

CHAPTER XXV

MRS. CORDERY

WHEN Vernon Shapland had undertaken to drive Mrs. Cordery to London there had been but one idea in his mind, and that was to get her away from Shapland at the earliest possible moment. As yet she knew nothing of her husband's tragic death, but every moment that she remained in the parish increased the imminence of the knowledge overtaking her. She had but to mention Cordery's name to one of the gossiping villagers, and her ignorance would be removed, with consequences that would not bear contemplation.

Accordingly, after he had persuaded her that her husband had never been to Shapland at all, he had hurried back to the Manor for his swift car, and not until the woman was seated by his side, running towards London, did he feel any relief from the apprehension which had almost overwhelmed him. As he drove on, apparently absorbed in the management of the car, he was trying to think out some further plan of action, and he did not find the task an easy one.

The woman must be kept ignorant of what had happened to her husband, and how that was to be done he did not know, and could not conceive. It was an amazing piece of luck that she had not yet learned of the murder, and entirely unaccountable except on the theory that she did not read the newspapers and that the people at whose house she lodged either did not know the name of their lodgers, or also were not interested in the news of

the day. And contemplating the risks to be faced he determined to find out.

"Where are you and Jack staying in London, Mrs. Cordery?" he asked carelessly.

"At a place called Limehouse, in an apartment house in Carling Street, not far from the river. It's not a place to be recommended, but it's the best Jack could manage for the time being. We shan't be there long, though, if all that he says is true. He's expecting to get a lot of money. That's why he came to England, and whilst he never told me exactly, he let slip once that he was expecting to get it from you."

"From me!" As he spoke the words Vernon Shapland's face was the index of astonishment that was wholly simulated, and there was a shadow of apprehension about his eyes. Apparently the woman knew more than he had thought, and he was filled with a consuming anxiety to find out the exact extent of her knowledge. So after his expression of an astonishment that he did not feel he asked:

"But why should he expect to get money from me, Mrs. Cordery? Had he some business that he wanted me to finance—say, the development of a mine or anything of that sort?"

A flush of embarrassment came on the woman's face, and there was a marked confusion in her manner as she answered in a low voice:

"No, I don't think Jack had any mine or business that he wanted money for, but all the same he expected to get money."

"But what for?" persisted Shapland, determined to discover all that the woman knew about the matter.

Mrs. Cordery showed signs of distress, and for

a little time did not answer. But Shapland waited, an inquiring look on his face, and at last the woman spoke haltingly.

"I—I don't know, leastways not exactly, Mr. Vernon. Jack never told me—and it's only because he let your name slip when he'd been drinking and said that he had you between his finger and thumb, an' could squash you like a mango, that I got the idea that it was from you he expected to get the money. I oughtn't to have told you, I suppose, but you're so kind to me, and—and——"

"When did Cordery let this slip?" demanded Shapland.

"It was the very day he saw you off on the Cooktown boat, the day that you came back from the Stanley Range. He went on the drink, as was usual with him when he came back from a trip, and he let it out the same night. I took no notice of it just then, as he often talks wild when in drink, but when three weeks later he said he was going to England, I began to wonder, and I've been afraid ever since that he'd get himself in some sort of trouble. He's a reckless one, is Jack."

Vernon Shapland laughed easily. The woman had no proper knowledge, nothing but surmise and conjecture, and he was beginning to see his way.

"I think you are worrying yourself unnecessarily, Mrs. Cordery," he said in a friendly tone. "When the drink is in the wit is out, you know, and what a man says under the influence of liquor need not be taken too seriously. As a matter of fact, I can think of nothing that would afford ground on which your husband might blackmail me—that's what you are thinking of, isn't it?—and I've no doubt that when we meet and have a little talk, all this that, you are distressing yourself about will resolve

itself into some business proposal that he means to make to me. He is a prospector, you know, and may have made a valuable discovery, which, as I said just now, he may be wanting me to finance. There is a man from New Guinea in England at present of the name of Rowley, whom my friend, Sir James Nancarrow——”

“I know Mr Rowley,” interjected the woman. “He is very good and kind.”

“You know Rowley?” asked Shapland quickly. He had deliberately introduced the name to learn if it had any particular significance for her, and now, finding that it had, with fear again clutching at his heart, he endeavoured to find how deep that significance was. “When did you meet him?”

“On the boat coming to England,” answered Mrs. Cordery, giving him a brief account of the occasion of that meeting.

“Did Jack never mention him to you?” asked Shapland.

“Never, directly and knowingly. But when in drink he talked about Mr. Rowley having been murdered.”

Vernon Shapland breathed freely once more.

“Anyway,” he answered carelessly, “your husband is bound to have heard of him, and of what he is doing, through Sir James Nancarrow, and as I am probably the only man whom Jack knows in England, I daresay he was coming to me to ask for similar help, so you need not distress yourself with uncomfortable thoughts, Mrs. Cordery. You’ll find that Jack’s business, whatever it is, will work out all right.”

“I am very glad to hear you say so, sir,” answered the woman, evidently relieved.

Vernon Shapland relapsed into silence. He had

learned all that he wanted to know, and there was before him a problem to which as yet he had found no solution—namely, how to keep from this woman the knowledge of her husband's death, for if that could be done there would be no need for any apprehension as to what she might say or do—at any rate for a little time.

As he drove a plan shaped itself in his mind. He would persuade the woman to leave Carling Street and lodge her in his own chambers for the immediate present, where he could keep her under surveillance. Then he would arrange somehow to get a message to her purporting to have come from her husband telling her that he had returned to New Guinea in haste and would send for her later. It would be easy enough then to offer her money to get out of the country, and once across the world, as he knew, she would be very unlikely ever to come back. The difficulty, as he recognized, would be to induce her to make the move without her husband, but as it happened circumstances on which he had not counted came to his aid. For when they reached Limehouse and drove down dingy Carling Street it was to find a rough and hilarious crowd in front of the house where the Corderys had their apartments. Two drunken women were fighting on the steps, one of whom Mrs. Cordery declared was her landlady.

"But you can't go in there, Mrs. Cordery, just now," Shapland protested.

"I must," said the woman. "Jack may be——"

"Jack isn't in that house, or he would hear the racket and come out to see what is up. Anyway, your landlady is in no condition to talk to you. You must come with me," he continued brusquely, "and in a little time, say in the morning,

you can return here for your belongings, and leave a message for your husband. You can't go into that house at present. It simply isn't safe."

The woman looked at her drunken landlady, who at that moment looked very much an Amazon, and gave way.

"Well," she agreed, "perhaps for a little time it would be better not to——"

Vernon Shapland waited to hear no more, but instantly reversing the car ran her to his own chambers. He managed to keep her there, on one excuse and another, until the next day, fairly contented in mind, but on the morrow, having been out for an hour or so, he was alarmed to find she had disappeared. Without delay he drove down to Limehouse to the house in Carling Street, and interviewed the Amazonian landlady, whose prowess had not saved her from a black eye.

"Mrs. Cordery is it you're wanting? Well she's gone not harf an hour since. Her husband, he's been murdered. It's in the papers, an' when I tells her of it she goes clean off her topper, an' runs out to find a policeman. She gets one, an' a bit arter that, a gentleman comes to see her, an' tykes her away, an' I don't care a fig, for I had the rent up to the week-end, and it don't do a respectable house like mine no good to go harbouring murderers. An' besides, I've a-let the rooms again, so there's no need for me to go piping my eyes, so far as I can see."

"I should say not," answered Shapland diplomatically, then asked a further question. "What sort of a man was it who took her away?"

"Now you're arskin' me something," answered the woman, with a grin. "He wasn't tall, an' he wasn't short, an' he wasn't handsome, an' he wasn't

the other thing, but just a plain everyday sort of man that you meet at every corner of the street. He's a wye with him, though, for he never gived me a chanst to speak to the poor woman before he put her in the taxi which he'd brought with him."

"What do you suppose this man was?"

"Dunno! Might ha' been an insurance agent goin' to dror the burial fees, by the look of him."

On the whole the description was not an inapt one of Inspector Garforth, but Vernon Shapland did not know that, and it would not have added to his peace of mind if he had. He returned to his chambers in a panic, and there tried to think what he should do next. If the police had got in touch with Mrs. Cordery he was likely to have a trying time, as he recognized. But he consoled himself with the thought that Cordery was dead, and that no one else knew the secret by which the prospector had hoped to profit, whilst, as he told himself, Mrs. Cordery knew him only as John Vernon, and, stranger as she was in London, would scarcely be able to find her way back to his chambers—even with the expert guidance of the police. So he quieted his fears, and when the day passed without anything happening, he gathered confidence, and the next morning ran down to the Manor in his car. On his way through the village, an unusual bustle at the *Shapland Arms* arrested his attention, and stopping the car to inquire the reason for it, he learned that the adjourned inquest on the dead Cordery was taking place.

A sudden overmastering impulse to know what was happening came to him. Leaving his car in the street, he pressed his way to the room, where the court was sitting. He was, as already told, just in time to hear Jane Cordery give her evidence of

the photograph of John Vernon, and produce it for the inspection of the coroner. He saw the startled look on the coroner's face, and then overwhelming fear surged in his heart. The coroner undoubtedly recognized it, and others would recognize it also. He would be called upon to give evidence, and he was in no condition to face any such ordeal. Unobtrusively he slipped from the room, and entering his car drove away at topmost speed.

Two minutes later Garforth, as recorded, made the discovery that he had left the room, and hastily spoke a single word to the coroner.

"Adjourn, sir."

The coroner nodded, but before he could act on the inspector's suggestion the foreman of the jury interposed.

"The jury would like to look at the photograph if they may, sir."

The coroner glanced quickly at Inspector Garforth. There was a question in his eyes which the officer understood. He shook his head emphatically, and started to move towards the door.

"I am afraid the request of the jury cannot be granted at the present moment, as to do so might hamper the police authorities in their investigations, and in view of new and extraordinary developments in the case, I adjourn the court until this day week."

Inspector Garforth was only half-way to the door when this announcement was made, and, as the spectators rose *en masse*, and began to pour out of the room, he found his way blocked. It was quite four minutes later when he reached the road, which was crowded by rustics eagerly discussing what had taken place. He looked carefully round. Across the road from the inn an old

man with a pair of hedge-clippers in his hand was standing watching the people pour into the road. He crossed to this individual, and addressed him.

"Did you see young Mr. Shapland come out of the inn a few minutes ago?"

"I did, zur! An' a dickens of a hurry he wur in, too, by the look of things."

"Which way did he go?"

"That way, zur," replied the rustic with a jerk of his head. "Towards the Manor."

"How far is it to the Manor?"

"Two miles or thereabouts."

"Was Mr. Shapland walking?"

"No, zur! He'd one o' them stinkin' motor-cars, an' he drove away like Jehu, the son of Nimshi, who drove like the devil if Scripture is to be credited."

"Thank you," answered the inspector and turned back to the inn with a slight frown shadowing his face.

CHAPTER XXVI

FLIGHT

COMING out of the door of this inn, Inspector Garforth met the coroner.

"He's gone!" he said shortly. "Have you a car, sir?"

The coroner shook his head.

"A country practice won't run to an extravagance of that sort. I've a horse and trap, and if they will be of any use they are at your disposal."

"Better than nothing, if I can't get a car. If you don't mind ordering them round, I shall be obliged. In the meantime I'll see the landlord,