

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?"

"By the jumping Josh! It's Mr. Vernon," cried Cordery, moving into the open. "Where in thunder have you been to?"

"It's rather a long story," answered Shapland, "and I'll tell you as we go back to camp. The sooner we're there the better; for the truth is, Cordery, I'm famished. I haven't had a bite all day."

"Then come out o' the water, Mr. Vernon. It's pretty open country down to the camp. I was just prospecting round looking for you, having heard the sound of yelling and drums from somewhere up there in the hills; but I never expected to come on you like this."

"Or any other way ever again?" laughed Shapland without any real merriment.

"Thought it a doubtful proposition, Mr. Vernon. If I must speak the truth, the most I expected to find was your head smoking over a slow fire—and maybe a handful of bones or two. The tribesmen got you, didn't they?"

"Yes, I was knocked on the head, before I could call out."

"So I guessed when we found your towel on a bush, with the foliage about all trampled down. I've been on your track all day. But how in thunder did you get away from the devils?"

Shapland rapidly explained, and Cordery listened without interruption until the end, then he asked in a curious tone: "Get the man's name?"

"No," was the reply, "he was reluctant to give it. He said he had a secret to guard, and seemed to think that if he told me his name the secret would be blown abroad."

"And he was going up-stream—making for the next hills?"

"So he said," answered Shapland.

"Then you've seen the man you came from London to see, Mr. Vernon—the man or his partner, or I'm a bloomin' Dutchman."

For a moment Shapland did not speak. He himself had entertained the thought to, which his companion gave utterance, but had dismissed it, because it was not a pleasant one to entertain. Now it re-asserted itself with the force of a conviction, and for a moment he was dumb.

"Don't you think so, Mr. Vernon?"

Shapland had really little doubt upon the matter, but temporized.

"Of course it may be so," he began slowly, "but——"

"What the paper-fellows 'ud call a dramatic situation, hey, Mr. Vernon?"

"Possibly," answered Shapland a trifle irritably, "but on the other hand you may be utterly mistaken in your conjecture! There must be plenty of wandering prospectors in these hills."

"Not as many as you'd think, Mr. Vernon. In more ways than one, the Papuan bush is an unhealthy place for prospectors; but if your man isn't Charley Rowley or his partner, then I'll eat my hat."

"What makes you so sure?" asked Shapland.

"Well, the fact that he's here at all, for the first thing. Second thing, that he wouldn't tell you his name for fear of givin' a secret away. That means the name is one that's known down at Moresby, an' if the secret ain't gold or some other rich strike that he wants to keep dark, then I'm a Dutchy. Now there ain't so many old-timers whose whereabouts ain't known, and no new chums would ever get up here on their own. Put on top o' that fact that there's been a goodish bit o' speculation as to what line

Rowley was really on, gems or gold, and whereabouts he locates himself, an' you'll see that what I say is just sense, an' neither more nor less."

"It does look like it," agreed Shapland absently.

They walked on in silence for a little while, then Shapland mentioned the suggestion of his rescuer that the party should travel by moonlight and change its route—a point which Cordery instantly fixed upon.

"Why should we do that, Mr. Vernon, if it ain't as I say? I ain't scared of any bunch of dog-toothed cannibals—not when I've got eight guns with me. I reckon Rowley's afraid we'll strike his camp, an' learn what game he's on! All the same I daresay he's right in his advice. If them durned villagers showed fight an' we had to wipe 'em out, the news would get down to Moresby, soon or late, an' then there'd be a heaping lot o' trouble. We'll work up the valley and over the spur, as Rowley suggests. I took a glimpse at it this afternoon, an' it's as good a way for the point we're making for as the valley of this river. But when we're over the spur we'll work east an' come round on Rowley's camp that way. That is, if you ain't too scared by what's happened to continue the journey."

"I must have a talk with Charles Rowley, if he's in the country," answered Shapland in a tone that spoke inflexible determination.

"Oh, he's in the country, right enough," answered Cordery, with a laugh, "and we'll give him the surprise of his life in a day or two. He thinks in sending us round he's put us off the scent of his precious secret; but we'll show him, Mr. Vernon, we'll show him."

Arrived at the camp, over the meal which Vernon Shapland needed so badly, they discussed the plan

further, and an hour and a half later, with the moon lighting every rook and corner of the wild landscape, they started on their night march and continued until an hour before dawn. Then they pitched camp anew, and feeling comparatively safe from intrusion by wandering tribesmen the two white men, leaving three armed bearers to keep watch, turned in to rest.

Cordery, like a true son of the wilderness, slept at once, but Vernon Shapland lay awake for quite a long time. The events of the past twenty-four hours had so excited his brain that sleep was for long impossible; but it was not on the perilous experiences through which he had passed that his mind dwelt mostly. He was conscious of a sharp sense of dismay at the thought that the man whom he had come so far to seek was still in the flesh. Somehow he had hoped that Charles Rowley had perished as so many prospectors had perished in New Guinea, either at the hands of cannibals, of fever, or by one of the many accidents by flood and field that are of daily occurrence in the wild lands. But he was alive. He shared Cordery's conviction as to that! He had had speech with him of his partner, and somewhere in the hills to the east there was the man whose continued existence imperilled all the future he had planned for himself. He was conscious of the irony of the situation; very conscious of the unutterable baseness of the deed he contemplated, but inflexible in his determination as to the course to be pursued.

His mind swung to other problems as they had done often during the past few weeks. Cordery was one of them, and Rowley's partner was the other. Somehow he must so manage things that the guide should not accompany him to Rowley's camp when they arrived in its neighbourhood. And that would not

be easy. Cordery was evidently bent on ascertaining why the two partners had their camp in these wild hills, and his conversation had revealed his conviction that the partners had made a strike which they were anxious to keep to themselves, and which he was equally anxious to share. It would be difficult to keep him back, but it must be done somehow.

And Rowley's partner was a complication not easy to eliminate, unless chance served him, as he hoped it might. One man he could deal with, but two——

Sleep overtook him whilst he was still wrestling with the problem, and when he awoke four hours later, and the march was resumed, the two problems still filled his mind and he was morose of temper and his brow was black with care.

Towards the end of the day they pitched camp by a small and rapid river that plunged from a high cliff, and whilst the evening meal was preparing, Shapland climbed the cliff, taking with him a pair of field glasses. When he reached the top he stood against a rock, and carefully and thoroughly searched the country with his glasses. For a long time he looked in vain, then about five miles away as near as he could judge, he saw a thin column of smoke rising in the still air, and a moment later located a small tent pitched on a flat at the foot of a rather precipitous hill. His heart gave a painful bound as he saw the camp, and he stared at it long and earnestly. He was quite sure that it was the dwelling-place of the man whom he was seeking, and again the problem of Cordery rose up in his mind, apparently insoluble.

But when he approached the camp again it was to find the problem already removed. Cordery hailed his coming with a joyous, excited shout, and hurried to meet him, with something clutched in his hand. His face was almost purple and streaming

with perspiration. His eyes danced with excitement.

"What is it?" asked Shapland quickly.

Cordery opened his hand and revealed a couple of smooth pebble-like things, of the size of horse-beans and of yellowish blue.

"Gold!" he shouted. "This durned river must be full of it. I picked them up from among the stones. I expect they've been washed down from somewhere up in the hills. In the morning I'll climb to the top of that fall an' explore. I shouldn't wonder if there's gold-bearing quartz by the ton up in them craggy hills."

Shapland smiled to himself. The problem of Cordery's company vanished instantly. The man had the gold-fever on him. He would be only too glad to be free to follow his bent for a day or two, and in that time it would be possible for himself to accomplish the object of his journey.

"We're both in luck," he said lightly. "You've found gold and I've found the camp we're looking for."

"That so!" said Cordery indifferently, his eyes fixed on the nuggets in his hand.

"Yes! It's about five miles away, across the bush."

Cordery scarcely heard him. He lifted his eyes from the gold in his hand, and looked at the fall.

"Top o' there," he said absently, "there's a fortune somewhere. I'll be a blessed millionaire. I'll keep the location to myself, or at any rate let in only a few old-timers."

"But how about your job with me, Cordery?" asked Shapland with a laugh.

Cordery looked at him blankly for a moment, then he said urgently: "Mr. Vernon, you wouldn't have a man miss the chance of a lifetime. There's

gold there, I tell you, yellow gold, enough to buy up all Moresby, Government House an' all. I've got to locate it before some other feller comes along. Don't you understand? You were saying something about Powley's camp. Take the boys along and get your business done, while I stop here an' prospect for the fortune that's shouting for me. Do! for the Lord's sake do!"

Shapland laughed again. He desired nothing better. "Very well," he said. "I'm quite agreeable. But there's no need for me to take all the boys a couple of them will do. In the morning I'll go over to Rowley's camp an' have the interview I want, whilst you can explore the river, and if it's the bonanza you think, you'll be able to make your stake, and return here after seeing me down to Moresby."

"Right-ho, Mr. Vernon! That'll suit me down to the ground. To think we've camped next door to a bloomin' mint! This country beats anything else God Almighty ever made!" He was too excited to eat; too excited to sit and smoke when darkness fell, and from his own place on the other side of the fire, Shapland watched him poking among the stones of the river by the light of an improvised torch. When the torch gave out, he returned empty-handed wet to the waist, but unshaken in his confidence.

"It's up there sure," he said with a glance backward at the cliff. "An' I'll find it in the morning as certain as eggs."

After an early breakfast the next morning, both of the white men left the camp, Cordery alone; Vernon Shapland with two of the bearers, one of whom was Cordery's old servant. All three carried rifles, for Shapland had no wish to repeat his terrible experiences of two days before; and as they marched they kept a sharp look-out for any signs of the in-

habitants of the country. They found none, however, though other obstacles rose in their path to hinder their march, for the country was a terribly difficult one. Two hours' march from camp they struck a black and noisome swamp that reeked with the musky smell of alligators; and as the bearers absolutely refused to venture into it, in the hope of discovering a way across, the little party was obliged to make a considerable detour, during which they were compelled to climb a rocky hill. When they passed the crest, the camp they were seeking came suddenly into view—a tent, with a native shack of reeds and grass standing a little to the rear. The camp was about a mile and a half away, on the flat at the foot of a hill, with a small river running in the foreground. Shapland stood looking at it for a little time, then giving the two natives a stick of tobacco each, he ordered them to await him there, and went forward alone. In the crook of his arm he carried a rifle.

Keeping in the cover of the bush, presently he reached the neighbourhood of the camp, and after surveying it for a moment, he crept forward cautiously. The camp appeared to be deserted, and as he moved nearer, convinced that such was the case, he was a little less careful of his going, and set his foot on a dry stick which broke with a sharp snap. There was a sound of movement inside the bushes; a tall white man threw back the tent fly and stood looking sharply about him.

He was obviously young, though he wore a curly brown beard, and the hidden man looked at him intently, and at the same time with an air of uncertainty. Was this the man who had come to his rescue? He could not be sure, having only seen him in the darkness. Was he the man whom he sought or another? There were two men at this camp:

which one was this, Rowley or his partner? The man at the tent door himself settled the question as he said aloud:

"I wonder what that was. I heard something as sure as my name is Rowley. I wonder if those confounded cannibals are——"

There was a sudden spurt of flame from the bushes, and as the sharp crack of a rifle echoed among the hills, the man at the tent door crumpled up and fell on his face, shot through the heart. The next moment Vernon Shapland was running through the bush as fast as his legs could carry him, frantically, like a man distraught.

CHARTER V

CHARLES ROWLEY'S DISCOVERY

IT wanted yet three hours to sunset when Vernon Shapland returned to his camp, and he found Cordery seated upon a log, juggling with the two nuggets of gold that he had found on the previous day. His clothing was torn and caked with mud, and there was a look of intense disgust upon his face.

"What is the matter?" asked Shapland. "Anything wrong?"

"Everything's wrong," retorted the gold hunter. "I've been up that cliff and a mile beyond the head of the fall, and I've been down the river, and never the colour of gold have I seen. I reckon some fool must have just chucked these two beans in the river to cause other fools to waste their time. This place is a blank. There's no bonanza here. It isn't another Yodda River."