

# The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 13: X. A DEBAUCH AND A TRAGEDY

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Mr. Hamilton was drunk, ercely and unmistakably drunk. There could be no doubt about it, although he betrayed none of the usual signs plebeian intoxication. He was not shouting or singing, or displaying any violent signs of affection for his boon companion and partner. He said a word—maudlin. He sat on a wooden bench with his hands on his knees and his chin thrust forward; whilst opposite to him, as though frightened by the erce glare of those red, bloodshot eyes, Mr. Skein was indulging in a very hollow affectation of thoroughly enjoying himself. With his hands in his pockets, and his sallow cheeks checked by his very moderate share of the empty bottle which lay between them, he was feebly essaying to sing the chorus of a popular comic song:

“Oh, my, tell ‘em to stop!  
Such was the cry of Maria  
When she cried ‘Whoa!’  
They said Let her go!  
And—”

“Shut up that d—d row, you blithering idiot!”

Mr. Skein closed his jaws with a snap.

“What’s the matter with it?” he asked feebly. “I know I haven’t got much of a voice, but that’s no reason why you should snarl a fellow’s words.”

“Much of a voice! It’s like the squeak of a hell-cat,” Mr. Hamilton remarked between his teeth. “Turn your rat’s face this way. I’m drunk, but I know it. Now, hark ‘ee. What the hell do you mean by sitting there and asking me questions about my private affairs, eh?”

“I—I didn’t mean any harm,” faltered Skein, with chattering teeth. “I’ve told you all about myself.”

“All about yourself! Yes, and it sounded like a blooming pack of lies,” growled the other. “Bah! what do I care about you and your petty crawling little life? Sit up, man, and pull yourself together. Don’t crouch there and look at me out of the corners of your eyes, as though I were about to eat you.”

“You’re such an odd fellow, Jim. You’re—”

“Ay, you’ll nd I’m odd before you’ve done with me. Pick up that bottle. Is it empty?”

Skein turned it upside down. Not a drop trickled out. Mr. Hamilton expressed his disappointment with a savage growl.

“Open that cupboard.”

Skein obeyed promptly.

“There’s a black bottle there, half full, unless you’ve been guzzling it on the sly. Out with it.”

Skein’s head and shoulders disappeared in the recess. In a moment he produced the bottle and passed it over. Mr. Hamilton handled it with affection, passing his hands up and down it with affectionate gentleness. Then he raised it to his lips, and held it there while it gurgled several times. As he set it down he caught his partner’s eye watching him timidly. He held out the bottle to him.

“Drink,” he commanded.

Skein took the bottle, raised it to his lips, and set it down. Mr. Hamilton scowled. He had been listening for the gurgle, and there had been no sound. Naturally he felt annoyed.

He got up with some alidity, and seized the bottle with one hand, and the back of his partner’s head with the other.

“Now, drink,” he shouted thickly. “Drink, you puling idiot! No shamming. Down with it like a man.”

With a trembling hand Skein guided the neck of the bottle to his mouth. Instantly it was held there like a vice. The raw, erce spirit poured down his throat as hot as liquid re. He coughed, spluttered, yelled. The tears streamed down his cheeks, and he grew purple to the forehead. Then he mightily laugh Mr. Hamilton withdrew his hand, and, carrying the bottle with him, resumed his seat.

“Hark ‘ee, Christopher,” he said, frowning till his thick eyebrows met, and his eyes glowed underneath them like pieces of live coal. “You’re drunk. You’ve shirked the bottle yourself on purpose. You’ve been asking me questions—pumping me, by thunder, just as though I was a commonplace idiot to be turned inside out by a sick-faced insect like you. Perhaps you didn’t mean anything. Better for you that you didn’t. I’m suspicious. Dare say I am. I don’t mind telling you this much, you miserable young cub. I’m low down, low down as hell, but I’ve been a gentleman, and an English gentleman, too, and hunted and shot, and had my town place and country place, and seen more of life than you’ve heard or read of. And I’m not quite done yet. I’ve got the disposal of a huge estate and a great name in my hand at this very moment. Ha! I’ll do one thing! There’s a man in the old country who trembles and turns pale at the mention of my name. He’s a proud man, too, one of the old nobles. You go to him and tell him that Jim Hu—Hamilton’s outside to have a word with him, and, Lord, how he’d op!”

Mr. Skein was himself again. His teeth had ceased to chatter, and his bead-like eyes were sparkling. He seemed to have forgotten even his own name.

“Why don’t you bleed him?” he whispered.

Mr. Hamilton laughed softly. It was an evil laugh. Even his admiring partner drew a little further away. It was a laugh which suggested things, but certainly not mirth.

“Ay, why don’t I?” he said. “Well, I’ll tell you, pard. You ain’t a bad little sort, and you wouldn’t try any games on me, I don’t think. I’m a good shot with my shooting irons when I’m roused. You remember that, my kid, and if you don’t want daylight letting into your body, keep a still tongue in your head. Now I’ll tell you. I was in England—not very long ago—never mind how long. There are two of them; one don’t know, the other does. I’m fixing things up when I got into a row—never mind what sort—it was a hell of a row, though! I had to bolt. Out here a man’s life more or less depends on his count. Lord, it’s the sort of place to be jolly in, this is! But I’ve written to those chaps. I’m going to run ‘em up, one against the other. Christopher, boy, if you were pards with me here,” he clapped his hand upon his chest, “your fortune would be made. But you ain’t, you see.”

Skein was trembling all over, not with fear this time but with excitement. He had distinctly heard the rustle of paper when his partner had opened his chest. It was there, sewn into his coat, very likely. How his heart was beating! Oh, if only he were not such a coward!

“What is it, Jim?” he asked, with quavering voice. “Documents?”

Mr. Hamilton shot a furious glance at his questioner. There was a look in the lean, craven face and hungry, piercing eyes, which did not suggest fancy. He was aware that he had talked too much. The fumes of the spirit had worked like re in his brain. What had he said? Perhaps it would be safer—

He drew out his revolver, and began to examine the priming. He spat on the barrel and polished it, glancing every now and then at his partner who was almost falling off his seat with terror.

There was an intense silence between the two men, so deep that the faint night sounds from the wood, and the music of the softly owling birds in the valley below, oated in through the open doorway to their ears. Suddenly they both gave a great start. Skein sprang up with a cry of alarm, his partner, leaning over, seized him ercely by the arm.

“Listen, you d—d fool!” he muttered savagely. “If you breathe a word I’ll knock your brains out!”

They listened motionless. A slight rustling sound again broke the deep night hush. What was it? A sudden breeze in the tree-tops, a soft rustle of leaves attracted by the light, or the faint rustling of a woman’s gown over the short grass?

“Some one has been lying there listening!” Mr. Hamilton hissed. “Quick!”

He staggered towards the door, the revolver in his hand. Half-way there, he reeled against the wall. The shanty was spinning round. He was drunk. He held out the revolver to Skein.

“Take it quick!” he muttered. “Outside! Blaze away!”

Skein snatched it from him, and rushed to the doorway. But he did not even glance out. He turned round and faced his partner. His cheeks were ghastly pale, and his eyes seemed starting from his head.

“Not inside, you blarsted idiot!” yelled Mr. Hamilton. “What the hell are you doing? D—n!”

Two shots rang out, one after the other. Mr. Hamilton, with a fearful oath upon his lips, fell sideways across the oor, with his hand pressed against his side. His partner, throwing down the revolver, leaped through the thick smoke, and knelt over the fallen body. His tongue was protruding from his teeth, and his eyes seemed starting from his head. With shaking ngers he commenced to undo the wounded man’s coat. Before he got to the last button Mr. Hamilton opened his eyes, and he drew back with a shriek.

“You’ve—done for me—you devil!” muttered Mr.

Hamilton. “Oh, if I could feel my hands around—around your neck!”

“Give me the—paper in your coat, and I’ll leave you alone!” Skein whispered. He was breathing hard, and his lips and eyeballs were bloodshot. It was not quite so easy to kill a man, after all! Mr. Hamilton thrust his hand into his breast, and his partner bent eagerly down. It was a rashness which he had reason to repent, for, instead of the paper, he received Mr. Hamilton’s st full in his face. He staggered against the wall, sick and dizzy. The wounded man raised himself with a little moaning cry.

“Myra!” he gasped. “Myra! he’s shot me! Hold him!”

Skein turned round, quaking. Standing upon the threshold, with the moonlight falling upon her face, a thin, slender gure clearly outlined against the deep blue sky, was the girl from the shanty opposite. He did not hesitate for a moment. He leaped past her like a cat, and fell headlong down the gorge. She did not try to stop him. Her limbs were paralyzed with horror.

“Myra!” he faltered. “I’m done! Will you come here?”

She did not hesitate then for a moment. She fell on her knees by his side, and took his hand. She forgot her loathing, and she forgot her fear. She forgot everything except that she was a woman!