

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. David is sure it is George Murray. Morgan doubts whether there is sufficient evidence to arrest Murray, but agrees with David that Judith's hasty decision to marry John Murray may mean that she has suspicions of his uncle's guilt. If George Murray is guilty, he will probably wait till a verdict of "guilty" is brought against Preston before giving himself up.

Ann admits that the first day of the trial has gone unfavourably for Preston.

CHAPTER XXV.—(Cont'd.)

DAVID met her quiet courage with miserable eyes but the honesty it deserved.

"Yes, I felt like that too. But it's too soon to form any opinion yet, Ann, far too soon. We mustn't let ourselves be carried away by our own fears or our own nerves."

"Oh no, I don't mean to," she replied quietly. "I'm not a bit afraid of going into the box or of the Crown Prosecutor or the Judge. I'm longing to give my evidence, to make them believe that my father is innocent. I mean to fight every single step of the way."

There was dead silence after she had spoken, but every heart in the room went out to the girl. They looked at each other in a sort of surprise. Was this the Ann who, a few short weeks ago, had been a clinging child? There was a warm glow of admiration on every face in the crowded little room, but it was old George Murray who voiced the general opinion.

"Well said, my dear. I like your spirit, and so do we all. And don't forget that you've got us all behind you, all, to a man. We've all come here to fight, and to fight on your side. Between us, we mean to prove your father an innocent man."

As he went out into the street David felt his head in a whirl. "We're all fighting on your side." Could these really be the words of a man who all the time was hiding behind the girl's unfortunate father?

CHAPTER XXVI.

But in spite of all the loyalty, all the determined optimism of the little group from Te Rata, it was impossible to pretend that the case did not look very black indeed as the trial unfolded. The prosecution followed precisely the lines that Ashton and Morgan had led them

It is dark in the bush

to expect, and it seemed as though the evidence of even the first day had drawn up a damning enough indictment against Preston.

But the second day gave the public the full story of the prisoner's previous connection with Langley, and the old scandal of the Preston Syndicate, with the account of Langley's treachery and the cunning that had got him off scot-free while his employer went to gaol. When the case closed at the end of the second day, the Crown Prosecutor had the appearance of a satisfied man; there was a dreadful air of finality and irrefutability about the evidence. Everything the Prosecution wanted was there—motive abundant and to spare, presence at the actual scene of the crime as testified by the drover who had seen Preston crossing the yard; the very poison in his possession that had killed his victim. Worst of all, there was the damning evidence of the prisoner's own lies in his first statement, the positive denial of his knowledge of Langley's presence in the neighbourhood, of his own visit to the cottage, all later to be succeeded by a fresh story so fantastic that it seemed as if no sane man could put it forward as a defence. David left the court with a dreadful conviction that only a miracle could save Preston's life, and he read the same fear reflected in the faces of the silent group gathered in the hotel sitting-room. They had ceased to pretend to an optimism that no sane man could feel, and even Judith was nervous and apprehensive. To his surprise it was Ann who took the initiative.

"Do you think," she asked George Murray with a wistful sweetness, "that I could have some tea—I don't want dinner—sent up to my room? I would like to go to bed, and I know that it will be much easier for you all to talk freely when I'm not here. There's that sleeping draught David has given me, you know; I shall take it quite soon and have a good night's sleep and save up for tomorrow. . . . And don't worry too much about me, David dear. After all, they didn't tell us anything new and they haven't heard our side yet. I'm not going to despair and you mustn't."

The memory of her gallant little face made David clench his hands when her name was called next day and she left him to go into the box. For the first few minutes he dared not glance at her, until he realised from the quiet steadiness of her voice that he was more nervous than she. When he had the courage to look towards her, he was amazed at her calmness, and her youth and beauty smote him afresh with a dreadful pang. Was all this to be sacrificed in the cause of a father she hardly knew? At least she was putting up a splendid fight, for she showed no sign

of faltering, and it was clear that her beauty and her pitiful youth had made an appeal that not even the stolid jury could entirely resist.

Ashton handled her cleverly, soothing her nerves, bringing out all the convincing simplicity of her story, letting no point escape the row of attentive jurymen. When he sat down at last there was a momentary gleam of self-satisfaction in his deep-set eyes. This witness, of whom he had been a trifle nervous, had done her part splendidly. If only her father, who had elected to go into the box, should prove equally steady and dependable!

Nor did the Crown Prosecutor seek to upset the effect she had made. He was too decent a man, too clever an advocate to prejudice his case by the shadow of an attempt to bully a young girl placed in such a tragic position. He questioned her as to her father's reasons for making for the coast, his irritation over the delay, the routes he had chosen. In no case was he able to shake her clear testimony of accident and coincidence. Cleverly enough, he contented himself with a certain indulgent handling of the witness, a gentle but deprecating kindness that suggested, with something too sympathetic for a shrug, that the court must not pay too much attention to the evidence, however honestly given, of a young girl in defence of her father's life and honour.

When at last Ann came back to her seat, a little sigh of emotional excitement rose involuntarily from the crowded court, and David surprised a pitying softness in the face of several of the jurymen. But it was only pity, not conviction. The Crown Prosecutor's tolerant kindness had done its work far better than any hostile cross-examination.

As the girl slipped into her place between himself and George Murray, David could feel her trembling, and secretly, under cover of a movement in the court, he took her cold little hand in his and pressed it hurriedly.

"Magnificent!" he whispered. "You were a lion of courage."

She managed a trembling smile at the inaptness of the metaphor, and at once their attention was focused on George Murray, who had taken her place in the box. From the first words that he uttered, it was obvious that the strength and integrity of the old man's personality had at once impressed itself upon the court.

"During the time he spent with us, Mr. Preston appeared perfectly content. Yes, certainly he had been ill, but he had recovered completely some time before the day of the murder. . . . Yes, I had gone about the place a great deal with him, riding and walking. . . . No,

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	
Sergeant Davis		Police Force.
Detective Missen, engaged by George Murray to help prove Preston's innocence.		
Morgan, lawyer engaged to defend Preston.		

to my knowledge, he never at any time showed any particular interest in the affairs or personality of the neighbours. . . . Certainly he gave none of us the impression of a man with something brooding in his mind. He appeared to have known trouble and was somewhat silent, but entirely pleasant and companionable—not at all like a man who was contemplating a crime or brooding on revenge."

So it went on, and the cross-examination was unable to shake his account of a quiet and entirely unassuming guest enjoying an accidental and carefree holiday in the country. Mrs. Marsden's evidence was on the same lines. She was as calm and unruffled as though she were presiding over the dining-room table at Te Rata as she gave an account of the arrival of the accused man and his daughter late at night.

"They had quite obviously lost their way and knew nothing whatever about our part of the world," she said quietly but emphatically.

She went on to describe their gradual absorption into the life of the household. "At no time did Mr. Preston give any impression of uneasiness or disturbance of mind," she declared. It had all, according to her, been an accidental friendship, but one which the whole party had enjoyed.

To the Crown Prosecutor she gave an account of Langley's calling one afternoon with a message for Mr. Murray. Yes, it was probably the first time the man had been there during Mr. Preston's visit; they had never seen much of him. Yes, he would go past the veranda where the guest was sitting and they would certainly recognise each other. If Langley delayed, it was only for a moment, for she herself had not noticed that he was long in getting off the premises.

She stepped down from the box leaving an impression of entire honesty and truthfulness. Ashton almost deigned to smile. This was one of those calm, unimaginative witnesses that are worth their weight in gold to a counsel; he whispered as much behind his hand to his subordinate and Morgan nodded emphatically.

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