

CHAPTER I

A SURPRISE

THE young man standing by the mantelpiece was tall, and of handsome but dissipated countenance. There was an expression of extreme amazement on his face as he stared at the elderly gentleman on the other side of the hearth—Sir Charles Shapland of Shapland Manor. The amazement further betrayed itself in his tones as he cried :

“ Married ! You, uncle ! When ? ”

“ Twenty-six years ago, when my succession to the title was not to be anticipated, Vernon.”

The amazement in the young man’s face gave place to open apprehension, and his voice shook as he asked the inevitable question.

“ Were there any children of the marriage, sir ? ”

“ There was one, a boy ! ”

“ A boy ! ”

Vernon Shapland’s tones were hoarse as he echoed the words. In a flash of the mind he saw himself thrust out of the succession to Shapland Manor, and visioned the financial ruin which must overtake him when this startling news was known to the world. As he did so anger and resentment surged up within him.

“ Where is this boy ? ” he demanded harshly.

“ Where is your wife—Lady Shapland ? ”

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The baronet did not resent the harshness of his nephew's questions. He understood what the young man must be feeling, and though there was little affection between them, his understanding made him sympathetic.

"Aias! Vernon, I do not know. I have not known for twenty-three years!"

"Twenty-three years!" Mingled surprise and relief found expression in Vernon Shapland's tones, and his manner unconsciously grew less harsh. "But why—I mean, how is that, sir?"

"It is really very simple," answered the baronet quietly. "When I left Oxford there was not the slightest likelihood of my succeeding to the title and estates, and as I had no liking for any of the professions, I went out to Queensland, following

'The bitter road the younger son must travel
Ere he win to hearth and saddle of his own.'

You know how that man, Kipling, puts it?—I went gem-hunting, and was so far successful that with the proceeds I entered into partnership with a man at Thursday Island, who was engaged in the pearling industry. He had a daughter, as sweet a woman as this earth ever knew, and within twelve months we were married, and after our son, Charles, was born she accompanied me on a pearling expedition to a small island that lies off the coast of British New Guinea."

He broke off his narrative for a moment, and his nephew, watching him, saw in his face evidence of painful emotion. When he resumed his voice was shaking.

"There were huts on the island, built by pearl-ers and bêche-de-mer hunters, and it was our custom to use those at night, sailing the schooner to the pearl-

ing ground every morning. Marie—that was my wife's name—usually remained behind with the boy and a couple of native servants, and one day the tragedy happened. It came on to blow, and to save the boat I was forced to run for shelter to the lee of a small island forty miles from our base. It was three days before we were able to return, and when we reached the anchorage there was no one to welcome us——”

His voice shook, and for a little time he was overcome by emotion, then he said brokenly: “The place had a most desolate look; and my heart was full of misgiving as I hurried ashore. . . . The huts had been ransacked. My wife and child and the two native servants were gone.”

“Do you mean they had departed of their own free will?”

“No,” answered the baronet slowly. “If I could think that, even all these years after, I should be grateful to Heaven. Two large canoes had been beached near the huts. We found a broken paddle that had been carelessly tossed away, and in one of the huts we found a stone war-club!”

Vernon Shapland shaped his lips to whistle, and then refrained. All trace of apprehension had quite gone from his face, and his voice was sympathetic as he inquired:

“They had been kidnapped by savages?”

“That is quite certain,” replied the baronet hoarsely.

“And you never found them?”

Sir Charles shook his head.

“No! All trace of them was lost. For twenty-three years I heard nothing, but last week I had a letter from a man in Cooktown, Australia, who has acted as my agent in this matter.”

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“ A letter ? ”

Vernon Shapland's face had grown suddenly white, and apprehension glowed in his eyes once more. The baronet, however, was not looking at him, and this quick change in demeanour escaped his attention. He went on with his explanation.

“ The letter contains what may prove to be a clue. It states that twenty-three years ago a trader named Rowley found a native woman and a white child living alone in a hut on a desolate Papuan creek. The woman spoke a dialect which the trader was unacquainted with, but he took the two on his schooner intending to put them in charge of the authorities at Port Moresby. On the way down, however, the woman died, and he ended by adopting the child—a boy—as his own.”

“ And this trader, sir. Is he alive ? ”

“ Unfortunatetely, no! He was killed and eaten by cannibals down in the Solomon Islands fifteen years ago.”

“ And the boy ? ”

“ My correspondent's informant says that he went to New Guinea some years ago, since when nothing whatever has been heard of him.”

For a moment Vernon Shapland did not speak, then he asked :

“ And you think that this boy may prove to be—er—my long-lost cousin ? ”

“ It is possible,” answered the baronet, “ and for that reason I decided to tell you the whole story, as the knowledge that my son may be alive affects your position as my heir very gravely.”

“ But supposing the boy is found ? ” asked the younger man quickly. “ How will you know him ? He will be a man now—and twenty-three years in the tropics is a long time.”

"There are marks," answered Sir Charles. "A missing toe on the left foot, due to an accident on a piece of sharp coral when he was learning to walk. Further, when he was vaccinated the surgeon accidentally scratched the skin between the two places of inoculation and when the arm was healed it showed a mark curiously like a dumbbell. The two together render a mistake impossible."

Vernon Shapland was silent for a little time. His face betrayed deep perplexity and his eyes had a sombre look. The baronet watched him, and, becoming conscious of his gaze, the young man gave vent to a short, harsh laugh.

"It's rather rough on me, after all these years! But the thing has got to be cleared up, and as it is a matter that affects my interests I should like to have a hand in doing that. Does your Cooktown correspondent know why you are interested in the child lost so long ago?"

"No! He does not even know who makes the inquiries. Letters have always been forwarded to my lawyers under a pseudonym. I have always guarded the secret carefully."

His nephew considered for a moment, then he said tentatively: "Suppose, sir, I were to go to New Guinea and endeavour to find this adopted son of the man Rowley. It seems to me to be the best way. I could make careful inquiries, exercising that discretion which the matter seems to need—a discretion that a hired agent might fail to exercise."

A look of relief came on the baronet's face.

"I am very glad that you are so willing, Vernon. I would go myself, but you know what my health is. I never dared to hope you would offer to do this. It is very generous of you—most generous, in view of all the facts——"

"It is not that, sir," broke in his nephew brusquely. "Knowing what I know now, I should find the position intolerable if I did not endeavour to clear the matter up."

Sir Charles nodded. "I understand. When will you start?"

"As soon as I can. I will run up to town this afternoon and make the necessary arrangements, whilst you can commit instructions and any further helpful information to paper. In the meantime if you will excuse me I should like to think quietly over all that you have told me; and pay a call that, in view of my prospective journey, is almost imperative."

The baronet nodded his understanding, and a half smile came to his lips.

"If you see Janet you might tell her that the orchids I mentioned to her have arrived, and that I shall be glad to show them to her any time."

His nephew started a little at the shrewd guess of the place of his projected call; and he also smiled.

"I will not fail to convey your message, sir."

A moment later as he passed from the library and left the house the smile vanished completely. A black frown came on his face, and his eyes burned with a fierce light. The news which he had just heard was of so startling a nature that he was scarcely able to realize it, though already the contingencies that it made possible were forcing themselves upon his attention.

He saw himself thrust out of the succession to Shapland Manor, and a title nearly three hundred years old to pass to some uncouth fellow who had grown to manhood in the wild places of the earth. For the title he cared little, but for the riches that must come to the heir of Shapland he cared a great deal,

and, indeed, had much need of them, already having anticipated them to an extent of which Sir Charles had not the faintest notion. As he thought of that unknown man whose unexpected intervention meant so much he ground his teeth in futile wrath. Then his mind began to work, shaping a plan whereby the threatened disaster could be averted.

"It's just as well that I offered to go and find this upstart," he muttered. "The secret is in the family yet, and if anybody can find the fellow, I can. And when I do——"

He broke off as he caught the sound of a horse's hoofs on the gravel, and looked up. The frown disappeared from his face in a twinkling, and the fierceness of his eyes gave place to a smiling light. A rider was approaching, a lady—little more than a girl. As his eyes fell on her, Vernon Shapland's face beamed with pleasure, and with good reason, for Janet Selby was divinely fair, lovely and fresh as a spring morning, and whether on foot or in the saddle, a figure to catch the eye.

As she came nearer, the girl checked her horse. "Why, Vernon," she cried, in surprise, "I did not know you were at Shapland."

"I only arrived last night, and I depart again this afternoon. But I am very glad to meet you, for I was on my way to the Abbey——"

"Father is away from home," interrupted the girl quickly. "It is Quarter Sessions, and——"

"It is not your father that I wish to see," broke in the young man. "It is you, Janet. I am going on a long journey, and I wish to say good-bye before I go."

A little embarrassment manifested in the girl's demeanour occasioned by the directness of his words, but watching her closely, at the mention of the long

journey, Vernon Shapland caught a flash of interest in her eyes. He smiled to himself, but as at that moment her horse began to fidget, distracting her attention, the girl did not see the smile.

"A long journey!" she cried. "What part of the world are you going to?"

"New Guinea."

"You are going to New Guinea?"

Janet's face betrayed astonishment, but Shapland ignored it, and answered "Yes, on business for my uncle, and I may be away for the best part of a year."

"That is rather a long time," said the girl quietly.

"It will seem like an eternity—away from you, Janet," cried the young man earnestly, "That is why I wished to see you before I left England. You know that I love you, that I have done so ever since the day we first met, when I was still at Eton, and you wore your hair in horse-tails——"

"Plaits is the right word," interrupted Janet, a little gleam of mirth showing in her eyes.

"Horse-tails or plaits it is all the same, Janet. I loved you then; I love you now, and always shall. You know that your father is in favour of——"

"My father thinks it would be a fine thing for me to be mistress of Shapland Manor."

"And you, Janet?"

The girl looked towards the old Tudor mansion in its setting of ancient trees, and then spoke frankly.

"It is a beautiful old place. Any woman might be proud to——"

"Then, Janet, you will——" he began impetuously, but she stayed him.

"I do not know," she broke in. "There are other things to be considered besides the mistress-ship of the Manor, and I have not considered them—yet; nor

was I expecting to do so this morning. The matter is not one to be decided in a hurry. When you return will be ample time for that."

Vernon Shapland looked at her as she sat there in all her youthful grace and beauty, and was shaken by the stress of his feeling.

"When I return Janet," he cried passionately, "you must say 'yes.' Must!—must! I can take no other answer. Without you my life would be worth nothing to me, and Shapland a mere setting without the jewel it ought to hold. I could not bear to live there without you."

Janet Selby was a little moved by this passionate utterance, nevertheless she kept to the way she had chosen.

"When you return, Vernon, I will give you a definite answer. I can promise no more than that. And now, if you will excuse me, I will ride on. There are some rare orchids Sir Charles promised to show me, and I have only a few minutes to spare."

She touched the horse with her spur, and as it sprang forward she waved her riding-whip in farewell. Vernon Shapland watched her go, and as she came into line with the Manor, he looked from her to the house, and a stormy light came in his eyes.

"By Heaven!" he whispered savagely. "I will not give them up—neither Shapland nor Janet, for any beastly upstart in the world!"

CHAPTER II

AT PORT MORESBY

FROM the deck of the boat running from Cooktown, Australia, to Port Moresby, the headquarters of the government of British New Guinea,