

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. David camps near the shanty and begins his search.

CHAPTER XXI. (Cont'd.)

FROM the track on the hillside half-an-hour later, the young doctor paused to look back on the homestead spread out below. A broad fan of smoke hung poised above the chimney stack and the figure of Ann in her white frock came out into the veranda to wave to him. From the stable yard at the back came the excited barking of Rough as he strained at his chain and watched John saddling his hack and Judith's mare. Through the gate leading out of the home paddock rode the broad, bowed figure of George Murray on his weight-carrying cob, his sheep-dog trotting sedately behind him. As he still paused his eyes lingering on the pleasant scene, Mrs. Marsden came out of the back door and crossed to the old apple tree behind the wood-shed. He saw her reach up and drop a score of the big rosy apples into her apron.

Something in the sight was curiously reassuring to David. They had been right. There was some enduring and restful quality about this kind, silent woman; she was not at all unlike the solid, beautiful clock to which she had compared herself. He could well believe that time had scarcely touched her. She said less than anyone else in the household, probably felt less, and yet there was a protectiveness about her that seemed to cover them all. He had a silly fancy that no great tragedy could touch even Ann with that comforting presence on guard. Nothing would shake her. She would go on for years, guiding, helping, standing by, herself untouched by all the emotional stress of life around her. But David lingered no longer even to meditate upon the Te Rata household; time was getting short; the police had their case all ready and so far the defence was thin enough. Loaded by the thought that only another fortnight remained before the trial, the anxious lover tore up the hill, leapt the boundary fence, and plunged into the shadows of the bush track. To-day, surely, he would have some luck.

It is dark in the bush

At lunch time a disillusioned sleuth was trying to coax a billy to boil in the open fireplace of the sordid living room. Everything was wrong; he had made no progress; he was tired and cross and now the fire refused to burn. He stamped angrily out to look for some chips and noticed some dry rimu behind an old sledge which was propped up against the wood-shed wall. With an impatient movement he pushed it aside and it fell and struck his shin. It was the last straw and David addressed heaven passionately for a few moments. In the midst of his best flight of fancy his mouth remained open and the oratory ceased. He stooped over the shed wall, examining it closely, then knelt down to get a better view.

The smoky fire burnt itself out; the billy of water tipped slowly over and emptied itself into the dirty hearth; the sun rose high in the hot sky and beat down on David's back as he paced slowly up and down the path, thinking, measuring, cogitating. For at last he had found his clue. Low down on the wall, hidden by the sledge, was a crude drawing in tar—simply an arrow that pointed into the bush and a round disc below it. The disc, David decided at once, must be the sun; the arrow pointed to the spot where the papers were hidden. It had been concealed from the trained eyes of the police by the sledge, placed there on the day when the body was removed. The road, he remembered, had been too wet for the ambulance and the body had been sledged as far as the gate. Then the sledge had been placed there, hiding the one clue for which they had been searching. But not everyone, David told himself at once; not the police; not indeed, anyone but himself. No one else knew of the existence of these papers; they were searching for clues of the murderer, for foot marks and fingerprints. This rough scrawl would hold no interest for them. The mere fact that it had been done in tar would make it all the more inconspicuous, for tar was the medium generally used by railway officials with which to scrawl the destination of a load of corrugated iron; also the various manufacturing firms usually wrote their brands in tar. No, Langley had been cunning enough—too cunning for his own purposes.

"But what did the diagram mean? I can't see what the sun could have to do with it. Unless it's a sort of chart. Perhaps it means that the shadow of the shed at mid-day falls in that direction and that somewhere in that shadow the papers are hidden—but that's all a very long chance and mighty incredible."

Yet David began to dig. The empty billy lay among the ashes of the dead fire, but still he toiled on; the police had

left a spade in the outhouse and by mid-afternoon he had dug a long patch of ground that he had marked out when the sun was due north. It lay directly between the shed and the bush and represented the shadow thrown at mid-day. At first he dug placidly and with assurance; presently he grew anxious; by five o'clock he was working frantically, disappointment staring him in the face. He had dug a large patch of ground; only the interposition of the forest trees and the clear evidence that the moss-covered ground here had never been disturbed stopped him at last.

By the time he had finished the mid-summer day was drawing to a close in one of the most brilliant and fantastic sunsets David had seen. It stirred him not at all, indeed, he scarcely raised his eyes to glance at it. Once more he had failed. Better, perhaps, to remove the traces of his digging in case it lead anyone else to the drawing on the wall. Not that anyone ever came here but Judith, and her aimless strolls had nothing to do with clues or hidden papers. Still, he would take no chances, and he began to dig again, but wildly and erratically this time, merely in order to destroy the symmetrical oblong over which he had spent such eager hours. One thing at least he knew. The papers were not buried in the garden. To-morrow he would begin searching in the bush in the direction in which the arrow pointed.

As he straightened his aching back he heard a slight halloo and saw the girls emerging from the bush track. They looked cool and charming in their summer frocks, and David, who was hot and grimy, felt an unreasonable resentment at their detachment. It merely needed Judith's tactless, "Dear me, has a pig been rooting here?" to make him glare angrily at her and say disagreeably, "What brought you up here? You seem to be haunting this place lately."

"Ann, I call that a snub—when we only came to see how he was getting on," said Judith with a mocking air.

David gave an ill-tempered growl and turned to the cottage to get his coat and hide his untouched lunch from those laughing eyes. Ann was all sympathy at once.

"Poor David! How hard you work! I wouldn't have come and disturbed you, but Judith was so keen to see if you'd found anything."

He scowled at Judith, a sudden suspicion in his mind. Was she watching him? What part was this quiet girl playing in all the tragedy? Something lay behind the mockery in her eyes and suddenly he was convinced that she was double-crossing him. She knew what he was looking for; she knew—or suspected—where the papers were. Well, two

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.	

could play at that game, and it would be strange if in the end he could not beat her at it.

"Do you remember the day when they took Langley's body away?" asked David casually of John that evening when the two boys were smoking alone on the veranda.

"Yes. I was there. What about it?"

"They took him on a sledge, I think you said?"

"Yes. The last quarter-mile was too slippery for the ambulance and I went down and got one of our horses and carted the body out on a sledge we found there."

"Rather a sordid ending."

"I remember thinking so at the time, especially as the old sledge was threatening to fall to pieces every bit of the way."

"That was jolly. Who drove it?"

"I did, because old Nell was in one of her skittish moods and she's used to me."

"John, can you remember what you did with that sledge afterwards?"

"Left it in the yard, of course. Why, did you think I might have pinched it?"

"No, I'm serious. Look here, John, I'm deadly interested in that sledge. Do you mind setting your mind to work to think out exactly what you did with it?"

"Of course, if you really want to know. Wait a bit, till I'm perfectly clear about it all. Yes, I drove it back to the clearing behind the cottage, undid the chains, hooked them on to Nell's collar and led her away. I know I left the sledge lying there, because it was still there a month afterwards."

"A month afterwards? Are you sure?" David's voice was sharp and perturbed and the other glanced at him curiously.

"Perfectly, because my uncle and I were up at the cottage after the police had all gone. It was just about the New Year when we'd been having all that hot moist weather. I pointed out to him the way the grass had all grown up between the cracks of the sledge and he said, 'Yes. Pretty phenomenal growth even for this time of year.' I can remember that perfectly and so would he. Why not ask him?"

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