

IT IS DARK IN THE BUSH

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quickly, she must see the busy fingers, the quiet serene face of the dead woman, come to witness this last act of the tragedy.

She started at David's question and looked across at him. This was the moment she had dreaded. Would they allow Mrs. Marsden's secret to remain inviolate?

"The papers? Yes, I had them."

"Do you mean to say you found what both Mr. Murray and I had been searching for all that time?"

"It was not through any great cleverness on my part; it was by sheer accident. Then after I had found them, I noticed that drawing on the shed wall and thought it would be wiser to cover it up with the sledge."

"How did it happen? I'd forgotten all about those beastly papers," said John suddenly. "Somehow, they seem so absurdly unimportant—now."

"Yes, they don't matter to any of us now. Well, it was through Rough I found them, and it happened the first time I took him up to the cottage after the police had left. He hadn't been up there since his master's death and he was very upset and searching everywhere. Very much as you saw him, David, only more distressed. Presently he rushed across the clearing and tried to leap up the side of that tree where the papers were hidden. I suppose Langley had often gone there to gloat over his treasure and the dog was used to seeing him there. That showed me the hole and I put in my hand and felt the papers. I took them out, all but that scrap you found later, David; that must have been torn off by Langley some other time, for when I found them they were wrapped in a piece of oilcloth and I didn't even unwrap them till I got them home."

"So you must have known for weeks."

"Yes, I knew. Mrs. Marsden knew that I did; she was like that, you know—she felt things. But she knew she could trust me and I felt the same about her. It was dreadful that Mr. Preston and Ann should suffer, but all along I knew that it could only be temporary, and I could not interfere."

"Where are the papers now?"

It was the question Judith had dreaded.

"I have them."

"What are you going to do with them?" It was George Murray's quiet question.

"With your permission, if you all agree, I am going to destroy them."

"Is that wise?" asked David's perturbed voice. "What about the police?"

The party sat with troubled faces and presently Judith spoke again.

"There is only one person who has the right to know what I know, and that is John."

"Because he's your husband?" asked Ann.

"Of course because he is my husband," lied Judith calmly. "John, what shall I do?"

"Burn them," said John without a moment's hesitation.

"You're perfectly right. If she'd wanted us to know, she'd have told us. Personally, I don't want to. I—I loved Marsy too much to want to poke my nose into her affairs."

Without another word Judith got up and went to the desk that had been Mrs. Marsden's, for George Murray had not allowed the dead woman's things to be put up to public auction; with the consent of the police, he had taken them over at a valuation and had given the desk to Judith. From it she brought the bundle of papers and, amidst a dead silence, thrust it deep into the heart of the glowing coals. When every scrap was consumed, John got up, and, involuntarily glancing at the empty chair on the other side of the hearth, he said, "I can almost hear her say, 'Dear, dear! Those ashes will blow all over the carpet.'" Then, with something between a laugh and a sob he went out of the room.

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It was almost a year later and John and Judith were sitting in the warm summer dusk on the Te Rata veranda. They had not built themselves a house, for Mr. Murray had said, "If you can bear it, I should like you to stay here. I shall be very lonely in this big house and I shall never have another house-keeper."

Judith had been reading a letter and now that the light was beginning to fail she folded up the sheets, and smiled as she turned to her husband.

"Ann sounds the happiest and proudest wife in the world. England is perfect and David is evidently to be its most promising surgeon, according to his wife."

"And her father?"

"He is happy in his cottage by the sea and talks of paying us a visit before the year is out. . . . Yes, I think that chapter has closed happily."

"Do chapters ever close?" John asked thoughtfully. "Since you told me of the child that is coming, I have felt that ours is only beginning."

"I hope so," said the girl gently. "A splendid new chapter, filled with infinite possibilities."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, dreaming of those possibilities, and then John said, rather diffidently, "I've been thinking, dear, that if it's a boy." . . .

Judith laughed. "Any husband to any wife!" she mocked gently.

"Don't laugh at me. . . . If it's a boy and you didn't mind, I'd rather like to call it Marsden. The name is honoured already in this country, and, though Marsy hadn't anything to do with the early missionaries, I'll swear there wasn't a better woman amongst them all. . . . I'd like to call the child after her."

"So should I. Elizabeth if it's a girl, Marsden, if it's a boy. . . . John dear, I'm so glad you feel like that."

"And I'm so glad you understand—but then you always do. . . . I feel like that more and more as time goes on, Judith. I'm not an imaginative chap, as you know, but I have a sort of idea that

the old girl's very near and rather pleased about us. . . . Does that seem silly?"

"Not a bit. Love like hers could not die."

"Not when we loved her so much, too. . . . Because, Judith, the love wasn't by any means all on her side. . . . I—I was awfully fond of Marsy. I didn't realise quite how much till she died, but I don't think I could have liked her more if she'd been my real mother. . . . Funny thing, I often used to wish she was."

"And do you still feel like that?"

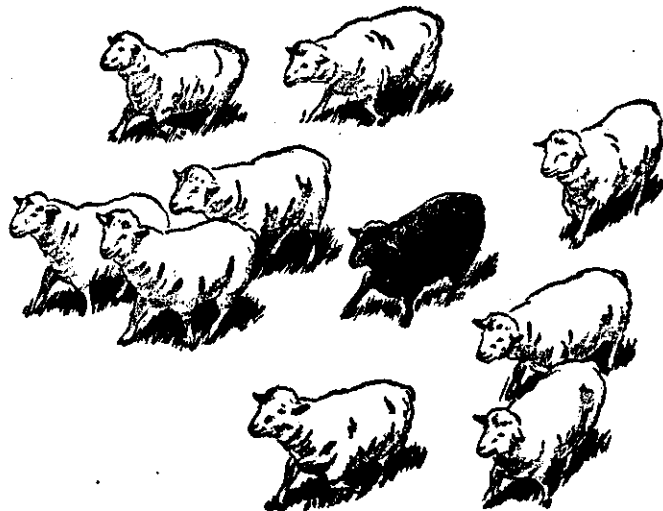
"More than ever. What she did makes no difference to me. It wasn't murder, it was justice. . . . No, she was the best and finest woman I have ever known, and I'd be proud to call her mother."

There was a pause and then they both got up and went into the lighted drawing-room. Judith went quietly to her desk and unlocked it with a key that she always carried with her; from it she took a sealed envelope and went across to her husband.

"I am so happy that you feel like that, dear," she said as she placed the letter in his hand. "Because I know now that the time has come to give you this letter and that it will make you both sad and joyful."

Then she went quietly out of the room and left him alone with his mother's secret.

(The end)



Everybody notices the one black sheep

In every community and in every kind of industry there is a small proportion of "black sheep". In addition to the many thousands of sensible and moderate people who enjoy the hospitality and fellowship to be found in a well-conducted licensed house, there is a small proportion who go beyond the bounds of good sense and good manners.

By drinking to excess and breaking the law in other respects they are a menace to the community, and they also endanger the freedom that is a traditional right in all British communities.

Public sentiment is in favour of moderation and sobriety, of liberty under the law. Every worthy citizen will endorse and support that sentiment to the end.

In wartime, some allowance must be made for the "black sheep" because of emergency conditions; but the licensed trade, in the interests of the majority of its patrons and of the public generally, steadily aims to eliminate undesirable conditions and practices.

An announcement issued in the Nation's interests by the National Council of the Licensed Trade of New Zealand.

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