

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

(Continued from previous page)

During the afternoon a succession of witnesses was called for the defence; John Murray's testimony bore out that of his uncle and of Mrs. Marsden, and was given with a youthful enthusiasm that could not be entirely hidden. Judith was an interesting figure in the box, and her appearance roused an excitement second only to that caused by Ann's evidence. She was very pale and to David's surprise not as calm and reliable a witness as they had all expected. Her voice shook and she had several times to repeat a remark at the Judge's request. Eventually she left the box amidst a general feeling of sympathy, at least amongst the female onlookers.

"And if she was a bit nervous, what could you expect?" murmured one woman in the gallery to her neighbour. "A young thing like that brought into court on her honeymoon, and in a murder case, too."

"Yes, and having to dress herself up so quiet, more as if she was in mourning than a bride, when of course she'd be wanting to wear all her smart clothes."

The fourth day of the trial opened with the examination of the prisoner himself, for, despite the misgivings of his advisers, Preston had insisted on going into the box.

"I've nothing to hide," he said doggedly, "so why be afraid of their cross-examination?"

Nevertheless, as he told the whole story of his association with the murdered man, as the Court heard the tale of trickery, of deceit and of cold-blooded desertion that had all happened a score of years ago and yet was still able to bring a flash of rage to the prisoner's sunken eyes, a ring of hatred and defiance to his low voice, it seemed as if he had lost more than he had gained by his honesty. Every word that Preston uttered, every admission that he made, proved more completely than any hearsay testimony that he had motive abundant and to spare for the crime.

Under Ashton's careful handling the full effect of unshakable innocence was brought out. Preston stated positively that he had had no idea at all of Langley's whereabouts when he left prison, no knowledge that he had gone to New Zealand to live; it was sheer, dreadful coincidence that had brought him to the same part of the world as his old enemy.

"Yet the evidence has shown that you were annoyed and impatient at the delay to your car?"

"I was."

"And exactly why?"

"Because, I suppose, I am impatient by nature. I was free at last and I wanted to go where I pleased, do what I pleased. I was irritated at being held up by a mechanical defect in the car I had hired."

"In short, your state of mind was disturbed?"

"Not particularly, except with the disturbance natural to the mind of a man who has been fifteen years in prison and is almost overwhelmed by the strangeness of liberty. I was, I suppose, extremely restless. I have always been restless."

The quiet words called up a terrible picture to David's eyes—that of a man naturally ardent, active, impatient, shut within the narrow confines of prison walls for the best years of his life. Fate had indeed been unjust and cruel. Was she about to make tardy restitution or to deal a final and shattering blow?

What impression was Preston making upon the stolid row of jurymen? He fancied that at one moment he had caught a sympathetic gleam in the foreman's eyes, but on the whole their attitude seemed to express the conventional disapproval of twelve law-abiding men for one of society's outcasts. Would a murder, they wondered, lie very heavily upon a heart so hardened?

But if there was any uncertainty as to the reception of Preston's story of the past, there could be no doubt of the disastrous effect caused by the cross-examination concerning his doings upon the day of the actual crime. When Ashton had questioned him, the dramatic force of the story had glossed over its wildness and incredibility; but when the Crown Prosecutor rose to cross-examine, it was changed almost at once to a fiction so palpably absurd that it was scarcely worth the serious attention of

a Supreme Court. In reply to Ashton he had told the story of discovery by his old enemy and, with no direct appeal for pity, had drawn a moving picture of his dreadful indecision, his determination to submit to blackmail rather than lose his new-found happiness and jeopardise the future of his daughter, of his wild rush up to the cottage, only to arrive there too late.

"Will you tell us what you found at the cottage?" asked Ashton's sympathetic voice.

"Nothing at first. The dog was chained at its kennel and barked at me but I saw no sign of Langley."

"What did you do then?"

"Shouted out once or twice and at last pushed open the door and went in. I wanted to see whether Langley had already left. If he had, I knew that the few possessions that were of any value would have gone too. But things were as usual in the kitchen. Then I walked through into the bedroom and found him."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Langley apparently asleep on his bunk. At first I thought he was drunk because there was a partly empty bottle of whisky on the table and the room smelt of spirits. Then I looked more closely and saw he was dead."

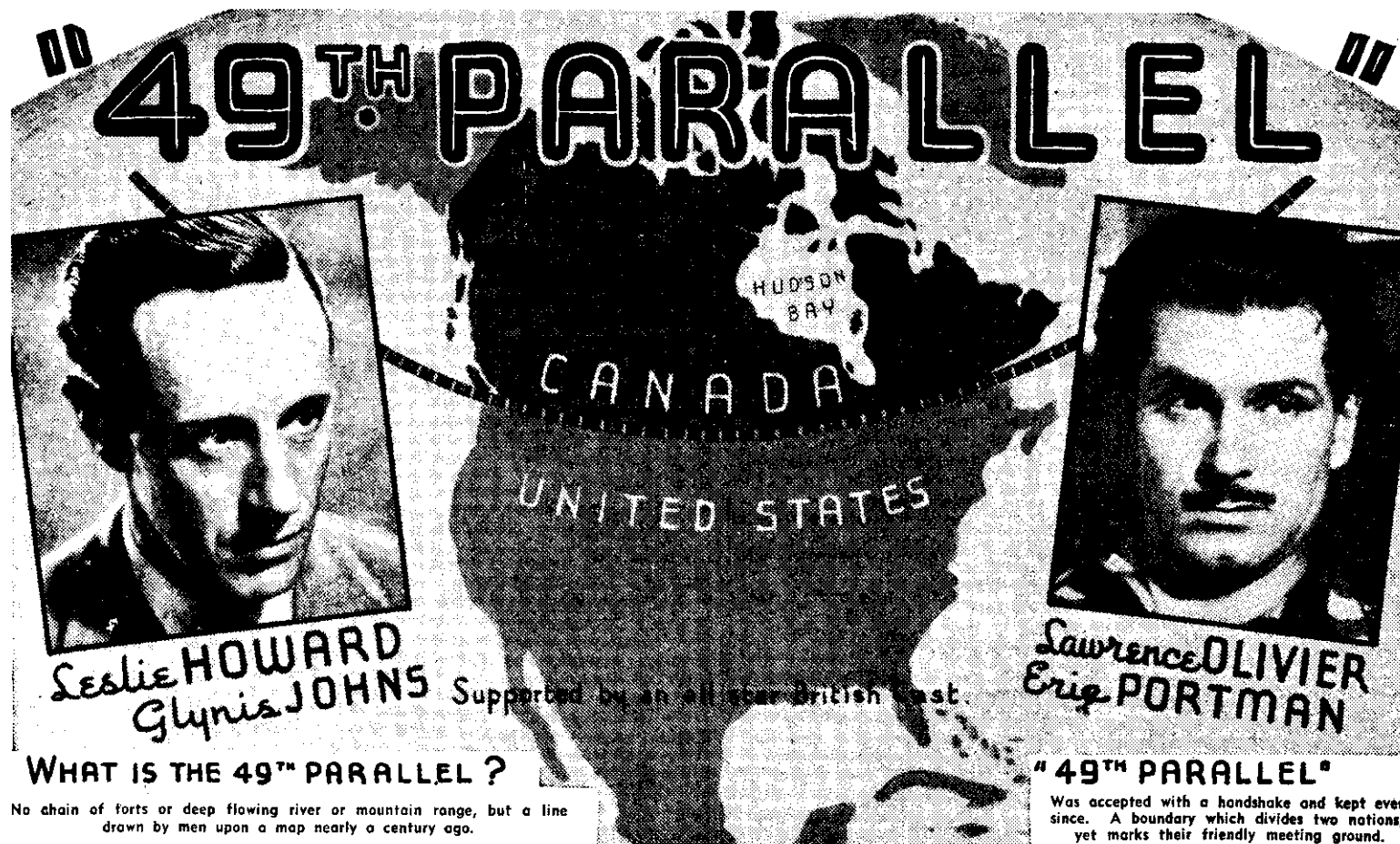
"And then?"

"My first feeling was naturally one of relief."

(To be continued next week)

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