

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 begs David to recover from the shanty Langley's papers, giving the full history of his blackmail victims, one of whom is probably the murderer. He reaches the shanty too late—the papers are gone. But there is someone else in the shanty. There is a struggle, but the figure escapes unrecognised.

Next morning, Ann produces for mending, a shirt of Mr. Murray's with a torn sleeve. David, convinced it was Murray he encountered the previous night, takes his story to Morgan, who points out that it will be a very difficult story to prove, but is reminded by it of a scrap of material, possibly from a shirt, found earlier near the shanty.

CHAPTER XXV. (Cont'd)

DAVID looked at Morgan with startled eyes. "By jove, why not? But no, I suppose that's a bit far-fetched. Mr. Murray could hardly have possessed a shirt like that without Mrs. Marsden's knowing about it. As a matter of fact, the old man once told me that she insists on making quite a number of his shirts and John's. No, she'd have known it and have given some sign when we found it. John, too. No, I'm afraid that's no go, unless by some extraordinary fluke he was wearing a shirt that no one had seen before. As for Mrs. Marsden, it's possible she knows something and is shielding him. There's a tremendous bond between them, naturally, after twenty years of such close association. What would Charles Preston be to her, after all, or Ann either?"

"Have you considered Miss Judith's actions from that point of view?"

"How do you mean? I don't see the connection."

"Possibly there is none, and yet how else explain this hurried marriage? If your theory is right, if George Murray is soon to stand in the dock in the place of Charles Preston, the blow to his nephew — to the young man who has been more like a son than a nephew to him—will be severe. From what I know of young Murray he's the sort that would hesitate to offer marriage to a girl if he hadn't an honourable name to give her. Much more likely to cut adrift from New Zealand altogether."

"Then you think that Judith suspects that Mr. Murray is guilty?"

Mr. Morgan considered the point carefully.

"It's possible. It would at least account for the way she behaved last night. She may have seen you going towards the cottage and have followed. She's afraid of your finding out something. You threaten to tell John Murray and she thinks that may lead to a

general disclosure of the uncle's guilt. So she hurries on the wedding."

"But—but that would mean she was shielding Murray and letting an innocent man be condemned to the gallows. Ann's father."

"I didn't mean that for one moment. I merely meant that she was fighting for time, till she had married John and was certain of him. Once she's his wife, she'll take some steps to save Preston — but not to involve George Murray."

David was pale with fury. "My God, I'd never forgive Judith if I thought she was standing by and letting Ann suffer like this. But it does explain some things. She's been rather queer lately, haunting that *whare*, keeping on eye on me, and then suddenly turning round one day and asking me always to remain friends with her. Not like Judith at all—but then the whole thing seems less like her than almost any girl I know. She's always been so straight."

"Remember she's fighting for her lover's happiness—and her own. You're doing the same—only you're in opposite camps. Can you blame her? In any case, from the little I've seen of Miss Anson, I don't believe that she'd stand by and see an injustice done—ultimately."

"The trial's almost here. Meantime, what about George Murray?"

"We'll take your information to the police, of course, but I warn you to expect nothing. After all, what's your evidence? Guesswork—and a torn shirt. George Murray's a well known and widely respected man; it would be a rash and foolish step for the police to take."

Nor had the police any intention of taking it; that was evident from the first. They shrugged tolerant shoulders, pooh-poohed David's theories gently and pleasantly, and suggested that he should wait till after the trial. David fumed helplessly and Morgan did his best to get the police to take the matter more seriously.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," conceded the Chief Detective generously at last. "We'll set a watch in the bush near the cottage. We'll tell no one but we'll put a couple of men there to watch night and day. Then you may rest assured that nothing will pass unnoticed. And the shirt? Yes, certainly, we'll start inquiries as to whether such a line of shirts has ever been on the market, at least within the last few years. Yes, we have the material, of course, though it's my opinion it was torn off a woman's dress, not a man's shirt. Still, everything possible will be done, everything possible."

He bade them a suave and courteous farewell and sent them away with a feeling of extraordinary helplessness.

It is dark in the bush

"I'll send Missen up again," said Morgan gloomily. "He can put up at Murray's house on some pretext or another and keep a close watch on all the old man's doings till he comes down for the trial. That's all we can do. I'm sorry, but I told you it would be."

"And if Preston is condemned to death?" asked David in despair.

"That hasn't happened yet," said the other emphatically, "and if it does I think you may rest assured that the guilty man will not stand by and see an innocent one suffer. Suppose for a moment that your ideas are right, that it is George Murray; you know as well as I do that, whether he murdered this blackguard or didn't, he's no villain. He's a decent old fellow who may have committed one dreadful crime for some reason that we cannot guess, but he's the last man in the world to let Preston go to his death. He is probably waiting, as Miss Anson is waiting, perhaps to see the outcome of the trial. If Preston is acquitted, well and good. After all, Langley was a cold-hearted villain and the world's the better for his leaving of it. If no one else is to suffer, I don't suppose the murderer sees why he should confess to the crime. Possibly it may not lie very heavy on his soul—but the sacrifice of Preston would unquestionably do so. Yes, if Preston is found guilty and you are right, I think developments will be rapid. For the present we can only wait and see."

"Wait and see!" What advice could possibly be more maddening to a young man wildly in love? The days that followed were the worst of David's life. He managed to obtain one interview with the accused man, using his engagement to Ann as a pretext once more, and confided to Preston the account of his own failure.

"But at least the police haven't got the papers," said the prisoner, who had received the news of their loss with more stoicism than David had expected.

"The man who stole them is the murderer," David declared.

"Very probably, and therefore he will want them to be discovered even less than I do. No, we may take it that they have been reduced to ashes long ago," said Preston, adding kindly, "My dear boy, you haven't failed. Our objective was to remove the papers from the police and this has been done."

As the tall bowed figure, escorted by his warders, went down the long corridor, David looked after him with admiration. Preston was facing a terribly uncertain future with high courage.

Nevertheless, he had the impression that the accused man hoped for acquittal and was pinning his faith on Ashton's eloquence at the time of the trial. How much did David himself dare to hope? It was clear from Ann's demeanour, too,

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.	

when he met her on the first morning of the trial, that she also was trusting largely to the effect that would be produced by the brilliant rhetoric and psychological intuition of the famous criminal barrister.

As she sat in the place set aside for her, David on her one side, and George Murray on the other, the girl's calmness and self possession amazed her lover. She seemed unaware of the thrilling interest and sentimental excitement her appearance created in the crowded court. David himself was in a state of suppressed fury at the indecent curiosity of the onlookers, but Ann turned a face of white indifference to their staring. It was on Ashton's face that her eyes were fixed, save for an occasionally pitying and affectionate glance at her father. Her attention was focused on every movement and facial change of the great man, so that it was apparent that all her hopes were fixed on him.

George Murray and the girl had arrived together in town on the evening before the trial began, but David had not visited them at their hotel. He had telephoned Ann with some excuse, which he hoped would sound more plausible to her ears than it did to his own. He could not bring himself to meet George Murray before he had to do so; he could not endure the thought of looking with suspicion and hatred at the face he had so trusted and liked; he could not bear to spend even one hour in the company of the man whom he believed to be a heartless assassin, to pose as his friend and guest, to watch his affectionate thoughtfulness for the girl whose father he was perhaps murdering. Time enough when they had to meet in court.

When the dreaded moment had actually arrived, when the taxi bringing Ann and her host had drawn up at the kerb, and David was furiously trying to protect the girl from the battery of press and private cameras levelled upon her, from the hostile or hysterical interest of the waiting crowd, the young man was surprised and a little ashamed to find that the sight of George Murray did not rouse the fierce hatred and scorn in him that he had expected. The old

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