

**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 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 until her father's name is cleared. Meanwhile, Judith and Mrs. Marsden become firm friends, and Judith realises that underneath her calm exterior Mrs. Marsden is a woman of strong emotions. She tells Judith something of John, and her deep affection for him is apparent. John's father was from all accounts a harsh and intolerant man, and John's mother died when he was two, since when he has been under Mrs. Marsden's care.

Ann, David and John go clue-hunting at the scene of the crime and bring back a piece of green stuff which Judith realises belongs to a dress of Mrs. Marsden's. Mrs. Marsden confesses to Judith that she was present in the clearing at the time of the crime, and saw Preston there. She did not tell the police, as she fears to implicate Preston. She swears Judith to secrecy, and affirms her confidence in Preston's innocence. It looks to Judith as though Mrs. Marsden is in love with Preston.

At a preliminary hearing, the defence is reserved. But the prosecution produces a drover who saw Preston in the clearing on the fatal afternoon. Preston's story had been that he did not know that Langley was in the district, and he completely denied being near the clearing on the fatal afternoon. Can his whole story be false?

**"WHAT do the lawyers say?"** Judith asked John Murray, after Ann had gone indoors to rest.

"Oh, they're pretty mad. You see, they had no warning at all, and it looks damned bad—to say he had been nowhere near the place."

"Yes. No doubt at all he was there, I'm afraid," said Judith gloomily.

"Preston still protests his innocence, of course—but it sounds altogether such a tall story."

"I believe him all the same," said David stoutly. "I was with Ann when she had her interview with him and I'll swear that man's innocent, however black his case looks."

"What happened? Or isn't it fair to ask?"

"Everything's fair. As you said a fortnight ago, we're all in this together. There was little enough. Of course there was a warder there, but he was very decent, stood at the door and tried not to hear."

"And Ann?"

"Ann was a marvel. The most wonderful little girl. Not a tremor."

"Plucky kid!"

"Yes. It was sheer grit and of course she's paid for it since. She went up to him and reached up on tiptoe to put her arms round his neck. 'Father dear,' she said, 'don't forget I'm thinking of you all the time.' Then she drew down his head and kissed him."

"And he?"

"It rather broke him up. Poor devil, he hung on to her as if she was all he'd

# It is dark in the bush

got—which I suppose she is. Presently he said, 'Ann, I didn't kill him. You do believe that, don't you?' She never faltered. 'Of course I do, and so does David. We both know you didn't do it.' 'You'll stick to that whatever happens?' She looked him squarely in the eyes and said, 'We'll stick to that — whatever happens. But nothing's going to happen. Father. We're going to prove you innocent to all the world—I know we are.' He looked at her queerly and said, 'That's your mother speaking. Her voice, her words. Ann, you had a wonderful mother and thank God you're like her.' She said, with the cheeriest little smile, just like a mother with a scared baby, 'Yes, dear, I'm glad I'm like her, because that pleases you; and I want to be like you, too, because that would please her.' Then the warder coughed and came over. 'Sorry, Miss Preston, but time's up.' She smiled very sweetly at him and kissed her father again and said quite loudly, 'Remember, I'm thinking of you all the time,' and he said, 'Good-bye, Ann. I can't feel so desperate after this.' Then he shook hand with me and said, 'I'm glad she's got you,' and I, feeling and looking like a fool, said, 'She'll always have that, sir — good-bye, and good luck!' And that was all."

"Poor Ann," said Judith, the rare tears in her eyes. "It doesn't seem a bit fair that she should have all this to bear."

"It was pretty awful," said David slowly. "I know I never want to go through anything like it again. The trouble is that there'll be worse to follow."

"Don't say that."

"I can't help thinking it. I feel hopeless to-day. The ghastly part about saying good-bye to him like that was the thought that there'll be another and a worse good-bye presently."

"Don't," said Judith quickly, shivering in spite of the warmth of the day. "We must believe. We've got to believe."

But it was hard to believe a few days later when Morgan came out once more. The lawyer was a very worried man as he sat in Mr. Murray's office facing the three men.

"Good lord, it's a mess!" he groaned. "Any child could have made up a better story. The thing's fantastic."

"What is his story?"

It was George Murray's voice, and his face was white and lined with anxiety. Surely, thought David, he had taken the cause of his guest very much to heart?

"He hasn't said he's guilty?" rapped out David with sharp anxiety.

"No, but it's just hopeless. The wildest story. No jury could be expected to entertain it for a moment. I can tell you that Ashton isn't looking forward to

his job — having to go into court and defend a case like this. You can guess the history of the last week. Endless interviews, endless prevarications, endless attempts at reconstruction — and then, this! Preston still swears he didn't kill the man, but he admits he strung him up in that tree."

"What?"

"Good God—he hanged him?"

"What do you mean?" It was David's voice and it shook for a moment. "He hanged him but he didn't kill him?"

"No. He says that Langley was dead when he found him."

"Then why? . . ."

"Exactly. Why hang a dead man? That's the ridiculous part of it. Really, it would be better if he would confess. There's a lot of sympathy for him. No one would condemn him utterly. People have never forgotten that romantic story—his attempt to break gaol for the sake of his dying wife, and the bad luck he had in killing that warder. Every one knew Langley as the worst possible skunk. Apparently, from what we've been able to discover, the Preston swindle was only one episode in a rotten life. He's been every kind of a scoundrel — women, blackmail, petty crimes—but always been able to slip through the noose. He's a despicable rotter, far better dead—and Preston's only hope of escaping the gallows is to admit that he did him in."

"But why should he admit it—when he didn't do it?"

It was David who spoke, and for a minute the two men glared angrily at each other, then Mr. Murray's voice intervened.

"Suppose you tell us the story without comments? Then we can judge for ourselves."

The lawyer looked resentfully round then began in a carefully non-committal voice.

"Preston admits now that he knew Langley's identity with the man Collins and where he lived for a week before the murder. He still asserts that he did not know he was there, did not know he was even in New Zealand till accident revealed it to him. As I said, it was a week before the murder and he was sitting on the side veranda of this house. He heard someone speaking to Mrs. Marsden at the back door, and, though he could not distinguish the words, he seemed to recognise something familiar and sinister about the voice."

"You are sure," interpolated George Murray quietly, "that he did not hear the conversation?"

"Quite—though that would not have been of importance, probably as Mrs. Marsden has just told me the man merely called to leave a letter for you and made

## 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		
Detective Missen, engaged by George Murray to help prove Preston's innocence.		
Morgan, lawyer engaged to defend Preston.		

some casual observations about the weather. . . . By the way, Mr. Murray, what was in that letter?"

"Nothing that will help us. He merely wrote to ask if my men would give him a hand to muster the day before the sale."

"Curious that he would write and not just ask you?"

"I thought so too. But he had called before, apparently, and found me out. Perhaps he wrote the note with the idea of leaving it if I should be out again, as I was."

"You haven't the letter?"

"Unfortunately, no. It was three lines on a dirty scrap of paper and I simply read it and dropped it into the kitchen stove as I stood there. One of the men rode up to tell him it would be all right, and as you know they gave him a hand on the day before the sale. To tell you the truth, I quite forgot about the note and I assumed, without even bothering to mention it to Mrs. Marsden, that she had found it with the rest of my mail in the letter-box at the gate."

"I see. As you say, it's not important. Mrs. Marsden bears out Preston's statement that the man was there."

"And he saw him then?" asked David, impatient to get on with the fatal story.

"Yes. He says he'd got to his feet at the sound of that voice and was standing there trying to assure himself that he must be mad or dreaming when the man turned the corner of the house and their eyes met."

"What happened then?"

"He said, 'Hello, Gaol-bird—well met,' and grinned. Preston didn't speak. He admits that at the moment he couldn't trust himself. The other turned on his heel and was gone before Preston had pulled himself together."

"The damned scoundrel!" cried John Murray. "Murder or no murder, he wasn't fit to live."

"Unfortunately," commented the lawyer drily, "that consideration will not weight heavily with the judge—or the jury. To resume. The encounter, Preston admits, weighed terribly upon his mind.

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