

# The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 7: IV. THE LAUGH OF MR. JAMES HAMILTON

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Three men, the last to leave their claims after the day's work, climbed up the gorge in the heavy twilight. The Englishman and his partner little in front, Mr. James Hamilton brought up the rear.

At the parting of the ways they were separating, as usual, without a word, when the Englishman looked back over his shoulder.

"No cards to-night, you chaps—not at my shanty, anyhow!" he said briefly. "Do you hear, Jim?"

"Yes, I hear!" Mr. Hamilton repeated surlily. "You want me to sit and get the miserables in this cussed hole! I'll see myself d—d rest. If you ain't playing I'm off to Dan Cooper's saloon. Who the hell's that dodging about your hut?" he added, peering upwards through the brambles. "I goes for them, at any rate! I'd shoot anything to-day, from a dog to a Christian!"

He raised his gun to his shoulder with a savage scowl. The Englishman stooped down quickly and knocked the barrel into the air, which exploded harmlessly.

"I'll do my own shooting, thank you, Jim!" he said carelessly. "I've got a stranger up there, a boy who's found his way from San Francisco. He goes to Cooper's store if you like, and be eeced, and catch a fever, and get drunk on poison at a dollar a glass! It's no business of mine, but by my advice, you'll stop where you are and go to bed early for once! There's enough blackguardism going on down there, without your being in it."

Mr. Hamilton turned his back on them with an oath, and disappeared. The Englishman and his partner scrambled up the opposite side of the gorge, to the platform where they had built their shanties about a hundred yards apart. Arrived at the top, Pete Morrison thoughtfully hit his trousers, and spitting out a tobacco plug, laid his hand upon the other's shoulder.

"Mate!" he said deliberately. "I seed that stranger."

The Englishman turned quickly round.

"Well, what if you did?"

"Not much! It ain't a female, is it?"

The Englishman was beginning to lose his temper. He answered testily, even angrily.

"What the devil does it matter to you or to any one else, who my visitor is! I suppose I may have whom I like in my own shanty."

Pete was quite unmoved, although his face had grown a shade more serious. He took off his cap, and began icking away a few stray hairs.

"No offence, pard. But ain't you heard what Dan Cooper and his lot have give out?"

"No."

"Well, they allow they're going to run these diggin's on a new tack. Dan was at the Black Creek lot, and I guess you know what a hell that turned into. Well, they allow that the first woman who shows here, out she goes and him as brought her, claim or no claim. That's what they do down yonder," he added, jerking his thumb downwards in the direction of the camp. "That's what Dan Cooper and his chaps do say, and they're strong enough to run this section."

"That's so!" the Englishman answered, frowning. "Thanks, Pete! I'll take care! Better be mum about my visitor, anyway."

He walked away up the little green path, and pushed open the door of the hut. He scarcely knew the place. It had been cleaned and swept, and an evening meal was prepared. Myra was sitting in a corner, mending some old garment of his.

He greeted her kindly, but without going over to her side.

"Well, Myra! been lonesome, eh?" he asked.

She ached a single look up at him from her brilliant eyes, and bent again over her task.

"Sorter lonesome," she assented. "I've been busy xing up things too!"

"Looks like it," he answered, glancing around. "Let's have supper! We've had a nailing hard day's work!"

She got up without a word, and seating herself opposite to him, poured out the tea from a tin pot. He ate and drank with characteristic relish, and she made a show of following his example. When he had nished, she cleared away, and then came and sat down by his side.

"Have you xed up when I am to go?" she asked quietly.

She turned a pale, anxious face towards him, and sat patiently waiting for his answer. It was long in coming. He had begun dimly to see the end of it must be; but even at that last moment he felt a curious reluctance to re-entering into the bondage of her love for him. He leaned back on the bench, and looked at her, wondering at the peculiar inappropriateness of her rude and ill-shaped clothes with that strange, delicate beauty which was so essentially dainty and feminine. His heart beat a little faster as he looked into her soft dark eyes with their silky eyelashes, with some return of his old admiration of her, the quivering sensitive mouth, the great coils of waving glossy hair, and the perfectly graceful line of her throat and neck, gleaming as white as marble in contrast with the low black shirt she wore. The power of her beauty had always been upon him, and he was beginning to feel a sudden and altogether undesired revival of the curious fascination which once before she had possessed him.

"I have been inquiring about the expressman," he answered. "Seems I was out in my reckoning. They say he's not due for three weeks."

She lifted her eyes, and watched him covertly. He had not seemed in any way disappointed or disturbed at the prospect which was before him. Perhaps, after all, he was not so very sorry. He was only human, and the fierce solitude of the long nights, with their almost brutal relaxation of the cards and raw spirits, had lled him with a great intolerable weariness. In the day-time when work was possible, the life was, at any rate, busy. But the darkness came early, and the evenings were long. He had no books, nor any inclination to read them. The man's nature was too proud to keep himself aloof from those others, his fellow-workers, and besides, he had not the capacity for solitude. He was one with his fellow-workers with all the instincts of a common and gregarious humanity.

Through the long day and in the intervals of his toil, he had been thinking of these things. What had been gall and weariness in the city, was itself here, and under these conditions, in altogether a different aspect. He might truthfully say, if ever his conscience should reproach him in years to come, that he had done his best to rid himself of this girl's presence. He had failed! It was fate! She had drifted to him again, a comet from the broad river of humanity, herself controlling the current which bore her into his arms. After all, he was but passive in the matter. Even if he desired it, escape would not be easy, and in his heart he was not at all sure that he did desire it. In San Francisco he had found life with a curious antipathy to all his crude notions of what was seemly and honest. A strong and never conquered dislike to their mode of living came from the first. He had not a particle of religion, nor any conscious love of morality. He went into his bondage perfectly untrammelled by any other than instinctive ones. But in a week he was conscious of but one desire: to free himself from a connection which was utterly distasteful as speedily as possible; and it was in a measure the reaction from the enervating period of his brief liaison which had led him to throw in his lot with a handful of men bound for the gold region. In the shadow of the great mountains, face to face with Nature in all her primitive grandeur, he had become himself again. The hard physical toil had been a luxury to him. He had already learned to think kindly, almost with regret, of the life which so suddenly returned into his life. What a difference her presence seemed to make in the miserable little shanty! He was forced to admit that his previous re actions had all been favourable to her. Even had he desired it, escape now would not be easy.

Perhaps she guessed by his face and his tone, that he was relenting in his demeanour towards her. Womanlike, she took advantage of the opportunity. She glided across the room, and fell upon her knees before him.

"Don't send me away, Bryan!" she begged. "Don't! Don't!"

She was sobbing hysterically at his feet, crouching there, her hair and dress disordered, with all the sinuous grace and elegance of some wild animal. Then he took her hand, and hesitated for the last time. Slowly he stooped down, and wound his arms around her, raising her up to him. With a little soft cry she twined her fingers around his neck, and buried her face upon his shoulder. Then he drew her lips to his and kissed her.

They were silent for a few moments, gazing out into the rich, soft darkness, which spread itself like a mantle below them. Down in the distance could hear the mingled sounds of revelry at Cooper's store, and the steady hammering of some new arrivals marking out their claim and staking their tents. It was early for the moon, and the red fires like ashes of gold darted up and down the sides of the steep ravine, and hung like tiny stars in the valley below. Suddenly from the other side of the cleft a red flame leaped up hissing into the night. Myra started and looked breathlessly at the darkness.

"It's only Jim Hamilton—the chap who has the shanty opposite," the Englishman explained. "He's on the borders of a wood, you see, and a lot of bears. He burns pine boughs there, every night he's alone!"

Another tongue of flame leaped up, and now they could hear the crackling of the burning branches. Another and another followed. Myra moved forward, holding her breath, and fascinated for a moment by the curious sight. Even the man whose arm was round her supple waist was looking. The whole air was full of that tiful yet brilliant light casting a vivid glow upon the undergrowth and down into the precipice hung with tiny red fires, and throwing back strange lurid shadows upon the red-trunked trees and the dense blackness of the wood. Mr. James Hamilton himself, alternately feeding and raking the fire he had kindled, bathed in the rich scarlet glow became almost a picturesque object. Suddenly, as though conscious of being observed, he stood upright and turned towards them, leaning on his shovel, and slightly shading his eyes with his hand.

A great tongue of red fire scattered a thousand sparks, and leaped up into the black night. For a moment every line and furrow in the man's face stood revealed. The disclosure was startling, almost sinister. Even the Englishman, who had sat opposite to the man for months, started and turned away. For a few seconds he forgot his companion. Then, as Myra, from his side, and an added weight upon his arms, reminded him of her presence, he started with alarm. He caught her up in his arms and bore her to the bed. Her face was white and her eyes were closed. She had fainted.

And across the gorge, bathed in a stream of red fire, Mr. James Hamilton stood there like a carved gure, with a light more brilliant than any flaming pine boughs had ever cast, blazing in his eyes, and a fire more fierce than that which had made white ashes of the dry wood, burning in his evil heart. Then he dropped his hand and burst into a hoarse ringing laugh, a laugh which echoed up the gorge and down the valley, and was heard to the ears of the men sitting in Dan Cooper's store. One cursed the jackals, and another spoke of wolves. But the laugh was the laugh of James Hamilton.