

MOONDYNE JOE

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE

CHAPTER IX

A DARK NIGHT AND DAY

The old chief led the way from the gold mine; and the strangely assorted group of five persons sat by the fire while meat was cooked for the travellers.

The youth who had escorted the white man from the water valley was the grandson of the chief, and brother of the beautiful girls. Savages they were elder and girls, in the eyes of the sergeant; but there was a thoughtfulness in Te-mana-roa, bred by the trust of treasure and the supreme confidence of his race, that elevated him to an exalted plane of manhood; and the young people had much of the same quiet and dignified bearing.

The revelations of the day had been too powerful for the small brain of the cunning trooper. They came before his memory piecemeal. He longed for an opportunity to think them over, to get them into grasp, and to plan his course of action.

The splendid secret must be his own, and he must overreach all who would to-morrow put conditions on his escape. While meditating this, the lovely form of one of the girls, observed by his evil eye as she bent over the fire, suggested a scheme, and before the meal was finished, the sergeant had worked far on the road of success.

The chief and Moondyne talked long in the native language. The sisters, wrapped in soft furs, sat and listened, their large eyes fixed on the face of the Moondyne, their keen senses enjoying a novel pleasure as they heard their familiar words strangely sounded on his lips.

To their simple minds the strongly marked white face must have appeared almost superhuman, known as it had long been to them by hearsay and the unqualified affection of their people.

Their girlhood was on the verge of something fuller; they felt a new and delicious joy in listening to the deep musical tones of the Moondyne. They had long heard how strong and brave he was; they saw that he was gentle when he spoke to them and the old chief. When he addressed them, it seemed that the same thrill of pleasure touched the hearts and lighted the faces of both sisters.

One outside, and two here," was the dread burden of the sergeant's thought. "Two days' ride—but, can I be sure of the way?"

Again and again his furtive eyes turned on the ardent faces of the girls.

"Ay, that will do," he thought, "these can be used to help me out." The sisters retired to a tent of skins, and, lighting a fire at the opening to drive off the evil spirit, lay down to rest. Sleep came slowly to every member of the party.

The old chief pondered on the presence of the stranger, who now held the primal secret of the native race.

The sergeant revolved his plans, going carefully over every detail of the next day's work, foreseeing and providing for every difficulty with devilish ingenuity.

The sisters lay in dreamy wakefulness, hearing again the deep musical voice, and seeing in the darkness the strange white face of the Moondyne.

Before sleeping, Moondyne walked into the valley, and lifting his face to heaven, in simple and manful directness, thanked God for his deliverance; then, stretching himself beside the fire, he fell into a profound sleep.

In the morning, Moondyne spoke to Koro and Te-pairu in their own tongue, which was not guttural on their lips. They told him, with much earnest gesture and flashing of eyes, about the emu's nest in the valley beyond the lake, and other such things as made up their daily life. Their steps were light about the camp that morning.

At an early hour the old man entered the gold mine, and did not return. To look after the horses, Moondyne, with the girls, crossed the valley, and then went up the mountain toward the emu's nest.

The sergeant, with bloodshot eyes from a sleepless night, had hung around the camp all the morning, feeling that, though his presence seemed unneeded, he was in the deepest thought of all.

Whatever his purpose, it was settled now. There was dark meaning in the look that followed Moondyne and the girls till they disappeared on the wooded mountain. When at last they were out of sight and hearing, he arose sullenly, and moved toward the mouth of the mine.

At that moment, the young bushman from the outpost emerged from the pass, and walked rapidly to the fire, looking around inquiringly for Moondyne and the girls.

As the sergeant explained in dumb show that they had gone up the mountain yonder, there rose a gleam of hideous satisfaction in his eyes. The danger he had dreaded most had come to his hand to be destroyed. All through the night he had heard the whirr of a spear from an unseen hand, and he shuddered at the danger of riding through the pass to escape.

But there was no other course open. Were he to cross the mountains he knew that without a guide he never could reach the penal colony.

Had the sage Te-mana-roa been present, he would at once have sent the bushman back to his duty. But the youth had drawn his spear from the dead tree at the outpost, and he proceeded to harden again its injured point in the embers of the fire.

The sergeant, who had carelessly sauntered around the fire till he stood behind the bushman, now took a stride toward him, then suddenly stopped.

Had the native looked around at the moment, he would have seen his spear through the stranger's heart as swiftly as he drove it into the tuad yesterday. There was murder in the sergeant's face as he took the silent stride, and paused, his hand on his pistol.

"Not with this," he muttered, "no noise with him. But this will do."

He stooped for a heavy club, and with a few quick and stealthy paces stood over the bushman. Another instant, and the club descended with crushing violence. Without a sound but the deadly blow, the quivering body fell backward on the assassin's feet.

Rapidly he moved in his terrible work. He crept by the entrance of the mine, and far within saw the old man moving before the flame. Pistol in hand he entered the cavern, from which, before many minutes had passed, he came forth white-faced. As he stepped from the cave, he turned a backward glance of fearful import. He saw that he had left the light burning behind him.

Warily scanning the mountain side, he dragged the body of the youth inside the mouth of the cavern, then, seating himself by the fire he examined his pistols, and awaited the return of Moondyne and the girls.

In the sweet peace of the valley, the livid and anxious wretch seemed the impersonation of crime. He had meditated the whole night on his purpose. All he feared was partial failure. But he had provided for every chance; he had more than half succeeded already. Another hour, and he would be sole master of the treasure—and with the sisters in his power, there was no fear of failure.

It was a terrible hour to wait; but at last he saw them coming, the lithe figures of the girls winding among the trees as they crossed the valley.

But they were alone: Moondyne was not with them!

They came with bent faces, as if thinking of pleasant things; but they started with affright, and drew close together, when they saw the stranger, alone, rise from the fire and come toward them.

With signs, he asked for Moondyne, and they answered that he had gone across the mountain, and would return when the sun had gone down.

This was an ominous disappointment; but the sergeant knew that his life would not be worth one day's purchase with such an enemy behind him. He must wait.

He returned to the fire, the girls keeping distrustfully distant. He feared they might enter the mine, and too soon discover the dreadful secret; so, getting between them and the rock, he lay down at the entrance.

Like startled deer, the girls looked around, instinctively feeling that danger was near. The evil eyes of the sergeant never left them. He had not foreseen this chance, and for the moment knew not how to proceed.

The sisters stood near the fire, alarmed, alert, the left hand of one in the right of the other. At length their quick eyes fell upon blood on the sand, and followed the track till they met again the terrible face at the mouth of the mine.

And, as they looked, a sight beyond strange white face of the Moondyne, a man, coming from the dark entrance, froze their hearts with terror.

The face of the aged chief, his white hair discolored with blood, appeared above the dreadful watcher, and looked out toward the girls. The old man who had dragged his wounded body from the cave, rose to his feet when he saw the sisters, tottered forward with a cry of warning, and fell across the murderer.

Paralyzed with horror, the sergeant could not move for some moments. But soon feeling that he was not attacked, he pushed aside the senseless body, and sprang to his feet with a terrible malediction. In that moment of his blind terror, the girls had disappeared.

He ran hither and thither searching for them; but found no trace of their hiding-place or path of escape. At length he gave up the search, a shivering dread growing upon him every instant, and hastened to catch the horses. He began to realize that his well-laid plan was a failure.

There was now only one course open. He must take his chance alone, and ride for his life, neither resting nor sleeping. The girls would run straight to Moondyne; and he must act speedily to get beyond his reach.

In a few minutes the horses were ready, standing at the entrance of the mine. The sergeant entered, and, passing the flaming basin, loaded himself with bars and plates of gold. Again and again he returned, till the horses were laden with treasure.

Then, mounting he called the dogs; but they had gone with Moondyne.

Once more the chill of fear struck like an icicle through his heart at its utter loneliness. Leading the spare horse by the bridle, he rode headlong into the ravine and disappeared.

CHAPTER X

ON THE TRAIL

It was evening, and the twilight was gray in the little valley, when Moondyne reached the camp. He was surprised to find the place deserted. He had expected a welcome—had been thinking, perhaps, of the glad faces that would greet him as he approached the fire. But the fire was black, the embers were cold. He looked and saw that there was no light in the gold mine.

A dreadful presentiment grew upon him. A glance for the saddles, and another across the valley, and he knew that the horses were gone. Following the strange action of the dogs, he strode toward the cave, and there, at the entrance, read the terrible story.

The sight struck this strange convict like a physical blow. His limbs failed him, and his body sank till he knelt on the sand at the mouth of the mine. He felt no wrath, but only crushing self-accusation.

"God forgive me!" was the intense cry of heart and brain. "God forgive me for this crime!"

The consequence of his fatal selfishness crushed him; and the outstretched arms of the old chief, whose unconsciousness, for he was not dead, was fearfully like death, seemed to call down curses on the destroyer of his people.

The years of his life went miserably down before Moondyne till he grovelled in the desolation of his dismal abasement. A ban had followed him and blighted all he had touched.

Years were pressed into minutes as he crouched beside the maimed bodies of his friends. The living man lay as motionless as the dead.

The strong mind brought up the whole scene for judgment. His inward eye saw the fleeing murderer; but he felt more of pity for the wretch than of vengeance. The entire sensibility of Moondyne was concentrated in the line of his own conscience. Himself accused himself,—and should the criminal condemn another?

When at last he raised his face, with a new thought of duty, the trace of the unutterable hour was graven upon him in deep lines.

Where were the sisters? Had they been sacrificed too? By the moonlight he searched the valley; he entered the cave, and called through all its passages. It was past midnight when he gave up the search and stood alone in the desolate place.

In the loose sand of the valley he scooped a grave, to which he carried the body of the young bushman, and buried it. When this was done he proceeded to perform a like office for Te-mana-roa, but looking toward the cave he was startled at the sight of the sisters, one of whom, Koro, stood aided by an extremely old woman, was tending on the almost dying chief, whose consciousness was slowly returning.

Benumbed and silent, Moondyne approached the cave. The girl who had watched him shrank back to the others. Te-pairu, the younger sister, rose and faced the white man with a threatening aspect. She pointed her finger toward the pass.

"Go!" she said, sternly, in her own tongue.

Moondyne paused and looked at her. "Begone!" she cried still pointing; and once again came the words, "begone, accursed!"

Remorse had strangled grief in Moondyne's breast, or the agony of the girl, uttered in this terrible reproach, would have almost killed him. Accursed she said, and he knew that the word was true.

He turned from the place, not toward the pass, but toward the mountains, and walked on from the valley with an aimless purpose, and a heart filled with ashes.

For hours he held steadily on, heedless of direction. He marked no places—had no thoughts—only the one gnawing and consuming presence of the ruin he had wrought.

The dogs followed him, tired and spiritless. The moon sank, and the sun rose, and still the lonely man held his straight and aimless road,—across mountains and through ravines, until at last his consciousness was recalled as he recognized the valley in which days before, on the way to the gold mine.

Stretching his exhausted body on a sheltered bank beside a stream, he fell into a deep sleep that lasted many hours.

He awoke with a start, as if a voice had called him. In an instant his brow was set and his mind determined. He glanced at the sun to settle his direction, and then walked slowly across the valley, intently observing a hundred paces he stopped suddenly, turned at right angles down the valley, and strode on with a purpose, that though rapidly, almost instantaneously formed, had evidently taken full possession of his will.

Sometimes persons of keen sensibility lie down to sleep with a trouble on the mind, and an unsettled purpose, and wake in the night to find the brain clear and the problem solved. From this process of unconscious cerebration Moondyne awoke with a complete and settled resolution.

There could be no doubt of the determination in his mind. He had struck the trail of the murderer.

There was no more indirection or hesitation in his manner. He settled down to the pursuit with a grim and terrible earnestness. His purpose was clear before him—to stop the devil he had let loose—to prevent the escape of the assassin—to save the people who had trusted and saved him.

He would not turn from this intent though the track led him to the prison gate of Fremantle; and even there, in the face of the guards, he would slay the wretch before he had betrayed the secret.

Death is on the trail of every man; but we have grown used to him, and heed him not. Crime and Sin are

following us—will surely find us out, and some day will open the cowl and show us the death's-head. But more terrible than these Fates, because more physically real, is the knowledge ever present that a relentless human enemy is on our track.

Through the silent passes of the hills, he heard a storm of fears and hopes, the sergeant fled toward security. Every mile added to the light ahead. He rode wildly and without rest—rode all day and into the night, and would still have hurried on, but the horses failed and must have rest.

He fed and watered them, watching with feverish eyes the renewal of their strength; and as he watched them eat, the wretched man fell into a sleep, from which he started in terror, fearful that the pursuer was upon him.

Through the day and night, depending on his great strength, Moondyne followed. While the fugitive rested, he strode on, and he knew by instinct and observation that he was gaining in the race.

Every hour the tracks were fresher. On the morning of the second day, he had found the sand still moist where the horses had drunk from a stream. On the evening of that day he passed the burning camp of a fire. The murderer was gaining confidence, and taking longer rest.

The third day came with a revelation to Moondyne. The sergeant had lost the way—had turned from the valley that led toward the Settlement, and had sealed his doom by choosing one that reached toward the impenetrable deserts of the interior.

The pursuer was not stayed by the discovery. To the prison or the wilderness, should the track lead, he would follow.

At first the new direction was pleasant. Dim woods on either side of a stream, the banks fringed with verdure and pranked with bright flowers. But like the pleasant ways of life, the tempting valley led to the desolate plains; before night had closed, pursuer and pursued were far from the hills and streams, in the midst of a treeless sea of sand.

Nothing but fear of death could drive the sergeant forward. He was a bushman enough to know the danger of being lost on the plains. But he dared not return to meet him whom he knew was hunting him down.

There was but one chance before him, and this was to tire out the pursuer—if, as his heart suggested, there was only one in pursuit—to lead him farther and farther into the desert, till he fell on the barren track and died.

It was sore travelling for horse and man under the blazing sun, with no food nor water save what he pressed from the pith of the palms, and even these were growing scarce. The only life on the plains was the hard and dusty scrub. Every hour brought a more hopeless and grislier desolation.

How was it with Moondyne? The strong will still upheld him. He knew he had gained till they took to the plain; but he also knew that here the mounted man had the advantage. Every day the track was less distinct, and he suffered more and more from thirst. The palms he passed had been opened by the sergeant, and he had to leave the trail to find one untouched.

The sun flamed in the bare sky, and the sand was so hot that the air hung above it in a tremendous haze. In the woods the dogs had brought him food; but no living thing was to be hunted on the plains. He had lived two days on the pith of the palms.

On the third day Moondyne with difficulty found the sand trail, which had been blown over by the night breeze. He had slept on the sheltered desert, and had dreamt of wells of water as the light dew fell on his parched body.

This day he was quite alone. The dogs, suffering from thirst, had deserted him in the night.

He began the day with a firm heart but an unsteady step. There was not a palm in sight. It was hot noon before he found a small scrub to moisten his throat and lips.

But to-day, he thought, he must come face to face with the villain, and would kill him like a wild beast on the desert; and the thought upheld him.

His head was bare and his body nearly naked. Another man would have fallen senseless under the cruel sun; but Moondyne did not even rest—as the day passed he did not seem to need rest.

It was strange how pleasant, how like a dream, part of that day appeared. Sometimes he seemed to be awake, and to know that he was moving over the sand, and with a dread purpose; but at these times he knew that the trail had disappeared—that he was blindly going forward, lost on the wilderness. Toward evening the cool breeze creeping over the sand dispelled the dreams and made him mercilessly conscious.

The large red sun was standing on the horizon of sand, and an awful shadow seemed waiting to fall upon the desert.

When the sun had gone down, and the wanderer looked at the stars, there came to him a new thought, like a friend, with a grave but not unkind face—a vast and solemn thought, that held him for a long time with upraised face and hands, as if it had been whispered from the deep quiet sky. Slowly he walked with his new communion, and when he saw before him in the moonlight two palms, he did not rush to cut them open, but stood beside them smiling. Opening one, at length, he took the morsel of pith, and ate, and slept.

How sweet it was to wake up and see the wide sky studded with golden stars—to feel that there were no bonds any more, nor hopes, nor heart-burnings.

The Divine Thought that had come to him the day before was with him still—grave and kindly, and now, they two were so utterly alone, it seemed almost to smile. He raised his body and knelt upon the sand, looking upward, and all things seemed closing quietly in upon him, as if coming to a great rest, and he would have lain down on the sand at peace—but a cry, a human-like cry, startled him into wakefulness—surely it was a cry!

It was clear and near and full of suffering. Surely, he had heard—he had dreamt of such a cry. Again—God! how near and how keen it was—from the darkness—a cry of mortal agony!

With a tottering step Moondyne ran toward the woful sound. He saw by the moonlight a dark object on the sand. The long weak cry hurried him on, till he stood beside the poor throat whence it came, and was smote with pity at the dismal sight.

On the sand lay two horses, chained at the neck—one dead, the other dying in an agony of thirst and imprisonment. Beside the dead he had fallen from the saddle, lay a man, seemingly dead, but whose glazing eyes turned with hideous suffering as Moondyne approached. The wretched being was powerless to free himself from the fallen horse, and upon his body, and all around him, were scattered heavy bars and plates of gold.

Moondyne loosed the chain from the suffering horse, that struggled to its feet, ran forward a few yards, and fell dead on the sand. The dead man's eyes met, and the blistered lips of the sergeant—for it was he—moved in piteous appeal. Moondyne paused one stern moment, then turned and ran from the place—ran toward the palm near which he had slept. With hasty hand he tore it open and cut out the pith, and sped back to the sufferer. He knelt down, and squeezed the precious moisture into the mouth of the dying man—the man whom he had followed into the desert to kill like a wild beast.

All the last drop was gone, he pressed the young wood. Then the guilty wretch raised his eyes and looked at Moondyne—the glazed eyes grew bright, and brighter, till a tear rose within them, and rolled down the stained and sin-lined face. The baked lips moved, and the weak hands were raised imploringly. The sergeant fell back dead.

Moondyne knew that his last breath was contrition, and his last dumb cry, "Pardon."

Then, too, the strength faded from the limbs, and the light from the eyes of Moondyne—and as he sank to the earth, the great Thought that had come to him filled his heart with peace—and he lay unconscious beside the sufferer.

The sun rose on the desert, but the sleeper did not move. Before the day was an hour old, other forms rapidly crossed the plain—not wanderers, but fierce, skin-clad men, in search of vengeance.

They flung themselves from their horses when they reached the scene; and one, throwing himself upon the body of the sergeant, sprang back with a guttural cry of wrath and disappointment, which was echoed by the savage party.

Next moment, one of the natives, stopping to lay his hand on the heart of the Moondyne, uttered an excited call. The spearman crowded around, and one poured water from a skin on the face and body of the senseless man.

They raised him to the arms of a strong runner, while another took the reins, and the wild party struck off at a full gallop towards the mountains.

When Moondyne returned to consciousness, many days after his rescue, he was free from pursuit, he had cut forever the bond of Penal Colony; above him bent the deep eyes and kind faces of the old chief and the sisters, Koro and Te-pairu, and around him were the hills that shut in the Valley of the Vasse Gold Mine.

He closed his eyes again and seemed to sleep for a little while. Then he looked up and met the face of Te-mana-roa kindly watching him. "I am free!" he only said. Then turning to the sisters: "I am not accursed," and Koro and Te-pairu answered with kind smiles.

TO BE CONTINUED

BEYOND THE LAW

"I have no hesitation in saying," Judge Brady remarked after a long pause, "that Biggins is a most remarkable character. Everybody concedes his crookedness; I shouldn't be surprised if he admits it himself. Yet—"

And the old man shrugged his shoulders. "Yet he's never caught with the goods, eh?" The District Attorney completed the sentence. "Well, that's right. He hasn't been caught—yet."

A smile flickered over the Judge's pale, finely-lined face. "Am I to assume that you think yourself capable of turning the trick, Mr. Calderlynn? You young men are so dreadfully sure of yourselves. Remember, big men and brainy men and resolute men have tried to get Biggins, and failed."

Calderlynn chuckled and knocked the ashes from his cigar. "Oh, I remember all right, Judge Brady. But I act occasionally, too. I've been watching Biggins closely for months. I've got his record."

"But getting Biggins' record isn't getting Biggins." The Judge leaned back in his morris chair with half-closed eyes. "For ten years that man has been at his tricks in this town, but he has never been guilty of a technical offence. He has never absolutely sinned against the letter of the law. He's too clever a rascal for you, I'm afraid."

"Well, you needn't worry. This time I've got him; and Biggins will get just about what's been coming to him for the last ten years."

Judge Brady's eyes opened slowly in tolerant, amused surprise. "It's a sure thing," Calderlynn continued enthusiastically. "You know about my frame-up for the Fundamental people? Well, Biggins is involved. Whenever there's any dirty work on foot, that man has a perfect genius for being involved."

The District Attorney pulled his chair closer and tapped lightly on the desk. "I trapped the Fundamental crowd the first thing this morning. I showed my hand, and maybe old man Black didn't pull out of the game! And he's handed all the trouble over to Biggins. I've got inside info, and I know."

"Here's the proposition Black put up to Biggins. Biggins gets \$50,000 in cold cash and deposits it safely in any bank of his choice. No matter what happens, that will be his, understand? Then Biggins will let himself be caught giving a bribe to a dummy depositor in the Fundamental. He'll plead guilty. He's counting on the Burton gang to get him off; but I've got the number of the Burton gang. So in less than two months, Biggins will be working in the jute-mill at the State penitentiary."

"You seem very positive about it, Mr. Calderlynn."

"I am very positive." The District Attorney lowered his voice. "We did a little tinkering last night in Black's private office. As a result there's a stenographer in the room below, with one of those new-fangled Edison aurophones, taking down every word uttered at the meeting with Biggins this afternoon. And at the proper moment—just when Black is handing over the money—piff goes the flash-light, and—"

"And then the rest is silence."

Calderlynn toyed complacently with his closely-trimmed mustache. "The rest, Judge Brady, will be the biggest newspaper sensation of the decade. Young Enright of The Investigator is on the job, and I expect to hear from him at any minute. I told him to come up here."

A long silence followed. The rain beat heavily against the windows and an auto-horn wailed spasmodically in the street below. The Judge's cigar burned out unheeded.

"I'm sorry," said Judge Brady, half to himself.

"For Biggins?" snorted Calderlynn. "Why, that man—"

The Judge raised his hand. "I'm not thinking of Biggins. You could hardly expect me to feel much sympathy for Biggins. The man has been crooked since the day he finished at law school. But the unfortunate circumstance is that in all these cases the innocent are dragged down with the guilty. I was thinking of Biggins' wife."

"I don't know anything about his wife."

"Well, I do. I've known her for years. I knew her before she was married. She was—and is—a grand woman, Calderlynn. How such girls as Margaret Rowe marry such men as Jimmie Biggins is the perennial enigma. But they do."

The Judge lit a fresh cigar and smoked slowly in silence. His glance fell upon the rows of familiar books ranged against the opposite wall. And he remembered that even to those silent and sagacious friends representing the best and highest thought of all the ages—the mating of human beings was an enigma, too. Shakespeare and Browning, Dante and Leopardi, Moliere and Racine, Kant and Goethe, all had luminous comments to make on the all absorbing drama of life; masters all, they had taught the Judge much concerning men and women. But, while telling of the loves that have strewn history and romance with roses red and white, they contented themselves with picturing the facts and the fancies, never imparting the hows and the whys. The perennial enigma—that was the door to which was found no key.

Manners, Judge Brady's well-oided and faultlessly running man glided into the library.

"Mr. Enright."

"Now you'll hear how it worked, Judge Brady," declared Calderlynn, a note of triumph booming in his history and romance with roses red and white, they contented themselves with picturing the facts and the fancies, never imparting the hows and the whys. The perennial enigma—that was the door to which was found no key.

"Enright was back of the camera, you know, and in touch with the stenographer. I wonder what kind of an act Biggins pulled off when he found himself trapped."

"I wonder," echoed the Judge, his eyes fixed dreamily on the bookcases. Young Mr. Enright did not assume the stride of the conquering hero. He almost slunk across the carpet, briefly saluted the Judge and slowly seated himself in the chair behind the desk. He looked tired and chagrined.

"Well?" asked Calderlynn impatiently.

Enright shook his head. "There's no story, Mr. Calderlynn." Calderlynn sprang to his feet. "You mean—?"

"I mean there's nothing doing. I mean our little three-ringed circus didn't come off. I mean money refunded at the box-office." And

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