The World\'s Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 5: II. ON THE BANKS OF THE BLUE RIVER

II. ON THE BANKS OF THE BLUE RIVER

The moon, which had risen now high above the wood-crowned hills, was shining with a faint ghostly light upon the new-corner's wan fac Englishman, who had started back like a man who sees a vision, as suddenly recovered himself. Surprising though this advent was, the doubt as to the identity of his visitor. Neither was there any doubt but that she was on the point of exhaustion. His rst duty was plain. She taken care of.

"Can you walk into the cabin, or shall I carry you?" he asked, in a tone as matter-of-fact as though he was accustomed every day to re visits. "Better carry you, I think! You look all used up!"

"I—I'm afraid I can't walk, Bryan," she admitted, looking up at him with the ghost of a smile on her lips. "I guess I fainted a bit ago! It w of your voice brought me to!"

Without another word he lifted the prostrate gure into his arms, and carried her into the shanty. Arrived safely inside—he had to bend double to enter the doorway—be laid her on his bed, and threw a blanket over her.

Then he took up his own tin mug of brandy, found that it was half full, and forced a little between the white lips.

The effect was swift and almost magical. A little faint colour stole into her cheeks, and she opened her eyes.

"Guess I'm starved!" she remarked, with a slight uplifting of the eyelids. "Got anything to eat?"

Her eyes wandered round the place hungrily. The Englishman stood still and considered for a moment. Then he struck a match and li opened a tin of beef extract, and in a few minutes had a steaming cup full of the liquid. He brought it to her side, and she clutched it eage

"Drink it slowly!" he advised. "That's the style! Good God!"

He went out into the darkness, and returned in a few minutes with a pail of water. Then he turned up his shirtsleeves, and taking her s feet into his great hands, bathed them carefully while she lay quite still with half closed eyes. When he had nished, he lit his pipe, and sa her side.

"Don't hurry, Myra!" he said, leaning back against the wall, and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Don't talk at all unless you feel lik beef tea, eh? There, just a drop! That's right!"

He held the cup to her lips, and then set it down.

"If you feel like going right off to sleep, why, off you go!" he said. "You can tell me all about it in the morning!"

He spoke cheerfully, but there was an undercurrent of anxiety in his tone which the girl's quick ears detected. Henceforth she watched furtively out of her big dark eyes, fled now with a fresh alarm.

"I'd as lief tell you now!" she said. "I'm rested!"

"That's capital! Well, how did you get here all by yourself? That's what I want to know."

A little note of triumph crept into the girl's tone. She watched her companion carefully to see what effect her words had upon him.

"I came on a mule half the way, Bryan. He died four days ago, and since then I have been walking!"

"You came on a mule!" the Englishman repeated bewildered. "Where from?"

"From San Francisco, of course!"

"My God!"

He looked at her in admiration tempered with wonder. She had expected this, and was grati

"Yes! You didn't think I was plucky enough for that, I guess! It's been pretty bad—worse than I thought it would be, when I started. I di much until Johnny—that was my mule—died. He seemed sorter company, and he was a real good one. Afterwards it got lonesome, and were so dark and long, I was scared sometimes. I used to lie quite still, with my face turned to the east, and as soon as the rst streak of could go to sleep. Then, the day before yesterday, I nished up all the food I had! I don't believe I want to talk about the time since then," concluded, with a little shiver. "I guess I won't, anyway!"

He sat and looked at her for a moment without speaking. He was not a man of quick comprehension, and the thing amazed him.

"Five hundred miles all alone, and a beastly rough track too," he said at last. "Why, child, it seems impossible. And why on earth have

The colour rushed into her dusky cheeks, and her eyes, soft and dark now that the gleam of famine had ed, lled with tears.

"You—you are not glad to see me!" she exclaimed piteously.

He was not. That was a fact. But he began to see that it would not do to let her know it. He swore a great inward oath, but he leaned o her hand as tenderly as he could.

"Of course I'm glad, Myra! If you knew how beastly dull it was here, month after month with never a soul to speak to, you wouldn't wor But what beats me is, why you've come! You haven't risked your life to come to such a picnic as we're having out here! You've got a rea coming!"

She nodded, with her eyes anxiously xed upon him. "Yes! I've brought you something. Guess what!" His expression changed. A sudd leaped into his eyes.

"Is it a letter?" he asked.

"Yes."

He held out his hand.

"Where is it?

"Give me a knife and I will get it," she answered.

He handed her one. She felt up one side of her tattered coat, and cut a little slit near the shoulder. Through the opening she drew a lo and held it out to him; her lips slightly parted, and her eyes eagerly watching for his approval.

He took it into his hand and looked at it almost as though he feared to break the seal. It was yellow with age, and the postmark was a looked from it into the girl's face. Her eyes were full of tears.

"You are not glad that I brought it," she faltered. "It isn't of any importance after all. You haven't thanked me, you haven't said a single me, and—and you haven't even kissed me! I—I wish I had died and not got here at all!" she wound up with a little sob.

He passed his arm around her waist and drew her lips to his.

"There, don't cry, Myra," he said kindly. "I'm not an eloquent chap, you know, and I was kind of dazed. You're a regular brick, little wo me that letter. I don't believe there's another girl in the States would have had so much pluck. Cheer up now, do. Of course I'm glad to s know that."

She listened to him eagerly, and gave a little sigh of relief. Then she swept the tears away, and smiled up at him faintly.

"I think I was pretty glad to have an excuse to come," she whispered in his ear. "I was weary of waiting for you to come back, and—oh such a bother. I would sooner have died than gone back to the old life, the life from which you saved me, Bryan. It was all horrid. Oh, are here! You won't send me back, will you?" she exclaimed, in sudden alarm.

"We'll talk about that in the morning," he answered. "I haven't read my letter yet. I may not be stopping here myself much longer."

"Say that I may stay as long as you do," she persisted. "Tell me that when you go, you will take me with you. Just let me hear you say won't worry you any more. I'll do everything you tell me. You say that."

He frowned and looked away from her great eager eyes on to the oor. Here was a pretty mess for him. What could he say to her?

"You'll have to be reasonable, Myra," he said slowly, "I don't see how you can stop. What on earth could I do with you? Do you know t four or ve hundred men down in the valley there, and not a woman amongst them? How could I keep you here?

"No one would know that I was a woman," she pleaded piteously. "I would never go outside the door, if you like."

"They'd soon nd out. They'd want to know why you didn't work, and what was the meaning of those pretty hands and feet," he said ind 'No, we couldn't keep the secret if you stayed, Myra. They're a rough lot down there, too, I can tell you. Besides, what on earth would yo added, with masculine irrelevance.

She glanced down at the rents in her rough attire, and blushed.

"You have a needle and thread here," she said. "I could patch these things up somehow. I—I brought a gown with me in my bundle th suppose I mustn't wear that?"

He shook his head and glanced towards the bundle, which was lying upon the oor half-open. Something he saw seemed to him famili touched it with his foot and leaned forward.

"What dress did you bring?" he asked.

Her eyes sought his appealingly, and the deep colour stained her cheeks. A little tremulous smile parted the corners of her lips.

"It is—the blue serge one, the one you liked. I had put it away until you came back. Kind of silly to bring it, wasn't it?"

He looked at her for a moment, and his own eyes grew misty. The pathos of the whole thing, as he alone could understand it, was irre borne in upon him. Like a swift vision he seemed to see her struggling across that great rocky plain, day after day, night after night, ghtri the horrible loneliness, braving dangers and enduring privations which might have daunted many a man, and all the while clinging to her bundle, never parting with it even in those last dreadful hours of exhaustion and despair. Poor child! He remembered the gown well. It w which he had bought for her himself, the straight tailor-made folds pleasing his English eye. He remembered, too, how proud she had be had admired it, and how she had worn it on every possible occasion. There it lay before him, carefully folded and rolled up, and carried f ve hundred miles in the hope that to see her in it might awaken some of that old tenderness which with him, alas! was almost a thing of He looked into her strained, plaintive face, and did what, as yet, of his own accord he had not done or desired to do. He kissed her.

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She laughed softly, and glanced up at him from his shoulder, pointing to her clothes.

"Do these things look very awful?"

He affected not to notice the look which pleaded for some consoling speech, and gently detaching himself from her embrace, he stoo and drew from underneath the plank bed a long white linen coat which he had bought in San Francisco, but had found far too small for h shook it, and held it out to her.

"They want stitching, then they'd be all right," he declared. "You'd better put this on for a bit, and try to go to sleep. You've talked more now, and you look deadly tired. Good night."

She sat up and looked at him for a moment, but he kept his head turned resolutely away.

"Where are you—going to sleep?" she asked quietly.

"Outside. I generally do. We are too high up here for the dews to hurt, you know. Call out if you are frightened, or if you want anything you."

"Thank you. Good night, Bryan."

A little break in her voice smote his heart. He thought of the long lonely nights of terror through which she had passed, and he was tro felt a brute. For a moment he hesitated. Then he took one swift step across to her side, and kissed her tenderly.

"Good night, Myra," he said. "God bless you!"

She laughed a little. Blessings sounded oddly in her ears, but the kiss was more like old times. So she did her best to console herself slipping off her soiled clothes and curling herself up on the bed. In a few moments she was asleep.

It was the end of her pilgrimage. She had risked her life, had faced a loneliness as awful as the loneliness of death, and had cheerfull most terrible hardships to bring him the letter—and herself; and now that her task was at an end she lay stretched upon his hard plank b dreaming as peacefully of the happiness of being once more with the man she loved, as though the bed were of down, and the hut a pal outside, within a few yards of her, the Englishman lay face downwards upon the short dry turf, cursing alike his past folly and his present His letter lay unopened by his side; for the moment he had even forgotten it. Whilst he had been with her he had striven hard to hide his but now that he was alone in the darkness he looked this thing in the face, and the longer he looked the less he liked it. It seemed only t that he had made his escape; that he had willingly, nay, eagerly, turned over that short chapter of his life, and with intense relief had told that it was a past dream of folly, over and done with for ever. It was one of fate's grim jests, an everyday affair. But it seemed a little harc

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After a while he sat up, lit a pipe, and tore open the envelope of his letter. The moonlight was just strong enough to enable him to deciph

"18, MARLOWE COURT, STRAND, LONDON, W. C.

"August 17th.

"DEAR SIR,

"After considerable trouble and some expense, we have become acquainted with some further details concerning the man, Maurice who visited you at Denton on the rst of last month. We nd that his real name is Marriot, and that seven years ago a warrant was issue his arrest on a charge of forgery. The warrant was never executed, as he ed the country, but, on his recent visit to England, the polic obtained some clue as to his identity, and were on his track. It was to escape from them, and not to avoid completing his disclosures that he quitted England so abruptly. We trust that this will enable you to come across him in the States, as he certainly has no object keeping out of your way. We believe that he took another name in New York, but that you will doubtless have ascertained for yourse information further goes to show that he was the son of a clergyman, and started life with every advantage. Should anything further transpire we will let you know. In the meantime we remain,

"Your obedient Servants,

"MASON AND WILLIAMS.

"P.S.—It is never our desire to extract from our clients an unwilling con dence, but at the same time, we cannot refrain from submittin you that we should be in a far better position to work on your behalf, if we possessed sonic information as to the nature of the disclos important to yourself, referred to by the man Marriot during his brief visit to you at Denton."

He read it through twice, and remained for some time afterwards deep in thought. Then, with an effort to conquer his restlessness, he pulled a rug over him, and tried to sleep. Through half-closed eyes he watched the re ies gleaming in the valley below, and listened to th lulling music from the pine forest away overhead. Gradually he grew drowsy. He was almost dozing, when a sound close at hand disturb door of the shanty was softly opened, and Myra came out.

She walked noiselessly towards him, with bare feet, and wrapped in the long white garment which he had given her, and which certai never seemed destined to fall into such graceful folds around so dainty a form. He caught one glimpse of her dusky face, strangely soft waning moonlight, the lips a little parted in a faint smile, and the deep, glowing eyes full of a wonderful liquid re; and he realized as he ha done before the wild, strange beauty of the girl who was stealing like a ghost to his side. Then he closed his eyes and breathed heavily.

She stooped down till her warm breath fell upon his bronzed, sunburnt cheek. Then, seeing that he made no movement, she gave a w sigh, and kissed him so lightly that her lips seemed scarcely to brush his. Still he did not move, or give any sign of wakefulness. Present sink down by his side, and her head drooped upon his shoulder. In a few moments she was asleep. As soon as he was sure of it, he thre over her, and rising softly, walked away in the darkness.