

## IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

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it! It was certainly true that amateur searchers rarely looked above their own heads.

The hole stood about seven feet above the ground, but the unevenness of the trunk would give easy foot-hold to a short man like Langley. David rested one foot on a broad knob and swung himself easily up so that he could reach one arm down into the darkness of the hole. Carefully his fingers explored it; then he withdrew his arm, dropped to the ground, and gave something like a groan. The hole was empty, save for one small scrap of paper. If anything had been needed to convince David that someone had been before him, the evidence lay in this piece of foolscap which he now examined by the light of his torch. It was the merest scrap. On one line he could read the words, "like every woman," on the next "rich heir." That was all, and as if to close the subject the bulb of his torch gently gave up.

It was a bitter disappointment. David returned to his doorstep and sat there with his head in his hands. Vanished were all the rosy dreams of saving Ann's

father and his own happiness at the same time. He had failed utterly and finally; he had been too slow; while he was digging "like a pig," as Judith said in that beastly sarcastic voice, someone had read the signs aright and found the papers.

Nothing to do but go home and try to sleep. He was thankful that no one knew of his mad expedition. He couldn't stand any more ragging about his efforts. Lucky that everyone had been in bed and asleep before he left.

It was at this moment that he became aware of movement in the *whare* behind him. He had been right. Someone else was abroad that night. Someone who had deciphered the writing on the shed wall and already had the papers. David was sure of it. The thief had made only one movement; he had knocked against the rough table. At once the silence had become even more profound. But David had not been mistaken. Someone was hiding in that room behind him. He felt for his torch and remembered the broken bulb.

And now David lost his head. The certainty of the murderer's presence, the fear of a blow from behind in the dark, the knowledge that, if he were not quick,

the man could get out of the *whare* by the other door—all this was in the spring that he made into the blackness of the hut.

For a moment his arms reached out wildly, encountering nothing; then he paused and the sound of quiet breathing came from his right. His senses guided him and he sprang, seizing an arm that held him off with surprising strength; an arm in a thin shirt sleeve, beneath which he felt strong muscles. The arm twisted and stiffened, eluding him, but he caught at the sleeve and felt the stuff rip under his fingers. He was now accustomed to the darkness and was aware of a figure making for the door; he lunged wildly after it and was caught by a very old trick — by an outstretched foot that tripped him in a shattering fall.

By the time he had picked himself up complete silence reigned. He staggered to the door but the garden was empty. In that minute his enemy had reached the cover of the bush. No use trying to catch him there, even if David had not knocked his head in his fall. He staggered to the tank outside the door and splashed water over his face, washing away the little trickle of blood that came from a cut forehead. He had, he

told himself, made a complete and unmentionable fool of himself. Sleuth be damned.

All that was left to him was one scrap of paper to show that Langley's Rogues' Calendar had ever existed. That scrap wouldn't be much comfort to Preston. David was not looking forward to telling the accused man of his failure. He felt better presently and made his way heavily down the track. He had no fear of meeting his attacker. The man had got what he wanted. With the papers safe in his grasp he would not waste time with the amateur whom he had fooled.

As he walked stiffly home in the uncertain light, David told himself that he had certainly missed the only chance of finding the murderer. For of course it had been the murderer of Langley who had come back for those papers. And he had had him within his very grasp! If only he could meet him now, when he was prepared, when he could fight with him in the open, as man to man!

It was at this moment that David heard the crackle of a branch released by an unwary foot. There was someone moving in the bush not twenty yards away.

(To be continued next week)

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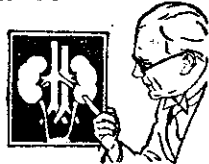
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