

CHAPTER XXIII

JANET SEEKS ADVICE

THE day after her journey to consult Signor Crispi, Janet Selby rode over to the Nancarrows' place to see Lady Nancarrow. She looked far from well, a fact which her friend immediately noticed, and on which she made sympathetic comment.

"My dear Janet, you look simply ghostly. Whatever is the matter? It is a good thing Vernon is away, or——"

"Vernon is of no account to me," answered the girl quietly. "I told my mother yesterday that I had given up all idea of marriage with him."

Lady Nancarrow's face expressed extreme amazement.

"You have told your mother—what?"

"That I do not mean to marry Vernon Shapland. I broke off my engagement on the night of the hunt ball."

"But, my dear child, whatever induced you to do such a thing?"

"I found that I did not love Vernon, and that—that—I——"

She broke off in some confusion, and Lady Nancarrow had a sudden intuition of what lay behind this simple statement, but refrained from putting her idea into words. She nodded thoughtfully.

"I am old-fashioned enough to think that is a sufficient reason even for breaking an engagement; though I daresay many people will think it is a very foolish scruple, particularly with Shapland Manor to weigh against it in the scales."

"My mother is one of those people," answered Janet quietly.

"Yes, she would be," replied Lady Nancarrow. "She has hoped for this match for years, and quite naturally she will be very disappointed. But nevertheless I think you are well advised to follow the dictates of your own heart. A marriage without love is the most godless thing under the sun, and it spells life long disaster. You are wise, Janet, in turning from that even at the eleventh hour. I shall tell your mother so."

"Thank you," answered Janet. "I shall be very grateful if you will. It may help to make things easier for me." She was silent for a moment, then a slight flush came in her pale face, as she asked, "Is there any news of Mr. Rowley?"

Lady Nancarrow saw the flush, and, enlightened by the intuition which had come to her, guessed that all that the girl had said so far was a mere preliminary to this question, and that here was the real reason for Janet's call that afternoon. But again she gave no sign of her understanding.

"Nothing good," she answered. "Of course Jim has seen him, and has engaged the clever criminal lawyer, Sir Robert Macklin, to watch his interests; but so far as I can understand things look remarkably black against Mr. Rowley, though there is something that may turn suspicion into another direction, if only it can be used. Sir James won't tell me what it is, but it is worrying him a great deal, as I can see. He says that if only they could find out who it was this dead man, Cordery, came to see at Shapland the matter could be cleared up in a twinkling. But the difficulty of the matter is that Cordery carried no papers, and though he said at the inn that he had known Mr. Rowley in

New Guinea, he did not say that he was the man he was after, but as he mentioned no other man, the inference that most people will make is obvious."

For a moment Janet did not reply. She sat looking at the carpet, and plucking nervously at a gold chain which hung from her neck, and from the expression on her face the baronet's wife easily deduced that she was considering some course of action which she did not find easy to follow. After a little time she looked up, and Lady Nancarrow was startled by the tragic look in her eyes.

"Is Sir James at home?" asked the girl abruptly.

"Yes. He is in the gun-room, with one of the keepers, I believe."

"I should like to see him, privately, if I may, Lady Nancarrow."

"Ah, you know something! You have thought of something, Janet. What is it, my dear?"

"It is something rather terrible—something that I would rather not tell to any one, but which I must tell to Sir James for Mr. Rowley's sake."

"Then I will send him to you at once, Janet," answered the baronet's wife, restraining her natural curiosity. "Excuse me, dear."

She left the room, and four minutes later the baronet made his appearance. His face wore a look of grave concern, and when he saw Janet's troubled expression his concern deepened.

"What is it, Janet?" he asked, without preliminaries. "Mary says that you have something to tell, something that you think will benefit Mr. Rowley. I need not say that I shall be very glad to hear it."

He looked at the girl, waiting for her to begin, and after a moment Janet began haltingly.

"It is very difficult for me, Sir James. I scarcely

know how to tell you, particularly as it has to do with Vernon Shapland."

There was a quick flash of interest in the baronet's eyes, and he looked at the girl commiseratingly.

"I can understand that what you have to say may be very difficult, Janet, but in a matter so serious as this it is better to be quite frank, to keep nothing back—nothing, you understand."

"I shall tell you everything!" answered Janet simply. "Everything I know, and everything that I have thought." She was silent for a little while, then she said: "Sir James, you will remember the miniature of myself, which Mr. Rowley showed you?"

The baronet nodded.

"Has Mr. Rowley ever spoken to you of the circumstances in which it came into his possession?"

"Only vaguely," answered Sir James. "I have no exact knowledge."

"Then I will tell you. Mr. Rowley had a foster-brother. He left him at their camp somewhere in New Guinéa, whilst he himself went to some trading-post for provisions, and he returned to find his foster-brother lying dead by the tent door. He had been shot, and, almost immediately after making this discovery one of Mr. Rowley's carriers found the miniature in the vicinity of the camp."

The baronet gave vent to a whistle of surprise, but offered no comment, and Janet continued:

"I see that you make the same deduction that I made; but there is worse behind it, Sir James. I have found out that Vernon Shapland had this miniature painted without my knowledge some time ago, although he denied to both Mr. Rowley and myself that it was my portrait. I have been to London and learned all about the painting of it

from Signor Crispi. Further, I learned that Vernon did all he could to prevent Mr. Rowley from meeting either Crispi or myself and that he paid Crispi's man-servant to deny that he had ever seen anyone like the portrait. Now why should he do that unless he had some very strong reason for not being associated with the miniature? "

Sir James did not immediately reply to the question.

He sat quite still considering the matter for what seemed quite a long time; and when he looked at the girl, his face was very grave, and his eyes were full of trouble.

"This is very serious, Janet," he said simply. "You will see to what it points, and I can tell you now that more than once in these last two days, I have thought of Vernon in relation to this awful business. You know, and I know, that he was in New Guinea a little while ago, so that Mr. Rowley is not the only man in this parish who may have been acquainted with the dead man Cordery." He broke off and again was silent for a moment, then asked: "Why did Vernon go to New Guinea? Have you any idea?"

"None," answered Janet, "except that he went for Sir Charles. He has never spoken much of his journey to me, and indeed I have thought more than once that it was a subject that he wished to avoid."

Sir James nodded. "I wish we knew. I can't help feeling that the purpose of that journey is at the bottom of this mystery. As I told Rowley the other day I never knew Sir Charles had any business interests away from the estate; and the matter puzzles me."

"There is something else," said Janet, "some-

thing which though it did not strike me at the time has now become quite clear to me. You will know that at the hunt the other day Mr. Rowley dragged this man Cordery out of the bushes, and threatened to thrash him. He did that because I happened to mention that I had seen the man watching me two or three times that morning. I have thought since, however, that it was not I whom the man was watching, but Vernon Shapland who was by my side most of the time."

"Yes," commented Sir James thoughtfully, "that is very possible."

"And there is yet another thing," continued the girl. "After my interview with Signor Crispi, as I left the station at Shapland a woman who had come down in the train, and was loitering in the road, stopped me and asked me if I could tell her of any Mr. John Vernon living in these parts.

"I told her that I knew of no such person, and she seemed rather worried, and began to talk of her husband, who it appeared had come down to Shapland four days previously to see this John Vernon, and had not returned home or sent any word of his whereabouts. Somehow I never thought of Cordery in association with her at the time, but afterwards it came to me that the dead man might be her husband that——"

"Mrs. Cordery is in England," broke in the baronet quickly. "We know that, and we are trying to find her. I think you are quite right in your surmise that the woman who spoke to you was Cordery's wife, and she must be found, for it is more than likely that she knows whom he came to Shapland to find."

"She does!" answered Janet with conviction. "I have not told you everything yet, Sir James.

I saw the woman again later. She told me that she had found John Vernon, and a minute or two later I saw Vernon Shapland stop his car to pick her up, and drive away down the London road."

Sir James rose to his feet. "Janet," he cried, "this is terrible for you."

"It has been very terrible to know it, and to decide what to do for the best," answered Janet quietly. "But now the matter is out of my hands and I have to decide nothing further. I came here meaning to tell you if it seemed necessary for Mr. Rowley's safety, but not otherwise. What will you do, Sir James?"

"I shall find that woman," answered the baronet energetically. "It is clear that she does not know of her husband's death, and to me it seems certain that she will be able to unravel this problem. You have nothing more to tell me, Janet?"

"No!"

"Then you must excuse me. I must go up to town at once. There is no time to lose. This woman simply must be found now. I will send my wife in to you, and, Janet—keep a good heart!"

"I will try," answered Janet, but when Lady Nancarrow entered the room she found her sobbing as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XXIV

A PHOTOGRAPH

THE assistant-commissioner of police sat in his office at New Scotland Yard, listening thoughtfully to what Sir James Nancarrow had to