

**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, for whom she has cared since he was two, and her deep affection for him is apparent. Mrs. Marsden confesses to Judith that she saw Preston in the clearing, but has kept silence lest her story should incriminate him. However, at the preliminary hearing, a drover gives evidence that he also saw Preston in the clearing on the afternoon of the murder. Preston then 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. Panic seized him when he saw a bottle of luminal on the table, and realised that he might be suspected of the murder. His one thought was to get rid of the body, so he dragged it far into the bush, and strung it on a tree. Even if the body were discovered, it would look like suicide.

David goes to town for a few days and meets his lawyer friend Stephen Bryce, to whom he tells Preston's story.

Now read on.

**CHAPTER XVII. (cont'd.)**

AN hour later David leant back in the easiest chair in Stephen's room and filled his pipe.

"There you are. That's the story up-to-date. It's a hell of a mess, isn't it? What do you make of it?"

"Nothing much just now—except that it sounds true."

"You think so?" David's tone was eager. He had a respect for Stephen's logical mind and knew that from him he would be able at last to get an unprejudiced opinion.

"Definitely, yes. Fantastic, of course, but that's rather in its favour. It's not the sort of a yarn a man would make up. Too improbable."

"But what will a jury make it?"

Stephen sat silently smoking for a minute. "I don't know. From what I hear and read, it seems pretty well impossible to tell how a jury will take anything. Mind you, Ashton's a brilliant chap; he'll know more about those jury-men than their own mothers by the end of the second day—and he'll shape his case accordingly."

"Then you think there's a chance?"

"A sporting one that's all. If you get a stolid lot of jurymen it'll be harder. Still, we can only wait—and hope."

"It's that that's so rotten. I suppose I couldn't do anything more? I'm not hard-up, as you know, and I'd spend every penny to get Ann's father out of this hole. You don't think it would be any use trying to get hold of some fresh man, someone quite independent of Morgan and his man Missen?"

# It is dark in the bush

Stephen shook his head. "I don't think so. Morgan and Missen are both good men and you're not likely to improve on them in this country. I can't feel anything's to be gained by roping in some more. People seem to be tumbling over each other up there already, from what I can make out."

"Yet there are absolutely no results."

"Except that bit of stuff torn from someone's dress. That's very interesting and points distinctly to someone else being connected with the crime."

"I don't know. After all, some woman of the district may have torn her dress when she was going for a stroll a week before the crime. We can't be certain exactly how long it was there."

"It didn't happen like that. The woman would have come forward if she'd had nothing to hide. No. The wearer of that dress has some jolly good reason for lying doggo. What about Mrs. Marsden—or Ann?"

David flushed angrily in spite of himself. "Mrs. Marsden's out of the question. She's so sublimely detached from the whole business that she'd have claimed the thing at once and only remarked placidly that it would make rather an ugly darn."

"And Ann? Oh, don't be a fool, David, I'm not trying to make out that she murdered the bloke—but she might have been on that track and seen her father and have kept quiet for his sake. Don't you see?"

David shook his head. "Not Ann. Judith, perhaps; she has an uncanny knack of holding her tongue. But not Ann—and even if she could keep it from outsiders, she couldn't help telling me."

"Probably not. You'd know if she was hiding something."

The men sat puffing silently for a few minutes. David was finding his pipe tasted better; after all, it was a comfort to have someone to talk it all over with.

"There remains—Mrs. Marsden."

The other laughed impatiently. "Mrs. Marsden! Just as well imagine a domestic cow mixing itself up in a mystery. No, that doesn't do her justice. She's too fine and capable and handsome for a cow—but there's just about as much mystery or passion about her. Anyway she was lying down in her room all afternoon, according to all accounts. Would she be likely to go careering round the countryside, tearing a bit out of a dress that no one knew she possessed? Picture her doing anything so rash as tear any garment, even an old one! And, if she did, would she be likely to lie about it? No, definitely—that's out of the picture."

"I mightn't admit it if I hadn't met the lady, but I'm inclined to think you're right. Neither she nor Ann turned a hair at sight of the piece of stuff, did they?"

"Not a hair. The only one who seemed excited was Judith. She was—well, for

her, almost upset when I talked to her about it afterwards."

"Judith's no good. She was wandering in the bush at the moment—and hadn't any dress of that colour in her knapsack. All the same, there are possibilities about that bit of stuff. The woman who wore it has some reason for hiding, and the chances are she's living somewhere near. If she'd been a stranger, she wouldn't have been likely to have been on that track. . . . One other thing, David—a good rule, according to the novelists—suspect everybody."

"How do you mean?"

"Cut out all your own feelings and intuitions and suspect everyone who hasn't a perfect alibi. I know it's the fashion to laugh at alibis. That's the fault of Agatha Christie and Co. But there's no use trying to get round an alibi like John Murray's. A dozen people saw him in town; they can't all be lying or bribed. So we cut him out. But he's the only one of the household at Te Rata who can prove that he wasn't on hand at the time of the crime. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, but. . . ."

"Wait a bit. Who else was on the place? Ann, Mrs. Marsden, Mr. Murray. Was that all?"

"Well, I suppose there were the station hands. There are always three men working on the place, you know. They board with the married shepherd."

"Well, find out all you can about them. They knew Langley, you say, as they helped him muster for the sale. Did any of them quarrel with him? Had one, perhaps, known him before? Where were they that afternoon?"

"Yes, I see what you're driving at, but I think the police and Missen are certain to have done all that."

"Never mind if they have. Who found that piece of green linen? Not the police and Missen. It may have been only beginners' luck—but you may be lucky again. Give it a go, anyway."

"I will, of course, but I'm afraid those men are out of it. I'm pretty sure I heard that they were all working within sight of each other, on the back of the place that day."

"If they were, there still remains—George Murray."

"David looked shocked. "Mr. Murray? Well, that's a pretty mad idea. You know the old boy, Stephen. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

"All the more reason to suspect him."

"Good lord, Stephen, you have got it bad. Keeping up the good old thriller tradition of looking for the criminal in the least likely person?"

"Why not? Truth sometimes follows fiction—even thriller fiction. Why not George Murray as well as Charles Preston?"

## 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.                                     |   |                              |

"But hang it all, Preston had known the blackguard before. He had every reason to hate him. Not that I'm weakening in my belief in him. I'm perfectly sure he's innocent. I'm only trying to show you that there's no reason to suspect Mr. Murray, but there is reason to suspect Preston. Really, Stephen, you're an ungrateful beast. Think how good old Murray was to us—the most genial host."

"Genial hosts have committed crimes before now. Now, don't glare at me. I'm not saying Mr. Murray did it; I'm simply saying you've no right to take him for granted. You ought to suspect everyone—Mrs. Marsden, the shepherds, George Murray—even Ann."

David made a wry face as he rose to his feet. "Thanks. Jolly advice. Luckily, it isn't humanly possible to follow all of it. All the same I see your point and I'll try to act on your advice."

"Believe me, it's the only way you'll do any good. Don't go yet. Plenty of time for a spot or two. Let's drink to the solution of the mystery and the confusion of the murderer."

"I'm not sure I want to drink that," said David slowly, glass in hand.

"Nor I—because Langley's better dead and his murderer's probably suffering enough already. Right old man, we'll drink to Preston, and may he get out of the mess safely and soon."

They raised their glasses and drank solemnly. To David it was a pledge.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

When David got back to his hotel he found a message telling him that Morgan had rung him; would he please communicate with the lawyer at nine o'clock next morning? The message gave him a restless night and he was waiting on the solicitor's doorstep when he reached his office next morning. In spite of himself he hoped for some splendid discovery.

"Nothing very urgent," said Morgan disappointingly. "Only that Preston wants to see you and that I've got permission for ten o'clock this morning."

"Do you know what it's about?"

"Something confidential to do with the daughter."

This was enough to set David in a ferment, and, when at last he was

(Continued on next page)