

MOONDYNE JOE

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE

BOOK THIRD

ALICE WALMSLEY

I.

MISERERE!

O Spirits of Unrest and Pain, that grieve for the sorrow dealt out to weak humanity, sweep from my heart the dull veil of individuality, and let my being vibrate with the profound pulsation of those who mourn in the depths. Spirits of Sorrow and Sympathy, twin sisters of the twilight, touch the trembling chords that sound the symphony of wrong, and desolation, and despair.

Almighty God, in Thy wisdom, and surely also in Thy love, Thou layest Thine awful finger on a poor human soul, and it is withered in Thy sight even to agony and death. Thy ways, far-seeing, our eyes may not discover. In those supreme moments of trial, when that which we see is black as night, teach us to trust in Thy guidance, give us light to deny the fearful temptation of Chance, and faith to believe that all who labor and are heavy laden may bring their heavy burden trustingly to Thee!

With a prayer, we enter the cell of Alice Walmsley—a cell where no prayer had been uttered, woeful to say, for the first five years of her life therein. We look upon the calm white face and the downcast eyes, that during the hopeless period had never been raised to Heaven—except once, and then only in defiance and imprecation.

God's hand had caught her up from the happy plain, to fling her into the darkest furrows of affliction; and from these depths the stricken soul had upbraided the judge and rebelled against the sentence.

Alice Walmsley had been born with a heart all kindness and sympathy. From her very infancy she had loved intensely the kindly, the unselfish, and the beautiful. She had lived through her girlhood as happily, healthily, and pure as the primrose beneath her mother's hedgerows. She had approached womanhood as a silver stream rippling to the sea, yearning for its greatness and its troubles and its joys—hurry-ing from the calm delights of the meadow banks to the mighty main of strength, and saltness, and sweetness.

The moment of communion was reached at last, when her girlish life plunged with delicious expectation into the deep—and in one hideous instant she knew that for ever she had parted from the pure and beautiful, and was buried in an ocean of corruption and disappointment, rolled over by waves of unimaginable and inevitable suffering and wrong.

From the first deep plunge, stifled, agonized, appalled, she rose to the surface, only to behold the land receding from her view—the sweet fields of her innocent and joyous girlhood fading in the distance.

She raised her eyes, and saw the heaven calm and beautiful above her, sprinkled with gem-like stars—and she cried, she screamed to God for help in her helplessness. The answer did not come—the lips of God were dumb—it seemed as if He did not heed nor see the ruin of one puny human life. The sky was as beautiful and serene as before, and the stars were as bright.

Then, from the crest of the wave, as she felt herself slipping back into the dreadful depths again, and for ever, she raised her face to heaven, and shrieked reproach and disbelief and execration!

On the very day of her marriage, before the solemn words of the ceremony had left her memory, she had looked for one dread moment beneath the mask of him who had won her love and trust—some old letters of her husband relating to Will Sheridan had fallen into her hands—and she shrank within herself, affrighted at the knowledge of deceit and habitual falsehood that the glimpse had brought her. It was her first grief and secret and she hid it in her soul for months before she dared look upon it again.

But a single grief, even though a heavy one, could not crush the light out of so joyous and faithful a heart. She still possessed the woman's angelic gifts of hope and faith. She had, too, the woman's blessed quality of mercy. She forgave—trusting that her forgiveness would bring a change. She prayed, and waited, and hoped—in secret confidence with her own heart. Another influence would be added to hers ere long. When she gave his child into his arms, and joined its supplication to hers, she believed, nay, she knew, that her happiness would be returned to her.

But before that day came, she was left alone. Her husband, from the hour she had given herself into his power, had followed one careless, selfish, and cynical course. She would not, could not believe that this was his natural life, but only a temporary mood.

When first he spoke of going to sea again, on a long voyage, she was pleased, and thought gladly of the change for her, who had never seen the great world. When he coldly said that she was to remain, she became alarmed,—she could not be left alone,—she implored, she prayed to go with him.

Then came the sneer, the brutal refusal, the master's command, the indelible insult of expressed weariness and dislike. She held her peace.

When the day came, he would have left her, for years of absence, with-out a kiss; but the poor, soul, hungering and waiting for a loving word or look, unable to believe her great affection powerless to win a return, could not bear this blighting memory. She clung to him, sobbing her full heart on his breast; she kissed him and prayed for him, with her hands on his shoulders, and her streaming eyes on his; she blamed herself, and told him she would be happy till he returned,—the thought of her coming joy would bless her life, and bless and preserve him on the sea. With such words, she let him go.

Firmly and faithfully the loving heart kept this last promise. Months passed, and her lonely home grew very dear to her. Her young heart refused to remember the pain of the past, and would recall day after day, untroublingly, the few poor pleasures of her wedded life. She would not allow herself to think how much often of these pleasures was due to others than her husband to her mother and her old friends.

But all her sorrow died, and her doubt and fear fled away on the day when she took to her yearning, breast the sweet baby that was hers and his. God's eye seemed too full of love that day. The harvest of her young life was the bursting of a flower of exquisite joy. Her baby was a prayer—God had come near to her, and had sent her an angelic presence. Her life for many days was a ceaseless crooning melody of soft happiness, mingled with prayers for her husband absent on the sea.

Then came the lightning, and blasted her fabric of joy, and shrivelled her future life into hopelessness before her face. One moment it rose fair and slightly and splendid; the next, it was scattered at her scorched feet, a pile of blackened and pitiful ruin. O, day of sorrow, would it had been of death!

It was a bright and happy morning, and she sat in her pleasant little room, with the baby in her arms. She had been dreaming awake. She was full of peace and thankfulness for her exceeding joy.

Suddenly, a shadow fell upon her some one had entered the room. She looked up, and met a terrible face—a woman's face, glaring at her and at her child. She could not scream—she was paralyzed with terror. The face was crowded with passion—every dreadful line seemed to possess a voice of wrath and hatred.

Alice had no power to defend herself; but she folded her baby closer to her breast, and looked straight at the dreadful face.

"You think you are his wife!" cried the woman with a laugh of hideous derision. "You think he loves you! You lie! You lie! He loves my husband! He never was yours! He is mine, mine! And he lied to you!"

More was said by the woman—much more; but it all resolved itself into this in Alice's confused memory. Papers the stranger produced, and held before Alice's eyes. She read the written words—they were transferred to her brain in letters of fire. Nearer and nearer came the dreadful woman, and more threatening the insults she heaped upon Alice's face.

She laid her hand on the baby's shoulder, and crushed it, cursing it. Still Alice could not scream. Her heart gave irregular throbs—her brain was beginning to reel. Nearer, still nearer, the hateful face—the words struck her in the eyes like missiles—they sprang like knives at her heart—her body grew weak—the baby fell from her breast and lay upon her knees—O God! the silent agony—the terrible stranger had seized the child—the mother's senses failed—the sunlight grew dark—the sufferer fell unconscious at her enemy's feet.

When she raised her head, after hours of a merciful blank, she was alone—her baby lay dead before her—and the love and trust of her life lay stark and strangled by its side.

What more? Nay, there was no more to be borne. The worst had come. The flaming rocket had spent its last spark in the dark sky—the useless stick was falling to the earth to be forgotten for ever.

Friends? What had they to say? Kindness was dead. Shame had no existence. Sorrow, disgrace, infamy, what had she to do with these? But they had taken her, had seized her as their prey, and she would make no resistance.

With bonds of faith and love and trust and hope, Alice Walmsley's life had been firmly bound to all that was good and happy. The destroyer's knife had severed all these at one merciless sweep; and the separated and desolated heart sank like lead into the abyss of despair.

Then followed a blank—intermixed with turmoil of formal evidence and legal speeches, and voices of clinging friends, who implored her to speak and clear herself of the dreadful charge. At this word, her mind cleared—she looked at and understood her position—and she refused to speak—she would not plead "not guilty"—when charged with killing her own child. Her mother, broken with years and with this affliction, tottered from the rails of the dock, against which she had leant, and sank heart-broken on the floor of the court. She was carried to the open air by weeping strangers,—carried past Alice, who never looked upon her dear face again.

Still she stood silent, tearless, but conscious of every act and relation. Anguish had changed her in one day from a girl into a strong, self-reliant

woman. To her own soul she said: "My life is in ruin—nothing can now increase the burden. If I speak, another will stand here—another who has been wronged as I have been. She was wretched before she became guilty. Let me undergo—let me never see the face of one who knew me, to remind me of the past. Between freedom and memory, and imprisonment and forgetfulness—I choose the latter."

These thoughts never became words in Alice's mind; but this was the mental process which resulted in her silence in the dock. The trial was short—she was found guilty. Then came the solitude and silence of the great prison.

Four white walls, a stone floor, a black iron door, a heavily barred window, through which she looked up at the moon and stars at night and, enclosed within these walls, a young and beautiful girl, a tender heart that had never throbbled with a lawless desire, a conscience so sensitive, and a mind so pure that angels might have communed with her.

Shall not this prisoner find peace in solitude, and golden sermons in the waves of pain? She had been one day and night in Millbank. The severe matron or warden of the pentagon opened her cell-door in the morning, and handed her two books, a Bible and prayer-book.

The window of the cell, outside the bars, was open. Without a word to the warden, the prisoner threw the books out of the open window.

"They are not true; I shall pray no more," she said, not fiercely, but firmly, as they fell into the yard within the pentagon.

She was reported to the authorities. They sent the Bible-reader to pray with her, in the cell, according to the rule laid down for the convict prisons; but she remained silent. They punished her,—for the dreadful word—"Murder" was printed on her door-card; they shut her up in a dark cell for days and weeks, till her eyes dilated and her body shrank under the meagre food. Remember a few weeks before, she was a simple, God-fearing country-girl. Neither prayer nor punishment could bring her into relenting, but only deepened the earnestness of her daily answer: "I shall pray no more."

Her case was brought before the Chief Director, Sir Joshua Hobb. This disciplinary visitor, her dark cell, and, with a harsh "Ho, there!" flashed a brilliant lamp on the entombed wretch. She sat on a low seat in the centre of the dark cell, her face bowed into her hands, perhaps to shut out the painfully sudden glare.

"She won't pray, eh?" said the great reformer, looking at the slight figure that did not move. "We'll see." He evidently took a special interest in the case. An hour later, the prisoner was taken from her cell, and dragged or pushed by two strong female warders till she stood in an arched passage beneath the prison. Her clothing was rudely torn from her shoulders to the waist; her wrists were strapped to staples in the wall; and before her weakened and numbened brain had realized the unspeakable outrage, the lash had swept her delicate flesh into livid stripes.

Then, for one weak moment, her womanhood conquered, and she shrieked, as if in supplication, the name of Him she had so bitterly refused to love—it—but when the mmer of her life had come, she was drenched with affliction and wrong which she had not earned, of the cause of which she was as innocent as her babe, murdered before her eyes. Her heart, hope, love, trust, had been flung down and trampled in the dust.

The alms of prayer that were doled out by the nasal Scripture-readers had long since been carried past her door. They regarded her as hopelessly lost. She never spoke her dissent; but she could see that she did not hear them, that she did not believe them. So they left her to herself.

One day, a man sat in the governor's office with a large book before him, in which he had been carefully reading a page on which had placed his index-finger. "It is a remarkable case," said the governor; "and she certainly is not insane."

"She was not a criminal by association," asked the visitor, closing the book. He was a powerfully built, dark-faced man, with a foreign air, and a deep voice. The studied respect of the governor proved him to be a person of importance. It was Mr. Wyville, who recently arrived in London, and who was visiting the prisons, with authority from the Ministry itself.

"No," said the governor; "she was a village-girl, wife of a sea-captain. Here, at page 42, we find the police reports—see, only one short entry. The police didn't know her."

"She has never defended herself, nor reproached others?" asked Mr. Wyville.

"Never," answered the governor. "She has never spoken about herself."

"It is very strange, and very sad," said Mr. Wyville to the governor. And to himself he murmured, "She must have suffered fearful wrong."

Soon after, in company with the governor, he passed along the corridor, and stopped at Alice Walmsley's cell. The warden opened the door. Mr. Wyville did not look at the prisoner, but walked across the cell, as if observing the window bars, upon which he laid his hand.

"The iron is covered with rust," he said to the governor. "The windows of this range certainly need repainting."

Then apparently looking around in the same practical way, Mr. Wyville remained, perhaps, a minute in the cell. He had scarcely turned his eyes on the prisoner; yet the mute intensity of her face had sunk into his heart.

"She has been terribly wronged," he repeated to himself, as he left the prison. "God help her! she is very young to be so calm."

When Mr. Wyville emerged from the prison arch, he walked rapidly along the river toward Westminster. He was in deep thought. He proceeded a little distance, then stopped, and looked down on the turbid stream, as if undecided. This was not the usual calm deliberateness of his conduct. He was evidently perplexed and troubled. After pausing a while, he looked at his watch, and then retraced his steps passed Millbank, and walked on in the direction of Chelsea.

It was an old habit of his to solve difficult questions as he walked; and he selected a quiet suburb, with streets leading into the country roads. In the streets, there was nothing very noticeable about the man, except his athletic stride and deeply bronzed face. He might be classed by the passing observer as a naval officer who had served many years in Southern latitudes, or as a foreign captain. His dress had something of the sailor about its style and cloth. But it is the inner man who interests us: let us follow the burden of his thought.

"Remorse does not end in this calmness unless the prisoner be insane. Her mind is clear; she is not melancholy; she is self-possessed and firm. Her health has not suffered. Yet she has abandoned belief in man's truth and God's mercy. She does not claim that she is innocent; she makes no defence and no charge; she accepts her punishment without a complaint. These are not the symptoms of remorse or guilt. She has abandoned prayer; she deliberately shuts out the past and the future. Yet she is in all other respects obedient, industrious, and kind. There is only one explanation of these contradictions—she is innocent, and she has suffered terrible wrong."

Mr. Wyville did not return to his house till late in the evening. He had walked for hours; and as he went, he had unravelled, with infinite patience, the psychological network that had troubled him. He had come to a decision. Two days after his visit to the prison, Alice Walmsley sat in her cell, sewing tirelessly. The morning had opened like all the other mornings of her imprisonment; there was nothing new, nothing to suggest a new train of thought.

Some one who walked along the corridor about 10 o'clock had seemed to hesitate a moment at her cell, and then had passed on. The governor, she thought, who had glanced through the watch-gate.

In the wall of every cell there was a minute hole, about two inches square on the exterior, cut in the solid stone. The opening, which the grey wide towards the interior of the cell, was in the shape of a wedge. A warden outside could see a large part of the cell, while the prisoner could only see the eye of the warden. As the officers wore woollen slippers, they could observe the prisoners without being heard or seen.

At this opening, Alice Walmsley thought, the governor had stopped as he passed, and had looked into her cell. It was not unusual. A few minutes later she paused in her work, almost impatiently, and tried to put away from her an unwelcome thought. After a short pause she renewed her sewing, working rapidly for a few minutes; and then she laid the coarse cloth aside, and buried her face in her hands.

She was thinking of her old life, of her old self; she had tried to escape from it, but could not. For years she had separated the past and the present until she had actually come to think of herself as two beings—one who had been happy, and who was dead—the other, living, but separated from all the world—alone, with neither memories nor hopes, neither past nor future.

Yet to-day, without apparent cause, the two selves had drawn together—the happy Alice had come beseechingly to the unhappy one.

For an hour she remained motionless, her face bowed in her hands. Then she raised her head, but she did not renew her work. She stood up, and walked across the cell, and re-crossed it, in the rapid way of restless prisoners; but on the second passage, she stood still, with a bewildered air. Her eyes had caught a gleam of bright color in the opening of the watch-gate. There was a flower in her cell!

She trembled as she reached her hand to take it. She did not try to recover her dispassionate calmness. She took it in her hand and raised it to her lips slowly, and kissed it. It was a sweet rosebud, with two young leaves. She had not seen a flower nor heard a bird sing since she left her own little garden.

This tender thing had stolen inside her guard. Its sweet fragrance, before she knew of its presence, had carried her mind back to the happy days of her girlhood. She kept the flower to her lips, kissing it. She fed her wistful eyes on its beauty. She had been so long without emotion, she had so carefully repressed the first promptings of imagination, that her heart had become thirsty unto death for some lovely or lovable thing. This sweet young flower took for her all forms of beauty. As she gazed on it, her soul drank in its delicious breath, like a soft and sensuous music; its perfect coloring filled her with still another delight; its youth, its form, its promise, the rich green of the two leaves, its exquisite com-

pleteness, made a very sympathy for the desolate heart.

Two hours passed, and still she fondled the precious gift. She had not once thought of how the flower had come into her cell.

"You are pleased at last, Number Four," said a female warden, who had been looking into Alice's cell.

Number Four raised her eyes from the flower, and looked silently her answer. For the first time in five years, the warden said that her eyes were flooded with tears.

TO BE CONTINUED

A COMPLETE SURRENDER

"A Catholic!" almost screamed Mrs. Sharp.

"Hector, my dear, let me speak," pleaded the rector, slowly and rather pompously. "Hector, am I to understand that you have chosen to abandon the Church of your baptism?" he demanded, and there was that in the old man's voice that made the boy expect no leniency from his father.

"If I was baptized, father, then I am but returning to the Church of my baptism," he replied, low but firmly.

The rector's wife set her lips together till all the flesh about them was white. "Romanist ranting," she snapped, jerking them asunder for an instant. Then she closed them again like a steel trap.

The boy looked at her appealingly. He was a handsome fellow, about twenty years of age, with dark hair that curled about a white brow and a firm jaw that he inherited from his mother.

She refused to see the pleading in his eyes, and turned from him a little under pretext of seeing better to pick up a dropped stitch.

"You, too, mother?" he murmured reproachfully, taking a low seat near her and stooping to recover the ball of wool that she had let fall.

She did not answer him, and for a moment there was silence. The rector walked slowly back and forth with his hands behind his back, an old trick of his when perplexed. Except for the soft patter of his slipper-shod feet, there was no sound. To the boy it seemed as though they and all the teeming millions of the neighboring city must hear the beating of his heart. He was too numbed to pray—he could only suffer.

This house had been his home all his life. The rector of St. Stephen's was his father; the rectress was his mother, his mild, indulgent, almost worshipping mother, and he was her only son, her only child, and it was Christmas eve. Father Wentworth had hidden him lose no time in telling his parents of his change of faith, but the boy could not help remembering it was Christmas eve.

He might have waited just one day more perhaps. Then he flung the temptation from him with a gesture that the mother knew well. She had watched him throw back his head with just such an air since babyhood and run his hands through his curls just so. She was almost softened, but, much as she loved her son, she hated the Catholic Church more, with a straightforward, unreasoning hatred, engendered by early education and fostered through years of prejudice. The boy rose. He could bear the tension no longer. "Father," he pleaded, laying his hand timidly on the rector's arm.

The old man stopped in his walk. At that moment the bells of St. Stephen's Church broke into a peal, for it was nearing midnight. And then the chorister boys and girls came up the little graveled path, as they had done every year for longer than the rector could remember, and sang the same old carols that had been handed down to Protestant England from the ages of faith.

Hector turned away. This last thrust was like a sword in his heart. It was home, the home of his babyhood, and now—"There was no room for them in the inn." For some unexplained reason the words flashed across his mind, and he breathed an aspiration. The answer came quickly in a further trial.

The rector had gone to his desk, and now he advanced holding a bank-note in his hand. "You will think better of this, Hector," he faltered. "Until that time you will leave this house. You shall not be able to say I sent you forth penniless on Christmas eve. Here is sufficient for your present needs. You can seek for work, and if you do not find it, send a note to me at the bank. You are my son, and I will not suffer you to starve, but I will not see you again until you have changed your mind. Till then you are dead to us."

The boy's first impulse was to decline the offered money. He made a gesture of refusal, but remembered in time that his father was suffering, too, and restrained himself. "As a loan," he said unsteadily, and the rector inclined his head in token of acquiescence.

"As a loan, as you say, if you prefer it, Hector. Think not that I am harsh in this; my position will not permit me to act otherwise. How could I stand before my congregation knowing that I was countenancing wrong? Persuasions are of no avail, and would only pain us both. I had hoped—but, there, it is but one more disappointment. Go—go quickly!" He turned away and seated himself before his desk, with his face hidden in his hands. The boy turned to speak a word of farewell to his mother, and she was gone. She must have stolen out to avoid the leave-taking he thought as he slipped into his overcoat that hung in the hall.

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