear, do take some aspirin and go to sleep. You're in for a bad day to-morrow. You really feel you must go?"

"Oh yes, of course I must."

"You know there'll not be any defence yet? They won't want you to give evidence."

"Yes, I know. David told me that."

"They don't want you to go, Ann. It'll be horrid. People staring and photographers trying to catch you unawares."

"I know—but I must be there. I want my father to see me there. I want everyone to see me—to know that I believe in him. I want to talk to him afterwards—David says they'll let me. I want to stand by him. Think what a rotten life he'd had. What on earth do my feelings matter?"

Judith stooped and kissed her; Ann blinked in surprise. She had never connected Judith with kissing.

"You're right, Ann. Perfectly right. Good-night, dear—try to sleep."

She had hardly gone into her own room when there was a tap at the door and Mrs. Marsden stood on the threshold. She was very pale—or was it merely a trick of the candlelight which she was shading with her hand?

"I thought you were still awake. Judith, could you come into my room for a minute? That tooth is worrying me again and I thought perhaps you would plug it for me."

Judith realised perfectly well that this was merely for the benefit of Ann, whose door stood open; in her own comfortable bedroom, the housekeeper shut the door softly and set down the candle. Neither dreamt of referring to the imaginary toothache. Instead, Mrs. Marsden took up the quilt that Judith had finished that afternoon and pointed to the square of crimson that had once been grey-green.

"Have you told John?"

It was not what Judith had expected her to say, but she shook her head. Mrs. Marsden's lips trembled and she

sat down on the couch at the foot of the bed. Judith remained standing, looking down at her gravely and without speech.

"Yes, I was on the track that day. It is perfectly true that I was there. I have kept silent because I could only harm him more."

Judith leant forward, her face white, her breath coming quickly.

"Harm him? Do you mean—oh, surely you don't mean that you saw Mr. Preston—he was there after all?"

The woman nodded slowly and again her lips trembled, so that she put her hand to them for a moment before replying.

"Yes, I saw him. I had gone for a walk up the hills. I often do, as you know. But this day the view was so beautiful that somehow I went on. I've always been fond of the bush and it looked so cool and tempting just above on the hill. So I climbed the boundary fence and walked along the track, looking for that little bush orchid that grows up on these hills."

Her voice faltered and was silent and presently Judith prompted her. "Yes? And then you saw...?"

"Presently I heard a crashing noise, a tearing, hurrying sound of something rushing along. I thought it was a cattle beast and I jumped aside and behind a tree. I'm not frightened of cattle but I don't like to meet them on a bush track like that. But it was not a bullock. It was Charles Preston."

"And he was going to that cottage?"

"He was walking up the track that leads through the bush and out on to the clearing, rushing along as if something was chasing him. I was going to step out and speak but I delayed for a moment and in that moment I saw his face."

She stopped and shuddered.

"And—and it looked...?"

"It looked—mad. He was a curious greyish colour and his face shone with sweat. He was swinging his arms about and muttering to himself. I—I was frightened, Judith."

"So he didn't know that you saw him?"

"No. I stood still and let him go. Ever since I've cursed my own cowardice. If only I'd stepped out and spoken quietly to him and got him to come home with me!"

"Then you think that he really did murder that poor man?"

THE effect of her words startled Judith. Mrs. Marsden got up quickly and seized the girl's arm in a grip that hurt.

"No, no. Not that. Never that. I believe he didn't. I'm sure he didn't—as sure as if I had been there."

"Yes, yes," said Judith hurriedly, trying to pacify her. "I feel just like that myself. Perfectly sure. Then why do you wish so much that you had stopped him?"

"Because then I could have asked him to go home with me, have stopped him going to that fatal house, brought him to himself."

"Then you believe he did go there?"

"I fear that he did."

"Then what... why do you think he's innocent?"

"Listen. I believe that Charles Preston went there, but I'm sure that it was through nothing but some dreadful accident. Either Langley was dead before he ever got there, or else he was out and Preston never saw him. But it was nothing but the most unhappy coincidence, I'm sure, that brought him to this part of the world. I don't believe for a moment that he knew when he came that Langley was here."

"But he knew later, before the murder."

"Yes. I'm afraid that he did."

"Then how did he find out?"

"He saw him come to the back door one day about a week before the murder. I was alone in the house with Mr. Preston, and Langley brought a message for Mr. Murray. I spoke to him at the back door, and as he went away he went past the side veranda where Mr. Preston was sitting. I don't see how they could avoid seeing each other."

"Did he ask you anything about him?"

"No, but he was so strange that night, excited and unlike himself. We all noticed it, but it was only afterwards that I connected it in any way with Langley's visit."

"It didn't occur to any of the others?"

"No. No one else knew that Langley had been there. Mr. Murray thought that he had left the letter in the box at the gate."

"And you didn't deceive him?"

Did the woman's face flicker for a moment? No, it must have been some trick of the candlelight. Her voice was casual enough.

"No. I didn't happen to mention it. As you know, I'm not a talkative person. I was very glad later that I had not—that no one knew that Langley and Mr. Preston must have met, that there was no one but me to disprove his statement that he did not know his old enemy was in the district."

"And apparently no one else to disprove the other lie—that he didn't go near Langley's farm that day?"

"I hope not. I pray not. Surely it must be safe now?"

"JUDITH," said Mrs. Marsden in a shaking voice, "it has been so dreadful—being afraid all the time that someone would find out that I was there—that I saw him."

"Yes. No wonder you haven't been sleeping. You were afraid of being questioned."

"Yes. I am like most women, I suppose, nervous of lawyers and of cross-examination. It would be hard to lie on oath."

"Dreadful. I don't wonder you wanted to remain silent."

"And then I have been so full of self-reproach. I'm not usually a coward, and yet that afternoon I failed through cowardice. You see, if I had stopped him, gone quietly home with him, had tea and been talking together when Ann came in, it would all have seemed so much more simple and natural. As it is, I am haunted always by the fear that they will yet find someone who saw him. He was rushing along so recklessly, not trying to hide or be at all furtive."

"At any rate that's all to the good."

Again there was doubt and perplexity on Judith's face; at once the woman saw it and with her sad eyes fixed piercingly on the younger girl she said slowly, "I need no proof. I am sure, as sure as I am of anything on God's earth, that Preston has no murder on his soul."

Something in the low, vibrant tones startled the girl, but she said nothing and the other went on. "When he had disappeared I came out and hurried home. On the way I caught my dress and tore it. I didn't notice it at the time but when I got home I saw the hole. It was a new dress and by the merest chance no one had ever seen me in it. I put it aside to try and patch it and then—then came the news of Langley's murder. At once I realised that no one must know I had seen Charles Preston that day, though I didn't know for a time what dreadful inducement the world would think he had to murder Langley. At the moment I didn't dream that he would be under suspicion. It was some instinct that kept me quiet."

"And so you told no one of the accident to your dress?"

"No one. But I was dreadfully worried to know that that torn piece was lying somewhere on the track. I lived in fear that the police would find it and question me and so I kept the dress hidden."

"And it's hidden now?"

"No. I burnt it. It was the night when the police arrested Mr. Preston. I knew in a flash that my evidence must never come out then. So I took the dress and stuffed it into the stove fire—I waited till you were all in the drawing room—and then did it, but I was dreadfully afraid you might smell something. I thought I'd burnt all the scraps, too; but somehow I'd overlooked that tiny bit. It was a shock to see it staring up at me from the quilt. Oh, how thankful I was that you had worked at it alone and without Ann—and how grateful to you for the way you took the piece out and asked no questions!"

(To be continued next week)

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