

CHAPTER VII

“MINE ! MINE !”

AS the boat ran along the coast and the passengers settled down, Vernon Shapland, having changed his clothes, sought out a comfortable seat on deck and looked through his glasses on the land in which he had spent such strenuous weeks.

The shore line was a dream of beauty. Right down to the water's edge the water ran, dark green mangroves trailing monstrous snake-like roots, emerald fronds of palm, camphor trees and dainmar, trailing lianas, with here and there some flowering tree that seemed a mass of yellow flame, made a picture such as few lands on earth can show. He dropped his glasses and lifted his eyes to the hills behind.

First came the high cliffs and rounded domes of the Owen Stanley Range, with the spire of Mount Yule piercing the light blue sky ; and, far behind, the heights of the inland chains, through which he had noticed to such an evil end, rose like wedges to cleave the heavens. For a time the sheer beauty of the panorama held him, then dark facts willynilly forced themselves upon his mind. He visioned a tent door with a man sprawling in front of it, dead. Somewhere in those tumbled hills, through miles and miles of terrible bush, that dead man was lying, waiting for some one to discover him.

He wondered idly if that discovery had been made. In any case it mattered little, for he was leaving that

land of his crime, and none knew that he had fired that murderous shot, whilst his identity was known to none in the land that he was leaving. In a few days he would be running parallel with the Barrier Reef southward to Sydney, and in a day or two after that, with moderate luck, nor'-west on the homeward track.

A gleam came in his eyes as he recalled Janet as he had last seen her, with Shapland Manoia in the background. He had no regrets for his crime. He was not a weak man, and generally it is only weak men who suffer repentance and remorse for deeds irrevocably done. A crook of the finger in a rifle trigger had made the succession to Shapland his beyond dispute, and with Shapland, Janet—a mistress of whom the old house itself might be proud.

Then suddenly and without warning, the black dog of care leapt on shoulders.

What was that that Cordery had cried on parting? The words as he heard them, recurred, immovably fixed in his mind as they would be so long as remembrance of the crime itself remained with him. Did Cordery know something?

"I wonder what the fellow meant?" he whispered. "If he knew——"

A sudden fear clutched at his heart. The clutch tightened as he reflected that if he did not already know then, he must guess the facts when the news of Charles Rowley's death trickled through to the coast. Would Cordery keep the news of the expedition to himself for fear of being implicated in the crime, or would he go to the authorities? Such men as he, pioneers of the wilderness, moving amid lawless peoples, had little liking for law and authority, and usually give both a wide berth. Cordery would probably follow that line, and in any case would be

disposed to keep his knowledge to himself in the hope of sometime turning it to profit.

With those parting words his mind suddenly, and with unerring instinct, linked Cordery's hope of a fortune to come to him from the trip. Blackmail ! Was that the game of his late guide ?

The fear loosened its grip and he gave a little laugh of relief.

“ After all,” he whispered, “ to him I am John Vernon, and John Vernon will take some finding when he ceases to be. Cordery may be a famous tracker in the New Guinea bush, but in the civilized world—well, he'll have to be a super-tracker to find me ! ”

At the call of the dinner bell he dismissed the matter from mind, but in the days that followed it recurred again and again, and though he had no fear of discovery when he stepped on the Sydney boat, it was under yet another alias, so that John Vernon should disappear once and for ever. Before he sailed for England he bought a batch of Australian papers covering the period from his departure from Port Moresby, and the first two days of the homeward voyage he spent in diligent reading of them. Nowhere did he find a single line in them referring to Charles Rowley's death. Either the news had not yet reached the coast, or the murder of the prospector in the remote inland bush was too small a matter for the notice of the news agencies. Having satisfied himself on this point, all fear died out of him. He thrust the papers through the port-hole of his cabin, and thenceforward all his thought was of the future and not of the past. That he would forget, if forgetfulness was in the power of his mind to achieve.

To one knowing all the circumstances looking on

him as he drove through the gates of Shapland on a late autumn morning it must have seemed that he had succeeded in that difficult achievement. His eyes bright with anticipation, his bronzed face free from care, all his bearing that of a man at peace with the world, and as he entered the library where his uncle awaited him, to hear his story, his step was firm, his manner free from hesitancy.

He found Sir Charles looking white and ill, and nervously anxious to know the worst.

"I got your cable from Sydney," said the baronet after an affectionate greeting. "When you have had luncheon you must tell me everything. I am going to the Riviera to-morrow by Claxton's orders. He says I must not winter in England—and I should like to know all there is to know before I go."

"There is very little for me to tell, sir. The cable gave you the gist of the whole matter. The young man Rowley was lost in the interior of New Guinea, fourteen months ago, whilst prospecting with another white man. Another party of white men stumbled on their camp, and found them both dead, so whether he was your son can never be known. I made careful inquiries, but could learn nothing more about the dead man."

Sir Charles nodded quietly. "It is the end of my agony," he said. "That young man represented the only hope that has been vouchsafed to me in three-and-twenty years. Henceforth we will dismiss the whole matter from our minds. You are my heir, and I shall be glad if you will make your home at Shapland more than you have done in the past and take a more active part in the administration of the estate."

Vernon Shapland's eyes gleamed.

"Of course, sir, I shall do as you wish."

They went in to lunch, and over the meal, at the

baronet's direct request, Vernon Shapland gave a fuller account of his journey, partly true, partly fictitious. On the way home he had had ample time to concoct the story that he told, and as he described the journey that he had made through the New Guinea bush to find a man known as Moresby Jack, who, he alleged, had been the leader of the prospectors who had discovered the dead Rowley and his partner; and told with vividness of his own adventure with the wild Tugeri, he was altogether convincing, particularly as his listener had no ground whatever for suspicion.

When the recital was ended, Sir Charles leaned forward and put a thin white hand on his arm.

“ My boy,” he said, “ I can never be sufficiently grateful to you. You have imperilled your life to set a father's doubts at rest. Henceforth you must be to me as my son.”

“ I shall try to merit the honour, sir ! ” answered the younger man with quiet brazenness.

“ You have already shown that you are worthy,” said the baronet in a shaking voice, “ and whilst I regret the death of that boy in a far land, believe me I am grateful to Providence for giving me one to take his place.”

Vernon Shapland winced a little at the unconscious irony of his uncle's words; but otherwise he played his part well.

“ Uncle I have done nothing that I would not do again for you—and Shapland ! ”

“ I am sure of that,” replied the baronet warmly, and there the matter rested.

When the meal was over the younger man left the house and going round to the stables had a horse saddled. Ten minutes later, Sir Charles, looking

through the window, saw him riding across the park, and smiled sadly.

"Youth is always impatient," he said aloud. "I wonder what Janet will do?"

Vernon Shapland also wondered as he rode. Shapland was his—or as good as his; and Janet—? He did not know. He could not even guess. He could only hope.

At a turn in a lane that afforded a short cut to the Abbey he came suddenly upon two riders, moving in the opposite direction. One was Janet, and the other was her father, a bluff country gentleman, of the old school, an M. F. H. and a magistrate. At the sight of the young man, Mr. Selby drew rein with a shout.

"Vernon, by all that's wonderful! When did you return?"

"Two hours ago. I was just riding over to the Abbey——"

"To see me or Janet?" laughed Mr. Selby with the tactlessness of the plain man. His daughter flushed a little at the frankness of the question, and as he caught the flush Mr. Selby laughed again. "No need for you to tell any polite fibs, my boy. I shouldn't believe you if you did; but I'm jolly glad to see you back again, and we can talk later. Just now, as I've some rather pressing business with Sir Charles, I daresay you can take my place with Janet, and give her a run across the downs."

He did not wait for an answer. He laughed once more, gave a *clk!* to his horse, and rode on in the direction of Shapland, leaving not a little embarrassment behind him. For a moment the young people remained silent. Janet's face was very rosy, and she was almost ashamed of her father's obvious manoeuvre, whilst Vernon Shapland wished that the M.F.H.'s

methods were not quite so crude. Then their eyes met, and the girl broke into sudden laughter, in which her companion joined.

“ When father was young,” she said “ there was an idea of putting him in the diplomatic service.”

Vernon Shapland laughed again.

“ He would have made a wonderful ambassador ; his methods are so amazingly direct. But there is something to be said for such simplicity, and as he has set the example, I follow it. Of course it was you whom I wished to see, Janet ! I want your answer—the answer you promised me on my return, Janet.”

The girl fidgeted with her whip, and her eyes dropped to her horse’s neck. To Vernon Shapland, watching, it was clear that she was yet of divided mind : and her manner betrayed some distress as she answered :

“ I do not know what to say, Vernon. I have thought a great deal, and yet I do not know.”

“ Then say ‘ yes ’,” he urged. “ That you are not sure is an argument for, rather than against, that course. For my sake do not turn from me. I have dreamed of this moment ; through all the months of my absence I have counted the days on my way home, and I have told myself that, when we met, your heart would leap with mine. Janet, marry me, you must !” he cried passionately ; “ your father wishes it, my uncle will be delighted, and what it will mean to me, I cannot trust myself to tell you. Janet—Janet—my dear——”

He stretched a hand towards her. The girl caught a glimpse of his face, bronzed by tropic suns. It was earnest, pleading, and the passion in his tone moved her, as she had never before been moved. Was it pity for him, was it love ? She still was not sure. The doubtful look was still in her eyes, as she stretched

her hand to his. They touched, almost clasped, when something startled the girl's horse. It started, and as it sprang forward their hands were wrenched apart. The girl made no attempt to check her horse. A sudden fear of the thing she had done smote her, and as the horse galloped up the lane she already wished that it had not been done. But Vernon Shapiand was unconscious of all this, and as he followed his heart was crying exultantly, "Mine! Mine! Janet and Shapiand. Mine!"

CHAPTER VIII

CHARLES ROWLEY HEARS NEWS

TREVOR DRAKE, sitting reading, behind a smoke smudge, in his tent-door an hour before sunset, looked up as one of his native bearers gave a shout. The next moment he was on his feet watching a white man and a number of black carriers coming down the half-dry bed of the small stream which at this part of the wilderness was made to do duty for a track. Ten minutes later he moved forward quickly to welcome the white man.

"Hallo, stranger!" he said genially, for he liked the look of the new-comer.

"Hello! Trevor Drake!" answered the other with a smile.

"You're pretty handy with my name," replied Drake with a grin.

The man he addressed pointed to the little flag placed in a prominent position. "Well," he said,