IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

admitted to the gaol and ushered into the governor's office, he had persuaded himself that fresh disaster lay ahead. The officials were kind; they could not allow him to see the prisoner alone, but the warders would stand at the door and allow as much privacy as possible. Presently he was facing Preston across a wide table that divided the room and made it impossible for either to touch the other. The warders were kindly, decent fellows who made their presence as unobtrusive as possible.

David's first impression was that Preston had altered in some subtle way during these two months of prison life. The air of doom that had enveloped him when they first met had gone. It seemed as if, now that fate had overtaken him again, apathy and resignation had fallen upon him. The yoke of the prison was on those broad shoulders once again and Charles Preston, the suffering, struggling human being, had gone for ever.

But despite this first impression, David soon realised that fear could still touch the man. Urgent appeal looked out of his sunken eyes and David's heart sank. Even now Preston had not told the whole truth to those who were to fight his battles; some secret still haunted him. and that, according to the message he had received, was to do with Ann.

Preston's beginning was peculiar, "I've sent for you, David, as my daughter's fiancé to tell you of something entirely private and connected with her alone."

Then David realised that these words were simply meant to carry as far as the doorway against which the warders were leaning. The younger man was quick to take his cue.

"If we are to discuss your daughter's private affairs," he said, "I'm sure these officers won't mind if we speak very quietly."

The men nodded and began to talk to each other, giving an opportunity which Preston quickly seized.

"It's not Ann. I had to use that excuse so as to get you alone to have some privacy. This concerns her only indirectly. I want you to help me, You're the only one I can trust, for her sake you won't fail me."

David nodded impatiently. "Of course not, but be quick. They won't give us long."

Langley had some papers hidden somewhere, in or near that cottage in the bush. He told me so. He said he told all his enemies about them so that they'd understand that they'd lose more than they'd gain by his death. He swore he'd written it all out in full-his whole beastly life, all the scandals that involved other people, the people he'd blackmailed-a full list with the names and addresses of the victims. That was how he protected himself because he knew there were people who wanted his death."

"But this fear kept them off. . . I see."

"Yes. You see how this evidence would tell against me - give the last link in the chain. You see how Ann would suffer if the whole of the past were known. Not only Ann-other people just as innocent that we don't even know. The thought of those papers is driving me mad, David-shut up here, unable to do anything.'

"He didn't give you any hint?"

"None; he just laughed and said, 'Yes, it's all written down, your story and a lot of others. A complete Rogues' Calendar. How pleased the police will be when they get it. So, if I should happen to peg out, they won't have to look far for the motive. Oh, I've found a bundle of papers just as good a protection as a steel waistcoat in my day.' But I couldn't get any more out of him, not even when he'd been drinking. Of course I meant to get those papers when I set out for the whare that day, but I was too late. Too late."

"Where can they be? Well hidden, for the police haven't found them yet. Of course they don't know about themdoes Morgan know?"

"No, I didn't tell him. Why? I suppose because an old lag never trusts a lawyer further than he can help. Be careful how you look for them. Don't let the police get any suspicion-but get hold of them somehow."

"Where on earth can they be? Some cunning place in the bush, I supposeor could he have left them with someone in town?"

"I don't think so, because, that time when he was drunk, he began boasting about them and chuckling because he said someone would give anything to get hold of them, someone I knew-and they'd be pretty mad if they realised they were only a few miles away from the papers."

"Only a few miles away!. But that meant someone at Te Rata-and besides. you don't know anyone except the people there. But that's ridiculous. Who at Te Rata would want the beastly papers?"

Even as he spoke he remembered Stephen's conviction that there was someone close at hand also connected with the crime. Someone, even at Te Rata itself. His heart beat fast with excitement and some other feeling; was it dread?

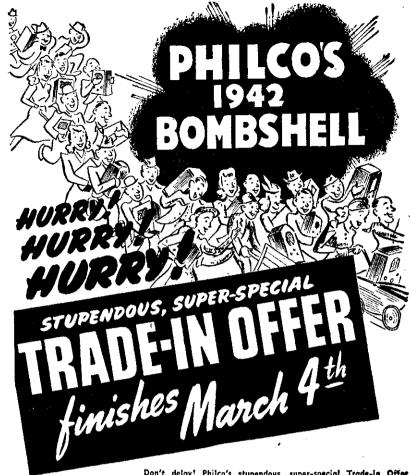
"I don't know what he meant. I've tried to puzzle it out a hundred times. The only solution seems to me wildly fantastic, but I've wondered sometimes. Yes. thank you, we've just finished."

Their time was up. The officers intimated that pleasantly enough. But, as David watched Charles Preston disappear, his last words returned to tantalise him-what had he often wondered

David walked slowly away from the grey and forbidding building, his thoughts busy with the whole problem. One thing was clear; to keep his promise to Preston and find those papers, he must go back to Te Rata to-morrow. That was the first step; the second was to work ceaselessly to recover that Rogues' Calendar; once he had found it, once he knew whom it involved, he would be able to pick up the missing link in the chain. He went back to his hotel and packed ready for his journey to-morrow. He would leave his suitcases in town and travel to Te Rata on his newly-acquired but second-hand motor bike. That would make it easy for him to move freely about the country, without being always dependent on George Murray.

George Murray. Stephen's words returned to taunt him: "Even a genial host can commit a murder. Suspect everyone. . . ." George Murray. . . . Who was it, "only a few miles away" who wanted those papers so desperately?

(To be continued next week)



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