

**SYNOPSIS**

Three students discover the body of James Collins on a tree in backblocks bush. The inquest reveals that Collins died of luminal poisoning and 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 that he is known to have bought luminal soon after reaching New Zealand.

Mrs. Marsden confesses to Judith that she saw Preston in the clearing on the afternoon of the murder (a piece of material discovered near the track was torn from her frock). Preston tells his lawyer that a week before the murder Langley came to Murray's house, Te Rata, with a letter for Murray, and, encountering Preston, taunted him and demanded money. Preston, fearful lest Langley should tell Ann of his past, goes up to the clearing with the money, enters the shanty and finds Langley already dead. Panic succeeds relief when he sees a bottle of luminal on the table and realises he will be suspected of the murder. Thinking to get rid of the body, he drags it far into the bush and strings it on a tree, hoping that even if the body is discovered it will look like suicide.

David visits Preston in prison. Preston tells him that, hidden near the shanty are Langley's papers giving the full history of the people he has blackmailed. Langley had boasted to Preston that someone else at Te Rata was anxious to get hold of them. Preston begs David to remove them before the police discover their hiding-place. But David's search is in vain.

**CHAPTER XX—(Cont'd)**

"AND yet," David mused, as he stood in the cottage doorway on the Thursday evening, "he can't have hidden the papers too mysteriously. If he did, he would defeat his own ends. Supposing the police could not find the document, his dying revenge is lost. No, they must be in some fairly obvious place, or else he left some sign telling us where to look . . . Why, even now it may be staring me in the face."

The sun had sunk low in the heavens as he stood dreaming in the doorway, and now the whole world was flooded with a lovely sunset glow. At once the sordid yard, the straggling trees at the edge of the bush, the dead stumps and gaunt skeletons of forest giants were transformed into things of a magic and radiant beauty. The bush behind showed no longer a tangle of undergrowth, broken by the efforts of a dozen searchers, the ground below muddy and trampled by countless careless feet; it became a cavern of mystery an abode of infinite peace.

David stood, pipe in hand, gazing before him, even his unimaginative young heart stirred by the beauty of the scene. What was the magic of the New Zealand forest that it should grip a man's heart like this? It had little colour, no variety of scent and sound, yet it seemed always to those who knew and loved it a thing of magic and unchanging beauty. Not a leaf moved, not a bird twittered as David stood gazing deep into the heart of the forest.

And then suddenly Judith's cynical words on the day when they had first penetrated its depths, first stumbled upon all this tangle of love and mystery, recurred to him with a sharpness that was almost a physical shock. The horrors of the peaceful countryside. Sherlock Holmes had been right and his faithful young disciple Judith Anson had been apt in her quotation. . . . Into the peace-

ful and serene depths of that forest a dead body had been dragged; upon one of those lovely trees a poor inanimate corpse had been hanged and left to dangle until decay robbed it of all semblance to the human form. . . . David shuddered and turned away. . . . Judith had known what she was talking about, with the uncanny intuition which occasionally was the prerogative of these silent and thoughtful people.

So much was the girl in his thoughts at the moment that it surprised him not at all to hear a crackling in the undergrowth and to see a dog come pattering along the path through the bush. It was Rough, the murdered man's only friend, and behind him walked his new mistress.

In years of friendship and in the closer intimacy of the last few weeks, David had grown used to Judith. He had an almost brotherly regard for her; she was one of the pleasant, abiding things in life. Not exciting or appealing, like Ann, but rock-like and unchanging. A fellow could put his last shilling on her.

He stood watching her and suddenly she looked up and saw him, and her grave eyes brightened in a smile.

"Hullo Sherlock, any luck?"

"Devil a clue. I'm afraid I'm not a Lord Peter—or even a humble Dr. Watson. But what are you doing up here?"

"Just walking—for the good of my figure, not to mention Rough's. Since he's been better fed he's inclined to get fat."

"He's looking very fit. Evidently he's ceased to mourn."

"I don't know about that. Look at him now."

The dog was behaving curiously. It seemed as though some old, half-forgotten memories were tugging at his heart. He stood still at the rickety back gate and sniffed the air with a short, half-yelping bark, then he rushed through the fence and into the barren garden, head down, evidently looking for a scent he failed to find. Presently he stood still and turned to glance uncertainly at his new mistress, his eyes travelling from her face to the little hut that stood gaunt and lonely with closed, dusty windows and gaping half-open door. Judith whistled and he turned obediently towards her, then paused and with a yelp of misery and excitement ran to the door of the little cottage. He hesitated on the doorstep, peered in with eager hope, then gave a loud, questioning bark and was off again on his search of the premises, only to rush back crestfallen to Judith's side in a few minutes. He stood before her, gazing, with a curious wild questioning, into the face he was learning to trust, as if imploring her to set his poor troubled mind at rest.

# It is dark in the bush

"Poor old boy!" said the girl, bending to lay a gentle hand on the rough head. "It's no use. He's gone away, Rough, and he's never coming back. Do you understand? There's no one here. He's never coming back. You've got only me now."

The dog continued to search her face with hurt, half-human eyes, then presently gave a whimper and threw himself down on the rough grass at her feet. Judith stood looking at him with pity and affection. "Good old boy! We'll have some splendid times yet—only you've got to follow meekly at my heels and not try to get so chummy with Mr. Murray's lambs."

They both laughed and the dog wagged his tail in an eager desire to applaud and understand every mood of his new idol.

"Poor, pathetic devil!" mused David. "At least somebody remembered Langley with affection."

"Yes. One is inclined to wonder if he can have been wholly bad when his dog loved him so much."

"I don't know about that. You remember O. Henry's contention that the men who were kindest to dogs were most cruel to women?"

Judith laughed lightly. "These theorists! At least we've found no woman in Langley's unsavoury past. Don't let's paint the poor wretch any blacker than he was."

"God knows I don't want to, but you started the quotation habit and I had to show that I, too, had dwelt among the immortals — at least the immortals of short-story writing."

"Nonsense. What classics have I been quoting?"

"Have you forgotten your delphic utterances on that first day when we climbed the hill on peaceful hiking bent? Your Sherlock Holmes quotation about the peaceful, smiling countryside has haunted me to-day."

"Oh that! Yes, it was rather clever of me to be so profound by accident, wasn't it? Anyway, that was a lot of nonsense. I've got to forget all about that now that I'm going to become a country woman myself. Not that it's difficult to forget tragedy and horror in the Te Rata household; it's an abode of peace and friendliness if ever there was one."

"You feel that?"

"Certainly. Don't you?" Her tone was light and he knew perfectly well that she was fencing with him; realising that his slower wits were no match for hers, he spoke irritably.

"I suppose so, but you can't expect me to feel as cheery about everything

## 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.                                     |                               |

as you do. It'd be queer if I were tumbling over myself with happiness when Ann is so wretched."

She was her kind self again at once, slipping her arm into his and saying gently, "I know. It's rotten for you. But it must clear up soon, David. The truth can't be hidden much longer."

Then she astonished him by suddenly saying, "Whatever happens, David, whatever comes of all this, we'll always stay friends, won't we?"

Before he could answer she was laughing at herself.

"There I am, going all sentimental and clinging to the old college friends and all that. Horrible results of approaching matrimony. Rather humiliating in a girl of 1937."

She was baffling him again, but as he watched her David was aware of tension and unhappiness in her face; there were shadows under her eyes and she was paler than usual. If Te Rata was such a home of bliss, if her road in life was to be so easy and so secure, why did Judith look like this? He gave an exasperated sigh; he was no good at this sort of thing; better get back to hospital and deal with bodies only; minds were evidently beyond him.

"Well, let's get home," he said gruffly. "This is a beastly place. I'm surprised you like coming here. It can't have pleasant memories."

"Really David, how tactless you are! Have you forgotten that you and I spent an entirely virtuous but not uneventful night in this spot? And, after all, if we hadn't come here I'd never have met John."

"All the same, it hasn't been happy memories."

"Oh, memories don't worry me. I've been here often."

The words had slipped out; he heard her catch her breath in annoyance. She hadn't meant to say that. Why? David pressed the point.

"What, you don't tell me you've been haunting this spot too? What on earth for?"

(Continued on next page)