

**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.

In spite of Ashton's eloquence, the verdict is "Guilty, with a strong recommendation to mercy." But David feels confident that now the real murderer will confess and is therefore surprised when George Murray returns to Te Rata with Ann. David goes to meet Mrs. Marsden at her hotel. The clerk gives him a letter from her. He rushes upstairs, but it is too late. Mrs. Marsden is already dead.

**CHAPTER XXIX.**

THE letter which David had scanned with such frantic haste was clear and concise enough.

"Dear David," it ran,

"I am sorry to involve you in yet more trouble and tragedy, but the distress and inconvenience will only be temporary and will lead, I hope, to real peace and happiness at last. In any case, I do not feel that you will begrudge me this last appeal to your sensible and practical kindness.

"By the time you receive this I shall be dead. It is now 1.30 and I am about to take an over-dose of luminal which will not be long in having its effect. When you find me at 7 p.m. I shall be long past any human aid."

So far David had read, then had come the wild rush to the upstairs room, the breaking open of the door, the finding of the dead woman. When he spread the letter out again and strove to read it connectedly, the words seemed to leap out and strike him in all their monstrous incredibility.

"The reason that I have taken my life is that I am the murderer for whom you have all been searching. I don't know whether you have any suspicion that I killed Peter Langley; Judith, I am sure guesses the truth and Mr. Murray also, but I have not been able to follow the workings of your mind so clearly. However, it will also be clear now, for I have left a full confession of the crime, together with any necessary evidence. This is contained in a letter and a parcel addressed to the police and both to be found in the top right-hand drawer of the chest of drawers. But please do not allow people to touch anything until the police are here. It

# It is dark in the bush

always means more trouble in the end and it is best just to leave things alone.

"I have thought all this out very carefully, with the object of causing everybody concerned as little pain and distress as possible, and I know that I can trust you to obey my wishes in this matter. Do not telephone to Mr. Murray this evening; when you have put matters in the proper hands and arranged everything with the police, go yourself and tell him. It will not, I think, be altogether a surprise, but I don't want him to hear it from outsiders. You should be able to get away at daylight to-morrow and reach there by mid-day before there is any fear of his hearing from accidental sources; but do not, my dear boy, scorch too fast on that motor-cycle and be careful of yourself at the hair-pin bends. I have always disliked those machines and hope that you will get rid of yours without too much loss now that all this worry and trouble are over.

"I have written a long letter, but must say one thing in farewell. Try, dear David, to forgive me for all the pain and anxiety I have caused you and many people, and particularly Ann, during the last few weeks. Try to believe that I was forced into a line of conduct that I hated, that I, too, have suffered, but that my silence was unavoidable. The happiness of others was at stake in a way that even now I cannot confide in you. Nevertheless, I think that you will understand and forgive. You and Ann are mercifully young and will soon recover from all this misery. May many years of love and happiness be yours.

Your sincere and affectionate friend,  
Elizabeth Marsden."

The signature was firm and unhurried, and with a little start it occurred incongruously to David that he had never before thought of Mrs. Marsden as even possessing a Christian name. How little any of them had ever known of the dead woman, who had lived and moved so quietly and inconspicuously among them, and now lay dead with a serene little smile of achievement on her tired face. . . . The face of a murderess? Ah no; that was unthinkable.

By the time he had read the letter for a second time, the police had arrived. He watched their movements about the room, the methodical taking of notes, the opening of the drawer where the letter and parcel lay side by side; heard their curt summing-up of the situation and the directions for the removal of the body.

"I see you have a letter, too, Mr. Armstrong?"

"Yes, I suppose you will want to see it, but let me have it back. I should like, too, to know what is in the one to the Superintendent."

"Naturally. You've been mixed up in this business all through, haven't you? Strange that there should be more of it. Wonder if this has anything to do with the murder; no, that doesn't seem likely. . . . Just coincidence, I suppose. . . . Well, we shall soon know. Come round to the office at nine o'clock and I expect you'll be able to see the Superintendent. . . . Meantime, we'd better ring Mr. Murray. The woman was his housekeeper, wasn't she?"

"Don't do that!" said David decisively; somehow the expression "the woman" had jarred curiously upon him, seeming at once to relegate Mrs. Marsden to the criminal classes. "Mrs. Marsden particularly asks me to take the news of her death to Mr. Murray to-morrow. He is old and alone in the house with Miss Preston, and the news will be a shock to both of them. I suppose I can get away at daybreak to-morrow?"

Almost he smiled to think how closely he was obeying the dead woman's directions; she still had power to manage them all.

"All right, Mr. Armstrong. After all, what's the hurry? Oh yes, you can get away. You'll have to come back for the inquest, but I don't anticipate any trouble. This business seems straightforward enough, almost as if she'd done all she could to arrange it beforehand so as to give nobody any trouble. . . . Wish more of them were as considerate."

David looked long at the dead face. Thought everything out—yes, she had always done that. Whatever dreadful sin she had committed, whatever compulsion had held her silent and brought all this misery upon them all, it had been caused by some strange and resistless force—never by thoughtlessness, by cowardice or by cruelty. She had asked him for forgiveness but it had been hers from the moment when he had opened that letter. He might never know or understand her reason, but he could trust her, as they had all trusted her always.

At nine o'clock he was received in the private room of the Superintendent with a cordiality that seemed to breathe relief.

"Yes, the whole business cleared up at last. . . . A load off everybody's minds. . . . One of those affairs when, however foolproof one's case appears, it leaves an unfinished feeling. No, we haven't released Preston yet. There are certain formalities to be gone through of course. But he was visited just now in prison and I think he, too, will sleep soundly to-night."

"The letter, then, was a confession?"

"A full and circumstantial one. You may read it. It will all, of course, have to be made public."

"What was in the parcel?"

## 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.		

"This," and the Superintendent held up before David's astonished eyes a plain frock made of grey-green linen; from one side a jagged piece had been torn."

"Good heavens! the missing dress. . . . And she never turned a hair when we showed her that piece of stuff."

"She was an extraordinary woman," said the official quietly. "Even now she has not revealed the whole story, although amply enough to vindicate Preston. . . . But such reticence is amazing in a woman. Here is a copy of the letter."

The official handed the typed sheets to David and then busied himself in some papers while David opened them up and began to read. The letter began without circumlocution or waste of time.

"To Those Whom It May Concern: On November 18th, 1938, I murdered Peter Langley by administering to him an overdose of luminal. I left the Te Rata house (in which I have been employed for twenty years as housekeeper) at 1.30. Mr. Murray was out, his nephew in town, and Mr. Preston sitting smoking on the veranda. The girl Sally had gone to spend the afternoon with her people who live two miles away. I put on the linen dress which you will find in the accompanying parcel and which I had just finished making. My reasons for wearing it were two-fold; no one had seen it and therefore I would not be easily recognised, especially as it was a colour I do not affect. Secondly, the particular shade tones in with the general colour-scheme of the bush and hills and would make my figure less noticeable. Coming home I tore a piece out of the skirt and immediately concealed the dress.

"I went up to the cottage by the bush track and went quietly into the house without knocking. Langley was sitting on the edge of his bunk, drinking whisky out of a mug. He was half intoxicated and greeted me with insults. I tried to argue with him, to persuade him to go right away from the district, but he became more abusive. I had been prepared for this and for the threats

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