

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. Preston tells his lawyer that a week before the murder Langley came to Murray's house, Te Rata, and meeting Preston, attempted to blackmail him. Preston, after several days' hesitation, goes up to Langley's shack with the money and finds him already dead. There is an empty bottle of luminal on the table. Realising he will be suspected of murder he drags the body into the bush and hangs it, hoping that in the event of its discovery, Langley will be presumed to have killed himself.

Preston tells David that hidden near the shanty are Langley's papers giving the past history of the people he has blackmailed, and begs him to prevent the police from getting hold of them. David searches and finds a mysterious sign painted on the wall of the shack. He digs, without success, in the direction indicated.

CHAPTER XXI. (Cont'd.)

NEVERTHELESS, in his heart David had a curious obstinate conviction that the drawing on the shed concerned the hidden papers; if that were so, if the sledge had been deliberately placed to hide it, then someone else had got on the track of the papers already. Someone else? Who could know about them save the mysterious person whose past was also connected with Langley's; who, according to the murdered man's foolish boast, would give a good price also for the papers; who, moreover, lived "not more than six miles away"?

CHAPTER XXII.

David was pondering all this one evening as he sat alone on the veranda; unhappily his eyes turned towards the elderly man who was sitting, half-reading, half-dozing, in the lighted drawing-room. His face in repose was kindly and benevolent. Lines of humour and generosity showed about mouth and eyes; nowhere could the wildest fancy find any possible trace of the cunning villain who had murdered his blackmailer and intended to allow an innocent man to pay the price of his crime.

No, it was impossible. Impossible, too, for George Murray to have any connection with that drawing on the wall, with those hidden papers. For, of course, the man who had known of those papers, who perhaps possessed them now, was the man who had poisoned Langley.

He was sitting turning over these disturbing thoughts, when John and Judith came up the veranda steps. They had been walking in the cool of the evening, and hailed him cheerfully where he sat in his dark corner.

"Look at that moon," said Judith pausing beside him. "Did ever you see anything so theatrical? It might have been taken straight out of the drop-scene of a theatre."

It is dark in the bush

"It seems to me merely like an oversized and bulging orange," said John disparagingly.

"Yes, but see how flat it is. It's just the way I used to draw the moon when I was a little girl. A curious flat disc such as never was on sea or land."

"Yours," remarked her lover dispassionately, "is clearly not the artistic temperament. Thank heaven for that!"

They laughed and passed indoors, but David had ceased to hear their bickering. "A curious flat disc." The words had taken him back to the writing on the shed wall. The object that he had taken to be the sun might just as well be the moon. Was it possible that a different shadow might be thrown, that something would be visible to him in the moonlight that was hidden in the bright and garish sunlight? It was just past the full moon to-night.

David had reached the stage when he would thankfully catch at any straw. It all sounded fantastic, impossible, but at least he would go and see for himself. He would go that very night, would wait till the whole house was quiet and asleep and then steal out.

Farm life and rising betimes is conducive to early hours at night. Soon after ten the whole party had separated and gone to their rooms. Ann had gone to bed soon after dinner; with the trial now only a few days off, the girl was suffering severely from over-strain. Despite her new self-control, she was almost at breaking point.

"When it is all over," David told himself, "however it goes, we shall have to look after Ann. This tension is getting her down."

So he had packed her off to bed after dinner and was smoking a solitary pipe on the veranda while George Murray alternately read and slept and Mrs. Marsden knitted in the drawing-room. The house-keeper was the first to make a move.

"Ten o'clock," she said, as the big clock in the hall struck ponderously. She rose and put away her work. "Mr. Murray," she said, smiling as she bent over him, "You are holding that book upside down. So bad for your eyes. Don't you think you would rest better in bed?"

David had come in from the veranda as the clock struck and now stood waiting to say good-night. As the old man woke with a little start and smiled up at the woman who bent over him, David was struck by the affectionate intimacy of their attitude. Mrs. Marsden as usual,

was kind and practical, but George Murray looked up at her with a half-humorous tenderness that surprised the boy.

In a moment he was wide awake and his expression altered again to mock indignation.

"Sent to bed in my own house!" he grumbled. "What it is to be hen-pecked at sixty."

He bade them good-night and ambled from the room with an air of humorous and protesting obedience; but the little scene remained long etched in David Armstrong's mind. So these two had behaved to each other every night for the last twenty years, ever since Mrs. Marsden had come to the house. She must have been a beautiful woman then and George Murray a handsome figure of a man; strange that they had never married.

At this point David pulled himself up with a jerk. Really, if this sort of thing went on, he would be writing love stories for the women's papers. What a cheap and silly idea! Why should they marry? What tie could possibly be more comfortable and satisfactory than their mutual respect and affection? Only a fool would imagine that people, because they were fond of each other, must necessarily fall in love.

David went to his room, changed from his light flannels into dark clothes, and sat down by the window to wait till the house was quiet. By half-past ten it seemed safe to venture forth, and very silently he slipped down the veranda steps, down the drive, and made across the paddocks to that track that his feet had grown to know during the last few weeks.

It was a beautifully clear night although black clouds piled on the horizon. But just now the moon was riding serenely in a violet sky. Surely if that disc meant the moon he had chosen the right night? If only those clouds did not hide its brilliance before he had done his work and read the diagram aright! He hurried on, feeling alive and hopeful, noting the white heaps at the side of the track which, as he approached, resolved themselves into sheep. They called their lambs indignantly to them and trotted sedately down the hill away from the interloper. It was a scene of pastoral peace, and David felt a sudden qualm of distrust. When the countryside looked most beautiful it was usually saving up some particularly nasty knock for amateur detectives.

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.	

CHAPTER XXIII.

As he hurried up the track, David met his first rebuff; an unseen supplejack caught him round the ankle and he fell heavily. As he lay there for a moment, trying to choose between a variety of adjectives that were all applicable to the supplejack, he thought he heard movement somewhere in the forest, not far away. He held his breath and lay silent, then realised that at night the bush is full of little scuffling noises, or rats and birds disturbed in their slumbers; here, too, there might even be a stray bullock, come through the fence from the Te Rata property. He had heard John say to his uncle that the boundary fences were in a bad way. Grinning at his own nervousness, David rose and trudged on. At least his suspicions had allowed him to recover his breath.

Yet the fancy returned to him once or twice. Some subtle instinct that warns a man when he is followed, however skilfully, told David that he was not the only person on that track to-night. He walked carefully and occasionally stopped to listen; but no discovery of a lurking criminal, re-visiting the scene of his crime, had come to reward him by the time he reached the whare.

He hurried to the sledge, lifted it aside, and once more studied the curious hieroglyphics. Although the clouds were advancing they had not yet covered the moon and he could clearly see the arrow pointing into the gloom of the bush. His eyes followed its direction and he gave a gasp. At the moment, nature decided to lend him a hand, and the moon shone out with almost daylight brilliance, lighting up the trunk of a tall rimu that stood by itself, in advance of the rest of the trees of that reserve. Its trunk was clear of creepers, for the hungry stock had stripped it clean in the winter months, and some trick of the pallid light threw into strong relief a hole that had escaped all his careful search. It showed like a black shadow on the tree trunk and the arrow pointed mockingly at it. What a fool he had been to miss

(Continued on next page)