

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

assuming some defensive armour. Her words were ordinary enough when they came.

"I'm afraid there's not very much to tell. He was a dear little chap, though very self-willed. Of course he'd had a year's spoiling before I came, and he didn't like me at all at first. I can remember quite well our first battle. He had made up his mind. . . ."

At that moment the telephone bell rang sharply in the hall. Both women sprang to their feet but Mrs. Marsden hung back and for a moment her habitual self-control faltered.

"You go. . . . Please. . . . I cannot. . . . It must be bad news. I know that it is bad news."

Evidently her courage could not face the blow which intuition told her had fallen upon the man she loved.

Judith went quickly to the telephone. Five minutes later she hung up the receiver and turned to the housekeeper with a white face; for a moment the two stared at each other, the older woman motionless as any statue, then Judith gave a little helpless gesture. How break the news of this disaster?"

"It is bad?" The voice though low, was perfectly controlled.

"Yes, very bad. Let us sit down and talk quietly. It'll all so unexpected."

They sat down silently on the settee in the cool and empty hall and the girl took a deep breath.

"John says they'll be back to-morrow. Ann saw her father after the court and she's pretty well bowled over. They're keeping her quiet to-night but they'll be back in time for lunch to-morrow."

Mrs. Marsden gave no sign of impatience but the girl had the impression of immense tension, of her whole vitality suspended and waiting for the next words.

"He — he was remanded to the Supreme Court. It all went as they said it would — no defence, everything reserved. But—but some unexpected evidence came to light."

"Something—bad?"

"Very bad. The police have traced one of the drovers. He gave evidence to-day. He—he saw Mr. Preston going across the clearing towards the cottage about half-past four."

"What?"

It was a cry of doom and Judith turned her eyes from the face wrung for a moment with deep anguish. No possible doubt that this was love. It was a cruel trick of fate that had brought it too late into this woman's life.

"There seems no doubt about it. The man was driving cattle from the sale and one got away. He left the mob with the other drover and came back to look for it, right to the gate. Then he saw it standing above the next bend and rode after it. But as he went down the road he looked back and saw a man whom he identified as Mr. Preston hurrying across the clearing to the house."

"Then he did go. I knew it."

"Yes. John sounds pretty hopeless. You see, Mr. Preston gave the police such an emphatic denial. In his statement he swore that he had never been near the place. It—it does look bad, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Very bad. After all I did no good by keeping silent."

"None, as it turned out. Will you speak now?"

"Never." The voice was so full of passionate denial that Judith looked up in surprise. Mrs. Marsden went on more reasonably. "What good could I do now? Only strengthen the case against him. No. Judith, you must forget every word that I told you. You must forget all about that grey-green patch."

"Yes, yes. . . . I didn't mean that I would speak. It's your business."

"Promise me that you will never speak. Promise me, Judith!"

Judith took Mrs. Marsden's hand; it was trembling and she held it for a moment in her strong, cool palms.

"Of course I promise. You know you can trust me."

"Yes. I know that. I knew it from the first hour I spent with you. Ah well, you must forgive me for being so melodramatic, my dear—but this is bad news."

"Terribly bad. I feel that it's fatal."

"Don't say that," cried the other, speaking with extraordinary energy and passion. "Don't think it. It isn't fatal. It couldn't be, because Charles Preston didn't do it. He is as innocent as you are. I know—and you can be sure that it will yet be proved."

CHAPTER XV.

The others arrived home for lunch on Saturday. Judith was relieved to find that Ann, though pale and very tired, was entirely composed. She had, indeed, grown up. She talked to Judith quite collectedly about the ordeal of the previous day.

"Of course you haven't seen the papers yet. They got the photographs they wanted. No, I really don't care a bit."

"Were there many people in court?"

"It was full and a crowd waiting outside. They all peered and stared. John and David were furious. They walked one each side and growled like a pair of Alsatians."

"I'm sure they did—and the crowd would think that thrilling."

"I suppose so—but what does it matter? I used to think I was so sensitive, but it was just that I thought too much about myself. I simply forgot all about them yesterday after the first few minutes."

"How did your father look?"

"Oh, dreadful, especially after that drover gave his evidence."

"That must have been an awful shock to everyone."

"I think so. I know it was to me. The room simply went round for a minute and when things got clear again I saw my father all huddled up in his chair—they'd let him sit down, you know—with his face hidden in his hands. David had my hand gripped tight, but he was as white as a ghost, and Mr. Murray looked—oh, just awful!"

"It was a frightful blow, but I'm sure there must be some way out of it."

"I hope so. The trouble is that he lied."

"Yes. It will make it all ever so much more difficult, won't it?" asked Judith nervously.

"Much worse. Everyone will be so wildly prejudiced against him. I could

see that both Mr. Morgan and Mr. Ashton were terribly surprised and just furious."

"I suppose they felt their ground cut away from under their feet. Well, they must just find some fresh one."

Judith tried to speak cheerfully but her heart was heavy with fear. Doubt she tried to stifle. Men had been damned by circumstance before to be found innocent in the end.

After lunch, when David insisted, despite her protests, that Ann should

go and rest, she went out with the two young men. Once out of hearing and sight of the house David flung himself on the grass with a groan and the other two sat down silently at his side in the shade of a spreading tree. As Judith looked from one gloomy face to the other she found herself wondering whether they had lost faith or only hope. Hard to tell. Loyalty bound them all in a common cause.

(To be continued next week)

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