

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

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"No. Please don't. Fact is, I want to keep this quite dark from everyone. Sounds queer, but I'll explain later. You say the sledge was in the yard. Can you think where?"

"Yes. A yard or two from the old shed where Langley kept his wood I expect it's there still."

"I expect so. I'll have a look tomorrow. And, once again, John, would you mind not mentioning to anyone at all that I was asking about it?"

The young farmer looked at his friend with mild amazement.

"All right. But you know you really do sound a bit potty, old chap. Whatever's the mystery about that old sledge?"

David did not respond to the friendly banter of the tone. Instead, he said seriously, "I'm in earnest this time, John—dead earnest. Promise me that you won't tell anyone at all?"

"Of course I won't breathe a word. I'm serious, too, if only I could do something. Don't forget that, David. Call on me at any time if I can be of any use. It must seem pretty callous to you the way Judith and I are just carrying on with our business, but don't think we're not damned upset about you and Ann."

"I know you are, John."

"We're both fond of Ann, you know. I'm sure Judith worries a lot about her, though she hates talking about it all. She seems quite sure Mr. Preston will get off at the trial. Wish I was."

"Me, too. Well, I won't forget your offer, John, and I'll call on you as soon as there's anything to do. At present I seem to be in a hopeless fog."

The fog did not lift for many days. For about a week David went daily up to the cottage in the bush and searched tirelessly in every direction that the arrow on the wall could possibly indicate. He had ceased to regard the disc above the arrow as being of any importance and searched doggedly everywhere. At last he had practically reached the stage of admitting himself beaten, had begun seriously to contemplate taking John Murray into his confidence and asking his help.

It was the matter of the sledge that troubled him most. If John was right—and he had no reason to doubt the perfectly clear memory of the young farmer—the sledge had still been lying on the ground a month after the murder. Since then it had been picked up and placed against the shed wall; had that been done by accident or design? Possibly in the act of clearing the ground one of the police or even Missen might have picked it up and propped it there out of the way. It was old and light and could easily be lifted by one person. The whole thing might have been accident. For the matter of that, the design itself might prove to be of no importance. It might have been scrawled on the sheet of iron before ever the shed was built. If that were so, he had been wasting precious time—and the trial almost upon them.

(To be continued next week)

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