The World\'s Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 4: I. TWO SLEPT, AND ONE WATCHED

"At last!" muttered Mr. James Hamilton, opening his eyes and sitting upright on the oor. "Get up, you chaps! D'ye hear? Get up!"

No one stirred. As a matter of fact, neither of the two men was awake. With a nal yawn the speaker stretched himself out and sti his feet. Then he threw himself upon a rude wooden bench, picked up the stump of a corn-cob pipe which lay upon the ground, and smo his elbows resting upon the empty window-frame, and his head stretched as far as possible outside. The dull stolidity of his features was for the moment into the semblance of eagerness. He was waiting to inhale the faint quivering breeze which was stealing down from the f

"At last!" he growled, with his eyes, dim and bloodshot, turned towards the western sky. "What a hell of a day! There she goes, and be

The rim of a red, burning sun had touched at last the highest peak of a low range of pine-topped hills crawling around the base of the day long, the heat in the valley had across that level stretch of rocky, broken country lying eastwards, had scorched the earth, dried up t watercourses, and very nearly turned the brains of those few dwellers around the banks of the Blue River, Work had been given up as a impossible. Down below where, around the bed of the old river, a score or so of gold claims had been staked out by a little band of eage reigned a deep, absolute stillness. Pickaxes, washers, pans, and all sorts of mining tools were lying about unused. Not a man had dare the burning heat and into air of the valley. Apart, they might have been borne for a brief while, at any late; together, they meant fever, dea virulent.

After a while, Mr. James Hamilton withdrew his head from the window-frame, and cast a grim look into the interior of the shanty. Save occupants, it did not afford much scope for investigation, nor was there anything in its appointments which could have offended the instinc most rigid ascetic. On a table constructed of a couple of broad planks from which the underneath bark had not been stripped, supported barrel at either end, were scattered a dirty pack of cards, two tin mugs turned upside down, and a black bottle rolling on its side. The wa perfectly bare, and a strong woody odour, and the tricklings of pine sap upon the rafters, showed that the shanty had only recently been together. The whole of the oor seemed to be taken up by the two men who lay there fast asleep.

It was upon the face of the one nearest to him that Mr. James Hamilton's attention seemed xed. With his hands on his knees, and his between his teeth, he leaned forward, watching him with a steady, expressionless scrutiny. If the sleeping man had suddenly awakened nothing in the look to terrify or even surprise him. It was simply the steady, critical survey of a man who desires to impress certain feature lineaments in his memory, or compare them with some previous association.

They were all three big men, with brawny limbs and muscles hardened and distended by physical labour, but the man who slept so sc almost a giant. His head, massive and tawny-bearded, was propped up against the opposite wall. One huge arm, naked to the shoulder, underneath it, and the other, stretched out perfectly straight, reached the doorway. One of his feet, bare and brown, rested upon an over bucket; the leg, extended at full length, seemed in the tiny cabin like the limb of a giant. A red anneil shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, revea mighty chest, curiously white. His trousers, of coarse linen, were rolled up to the knees, and although stained and discoloured, showed t constant efforts at cleaning.

Mr. James Hamilton, whose eyes had been noting this amongst many other things, suffered for the rst time a shade to pass across his gave vent to his feelings in an expressive grunt, and spat upon the oor.

After that rst futile summons, he seemed in no hurry to awaken his comrades. Withdrawing his eyes at last from the man who lay stret his feet, he carefully stepped over his body, and lounged to the doorway. The frail structure creaked with his weight as he leaned against Mr. James Hamilton himself was a fourteen-stone man, but he made himself comfortable there and folded his arms, smoking steadily, a watching the dull red ball of sun sink behind the hills. Unconsciously he contributed one more, and a necessary gure, to the dramatic co of the scene.

Down from the hills stole the softly-descending darkness. There was none of the lingering twilight of an English summer. Swift shadow ghostlike across their bare brown sides, and hung about the valley, and the colour stole into a white moon hung in a deep blue sky. A br desired and grateful, swept through the army of pines which crowned the sheer hill behind the cabin, hanging on to its ledges and crevic growing out in places almost at right angles to the precipice below. Mr. James Hamilton took off his apology for a hat, and pushed his ha his head, to taste as much of the welcome air as possible. He even glanced over his shoulder into the cabin, and seemed to contemplate t attempt at arousing his companions. But, although he went so far as to remove the pipe from his teeth, he did not at once speak to them

"I reckon this is the darnedest, loneliest, saddest hole I ever came across!" he muttered to himself, gazing away from the valley and th crowned hills to where a great rolling expanse of broken country surged away to the eastern horizon. Mr. Hamilton's artistic education h neglected, and he saw no beauty in the fantastic panorama of shadowland, the lone clumps of alder-trees and bushes the very leaves o seemed like elegant tracing against the deep clear sky, and the faint blue haze mingling with the deeper twilight. His regretful thoughts a moment were xed upon a certain pine-board saloon a few hundred miles beyond that uncertain line where the rolling plain touched the s the music of the quivering breeze amongst the pines fell upon dull, unappreciative ears. The fact undoubtedly was, that Mr. James Hamil sharing a similar accusation to that which a goodly proportion of his fellow-creatures, steeped to the ngers in Eastern civilization, encou every day. He was bored! The absence of kindred spirits, the enforced temperance of hard work, and, as he expressed it, the cursed lor place, were becoming insufferable. It was possible, too, that he was a little homesick; for Mr. James Hamilton was not an American, and been heard to express any unbounded admiration for that country. The only thing, in fact, which had drop pins and was the oaths, which he had mastered with wonderful facility, and by means of which he was able, as he remarked with constant satisfaction, to expres a gentleman.

Yet, although he was unaware of it, the loneliness was not quite so complete as he had imagined. Away across the broken plain, the human being was slowly limping and crawling along the rough track towards the valley; a human being in the direst and most pitiful of st yet, all signs of the little settlement and the river were hidden from him. He was in a vast lonely stretch of barren country, with the great f front, and no sign of human life or habitation to break the deep serene silence. Every now and then a moan broke from the white parche despairing moan of pain and deep physical exhaustion, and more than once in the short space of a hundred yards, he threw up his arms down upon the ground. He was dressed in the remnants of a cowboy's clothes stained with sun and water, and torn almost to rags by the th the forests. His face was worn to a shadow, and black rims were under the deep-set eyes bright with the gleam of famine. The feet were stained with blood, and the hands were cut and bruised. And with it all he seemed to have the look of one utterly unused to such privatio shape of his limbs was slender, even delicate, and the face, notwithstanding its emaciation and deadly pallor, was curiously handsome. gun or stick, but a small bundle from which the butt-end of a revolver was sticking out, and as once more his feet gave way beneath him sank down, his ngers closed upon it convulsively.

He lay upon his back, and looked up at the stars which were beginning to steal into the sky. For a moment his mind began to wander, sky and space seemed to be ringing in one confused chaos. Then, setting his teeth and making a great effort, he arrested his eeling consciousness. He raised his head a little and his lips moved.

"Oh, God! if I could crawl but just a mile—just a mile or two further! I must be near the Blue River now! Yonder are the mountains—tha the valley! Oh, if only I had the strength!"

He raised himself a little more and looked around despairingly. The deep, majestic stillness of the great pine-clad hills and brooding fo solemn silence of night descending slowly upon the land, seemed to stir up a sudden half-frenzied anger in the traveller. Was he to die t agony, almost within sight of his goal? To die before the yellow light faded from that great moon, and the slow-ushing morn paled the ea skies? Even in his growing weakness, the cruelty of it and the deep, solemn indifference of all inanimate things in the face of his misery, home to him. With a curious mixture of blasphemy and devotion, he sat up and faintly cursed the distant moonlit hills, the perfumed breez fanned his burning forehead, and the far-off sound of a mountain torrent which mocked his dry throat and cracked lips. Then he pulled o revolver.

"One shot more!" he gasped. "Shall I?"

He looked into the deep barrel, and held it to his forehead, pressing it there so tightly that when his ngers relaxed there was a livid red his temple. Then he laid it down by his side, and sitting up, sobbed out loud.

"Oh, God help me! God help me!" he moaned. "I daren't die! I'm afraid! Oh, for just a little more strength, only just a little! I must be ne

He raised himself slowly on to his knees, and leaned forward on his hands. Behind him lay the great desolate plain melting into the sk were the mountains, the deep gorge, the pine-topped hills; and, at their base, though he could not see it, the little shanty where two men one watched.

"I must be near there now!" he gasped. "Very near! One more effort now—one more—and if I fail—I will do it!"

He replaced the revolver in the little bundle, and pushed back the thick hair from his forehead, with a gesture of determination, Then r pain and slowly, on hands and feet, he crept on with his face towards the hills, muttering softly to himself:

"I must not give up! I will—be brave! I will not faint! No! I will not, I will not! How brightly the moon shines through the dark trees, and w shadows lie across the plain! Down there must be the valley! Yes, yes; that is where they are. I have come so far—I will not give in! I sh Yes, I shall nd him! The ground seems unsteady! it is fancy, fancy! Just beyond those trees—that is where they will be. It is—very near, fragrant with the perfume of the pines. It is—only a little further. I shall soon be there—very soon. Ah, what is that? How bright it is! Oh, G mock me. It is a re y, it must be—a re y! I will not believe that it is a light. Oh, my head! How giddy I am! I must not give way. I will not! I w is—oh!"

He sprang to his feet, and raised his hands to heaven. A sudden wild joy shook him.

"It is a light—a match!" he shrieked. "I am there!"

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Mr. Hamilton's pipe had gone out, and the tobacco was in his host's possession. He turned round and kicked the body of the man neare

"Hullo!" he cried. "Are you chaps turned into logs? Get up!"

The man more directly addressed opened his eyes, gave a mighty yawn, and staggered to his feet. Then he thrust his head out of the drew a long breath.

"Whew! This is good!" he exclaimed, opening his lungs and breathing in great gulps of the fragrant pine-scented breeze which was bl across the gorge from the forests beyond. "Jim, you idiot, why didn't you wake me before?

"Not my business!" Mr. Hamilton growled. "Shouldn't have done it now, only I wanted a smoke. Hand over the bacy!"

His host produced a huge pouch from his pocket, lled his own pipe and handed it over. Mr. Hamilton, still lounging in the doorway, lei stuffed his corn-cob as full as he could, struck a match, and thereby, in all probability, saved the life of a fellow-creature.

Neither of the men heard the faint despairing cry of the stranger. After smoking for a few moments in silence, they were joined by the occupant of the shanty. He was a tall, lank man, with grizzled hair, high cheekbones, and clear gray eyes. After his rst uprising he stood while indulging in a succession of yawns. Then he felt for his pipe, snapped his ngers for the tobacco, and, leaning against the wall, smo silence.

"Say, pal, how's the liquor?" grunted Mr. Hamilton insinuatingly, a sudden gleam of interest illuminating his classical features. "It's a cu climate!"

His host, who in the little community was generally called the Englishman, stretched out his hand and drew a bottle from a wooden bo end, which appeared to do duty as a cupboard. He turned it upside down, and contemplated it thoughtfully, smoking all the time.

"Half a bottle," he announced. "All we've got, and no supplies for a week! Guess we'd better thirst!"

"That be d—d!" growled Mr. Hamilton. "This place is as slow as hell, anyhow. Let's share up, and have a game of poker. Chance to-m cut my throat if I don't have a drink!"

The Englishman balanced the bottle thoughtfully in the palm of his hand

"What do you say, Pete?" he asked, turning to the other man.

The gentleman addressed, Mr. Peter Morrison by name, scratched his head and glanced furtively at the sullen brow and red, bloodsh man who lounged in the doorway. The sight seemed to decide him.

"I say let's drink! I saw Dan Cooper this morning, and he allowed there was plenty of stuff left in the store. We shan't have a much drie this, anyhow."

"D—d poor stuff that store whisky," muttered the Englishman. "Two against one takes it, though. Down you sit, you chaps! Share up th Here goes! Jim, deal the pictures!"

The men sat down without a word. In silence they drank and smoked, deal t and won. Loquacity was not a popular quality at Blue River diggings, and conversation was a thing almost unheard-of. Only, once Mr. Hamilton brought his st down upon the frail table, and to from his mouth.

"You chaps, I'm off next week. Gold-diggin's a frost. D—d if I can stand it any longer. Say, are you coming, Bryan?"

The Englishman shook his head.

"Going to hold on a bit longer," he answered. "Shouldn't half mind it if it wasn't so blazing hot!"

"How about you, Pete?" Mr. Hamilton inquired, turning to the other man.

"I'm in with Bryan," was the quiet reply. "We're pards, you know. Ain't that so, Bryan?"

"Right for you, my man!" was the hearty answer. "Two pairs, aces up! Show your hand, Jim!"

Mr. Hamilton threw down his cards with a string of oaths which even surpassed his usual brilliancy.

"You fellows can stay and rot here," he muttered hoarsely. "Just you wait till the rains come, and see how you like it."

There was no further attempt at conversation. Every now and then Mr. Hamilton swore a deep oath as the cards went against him, wh often. The Englishman and his partner won or lost without a murmur—the former with real carelessness, the latter with a studied and clu nonchalance. Mr. Hamilton was the only one who showed any real interest in the game, and his method of playing, which was a little pe required all his attention.

Outside, the calm of evening deepened into the solemn stillness of night. The moon rose over the pine tops, and the mists oated away valley. The breeze dropped, and the trees in the forest were dumb. The three men played steadily on till midnight. Then the Englishman threw down his cards.

"Out you go, you chaps!" he said shortly. "I've had enough of this, and I'm going to turn in."

The two men rose: Mr. Hamilton grumbling, Morrison as silent as ever. Together they all walked out into the darkness.

"Good night, and be d—d to you!" muttered Mr.

Hamilton surlily as he scrambled down the hillside, holding on to the young r-trees, and every now and then balancing himself with dif "What the devil were you thinking of when you built your shanty up in the clouds?" he shouted back as at last he reached the bottom. "I'm all over. I'll be shot if I come again."

The Englishman laughed out lustily, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Good night, Jim!" he shouted, his deep bass voice awakening strange echoes as it travelled across the rocky gorge. "Don't know wha swear at me for! You've drunk my whisky, and smoked my tobacco, and won my money, you surly beggar, you! Good night, Pete!" he a partner in a milder tone. "Be careful how you go, there! You've had as much liquor as you can carry, you have, you idiot!"

He walked a step or two further out, and watched both men gain their shanties. Then he turned round and stood for a moment or two thoughtfully out into the darkness. A sudden impatience had prompted him to get rid of his rough companions, but he had no desire to s still, startlit night, the faint snowy outline of the distant mountains, the perfume of overing shrubs, and the night odour of the pines, had o his senses and stirred vaguely his inherent love of beauty, so that he was forced to rid himself abruptly of his coarse surroundings and h into the darkness. He leaned against the frail supports of his little dwelling, with folded arms, and dreamed—dreamed of that Eastern wo he had left, and which seemed a thing so far away from this deep majestic solitude. He turned his face towards the plains, and half close His had been a curious and a solitary life; a life oftenest gloomy, yet just once or twice bathed in a very bright light. It was something to th these brighter places so few and far between. Did he wish that he was back again where they would be once more possible? He scarce erce trouble and the disquiet of the days behind was no pleasant memory. He looked across, to the mist-topped hills and dark forests, that they had grown in a measure dear to him. In his heart, this great lonely man with the limbs and sinews of a giant was a poet. He wa books, and uneducated, but he loved beauty, and he loved nature, and in his way he loved solitude. He was happier here by far than he amongst the gilded saloons and cheap haunts of the Western cities. It was only the monotony and the apparent uselessness of his life h oppressed him. He was a man with a purpose, a purpose which he had followed over land and sea, through cities and lonely places, wit persistence characteristic of the man and of his race. In his expedition here, for the rst time he had turned away from it, and the knowled beginning to trouble him. The hard physical labour, the glory of his surroundings, the mighty forests and hills broken up into valley, and g and gorge, and all the time overshadowed by that everlasting background of the snow-capped Sierras, these things were all dear to him and uncultured though he was, they sank deeper into his being day by day, and night by night. He could not have talked about them. Na given him the sensibility of the poet and the artist, but education had denied him the use of words with which to express himself. As yet h appreciated all that he lost. That would conic some day.

Suddenly his dreaming was brought to an abrupt termination. His body stiffened, and his hand felt for the revolver in his belt. With the instinct of a man used to all sorts of emergencies, he recognized that he was no longer alone. Yonder, almost at his feet, behind that low shrub, a man was lying.

"Who are you?" he asked quickly. "What do you want here? Put up your hands!"

The reply came only in a faint whisper.

"Bryan! Bryan, come and help me! Give me some brandy! I'm almost done! Thank God, I've found you!"

The Englishman stuck his revolver into his belt, and took a giant stride over to the spot.

"Who are you?" he asked, dropping on one knee, "and where, in God's name, have you come from? How do you know my name?"

The gure raised itself a little. The tattered remnants of a cap fell off, and the moonlight fell upon the wan but strangely handsome face in the dark eyes lit up with a sudden eager light.

"Don't you know me, Bryan?" asked a soft, caressing voice. "Am I so altered?"

The Englishman gave a great start, and his bronzed face grew pale.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "It's Myra!"