

The disappointment on the woman's face grew more pronounced.

"That's bad," she said, more to herself than to Janet. "I can't have made a mistake. I am sure he said the name of the station was Shapland. He can't have run away and left me. He wouldn't do a thing like that."

She caught Janet's eyes fixed upon her questioningly, and volunteered an explanation.

"It's my husband, miss. He left me in London four days since to run down here, to see the gentleman called John Vernon. He was to have been back the same day, but he didn't come, and since then I haven't had so much as a word from him, and I am a bit worried in my mind, for he wouldn't leave me in London for so long alone, me being a stranger there, and not used to cities."

"I daresay it will be all right," answered Janet sympathetically. "Probably you have made a mistake in the name of the station. There are two or three names on the line not unlike this one. I hope you will find your husband quite safe and sound. Good afternoon."

She nodded, and passed on, whilst the woman, a set look of disappointment on her face, sauntered slowly after her.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A NEW DANGER

THE woman continued walking down the road listlessly and aimlessly. There was an expression of disappointment on her face, which, as she sauntered on, gave place to a look of concern.

When she reached the end of the station road she did not so much as glance at the guide post at the corner, but turned to the right, apparently for no other reason than that she happened to be on that side, and because it was nearest. For some time she ambled on, then, coming to a fallen tree, she seated herself, and remained there for some time without moving, absorbed in deep thought. At length her lips moved.

"I'm sure something has happened to Jack! He'd never have left me like this. I wish I could find Mr. John Vernon. I wonder if I have made a mistake, and if it was one of them other places on the line that the young lady mentioned."

The sound of a man whistling caused her to look up. A man in a blue uniform was approaching her—Constable Lindsay. She rose to her feet.

"I'll ask the policeman! Maybe he'll know better than the young lady."

She moved forward a little, and as Lindsay drew near she stopped.

"Excuse me, officer, but do you know a Mr. John Vernon that lives hereabouts—a rich man?"

Constable Lindsay shook his head. "There's no such person, rich or poor, in the bounds of this parish, nor in the next one either."

"Thank you, officer. I think I must have come to the wrong place after all."

Constable Lindsay did not loiter. He had to meet the sub-inspector's trap a mile and a half away, and he had no time to waste. At any other time he would have gossiped with the woman, in order to find out her business, where she came from and so forth, but, being in a hurry, he passed on, and so missed the golden opportunity of his official life.

The woman went back to the fallen tree, seated herself once more, and taking out her purse counted the little money it contained.

"It ain't much," she commented. "If Jack doesn't come or send soon I'll be hard 'put to it. And I haven't enough to go down to them other stations making inquiries."

She put the purse away, and continued sitting there for some time longer. Then a man climbed the stile a little further up the road, and sauntered towards her, flicking the dead bracken with his cane. It was Vernon Shapland. The woman saw him approaching, and rose to her feet.

"I'll have one more try," she said to herself. "Maybe the third time will be the lucky one."

Shapland drew nearer, and as he caught sight of the woman standing there, glanced at her casually and saw that she was a stranger. Then the woman took a step forward.

"Excuse me, sir, but do you know a Mr. John Vernon what——"

Shapland started as if he had been unexpectedly shot. His face became livid, and his eyes stared at the woman as if she were the incarnation of fate itself. For her part the woman did not complete the question, the startled look on the man's face having surprised her into silence. For perhaps five seconds they confronted each other without speaking, then a quick change came on the woman's face, and a light of recognition shone suddenly in her eyes.

"Why!" she cried. "You are the man himself!"

Vernon Shapland recovered himself a little. His face was still livid, and there was an anxious look

in his eyes, but he answered in a voice that was almost nonchalant :

“ My good woman, I am afraid you are making a mistake ; my name is not John Vernon, I know of no such person.”

“ That’s as may be, but John Vernon was the name you wore when you came to see my husband at Port Moresby.”

A great fear surged into Vernon Shapland’s heart, as he questioned himself, quickly. Her husband? Who was this woman? What did she want of John Vernon? But though the fear was almost overwhelming, he schooled himself to affect ignorance.

“ Port Moresby? Where is that? ”

“ It’s in New Guinea, as you know very well,” answered the woman in a voice that told him that she was not to be deceived by his affectation of ignorance.

“ And your husband? You mentioned him—what is his name? ”

“ Cordery—Jack Cordery, though some people call him Moresby Jack! ”

Vernon Shapland was appalled into momentary silence. He was conscious of an overmastering inclination to take to his heels and run from this woman who had suddenly appeared from nowhere to menace his peace of mind, and only the utter folly and certain futility of such action kept him there. He struggled hard to maintain his air of polite interest, but his voice shook as he replied :

“ Jack Cordery—Moresby Jack, I never heard of him in my life.”

The woman shook her head obstinately.

“ That won’t do,” she said. “ I’ve a good memory for faces, and I took a good look at you through

the mat screen when you were sitting on the verandah, talking to Jack, and arranging for a trip into the back ranges. John Vernon mayn't be your name, but it's the name you gave my husband, and you know him well enough, and why you should want to deny it I don't know."

At her last words there was a flash of relief to Vernon Shapland's face. The woman recognized him, but apparently she was in ignorance of her husband's blackmailing purpose, and, more reassuring still, in ignorance of his death. He began to see a way out of the difficulty which confronted him. So long as she was in the neighbourhood there was danger for himself, or if not danger much disquietude of mind. If only she could be induced to go away he would have time to think, time to plan some course of action. He made a sudden decision.

"Well," he said, with a mirthless laugh, "suppose I admit that I am John Vernon, will you tell me why you were asking for me just now?"

"Because I wanted to find my husband. He came down here four days since to find you, and since then I've neither seen nor heard of him. Have you seen him, sir?"

For just the fraction of a second Shapland hesitated.

The woman was certainly in ignorance of the fate that had overtaken her husband. Perhaps she did not read the papers, or possibly her ignorance was accounted for by the fact that just then the London papers were more concerned with a political crisis than with a murder in the provinces. In any case, she did not know, and he recognized that for the present she must be kept in ignorance, and at all costs be induced to leave a neighbourhood where a chance word of gossip might reveal to

her the truth. So he shook his head and lied boldly.

"No, I have not seen him since I waved him good-bye from the steamer's deck at Port Moresby. Whatever he may have purposed, he has not been here, and I am afraid that you are wasting your time in looking for him here."

"But," began the woman, hesitatingly, "he said——"

Vernon Shapland saw that she was already more than half-convinced, and interrupting her, he pressed his advantage home.

"He may have changed his mind—after he left you or he may have gone on the drink. You know how he used to do that at Moresby——"

"But he's been different lately," broke in the woman. "He's been as steady as a rock. He said he had serious business in hand, and he wasn't going to mull it for a bottle of whisky."

"Did he say what the business was?" "There was a note of apprehension in Shapland's tones, but the woman did not notice it.

"No," she answered. "He is awfully close, is Jack, at times."

Vernon Shapland's relief was great. After all, he had little to fear from this woman, and as the apprehension passed, his manner changed and grew friendly and confidential.

"Mrs. Cordery, you know Jack, you know his weakness. He may have the best intentions in the world, but men of his type are always liable to relapse, and London, with a bar at every corner, is a place of many temptations. If you'll take my advice you'll go back and wait for him. He's sure to show up in a day or two——"

"But suppose he doesn't," said the woman quickly.

"The rooms we have are paid for, but I've hardly any money——"

Vernon Shapland laughed easily.

"There's no difficulty about that" he said. "You must let me help you, Mrs. Cordery. If your husband is wanting to see me, I daresay it is on some matter of business in which he wants me to have a hand, and there's no reason at all why I shouldn't help you over a difficulty. And I am convinced that the sooner you are back in London the better."

The woman also was convinced. She looked back towards the station. "I wonder what time there is a train?"

"Not for over two hours," answered Shapland. "But there is no need that you should wait for that. If you will walk slowly down the road I will overtake you with a car. I have to run up to town either to-day or to-morrow, and I may as well do so to-day. You'll be in London that way before the train leaves Shapland."

"Thank you, sir. It's very good of you, and I'll be terribly grateful——"

"Then you must walk on, and I'll overtake you in ten minutes or so! Perhaps we shall find Cordery waiting for you when we get to town, and in that case I shall be able to see him without his troubling to come up here."

He nodded to her, and, turning, re-climbed the stile from which he had entered the road. The woman walked slowly on, looking back from time to time. Presently she passed some gates which gave on to a gentleman's park, and saw the girl whom she had spoken to when leaving the station. Janet was talking to the lodge-keeper, and the woman interrupted them to explain.

"I've found Mr. John Vernon, miss. So he does live in 'these parts after all."

Janet smiled as she replied:

"I am very glad to hear it."

The woman smiled back, and with a good afternoon continued on her way. Janet resumed her conversation with the lodge-keeper, who was giving her particulars of the inquest. A minute later a car flashed by the gates. The driver was Vernon Shapland, and Janet recognized him as he raced past. Then a little way down the road she heard the vehicle come to a standstill. Wondering what had happened she stepped outside the gates to see, and beheld the woman who had spoken to her in the act of stepping into the car.

Once more the association of the name the woman had inquired for with that of Vernon Shapland leaped into her mind, and this time it was not dismissed. The conviction assailed her that Vernon Shapland was the man for whom the woman had been inquiring. In that case what did she want with him? She had mentioned her husband. She had declared that four days before he had left London to come to Shapland to see—Good heavens! It was four days since Cordery had first appeared in the village. Suppose—

Her face grew suddenly white and tense, and she stood looking down the road long after the car had disappeared in a cloud of dust.