

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,

"everybody who has been in the country a year knows that a camp with that totem is a Trevor Drake's."

Drake laughed. "Maybe," he replied, "and since I need none you may as well introduce yourself."

"My name's Rowley!"

"Son of Charley Rowley who was killed down in the Solomon's some years back?"

"He was my adoptive father."

Drake thrust out a hand, and as Rowley took it he said: "I am glad to meet you. I was partner with your father once in a pearling venture. He was a straight man. Tell your fellows to pitch camp here and we'll have a yarn together."

The yarn began after supper. Pipes had been lit and both men were sitting in the opening of the tent, Rowley looking into the fire with grave eyes, and Drake from time to time glancing thoughtfully at the younger man. Suddenly Drake spoke.

"Going down to the coast?"

"Further! I'm going to London."

"London! Then you've a mile or two to go. Pulling out?"

"Temporarily!"

"Tired of the wild?" laughed Drake. "Going out for a racket, leaving the castle to look after itself I suppose?"

"I've left a dead man in charge," said Rowley in a voice that made Drake look at him sharply.

"A dead man?"

"Yes, my foster-brother and partner!"

"Was it fever?" asked Drake sympathetically.

"No, it was not fever. Jim was almost proof against that. He was murdered!"

"Murdered!" cried Drake. "Do you mean that some of the infernal blacks got him?"

"It was no black that killed Jim," answered

Rowley quietly. "The natives in the back ranges don't carry rifles."

Trevor Drake whistled. "Phew! Shot was he?"

"Yes."

"Any idea who did it?"

"No. It is most mysterious. I don't know a man in the wide world who would have done a thing like that to Jim. He was everybody's friend, and the very cannibals liked him."

Trevor Drake looked thoughtful, and after a moment's silence he asked: "I suppose you were away when it happened?"

"Yes, I'd been across the ranges with my blacks to a Dutch trader for grub, and when I came back I found him lying in front of the tent. He couldn't have been dead for more than an hour or two, and that very day he'd written up a diary that he kept. There was something in it that may have a bearing on the crime."

"That so? Tell me, Rowley. Two heads are better than one, you know."

Rowley nodded. "I tell you—no, I'll read you the passage from the diary."

He rose from his seat, and unstrapping a pack, returned to the fire with the diary, then he read the last entry that his brother had made. When he had finished, he closed the book and looked at Drake.

"What do you think?"

"Well," said Drake slowly, "it proves that there were white men in the neighbourhood, and since he was shot—must have been with a white man's gun—it looks as if the man whom your brother had helped, or some one who was with him, was the guilty party."

"Just what I think," answered Rowley quickly, "but what sort of a man must he have been to do a thing like that after what Jim had done for him?"

"An out-and-out rotter, of course. But there are some fellows who are like that! Was your camp robbed?"

"Not a stick touched—and there was stuff worth taking in the tent. That's what makes it so mysterious. The whole business seems to be without motive."

"It wasn't that—unless a maniac did the killing, and that doesn't seem likely. There's always a motive for crime, and the more purposeless it seems, the deeper and more subtle the motive as a rule."

Again he fell silent, then after looking in the fire for a little time, he asked a question. "Have you had any visitor at your camp in the last few weeks, Rowley—any white man, I mean?"

"No," answered Rowley; "Jim and I kept our camp dark—you see we were on a good thing."

"I understand."

"Why do you ask about the visitor?"

"Because of something that may have a bearing on this foul business of your brother's death."

"What is that?" asked the other quickly.

"Well, coming up from Cooktown two or three months back, I met a man on the boat, who asked me if I knew you."

"Is that so?" asked Rowley, with a sudden quickening of interest. "What sort of a man was he? What did he want me for? For God's sake tell me, Drake. He may be the man who killed poor Jim."

"So it seems to me," agreed Drake. "But I'm bound to say he didn't seem the sort of fellow to be a killer, seemed too tony for anything of that sort. He didn't tell me the business he was on, and where you were concerned said it was merely a question of a mutual friend sending him on if he should run across your track."

"What was his name?"

Drake scratched his head. "There now! It's clean gone. This climate's a rotten one for the memory; and of course the man was no more than a ship acquaintance. Let me see? It began with V, I'm sure of that. V—V—Verdant. That's no, it, but it's something like that! Perhaps it'll come to me when I'm not thinking about it."

"Where did the man come from?"

"London I think. Anyhow he was an Englishman—nothing of the Colonial about him."

"It's strange," said Rowley musingly. "Who could be going to introduce a fellow like that to me?"

"Oh, somebody down in Sydney—or Cooktown may be—somebody who knew that you were thi way on."

"But no one there did know," objected Rowley. "Jim and I only reached our location by accident. We were pearling and were wrecked on the Dutch coast, and being on a desolate patch we collected stores and started to march overland to Moresby, and except when we've been down to the port once or twice on business we haven't seen a soul. And nobody in Cooktown could have wanted to introduce him to me, for Jim and I when we were pearling were located at Thursday Island."

Drake threw up his hands. "I give it up, then. But it's worth while keeping it in mind, Rowley, that a month or two back there was a stranger—I can't recall the blessed name—inquiring for you, who—by Jove, yes!—who knew that you were Charley Rowley's adopted son."

"He knew that?"

"He mentioned it, or I should never have remembered the fact at all."

"Did you tell him about Jim?" asked Rowley quickly.

"Couldn't, for I didn't know about him myself till you told me just now."

"Then he probably didn't know! And if he were the man who shot poor Jim, in all likelihood it was me he intended to get."

Trevor Drake rose to his feet in sudden excitement.

"By Jove! Rowley, I believe you've made a bull's-eye! The man who killed your brother was after you, as sure as daylight."

"But why did he want me?"

"Ask me another," said Drake.

"A man I've never seen, and who had never seen me," mused Rowley. "It sounds too mad to be true. And yet—and yet—"

"It's like a shilling shocker! But I'll wager my teeth there's a deep motive at the back of it all—and if we had the motive the whole thing would open out like an oyster in the sun."

"Yes, but we haven't the motive."

"No! It's a bit of a corker."

"All the same I'll come up with the man who killed Jim, if I comb the world for him."

"There's a middling-sized crowd of men to comb through," replied Drake thoughtfully. "I should start at Port Moresby. Report to the authorities, and tell them what I have told you."

"No use! The Federal authorities have no real power in the back bush, and besides we are on the edge of the Dutch ground. I shall report Jim's death, of course, but I shall set out to find the murderer myself. He left a clue behind him!"

"A clue! What sort of a clue?"

Charles Rowley thrust a hand into an inner pocket

and producing the locket with its fragments of gold chain, handed it to the other.

"That!" he said. "Open it, and look inside."

Drake turned the locket over in his hand, considering it for a moment, then he opened it, and stooped towards the firelight. A slow whistle came from his lips as he looked at the beautiful face of the miniature, then he said quietly:

"It's a face in a thousand! There are not many like it in the world. I suppose your idea is that if you find the original, you will get at the man who carried it about with him, and left it behind him up in the ranges?"

"Something of that sort!" agreed Rowley.

Drake looked at the miniature again. "There are I forget how many million women in the world; and though this one is exceptional she'll take some finding."

"Not so much as you think," was the reply. "I've had that picture out of the locket, and I found a name painted on the back——"

"Ah! the girl's name?"

"No! the name of the artist in London who painted the portrait."

"Then you've got your man; as sure as Christmas, you've got him, Rowley, always assuming that the owner of this trinket was the man who shot your foster-brother."

"That is how I feel," answered Rowley quietly, "and something in my bones tells me that I shall lay hands upon him."

"Yes, this picture turns a terrific job into a simple one. I haven't any doubt that you'll succeed." Drake looked at the miniature again, and after a time he said musingly: "I wonder what this girl was to the man who carried her likeness with him. Sweetheart, wife or sister?"

“ Or daughter ? ”

“ Couldn't be that,” said Drake promptly, “ not if it was the man whom I met on the Cooktown boat. He was too young, but a little older than yourself.”

“ Then she is one of the other three.”

“ Yes! And if you get the man and he proves to be your brother's murderer, you'll be bringing trouble to her.”

“ If he's the kind of man who could let himself be saved by Jim and then go out and kill his saviour, such trouble would spell a deliverance to her.”

“ Maybe,” agreed Drake. “ Most men would put their seal to that. But if this girl loved the man, you'd have hard work to convince her. She's the sort who'll be loyal to a man through thick and thin. Any one can see that with half an eye.”

“ Yes,” replied Rowley. “ I don't know much about girls ; but that face speaks for itself.”

“ It does ! ” answered Drake handing the locket back to his companion.

As Charles Rowley took it, he looked at the sweet face within long and earnestly, and a soft light came in his eyes. Drake saw that light, and wondered what Rowley would do if the original of the miniature pleaded with him for mercy—mercy for the man who had lost it. He looked at the other's face as it showed in the firelight. It was cast in strong lines, the mouth was firm and resolute, the steady eyes, softened though they were by a light of unconscious tenderness, were those of a man who would not shrink. That face gave the answer to the question that had arisen in his mind, Rowley would go through with the matter to the bitter end. A minute later, in answer to a question he had the conviction confirmed.

“ I suppose whatever that girl is to the man—you'll strike and spare not ? ”



"He did not spare Jim! And the law of the bush is an eye for an eye. Nothing shall save him from the penalty."

"Not even the girl?"

"No, not even the girl!"

"Well, I don't know that I can blame you; but if things are what the locket seems to indicate, you've a bad half-hour before you somewhere."

"I can't have a worse one than that which came to me when I found poor Jim by the tent door!" was the reply. There was a little pause, and the silence of the bush was unbroken except by the murmur of the neighbouring stream, then Charles Rowley said suddenly: "I suppose you haven't remembered that name yet?"

Drake shook his head. "No! It's dodging about in the back of my mind, but it won't come out into the open. Most likely I shall remember it before morning."

But in the morning the name was still as elusive as ever; and an hour after sunrise Charles Rowley resumed his march to the coast without having heard it, and as he marched the thought of that unknown man who had inquired of a casual steamer acquaintance about himself remained with him. Who was he? What did he want with him? Had the man indeed shot Jim in the belief that Jim was himself? And above all, what was the man's motive in committing the crime which though Jim had been the victim, had been directed against himself?

He could not escape the questions, nor could he answer them, and all the way to the coast they recurred with almost maddening iteration.

And it was not until five days later, when ten marches lay between them, that Trevor Drake, reflecting on Rowley's story, remembered the advice he had

given to his fellow-passenger to seek out Jack Cordery.

"Great Scot!" he said, "to think that I forgot that too! If that fellow—Vernon—yes, by Jupiter that was the name!—if he went to Cordery with his inquiry, it would make it quite clear that he really wanted Rowley badly; and maybe Cordery was the man who accompanied him upon the trip. I'll write a note with the name and this little bit of news, and send a couple of boys down to Moresby with it. Then Rowley can make inquiries about Vernon and his movements and find out if Cordery knows anything about this fellow."

But though he carried out this intention, the well-meant effort was in vain, for when the natives reached Port Moresby with the note, Charles Rowley had left, and by that time was racing down the long Queensland coast on his way to Sydney, there to take the English boat.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE STOWAWAY

**A**BOARD the Australian liner *Queensland*, two days out of Sydney, and bound for England, most of the first-class passengers were on deck, enjoying the beautiful weather. Among them was Charles Rowley. He was seated on a deck-chair, a little apart from his fellow-passengers, with a very thoughtful look in his eyes. The locket which Boromai had found was in his hand, open, and from time to time he glanced at the beautiful face, which looked out at him