

CHAPTER XV

A BARGAIN

AS Cordery slunk through the bushes he growled curses to himself, and there was wrath in his heart towards the man who had publicly threatened him. But the curses dried up suddenly, and a grin came on his face, as breaking through the copse on the further side, he came unexpectedly upon a horseman in a scarlet coat riding towards him. The man was Vernon Shapland, and with the grin still creasing his face Cordery hailed him.

"Top o' the morning to you, Mr. John Vernon!"

Vernon Shapland went deadly pale as he was thus greeted, but stared at the prospector as if he had never seen him in his life before.

"I'm afraid you are making a mistake, my man," he said, reining in his horse.

"Well, that's as one looks at it," replied Cordery cheerfully. "But when a man has two names, if he don't recognize hisself by one it's as well to try the other. So we'll say Mr. Shapland, of Shapland Manor, if that's any help to you."

Vernon Shapland looked hastily round. Far away on the crest of a hill he caught sight of the hunters moving rapidly away, but nearer at hand were stragglers of the miscellaneous crowd who follow the chase on foot. There was an apprehensive look in his eyes as he turned to his ex-guide once more.

"Well," he said quietly, like a man accepting a desperate situation, "what do you want, Cordery?"

"That's better, a lot better," chuckled Cordery

genially. I thought you'd remember an old friend, if you tried."

To Shapland there was something threatening in that geniality, and whilst he waited for the man to continue, questions burdened with dread were pounding through his mind. What was the fellow doing here? What did he want? How much did he know? After a moment Cordery spoke again.

"I didn't expect you'd know me the first time of looking. This here climate don't suit a man who has malaria in his bones. But I'm real glad you knows me now you've looked at me twice, Mr. Vernon—Shapland I should say. Though when you rode off the field just now, I says to myself, he knows me, but is a bit shy of meeting an old friend before all these swells, an' particularly before that nice young woman, what——"

"Confound you!" broke in Shapland, "keep your tongue off her, and tell me what you want. If you're needing help, say so, and perhaps——"

"There! I knowed you had a good heart, Mr. Shapland. I've said it to myself many a time, but it's not charity I am wanting, not one little bit."

"Then what is it?" demanded Shapland.

"The keys of heaven," answered Cordery with a grin.

"Confound you! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. Remember our little talk about heaven a while back in Papua, Mr. Shapland? Maybe you'll recall that I told you mine was a schooner an' a steady little income to keep a man in comfort?"

"Yes, I remember," replied the other harshly. "What about it?"

"Well," answered Cordery genially, "I reckon that's just what I'm after."

"I don't pretend to understand you, man, but I do remember that you said our trip would help you to your dream. Did you find that gold-reef?"

"I never went to look. There was an easier way nor that, an' I took it an' here I am, reaching after my kingdom of heaven."

Knowing what he did, these words, though they were genially spoken, were full of menace to the man who heard them. He saw his worst fears realized, and knew intuitively that the other was blackmailing him, but, though he recognized his helplessness, he had himself well in hand now, and was determined to yield nothing prematurely.

"A very laudable ambition, Cordery," he answered easily. "But for a man of your particular qualities England is hardly the place in which to attain it. You're wasting your time here. You should——"

"Oh, drop it!" broke in the other brutally. "You know what I'm after, an' you an' me's got to talk—soon, an' this ain't the place. Somebody might overhear us, an' that wouldn't be pleasant for you. I tried to get you in London, an' followed you to a swell club, meaning to wait for you, but there I got your name confirmed, an' I knew that if I could get at you down here we could talk quiet. So as we've met you'd best fix up an interview."

This sudden change of tone convinced Vernon Shapland that Cordery was not to be bluffed, and he bowed to the inevitable.

"Very well," he said after a moment's thought. "You want to see me quietly, and you shall. You know that I live at the Manor, and as just now

I happen to be alone, except for the servants, the matter can be arranged easily. Come to the house at eleven-thirty to-night, and you can say what you have to say. I will be waiting for you on the terrace."

"Now that's what I call talkin'," answered Cordery approvingly. "And I'll be there on the tick— He broke off and looked down the lane. "There's somebody coming along," he said, "an' as you're shy of being seen with an old friend I'll scoot. So long!"

He drew back into the wood, and as the sound of galloping hoofs came up the lane, Vernon Shapland himself put the spurs to his horse and rode away, his face full of torment.

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That night as the clock of Shapland Church sounded the half-hour before midnight, Vernon Shapland rose from his chair in front of his fire in his own sitting-room, pushed the decanter further on the table, and extinguished the light. Then he moved to the French window, slipped the bolt, and opening the window, stepped out on to the terrace. As he did so a shadowy form emerged from behind a clump of bushes at the far end and moved towards him. It was Cordery.

"Walk on the grass," whispered Shapland, and turned to the window, followed by Cordery.

When they had entered the room, Shapland closed the window, and drew the thick curtains before switching on the light.

"Take a seat," he said quietly.

"I will, an' a drop of liquor, if you don't mind. I see you've got it handy."

Shapland took a glass from a small table and put it within Cordery's reach.

"Help yourself," he said.

Cordery helped himself generously, then he raised the glass, nodded to his host, and gulped down a good half of the mixture.

"Now," he said genially, "we can talk." He looked at his host as if expecting him to begin, but Vernon Shapland understood the value of silence, and was determined that Cordery should reveal what he knew before he himself said much. So he merely nodded and waited for the visitor to take the initiative.

Cordery waited a moment, then he grinned as if he understood.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "about that income?"

"What about it?" asked Shapland, as nonchalantly as he could. "I told you England was hardly the place to——"

"Oh, stow that rot," interrupted Cordery harshly. "We settled that this morning, an' you know it, Mr. Ver—Shapland, or I wouldn't be sitting here now. England's all right, and you're the man to find the money."

"You are expecting me to provide this income for life for you?"

Cordery nodded. "Enough to let a man live comfortably in the Islands and run a little trading schooner, just to keep one from rusting."

"Your expectations are modest!" sneered Shapland, "but why I should agree you haven't yet told me. I paid you pretty well for what you did for me in New Guinea."

"And now you've got to pay me for what you did," chuckled the ex-guide.

Shapland had no doubt as to what the other meant, but for all that he affected ignorance, de-

terminated to be quite sure before committing himself.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "If you will explain yourself——"

"Oh, I'll explain," laughed Cordery, "just as much as you want. Don't mind if I smoke while I'm doing it do you?"

He did not wait for permission, but filled a rank pipe with rarer tobacco, and lit it with a brimstone match. When it was thoroughly alight, he blew out a cloud of smoke, and began:

"You remember that carrier Joey who went on that trip to the back ranges with us?"

"I can't say that I do. Those natives were all alike to me," answered his host.

"This one you're bound to remember. He was a Thursday Islander, an old servant of mine, an' he talked English like a native who's been in a mission school. Big fellow, pockmarked, who kept his wool cropped short, an' never plastered it down with lime like the others did."

"Well, what of him?" asked Shapland carelessly.

"Only this; he was one of the two men who went with you to the Rowley Camp that morning when you hopped off there, leaving me to prospect the river for gold."

Vernon Shapland's face blanched a little, but he still strove to keep an air of ignorance.

"You were talking just now about an income, and now you are talking about a Kanaka carrier. You must pardon me, Cordery, if I say that I don't quite see the connexion."

"No?" Cordery smiled incredulously, and added: "Well, you will in a minute or two. I'm coming to that in a jiffy, and when I get there you'll see the coupling right enough."

He sucked at his pipe a moment, and then continued. "Joey is a good chap, as Kanakas go, as good a man for camping as any native I ever struck. But he has a vice that all these islanders have, and he has it bad—he's mortal curious."

He looked at Vernon Shapland as he spoke, but beyond the fact that his face was a little pale, his host gave no sign of anticipating what was to follow. He waited without speaking, and Cordery took up his explanation anew.

"His curiosity gets the best of him sometimes—an' it got on top of him that morning, when you left him an' his chum to kick their heels whilst you went forward to the Rowley Camp. You left him behind, but he didn't stay behind. He followed you, an' he saw you plug young Rowley. He wasn't surprised—a Kanaka man never is—but he'd a bit of trouble with his chum, who belonged to a head-hunting tribe an' wanted to collect Rowley's skull for a souvenir. But Joey wouldn't have that, and hurried back to the rendezvous, an' being natives they got there before you; an' Joey told me all the yarn when you left camp to gather orchids. Remember?"

"Suppose I said this was all a lie of Joey's?" asked Shapland with stony calm.

"Shouldn't believe you," answered Cordery promptly. "You've to remember I heard the shot, an' when I asked you about it you were a bit flustered. That set me thinking, an' I didn't believe the snake yarn you tried to put on me; whilst when you wanted to quit camp there an' then I thought more. I asked Joey about the snake—an' I got the truth. The thing's no lie of Joey's. Charley Rowley was in Port Moresby three weeks later, an' he reported the mysterious

murder of his partner—an' foster-brother Jim——”

Cordery broke off sharply as he caught sight of his host's face, which had suddenly grown almost ghastly. For a moment there was a puzzled look in his eyes. What had he said that his victim should look like that? Then a light broke upon him, and he smote his knee with his hand.

“By the mass!” he cried. “You got the wrong man! I remember now it was Charley Rowley you wanted, an' you got the other instead. The man you were after wasn't in camp. He came back later to find Jim dead, an' now he's in this neighbourhood, an' no end of a swell—the first New Guinea millionaire they call him at Port Moresby. I wonder why you wanted to get him so badly?”

Vernon Shapland offered no explanation. Indeed, for the moment he was quite beyond anything of the kind; Cordery's careless words revealing that he had killed the wrong man had almost stunned him. More than once since his first meeting with Rowley he had wondered what relation he bore to the dead man, and had been haunted by fears that now were justified by the fact. For what seemed quite a long time he sat there incapable of speech, then he said in a strangled voice: “How—how much do you want, Cordery?”

Cordery grinned. His victim had surrendered at discretion, and he was not by nature a merciful man.

“Well,” he answered slowly. “I had thought of five hundred a year, first payable in advance, but I guess now I'll make it six. Seems to me that's a fair deal.”

“It's three hundred too much! I am not a rich man. And for what I have I am altogether dependent upon my uncle.”

The prospector shook his head.

"That cock won't fight! You're the heir of the Manor, and if you ain't got the money handy you can raise it easily. I've been making inquiries, and I know."

"But I tell you I haven't——"

"Fudge, Mr. Shapland! What do you suppose Charley Rowley, who is a millionaire, would pay for the name of the man who shot his foster-brother? A bonny penny, I'll bet, an' I give you the straight tip, if I don't get the rhino from you, then I'll get it from him."

The possibilities of the situation were full of peril, as Vernon Shapland recognized. On the one side there was the hangman's rope, on the other the certainty of blackmail for the rest of his life, with the possibility of continually increasing pressure from Cordery. For the present there was only one way open to him. He must agree, and trust to some lucky accident ridding him from the incubus of the blackmailer. That was the only way, and he took it.

"Very well," he said in a level voice. "I agree. I will pay you six hundred a year at any address you give me. If you will let me know where I can find you I will pay you the first instalment in three days." Cordery chuckled.

"Now you're talking reasonable, as I knew you would when you got the hang of the business. My address is 20, Carling Street, Limehouse. It ain't much of a place, but as I shall be taking the first boat after I hear from you, that don't matter much. Three days you say. That's Thursday night. I'll be there, an' you will, too, I am sure, for you ain't going to run away from a property like this for a miserable six hundred a year."

"I won't fail to be there," answered his victim tonelessly.

"Then I'll take another drink and quit," said Cordery.

He replenished his glass, gulped the liquid down, and looked towards the window.

"Go out the same way as I came in, I suppose."

"Yes," was the reply, "but before you go you might tell me one thing. How did you find me out?"

"Simplest thing in the world," answered Cordery. "You remember that outfit you left behind? In one of the pockets was a tailor's bill with your name and London address on it. I'd seen it before when packing for you, and when you went off in the boat it was the first thing I looked for. I was on my way to that address when I saw you in the street. I followed you to a swell club, and the fool of a doorkeeper let out your address here."

Shapland nodded.

"It sounds simple," he agreed, and then moved towards the switch. "You had better not go by the lodge," he advised. "The gates are locked at night. There's a path to the left of the house here. It crosses the park and hits a lane that runs through the wood just above the village. If you _____,"

"Way I came," interrupted Cordery, "an' I guess I'll go that way back."

Shapland nodded, and extinguished the light, and half a minute later the blackmailer had slipped out of the window, and was creeping carefully away.

The man he had left closed the window, drew the curtain and put on the light once more. His face was deadly pale, and wore a hunted look. For

a full minute he stood staring into vacancy, then as a thought occurred to him a fierce light glowed in his eyes.

"By heavens, yes! That's the way!" he whispered, and hurried from the room.

A moment later he returned, dressed in a cap and ulster, and going to a desk took something from a drawer and thrust it into his ulster pocket. Then once more he extinguished the light, opened the window, and as he stepped outside, dragged it to after him. He listened for an instant, then started to run on the grass, following the direction that Cordery had taken.

CHAPTER XVI

MURDER

ON the day following his interview with Cordery, Vernon Shapland rode over to the Abbey to interview Mr. Selby on a matter that he had carefully thought out during a sleepless night. As he approached the gates an automobile with two men in it swung out and glided down the road in the direction that he himself was travelling. Though the gates were a hundred yards away he recognized the occupants of the car for Sir James Nancarrow and Charles Rowley, and as he did so a frown came on his face, and he wondered to himself what they had been doing at the Abbey.

The frown was still on his face as he rode up to the house, but it cleared as he saw Mr. Selby and his wife talking to each other on the steps.

"Hallo, Vernon," cried Mr. Selby in cheerful