

MOONDYNE JOE

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE

CHAPTER VII

THE IRON-STONE MOUNTAINS

Moondyne took a straight line for the Koagulp Swamp, which they "struck" after a couple of hours' ride. They dismounted near the scene of the capture, and Moondyne 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 Moondyne quietly, "unless we break the track we shall have 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 Moondyne 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 Moondyne 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 tree, within fifty paces of the underwood of the mountain on either side.

When Moondyne, 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.

Moondyne 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 Moondyne.

Tall, lithe, and powerful was the young bushman. He arose and leant on his handful of slender spears, speaking rapidly to Moondyne. 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 Moondyne 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 Moondyne 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 Moondyne.

It was evident that Moondyne 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, Moondyne simply repeated the words of the chief; "He cannot be trusted."

"Had he come blindfolded from the Koagulp," continued the chief, "we might lead him through the pass 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 Moondyne. 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 Moondyne. 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.

Moondyne 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 Moondyne 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 Moondyne 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 rooted 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.

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."

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 dingham 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, 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."

He could say nothing. "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. "Mope'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."

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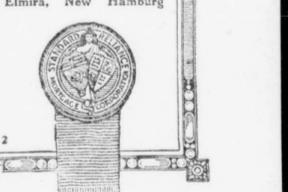
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