

## MOONDYNE JOE

## BOOK FIFTH

## THE VALLEY OF THE VASSE

## IV

## THE MEETING

With the first warm flush of morning, Alice was away on her favorite lonely walk by the river. The day opened, like almost all days in Western Australia, with a glorious richness of light, color, and life. The grand shadowy stretches in the bush were neither silent nor humid, as in tropical countries. Every inch of ground sent up its jet of color, exquisite though scentless; and all the earth hummed with insect life, while the trees flashed with the splendid colors of countless bright-necked birds.

Alice breathed in the wondrous beauty of her surroundings. Her heart, so long unresponsive, had burst into full harmony with the generous nature of the Australian bush.

Down by the river, where the spreading mahogany trees reached far over the water, she loved to walk in the early morning and at the close of the day. Thither she went this morning; and an hour later some one followed her steps, directed where to find her by Mrs. Little.

That morning, as she left the house Mrs. Little had told her that Mr. Sheridan was to call early, and had asked to see her.

"I shall be home very soon," Alice said, as she went out.

But she did not return soon; and when Mr. Sheridan called, much earlier than he was expected, Mrs. Little told him where Miss Walmsley usually spent her mornings, and he, leaving his horse in the stable, walked down through the bush toward the river.

The shadows and the flowers and the bright-winged birds were as beautiful as an hour before, but Will Sheridan, though he loved nature, saw none of them. He walked rapidly at first, then he slackened his pace, and broke off a branch here and there as he passed, and threw it away again. When he came to the river, and stood and looked this way and that for Alice, all the determination with which he had set out had disappeared.

But Alice was not in sight. He walked along by the river bank, and in a few minutes he saw her coming toward him beneath the trees.

He stood still, and waited for her. She walked rapidly. When within ten yards of where he stood, she turned from the river, to cross the bush toward the house. She had not seen him, and in a minute she would be out of sight. Sheridan took a few paces toward her and stopped.

"Alice," he said aloud.

She turned and saw him standing, with an eager face, his hands reached out toward her. Every premeditated word was forgotten. She gave one look at the face, so little changed, she felt the deep emotion in voice and gesture, and her heart responded impulsively and imperatively. She only spoke one word.

"Will!"

He came forward, his eyes on hers, and the eyes of both were brimming. Without a word they met. Alice put out both her hands, and he took them, and held them, and after a while he raised them one after the other to his lips, and kissed them. Then they turned toward the house and walked on together in silence. Their hearts were too full for words. They understood without speech. Their sympathy was so deep and unutterable that it verged on to the bounds of pain.

On the verandah, Alice turned to him with the same full look she had given him at first, only it was clear as a morning sky, and with it she gave him her hand. Sheridan looked into the cloudless depths of her eyes, as if searching for the word that only reached his senses through the warm pressure of her hand.

It was a silent meeting and parting, but it was completely eloquent and decisive. They had said all that each longed for, in the exquisite language of the soul. As Sheridan was departing, he turned once more to Alice.

"I shall come here this evening," she only smiled, and he went away with a satisfied heart.

On that morning, Mr. Wyville had started early for Fremantle, his mind revolving two important steps which he meant to take that day. Since the arrival of the ship he had been disquieted by the presence of Draper in the colony. He questioned his own wisdom in bringing him there, or in keeping him there when he might have let him go.

But, in his wide experience of men and of criminals, Mr. Wyville had never met one who was wholly bad; he had discovered, under the most unsightly and inharmonious natures, some secret chord that, when once struck, brought the heart up to the full tone of human kindness. This chord he had sought for in Draper. He had hoped that in the day of humiliation his heart would return to her he had so cruelly wronged.

There was only one step more to be taken—to release Harriet, and, if she would, let her seek her husband and appeal once more to his humanity.

On this day, Mr. Wyville intended to issue a pardon to Harriet Draper. The Government had awarded to Alice Walmsley, as some form of recompense for her unjust suffering, a considerable sum of money; and this money Mr. Wyville held, at

Alice's request, for the benefit of Harriet.

Arrived at Fremantle, he proceeded to the prison, and signed the official papers necessary for the release. The money was made payable to Harriet at the Bank of Fremantle. He did not see her himself, but he took means of letting her know the residence of her husband; and he also provided that Draper should be informed of her release.

He watched her from his office window as she was led to the prison gate. And as she took the pardon in her hand, and turned toward the outer world in a bewildered way, the utter misery and loneliness of the woman smote Mr. Wyville's heart.

"God help her!" he murmured; "she has no place to go but to him."

This done, Mr. Wyville set his mind toward Perth, where, on his return that day, he was to enter on another act of even deeper personal importance. Somehow, his heart was heavy as he walked from the prison, thinking of the next few hours. He had been more deeply impressed than he thought, perhaps, by the misery and loneliness of the poor woman he had just released.

At the stable where his horses were put up, he found Officer Lodge, who, with Ngara-jil, he sent on to Perth in a light carriage before him. He followed on horse-back. As he rode through the town, he passed the bank. In the portico sat a woman on a bench, with her head bent low on her hands. He was startled by the attitude; it recalled to his mind the figure of the unhappy Harriet, as he had seen her in the lock-up of Walton-le-Dale.

Something induced him to look at the woman a second time. As he did so, she raised her face, and smiled at a man who came quickly out of the bank, pressing something like a heavy pocket-book into his breast. The woman was Harriet; and the man was Draper, who had just drawn her money from the bank.

Mr. Wyville was in no mood to ride swiftly, so he let his horse choose its own pace. When about half way to Perth, however, he broke into a canter, and arrived shortly after the trap containing Ben Lodge and his native servant.

Mr. Wyville had not occupied the official residence of the Comptroller-General; but had kept his quarters at the hotel, a very comfortable establishment. As he dismounted in the yard, Ben Lodge held his horse, and seemed in garrulous humor.

"Mr. Sheridan was here, sir," said Ben, and he asked after you. He said he was going to Mr. Little's tonight, and he hoped to see you there."

Mr. Wyville nodded to Ben, and was going toward the house; but Officer Lodge looked at him with a knowing look in his simple face, as if enjoying some secret pleasure.

"He's found her at last, sir," he said.

Mr. Wyville could only smile at the remark, which he did not at all comprehend.

"He was always fond of her. I've known him since he was a boy."

Still Mr. Wyville did not speak; but he seemed interested, and he ceased to smile. Old Ben saw that he might continue.

"I thought at one time that they'd be married. It's years ago; but I see them as plain as if it were yesterday. He was a handsome fellow when he came home from sea—just like his father, old Captain Sheridan—I knew him well, too,—and just to think!"

Here old Ben stopped, and led the horse toward the stable, satisfied with his own eloquence. Mr. Wyville stood just where he had dismounted. He looked after the horse, then walked toward the hotel, but he changed his mind, and returned, and entered the stable, where Ben was unsaddling the horse.

"Was Mr. Sheridan alone when he started for Mr. Little's?" he asked.

"Yessir, he was alone." Then Ben added with a repetition of the knowing look: "Happen, he don't want no company, sir; he never did when he was a boy, when she was round."

Mr. Wyville looked at Ben Lodge in such a way that the old man would have been frightened had he raised his head. There was a sternness of brow rarely seen on the calm, strong face; and there was a light of terror in the eye.

"He were very fond of Alice, surely," said the old fellow, as he went on with his work; "and I do believe he's just as fond of her today."

"Do you tell me," said Mr. Wyville, slowly, "that Mr. Sheridan knew Miss Walmsley, very intimately, in Walton-le-Dale, years ago?"

"O, yessir; they was very intimate, no doubt; and they were going to be married, folk said, when that precious rascal Draper interferred. They say in Walton to this day that he turned her head by lies against the man she loved."

Ben Lodge carried the saddle to another part of the yard. Had he looked round he would have seen Mr. Wyville leaning against the stall, his face changed by mental suffering almost past recognition. In a minute, when the old man returned, Mr. Wyville passed him in silence, and entered the hotel.

The door of his room was locked for hours that day, and he sat beside his desk, sometimes with his head erect, and a blank suffering look in his eyes, and sometimes with his face buried in his hands. The agony through which his soul was passing was almost mortal. The powerful nature was ploughed to its depths. He saw the truth before him, as hard and palpable as a granite rock. He

saw his own blind error. His heart, breaking from his will, tried to travel again the paths of sweet delusion which had brought so great and new a joy to his soul. But the strong will resisted, wrestled, refused to listen to the heart's cry of pain—and, in the end, conquered.

But the man had suffered wofully in the struggle. The lines on his bronzed face were manifestly deeper, and the lips were firmer set, as, toward evening, he rose from his seat and looked outward and upward at the beautiful deep sky. His lips moved as he looked, repeating the bitter words that were becoming sweet to his heart—"Thy will be done!"

Two hours later, when the glory of the sunset had departed, and the white moon was reflected in the mirror-like Swan, Will Sheridan and Alice stood beside the river. With one hand he held one of hers, and the other arm was around her. He was looking down into her eyes, that were as deep and calm as the river.

"It has been so always, dear," he said tenderly. "I have never lost my love for one day."

She only pressed closer to him, still looking up, but the tears filled her eyes.

"My sorrow, then, was not equal to yours," she said.

"Darling, speak no more of sorrow," he answered; "it shall be the background of our happiness, making every line the clearer. I only wish to know that you love me as I love you."

Their lips met in a kiss of inexpressible sweetness and unity—in a joy so perfect that the past trembled out of sight and disappeared for ever.

While yet they stood beside the river, they heard a footstep near them. Alice started with alarm, and drew closer to her protector. Next moment, Mr. Wyville stood beside them, his face strangely lighted up by the moonlight. He was silent a moment. Then Sheridan, in his happiness, stretched out his hand as to a close friend, and the other took it. A moment after, he took Alice's hand, and stood holding both.

"God send happiness to you!" he said, his voice very low and deeply earnest. "Your past sorrow will bring a golden harvest. Believe me, I am very happy in your happiness. They did not answer in words; but the truth of his friendship was clearer to their hearts than the bright moon to their eyes. He joined the hands he held, and without speaking further, left them together by the river.

## V.

## MR. WYVILLE FACES A STORM

In the peaceful water of Fremantle harbor, Mr. Wyville's yacht had lain at anchor for several months. On her return from Adelaide with Mr. Sheridan, she had taken on board a cargo, contained in large cases and swathed in which had arrived from Europe some time before. She also took on board many persons of both sexes, mostly mechanics and laborers with their families; and among the crowd, but with airs of trust and supervision, as caretakers or stewards were Mr. Haggett and Officer Lodge. Their friend Ngara-jil had come on board to bid them good-by, and as he strode about the deck, naked, except his fur boka, hanging from his shoulder, and carrying two long spears in his hand, he seemed a strange acquaintance for two persons so prosaic as Mr. Haggett and Ben Lodge.

This thought, indeed, occurred to both of them with renewed strength that day; and it was emphasized by the remark of one of the mechanics,—"That black fellow seems to know you putty well," addressed to Ben Lodge.

"Yes," said Ben, with hesitation, and a glance of doubt at Ngara-jil; "we knew him in England. He were dressed fine there."

"Well," said the good-natured mechanic, "he's the same man still as he war there. 'Tisn't clothes as we ought to vally in our friends."

This remark brightened Officer Lodge's face, and his hesitating manner toward his wild friend vanished. When the anchor was weighed, and the last visitor had jumped on the barges to go ashore there were no warmer farewells spoken than those of Mr. Haggett and Ben Lodge to Ngara-jil.

That evening, at Mr. Little's pleasant dinner-table, Mrs. Little spoke to Mr. Wyville about the destination of the passengers.

"They are going to settle in the Vasse district," he said; they have purchased homesteads there."

"You have built extensively on your own land there, I believe," said Mr. Little.

A shadow, scarcely perceptible, flitted over Mr. Wyville's face; but his voice had its accustomed tone as he answered.

"Yes, I have worked out an old fancy as to the site and plan of a dwelling-house. But the building was not for myself. Mr. Sheridan has bought the place from me."

"Bless me!" said Mrs. Little, in a disappointed tone: "after sending scores of workmen and gardeners from Europe, and spending four years and heaps of money to make a lovely place, to go and sell it all, just when it was finished! I'm sure Mr. Sheridan might go and make some other place beautiful. It really is too provoking."

"Mrs. Little," said Hamerton, adroitly taking the good lady's attention from a subject which she was in danger of pursuing, "will you not direct me to some rare spot that is capable of beauty and hungry for

improvement? I, too, am hunting for a home."

The lady was quite successful. Mrs. Little ran over in her mind all the pretty places she knew in the Colony, and instructed Mr. Hamerton with much particularity and patience.

The further conversation of the evening touched no matter of importance to the persons present.

After some weeks the steamer returned to Fremantle, and lay at anchor for several months, except some pleasure-trips round the adjacent coast, arranged by Mrs. Little, and taking in many of the ladies of the Colony.

Mr. Wyville was engaged every day in directing the operation of the new and humane law he had brought to the Colony. At first, it seemed as if it must end in failure. Its worst enemies were those who proposed to serve. The convicts, as soon as they found the old rigor relaxed, and a word take the place of a blow; and when they saw offences that used to earn five years in chains, punished by five minutes of reproof from a superintendent, or at worst, by a red stripe on the sleeve,—when first they saw this, they took advantage of it, and shamefully abused their new privileges.

Among the officials of the convict service were many who watched this result with satisfied eyes,—croakers, who always predict defeat, and a few envious and disappointed ones, who had lost some selfish chance by the change.

At last, it came to such a condition—the reports from the outlying districts were so alarming, and the croakers and mischief-makers became so bold in their criticism,—that even the warmest friends of the new system held their breath in fear of something disastrous.

But through the gloom, there was one steadfast and reliant heart and hand. He who had planned the system had faith in it. He knew what its foundations were. When even the brave quailed, he still smiled; and though his face grew thin with anxious application, there was never a quiver of weakness or hesitation in it.

His near friends watched him with tender, sometimes with terrified interest. But, as the storm thickened they spoke to him less and less of the danger, until at last they ceased to speak at all. They only looked on him with respect and love, and did his few bests without a word.

Mr. Wyville knew that he was trying no experiment, though he was doing so; he had never done before. It was not experimental, because it was demonstrable. He had not based his system on theory or whim, but on the radical principles of humanity and he was sure of the result. All he wanted was time, to let the seething settle. Those who doubted, were doubting something as inexorably true as a mathematical axiom. His ship was in the midst of a cyclone; but the hand on the tiller was as true as the very compass itself, for it obeyed as rigidly as natural law.

## TO BE CONTINUED

## GUARDING HIS SECRET

The remarkable story here related was told by a church dignitary in England, whose name is mentioned with respect and reverence wherever the English tongue is spoken.

One evening the Bishop had accepted an invitation to dine with some friends. His arrival was a little earlier than expected, and a servant directed him into the parlor. When entering the room he noticed a priest there, a stranger, seated on a sofa. In his hand he held a book, apparently a breviary, which engrossed his attention.

As the Bishop entered the priest immediately arose, bowed politely, then without a word resumed his reading. The stranger was a strong, well-built man, evidently accustomed to a very active life. His features bore a remarkable expression of weariness and anxiety, and the Bishop wondered whence he came and who he might be.

Some other guests arrived. The hostess now also appeared and was profuse in her apologies to His Lordship for not having been present to receive him. While yet they were speaking dinner was announced. The Bishop had intended to inquire who the stranger was, but in the meantime it had escaped his mind.

When they were seated at table, he glanced at the different faces around him, and not seeing the priest among the guests, said with some surprise to the hostess who sat near him, "Where is the priest who was sitting in the parlor? It seems he is not at dinner." A strange expression passed over the face of the hostess, and she quickly replied in a whisper, "Did you really see him?"

"Yes," said the Bishop, "but I beg your pardon, I fear I have touched upon a disagreeable subject, perhaps a family mystery. I had not the least intention of doing so, and merely thought that the priest was a guest. His presence aroused my interest inasmuch as I would have been pleased to make his acquaintance. However, if for some reason you wish the matter to be kept a secret, it is scarcely necessary for me to assure you that you may depend on me."

"No, no," replied the lady almost inaudibly. "Your Lordship has misunderstood me. There is nothing that I wish concealed from you, although my husband does not wish the matter spoken of. I was surprised to hear that you saw the priest, because thus far he has shown himself only to members of our

family. What you saw was not a visitor, but an apparition."

"An apparition!" exclaimed the Bishop in astonishment.

"Yes," replied the lady, "nor can there be any doubt about it being an apparition from the world beyond, for within two years we have occupied this house the priest has appeared to my husband and myself at least ten times, and always in such a manner that there can be no question of an illusion nor of our being deceived. We have, however, been unable to solve the mystery, and we are convinced that it could not proceed from natural causes, we decided not to speak of the matter to any one. But since Your Lordship yourself has seen the apparition, may I beg a favor of you?"

"Most certainly, if it be in my power."

"I have often thought," she continued, "that if any one had the courage to address the apparition, we might be delivered from it. Would Your Lordship make some excuse and return to the parlor, just a few moments to see whether the priest is still there, and in case he is, will you not speak to him and conjure him to stay away from this house—in a word, apply the exorcism of the Church?"

After some hesitation the Bishop consented and decided to make an attempt. The other guests had evidently taken no notice of the subject of their conversation, as they had spoken in a low tone. The Bishop arose, excused himself, and left the room. Not without a feeling of dread as may well be imagined, he entered the parlor, and behold—the priest was still on the same spot—reading attentively as before. The Bishop approached slowly, but with a firm determination, and stood directly in front of the apparition. Bowing politely, the priest greeted him as before, but this time, instead of turning his eyes again to his book, his gaze, which expressed indescribable weariness, yet a degree of suppressed and longing expectancy, rested on the face of the Bishop.

After a momentary silence, the Bishop said slowly and solemnly, "I conjure you in the name of God, tell me who you are and what you desire."

The priest closed the book, arose from the sofa, stood before the Bishop and after a slight pause said in deep and measured tones: "I have never yet been thus conjured; I will tell you who I am and what I desire. . . . As you see, I am a Catholic priest. Eighty years ago this house belonged to me. I was a good houseman and my favorite pastime was hunting, an amusement I indulged in at every opportunity. One day as I was preparing to join a hunting party, a young lady of high rank came and begged me to hear her confession. I may not, of course, mention what she said, but her confession touched the honor of one of the most distinguished houses of England. I considered the matter of such great importance, and the case so complicated, that I did a very imprudent thing—something that is sinful and forbidden by the Church—I wrote down some points from the confession I had heard.

"Having absolved and dismissed the lady, I found that it was barely possible for me to arrive in time at the appointed hour, still, despite my great haste, I fully realized the extreme importance of carefully concealing the matter which had been confided to me.

"For certain purposes which I need not now explain, I had made a little hiding place, in one of the lower walls, the opening of which was closed with bricks placed in loosely. This, I thought, would be the proper place where, at all events, the paper would be perfectly secure until I returned from the chase. I would then at my leisure try to solve the case and immediately afterwards destroy the paper. I quickly laid it in a book, ran downstairs, threw the book into the opening in the wall, replaced the bricks, jumped into the saddle and galloped away."

The next day while on the hunting-grounds, I was thrown from my horse and instantly killed.

"It has been my sad lot ever since, to remain in this my earthly home in order to avert the consequences of my sin—to endeavor to prevent any possibility of the fatal paper being discovered. Hitherto no human being has had the courage to speak to me as you did; until now it seemed as though I should never have any hopes of being released from my awful task. But will you deliver me? If I show you where the book lies concealed, will you swear by all that you hold sacred, that you will destroy the paper without reading it—without letting any human eye fall upon even a word of its contents? Will you give me your word of honor to do this?"

"I give you my word of honor," replied the Bishop solemnly, "that I will faithfully comply with every detail of your wishes."

The priest's gaze now became so penetrating, that it seemed he would fathom the Bishop's very soul. The result of his scrutiny was evidently satisfactory, for he turned around, saying with a deep sigh of relief, "Very well, follow me."

With the strange sensation born of the knowledge that he was dealing with a being from the invisible world the Bishop followed. Down the wide staircase they went, into the lower corridors, then down a narrow stairs made of stone which led into a cellar or vault-like apartment. Suddenly the priest stopped.

"This is the spot," he said touching the wall with his hands; "remove the cement coat, take away the

bricks, and you will find the place of concealment of which I spoke to you. Mark the place well, and remember your promise!"

The Bishop looked at the spot carefully, closely examined the wall, and then turned to the priest to ask something more—but what was his amazement to find that his strange companion had disappeared. All alone he stood there in the dimly lighted passage. He had expected the apparition to vanish suddenly, nevertheless, a feeling akin to terror crept over him, despite his efforts to suppress it; he ran up the stairs and re-entered the dining-room pale and breathless.

The guests had begun to wonder what detained the Bishop so long, and now his hasty entrance and agitated appearance attracted the attention of all. Unable to compose himself for the moment, he referred their anxious inquiries to the hostess. After some hesitation, she explained to them what had taken place, and why the Bishop had left the room. We can easily imagine that her words were followed with profound attention. But the excitement reached its climax when the Bishop, who had somewhat regained his composure, as it was now impossible to keep it secret. With the eloquence so peculiar to him, he related his strange experience.

When he concluded, all agreed that a mason be sent for at once to make an opening in the wall, in order to ascertain whether or not there was any truth in the whole affair. The mason came and the whole party followed the Bishop down the stairs to witness the result. The Bishop shuddered when he again found himself in the passage where his ghostly companion had left him without a word of farewell; but he pointed out the exact spot, and the mason immediately set to work.

The man proceeded to remove the masonry from the spot designated and took out a few bricks. Although no one was surprised, there was nevertheless a marked excitement among the guests, when the workman announced that there was a hollow space within the wall, measuring about two feet square, and a foot and a half deep. The host pressed forward to look in, but presently recollecting himself, he stepped back to make room for the Bishop.

"For the moment I forgot about the promise Your Lordship made," he said.

Pale, yet composed, the Bishop approached, and after glancing into the opening, he reached in and drew forth a good houseman and my favorite pastime was hunting, an amusement I indulged in at every opportunity. One day as I was preparing to join a hunting party, a young lady of high rank came and begged me to hear her confession. I may not, of course, mention what she said, but her confession touched the honor of one of the most distinguished houses of England. I considered the matter of such great importance, and the case so complicated, that I did a very imprudent thing—something that is sinful and forbidden by the Church—I wrote down some points from the confession I had heard.

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