

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

He felt all the old bitterness well up in his heart again, the hatred that had poisoned life for him in that Australian prison. He knew his one hope was to keep away from him, and he learned with thankfulness that the man was to leave the district in a few days. Unfortunately then Langley overdid things. Not content with the old injury, he apparently thought that he might wring a little more out of his victim. He met him in a deserted part of the road one day—evidently after dogging him about for some time—and demanded hush money from him. He said that he was down and out and that old pals should stick together. Preston admits that it was hard to keep his hands off the little rat, but he simply told him that, if he saw him starving in the gutter he would never give him a penny piece. Then the scoundrel tried threats, blackmail. Would he like his pretty little daughter to know? She seemed mighty thick with that young runholder, but old George Murray was far too proud a man to stand having a gaolbird's daughter for his nephew's wife."

David uttered a curse that shocked himself, and to his surprise George Murray echoed it.

"Vermin. . . . Vermin. . . . The man's better dead," he said. Then, after a moment, pulling himself together, "But proceed, please Mr. Morgan. We want to hear it all."

"Langley left him in a bitter rage, uttering all sorts of threats that Preston says he hardly heard. The man, he thinks, was mad, for he says that he appeared to hate not merely himself but most of the people around. He has a distinct recollection of his uttering all sorts of hints about the people at Te Rata."

"He must have been mad, indeed," said George Murray shortly. "I hardly knew the fellow. Nor did you, John, I think?"

"Spoke to him half a dozen times," said the nephew laconically. "He must have been dotty, I should think."

"Curiously enough, Preston has the impression that he was talking about you, all the same. However, as you say, that is not a matter of importance. Our man went home entirely shattered by the interview but determined to put it from his thoughts. After all, there was no real harm that the blackguard could do him now. He'd paid for his crimes—or his mistakes—and that was over. However, the thought of his daughter weighed on his mind and he felt mad with rage at the dreadful coincidence that had thrown him in the path of his old enemy."

"He seems indeed to have been marked down by fate. Go on."

"It culminated on the day of the sale. When he woke he found a scrap of paper thrown in at his window with the words, 'Your last chance. To-night I speak.' He spent a day of misery and at last he made up his mind. Rightly or wrongly, he decided that his daughter had suffered injury enough through his fault in the past; she should know nothing of the stain on her name. So he set

off from the house about four o'clock, taking all the money he had and his cheque-book with him. He rushed up the track and through the bush, intent on catching Langley before he left the shanty. He found his enemy—but someone else had been there before him. Langley lay dead upon the sack bunk of his filthy whare."

CHAPTER XVI.

Morgan paused dramatically but no one spoke. All three men sat with eyes fixed on him, waiting breathlessly for the next words.

"At first Preston was conscious of only one feeling—one of intense joy and relief. Fate had intervened. The wretched man had killed himself—for no thought of foul play entered his head. Langley had been only bluffing with him; when the bluff failed he had seen his last hope of money go with it. The stock that had been sold that day belonged to the firm who held a bill of sale over them. He had nothing and he dared not begin again his life of banditry in the cities. He knew that he was a marked man. There was no avenue open for him. On the table lay a bottle of whisky, almost empty. Even in Australian days Langley had been a heavy drinker. He had heard Mr. Murray speak of him with scorn as a sot. Presumably he had put some drug into his liquor and had chosen the easy way out."

"But surely," said John Murray, his face very puzzled, "It was the easy way out for Mr. Preston too. His enemy was dead. Why didn't he turn and leave him?"

"He was going to do so. He had already looked about him to see that no trace had been anywhere left of his visit—when suddenly his eye caught something that made him stop. It was an empty bottle of luminal and it lay beside the dead man's hand."

"Yes. The stomach showed traces of a big dose. But why did that matter?" asked John.

David gave a sudden exclamation, leaning forward in his excitement. "Luminal. Of course. And he remembered that he himself had bought it."

George Murray drew a deep breath. "He was afraid. He knew that it could be traced."

"Yes. Common sense told him that once Langley's death was known the police would soon get on to his story. The old business in Australia would all come out and his own whereabouts be the next inquiry. He realised that he could easily be traced to Auckland and then the luminal purchase would be discovered. He knew it was an uncommon drug—as a matter of fact, he admits that he himself had known little of it till some men on the boat were discussing sedatives and one spoke of the marvellous effects of luminal on nerves that were racked by sleeplessness."

"Can we find those men who were talking about it?"

Morgan shrugged. "They were through passengers to America and he doesn't even know their names. As a matter of fact, we wouldn't advance our cause much if we did find them. We can't disprove the purchase of luminal and we know

that luminal was the cause of Langley's death."

"Good lord, how hopeless it all seems!" groaned John.

"Exactly. That was how it seemed to Preston. He says that he stood stock still and gazed at that empty bottle which still carried a luminal label, but from which the chemist's name had been removed. Preston had finished his own bottle and thrown it away. He couldn't produce it. He says that he seemed to feel the rope closing round his neck. He saw in a flash that Langley had, quite unknowingly, taken the most complete and devastating revenge in the moment of his death."

"And then?"

"And then he admits he lost his head. Oh, granting for a moment that he's been speaking the truth this time, you can't wonder at it. Picture his position—a man always hounded by fate, as Mr. Murray has said. It would be the last straw. He has all the old lag's fear of the police. The motive for the crime is there. The very evidence of the empty luminal bottle stares him in the face. Small wonder that he went mad for a minute."

"And while he was mad what did he do?" George Murray's voice was so unlike his own that even John looked up sharply and the lawyer was apologetic.

"It's a nasty story and I can see that it's worrying you, Mr. Murray."

The older man made a gesture of impatience. "Nonsense. I'm not a fool or a baby. For God's sake, man, get on with it."

The two young men gaped; not even John had ever heard his kindly and gentle-spoken uncle give way like this.

The horror of the story had evidently worked badly upon nerves already frayed by the extraordinary happenings of the last month.

George Murray was a man of importance, and the lawyer did not show the resentment that he doubtless felt. He coughed apologetically and began to talk once more, and as the tale unfolded it seemed to his hearers that they had left the sensible, everyday world and plunged abruptly into some realm of horrible fantasy.

"His one idea, he says, was to attempt to hide the body. At first he thought of burying it in the bush, and he searched wildly in all the sheds for any kind of spade or shovel. There wasn't a thing. Apparently every worn-out tool had been sold to raise a few more pence for the mortgages. Preston felt his brain reeling. Time was passing. At any moment somebody might come in and the suicide—that he knew would never be accepted for a suicide—be discovered. What could he do? Once again he had that distinct impression of the hangman's rope—and that gave him his sudden fatal inspiration. In the corner of the empty tumble-down shed he had noticed a new rope. Its incongruousness in those bare and penniless surroundings had impressed itself upon his sub-conscious brain. As we have found out since, the rope was one left by your own workmen, Mr. Murray, when they had helped Langley to muster and dehorn some cattle a week or so before."

"Yes. It was my rope. Both Johnson and Smith knew it well and remember leaving it there."

(To be continued next week)

The future
won't take care
of itself....



The wise man does not worry about the future but equally he does not ignore it, for dangers have to be guarded against.

Your duty is to make suitable provision for the administration of your estate and for the running of

your business when you are gone. Your local Public Trust Office will gladly furnish you with the in-

formation you require and show how it can assist in foreseeing and meeting the problems which may arise when you are no longer here to grapple with them.

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