

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.

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 next evening, David discovers Mrs. Marsden dead in her hotel room. She leaves a letter for the police confessing that she murdered Langley, and in a letter to Judith, reveals that she is John's mother, the wife of James Murray. She and James Murray were unsuited to one another, and early in her married life she fell in love with Peter Langley's charming brother.

CHAPTER XXX. (Cont'd)

FATE ended the connection. just after my eyes were opened to my own wickedness. Kenneth Langley was killed in a car accident and three months later my husband again came back on furlough. By this time the memory of my unfaithfulness had become hateful to me, and my repentance showed itself in more dutiful behaviour towards James. When he went to sea again I found I was going to bear his child; at once the memory of poor Kenneth Langley became a torment and the fear of discovery a nightmare. How little I dreamt that Kenneth had kept my letters, and that they were to fall into the hands of his wicked brother!

"With John's birth, life became transformed. I suppose I'm the type of woman made for maternity and not much else. I only know that I adored my baby and for his sake began even to tolerate my husband and to make allowance for his harshness and jealousy.

"When John was a year old, Peter Langley crossed my path and began to threaten me with exposure.

At once I was flung into violent despair; my husband was due back shortly and I became so terrified that I made the fatal mistake of giving the man money to leave the town. For the following six months my life was a nightmare and at the end of that time my husband discovered the whole truth. . . .

"He acted exactly as you would expect such a man to do. After a scene of dreadful violence, he turned me out of his home and told me never to enter his doors again. Then he took my baby away to New Zealand and presently deposited him with his brother. It is easy to talk of broken hearts, Judith, but if such things can happen and if one can live on afterwards, I think mine broke during those years when I was separated from my child with no hope of ever seeing him again. What did I

do? Just what other broken-hearted women do — found work as a stenographer and tried to keep myself from thinking by day or dreaming by night.

"That lasted for two years, till I had saved enough to take a steerage passage for New Zealand. Not long afterwards I heard of my husband's death, and presently I managed to obtain work in the town nearest to his brother's farm in the hopes that sometimes I might catch a glimpse of my child. Then suddenly fate was kind again. George Murray wanted a housekeeper; I applied and obtained the position. The next twenty years you know; what you do not know, what you are too young yet to divine, is the mingled joy and pain of these years, spent so near to my beloved, yet so hopelessly separated from him. Never once did I dream of disgracing him by telling the truth; I was not afraid of George Murray's judgment. He was gentle and forbearing as his brother had been narrow and harsh and would have been ready to forgive. But something else held me silent, a desire to make amends, to build from weakness of Elizabeth Murray a character which would help, not hinder, my son. The concealment I took for my punishment, for a discipline that would help me one day to become worthy of the kindness that Fate had shown me in allowing me to be always beside him. . . . But why write of all the struggles, the joys and tears of those years? Their sum total amounted to a great happiness and peace from which emerged the placid, self-controlled, ordinary woman whom you know as Mrs. Marsden.

"But Fate had been kind long enough and I was not to get off with such mild punishment. Somehow Peter Langley heard of my whereabouts and deliberately planted himself at my gateway that he might the better blackmail me for the rest of his life. And here I made my fatal error; I should not have kept silent, but at this point I should have confided in George Murray and trusted the whole affair to him. But by this time concealment had become a habit with me, so that it was as hard for the woman of that day to confide as it had been for the girl Elizabeth Murray to keep silent. Also, I had an unreasonable feeling that I had atoned—as if atonement is ever complete in this world!—that something would save me; always I went on hoping, always I was slipping a little further and a little further and a little further into his clutches.

"Then presently I learnt that my health was endangered and a visit to a specialist soon convinced me that I had not much longer to fear even Langley.

My whole idea now became to hide my illness from everybody, not to let my enemy guess that he would soon lose his target, but to die with my secret intact, to die knowing that John was safe.

"The end came quickly. Langley grew ever more pressing in his demands as my resources grew smaller; I realised that he was planning to leave the district and to extort every penny before he went. Cruelly he threatened to tell my story before he left; one day he casually mentioned that he had committed it all to writing and had concealed the papers. That made me desperate, for it meant that, even if I were dead and out of his power, John would remain in it. Vainly I tried to bargain with him and when that failed I deliberately planned to kill him. Yes, Judith, it was entirely deliberate. When I asked the doctor for an opiate to relieve my pain and he prescribed luminal I took care to get it in powder form and in a quantity large enough to kill my enemy.

"I met Langley on the day before the sale and he gave me an ultimatum, as he had already done to Mr. Preston. The rest of the story all the world will soon know; I tried in vain to plead with him and when that failed I poisoned him. After he was dead I went back quite calmly to the house feeling no more remorse than if I had destroyed a dangerous animal.

"Then the blow fell with Mr. Preston's arrest; too late I saw that I had involved an innocent man. I played for time, not because I was afraid for myself but because I must make sure of John's happiness first. I had already seen that he was attracted by you, and I knew that, if I had searched the world, I couldn't have found a girl to whom I would so unhesitatingly trust his happiness. But, if I gave myself up and the truth came out, John's name would be disgraced—and he would never offer you that.

"I was terrified of the police finding those papers. I was prepared for their discovery of that piece of torn material—though not for your coming across a scrap that I thought I had destroyed. Of course I didn't burn the dress. (One of the worst parts of this business is the number of lies in which I've involved myself; do forgive me that, Judith) I kept the dress, as it might be needed eventually for evidence—put it in the storeroom in a parcel hidden at the bottom of a case of apples.

"Then something you said, and even more something in your eyes, convinced me that you and no one else, had the papers. I knew my secret was safe with

you. I saw you go out after David Armstrong that night and understood why you hurried on your wedding day. You meant to save John's happiness in case the truth came out before I was ready.

"You must have thought me callous to wait like that till the trial was over, but I hoped against hope that Mr. Preston would be acquitted and I did not want scandal to touch Te Rata—even through its housekeeper. If he had been set free, I should not have taken my life but have died — lingeringly and rather painfully—in a private hospital in a few months time. I think this is the better way, in spite of the pain and shock it will cause John at the time.

"To spare Ann a little, I went out after the end of the trial and—by pretending that I wanted to buy a second-hand typewriter but must check it over first—wrote her that note in a shop. Then I came back and saw them off to Te Rata and made all my plans for leaving this world with as little fuss as possible—to atone for some of the trouble I had caused everybody.

"That, Judith dear, is all my story. You are far too wise and too sweet to condemn me; I know you have understood and pitied. Once more, I leave my secret in your hands with entire confidence. Don't tell John just yet; you are both a little strange to each other and he might feel himself humiliated in your eyes by my shame. Later, when he has children of his own, he will understand better. He has given me so much affection that I feel I cannot spare even a little bit of it—so wait, my dear.

"My love to you both, my dearest children. For the first and only time in this world, I sign myself,

Your loving Mother."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Do you mean to tell me that you had those papers all the time?" asked David, in amazement not unmixed with wrath.

It was a few days after Mrs. Marsden's funeral; all the publicity, all the fuss and the formalities were over. The papers had found another sensation; the Mystery in the Bush was stale already. . . .

In the Te Rata drawing-room the old party was gathered; but to-night there was no strolling in and out of the veranda doors. With one of those unaccountable changes that come so unseasonably in that high bleak country, a storm had risen and was raging without. Although it was February, a small fire burned in the open hearth and round it the members of the household were grouped. A little in the background and somewhat in the shadows sat the tall bowed figure of Charles Preston. Only one chair was empty, for by tacit consent no one had taken the big high-backed armchair in which Mrs. Marsden had always sat. To Judith it seemed as if her presence still dwelt amongst them, as though, if she turned

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