

**SYNOPSIS**

Strung up on a tree in thick backblocks bush the body of a nearby shanty owner, James Collins, is discovered by a student, David Armstrong. With Judith Anson he seeks help at the nearest house, where live George Murray and 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; and he is known to have bought a bottle of luminal soon after reaching New Zealand.

Ann refuses to marry David till her father's name is cleared. Meanwhile Judith and Mrs. Marsden become firm friends. She tells Judith something of John, and her deep affection for him is apparent. John's father was a harsh and intolerant man, and his mother died when he was two, since when he has been under Mrs. Marsden's care.

Mrs. Marsden tells Judith that she was present in the clearing at the time of the crime and saw Preston there. But so unshaken is her belief in Preston's innocence that Judith concludes she must be in love with Preston.

When, at the preliminary hearing, a rover gives evidence that he saw Preston in the clearing on the afternoon of the murder, Preston retracts his story of complete innocence and confesses to his lawyer that a week before the murder he found out that Langley was in the district. Langley came to Murray's house with a letter for Murray and, encountering Preston, threatened to tell Ann of Preston's past. After some days Preston realised he had no alternative to paying the money which Langley demanded. He went up to the clearing with the money, entered the shanty, and found Langley already dead. His first thought was of relief at Langley's suicide, followed by panic when he saw a bottle of luminal on the table and realised that he might be suspected of murder. His one thought was to get rid of the body. Then he noticed a coil of rope, John Murray's rope, in the corner of the whare.

**CHAPTER XVI. (continued)**

"SEEING the rope," the lawyer continued, "Preston realised that if only Langley had hanged himself instead of poisoning himself, then everyone would know it was suicide. No one ever bothered much about a case of hanging. No one would dream of suspecting murder. It was the ordinary way out for the derelict who could no longer face life. If only Langley had hanged himself. Then it came to him. Why should not the dead man have hanged himself? Hanged himself in the bush where the body would probably not be found for weeks. Right in the depths of the bush where no one would be likely to go. He knew that Langley was unpopular in the district, that he was supposed to be clearing out after the sale—no one knew or cared where. The farm was being left empty, like so many more deteriorated farms in these days of slump. Who would go near the bush? By the time the body was discovered, who would be able to tell how the man had met his death? You see the idea. . . ."

"A mad idea. A p.m. would disclose the luminal at once."

"Yes, but who would hold a p.m. on a body that had been hanging for months perhaps in the bush? Who would look for any other cause of death than suicide in a down-and-out? That was what flashed across the poor devil's mind. A mad idea? Possibly, but I think, the man was mad at the moment."

Morgan spoke hotly, lost in the interest and drama of his tale. The cold and calculating lawyer was gone for a moment,

# It is dark in the bush

only the special pleader remained. The other three unconsciously hung on his words.

"The rest was simply a matter of carrying out this mad idea. As you know, Langley was a very short spare man, weighing not 10 stone, and Preston is exceptionally powerful."

"Exceptionally," agreed Mr. Murray, and the others knew that he was thinking of those bales of wool that the accused man had helped them to press in the shed only the day before the crime. "Nevertheless, he confesses that it took all his strength. But he says that at the moment he felt no fatigue or strain—that he was, he supposes, possessed of only one idea, and his body a mere instrument in the power of an overwhelming obsession. He doubts whether otherwise he could have done it—even taking their comparative sizes into consideration. Because you see it was not only a question of carrying the body out—he had to hang a dead weight on the tree—to raise it some height from the ground."

"Could he do it?" asked David doubtfully. "It's supposed to be a very difficult job."

"He did it all right, assuming once again that he is telling the truth. He described the method to me—says that he remembered in that hour of extremity a scene which must have lain dormant in his mind for years—he remembered watching a man on a sheep station in Australia hanging the carcass of a sheep that he had killed. It was a very heavy carcass and the man was boasting of his strength. His mates bet him that he couldn't raise this dead weight alone and without a pulley and the chap won the bet. Preston imitated his method—tied the slack of the rope round the foot of the tree and pulled; tightening the slack all the time. That did it. He says that he knows he couldn't have done it in cold blood—but he did it in that moment of extremity. Only, he made two bad mistakes."

"He lifted the body too high. I remember that. It struck me as soon as I looked at the cut rope."

"Yes. In his mad desire to hang it, he lifted it to within a few inches of the branch and forgot that the strain of the rope had left a groove in the timber. That was one. But the other was more serious."

"The dog," said David shortly. "He forgot the dog."

"He didn't exactly forget it, but curiously enough he weakened at the thought of destroying it. He had no weapon, you see, and he hated the thought of battering the poor brute to death. Of course he knew the dog would have to die, but he made up his mind to come back the next morning with a gun—to borrow

yours, Mr. Murray, and say that he would look for a rabbit. That delay was fatal. But for that you boys would never have found the body—it might have hung there for months, to pass in the end as a case of suicide and be left at that."

"Yes. The dog was a fatal blunder. A farmer would have realised but not a man unaccustomed to animals."

"There's the story. Believe it or not as you choose. Officially we've got to believe it."

"I believe it," said David slowly. "It bears the stamp of truth, just because it's so mad."

"I agree with David," said John Murray after a minute. "The only thing that worries me—do you think, Uncle, that one man could have pulled up the body like that?"

"Yes," said George Murray quietly, but emphatically. "It could be done. The undressed carcass of a fat sheep does not weigh so very much less than the dead body of a light man. That feat of strength that Preston said he had seen in an Australian shed is not uncommon. I've seen a powerful man do it several times."

"And then we must remember that Preston is quite unusually strong," said the nephew, glad to be convinced.

"And that he was probably endowed with almost superhuman strength at the time," amended David. "A man under the goad of a mortal terror like that would be capable of extraordinary effort."

"Which he paid for later," said the old man. "You remember those heart attacks?"

"Probably he wouldn't have suffered from it," mused the young doctor, "if he hadn't just had influenza and been pretty bad from all accounts. It must have taken him a long time, all the same."

"He had just finished and was busy removing all his tracks, fingerprints, etc., when he heard your voices far up the hill. He turned and went for his life, and just as he was going down the track through the bush he heard an infernal clamour break out. The dog, which had apparently grown used to his coming and going, was making himself heard at the sight of a fresh lot of strangers."

"That dog is a curious business altogether," said David. "Why was it so upset? Why did it howl like that?"

"Nothing very strange in that," said George Murray quietly. "There are plenty of stories of dogs lamenting the death of their masters in that way. No, don't ask me to explain it, Mr. Morgan. You lawyers must leave something to the imagination. What is it? I can't tell you. Some sixth sense, an intuition denied to man, perhaps, I only know that when a shepherd was killed here by

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

a fall from his horse his dogs howled all night although they had had never a sight of the body. Dogs are queer things you know, and there's a very special bond that unites them to their masters, especially when they live alone with them as this poor brute did."

"Evidently. What happened to it, by the way?"

"He's here. Miss Anson adopted him. He's quite reconciled to his new owner now and they go about a good deal together."

"Miss Anson is a remarkable young lady. I wish we could get her into the box on our side. I rather fancy she'd shine under cross-examination."

"She does not lose her head easily," George Murray assented with a smile at his nephew. "But I think that Ann Preston will do well. She is, you see, absolutely convinced of her father's innocence."

"And so are you all, I take it?" said the lawyer, glancing round. "Curious how helpful an audience of sympathetic listeners is, even if they are amateurs. I felt the story almost too fantastic to tell when I came here. Now I—well, I declare I believe it myself."

"A tribute to your own eloquence, perhaps, rather than our listening," said the old man smiling. "I thought as you talked that it was a pity that it was to be Ashton and not you at the trial."

"Ashton will do far more with it. As a matter of fact, it's a sensational story, and you know how good he is at that. Can't you see the whole thing for yourself?"

"I can certainly imagine it clearly. The unfortunate man must have felt the dice truly loaded against him when he saw that bottle. Still, his idea was a very wild one."

"What, exactly, could he do that was better?" asked David. "After all, the greatest argument against his plan was that it failed. Its failure was due to the dog, according to Mr. Morgan. But the dog itself would have done no harm if we hadn't turned up. I've no doubt Preston would have come next day and shot the poor brute and buried it."

"I wonder whether he would have buried the corpse too? Surely he wouldn't have gone away and left it hanging there?"

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