

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,

Vernon Shapland saw the vast blue coast of the most mysterious land on earth rise out of the warm tropic seas. It was near evening, and as he looked at the long coast line, the sense of the mystery of the land was heavy upon him, but it was not that which made his brow grow dark and his eyes take a troubled ruminative look. He was thinking, as he had thought for eleven long weeks, of the story which Sir Charles had told him and of the man whom he had crossed the world to find.

Somewhere in that dim, mysterious land, if there were anything in the tale of the baronet's Cooktown agent, was the man who was the rightful heir of Shapland Manor, and who did not know it. And Vernon Shapland had resolved that he never should come to that knowledge. He had reached that resolution in the first hour when he had heard the story, and every day that had passed since had helped to confirm him in it. The trend of his thought was shown by the fact that after leaving the P. & O. boat he had registered on the Australian coastal liner as John Vernon, and that under that assumed name he was going to Port Moresby. A man does not adopt an alias without good reason; and the truth was that already Vernon Shapland was covering up his tracks—hiding himself before there was need to hide.

Not once in all the long voyage out had he permitted himself to look the real purpose of his journey in the face. It had hovered in the background of his mind all the time. It had dictated the assumption of a misleading name. It had made him avoid Sir Charles's agent at Cooktown, instead of going frankly to him for information; but now it thrust its way into the open, and as he looked on that great silent land, stained with cannibalism and blood, he knew that it

was a fitting place for the grim purpose that now defined itself in his mind.

Night fell, and Papua was little more than a dense shadow in the darkness, yet still he stared and stared. Then a bright light rose out of the sea, Venus—the great star of the tropics; and with its radiance a new thought came to him as he sat there watching the shadowy land slide by.

“Why not find the man? Why not take him back to Sir Charles?”

But scarcely was the thought born before it was strangled by his innate selfishness.

“What! and give up Shapland Manor and Janet Selby! No! By Heaven, no!”

He rose suddenly from his seat. His decision was taken once for all. Nothing should move him from it, and already he was a murderer at heart. For a moment he stood by the rail looking at the black shadow of the grimmest land on earth, and the thought crossed his mind that nowhere in the world was there a country better suited for his purpose than this last stronghold of savagery; then a voice suddenly broke the silence:

“A dollar for your thoughts, Vernon.”

At the sound of the unexpected voice he jumped, for when a man is plotting evil he is already a conscience-made coward. Then he laughed a little harshly:

“Great Scot! How you started me, Drake!”

“Nerves must be jumpy!” laughed the other. “Come below and have a drink to steady them.”

“It will be as well, perhaps,” answered Shapland, who had no longer any desire to be alone with his thoughts, and was glad to talk with a steamer acquaintance to whom Papua was like an open book. They went below and made their way to the smoke-

room. Drake called a steward and gave him an order for whiskies and sodas, but Shapland intervened.

"No, not whisky to-night! Let it be champagne, steward. A bottle—and bring the card to me to sign. He turned from the steward to his companion. "The truth is, Drake, I feel a bit hipped to-night!"

"By Jove, an' you look it!" said Drake cheerfully.

"You're quite white about the gills, man! What's got you?"

"Nothing particular," replied Shapland, a little startled as he caught sight of his own face in a mirror. "A touch of the nerves, as you hinted!"

"Sure you haven't fever on you, old man?"

"Quite sure! I shall be all right after a glass of fizz."

And it was as he said. After the first glass of champagne the colour came back to his face, and the nervousness of his manner disappeared. Leaning back in a comfortable chair, he lit a cigarette, blew a smoke ring, and as he watched it expand remarked casually: "You know Papua pretty well don't you, Drake?"

"I guess I do, and probably better than most," laughed Drake. "You know I've been here on and off for twenty years. Time and time again I've sworn to leave it; and twice I've drawn stakes and retired to Sydney, but I couldn't stop there. This place pulls. The wildness of it gets in the blood, I suppose."

Shapland was not interested in Drake's reasons for returning to New Guinea. He wanted information, and took another step towards getting it.

"Then you'll know most of the men who are here."

"All the old-timers, practically! But not the new men. The Yodda gold strike and the rubber

plantation boom have brought an absolutely fresh crowd into the country."

"Ever met a man called Rowley?"

"Rowley! Charley Rowley! I should think I have. I was partner with him on a pearling cruise once. The poor fellow was kai-kaied down in the Solomons fifteen years back."

"That would be the old man—it's the son I was thinking of."

"Didn't know he had a son," answered Drake with a laugh. "Charley Rowley never struck me as being domesticated, and in any case he never yarned about his family affairs."

"I believe the son I'm thinking of was only an adopted one!"

"By Jove, yes!" cried Drake in sudden recollection, "I remember now hearing a yarn about a white kid whom he found somewhere on the Delta. I believe he did take him over, but I remember nothing about the particulars."

"Then you don't know if this younger Rowley is in Papua?"

"Know nothing about him! Do you want him badly?"

"Oh, no!" answered Shapland with a careless laugh. "It's just that a mutual friend asked me to introduce myself to him if I ran against him."

Drake nodded and helped himself to more champagne, then he remarked:

"There's one man in Moresby who can tell you where he is, if he's in Papua at all; and that's an old-timer by name of Jack Cordery, better known as Moresby Jack. He knows everybody in the country that's civilized, and a thundering lot who aren't. Talk to him, and if he can't tell you about the chap, you can bet your bottom dollar he isn't in Papua."

"Thank you, I will," answered Shapland lightly, carefully registering the name in his mind.

In the afternoon of the following day when the steamer came to anchor in the shadow of Paga Hill, he went ashore and registered at the tin hotel, still in the assumed name of John Vernon, and half an hour later strolled into the bar and entered into conversation with the man in charge. After an exchange of commonplaces, he led the conversation round to the recent influx of white men into the country, and then inquired: "Do you know any one of the name Rowley—Charles Rowley, I think—who has been in the country some time?"

The bar tender looked thoughtful.

"Seems to me I've heard the name, somewhere! But I ain't been in Moresby long. Only drifted in last spring myself." Then noticing the disappointment on his questioner's face, the man offered a suggestion. "I'll tell you what it is. You hop along an' see Jack Cordery. He lives in the tin shanty half-way between Government House and the native village. He knows everybody that is or ever was in Papua, an' if he don't know your Mr. Rowley, then for certain he ain't in these parts. You'd best slip along this afternoon, as being broke he's due to pull out to the Range in the morning a-shooting birds of Paradise. You can't miss his place. It stands all by its lonesome, an' there's a thundering big palm-tree risin' over it for all the world like a bloomin' umbrella."

"Thank you," said Shapland, and without finishing his whisky he turned and left the hotel.

Outside in the shade of the verandah he stopped to consider for a minute or two. Clearly he must see this Jack Cordery who had been twice recommended to him, and the sooner he did so the better, since it

was indiscreet to attract attention by indiscriminate inquiries of all and sundry. He nodded to himself, then stepping out into the blazing sunshine, he turned in the direction where Cordery's tin shack lay.

As he walked, the warm air was heavy with aromatic scents and strange sights met his gaze. Natives with their hair fantastically dressed, scantily clothed in coloured beads and gay calicoes, drifted by; the eucalyptus, the frangipani trees, the scarlet flame of the hibiscus flowers, and the high feathery palms made the place like fairyland to a stranger beholding it for the first time—but Vernon Shapland had no attention to spare for any of these things. The matter which had brought him across the world absorbed him to the exclusion of all else. In a few minutes he would know whether Charles Rowley was in New Guinea or not.

As he approached the hut of corrugated iron standing in the shade of a giant palm, a man clad in pink and white pyjamas came out on to the verandah, and threw himself in a deck-chair. Shapland's heart beat quicker as, looking up from lighting a calabash pipe, the eyes of the man in the pyjamas met his own. He hesitated a moment and then walked on past the hut. But five seconds later he turned round, and found the man on the verandah regarding him with frank curiosity. At that he returned, looking at the man who was staring at him so frankly, and who apparently was not averse to his conversation, for suddenly he addressed Shapland.

"Looking for Christmas, boss?"

"No," replied the other with a nervous laugh, "I'm looking for Mr. Jack Cordery!"

"Then you can set your flutterin' heart at rest, stranger."

"Are you Mr. Cordery?" asked Shapland, sure all the time that he had found his man.

"I'm Cordery—Jack Cordery, without the mister," answered the pyjama-man, surveying his questioner with shrewd eyes.

"Then I should like a word or two with you," was the reply.

"Words is cheap this afternoon," replied Cordery with a laugh; "just climb up out o' the sun, and introduce yourself proper."

As he spoke he waved a hand towards some steps which gave access to the verandah, and without wasting time, Vernon Shapland climbed up. Then as he stood in the shade the man in the deck-chair held out a rather grimy hand.

"I'll take your card," he said.

His visitor laughed a trifle confusedly. "I haven't one," he said. "I didn't know you would expect such refinements out here. But my name is Vernon—John Vernon, and I'm from London."

"Then you must be mortal tired if you've come so far," replied the pyjama-man with a noisy laugh. "Sit down, Mr. Vernon."

He waved a hand towards a second deck-chair, and Vernon Shapland seated himself, lit a cigarette, and then addressed himself to the owner of the hut.

"Mr. Cordery, I have come to you because I am told that you are the one man in Papua who can give me certain information that I need."

"That," replied Cordery with a grin, "is an unsolicited testimonial that makes me proud. Who gave it?"

For the fraction of a second Shapland hesitated between the name of his steamer acquaintance and the man at the hotel, and deliberately chose the latter.

"The bar-tender at the hotel."

"Um!" grunted Cordery. "Knocks the gilt off a bit! But what is it that you want to know, Mr. Vernon? I ain't a walking encyclopædia, but I reckon to know something about this blamed country."

"I'm looking for someone whom I have reason to believe is in this country, and I am told that you are the likeliest man to help me to find him. Do you know a man of the name of Charles Rowley?"

As he asked his momentous question, for the life of him Vernon Shapland could not keep his voice from quivering, and his eyes, though he did not know it, were alight with eagerness. Cordery noted both the quiver and the eager light, and wondered what occasioned them, but refrained from remarking thereon. He puffed once or twice at his calabash without speaking, then he remarked laconically:

"Used to! Youngish chap—under thirty, tall, blue eyes, curly brown hair?"

"I have never seen him," answered Shapland quickly, "so that your description does not help me. But the name is sufficient. Do you happen to know if he is still alive?"

"He was six months back," laughed Cordery, "but that ain't no guarantee that he haven't qualified for a harp an' a crown by this—for this ain't a white man's country. There's fevers an' snakes an' alligators an' cannibals an' what the immortal bard calls the 'moving accidents of flood an' field,' though what the blazes he knew about 'em, not havin' lived in Papua, beats me!"

"Then you don't know where he is now?"

Cordery waved his hand towards the blue line of the hills. "Somewhere far back in the ranges—if he ain't petered out. I did hear as how he had gone

nearly to the German border, gem-huntin'. That's his particular line; paying one too, judging from the way in which he an' his partner can fling the dust about when they're in Moresby here."

Vernon Shapland considered this information carefully. Except what he had read on the voyage out, he had little knowledge of the country, and none whatever of the inland fastnesses of a land that has been called "the country of the impossible." What the proposition he was about to make involved, he had only the dimmest notion, and when he spoke it was lightly enough.

"You know the country pretty well, Mr. Cordery, and I am anxious to meet Rowley. What would you say to a proposition to help me to find him? I am told that you are going on a bird-shooting expedition very shortly, suppose you combine that with leading a party for me. What do you say?"

"What do I say?" A slow grin came on Cordery's face. "Well, I say that it depends on what the job is worth!"

"It could be made well worth your while," answered Shapland quietly.

"As how?"

"Well, say two hundred pounds for you, and all the expense of the trip free."

As he made the offer, Cordery flashed a keen glance at him and, taking the pipe from his mouth, commented: "Must want to see that chap Rowley pretty badly!"

"That's neither here nor there," replied Shapland quickly. "The question is, will you go with me and help me to find him? You will still be able to do the bird-shooting you want, and the trip will be all profit to you."

Cordery rose slowly from his chair and crossed the

verandah to his visitor. His face was like that of a wooden image, and Shapland had not the slightest idea what this moment portended. But at an arm's-length from him, Cordery solemnly offered him a gnarled and warty hand.

"It's a bargain!" he said. "When do we start?"

"As soon as we can," answered Shapland quickly.

"I don't want to waste time. You can make all the necessary arrangements, and I'll foot the bills!"

"Right, Mr. Vernon!"

"There is one thing, Cordery," said Shapland a little hesitatingly. "I—er—don't want this trip talked about. The business I am on is a—er—very private matter, and I don't want attention attracted to it, so the more private your arrangements are the better I shall be pleased. You understand?"

"Guess I do," was the reply, given easily. "And you can put your trust in Moresby Jack. Half the town knows that I'm broke and about due for a trip to the ranges, and it'll be easy enough to explain the necessary arrangements by saying I'm taking with me a new chum who is anxious to see something of the country—nobody in Moresby will think anything of that; an' one of these mornings we'll just pull out unbeknown to anybody, an' fade away into the bush. Guess that'll suit you, Mr. Vernon, hey?"

"Very well," answered Shapland, and remained a little time longer, discussing the arrangements.

When finally he departed, Cordery stood by the verandah rail watching his white drill clad figure as it receded down the grassy track. On his not very prepossessing face there was a frown of perplexity, and finally he muttered his perplexity aloud.

"Now I wonder what that guy's game is? . . . I guess he'll bear watching or my name ain't Jack Cordery!"

He stood there watching through narrowed eyes until his visitor was lost to view, then with the frown still upon his face, he turned and went indoors.

CHAPTER III

IN PAPUAN HILLS

FOUR days later they departed on their quest, taking with them six native carriers, one of them an old servant of Cordery's who had been with him on many expeditions. The tracks were thick with dust, the settlement was hot and dry as an oven, when in the early dawn they started for the Never-Never Land. As they reached the top of Paga Hill and marched along the cliffs and across the flats, Vernon Shapland's eyes fixed themselves upon a range of hills that cleaved the sky like a long blue wedge. In the clear morning air the scene was full of strange beauty, but Vernon Shapland had no eye for it, and though he stared at the distant range, it was not of the hills, or of the beauty of them, that he was thinking. Though his mind, keeping time to the dull thud of the bearers' feet, beat a couple of lines that he had read somewhere, and which repeated themselves with that monotonous insistence on the attention that sometimes characterizes stray tags of verse—

“Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind
the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for
you. Go!”

Those lines beaten out by his brain monotonously gave the twist to his thoughts as he stared at the