

MOONDYNE.

THE GOLD MINE OF THE VASSE.

"But what did he answer?" asked the eager crowd.

"He never said a word; but he laid his finger on his lips, like this, and waved his hand as if he warned me to go back to the camp. I turned to go; then I looked back once, and he was standing just as I left him, but he was looking up at the sky, as if there was some't in the moon that pleased him."

The convicts worked silently, each thinking on what he had heard. "He might have been afraid, though," said low bowed Dave; "I'd let them cut my tongue out before I'd sell the Moondyne."

"That's true," said several of the gang, and many kind looks were given to Terrel. A strong bond of sympathy, it was evident, existed between these men and the person of whom they spoke.

A sound from the thick bush interrupted the conversation. The convicts looked up from their work, and beheld a strange procession approaching from the direction of the swamp. It consisted of about a dozen or fifteen persons, most of whom were savages. In front rode two officers of the Convict Service, a sergeant, and a private trooper, side by side, with drawn swords; and between their horses, manacled by the wrists to their stirrups, walked a white man. "Here they come," hissed Terrel, with a bitter scaldation, his low brow wholly disappearing into a terrible ridge above his eyes. "They haven't killed him, after all. O master, what a pity it is to see a man like Moondyne in that plight!"

"He's done for two or three of 'em," muttered another, in a tone of grim satisfaction. "Look at the leads behind. I know he wouldn't be taken this time like a cornered cur."

Following the prisoner came a troop of "natives," as the aboriginal bushmen are called, bearing three spearswood litter with the bodies of wounded men. A villainous-looking savage, mounted on a troop-horse, brought up the rear. His dress was like that of his pedestrian fellows, upon whom, however, he looked in disdain—a short tunic, or cloak of kangaroo-skin, and a belt of twisted fur cords round his naked body. In addition he had a police-trooper's old cap, and a heavy regulation revolver stuck in his belt.

This was the trickier, the human blood-hound, used by the troopers to follow the trail of absconding prisoners.

When the troopers neared the convict-party, the sergeant, a man of a natural expression, whatever it might have been was wholly obliterated by a frightful scowl across his face, and spat silently in a group. The wounded men moaned as the litters were lowered.

Dave Terrel brought the water. He handed a panikin to the sergeant, and another to the private trooper, and fillet a third.

"Who's that for?" harshly demanded the sergeant.

"For Moondyne," said the convict, approaching the chained man, whose neck was stretched towards the brimming cup.

"Stand back, curse you!" said the sergeant, holding his sword flat on the convict's forehead. "That scoundrel needs no drink."

There was a taut in the tone, even beneath the brutality of his words.

"Carry your pal to those litters," growled the sinister-looking sergeant, "and keep your mouth closed if you value your hide. There!" he said in a suppressed voice, flinging the wet drops he had left in the face of the manacled man, "that's water enough for you, till you reach Bunbury prison to-morrow."

The head of the prisoner hardly changed. He gave one straight look into the sergeant's eyes, then turned away, and seemed to look far away through the bush. He was a remarkable being as he stood there. In strength and proportion of body the man was magnificent—a model for a gladiator. He was of middle height, young, but so stern and massive by features, and so browned and bearded by exposure, it was hard to determine his age. His clothing was only a few torn and bloody rags; but he looked as if his natural garb were utter nakedness or the bulwark's cloak, so loosely and carelessly hung the shreds of cloth on his hunched body. A large, finely shaped head, with crisp, black hair and beard, a broad, square forehead, and an air of power and self-command,—this was the prisoner, this was Moondyne Joe.

Who or what was the man? An escaped convict? What had he been? Perhaps a robber or a mutineer, or maybe he had killed a man in the white heat of passion; no one knew—no one cared to know.

That question is never asked in the penal colony. No case there. They have found bottom, where all steps equal. No envy there, no rivalry, no greed nor ambition, and no escape from companionship. They constitute the purest democracy on earth. The only distinction to be won—that of being trustworthy, solid and true. The good man is he who is kind and true; the bad man is he who is capable of betraying a confederate.

It is by no means in the superior strata of society that abound the strong, true natures, the men that may be depended upon, the primitive rocks of humanity. The complexities of social life

beget cunning and artificiality. Among penal convicts there is no ground for envy, ambition, or pretense; nothing to be gained by falsehood in any shape.

But all this time the prisoner stands looking away into the bush, with the drops of insult trickling from his strong face. His self-command evidently irritated the brutal officer, who, perhaps, expected to hear him whine for better treatment.

The sergeant dismounted to examine the handcuffs, and while doing so, looked into the man's face with a leer of cruel exultation. He drew no expression from the steady eyes of the prisoner.

There was an old score to be settled between those men, and it was plain that each knew the metal of the other.

"I'll break that look," said the sergeant between his teeth, but loud enough for the prisoner's ear; "curse you, 'I'll break it before we reach Fremantle.'" Soon after he turned away, to look to the wounded men.

While so engaged, the private trooper made a furtive sign to the convict with the hand, and he, keeping in shade of the horse, crept up and gave Moondyne a deep drink of the precious water.

The stern lines withdrew from the prisoner's mouth and forehead; and as he gave the kindly trooper a glance of gratitude, there was something strangely gentle and winning in the face.

The sergeant returned and mounted. The litters were raised by the natives, and the parties resumed their march, striking in on the new road that led to the prison.

"May the lightning split him," hissed black-browed Dave, after the sergeant. "There's not an officer in the colony will strike a prisoner without cause, except that coward, and he was a convict himself."

"May the Lord in his Moondyne Joe this day," said another, "be he chained to the stirrup of the only man living that hates him."

The sympathizing gang looked after the party till they were hidden by a bend of the road; but they were silent under the eye of their warder.

III. NUMBER 406. Some years before, the prisoner, now called Moondyne Joe, had arrived in the colony. He was a youth—little more than a boy in years. From the first day of his imprisonment he had followed one course: he was quiet, silent, patient, obedient. He broke no rules of the prison. He asked no favors. He performed all his own work, and often helped another who gumbled at his heavy task.

He was simply known to his fellow-convicts as Joe; his other name was unknown or forgotten. When the prison roll was called, he answered to No. 406.

In the first few years he had made many friends in the colony—but he had also made one enemy, and a deadly one. In the gang to which he belonged was a man named Isaac Bowman, one of those natures seemingly all evil, serious and cruel, detested by the basest, yet self-contained, full of jibe and derision, satisfied with his own depravity, and convinced that every one was secretly just as vile as he.

From the first, this fellow had disliked and sneered at Joe, and Joe having long observed the man's cur-like character, had at last adopted a system of conduct toward him that saved himself annoyance, but secretly intensified the malevolence of the other. He did not avoid the fellow; but he never looked at him, saw him, spoke to him,—not even answering him when he spoke, as if he had not heard him.

This treatment was observed and enjoyed by the other prisoners, and sometimes even adopted by themselves toward Bowman. At last its effect on the evil nature was too powerful to be concealed. With the others he could return oaths for oaths, or jibe for jibe, and always came off pleased with himself; but Joe's silent contempt stung him like a scorpion.

The convicts at length saw that Bowman, who was a man capable of any crime, had a deep hatred for Joe, and they warned him to beware. But he smiled, and went on just as before.

One morning a poor settler rode into the camp with a cry for justice and vengeance. His hat was only a few miles distant, and in his absence last night a deed of rapine and robbery had been perpetrated there—and the robber was a convict.

A search was made in the prisoners' hut, and in one of the hammocks was found some of the stolen property. The man who owned the hammock was seized and ironed, protesting his innocence. Further evidence was found against him—he had been seen returning to the camp that morning—Isaac Bowman had seen him.

To be Continued.

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