

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

"Not haunting it," said Judith lightly, evasively. "But I walk a good deal when John's busy and I've sometimes come here in the course of my walks. It seemed best, too, to let Rough see for himself that his master had disappeared."

"I must say you make a lot of fuss about that dog. Anybody would think he was human."

"Dogs are human. They've got all our best points," said the girl mischievously. "They listen and don't speak; they accept and never ask silly questions."

"Thanks. Why not add that they don't try to pose as Sherlock Holmeses?"

"Ah, that's different. If this one could speak we'd need no amateurs and no professionals either. Come along, Rough. We've captured our sleuth and now we'll take him home to dinner," and with a teasing laugh she set off down the hill, the dog following submissively, contentedly at her heels.

CHAPTER XXI.

Like most normal people, living for a time under the shadow of tragedy, the Te Rata household seized eagerly on small jokes and made the most of them. It had become their habit to tease David about his sleuthing propensities and, at

the breakfast table next morning, when he asked Mrs. Marsden if he might take his lunch out once more, there was a general laugh.

John Murray grinned as he said, "Judith, you know him better than we do. Is he often like this?"

"He varies," she replied gravely. "It's a case of obsessions, really. At the moment he's certain that he's a reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes. By next week it may be something quite different."

"We must watch him," said Mr. Murray. "The moon's not far off the full and he may be dangerous then."

"Never mind," said Ann stoutly, "I think he's wonderful and I'll bet anything that, if there's anything to find he'll find it."

"I wouldn't take up that bet," said Judith, "because you'll probably win. David always was the dogged kind. Anyway, he's wiser than the rest of us. He fills his time and his mind. We haven't the blessing of that distraction."

"You surely could have," said Mrs. Marsden unexpectedly.

"As, for example?"

"Well, I suppose you modern young things would call a wedding a distraction. Why not fill in the time in that way?"

"Everybody gaped at her in surprise, but Mrs. Marsden continued placidly to butter her toast. Was it stupidity or blindness that made her harp like this on John's wedding? No one else would have dared to interfere, yet she seemed unable to leave the subject alone.

John broke into the awkward moment by seconding her heartily, adding, almost defensively, "And let me tell you, after twenty years' experience of Marsy, that she's not the sort that rushes in with advice."

"As a matter of fact," said his uncle, "I was just reflecting that I've only known Mrs. Marsden volunteer an opinion once before—and that was on the important question as to whether John should be given castor oil at the age of six. Rather a record for a woman, I think."

"I'm sorry I've broken it now. Evidently old age has overtaken me. I always think that minding other people's business is one of its worst symptoms."

"If you're the victim of old age," said Judith with unexpected warmth, "I'll never be afraid of it again."

"You talking of being old, Marsy?" gibed John affectionately. "Why, you're like the sphinx, or something. You never change or alter."

"Still I'm twenty years older than when you first knew me, John."

"You don't look it, and you don't seem it. You've always looked exactly the same, to my memory."

"Thank you John—I like that compliment more than I should have done twenty years ago."

He did not laugh, but went on musingly, "I suppose it's because I'm so used to you. You're a permanent institution. I couldn't imagine life without you any more than without—without."

He looked about vaguely, trying to find his metaphor and she supplied it with a smile. "Without the grandfather clock that your great-grandfather brought from England."

They all laughed at this except John Murray who shook his head.

"Something more original than that. Something with a bit of inspiration and heart to it. Let's say that I can't picture life without you any more than I can without Uncle George. That's nearer the truth." She smiled, but rose from the table rather abruptly and said, "Far too complimentary for breakfast time, John. Well, I must get to my work."

"Yes David, your lunch will be ready in ten minutes."

(To be continued next week)

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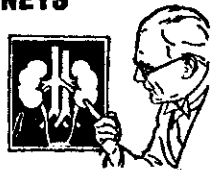
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