

MOONDYNE JOE

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE

CHAPTER VII

THE IRON-STONE MOUNTAINS

Moodyne took a straight line for the Kogulup Swamp, which they "struck" after a couple of hours' ride. They dismounted near the scene of the capture, and Moodyne pulled from some bushes near the edge a short raft of logs bound together with withes of bark. The sergeant hesitated, and looked on suspiciously.

"You must trust me," said Moodyne quietly, "unless we break the track we shall have that sleuth-dog tracker after us when he gets loose." The sergeant got on the raft, holding the bridles of the horses. Moodyne, with a pole, pushed from the bank, and entered the gloomy arches of the wooded swamp.

It was a weird scene. At noon-day the flood was black as ink and the arches were filled with gloomy shadows. Overhead the foliage of trees and creepers was matted into a dense roof, now pierced by a few thin pencils of moonlight.

Straight toward the centre Moodyne steered, for several hundred yards, the horses swimming behind. Then he turned at right angles, and pushed along from tree to tree in a line with the shore they had left. After a while the horses found bottom, and waded.

"No more trouble now," said Moodyne. "They're on the sand. We must keep along till morning, and then strike toward the hills." They went ahead rapidly, thanks to Moodyne's amazing strength; and by daylight were a long distance from the point at which they entered. A wide but shallow river with a bright sand bottom emptied into the swamp before them, and into this Moodyne poled the raft and tied it securely to a fallen tree, hidden in sedge grass.

They mounted their horses, and rode up the bed of the river, which they did not leave till noon-time. At last, when Moodyne deemed the track thoroughly broken, he turned toward the higher bank, and struck into the bush, the land beginning to rise toward the mountains when they had travelled a few miles.

It was late in the afternoon when they halted for the day's first meal. Moodyne climbed a mahogany tree, which he had selected from certain fresh marks on its bark, and from a hole in the trunk pulled out two silver-tailed possums as large as rabbits. The sergeant lit a fire on the loose sand, and piled it high with dry wood. When the possums were ready for cooking, the sand beneath the fire was heated a foot deep, and making a hole in this, the game was buried, and the fire continued above. After a time the embers were thrown off and the meat dug out. It looked burnt and black; but when the crust was broken the flesh within was tender and juicy. This, with clear water from the iron-stone hills, made a rare meal for hungry men; after which they continued their travel.

Before midnight they had entered the first circle of hills at the foot of the mountains. With a springing hope in his heart, Moodyne led the way into the tortuous passes of the hills; and in a valley as silent as the grave, and as lonely, they made their camp for the night.

They were in the saddle before sunrise, and travelling in a strange and wild country, which no white man, except Moodyne, had ever before entered. The scene was amazing to the sergeant, who was used to the endless sameness of the gum forests on the plains of the conifer settlement. Here, masses of dark metallic stone were heaped in savage confusion, and around these, like great pale serpents or cables, were twisted the white roots of tuad trees. So wild was the scene with rock and torrent, underbrush and forest, that the sergeant, old bushman as he was, began to feel that it would be dangerous for a man who had not studied the lay of the land, to travel here without a guide. However, he had a deep game to play, for a great stake. He said nothing, but watched Moodyne closely, and observed everything around that might assist his memory by-and-by.

In the afternoon they rode through winding passes in the hills, and toward sunset came on the border of a lake in the basin of the mountains. "Now," said Moodyne, dismounting by the lake-side, and turning loose his horse to crop the rich grass, "now we may rest. We are inside the guard of the hills."

The sergeant's manner had strangely altered during the long ride. He was trembling on the verge of a great discovery; but he was, to a certain extent, in the power of Moodyne. He could not help feeling that the man was acting truly to his word; but his own purpose was so dark and deceitful, it was impossible for him to trust another.

The punishment of falsehood is to suspect all truth. The mean of soul cannot conceive nobility. The vicious cannot believe in virtue. The artificial dignity imparted by the sergeant's office had disappeared, in spite of himself; and in its place returned the catfist aspect that had marked him when he was a convict and a settler. Standing on an equality with Moodyne, their places had changed, and the prisoner was the master.

On the sandy shore of the beautiful lake they found turtles' eggs, and these, with baked bandicoot, made supper and breakfast.

On resuming their ride, next morning, Moodyne said: "To-night we shall reach the gold mine." The way was no longer broken; they rode in the beds of grassy valleys, walled by precipitous mountains. Palms, bearing large scarlet nuts, brilliant flowers and birds, and trees and shrubs of unnamed species—all these, with delicious streams from the mountains, made a scene of wonderful beauty. The face of Moodyne was lighted up with appreciation; and even the sergeant, coarse, cunning, and brutish, felt his purifying influence.

It was a long day's ride, broken only by a brief halt at noon, when they ate a hearty meal beside a deep river that wound its mysterious way among the hills. Hour after hour passed, and the jaded horses lagged on the way; but still the valleys opened before the riders, and Moodyne advanced as confidently as if the road were familiar.

Toward sunset he rode slowly, and with an air of expectancy. The sun had gone down behind the mountains, and the narrow valley was deep in shadow. Before them, standing in the centre of the valley, rose a tall white tuad tree, within fifty paces of the underwood of the mountain on either side.

When Moodyne, who led the way, had come within a horse's length of the tree, a spear whirled from the dark wood on the right, across his path, and struck deep into the tuad tree. There was not a sound in the bush to indicate the presence of an enemy. The gloom of evening had silence even the insect life, and the silence of the valley was profound. Yet there was startling evidence of life and hostility in the whirr of the spear, that had sunk into the tree before their eyes with such terrific force that it quivered like a living thing as it stood out from the tuad.

Moodyne sprang from his horse, and, running to the tree, laid his hand on the shivered spear, and shouted a few words in the language of the aborigines. A cry from the bush answered, and the next moment a tall savage sprang from the cover and threw himself with joyful exclamations at the feet of Moodyne.

Tall, lithe, and powerful was the young bushman. He arose and leant on his handful of slender spears, speaking rapidly to Moodyne. Once he glanced at the sergeant, and smiling, pointed to the still quivering spear in the tuad. Then he turned and led them up the valley, which soon narrowed to the dimensions of a ravine, like the bed of a torrent, running its perplexed way between overhanging walls of iron-stone.

The sun had gone down, and the gloom of the passage became dark as midnight. The horses advanced slowly over the rugged way. A dozen determined men could hold such a pass against an army. Above their heads the travellers saw a narrow slit of sky sprinkled with stars. The air was damp and chill between the precipitous walls. The dismal pass was many miles in length; but at last the glare of a fire lit up the rocks ahead.

The young bushman went forward alone, returning in a few minutes. Then Moodyne and the sergeant, proceeding with him to the end of the pass, found themselves in the opening of a small valley or basin, over which the sky, like a splendid domed roof, was clearly rounded by the tops of the mountains.

A few paces from the entrance stood a group of natives, who had started from their rest at the approach of the party.

CHAPTER VIII

THE KING OF THE VASSE

Beside the bright fire of mahogany wood, and slowly advancing to meet the strangers, was a venerable man—an aborigine, tall, white-haired, and of great dignity. It was Te-mana-roa (the long-lived), the King of the Vasse.

Graver than the sedateness of civilization was the dignified bearing of this powerful and famous barbarian. His erect stature was touched by his great age, which outran, it was said, all the generations then living. His name as a ruler was known throughout the whole Western country, and among the aborigines even of the far Eastern slope, two thousand miles away, his existence was vaguely rumored, as in former times the European people heard reports of a mysterious oriental potentate called Prester John.

Behind the aged king, in the full light of the fire, stood two young girls, dark and skin-clad like their elders, but of surpassing symmetry of body and beauty of feature. They were Koro and Tagairu, the grandchildren of Te-mana-roa. Startled, timid, wondering, they stood together in the intense light, their soft fur boccas thrown back, showing to rare effect their rounded limbs and exquisitely curved bodies.

The old chief welcomed Moodyne with few words, but with many signs of pleasure and deep respect; but he looked with severe displeasure at his companion.

A long and earnest conversation followed; while the cunning eyes of the sergeant and the inquiring ones of the young bushman and his sisters followed every expression of the old chief and Moodyne.

It was evident that Moodyne was telling the reason of the stranger's presence—telling the story just as it had happened—that there was no other hope for life—and he had promised to show this man the gold mine.

Te-mana-roa heard the story with a troubled brow, and when it had come to an end, he bowed his white head in deep thought. After some

moments, he raised his face, and looked long and severely at the sergeant, who grew restless under the piercing scrutiny.

Still keeping his eyes on the trooper's face he said in his own tongue, half in soliloquy, and half in query: "This man cannot be trusted?"

Every eye in the group was now centered on the sergeant's face. After a pause, Moodyne simply repeated the words of the chief; "He cannot be trusted."

"Had he come blindfolded from the Kogulup," continued the chief, "we might lead him through the passes in the night, and set him free. He has seen the hills and noted the sun and stars as he came; he must not leave this valley."

The old chief uttered the last sentence as one giving judgment. "Ngaru," he said, still gazing intently on the trooper's face. The young bushman arose from the fire.

"He must not leave the pass Ngaru."

Without a word the young and powerful bushman took his spears and wammara, and disappeared in the mouth of the gloomy pass.

Te-mana-roa then arose slowly, and lighting a resinous torch, motioned the sergeant to follow him toward a dark entrance in the iron-stone cliff that loomed above them. The sergeant obeyed, followed by Moodyne. The men stooped to enter the face of the cliff, but once inside, the roof rose high, and the way grew spacious.

The walls were black as coal, and dripping with dampness. Not cut by the hands of man, but worn perhaps in ages past by a stream that worked its way, as patient as Fate, through the weaker parts of the rock. The roof soon rose so high that the torch-light was lost in the overhanging gloom. The passage grew wide and wider, until it seemed as if the whole interior of the mountain were hollow. There were no visible walls; but at intervals there came from the darkness above a ghostly white stalactite pillar of vast dimensions, down which in utter silence streamed water that glistened in the torchlight.

A terror crept through the sergeant's heart, that was only strong with evil intent. He glanced suspiciously at Moodyne. But he could not read the faces of the two men beside him. They symbolized something unknown to such as he. On them at that moment lay the great but acceptable burden of manhood—the overmastering but sweet allegiance that a true man owes to the truth.

It does not need culture and fine association to develop in some men this highest quality. Those who live by externals, though steeped in their parrot learning, are not men, but shells of men. When one turns within his own heart, and finds there the motive and the master, he approaches nobility. There is nothing of a man but the word, that is kept or broken—sacred as life, or unstable as water. By this we judge each other, in philosophy and practice; and by this test shall be ruled the ultimate judgment.

Moodyne had solemnly promised to lead to the mine a man he knew to be a villain. The native chief examined the bond of his friend, and acknowledged its force.

The word of Moodyne must be kept to-night. To-morrow the fate of the stranger would be decided. They proceeded far into the interior of the mountain, until they seemed to stand in the midst of a great plain, with open sky overhead, though in truth above them rose a mountain. The light was reflected from myriad points of spar or crystal, that shone above like stars in the blackness. The air of the place was tremulous with a deep, rushing sound, like the sweep of a river; but the food was invisible.

At last the old chief, who led the way, stood beside a stone trough or basin, filled with long pieces of wood standing on end. To these he applied the torch, and a flame of resinous brightness swept instantly over the pile and licked at the darkness above in long, fiery tongues.

The gloom seemed to struggle with the light, like opposing spirits, and a minute passed before the eye took in the surrounding objects.

"Now," said Moodyne to the sergeant, raising his hand and sweeping it around—"Now, you are within the gold mine of the Vasse."

The stupendous dimensions of the vault or chamber in which they stood oppressed and terrified the sergeant. Hundreds of feet above his head spread the shadow of the tremendous roof. Hundreds of feet from where he stood loomed the awful blackness of the cyclopean walls. From these he scarce could turn his eyes. Their immensity fascinated and stupefied him. Nor was it strange that such a scene should inspire awe. The vastest work of humanity dwindled into insignificance beside the immeasurable dimensions of this mysterious cavern.

It was long before consciousness of his purpose returned to the sergeant; but at length, withdrawing his eyes from the gloomy stretch of iron-stone that roared the mine, his glance fell upon the wide floor, and there, on every side, from wall to wall, were heaps and masses of yellow metal—of dust and bars and solid rocks of gold.

TO BE CONTINUED

Affective love of our dear Lord leads us to pour out our whole souls in confidence before Him, to complain of our coldness and imperfections, to put before Him our pains, weariness, disgusts, and trials, and to abandon all to Him with a quiet and childlike indifference.

THE PUBLICAN

"And—and the worst of it is I don't believe the man has a bit of religion in his heart!" ejaculated Father Maguire, suddenly.

He looked up from a second perusal of the crisp, almost curt, letter, glancing with a little sharpness at his superior.

"What! After giving us such a splendid donation?" asked Father Torrance. Behind his glasses, his eyes were twinkling with amusement.

Father Maguire shrugged his shoulders. "I'll take good Mrs. Ruddy's dollar and her blessing," he said. "On!" Father Torrance swung around in his chair. "What's the matter, man? Something's gone wrong?"

"Nothing," said Father Maguire. "Something—I said," persisted Father Torrance. "You were to dinner there Thursday?"

"I was—a good dinner; and he has first-class cigars—very best I ever smoked."

"You must have made an impression on him, hence this check. Were you speaking of endowing a bed at St. Gregory's?"

"Oh, I talked about it!" Father Maguire dismissed the subject. "You know I've been interested right from the start. Ever since I met the boy, Murray." Father Maguire smiled at the remembrance. "I'll never forget my surprise when Murray introduced his father. But I pulled myself up short for that. Then I went to the other extreme. I thought I'd try—try hard. I did."

"Well?"

"I found nothing."

"Absolutely nothing. He has no feeling, no sympathy."

"I'm surprised at you," said Father Torrance. "It isn't likely that a man of his type would wear his heart on his sleeve. He won't let you know what he is thinking of. 'One has to take time—to get beneath.' Father Torrance spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "He's a distant man. So are you, Pat."

"I?" Father Maguire's Irish-blue eyes widened to their fullest extent. "You're the first one I've ever heard say—"

"With John O'Mara, I mean. It's a spiritual aloofness, if you can get the exact shade of my meaning. He may be trying to get underneath, too."

Father Maguire threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Sure a baby can see through Pat Maguire," he said, with a broader assumption of his natural brogue. "An it's many the time you've said so. However," the stretched himself, "I'm going back—not this Thursday (I have confessions), but the next. I'll see."

Father Torrance twirled a paper-cutter between his fingers. "Sometimes one sees so very much that one thinks he sees nothing," he remarked, "especially when he's a searcher of souls."

"And perhaps now you'll explain that?"

"The man has feeling and heart, and religion, too, such as it is. I can't tell you whether it's for his ultimate good."

Father Maguire was puzzled. "How many times have you met him?"

"Three. But I knew it right away. I wasn't looking for it."

Father Maguire laughed again. "Either, 'I'm very stupid or you're trying to be plain funny,' he said. 'I refuse to answer,' smiled Father Torrance.

He ran through the rest of his personal checks, made a note or two on the back of an envelope, and laid the book aside, turning to the pile of letters at his elbow. At the first one his eyes kindled. That chap out West was making good; he must increase his salary. Wouldn't he do to let him get away. Here was an order, now—

A slight noise interrupted his line of thought. He swung around in the swivel chair, his glance resting on a slight form—the form of an old woman, attired in a rusty black garment which was partially covered by a gingham apron. She had gray hair, smoothed back from a wrinkled forehead; and as the iron man turned, she was in the act of lifting a glass of water to her lips from the tray.

John O'Mara stared at her grimly. "You will kindly take that glass with you when you are going out," he said icily. "And tell Mr. Perry to replace it with a new one. In future remember that the drinking water for the employees is provided at the end of the corridor."

The woman picked up the glass. She had grown very pale. "I beg your pardon," she murmured. "It—was the heat—I felt so faint!"

John O'Mara dismissed her by turning his back. Holding the glass she went to the door. Two minutes later an office boy tapped lightly and entered. He bore in his hand an empty glass, which he placed on the tray at the water-tank. Then instead of leaving, he approached John O'Mara.

"Mr. Perry thinks Mrs. Byrnes had better go home," he said timidly. John O'Mara glanced up. "And who is Mrs. Byrnes?"

"She cleans here, sir."

"So! She cleans here! Really! And did Mr. Perry authorize you to talk to me about it?"

"She isn't feeling well, sir."

"Well, then, the lady may go home. Tell Mr. Perry to give her her money and let her stay home!"

"Yes, sir," said the office boy. He turned, dragging his feet a few steps. Then he went back to his desk again, brave, but frightened.

"Mr. O'Mara," he began, "you—you don't mean—for good? She's not discharged? Honest, she's awfully nice, Mrs. Byrnes is."

John O'Mara muttered something under his breath as he pressed the button that summoned his stenographer.

"You can get your money, too, and go with her," he said over his shoulder.

The boy left instantly. John O'Mara had forgotten him before he reached the door. He was looking at his correspondence—but in some odd way that hospital bed kept intruding itself before his mental vision.

"I could call it the Murray O'Mara Bed, if I gave the entire sum," he was thinking. "The Murray O'Mara Bed! Not bad at all, that. Perhaps I will. Sounds good. But Murray mightn't like it. I have it. I'll give it in his mother's name—the Anne Murray Bed. There—the very thing! That will please the boy. And it is what Anne herself would like to do if she were alive."

Anne Murray! How many years it had been since he heard that name, or had even thought it in his own mind! It brought back memories, as the simplest things do occasionally. With one hand resting on the pile of correspondence, he stared before him, seeing other things. He was on the deck of a steamer—an outgoing steamer—watching the last faint outlines of his native land disappear from view. He was young then, and had all the strength of Ireland's youth in his throbbing veins. One arm was extended, rigid, the fingers claspng the rail. The other hand pressed to his forehead, the slender, shivering girl—a girl who wept upon his shoulder as if her heart was broken.

"Anne," he whispered, "I'll make you happy in the new land. Trust me. Look out, dear heart! 'Tis the last we'll see of Ireland for many and many a day."

She drew the veil from her face, and, still sobbing, did as he had bidden her.

"We'll look at it again, you and I," he said, and there was bold defiance in his tones.

"Go prospering!" she whispered. He did not speak. The hard vein was in him even then. He could not echo the words and mean them. "God prospering!" Surely John would expect him to hew out his own fortunes. No answer came; but he tightened his arm about her, and the pressure satisfied.

Cold and calculating and unemotional he may have been, but Anne Murray was sensible always of a protecting fondness. He did make her in his sinewy hands, and she had a hope that few emigrant brides possess when they first come to America's shore. But ere two years had fled he knelt beside her, and she laid her frail hand for the last time on his black hair.

"We'll never see Ireland together now, my man!" she panted. "Maybe I'll see it first—maybe—before I begin my purgatory. The dear Lord in heaven knows how hungry I am for a sight of it. He'll let the sons of me fly far across the waters. He'll let me look down at the wee village . . . and the little cot . . . and the church where we were married."

"I'm leaving you a bit of remembrance," she went on. "Be kind to him. It's hard for you to be kind at

times, since you're not that by nature. But you never failed me, and you'll never fail the treasure of my heart."

How plainly John O'Mara could hear the words even now, sitting there with his letters before him!

A voice at his elbow brought him back to the present. Miss Lansing was speaking in her usual business-like way. He did not notice that, in spite of her composed face and quiet voice, her eyes were red.

"Yes, I sent for you," he answered. "Take these. Most of them you can attend to without bothering me." He hesitated, and tossed papers about until he found his check-book again. "Write to Father Torrance," he said, "I've changed my mind about that matter."

So the letter endowing the "Anne Murray Bed" in the new Hospital of St. Gregory was duly sent off, "enclosing check for the difference." Father Maguire the next morning. Father Maguire made no comment. The dinner was over. As usual, it had been a good dinner—a man's dinner, plain and sensible. The cigars followed. "My one extravagance," John O'Mara said, laughing. They sat down comfortably in John O'Mara's living-room—also a man's room, uncompromisingly furnished for use and not ornament. Sat comfortably and at first silently.

"I was expecting a letter from the boy today," said John O'Mara. "I wrote to him—about the bed, you know. I thought 'twould please him."

"It will," replied Father Maguire. "Murray is that sort—all heart."

"What kind of a priest do you think he'll make?" asked the father, diffidently.

"You know—"

"Oh, I know!" John O'Mara spoke impatiently. "But what kind—"

"I don't think he'll resemble his father," said the priest.

"Um-m-m!" John O'Mara looked at the solid ash of his cigar meditatively. "More's the pity!"

Father Maguire said nothing. O'Mara's gray eyes twinkled. "You don't agree with me?"

"Well," answered Father Maguire, "if there's a choice between the priest with the head and the priest with the heart, I'll take the latter. Murray may be a graceful combination of the two," he added. "I haven't noticed anything the matter with his brains, but he's got a heart big enough for twice his size."

"Yes," said John O'Mara. "He's more like the mother."

"The mother?" echoed Father Maguire.

"She died when he was born," said John O'Mara. "A good little woman. Murray gets his ways from her."

Father Maguire raised his eyes quickly. Not a bit of feeling on that face.

"A good little woman," repeated John O'Mara. "We'd only been married in the old country and came away right after."

He might have been speaking of the weather or of one of his contracts—no; Father Maguire was positive he would have shown much more emotion over a contract.

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