

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

distant range. Somewhere behind that high blue wall, hidden far in the deeps of this strange land, was a man who for three-and-twenty years had been lost, and who was waiting to be found, whom he himself was journeying to find. There, lost behind the ranges, was his uncle's son and the rightful heir of Shapland, and marching to seek him, he knew in his innermost heart that this was a journey of fate for them, both of them, the possible issue of which brought a dark frown to his face.

"No! By Heaven, no!" he whispered to himself as he had done once before when, on the deck of the Moresby boat, he had considered the better course and had resolutely determined to follow the worse.

And the whisper broke the spell that had seemed to be laid upon him. The lines no longer beat monotonously through his brain, the bearers' feet no longer seemed to reiterate them, he was delivered from the darkness which had fallen upon his spirit, and when they presently left the sun-scorched flats and plunged into the steaming heat of the primeval forest, he began to take an interest in the things about him.

Strange butterflies drifted by. Gorgeous-plumaged birds darted across the forest glades like flashes of coloured light. In the tree-tops parrots mocked them with their chattering, and in the rotting vegetation under foot crawled terrible life, centipedes ten inches in length, grey and green and orange, flashing hideously on his unaccustomed gaze; the great scorpion of Papua with its terminal nippers carrying horrible death, and sometimes among swinging lianas he caught a glimpse of something else that swung and stared at him with beady malevolent eyes. The trees also were strange, the leaves unlike anything that he had seen before, monstrous orchids stranger than anything in Sir Charles' expensive orchid houses at home, were

everywhere, and sometimes a flowering shrub glowed and flamed in the changing light of the forest like some burning bush.

They toiled on for days, the days grew into weeks, and always one feeling prevailed. The land to him, was a malevolent land. There was something sinister in its mid-day silence, something unfriendly in the roar of its mountain streams and the crash of its unseen waterfalls. The life it spawned so freely was inimical to man; and the men that it begot were so far down in the scale of humanity as to be nearer beasts than men. It threatened all who ventured into the bush with savage death; and always it flung obstacles in the way. Huge swamps, the haunt of alligators, turned them miles out of their way. Unnamed streams tumbled down from the hills, to be crossed only by wild leaps from rock to rock, huge cliffs barred the road and had to be scaled by means of the lianas which served for ladders, and when the height was reached and they breathed it was to find that they were on the edge of some precipice that dropped sheer to the tree-tops a full thousand feet below.

From one of these heights, his clothes torn, wet through with the sweat of his labours, Vernon Shapland considered the tangled landscape.

"It looks," he said, "as if a Titan had made the land when he was mad or drunk."

Cordery laughed, "Mad enough for sure," he said. "Guess the creator finished it an' then stirred it up with an egg-whisk, just to give variety. It's a regular jumble!"

"What I can't understand is how you find your way through; or how you can be sure where you are."

"Been here before," answered Cordery, "an' so have three hundred other white men, though they

didn't all go back. You didn't notice much of a track, I daresay, but it's there all the same. There was a gold-strike in these hills five years back, and there was a regular rush of diggers. They made a sort of road to get to the place where the gold was found, but the quartz gave out three months before the last man got to the spot; an' so they went out again, leaving the track to look after itself. An' five years is a long time in Papua. Things grow that lustily that if you kept a man with a cane-knife working on a twenty-mile track he'd always be behindhand with his job. The green things would spring up under his very knife! But when you've been on a track twice, you know it. The shape of the hill here, the look of a cliff there, a gorge with a river tumbling through, they all give you a sort o' sense of your way, that is if you ain't born blind or a fool."

"But these hills and cliffs and gorges all look alike to me!" protested Shapland.

"That's because you're following the track for the first time," explained Cordery. "If it was the second or the third time you'd pick out the landmarks easy enough—same as I do."

"How long shall we be now before we reach the hills you are making for?" asked Shapland for the hundredth time,

"Two days at most," answered Cordery. "See that hump back against the sky-line there. Well, the other side of that we ought to strike Rowley's camp. The native, that man of mine I colloquized with this morning, said there was a white man's camp two marches away, and it ain't likely to be anybody but Charley Rowley an' his partner."

"I hope you are right," answered Shapland. "I'm growing tired of this bush and these everlasting hills and gorges."

Cordery laughed. "They are a bit wearing when you ain't used to them. But it's time we were pushing on."

They resumed the march, and having to descend into a valley were presently cutting their way through a dense green jungle that left them little time to spare for anything else. Late in the afternoon they found a place more open than anything they had seen for days; and tired with their exertions, decided to camp. The fly-tent was pitched and the fire started, when Cordery saw a flock of parrots rise screeching out of the wood beyond. Quickly he looked round and counted the boys.

They were all busy about the camp, and Shapland was standing by his side.

"That's darned queer!" he said, watching the wheeling birds.

"What?" asked Shapland.

"Them birds! Something scared them!"

"What do you think would do that?"

"Don't know! Natives maybe! Ah! Look there!"

He had been looking round as he spoke and pointed suddenly to a hill right in the eye of the setting sun. It was distant perhaps three miles away, and on the topmost point was outlined a human figure. Both of them saw it and stood watching for a minute, then it disappeared, but a minute or two after a long column of blue-grey smoke rose in the air from the crest of the hill.

"The bush-telegraph!" said Cordery laconically. "The fellow's sending the news of our presence to his pals."

"But how——"

"The smoke is a signal. If we were higher up we should see some other smoke column on another hill

as like as not. That fellow up there will shout across to the next hill——”

“ Shout ! ” interrupted Shapland incredulously.

“ Yes, shout. Top o’ those hills the air is wonderfully clear and the sound will travel a long way. I’ll bet a dollar that by sunset the fact that we’re here is known to every village in the range. Shouldn’t wonder if that beggar we met this morning has set the news travelling.”

“ Are the natives hostile ? ”

“ You never know from day to day what the tribes in these hills are. Some are quiet as mice, others are just cannibals. It depends what particular lot we’ve struck ; but it’ll be just as well to keep a watch to-night. There may be no real need, but it’s no blame use taking chances—not in Papua.”

Until dark they kept a sharp look-out, without however perceiving any hostile signs, and when presently the camp “ turned in ” Vernon Shapland undertook the first watch. Sitting with his rifle ready for action he found the time pass with leaden feet ; and presently he thrust a hand inside his shirt and drew forth a gold locket attached to a fine chain. Opening the locket he stooped a little so that the red glow of the fire shone on it. Inside was a miniature of Janet Selby. He gazed at it long and earnestly, and after a time his eyes took a far-away look. In his mind he was reviewing his last interview with her, and round one sentence of hers all his thoughts centred. It was the sentence relating to the mistress-ship of Shapland Manor.

“ It is a beautiful old place. Any woman might be proud to——”

He knew the meaning of that unfinished sentence ; and he felt sure that the lordship of the Manor was his best claim to her favour. Looking into the beauti-

ful face as depicted in the miniature he saw nothing of mere worldliness or ambition, but he was well aware of the strength of social influences in the class in which he and Janet moved; and he knew her father's favour would be of great help. He could not persuade himself that Janet loved him as he loved her; but she liked him, they had been friends from childhood; and friendship was a good foundation for marriage. And Janet was wise in her day and generation. She would do nothing foolish. The social standing of the mistress-ship of one of the oldest manors in England was something that would appeal to her mightily and——"

His thoughts took a sudden turn as he remembered the man behind the ranges, and as he looked across the fire into the darkness of the bush beyond a black look came on his handsome face. There, in that unknown man, was the stumbling-block in the way to the Paradise that he was planning! Would he succeed in finding him, and if he did——

His eyes sought the miniature once more, and then kindled with the flame of a passionate resentment of the situation in which he found himself.

"Nothing shall stand in my way," he whispered. "Nothing. I——"

He checked himself at the sound of Cordery moving in his tent, and turned with a little surprise as the guide stepped into the open; for he had been so engrossed in his later thoughts that he had not realized how much more quickly the time had passed. He thrust the locket back into its hiding-place, and rose quickly to his feet.

"See or hear anything?" asked Cordery with a yawn.

"Nothing!" he answered. "The bush is as still as death!"

Cordery nodded. "Daresay we're wasting time in keeping a look-out, but after all we don't want the camp to be rushed. Best turn in now. We've a hard day in front of us to-morrow, an' you need rest more nor I do!"

Shapland nodded and retired to the little tent; but it was a long time before he slept; for dark thoughts in the mind are the enemy of sleep, and when at last it came to him his slumber was broken and fitful, and haunted by evil dreams.

He woke in the morning unrefreshed, and went outside half-clothed to find breakfast preparing. Cordery nodded to him.

"All quiet through the night," he said. "Guess we may have been mistook about them niggers' interest in us."

"Possibly!" answered Shapland, looking round.

Four hundred yards away, hidden by a stretch of bush, a small river tumbled down a precipitous place, and at the bottom of the cascade formed a series of pools. The sound of the water reaching him through the still air made him yearn for its refreshing coolness. He turned to Cordery.

"I feel a bit dull," he said. "I think I'll bathe!"

"All right!" said Cordery. "Don't be long. Tuck will be ready in ten minutes."

Procuring a towel, he made his way through the intervening bush and walked a short distance along the river bank looking for a likely pool. He had just found one, and having thrown his towel on a bush had lifted his hand to his shirt collar when a shadow on the water made him turn swiftly round. A native with a raised club was standing close behind him. He had not even time to cry out before the club descended on his head, knocking him unconscious.

When he came to himself it must have been a long

time after, for the sun was up in the heavens, and he was aware of intolerable pain in his limbs. Looking around, he found that he was trussed like a dead pig on a pole, suspended by hands and feet tied together, and that, borne on the shoulders of two stalwart savages, he was being hurried along a bush track at a great rate. His head ached intolerably, the tropic sun in his eyes caused him acute pain, and when, remembering Cordery he strove to cry out, he found his throat and mouth so parched that he could give no sound beyond a hoarse wavering cry of little volume. At that sound a third savage stepped forward and made menacing signs with an ironwood spear, and discretion as well as inability to help himself imposed silence upon him.

They travelled on, as it seemed to him, for hours. Two or three times he must have fainted, and the last faint must have been a long one, for when he revived [from it, it was to find himself the centre of interest to the inhabitants of a small hill village. He had been cut loose from the pole to which he had been trussed, but there was no feeling in his limbs and he lay on the ground quite helpless, whilst the kinsfolk of his captors flocked about him.

Gradually gathering strength he looked about him with apprehensive interest. The villagers were a wild lot, more like chattering apes than human beings, with fierce eyes and huge lips, and an indescribable air of bestiality. Their sole clothing consisted of fringes of bark and leaves, with necklaces of dog's or human teeth. The men were very hairy, heavy-browed, and their eyes had the fierce, startled, furtive expression which is characteristic of cannibal races in every clime.

Shapland was far from being a coward, but he shuddered as he looked on the creatures into whose

hands he had fallen. They were wild men, and unless help came to him he had little doubt what his end would be. But for the moment he did not surrender hope. Apparently Cordery and the bearers had so far escaped, and Cordery was not the man to be beaten by a crowd of savages. If only he were not killed immediately, it was possible that there was a chance of ultimate escape.

He had just arrived at this conclusion when, at the bidding of one who seemed to be some sort of chief, two of the savages stepped forward, and gathering him up carried him to a grass hut towards the end of the village. Entering, they threw him on the floor, with as little ceremony as if he had been a log, and retired, blocking the entrance behind them.

He was in almost complete darkness. His head ached terribly, and for a little time he lay where he had been thrown without moving. But after a while, he became conscious of little prickings in his hands and feet, and realized that nature was working to restore the circulation, he began to move his limbs in order to assist. Gradually the prickings increased. The numb feeling began to pass, and shortly he was able to use his hands. Then he rubbed both arms and legs diligently for a long time, and when the circulation was quite restored he staggered to his feet.

A feeling of unutterable nausea almost overcame him; but leaning against the wall of the hut he mastered it; and then feeling in his pocket he found a large clasp knife, which had escaped his captors' attention. With this he cut a peep-hole in the wall of the hut, and looked forth on a wild scene.

Night had fallen, but a great fire which had been lit in the centre of the village gave all the light that was needed. All the population seemed to be in the street, and most of the men were engaged

in some weird dance, circling round and round the fire to the screeching of bamboo pipes and the sound of a drum made from the hollowed section of a tree trunk with drum heads of lizard skin. As he watched, the dance quickened and the dancers began to howl as they pranced. It was clear to him that the savages were working themselves up to a pitch of excitement that would end in absolute loss of control. Then—

He looked at the fire, and understood. It was built to roast meat for a feast, and as yet there was no meat in sight. He knew that he had but little time and that to wait for Cordery to help him would be to invite disaster. He turned quickly from his peep-hole and crossed the hut with the intention of cutting through the grass wall on the further side.

As he did so something smote the wall and he caught a rasping, cutting sound. A little light came through the hole he himself had made, and he saw it glint on a broad blade of steel. As he beheld it relief surged in his heart. Some one was cutting a way into the hut. Cordery (he never thought of any one else) had arrived in time. As he watched, the broad-bladed knife hacked and slashed, and when a hole big enough for a man to crawl through had been made, the person outside ceased operations, and a voice hailed him in a low tone.

"Hallo there!"

"Hallo," he responded in surprise, for the voice was not the voice of Cordery.

"If you're able to move," answered the stranger, "crawl through the hole. And for the Lord's sake be quick unless you want to be kai-kaied."

Half a minute later Vernon Shapland was standing in the open air, by the side of his deliverer. In the shadow of the hut cast by the fire on the further

side he could make out nothing beyond the fact that the man was as tall as himself.

"Who are you?" he asked quickly.

"What's that matter?" laughed the man. "This isn't precisely the time for introductions. Give me your hand and move as quietly as you can—though it's not likely we'll be heard unless by some one prowling in the bush."

The discordant clamour in the village was growing louder every moment. Now it seemed that the whole of the population was howling at the top of its voice, and looking back as they plunged into the bush behind the village, Shapland had a vision like a scene from some inferno, a vision of naked howling savages dancing by the leaping flames of the great fire. Almost involuntarily he shuddered. His deliverer, still holding his hand, felt the shudder, and said sympathetically, "Nice lot, aren't they?"

Shapland did not answer; indeed he had not time, for the other spoke again almost immediately.

"There's a ledge here. I'm going to jump down. You follow. It's a six-foot drop and soft falling. Take it easy."

A second later he disappeared in the darkness and Shapland caught the thud of his feet on soft earth. He waited a moment, then he himself followed, and as he alighted safely, the other man took his arm again.

"Now I'll have to guide you—for it's tough going. Lift your feet well and ware rock!"

Shapland could not see a yard in front of him, but he was conscious that they were moving downhill. Occasionally an outcrop of rock caught his feet, the fronds of low-growing tree-ferns swept his face and once a thorn caught his sleeve, ripping it from elbow to wrist. His companion, who seemed to

know the way quite well, pressed on without speaking, and finally Shapland, who was consumed with curiosity as to the man's identity, asked: "How did you know I was in the village?"

"Heard the brutes shouting the news of the capture across the hills this afternoon, and summoning the outlying tribesmen to the feast. So I came along on the off-chance of your being yet alive."

"You camp hereabouts?"

"Across the divide and over the next hill. I know this lot and they don't interfere with me, having had their lesson five months back."

Shapland waited, hoping that the man would volunteer further information about himself, but he did not do so. He would have liked to ask his rescuer's name, but since the man showed no reciprocal curiosity about himself, found it difficult to do so; and in silence they moved on, until they reached the bottom of the declivity, when Shapland caught the murmur of running water. Then his companion stopped.

"I'm going to leave you here," he said.

"Leave me!" echoed Shapland. "But——"

"You'll be all right now. There'll be a moon in ten minutes, you can see the shimmer of it above the hills there. Just step into the stream, it's shallow and has a pretty firm gravelly bottom with no rocks to speak of. Follow it, and in an hour you'll find your lot camped on the bank of it. I saw them pitching camp as I came over the hills on the edge of dusk. You needn't be afraid of those brutes up there. They're too scared of Heaven knows what devils and goblins to follow you at night!"

"But where are you going?"

"Up-stream! Back to my camp! I shan't make it much before morning."

Shapland looked at him in some embarrassment.

"I'm awfully grateful to you," he said; "won't you tell me your name?"

"I'd sooner not, if you'll excuse me," laughed the other. "Fact is, I've a secret to guard, and if my whereabouts leaked out in Moresby the secret would be no secret. . . . But before parting I'll give you a piece of sound advice. Get your party on the move as soon as the moon is well up, and if you're going north take the next valley and up over the spur at the end. With that lot up there in the state they are, this isn't a healthy neighbourhood for any prospecting party that don't know the land. So long, chum!"

Without another word the man stepped into the water and turned his face up-stream. Shapland watched him for a moment, then he himself stepped into the water and, making a cup with his hands, drank his fill. A minute later, as the full moon sailed majestically over the hills, he began to walk in the direction in which the stream ran.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAMP IN THE BUSH

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later, Vernon Shapland, emerging from the shadow of an overhanging tree-fern, was brought up suddenly by a sound that was wonderfully like the click made by a breech-bolt of a rifle. Looking about him carefully, he saw the moonlight glinting on a steel barrel half a score of yards away, and divining who was behind the rifle he called out:

"Is that you, Cordery?"