

# 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, to 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 begs David to recover from the shanty Langley's papers giving the full history of his blackmail victims. One of these must be the murderer. But David finds their hiding place in the rimu too late — the papers have gone. He hears movements in the shanty, there is a brief struggle but in the darkness the figure escapes unrecognised. David is almost home when he is aware that someone is following, not twenty yards behind him.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

JUDITH spoke just in time. "Dear me, David, is that you lurking in the bushes? How romantic of you!"

In another moment, he would have hurled himself upon her, for in the darkness he had been perfectly certain that at last he was to come to grips with the murderer. Well, thank Heaven he hadn't; he could imagine the story she would have made of it at breakfast next morning. But the double disappointment was too much for his manners, and he positively growled at her.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Darling, how gallant you are! What was I doing here? I was looking for Rough, of course. The naughty boy slipped his chain and wandered off, and I was a little afraid he might get into mischief."

David wanted to say, "That's a lie," but resisted the temptation. Instead he said crossly, "Well, he isn't here. Come along home. It's going to rain like blazes."

They hurried down the track without further words. Why hadn't she asked him what he had been doing up that track at midnight? Well, he wasn't going to tell her; she might make up any story she liked to amuse the others. Nothing, he told himself, savagely, would be funnier than what had actually happened.

As they emerged on to the open hillside, the first drops of rain fell. "It only wanted that," he muttered furiously, and blundered after Judith. The girl had switched on her torch and walked quickly and unerringly; no question but that she knew the track almost as well as he. He stumbled after her, his head aching and his limbs heavy with weariness. The rain tore and stung now, and ordinary decency made him offer her his coat. "Go on," he said roughly, "You'll only catch your death of cold."

"I never catch cold," she said with maddening superiority. "I'm abominably healthy; quite the ideal farmer's wife."

# It is dark in the bush

"I don't know about that," he growled. "John mightn't think so if he knew you wandered all about the countryside by yourself at midnight after that damned dog."

They were turning in at the gates of the homestead as he spoke and she swung round and faced him in the shelter of the first tree that grew beside the drive.

"Look here, David, here's a bargain. I won't say a word about your adventures to-night if you don't mention mine."

"I don't know about that," he said doggedly. "Why not? What's all the secrecy about?"

"Nothing particular, but John thinks I make too much fuss over Rough and he might be annoyed. Also, I don't want Mr. Murray to get the idea that the dog's unmanageable or that I'm nervous of what he may do. . . . You know how I hate a lot of fuss."

David surveyed the dripping figure in unsympathetic silence for a moment, then turned grimly away. "I'll give you your answer when I've had a look at that dog's kennel," was all he said.

Judith offered no protest but followed him in silence to the stable yard. As they crossed the concrete paving there was a sleepy murmur from Rough's kennel, and the next moment the dog had sprung out and was fawning upon his mistress. David ran his hand along the chain and collar. "All perfectly secure. Now what have you to say?"

The girl's voice was elaborately indifferent. "Only that one of the shepherds must have heard him barking and chained him up," she replied with a yawn.

"Pity you're such a bad liar," he retorted rudely; her laugh infuriated him, so that he took her roughly by her bare arm and said, "What were you really doing up there to-night? What's your game? Why do you mix yourself up in all this and then lie about it?"

She removed his clasp from her arm with a cool politeness that showed how angry she was, and her voice was icy. "My dear David, you're really a little mad about your sleuthing business. Why not write a thriller?"

"No use putting me off like that. That manner may settle John, but I've known you too long."

"Rather a pity, on the whole. You're not improving on acquaintance, David. Well, what is it? Do you imagine I murdered Langley?"

"Of course I don't, but I think you know who did. I believe you're shielding someone, keeping quiet and letting Ann go through hell."

"Do you really? Well, believe it, then. I'm too tired, and too bored with your conversation, to stay out here all night," and she turned on her heel.

"Perhaps John will be able to explain," he exploded.

She paused and looked at him, then said quietly, "Is that a threat? Very well. I'll give you your answer to-morrow morning," and in a moment was gone.

David slept heavily; a bruised head and aching limbs saw to that. When he sat up and looked grumpily at the clock at last, he saw that it was nine o'clock. Well, what did it matter? No one would be a penny the worse if he never got out of bed again. With a grunt of extreme self-pity, he turned over and went to sleep again.

It was ten o'clock when he made a shame-faced appearance. Judith would have been before him with her story. He hardened himself for the laughter and gibes that would greet his entry. Never mind; Judith would have a spot of explaining to do too.

But no one was in the dining-room and the veranda was empty. In the kitchen he found Ann peeling apples while Sally washed dishes. The face she turned to greet him did a great deal to console his battered ego. Judith might jeer at him, murderers might attack him in the night watches, here was some one who trusted and loved him utterly.

Not a word about his escapades of the night before, only an anxious inquiry as to why he looked so tired and had slept so late.

"I woke with a headache," he said with painful truth.

"It's because you worked far too hard in all that heat," she cried tenderly, and hurried to make him some breakfast.

"But where's everybody? Mrs. Marsden not ill, is she?"

"No, no; nobody's ill except you, poor dear. Mrs. Marsden's away. Wait till I cook this bacon and then I'll sit down and tell you everything. Most exciting things have been happening."

David groaned. He'd had all the excitement he wanted for a long time. When at last Ann sat down beside him in the dining-room she reproached him for his lack of interest.

"Now try to guess—something that's really jolly and exciting."

He put his hand to his head. "I can't think of anything that could possibly be both. You'll have to tell me. I haven't the brains to guess anything this morning."

"Well, I'll help you. Everyone's away. We've got an empty house. Judith's gone. John's gone. Mrs. Marsden's gone. Now, what does that suggest?"

## 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.	

"Nothing except a little peace," he replied nastily. "No, darling, I don't mean that, but it'll be good to be alone with you. Where have they gone and how soon will they be back?"

"Mrs. Marsden will be back in four days, the others not for a week. Now, you dull old darling, you must surely know. Why, they've gone away to be married, of course."

"What? Married? So quickly?"

"Why not? After all, they've been threatening to for weeks—at least, John has. But Judith kept putting him off till this morning, and then quite suddenly she changed her mind and they were off."

So that was it. That was the answer to David's threat which Judith had promised him in the morning. She had scored again.

Something about the whole business amazed him. Could Judith be making sure of John? No, that wasn't in character. Angry and puzzled though he might be, the cooler reason of morning told David that it was impossible for Judith to do anything so coldly calculating. He was in error again.

Ann talked on, bravely concealing any wistfulness she might feel at the happiness of the other couple.

"We were all at breakfast and Judith came in late. That was queer in itself because she's just about as punctual as Mrs. Marsden. By the way, David, has it ever struck you how alike those two are in lots of ways?"

"Not particularly. They're both pretty silent, but Mrs. Marsden isn't deep. She's just amiable and practical."

"Well, so's Judith. Darling, you have got a grouse this morning, haven't you? Well, when we asked her if she'd been sleeping in, she said calmly, 'No, packing up,' and helped herself to toast just as if that wasn't a bombshell. 'Whatever for?' John asked, very sharply. 'Why, to go to town and get married,' she said—as quietly as that, though she flushed that pretty slow way that she sometimes does. Isn't she a wonderful girl, David?"

"Very wonderful," he replied without enthusiasm. "And John, of course, rose with a whoop?"

(Continued on next page)