

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. David is sure it is George Murray, and immediately suspects him of the murder, a suspicion which is reinforced by Judith's hasty marriage to John Murray. And in spite of Ashton's eloquence, the trial goes badly for Preston.

CHAPTER XXVII.—Cont'd.

THE Court rose at four o'clock that afternoon, and when it re-assembled next morning, the jury found the prisoner guilty with a strong recommendation to mercy. Only the men of the party were present when sentence was pronounced, and as soon as the Court rose, David hurried to meet Morgan.

"That recommendation to mercy—what's it worth?"

"A life sentence at the best. It rests with the Executive and there's been a strong reaction in favour of capital punishment just lately. Too many crimes of violence. . . . But tell the daughter that at least it won't mean the death sentence."

"It won't?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Heaven knows, but no harm in telling her so. Poor child, at least she did her best."

"And George Murray?"

The lawyer glanced round and lowered his voice. "You heard his evidence; you saw him give it, and, if you were to voice your suspicions at this moment you would probably be forgiven as mentally deranged. Still—wait and see. I had a curious feeling once or twice that the witnesses were only temporising."

"Temporising, with the death sentence pronounced!"

"But not confirmed. The part you heard, dreadful though it was, was only a formality. There must be a delay of some weeks and I don't think we shall have to wait as long as that for the truth to come out—if there is any to come."

At the hotel he found John Murray waiting for him, his face very pale and his mouth set in lines of suffering. He gripped David's hand in silence and then answered his unspoken question.

"Yes, my uncle has told her. He will be glad you are here, as he was afraid of collapse; personally, I don't think there'll be any, because she's been preparing herself for this all along."

It is dark in the bush

"Yes; still when it comes it must be a shock. . . . And the others?"

"I don't know where Mrs. Marsden is; she was here when we got back and heard the verdict but she went out afterwards. Judith's almost as much bowled over as Ann. . . . That's been a surprise to me, David. I thought Judith would always take everything without turning a hair, but you saw how she nearly crumpled up in the witness box?"

"Yes. But of course it was a terrible ordeal."

"Certainly, but Ann managed it. . . . I've discovered, David, that Judith's not nearly so independent as you all thought. What she wants, really, is someone to lean on."

Under other circumstances David would have been amused at the self-complacency of the young husband's tone, but he was in no mood for talk, and turned quickly to George Murray as he entered the room.

"Yes, she is brave—amazingly brave. No, she wants to be alone. She sent you her love and will get someone to ring you up if she needs you. Otherwise, come this afternoon and she will feel more able to talk."

"Where's Mrs. Marsden? It's not like her to go when everyone is sure to need her."

"She won't be long, I'm sure, and she will look after the child when she comes. I know she has been up and down half-a-dozen times the last few nights to be sure that Ann slept or to talk to her if she was lying awake."

"I know. Ann told me. Whatever would we all do without that woman?"

"I don't know. I've wondered often enough during the last twenty years."

A week ago David would have found something significant in the old man's manner; but to-day he passed it by as only another enigma. No use for him to try to understand George Murray or to waste time speculating about him. The man was a mystery to him. . . .

When David tapped at Ann's door at three o'clock that afternoon he found her lying wide-eyed but composed on her bed. He sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"My dear, Morgan says that the Executive are sure to take notice of the jury's recommendation. You are not to imagine that anything worse can happen."

"Worse than imprisonment for life? David, what could be worse?"

He had nothing to say, no way of comforting her. When he asked her if there was anything she needed, she replied, "Oh no; Mrs. Marsden is back and she thinks of everything. John and

Judith, too, have been so good—and Mr. Murray is the dearest of all. Oh David, what a tragedy we brought on everyone when we turned up at Te Rata that night—yes, and on you, too."

But he knew the answer to that, though the sight of her helpless misery was almost more than he could bear. He got up restlessly and prowled round the little room, picking up a note from the dressing table and glancing at it idly. It was unopened and unstamped.

"Hullo, what's this?"

She glanced at it indifferently. "Only another typed one. I expect it's anonymous. You wouldn't believe, David, how many letters I've had from absolute strangers since the trial began. The world must be full of queer people. Mr. Murray's taken to going through my mail for me the last two days. He can't have noticed this one."

"Shall I open it?"

"If you like, but I don't want to see it. Some of them are—oh, hateful."

It was a slip of ordinary typing paper; he looked at it casually, then bent over it, scanning the words closely. There was no noise in the room except the monotonous droning of a mason bee somewhere in the window frame.

Ann opened her eyes and said, rather querulously, "What's the matter? Why are you gazing at that stupid letter as if you'd seen a ghost?"

He handed her the paper and she raised herself on her elbow to read it. "Set your mind at rest. Your father is innocent and will be at liberty in a few days. Tell no one of this letter."

Ann began to sob helplessly; after her restraint and self-control of the last few days, the reaction was too much. David gathered her into his arms and still sat staring at the paper. So that was George Murray's plan. He could bear this sight of her suffering no longer; he had determined on his own course but wished to relieve her mind meantime. All would now be well.

"Oh David, who could have written it?"

"I don't know, Ann."

"What if it's a hoax?"

"It isn't. How could it be? Who would be such a devil?"

This reassured her but still she came back to the question, "But who could have written it? How did it get there?"

At last he said, "Ann, it may be like this. Somebody—the real murderer, has waited. He's been hoping your father would be acquitted. Now that's over, he means to own up."

With that she had to be content. David sighed as he left her. When the

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.	

truth came out, when George Murray confessed, would not the blow to Ann be still a cruel one?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

They were all amazed at the improvement in Ann's state of mind next day; since no one but David knew of the mysterious letter which was buoying up her hopes, they were delighted at the comparative cheerfulness with which she agreed to go back to Rata. It was pathetic, David thought, to watch George Murray keeping up the fiction with everyone.

"It's the greatest surprise and relief to find the child so much better. I suppose she's pinning her hopes on the jury's recommendation of mercy."

David agreed hurriedly, avoiding the other's quiet eyes. He found the tension of these days of waiting almost unbearable and was filled with admiration and relief at the old man's calmness. Yet he noticed that new lines of pain had graven themselves in George Murray's face and that his eyes were haggard with sleeplessness. What did he mean to do—give himself up or take his own life? There was no indication from his manner or words, even in his least guarded moment.

Ann had made the one condition that she be allowed to see her father before returning to the country. David and George Murray went to the gaol with her and, though she was in tears when she came out to them, David noticed that she put her arm in the old man's and that she seemed to support him rather than lean upon him as they left the gaol.

When they were alone, he asked her whether she had told her father of the note.

"No; I couldn't, when all the time I've still a dreadful fear that it may all mean nothing. But I whispered to him as I said good-bye that he was not to despair, that I believed the truth was going to come out very soon now; that was all right, wasn't it?"

"Quite. And now you're going back to Te Rata?"

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