

The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 8: V. A HATEFUL FIGURE FROM A HATEFUL PAST

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It was morning. As yet the sun had gained no strength, and though the air above was clear and bright with the promise of a glorious day, hazy white mists oated in the valley, and hung over the tree-tops. Mr. James Hamilton, after throwing a careful glance around, slipped out of his cabin, scrambled down the gorge and up the opposite side, and walked softly along the garden path which led to the shanty.

The Englishman had gone to the river—he had watched him go. Only his visitor was there. As he approached within a few yards of the door, Myra, who had just risen, came to the door to watch the sun strike the tops of the distant Sierras. Instead, she looked into the dark, evil face of James Hamilton.

She started back with a little low cry. The colour faded from her cheeks and the glad light from her eyes. A sudden faintness came over her, and sky, wooded gorge and rolling plain, commenced to dance before her eyes. She felt herself growing sick and numbed with horror. Later she had persuaded herself that it was a delusion. The shadows and the dim light had made her fanciful. But here in the clear morning's suns every object possessed even an added vividness, there could be no possibility of any mistake. The man whom it had been the one fervent wish of her life that she might never see again, was face to face with her alone in these mountain solitudes.

And he had not changed—not a whit. There was the same cold, ugly smile, the same endish appreciation of the loathing which he aroused. He took off his battered cap, and made her a mock obeisance.

"You—here!" she gasped. She felt that she must say something. The silence was intolerable. It was beginning to stir her.

"You've hit it!" he remarked. "Did you think I was a ghost? Feel! I'm flesh and blood! Come and feel, I say!"

He held out his arms with a gesture of coarse invitation. She shrank away with a little cry which dropped into a moan—almost of physical pain.

"Don't touch me! Don't dare to touch me! What do you want?"

Mr. Hamilton appeared hurt. His manner and his tone implied that he had expected a different reception.

"What do I want? Come, I like that! You don't mean to tell me that you've come to this God-forsaken hole of a place after some one else? I saw you last night, I thought at first of coming right over and claiming you. It's me you came for, I reckon. Ain't it, eh?"

Her eyes flashed upon him.

"Come after you!" she repeated, her bosom heaving with pent-up emotion. "Oh, my God! I would sooner walk into my grave. To look at you and remember, is torture! What do you come here for? How dare you come into my sight!"

He laughed; a low, sneering laugh that had little of merriment in it.

"So it is the Englishman, is it? Now listen here, my sweetheart, and don't squawk feathers. If we were in San Francisco, or any place where there was a choice of society, you could take up with whom you liked and be damned to you; but out here it's different! You're mine, and I want to have you! Do you hear? This blasted hole has given me the blues. I'm lonely, damned lonely, and 'pon my word, you're a devilish handsome little thing, you know! It won't be for long. I shall soon be as tired of you as I was before, and then you can come back to your Englishman! No nonsense, little fool! You belong to me, body and soul, and I'm going to have you!"

She had not been able to attempt any escape, had any been possible. The man's very presence seemed to have bereft her of all strength. She stood there fascinated with the deep unspeakable horror of it, trembling from head to foot, and miserably conscious of her own impotence. As she could recover herself his arms closed suddenly around her, and his hot breath scorched her cheek as he stooped down and lifted her face to his arms. She gave one despairing shriek, and then a cry of joy. There was a slow, deliberate footstep outside, and a tall form stood upon the threshold. Mr. Hamilton dropped his burden, and turned round with a fierce oath.

It was Pete Morrison who was lounging there, lank and nonchalant, with a pipe in his mouth and his hands in his pockets.

"Hello! What's the shindy!" he inquired good-naturedly.

"It's no affair of yours," answered Mr. Hamilton, with savage emphasis. "Stand aside and let us pass, Pete Morrison. I don't want the man to touch me, and I'll stand to my word to-day. Out of my path, or I'll let daylight into you, sure as hell!"

Pete Morrison stood a little on one side, and blew a volume of tobacco smoke from his mouth.

"Where's the hurry?" he inquired. "I ain't standing in your way. You may go as fast as you like, but I kinder think you'd better leave the door open, and added mildly.

"The boy's mine. Clear the way, I tell you!"

His hand stole down towards his belt. Quick as lightning Pete Morrison's hand flashed out towards him.

"Hands up, Jim."

Mr. Hamilton obeyed the order, and saved his life. He still looked into the dark barrel of Pete's revolver, but the pressure on the trigger was gone.

"Now look here, Jim," Pete Morrison remarked calmly. "I'll allow that this ain't none of my affairs. I interfere only as far as this. While my back is turned away, no one don't enter his shanty, nor meddle with his property—not if I'm around, anyway. If this 'ere boy belongs to you, come and fetch him while Bryan's here. That's all. Now I reckon you'd better quit. You seem to have scared the life out of the young 'un."

Mr. Hamilton was white with rage. He walked sullenly to the door and then turned round.

"Very well, Pete. Your turn now, mine next. I'm off to the creek. What was it Dan Cooper proposed, and Pete Robinson seconded, eh? Well, well! No women in this 'ere camp. And you and your damned partner thought you'd make fools of us all by calling that a boy, eh? Ha! ha! ha! Well, well! By my words, Pete, my ne chap. Before to-morrow's sun goes down, you'll be advertising for a partner. Ha! ha!"

He turned away. Suddenly a faint voice recalled him. He looked round. Myra was standing in the doorway, pale and trembling. She laid her hand on Pete Morrison's coat-sleeve.

"Is that true?" she whispered hoarsely. "Tell me quick."

"Reckon so," Pete answered gruffly.

He had done his duty to his partner, but he had no friendly feelings towards this stranger. She turned towards Mr. Hamilton, who was looking at her with an evil smile.

"Will you wait a little time before you go down and tell them in the camp?" she said, in a dull, lifeless tone.

"Four-and-twenty hours," he answered briefly. "If you are with me to-morrow morning before the sun touches yonder ridge, I am silent. If not, you know."

He sprang down the gorge side and disappeared. Pete Morrison had also gone back to his shanty without another word to the stranger. In his presence he found so unwelcome. Myra was alone.

She sat down upon the little bench and looked out with blind, unseeing eyes on the sun-smitten woods and the valley still overhung with wreaths of fairy-like mist. Alas, all their sweetness was gone for her. A great black shadow lay across it all. Shuddering, she dared for a moment to glance back at those awful days which for years she had been striving to forget; days of horror, and degradation, and sin, days almost of hell. She had climbed a little way out of hell, only to be thrust back again by the same hand that had 'dragged her down. She knew no God. She had no friend. There was no way for her to turn, nothing but death. She stretched out her hand, and thrust the small revolver which she had brought with her from San Francisco into the bosom of her gown. She had been very near it twice before: once when her first trust had been betrayed, in the desert when gaunt famine had stared her in the face. This time it seemed to her that death would be an easier thing. The man who had shown her the blackest and most hideous depths of human depravity was breathing the same air. Better death by the slowest and most agonizing tortures than that his hand and hers should ever meet again upon this earth. Better a hell of everlasting torture than such a hell as this. She stretched out her hand with a convulsive, dramatic gesture towards the little brown shanty on the other side of the gorge, and her lips moved as if to speak an unspoken oath. The sweet, sharp air into which she looked was rent by the single word which burst from her tightly-compressed lips: "No!"