

CHAPTER VI

THE RETURN

AS Vernon Shapland turned his face to the coast his heart was light, his eye serene. He had no qualms of conscience for the foul thing that he had done, and with every step towards Port Moresby, the fear of discovery, never very great, lessened. Cordery found him a genial companion, quite different from the rather reserved man who had journeyed from the coast in search of a man whom he had never seen. He laughed at the difficulties brought by each day's march. By the fire at nights he talked freely of travel in other lands, and mocked at the idea that Papua would ever be settled by white men.

"The Australian administration will do its best," he said one night, "but its best will be but little. It will set a fringe of civilization along the coast and maybe a little way up the rivers like the plantations on the Astrolabe, but the chaos of the interior will defy it for hundreds of years. This," he waved a hand dramatically towards the heights behind them, "is the last home of barbarism, and I should say it is an impregnable stronghold."

"Pretty bad," grunted Cordery shortly.

Shapland looked at him. For a few days he had been conscious that Cordery had changed and that he was not the man that he had been on the way up from the coast. Instead of being inclined to garrulousness, he had become a silent man, sitting at nights staring in the fire, with a thoughtful, rather moody look upon his face; and when his employer was engaged with his own thoughts, he often watched

him with a curious questioning gaze. Thinking from his answer that Cordery was indisposed to talk, Shapland fell silent, and sat there staring in the fire, occupied with his own thoughts, which, judging from his expression, were not unpleasant ones.

Presently he looked up and caught Cordery looking at him in the curious questioning way already mentioned. The gaze filled Shapland with a vague disturbance, for there was something that was enigmatic and strange in the way in which the gaze was averted instantly he showed that he was aware of it. Under the pretence of a dropped pipe, he moved a little out of the direct range of the fire-light, and then addressed his silent companion again.

"A penny for your thoughts, Cordery."

The guide took a pipe from his mouth, blew out a long stream of smoke, then said with a slow deliberation and a surprising directness of speech:

"Well, Mr. Vernon, I was just wondering what brought you across the world to look at a man who it turns out ain't the man you wanted."

Vernon Shapland laughed.

"I never said I wanted him, Cordery. As a matter of fact, I don't, and I'm very glad that this man Rowley has turned out not the man I was looking for."

As he considered this statement an enigmatic smile flashed on Cordery's face.

"A thunderin' waste of time an' money for you this trip—anyway."

"Not at all," answered Shapland easily. "On the contrary, it quite settles a little matter that was in dispute."

"That so?" inquired the guide, a quick note of curiosity in his voice. He waited as if for a reply,

then as none was forthcoming he deliberately asked a further question: "The settling makes a big difference to you, don't it, Mr. Vernon?"

"How did you guess that?" asked Shapland quickly, a little off his guard.

Cordery puffed at his pipe, and between puffs granted: "On general principles, as one o' them missionary fellers 'ud say. Goin' up you was as long-faced as a fiddle, coming down you're as gay as a cockatoo. So it's easy to guess the difference this trip makes to you must be pretty considerable."

"It makes the difference between heaven and hell."

Shapland laughed harshly as he answered, and Cordery nodded his head and waited with a little eager light in his eyes to see if his employer would be more explicit. But his face was towards the fire, and looking at him Vernon Shapland became suddenly aware of that eager gaze, and instantly grew taciturn. A moment later he rose to his feet, and making an excuse turned and entered his tent. Cordery remained where he was, smoking and looking into the fire. He sat there quite a long time. Utter silence fell upon the camp. Sounds that had come from his employer's tent indicating that he was turning in for the night had long ceased, and still he sat there, staring, smoking, thinking. The sound of slumber came from the neighbouring tent, and he glanced round.

"Like a child!" he whispered with a grin. "An' after what has happened!"

He resumed his meditations, and half an hour after, as he gently knocked the ashes from his pipe, he whispered to himself again.

"The difference between heaven and hell! It's a pretty wide stretch that! Wonder if it's a fortune, or only a woman? Well, it don't matter much either way. The feller's got the dust, an' if I can't

turn a honest penny then I ain't Moresby Jack."

Having reached this conclusion he also turned in, and next morning he was more like his old self, cheerful and talkative, with all his moroseness gone; though at times he still watched Shapland with that odd, questioning gaze.

The weather was beautiful. On the high ranges it was cool, in the morning the air was diamond clear, and the country was visible for miles and miles, a jumble of conical hills and peaks and cliffs shaped like baronial castles, purple and blue, with gorges bright green in the clear sunlight, and in the bottom of them water raced, mere ruffled strips of white, or fell from the high cliffs like long ribbons. The clear air was exhilarating, and the toil of travel since they were homeward bound seemed a small thing. The days passed swiftly, and Vernon Shapland developed an interest in the wild beauty about him that he had not really felt on the outward journey, and once or twice he was even moved to make pencil sketches, only to laugh at his own work and tear it up as totally inadequate. And so they journeyed, both men in a good mood, until they neared the coast, and once more found themselves in leech-infested swamps, heavy with the musky smell of alligators, and crossing low-lying plains through which rivers ran. Here the heat was terrific, every pore opened to it so freely, that it was necessary to dry their clothes by the fire at night, whilst the mosquitoes swarmed like a plague sent by some malevolent God.

A change came over their tempers. Each man grew short with the other, and one night the shortness developed into something very like a quarrel. The camp had been pitched on a terrace of rising ground, when on another hillock distant perhaps three miles away Cordery caught sight of another

camp, a white man's camp as the little fly-tent revealed. The guide borrowed Shapland's field glasses and carefully considered the encampment, when he lowered them there was a grin upon his face.

"A white man's camp, of course!" remarked Shapland casually.

"Of course, Mr. Vernon!" answered Cordery. "An' I guess I know the man's name. He carries his trademark with him wherever he goes!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Just take a squint through them glasses an' you'll see it, sure."

Shapland took the glasses, and carefully adjusting them became aware of a small Union Jack that fluttered upon a pole near the tent.

"Do you mean the flag?" he asked.

"Yes," grinned Cordery.

"To whom does it belong?" asked Shapland.

"There's only one man in Papua who takes that little bit o' coloured rag round with him, and that's Trevor Drake. He——" Cordery broke off suddenly as he caught sight of his employer's face, then he asked curiously: "Say, Mr. Vernon, d'you know Trevor Drake?"

Shapland shook his head. "No," he answered as casually as he could. "Never heard of the man in my life."

"I thought maybe you had," said Cordery without giving his reasons, and then looked again at the other camp. "I guess I'll stroll across an' cadge a handful of salt; we're getting a bit short."

"There's no need," answered Shapland quickly; "we shall manage."

"Maybe! But when there's no need to manage, I ain't one to do without things."

"A shortness of salt won't hurt you for a day or

two!" replied Shapland in a tone that was a trifle sharp.

Cordery swung round and looked at his employer. There was a shrewd light in his eyes which might have warned the other that the guide suspected that his employer had some reason against his visiting Drake's camp. Perhaps it was that suspicion which made Cordery persist.

"Oh," he said casually, "'tisin't for the salt only I want to go. Drake's by the way of being an old pal of mine, and I have an idea I'd like to have a yarn with him."

Anxiety was now indexed in Shapland's face. A child could have seen that he was averse to the proposed visit, and his anxiety made him forget to be careful.

"You'll be needed here," he said, "This is where your job is. And as we've to get away early in the morning you'd better stop here. There's no sense in knocking yourself up by doing an extra tramp at this time of the day."

The tone of authority in which he spoke ruffled the other's temper.

"Oh," he said, "you're mighty careful o' my health all of a sudden, ain't you?—you who've pushed this blamed expedition on as if it was an express train. But you ain't goin' to stop Jack Cordery from seeing an old pal—nor a score like you! This is where my job is—is it? Well, maybe it is; but there's nothing in the contract against me having a pow-wow with an old friend, an' I'm going to have it, right away. I'm off now; an' if there's any dirty job wants doing, well! you can get one o' the niggers to do it, or do it yourself!"

"I warn you——" began Shapland in helpless anger.

"Warn away!" jeered the other wrathfully.
"I'm off."

Without another word Cordery turned and began to walk in the direction of the distant camp. Shapland could do nothing to prevent him, much as he desired that his ship board acquaintance and Cordery should not meet, and the next two hours were burdened with anxiety for him, anxiety from which, however, he was delivered by Cordery himself; for when the guide returned he was plainly a disappointed man, and the look on his face cheered his employer wonderfully. Without a word Cordery began to eat the meal which his black servant set before him.

"See Drake?" asked Shapland presently in a conciliatory tone.

"No!" answered the other in an aggressive tone.

"How was that?" inquired his employer in a tone in which relief mingled with pretended sympathy.

"Because he ain't there!" answered Cordery, responding to the other's conciliatory attitude. "That's his main camp right enough, but he's off visiting some cursed cannibal across the hills an' won't be back for three days. There's nobody there but a couple of blacks."

This information brought a further uplift of spirits to Vernon Shapland. He laughed sympathetically. "A pity you wasted time an' strength on the journey," he said, "and I was a fool to oppose your going; but this climate's trying to the temper. As soon as you've finished eating we'll have a cigar together, and forget an incident which is the one regrettable incident in a perfect trip."

"The one!" said Cordery with a sudden harsh laugh. "Forgetting the fortune that I didn't find at

the top o' that blamed water-shute, ain't you, Mr. Vernon."

"Yes," agreed Shapland, "I had forgotten that."

"But the trip ain't without profit," said Cordery musingly. "Two hundred o' the best, you owes me!"

"I'll make it two-fifty!" said Shapland on a sudden impulse.

"That's real handsome o' you Mr. Vernon," answered Cordery, without any ring of gratitude in his voice. "Between one thing an' another, I have a sort of notion that this trip'll set me up for life."

"How? what do you mean? Two-fifty isn't exactly a fortune."

"I'm not saying it is," was the reply, "but it'll help. An' there's been more in this trip than meets the eye." He thrust a hand in his breeches pocket and produced the two nuggets that he had found.

"There's evidence of gold, an' the man who uses his eyes an' wits, same as I do, will multiply that till there's no figures left in the multiplication table."

"Then you think you've a safe thing in view."

"Sure," replied Cordery with a grin. "I was disappointed at first; but second thoughts are best; an' if I don't get within twelve months what I've been set on for years may I be kai-kaied by the dirtiest cannibal in New Guinea."

At that moment Cordery pushed the tin plate from him, and Shapland promptly offered him a cigar from a store carried in an air-tight box. As the guide bit the end off, Shapland asked the almost inevitable question:

"What is it you've set on having, Cordery?"

Cordery reached for a burning stick from the fire, and lit the cigar. He puffed once or twice before

speaking, then he said: "My kingdom of heaven, Mr. Vernon!"

"Your what?" asked the other, secretly amazed.

"My kingdom of heaven!" repeated the guide. "Didn't know I had one, I guess! But every man has more or less. You've got yours. 'The difference between heaven an' hell,' you said this trip made to you, up there in the ranges; so I reckon you got your dream, though what it is you ain't told me. But I ain't making no secret about mine. It's a steady income, an' a comfortable little schooner to run about in, in the Islands, with a Kanaka crew, and me for boss; doing a bit o' trade if the fancy takes me, an' letting it alone if it don't! I guess with that I'll live to be as a venerable old Methuselah, an' most folk will agree that the blue Pacific is better than them golden streets they sing of down at the Mission Schools."

Shapland laughed in real sympathy this time. "And you think you'll get your steady income and your schooner out of this trip?"

"Dead sure of it, Mr. Vernon. But I ain't going to give the show away just yet. A secret is only worth money while it's a secret, an' I ain't going to let all Papua in at my front door."

"I daresay you're wise!" answered the other, wondering whether Cordery's disappointment after prospecting the river above the fall was no more than a mere pretence.

"You bet I am, Mr. Vernon! Solomon hisself ain't in it with me."

Shapland laughed, and the conversation languishing, he went to his tent. He was quite light of heart, and really glad that his guide had not met Trevor Drake; and before he slept he had convinced himself that

Cordery's desire to see Drake had to do with the fortune that the trip was to bring to him.

A week later when they arrived at Port Moresby it was to find an Australian boat within an hour of departure. As he received that information, Vernon Shapland, who was exhausted by a long march under a hot sun, grew suddenly animated.

"By Jove! what luck! I must get that boat, Cordery."

"There'll be another in a week——"

"A week's an eternity, man!"

"Not in Papua! Best loaf round an' get over the trip, before——"

"That's the boat I'm going by," answered Shapland with decision.

He hurriedly secured a passage, settled with his guide, got his luggage which had been left at the hotel, and caught the steamer with a few minutes to spare. Cordery waved to him from the jetty.

"Quick work, Mr. Vernon."

"Very!" laughed Shapland.

"There's that outfit o' yours," bawled Cordery as the boat began to move. "We'd clean forgotten——"

"Keep it!"

"Thanks! But maybe I'll bring it with me when I come to see you in England."

Vernon Shapland started, and wondered if he had heard aright; for the chatter and the shouting of farewells was considerable. He looked towards the now distant figure, and recognised the uselessness of seeking for an explanation. No doubt Cordery was just having his little joke, and so in the bustle of the steamer's departure he dismissed the words from mind.