

MOONDYNE JOE

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE

BOOK FOURTH

THE CONVICT SHIP

XIV.

THE DARKNESS OF DESOLATION

The recovery of Captain Draper was regarded as a good omen by the sailors and convicts; and with a return of confidence to them the fever daily declined.

The average of recoveries grew larger, and there were few new seizures.

From the day of his interview with Harriet, Draper saw her no more. Neither did he see Miss Pandora. The steward alone attended him. He was forced to ponder on the future, and every new possibility was harder to accept than the last. During those days of convalescence, his coward soul preyed upon by his villainous imagination, Draper suffered almost the torments of the damned.

When the heartbroken Harriet recovered from the excitement of the dreadful interview, her soul had only one feeling—remorse. One dying of thirst might sit down on the burning sand, and commune with the devouring fire in the body, so this unhappy one sat upon her pallet in the hospital room, and communed for hours with the newly-lighted consuming fire in her soul.

At last Mr. Wyville entered the hospital, with the physician. He approached Harriet, and spoke in a low tone, such as he had used when addressing her once before.

"Do you remember me?"

She looked at him in surprise, at first; but as she continued to gaze, there rose in her mind a recollection that brought the blood strongly from her heart. She clasped her hands beseechingly.

"I thought I had dreamt it in the cell—I did not know that it was real. O, sir, did you not come to me and speak blessed words of comfort? Did you not say that he was guilty of part of my crime?"

"Yes; it was I who visited you in Walton-le-Dale. I come now to say the same words—to ask to save the innocent one who has borne your penalty."

"Thank heaven, it is not too late! This moment let me do what is to be done. O, sir, I know now the whole of my crime—I never saw it till this day. I never pitied her nor thought of her; but now, when I could ask for even God's pardon, I dare not ask for hers."

Seeing Harriet in this repentant mind, Mr. Wyville lost no time in having her confession formally taken down and witnessed. This done, he spoke comforting words to Harriet, who, indeed, was relieved by the confession, and felt happier than she had been for years. Assembling the officers of the Convict Service in the cabin, immediately afterward, Mr. Wyville took his first step as Comptroller General, by announcing that Alice Walsmsley was no longer a prisoner, that her innocence had been fully established by the confession of the real criminal, and that henceforth she was to be treated respectfully as a passenger.

When this news was given to Sister Cecilia, she almost lost her placid self-control in an outburst of happiness. But she controlled herself, and only wept for very gladness. Then she started up, and almost ran toward her secluded room, to break the tidings to Alice.

Alice was sewing when Sister Cecilia entered. She had acquired a habit of sewing during her long solitary confinement, and now she was happiest while working at a long seam. She smiled pleasantly as Sister Cecilia entered.

The kind little nun almost regretted that she bore news that would break the calm stream of Alice's life. She was happy as she was: would she be happier under better circumstances? would the awakened memories counterbalance or sink the benefit?

"Good news, Alice!"

Alice looked up from her sewing inquiringly.

"Is the fever over at last?" she asked.

"Better than that, my child," said Sister Cecilia, sitting down beside her, and putting an arm around her with tender affection. "I have special good news that will gladden every kind heart on the ship. One of our prisoners, who has been in prison a long time, has been proved innocent, and has been made free by order of the Comptroller-General!"

As Sister Cecilia spoke she still embraced Alice and looked down at her face. But there was no perceptible change, except a slight contraction of the brow-muscles denoting awakened interest.

"And she, who was a poor prisoner an hour ago, is now a respected passenger on the Queen's ship!" continued Sister Cecilia, lightly; but in truth she was alarmed at Alice's calmness.

"It is a woman, then?" said Alice.

"Yes, dear; a woman who has been nine years in prison, suffering for another's crime. And that other has confessed—Alice! Alice!" cried Sister Cecilia, dismayed at the effect of her words. But Alice did not hear; she had slipped from her seat, pale as marble, fainting; and were it not for the supporting arm of the nun she would have fallen headlong to the floor.

Sister Cecilia did not alarm any one; she was experienced in emotional climaxes. She did the few things proper for the moment, then quietly awaited Alice's recovery.

THE NEW PENAL LAW

There being no female passengers in the cabin of the *Houquemont*, it was decided that Alice Walsmsley should remain in her room with Sister Cecilia till the end of the voyage. The only change made was in her dress, and this, by some strange oversight on the part of the little Sister, as it seemed, was quite extensively and fittingly provided for.

Alice selected the quietest possible dress, and when she stood arrayed in it, after so many weary years in prison gray, she could not help glancing at her face in the glass, and blushing as she looked; and at this very pretty and womanly moment, Sister Cecilia came upon her and gave a pleasant little laugh. Upon this, Alice blushed deeper, and turned her confused face away, whilst Sister Cecilia reached after it, and drawing it to the light kissed her affectionately.

"Why, Alice," she said, with a provoking smile, "you are quite a beauty."

Unquestionably, even a few days without the burden of bondage had worked wonders in Alice's life. She was no longer moody; she instantly and naturally began to take fresh interest in everything she saw and heard around her.

The ship cleared the Cape in the afternoon. Southern trades. The blustering winds and the rough sea brought refreshment even to the feeble, and to Alice renewed strength. Her face lost the pallor of confinement, and her step became elastic. The years of her imprisonment had kept dormant the energies that waste with exertion. She began to feel as youthful and as cheerful as when she was a girl.

One day she was standing beside her open window, looking out on the sea, when she plainly heard above her, on the poop deck, a voice that held her rooted to the spot.

"I cannot foresee the result," she heard these words—"but I shall go on to the end. I have loved her dearly always; and I shall, at least, prove it to her before the dream is dispelled."

Alice held herself to the window, not meaning to listen to the words so much as to obey the strong promptings of her love to hear the honest ring of her voice.

It was Will Sheridan who spoke—he stood on the poop with Mr. Wyville—and Alice knew the voice. After so many years, it came to her like a message from her girlhood, and bridged over the chasm in her life.

No other words reached her; but the conversation continued for a long time; and still she stood beside the window, her cheek laid on her hands, while she allowed the familiar tones of Sister Cecilia to find her way to her thoughts; but Alice's diffidence was so evident that the little nun sat down and laughed heartily.

The voyage round the Cape had no special interest; and a few weeks later the officers began their preparations for disembarkation. The air grew balmy once more, and the sky cloudless.

"We are just three hundred miles from the mouth of the Swan River," said Sheridan one day to Mr. Wyville, when he had taken his observations. "Have you ever landed at Fremantle?"

"Yes, once—many years ago," said Mr. Wyville, and he crossed the deck to observe something in the sea.

Throughout the voyage, neither Sheridan nor Wyville had seen Alice Walsmsley. Each in his own mind deemed it best to leave her undisturbed with Sister Cecilia. Mr. Wyville was still impressed with the conviction of Sheridan's unhappy and hopeless affection for Harriet; but he was much perplexed by her forgetfulness of his name. However, when they reached Australia, one day ashore would clear up matters without the pain of preliminary explanation.

Day after day, in the mild Southern air, the ship glided slowly on, and still the watchers on the crowded deck saw no sign of land. From morning light they leaned on the rail, looking away over the smooth sea to where the air was yellow with heat above the unseen continent. There was a warmth and pleasure in the promise it gave.

The straining eyes were saved the long pain of watching the indistinct line. The shore of Western Australia is quite low, and the first sign of land are tall mahogany trees in the bush. The ship passed this first sight line early in the night; and next morning, when the convicts were allowed on deck, they saw, only a few miles distant, the white sand and dark woods of their land of bondage and promise.

The sea was as smooth as a lake, and the light air impelled the ship

slowly. At noon they passed within a stone's throw of the island of Rottenest, and every eye witnessed the strange sight of gangs of naked black men working like beavers in the sand, the island being used as a place of punishment for refractory natives.

An hour later, the ship had approached within a mile of the pier at Fremantle. The surrounding sea and land were very strange and beautiful. The green shoal-water, the soft air, with a yellowish warmth the pure white sand of the beach, and the dark green of the unbroken forest beyond, made a scene almost like fairyland.

But there was a stern reminder of reality in the little town of Fremantle that lay between the forest and the sea. It was built of wooden houses, running down a gentle hill; and in the centre of the houses, spread out like a gigantic star-fish, was a vast stone prison.

There was a moment of bustle and noise on the deck, through which rang the clear commanding voice of Sheridan, and next moment the anchor plunged into the sea and the cable roared through the hawse-hole. Every soul on board took a long breath of relief at the end of the voyage.

A tug was seen coming from the wharf, the deck of which was crowded. At its mast-head floated the governor's flag. On the deck was the governor of the Colony with his staff, and a host of convict officers from the prison.

The tug steamed alongside, and the governor came on board the convict ship. He wore a blue tunic, with epaulettes like a naval officer, white trousers, and a cocked hat. He greeted Mr. Wyville with official welcome on account of his position, and warmly expressed his admiration of his philanthropy.

"I understand you bring us a new penal system," said the governor. "I hope it is a stronger one than that we have."

"It certainly is stronger," said Mr. Wyville, "for it is milder and juster."

"Well, well," said the governor, who was a testy old general, "I hope you won't spoil them. They need a stiff hand. Now, I suppose you want those warders from the prison to get your crowd into order for landing. Shall I order them on board?"

Mr. Wyville had been looking down on the tug, observing the officers, who were a rough crew, each one carrying a heavy cane or whip, as well as a pistol in the belt, and a sword. He turned with a grave face to the governor.

"Your Excellency, I am sure, will see the wisdom of beginning with our new code at once. We have here the best opportunity to emphasize its first principles. Shall I proceed?"

"By all means, sir; you have absolute control of your department. I shall watch your method with interest."

At his order, the warders boarded the ship, formed in line, and saluted Mr. Wyville descended from the poop and carefully inspected them as they stood in rank.

"Go to the steward," he said to the chief warder, as he came to the end of the line, "and get from him a large basket."

The man was astonished, but he promptly obeyed. In a minute he returned with a capacious hamper.

"Begin on the right," said Mr. Wyville, in curt tones, "and place in that hamper your pistols, swords, canes, and whips."

The warders scarcely believed their ears; but they obeyed.

"Now listen!" said Mr. Wyville, and his voice thrilled the warders with its depth and earnestness. "I am going to read for you the new law of this colony of which you are the officers. Its first word is, that if any of you strike or maltreat a prisoner, you shall be arrested, discharged, and imprisoned."

The warders fairly gasped with astonishment. The old governor, who had listened attentively at first, opened his eyes wide, then nodded his head in decided approval.

Mr. Wyville read the heads of the new law, emphasizing the mild points. As he proceeded, the faces of the warders lost all expression but one of blank amazement. The entire meaning of the law was that convicts were expected to rise from bad to good, rather than descend from bad to worse. In other words, it was a law meant for reformation, not for vengeance.

In passing along the line, Mr. Wyville's eye rested on a silver medal worn by one of the warders. He looked at it keenly.

"What is that medal for?" he asked.

"For the mutiny of two years ago," said the chief warder; "this officer killed three mutineers."

"Take that medal off," said Mr. Wyville to the warder, "and never put it on again. We are to have no more mutiny."

The warders were then dismissed from the rank, and instructed to go below and get the convicts in order for disembarkation. As they departed Mr. Wyville gave them one word more.

"Remember, you are dealing with men, not with brutes—with men who have rights and the protection of law."

When they had disappeared into the hold, the old governor shook Mr. Wyville warmly by the hand.

"By the lord Harry, sir, this is excellent," he said, heartily. "This damned colony has been a menagerie long enough. If you succeed with your system, we'll make it a civilized country at last."

TO BE CONTINUED

THE YEAR OF THE BIG WIND

Not in this generation, nor the next, will the financial panic of eight years ago be forgotten in the manufacturing district round Fulcherville and its neighboring town, Brampton. The "year of the big wind" they call it thereabouts and the name is fitting. It followed a decade of prosperity during which money had been shoveled up rather than made, and the inevitable Bonanza ills accompanied it. Country financial frogs, the Napoleons of provincial puddles, sought to match the metropolitan ox, and dreamed themselves into the Morgan class. They began feverishly to advertise their advent by purchasing rare tapestries, old masters, and famous manuscripts. Manufacturers who had been ordinary workmen a few years before bloomed overnight into captains of industry. Their wives and daughters, happy heretofore on a hundred almonth and Sunday supplement dreams, became on a thousand a day, and with envy and the horrible toil of social greased-pole climbing. Their sons began to regard work as the servile bondage of the great unwashed, and were afflicted, in virulent degree, with yearnings after polo and other undemocratic diversions that are supposed to mark the caste of Vere de Vere.

Then came the deluge. The rains descended, the floods came, the winds blew, and beat upon the houses that were long on castellated battlements and short on foundations, and they fell, and great was the fall thereof. After the cyclone the world was sweeter, cleaner, fairer. It blew incipient hell out and permanent salvation in. There are young men round that district to-day, first-rate good fellows, working hard six days a week to the everlasting profit of their immortal souls, married to cured climbers who are self-broke to kneading board and gingham aprons, and raising perfect satisfactory boys and girls instead of the rotten and gingerbread, and they leaved in amaze that, after all, they were really men, instead of things for ingenious tailors and valets to experiment upon.

It was 10 o'clock of a brilliant October morning in the year of the big wind when Miss Pandora Fulcher's car set her down before the doors of a big office block on lower Broadway. Even the bustling, self-centered New Yorkers, streaming to and from the elevators, turned to cast a second glance at the tall, big-framed, plainly dressed woman, who seemed to bring with her, as she strode through the crowd, something of the swing and majesty of the seas. Verging on sixty, her eyes dark, direct, piercing, were expressive and full of fire as those of a vivacious, quick-blooded girl. In her strong, ivory tinted face was something of the severe immobility of the Indian. The prominent cheekbones, the firm, rather full lips, and powerful beaked nose, emphasized the impression. Among those who hurried along were doubtless some who recognized the multimillionaire mistress of the great upstate Fulcherville Mills, with their 10,000 workpeople, whose home on Fifth avenue was one of the historic family mansions of older New York, and whose steam yacht, the *Xantippe*, was known on all the Seven Seas.

Miss Fulcher made her way to the city offices of the Fulcherville Company on the fifth floor. The busy year of the firm ended with August. The balance sheet, together with a voluminous and itemized report of the work of the various departments, had been sent to her Copenhagen, and she had studied it on the way home; for she was a keen and shrewd business woman, and kept an experienced eye on the general progress of the Mills. Ezra Flaxton, her general manager, was awaiting her in the office, a tall, spare New Englander, who had grown up in the Mills from "doffer" boy to superintendent, and whose strong, capable hand was in every part of their complex organization. In a few minutes they were busy with the balance sheet and reports. The year had been prosperous, orders abundant, and profits large. There was, as usual, little to criticize, but the sharp eye of the mistress detected one poor bare spot in the generally prosperous field.

"What's the matter with Mohairs this year, Ezra?" she inquired.

"Production has fallen off and profits are considerably reduced."

"A bit of extra sharp competition that caught us napping in the early part of the season," he admitted.

"There was a time we had that field pretty much to ourselves, but young Lathrop, or Brampton, has jumped into it and got away with business we thought we owned. I don't think he'll catch us that way again."

"Who's Lathrop?" asked Miss Pandora, interested at once.

"Just a bright youngster who bought the old Slade Mill at Brampton, and got his claws into the money lender, Penstock, the Tom Slade, foreclosed, bought in at the sale, and sold to Lathrop, so much down, the balance in annual instalments."

"So the Slades are gone," she mused. "I remember when they were the big folks hereabouts, judges and governors and senators."

"And the last of them is down to borrowing quarters for drinks," said Ezra.

"That's the way of it, sabots to silken shoes and silken shoes to

sabots again. 'Clogs to clogs in three generations' as the Old Country folk put it," quoted Miss Pandora. "The earlier generation made its money like a chain-gang laborer, the last spent it like a drunken sailor. Who is the new man Lathrop?"

"A boy with his head screwed on the right way, and lots of hustle and pluck," replied Ezra generously. The Fulcherville folks were big enough not to grudge the small man his place in the sun. They would wrestle they would use their weight fairly and a little more than that. "He'll make his way all right if he can weather the storm that's coming."

"There is trouble ahead, then?" she asked. "I heard whispers and prophecies on the other side."

"Big trouble," he replied. "It's here now, right overhead, and black as ink. After the hot spell come the lightning and the hot spell all right. It has been a hot spell all right. Reckless borrowings and lending and spending, without a thought of the morrow. You would think a bottomless gold mine had been discovered by the new smarties, that grew richer the deeper they dug. Banks and Trust Companies as mad as the rest, or madder, and now they're paying time has come, and they'll pay to the skin and bone of 'em. They'll be fewer papers millionaires this time than months, and a lot of good wholesome business that can't get clear of the wreckage will be swept away. Lathrop out yonder is tied up to some shaly concerns, and he'll find Penstock hard as the nether millstone if he makes a slip. The boy's a live competitor, but I'd hate to see him swamped. He's married to a nice girl and just getting to his feet."

"Sentimental as a housemaid still, Ezra," sniffed Miss Pandora. "Business is war, and the time to sympathize with a competitor is when you send the wreath to his funeral. When he's living knock him on the head, and it will cost little to say what a fine fellow he was when he's inside his coffin. Well, I'll get back home. What a day it would be at sea! I'll have to run up to Fulcherville some day next week to see how they are shaping with the rebuilding of the Homestead, and then the *Xantippe* turns south. I'll be a miserably soul in heaven, Ezra, if there's no sea there."

Looking back on events in the light of subsequent history, it is borne on one that the zenith of Brampton's halcyon was attained on the Saturday of Mrs. Milton Penstock's "Five O'Clock" at the Country Club. The day looms up in retrospect, with a "night before Waterloo" halo about it.

Mrs. Milton Penstock, a large, floridly handsome woman, was one of the leaders of the little manufacturing town's *haut monde*. Ancestry and lineage, antecedent to a possible grandfather, few Bramptonians could boast and these were mostly to be found among the poorer and humbler, the has-beens and down-and-outs financially, who consequently no longer counted. Social status fixed itself automatically in sympathy with the size of the individual or family dollar pile. Mr. William Milton Penstock had been known in his humbler days as Billy, but with the acquisition of money and status his reserve name had come into use. He was Brampton's most brilliant illustration of the trite adage that there's always room at the top. His ascent from a second-hand furrier, money-lender, and chattel mortgage dealer, to a real estate magnate, had been monkeylike in its rapid agility. The poor we have always with us, hence the success of the Penstock kind, those skilled fishers in the troubled waters of the unfortunate world. He now called himself a banker, an elastic term that covers a wide diversity of financial operations. One of the most earnest pursuits was to forget the things that are behind, and press forward to the prizes ahead. A neat, suave little man, with shrewd, cold eyes, sharp nose, relentless steel grip, and a store of pompous moral platitudes that would have ornamented the discourse of a Bishop. He could foreclose on the home of a widow so sympathetically that she would almost believe him to be the hapless victim of some inexorable legal process, that compelled him to do what he hated with all his soul. Blunt-spoken men called him a variety of harsh and nasty names, but on the whole, he was in good repute, for money covers a multitude of sins. He had purchased and presented a rare folio Shakespeare to the Brampton Public Library, and the gem of the local Art Gallery was an Old Master, presented, as the scroll above it ran, by William Milton Penstock, Esquire.

The Country Club's "Five O'Clock" teas were among the high-water mark functions of Brampton's social life, and none was more brilliant or exclusive than that of Mrs. Penstock, held at the "Dorsey House" as it was rather plagiaristically named, with its spacious grounds, furnished with a charming scene. On the far meadows two teams of helmeted and malleted Bramptonians of the blood dashed hither and thither on ratty ponies. The fair green of the golf course was pleasantly flecked with the bright colours of moving players. On the tennis courts the white balls flashed to and fro like swift shuttles. A company of matronly ladies, attracted by social rather than sporting pleasure, sat about the breezy angle of the wide veranda, for the

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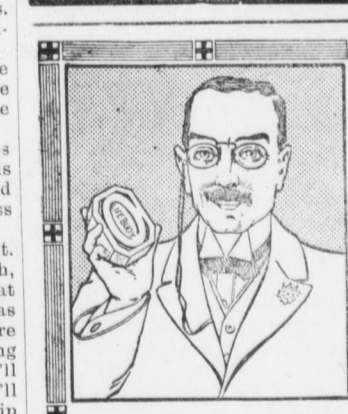


"I'm afraid I have a very rude little girl," said Alice apologetically. "You really should not have given her such a lovely box."

"She's a darling, my dear," said the woman. "You are Mrs. Lathrop, Mrs. Charles Lathrop, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Alice. "You know my husband? He is on the links."

"No, but I've heard your name," the other answered. "Won't you sit down a moment? I'm afraid I ran into some function here of unusual solemnity. May I ask who the lady is who apparently regards me as some odd biological specimen?"



"I know who you are," she continued confidentially.

"Well, who am I? There's the nicest, prettiest box of candy the steward can bring if you can tell me truly," said the woman.

"You are the old lady who sweeps the cobwebs off the sky, and this is your broomstick." And the child took up the hazel stick. "Guess you swept off the broom part."

The woman chuckled with delight.

"What a clever little honeybunch, that's just what I am. They say I was dreadfully black and dirty, and there were such lots of spiders spinning their ugly webs there. I guess I'll have to buy a new broom. Now we'll go for the candy." And hand in hand the big, grim woman and the dainty child passed indoors to the steward's counter, returning a few minutes later with a great pictured box of chocolates. Young Mrs. Lathrop met them as they came out.

"Oh, Mummy!" said the child. "See what the old lady who sweeps the cobwebs off the sky has given me."

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