

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 being that as Charles Preston he suffered a heavy jail sentence in Australia for a crime for which his secretary Peter Langley (alias Collins), was responsible; he is one of the few men strong enough to have hoisted the body on to the tree, and he had a bottle of luminal in his possession.

Ann refuses to marry David till her father's name is cleared. John tells Judith something of his early life. His mother died when he was two, and when he came to live with her uncle, Mrs. Marsden took her place. Knowing Mrs. Marsden's devotion to John, Judith is glad that she approves of her as his future wife. The two become fast friends, and Judith stays behind to help Mrs. Marsden with a patchwork quilt while the others go clue-hunting at the scene of the crime. They return with a piece of green material, the counterpart of which Judith has just sewn into the quilt. Judith, unknown to the others, removes it. Mrs. Marsden confesses to Judith that the piece of stuff was torn from her skirt and that she was on the spot on the afternoon of the murder. She did not tell the police because she would be forced to confess under cross-examination that she had seen Preston there. She also knows that Preston and Langley met prior to the murder. Yet she tells Judith she is convinced, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, that Preston is innocent. She is grateful that Judith removed the tell-tale piece of material from the quilt, and asked no questions.

CHAPTER XIII. (Cont'd.)

"I was lucky none of them happened to see the piece of cloth," said Judith. "They might have remembered it. I—I'd better burn that other piece, hadn't I?"

"Yes, yes. Give it to me now, Judith, and we'll burn it. Go and get it quickly."

They burnt it in the kitchen grate, where a few coals still smouldered. As they turned to go back to their rooms Judith was amazed to see tears in Mrs. Marsden's eyes.

"Thank God," she whispered, half to herself, "now he is safe."

Judith lay awake that night and pondered those words. He is safe. Charles Preston, of course, she meant. All that feeling, that deep emotion for a man she had known so little. Here Judith pulled herself up; not so little after all, for had not Mrs. Marsden nursed him back to health? They said nurses often fell in love with their patients. How amazing! This strange silent woman was consumed by some passion, certainly, and it must be for that tragic figure, Charles Preston.

It is to be feared that Judith had lapsed once more and was allowing herself to lay down the law about human passions of which she knew little.

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
Sergeant Davis		Police Force.
Detective Missen, engaged by George Murray to help prove Preston's innocence.		
Morgan, lawyer engaged to defend Preston.		

CHAPTER XIV.

During the next thirty-six hours Judith had plenty of opportunity to study the reactions of middle-aged love, for she and Mrs. Marsden were left alone while the others went to town for the preliminary hearing of the case against Ann's father. If the girl had expected any further revelations she was to be disappointed, for nothing could have been more restful and placid than the hours they spent together.

But Judith, herself innately reticent, admired the other all the more for her reserve. She liked Mrs. Marsden's calm and detached attitude towards life; before her discovery of her secret love, there had been times when Judith had imagined her almost inhuman, but now she knew of heights and depths of which the outside world would never have dreamt. But it was as hard as ever to get the housekeeper to talk; the only subject on which she would be at all expansive was the one about which Judith was naturally most eager to hear. When she talked of John Murray, Mrs. Marsden spoke warmly and freely, and through the simple words Judith could read the depth of her affection for the boy who had been and the man who was.

On Friday night they sat late on the veranda, watching the stars come out one by one in the moonless sky, waiting for news of the proceedings in the magistrate's court that day.

"They'll ring through as soon as they can and tell us," said Mrs. Marsden.

"I hope so, but they may be too worried," replied Judith, hoping to hide the fact that she had been listening for the telephone for the last hour.

"They will ring. Mr. Murray will think of it as soon as they are free, and John will not fail to get through. He always rings up from town, even if it's only to say they'll be late or not back till next day."

"Does he really? Most young men aren't so thoughtful."

"He knows I'd be anxious. These roads are so dangerous. All these years he's never once forgotten to keep me informed."

"That's very thoughtful."

"John is thoughtful. He seems just a jolly boy, but there's always been the other side."

"Yes. I've found that out."

"You may depend on it. John will never fail you."

"You love him very much, don't you?" Mrs. Marsden paused, as if deliberately weighing her words.

"I am fond of John. When you've watched a boy grow up you're naturally interested in him."

Judith rather prided herself on the moderation of her language, but this was overdoing it.

"That's an under-statement. You're more than interested—judging by the way you look at him."

She laughed teasingly and the older woman smoothed the severe white collar of her dark dress with her work-hardened hand.

"Dear me, that sounds as if my heart were in my eyes—whatever that idiotic expression can be said to mean. I'm afraid I must be becoming a sentimental old woman. What a humiliation, because I've always disliked sentiment."

"What nonsense! There's nothing sentimental about a mother's love for a son—and that's almost how you feel about John, now isn't it?"

From the sound of her calm voice when she answered, Judith guessed that the other was smiling in the semi-darkness.

"Is it? How lightly we use these expressions! Mother-love! What do either of us really know about the feeling? Because I'm fond of him and proud of him; because he turns to me to sew a button on his shirt or listen to his stories about town and stock sales—therefore we must be almost mother and son! Well, it's a nice thought, Judith—a flattering thought to an elderly woman who isn't a mother, alas!"

In spite of the deliberate cynicism of her comment, Mrs. Marsden's voice trembled a little on the last words and Judith's mind leapt at once to some further secret, and that a tragic one. Had this woman borne a child and lost it? Hers was not the confiding type. Probably on one, not even old George Murray, knew anything of her past. Judith began to preen herself; in a few weeks she had learnt more of Mrs. Marsden's inner and hidden feelings than these people who had known her for twenty years. Such, thought the girl complacently, was the value of a quick intuition. Then in a moment she had almost laughed. Truly the sleuth complex was in the air. It had made even Judith lose her pretty head for a moment.

"John's been lucky in his adopted mother, whether she claims the relationship or not," she said lightly. "He doesn't seem to have very happy memories of his father. You didn't meet him, did you?"

"I came here after his death. From all accounts he was a just man but harsh."

"Most unlovable. I wonder what his wife saw in him. Did you ever hear what she was like? John never saw her, did he?"

"Not that he can remember. She died when he was a baby. Possibly she was glad to give up the struggle."

"What struggle?"

"The everlasting struggle for a frail and ordinary woman to live with an exacting and intolerant man."

There was inexplicable feeling in the words and Judith was surprised. Was there more in this than she had guessed? Had this strange and reserved woman been perhaps a friend or connection of the dead wife. That would account for her devotion to the son.

"I should not speak like that, perhaps, from hearsay," went on the quiet voice, shattering all Judith's latest theories. "James Murray may have been an indulgent husband if he was a harsh father. The truth is that his brother has prejudiced me. Mr. George Murray never got on with his brother, you know. Of course he never met the young wife, for his brother's home was then in England. But he had an idea, perhaps quite a wrong one, that the girl—she was only eighteen when she married the brother and twenty-one when she died—had had a bad time of it with her martinet of a husband. But I don't see where he can have got his information, so it is really all conjecture."

"And conjectures can be dangerous," thought the girl, who a moment before had been ready to credit this woman with a secret friendship as well as a bereaved maternity. Already she was the heroine, in the girl's usually unimaginative mind, of a hopeless passion for a suspected murderer. Judith smiled to herself in the darkness. It must be the very prosiness and matter-of-factness of this woman that made your fancies run riot with her in this ridiculous way.

"It's hard to imagine Mr. Murray with such a disagreeable brother," she said, hastily returning to the land of the safely concrete.

"Brothers are often very unlike," remarked the other placidly.

Judith looked at her in despair. Was there ever such a woman for uttering common-place platitudes? "No, I shall have to find someone else to romanticise about," she decided privately.

"Mr. Murray's a dear. He's been such a jolly friend to all of us and he's wonderful to Ann. Sometimes I wonder whether he really does believe in her father or if he's just doing his best to help and be kind."

"I can't say about that. Mr. Murray doesn't confide his private ideas about the case to anyone."

There was reserve in the tone, and subtly Judith was made to feel that she had taken a liberty. Mrs. Marsden, at any rate, had her sleuthing instincts well under control. The girl changed the subject hurriedly to one that was more congenial.

"Tell me about John when he was a child."

There was a pause and Judith had a distinct impression that the woman was

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