

## (Continued from previous page)

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.

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."

"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."

"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."

"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."

"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."

"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 *where* that day, but I was too late. Too late."

"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."

"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."

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?

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

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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