

**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.

"Guilty, with a strong recommendation to mercy," is the jury's verdict. The evening after the trial, David arranges to meet Mrs. Marsden at her hotel. He finds her already dead. Mrs. Marsden leaves a letter for David and another for the police, in which she confesses that she was Langley's murderer.

**CHAPTER XXIX. (Cont'd)**

DAVID remembered with shame and compunction all his doubts and suspicions of good old George Murray. Had he once been mad enough to connect that kindly and generous nature with murder and concealment? Then he sighed quickly. After all, whose heart was naturally kinder or more generous than Mrs. Marsden's? — and yet the world now knew her for a self-confessed murderess. Who, after all, was he to judge?—he who as yet could understand so little of the whole mysterious business.

Ann was incredulous and aghast at the news, but Mr. Murray received it more calmly than David had dared to hope. That evening, when the shock had subsided and they were all able to speak and think calmly again, they sat out on the veranda in the cool dusk and the old man told them something of the history of the last three months.

"It was about a fortnight before the murder when I first realised that Langley had some hold over her," he said. "Ever since the villain's death I have been blaming myself bitterly that I did not intervene at that point and drive him out of the district. But I hesitated at the moment and then it was too late."

"How did you know of the trouble?"

"By accident, and by overhearing what I was not meant to hear — that made it all so much more difficult. I had told Mrs. Marsden that I would be out for the day but returned unexpectedly because my horse had gone lame. I was taking a short-cut across the grass when I heard their voices in the trees behind the tennis court and Mrs. Marsden's was so different from her usual low tones that I stopped involuntarily and listened."

"What was she saying?"

"You mean to say that you have put it down—my whole story—in black and white? Then, if you die, someone may find those papers and my secret will never be safe. Oh, you villain, you

black-hearted villain. . . . And you swore to me when I let you have that last twenty pounds that you would go away, leave New Zealand altogether."

"That was all I heard, for I felt all the guilt of the eavesdropper and hurried away. But when I got to the house I looked back and was amazed to see Langley's figure slipping away up the track. I lay awake all night, pondering what I ought to do, but at last I decided that I must intervene. I went to her next morning and asked her if she was in any trouble. At once her head went up like a frightened horse's, and she denied it absolutely. I said, 'Well, don't forget I'm here. Twenty years of friendship constitutes a claim and there's little I wouldn't do to satisfy it.' She looked at me in silence for a moment and then she said, 'You can help me best by seeing nothing, knowing nothing. It will all come right. It must come right.' You know the sort of woman she was, so self-contained and reliant; all I could do was to say, 'Well, here I am. Don't forget and don't hesitate if you want me.' She smiled at me, that sudden warm smile she sometimes had."

The old man's voice broke and they all sat in silence for a minute. Presently he said, "I was very fond of her. Oh, not in love at all. . . . Perhaps it seems strange to you young people that a feeling so warm and so sincere could last for twenty years and never turn to anything closer? Well, it never did. I'd had my romance and she'd had her tragedy. . . . What it was I never knew, but it closed her heart to love as mine was closed. But much remained, friendship and admiration and all those little jokes we used to make about her, always with her encouraging us without seeming to. . . . I shall miss her very much."

"Tell me, Mr. Murray," said David later, "Why did you follow me to the cottage that night?"

"Because I was haunted by the fear of someone finding those papers. I could tell from the words I'd overheard that that villain had written it all down and hidden it somewhere. I thought he'd probably used the same threat to Preston and that Preston had told you — and that was why you were spending all your time up there. I didn't want you to find them; I didn't mean anyone to interfere with Mrs. Marsden's plans. I didn't know—I didn't dare think—who had killed Langley. But I knew well enough that if she had, she wouldn't let Preston suffer. For some reason, she wanted more time—and she was going to have it. I was dreadfully ashamed of

allowing Ann to suffer more than she needed, but I knew I could trust Mrs. Marsden—and wait for her."

"So it was you who found them!"

"Found them? What, the papers? My dear boy, I never saw a sign of them."

"Then who on earth has got them?"

There was a thoughtful pause and then George Murray said, "No one, obviously no one — certainly not the police, or it would all have come out. Perhaps he destroyed them himself in a last decent impulse. Anyway they haven't fallen into outside hands, or the police would have known. That's all that matters now. Yes, David — I was the villain that tripped you up—and a dirty trick it was."

"What a muddle it's been," David confessed later. "Do you know, sir, I suspected the most unlikely people of the crime."

George Murray smiled. "I know you had your doubts of me. Oh, don't apologise. I've often wished I had murdered the villain. I'd have made a better job of it and saved one valuable life and a lot of unhappiness to everyone. . . . No, no, my boy, of course I understand what was in your mind when Ann told me that she had shown you the torn shirt and that you had remembered urgent business in town."

They looked at each other kindly and with understanding; peace had come to them, but the sadness remained.

**CHAPTER XXX.**

On this morning of the same day on which David had carried the news of Mrs. Marsden's death to the Te Rata household, Judith was anxiously tearing open a letter in the bedroom of the seaside hotel where they were staying. The morning's letters and papers had arrived by launch and, while John sat idly smoking on the veranda outside the room Judith was unfolding a letter written in the housekeeper's upright, characteristic hand.

One glance at its contents and she rose hurriedly; at all costs the papers must be kept from John until she had been able to tell him the last chapter of the tragedy in the bush. She satisfied herself that he was entirely absorbed in a sporting paper a week old, and buried herself in her letter; as she read on, her breath came in little choking gasps and the tears were running unchecked down her cheeks. There were two letters in the envelope, the first was short, but the second was marked "Entirely Private." The shorter letter ran thus:

"My Dear Judith,

This should, I suppose, be a conventional letter of farewell, but you and

**PEOPLE IN THE STORY**

David Armstrong	}	Students
Stephen Bryce		
Judith Anson	}	the murdered man.
James Collins, alias Peter Langley;		
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.		

I understand each other too well to take much heed of the conventions. There has, I think, been little hidden from your clear eyes during the last two months; my lie about Charles Preston—or rather the twisting of the story by which I led you to infer that I cared for him—deceived you for a time, but not for long. How the whole truth was revealed to you I do not know, but I imagine from the discovery of the hidden papers. Your discretion towards the world, your trust in me, have linked us in a tie which I scarcely think death will break.

"By the time you read this I shall know whether human ties can survive the grave, for I shall be dead. You have probably divined that I meant to take this way out if Mr. Preston were found guilty. I stayed in town for this purpose, because I wished to bring no more unhappiness than was necessary to the people I care for, nor to throw any heavier shadow upon that house where I hope you will yet be very happy. I believe that you will be.

"Don't grieve for me, my dear girl. One thing I will tell you, that even your wise eyes have not seen, but which will now convince you how very foolish it would be to mourn for me. I had only a few months to live in any case; those repeated visits of mine were to a doctor, not a dentist, a specialist who told me the truth. It was too late to operate by the time I went to him, and in any case I had accomplished what I most wished to do. You know, I think, what that was. . . . I went to this doctor under an assumed name, but his prescription made it easier for me to obtain luminal without attracting undue attention. Tell Mr. Murray and John of my illness, it will reconcile them to my death, but will not, I am sure, make them think that I was influenced to make my confession or to take my own life by the fact that that life was in any case a bad one, as the insurance agents would say!

"Give John my love; he knows, I think, that he has always had it. To Mr. Murray also it seems unnecessary to send any conventional message. To

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