

Without a word, the disciplined trooper shook the drowsiness from him, saddled his horse, and mounted. In half an hour they were gone.

Moondyne Joe and the sergeant listened till the last sound died away. The tracker was curled up again beside the fire.

Sergeant Bowman then unlocked the chain, and the powerful prisoner rose to his feet. In a whisper the sergeant told him he must secure the native before he attempted to take the horse.

Moondyne went softly to the side of the sleeping savage. There was a smile on his face as he knelt down and laid one strong hand on the man's throat, and another on his pistol.

In a few moments it was over. The bushman never even writhed when he saw the stern face above him, and felt that his weapon was gone. Moondyne left him tied hand and foot, and returned to the sergeant, who had the horses ready.

When the convict stood beside the trooper he raised his hand suddenly, and held something toward him—the tracker's pistol, loaded and capped! He had played and won. His enemy stood defenceless before him—and the terror of death, as he saw the position, was in the blanched face of the sergeant.

'Take this pistol,' said Moondyne, quietly. 'You may give it to me, if you will, when I have kept my word.'

The sergeant took the weapon with a trembling hand, and his evil face had an awed look as he mounted.

'Call the dogs,' said Moondyne, 'we shall need them to-morrow.' In answer to a low whistle the wolf-like things bounded through the bush. The men struck off at a gallop, in the direction of the convicts' camp, the sergeant a little behind, with his pistol ready in the holster.

VII.

THE IRON-STONE MOUNTAINS.

Moondyne took a straight line for the Koagulup Swamp, which they 'struck' after a couple of hours' ride. They dismounted near the scene of the capture, and Moondyne pulled from some bushes near the edge a short raft of logs bound together with withes of bark. The sergeant hesitated, and looked on suspiciously.

'You must trust me,' said Moondyne quietly: 'unless we break the track we shall have that sleuth-dog tracker after us when he gets loose.'

The sergeant got on the raft, holding the bridles of the horses. Moondyne, with a pole, pushed from the bank, and entered the gloomy arches of the wooded swamp.

It was a weird scene. At noonday the flood was black as ink and the arches were filled with gloomy shadows. Overhead the foliage of trees and creepers was matted into a dense roof, now pierced by a few thin pencils of moonlight.

Straight-toward the centre Moondyne steered, for several hundred yards, the horses swimming behind. Then he turned at right angles, and pushed along from tree to tree in a line with the shore they had left. After a while the horses found bottom, and waded.

'No more trouble now,' said Moondyne. 'They're on the sand. We must keep along till morning, and then strike toward the hills.'

They went ahead rapidly, thanks to Moondyne's amazing strength; and by daylight were a long distance from the point at which they entered. A wide but shallow river with a bright sand bottom emptied into the swamp before them, and into this Moondyne poled the raft and tied it securely to a fallen tree, hidden in sedge grass.

They mounted their horses and rode up the bed of the river, which they did not leave till near noon-time. At last, when Moondyne deemed the track thoroughly broken, he turned toward the higher bank, and struck into the bush, the land beginning to rise toward the mountains when they had travelled a few miles.

It was late in the afternoon when they halted for the day's first meal. Moondyne climbed a mahogany tree, which he had selected from certain fresh marks on its bark, and from a hole in the trunk pulled out two silver-tailed 'possums, as large as rabbits. The sergeant lighted a fire on the loose sand, and piled it high with dry wood. When the 'possums were ready for cooking, the sand beneath the fire was heated a foot deep, and making a hole in this, the game was buried, and the fire continued above. After a time the embers were thrown off and the meat dug out. It looked burnt and black; but when the crust was broken the flesh within was tender and juicy. This, with clear water from the iron-stone hills, made a rare meal for hungry men; after which they continued their travel.

Before nightfall they had entered the first circle of hills at the foot of the mountains. With a springing hope in his heart, Moondyne led the way into the tortuous passes of the hills; and in a valley as silent as the grave, and as lonely, they made their camp for the night.

They were in the saddle before sunrise, and travelling in a strange and wild country, which no white man, except Moondyne, had ever before entered. The scene was amazing to the sergeant, who was used to the endless sameness of the gum forests on the plains of the convict settlement. Here, masses of dark metallic stone were heaped in savage confusion, and around these, like great pale serpents or cables, were twisted the white roots of tuad trees. So wild was the scene with rock and torrent, underbrush and forest, that the sergeant, old bushman as he was, began to feel that it would be dangerous for a man who had not studied the lay of the land, to travel here without a guide. However, he had a deep game to play, for a great stake. He said nothing, but watched Moondyne closely, and observed everything around that might assist his memory by-and-by.

In the afternoon they rode through winding passes in the hills, and toward sunset came on the border of a lake in the basin of the mountains.

'Now,' said Moondyne, dismounting by the lake-side, and turning loose his horse to crop the rich grass, 'now we may rest. We are inside the guard of the hills.'

The sergeant's manner had strangely altered during the long ride. He was trembling on the verge of a great discovery; but he was, to a certain extent, in the power of Moondyne. He could not help feeling that the man was acting truly to his word; but his own purpose was so dark and deceitful, it was impossible for him to trust another.

The punishment of falsehood is to suspect all truth. The mean of soul cannot conceive nobility. The vicious cannot believe in virtue. The artificial dignity imparted by the sergeant's office had disappeared, in spite of himself; and in its place returned the caittiff aspect that had marked him when he was a convict and a settler. Standing on an equality with Moondyne, their places had changed, and the prisoner was the master.

On the sandy shore of the beautiful lake they found turtles' eggs, and these, with baked bandicoot, made supper and breakfast.

On resuming their ride, next morning, Moondyne said: 'To-night we shall reach the gold mine.'

The way was no longer broken; they rode in the beds of grassy valleys, walled by precipitous mountains. Palms, bearing large scarlet nuts, brilliant flowers and birds, and trees and shrubs of unnamed species—all these, with delicious streams from the mountains, made a scene of wonderful beauty. The face of Moondyne was lighted up with appreciation; and even the sergeant, coarse, cunning, and brutish, felt its purifying influence.

It was a long day's ride, broken only by a brief halt at noon, when they ate a hearty meal beside a deep river that wound its mysterious way among the hills. Hour after hour passed, and the jaded horses lagged on the way; but still the valleys opened before the riders, and Moondyne advanced as confidently as if the road were familiar.