

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

man's face and bearing were so perturbed, his anxiety to protect the girl so clearly over-mastered every other feeling, that David felt himself instinctively allied with him, unable to contemplate the thought that, if his own theories were correct, George Murray and no other was responsible for every bit of the pain that Ann was suffering at the moment.

When at last the jury was chosen, David found himself studying their faces with feelings of acute anxiety. The next moment he caught his breath in an involuntary sign of disappointment; his eye met George Murray's and the older man gave a little imperceptible shrug of despair. To an outsider, the jury looked the most commonplace lot of men ever gathered together for a criminal trial in any part of the world; impossible to imagine them reacting to Ashton's Celtic eloquence.

David fancied he read a similar disappointment on the face of the barrister. He learnt forward and whispered in Morgan's ear and his colleague nodded and shrugged disparagingly. Evidently Ashton himself realised that his work was cut out if he was to strike a spark from that metal.

The trial ran its usual preliminary stages. As in a dream David heard the judge exhorting the jury to dismiss all prejudice and come to the case with minds as empty and as receptive as a slate upon which the record of truth and of their own judgment could be written. Looking from one to the other of the dull, commonplace or obstinate faces, David felt that this was exactly what such a jury could not do. It was rather much to expect of any save supermen, and in this case he did not believe that it lay in their power to wipe those slates clean. Their intelligence was not high enough, their senses not sufficiently disciplined to make such a course possible.

Formal evidence was taken. Stephen and David himself testified to the finding of the body in the bush. The doctor gave evidence of what the post-mortem had revealed, the chemist of the purchase of luminal by the accused, the garage proprietor of Preston's annoyance at the delay in mending his car, to his general air of purpose and haste. Then several neighbours told all they knew of the happenings of that day.

As David sat listening, he found his eyes continually straying to the fine gentle face and manly figure of George Murray. As he watched the old man's air of protection towards the girl at his side, his courtly manner and the transparent honesty of his expression mingled with a sympathetic sadness, David felt all suspicion and anger melt away. No one who looked like that could be a murderer, no one who behaved like that could contemplate allowing another, and this time a cold-blooded crime to rest upon his soul. It all seemed outrageous, absurd, the fantasy of some mad world where everything appeared topsy-turvy.

Yet in the sleepless hours of that night one or two of those suspicions came creeping back, dared to raise once more

a furtive head. A word with Morgan had reassured him that George Murray was being closely shadowed, every movement watched.

"It's a wild surmise, but we'll try it out," the lawyer had said. "I don't much like the look of the jury or the way things are shaping."

Meantime the other members of the party had arrived and joined George Murray and Ann at their quiet hotel. Mrs. Duncan, too, had come from the south and was staying with friends in the town. John and Judith had appeared during the evening, tiresomely casual and elaborately off-hand with each other, but obviously happy. Mrs. Marsden had finished with her dentist and reported the satisfactory conquest of a difficult nerve-stopping with as much calmness as though the party had assembled for a day's shopping instead of the trial of one of their number for murder. In fact, the atmosphere of Te Rata had miraculously descended, particularly since the arrival of the housekeeper, upon the stiff and ornate "private sitting-room" of their little hotel.


David had a curious impression of unreality, a sort of nightmare feeling of grown-ups play-acting in the presence

of real danger, when he looked in on the party during the evening. Stephen had arrived and in the curiously unhomelike room Mrs. Marsden was knitting with needles that never paused or blundered, Mr. Murray was reading the paper half-heartedly, Ann very close to his side, and the other young people were bickering in a corner in the way common to 'Varsity students all the world over. David spent half-an-hour amongst them so that he might give no occasion for speculation, and then rose to take his leave.

"How did you think things went today?" asked George Murray unexpectedly, looking up from the paper he had scarcely pretended to be reading. As if at a pre-arranged signal, the conversation stopped and every face dropped its mask of gaiety. David hesitated, his glance naturally turning to Ann, but the girl got up and said quietly, "Tell us truly, David. After all, we've got to face it sooner or later. I thought it went badly myself. The jury looked dull and stupid and rather as if they had all made up their minds that my father had done it before they came into court, and I thought both Mr. Ashton and Mr. Morgan seemed nervous and anxious. Didn't you think so, too?"

(To be continued next week)

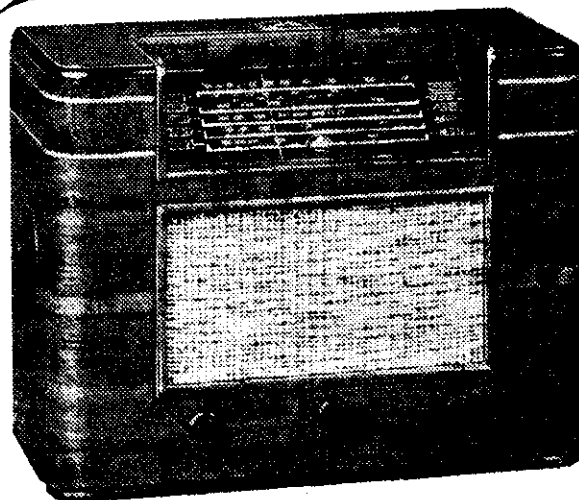
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