

# The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 6: III. A WESTERN LOVE

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By six o'clock in the morning a bright sun, mounting into a sky of dazzling clearness, began to make its power felt. An hour later the Englishman who had been working on his claim since the first gray streaks of dawn, took off his clothes and plunged into a deep pool of the river. Eme dried himself leisurely, dressed, and scrambled up the gorge side to the small platform of green turf on which he had built his cabin.

His guest was at the door in her cowboy's clothes, patched and mended up. She welcomed him with a little cry of delight, and then a blush, as she saw his lips part with amusement.

"That's real mean!" she declared. "It's bad enough to have to wear such things, without being laughed at. I shall go and put on my gown."

He laughed outright, pushing her before him into the cabin, and glancing apprehensively down into the valley, and across to the opposite side. There was no one in sight.

"You won't do anything of the sort, if you please," he said decidedly. "You look very well as you are. Come and let's get some breakfast. I'm starving!"

"It's ready and waiting—all that I can do. Bryan, this is the most elegant place in the world. I never saw anything half so beautiful."

He turned round and stood by her side in the doorway, looking across the valley to where a dim blue haze shrouded the distant mountains. The pure, new air all colours seemed intended—the green of the alder and hazel-trees rising sharp and clear against the sky, and the deeper shades of the broad belt of pine-trees which fringed the mountain's side; a greatowering cactus with bright scarlet blossoms drooped over the plain below, and the rocks and bushes were starred with flowers of strange and brilliant colours growing out of every crack and in every corner. The morning air was sweet, too, with the perfume of many herbs and flowers, and far down in the valley the sun-smitten river gleamed like a bright silver. The girl, to whom nature in such a guise as this was a revelation, stood there with bright, thoughtful eyes, and with the languid motion of a breeze stealing through her dark wavy hair, no longer coiled up and concealed. She was feeling the touch of a new power in the world, a new sensation. Hereafter she sometimes associated a new phase of life into which she was to pass, with this morning.

"I like this!" she said softly. "It's better than the city. I'd like to live here always!"

The Englishman frowned.

"You'd be tired of it in a week, Myra. No shops, no theatre, no drives in the park! I doubt whether you'd stand it for a week. Come along and see what you've made of breakfast."

The girl turned away with a sigh, and followed him into the shanty.

"I've found some tea," she said, "and some bacon—I cooked that. The stove don't go very well; guess it wants cleaning."

"That's all right. Things look real tidy for once. Sit down and let us have some breakfast. Afterwards I want to talk to you."

She obeyed him in silence. Her cheeks had suddenly grown pale again. She ate but little, watching her companion most of the time. What was he going to do with her? Would he send her back after all—away from him, and back to the life she hated with a great soul-shuddering hate? It would not be so cruel as that; surely he would not! Go back to that great hideous city with its garishness and glitter, its cheap vice and all its show of falseness and iniquity! She had drifted there on the broad bosom of an unkind fate; a fate which should surely have marked her with better things. Vice had no allurements for her. The pleasures of the demi-monde, the cheap theatre and the tawdry dancing saloon, were all so flavourless to her. She thought of them now as she gazed out at the glorious blue sky, and the panorama of mountains and valleys, with a shudder which came from her very soul. The sweet scented breeze which swept in through the open doorway, tasted to her jaded senses like an elixir of life. A passionate disgust of cities and all their ways leaped up within her. From that moment the life of the past had become impossible to her. She had been born one of nature's children outside the ken of cities, almost of civilization, and it was but the return to an old allegiance.

The Englishman had finished his breakfast, calmly unconscious of all that was passing through the mind of his companion. He lit a pipe and pushed the form into the sunshine, and motioned her to sit at the other end of it.

"Myra," he said gently, after a few moments' meditative silence, "you've done me a real good turn. You've shown uncommon grit, and you've accomplished a thing which a good many men wouldn't have cared about. I haven't said much about it; I was so surprised to see you last night, you might have thought I wasn't grateful. But I am. I want to show it, if I can. I want to repay you so far as a man is able to repay a service, and so—"

"I want no repayment—only to stop right here," she interrupted breathlessly. "I should be perfectly happy. I could look after things and keep you, and keep the place clean, and—oh, Bryan, for God's sake, let me stop! You were fond of me once—anyway, you used to tell me so. Don't send me away! I don't care how you treat me. I will be your slave if you like—nothing more. Only don't send me back! Let me stay, Bryan! Do it!"

She had slipped from the form on to the ground, and was kneeling at his feet, her eyes bright with tears, and the colour coming and going on her cheeks. She even ventured to lay her arms imploringly on his shoulders, and turn them round his neck. The Englishman gently unwound her arms, retaining possession of one of her hands. He looked down into her upturned face with a troubled shade in his own.

"Myra, it wouldn't do," he said kindly. "You'll think me a brute, of course. Dare say I am. But I want you to leave here with the express intention of after-to-morrow, and go right back to San Francisco. I can't keep you here, little woman, if I wanted to; and if I could, I wouldn't, so there!"

Her bosom heaved. She drew herself right away from him, and stood leaning against the wall, with a crimson colour in her cheeks and a look of despair.

"You—you don't care for me any more, then? It was true, what I feared! You came here to get rid of me. You were tired, you wanted to get away!"

"Steady, Myra. You know that's not right. I came here for two reasons. First, to make money. Secondly, to get rid of a man who was a nuisance. I had come from England to find a man, and was not in San Francisco. I had no trace of him, nothing to go by. I thought to myself that if he was the real thing, of chap every one made him out to be, he would most likely be off on the gold fever, like the rest of them. That's why I came, Myra. It's a rough life for me here. I'm a rough sort of chap, and I can't do my level anywhere, but it's not the place for a woman."

"Any place is good enough for such as I!" she cried passionately. "It's only an excuse; you want to get rid of me. You do! And I have come here just to see you, just to bring you that letter. Just to be with you! Oh, I hate myself! I hate you! I wish I were dead!"

Her eyes strayed to the revolver which lay upon the table. She made a quick movement towards it, but he caught her wrist and held it fast.

"That'll do, Myra," he said firmly. "Just listen to me. If I am brutal it is your own fault—so here goes. You came to me of your own free will, on your own accord. Is it not so? I met you in Josi's cabin at San Francisco, whilst I was idling about waiting for—you know what. Well, you came to my house with me for a month or two. I was not the first. You told me so yourself. The thing was common enough. I never made you any promise, I never gave you to understand that it would be likely to last. When I heard that the man for whom I was lying in wait had left the city, I gave you notice that I was off. Well, you were sorry, and I was sorry. I shared up all that I had in the world, and I left you. I may have made you some promise about coming back again, but never as a permanency, you understand. I'm as fond of you now as I ever was—fonder, if anything. You've done for me—but you must take this little affair with me as you took the others—see? Now I've made you feel badly. I'm sorry, but I can't do it."

The changing shades in the girl's countenance had been a study for which many an eastern painter would willingly have bartered even the contents of his studio. At first her dusky face had darkened, and her eyes had blazed with all the wild free fury of a woman whose vanity, or love, or pride, had been deeply wounded. But as he went on, as the whole bitter meaning of his words, winged with a kindness which seemed to her like the point of an arrow's tip, sank into her understanding, the anger seemed to die away. When he had finished she was crouched upon the ground with her head to the ground. She did not answer him or address him in any way; only he knew that she was sobbing her heart out, and, being by no means a stoic, he tried to relent.

"Myra," he said kindly, stretching out his hand and laying it upon her shoulder, "come and sit with me for a minute or two before I go! I want to work again directly, and I can't leave you like this."

She got up meekly, dried her eyes, and sat at the extreme end of the form, with her hands folded in her lap, and gazing listlessly out of the doorway. Alas! the music of the winds and the deep, soft colouring of the hills and far-off mountains were nothing to her now! All the buoyancy of life seemed crushed and nerveless. Even that sudden strong, sweet joy in these glories of nature which had leaped up in her breast, a noble and joyous thing, was dead. Watching her as she sat there, the Englishman felt like a guilty man. He had made some clumsy attempt at a nonchalance which seemed to his limited vision right and kind. He was not accustomed to women or their ways, but he felt instinctively that he had made a mistake somehow. A sense almost of awe came upon him. He felt like a man who has destroyed something immeasurably greater than himself, something so grand that no power in this world could build it up again. He was penitent and remorseful, even sorrowful, without any reason as to what this evil thing was that he had done. Only he looked into this girl's downcast face, and he felt like some wanton schoolboy who has dashed to the ground one of those dainty, brilliant butterflies with peach-coloured wings, and a bloom so beautiful that a single touch from coarse fingers must mar it for ever. A moment before it was one of God's own creatures, a dream of soft elegance and refined colouring. Now it lay on the ground bruised and shapeless, uttering its broken wings for the last time, and breathing out its sad little life. In a minute or two some wind will kick it into the dust. That will be the end of it. The Englishman looked at the girl by his side, and his eyes twitched convulsively. There was a lump in his throat.

"Myra, I don't want to be a brute!" he said softly. "I want to act squarely to you. That's what makes me seem unkind, perhaps. I'm quite sure here! I've heard nothing of the man I'm in search of, but directly I have found him, I shall be leaving the country for good. It wouldn't be fair to come up with you again, would it? You're not like the others. I wouldn't mind if you were!"

She shuddered and looked up at him, dry-eyed and callous. "You are quite right! I do not want to be a burden upon any one!" she said. "I'm ready to do just what you think best. If you like, I'll go back the same way I came. I dare say I could do it all right. If not, it wouldn't much matter."

The dull despair of her tone, and the mute abandonment of herself to his wishes, moved him strangely. For the first time he hesitated. He had been prepared for reproaches, he had steeled his heart even against her tears, her caressings, her beseechings; but this was something new and different. From feeling altogether in the right, he began to wonder vaguely whether he was not attempting something singularly brutal and unmanly. He hesitated, and every moment the words which he desired to say became more impossible. He turned to her abruptly.

"Aren't you just a little rough on me, Myra?" he said softly. "Don't you see that it is for your sake I wanted to go!"

She looked at him, and his eyes fell before hers. "For my sake!" she repeated bitterly.

He began to feel absolutely conscience-stricken. After all, the reproach in her tone was just. It was as much for his own sake as hers that he wanted to be rid of her. There was an element of Puritanism in the man which rebelled against all the irregularities of this wild western life. He wanted to be his own man and live his own life! Well, he should have been consistent! Here was a harvest of his own sowing. If his heart had not been moved by the wild, beseeching pathos of this girl's dark eyes shining at him through a cloud of thick tobacco smoke in Josi's saloon, he would have found himself in such a quandary. Bah! it was useless to waste time on empty regrets, to rail at the past while the girl's heart was beating and bent over her.

"Look here, Myra," he said kindly. "I guess I'm not so sure about being right after all. I'll think it over whilst I'm at work. See? Don't fret! We can't fix up something."

"Very well."

He relit his pipe, and kissed her hesitatingly upon the forehead, a salute which she accepted with perfect impassiveness. Then he strode out of the cottage, and down the gorge to the river-bed.