

The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 9: VI. THE DESIRE OF THE WORLD

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Soon after eight o'clock, the Englishman, with his spade over his shoulder, and the perspiration streaming from his face, came toiling up all unconscious of the fact that he was being watched by three people. Mr. Hamilton, duly prepared for any little unpleasantness that might place, was skulking in the dark interior of his shanty, with a long knife in his belt, and his revolver on the table before him. He had no intention of going down to work until he saw what was to be the result of his morning's expedition. In public he felt that any contest between the Englishman and himself would have to be conducted according to the camp's notions of fair play. Here, on the contrary, he would have full advantage of the methods known only to himself and in which by frequent practice he had attained a singular proficiency. So he sat smoking his pipe, and the tall, stalwart gure climbing up the valley, with a grim smile on his dark face.

There were two others who watched his progress. Pete Morrison, who stood at the door of his cabin, equipped for the day's toil, and ready to go off and take his place; and Myra, who was of the three certainly the most anxious. Directly she saw Pete Morrison step out as though to take his partner, she hurried forward to the edge of the gorge, and waved both her hands to hasten him on. If she had felt sure of her footing, she would have scrambled down to meet him. Anything to have reached him first—anything to prevent the knowledge of the morning's adventure reaching him from any one else save herself.

She took one step down the gorge, steadying herself with a low-hanging alder bough. The Englishman saw her, and waved her back.

"Hold on!" he cried, in surprise. "I'm coming!"

"Hurry, then!" she called back. "Breakfast is just spoilt!"

Pete, too, had taken his pipe from his mouth, and seemed about to address his partner, now immediately below him. At the sound of the woman's voice, however, he paused and glanced up to the broad green platform on which she was standing, her hair waving in the breeze, and her form clearly outlined against the blue sky. He was too far away to read her expression, but something in her voice and her quick, anxious glance in that direction struck him curiously. He checked his forward movement, and contented himself with a gruff good-morning, as the Englishman passed below, and commenced to scramble up the gorge.

"Going down, Pete?" he called out.

"Right away!" was the brief reply.

"Hold on a bit!"

He lounged forward to meet his partner, who was scrambling up towards him. During the interval of his waiting, he glanced up to where the woman was watching the two men, in a manner which he meant to be reassuring.

"She'll tell him right enough," he reflected. "Guess she'll try and smooth it down. Just as lief she would! Hullo, mate, what's up?" he asked.

The Englishman's face was all aglow. He had something tightly clenched in his left hand, and after a quick glance around, he held it out to his partner, and slowly unclasped his fingers. Even Pete Morrison's set features relaxed for once. A gleam of enthusiasm shone in his hair, and he glanced suspiciously over towards Mr. Hamilton's abode.

"Keep it snug!" he said coolly. "I ain't seen Jim go down this morning, and I'd just as lief he didn't know of this, yet. Any more?"

"Heaps! More in my pockets. It's the biggest nd yet!"

Pete Morrison looked away for a moment, and his coat-sleeve brushed across his eyes. He had turned towards the Blue Hills, but he had seen the woman's worn, pale face, thin and harassed, yet with a soft, pleasant light in the keen gray eyes. It was gone almost directly.

"I was thinking—of my old woman!" he remarked apologetically. "It seems kinder hard!"

The Englishman made a gesture as though to stretch out his hand. Pete stopped him.

"Thank 'ee, mate!" he said hurriedly. "We won't shake. I guess that Jim's watching us from yonder. He's a bad lot, is Jim—a cursed bad lot."

The other nodded silently, and they separated. Pete shouldered his spade, and after one more doubtful glance at the slim gure watching him earnestly from the summit, slouched off. Myra watched him with relief. He had not told. A single glance in the Englishman's face was sufficient to assure her of that.

"Hungry, little woman?" he cried out cheerfully, throwing down the spade, and drawing her into the shanty. "Come inside, and hear some news."

He pulled the door to after them, and drawing her pale face up to his, kissed her once or twice.

"You've brought us luck, after all, you little puss!" he said heartily. "Sit down and give me my breakfast. I want to be off back at work. Let's rest, though!"

He held out his left hand, and she saw a lump of dull brown metal here and there glittering brightly. She balanced it in her fingers and gazed at it to him.

"Is it gold?" she asked, half-fearfully.

"Gold! Ay, to be sure it is," he answered, "and gold such as hasn't been found hereabouts yet. There's more, too, heaps more—piles and piles of it. My God! To think of its coming so suddenly as I was on the point of giving up! It's wonderful!"

He was standing up in the centre of the hut, his eyes gleaming, and his whole face lit up. The fever of the thing was upon him. After so much useless toil, success such as this was intoxicating. His companion's apathy amazed him.

"Don't you understand, Myra?" he exclaimed, passing his arm around her. "We're going to be rich, going to have heaps and heaps of little brown nugget here," he went on, touching it enthusiastically, "means the key to another world. It means diamonds and Paris dresses and a carriage for you, and for me, more than all that! For me—"

He stopped abruptly. A dark shade had stolen into his face; the light had died away. It was several moments before he spoke again.

"Yes, it means more than all that for me!" he added quietly. "It shall mean it. With this gold to aid me, I shall succeed. Come, Myra, be off with me, be off again!"

He ate and drank heartily, but a curious abstraction seemed to have settled down upon him. Every now and then he muttered to himself, and watched him with tears in her eyes. He was taking no notice of her whatever.

Her heart was aching to tell him everything; to creep into his arms, and sob out her miserable story. And then a chill stole into her blood through her veins. If they sent her away she would have to go alone. Now that they had at last found gold, all chance of his leaving with her was gone. Perhaps he would be angry when he heard that she had been discovered, that those rough men who had constituted themselves the guardians of the camp were to be appealed to, that she might be driven out. Perhaps—but, no, she would not dream for a moment of anything so horrible as that. He would never dare to suggest her compromising in any way with the man who had discovered her. He had been rough and sometimes, but he was a man—he would not do that! Oh, if only she could fall at his feet and tell him everything. Her brain was dizzy and her heart was sick with fears and memories. She looked into his face with despairing longing; if only he would let her see he must see the trouble she was in. But it was hopeless. He was almost unconscious of her presence. His sudden good fortune seemed to have awakened a train of memories completely and absolutely absorbing. She watched him in mute despair as he rose, lit his pipe, and prepared to go. Yet she must say something before he left her. He must know, at any rate, of the morning's adventure. If she did not tell him, Pete Morrison would.

"Bryan!" she began hesitatingly. He turned sharply around. He had been about to leave the place without even bidding her good-bye.

"What is it, Myra?"

"J wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. Are you in a great hurry?"

"Of course I am," he answered impatiently. "Whatever it is, to-night must do! I can't stop now."

She tried to speak again, but the words died away upon her lips. Before she could recover herself, he was gone. She listened to his loud steps as he strode away and disappeared over the gorge side. Even then she could scarcely believe it. She stood just as he had left her, her lips, and nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers. Gone with never a word or a glance to comfort her! For the whole day she must rest alone, alone with this hideous ghostly stock of memories to bear her company, and this precipice, deep and black, still yawning at her feet so much.

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The sun was high in the heavens when she opened her eyes. She had fallen across the oor face downwards, and the blood from a slight temple had dried upon her face. She staggered to her feet, and looked half-fearfully around. She was alone. There were no signs of any one who had been in. Presently, she fetched a pail of water and bathed her face, arranged her disordered hair, and sat down at the door.

Below in the valley there was a little hum of excitement. The news of a great nd had spread like wild re, and every one was working with feverish energy. She could see the dark gures all crowded together near the lucky claim, and now and then she could hear some hoarse murmuring of many voices. A new thought worked itself into her dull brain. Perhaps, in this great wave of excitement, they would let her go, and he would not be able to carry out his threat. She had done nobody any harm; perhaps they would not turn her out after all. Gradually, she came herself into a state, if not of cheerfulness, at least of some hope. She got up and tidied the place, made herself a cup of tea, and some food. Of her natural light-heartedness reasserting itself, she began even to sing. She had not much fear of another visit from Mr. Hamilton, for she knew him well enough to guess what the effect of the gold nd would be upon him. He would work for awhile, at any rate. She could picture him to herself, half-naked, and covered with dirt and sweat, digging with feverish energy, and cursing through his white teeth at every empty spung up. Until night, at least, she would be safe from him.

The afternoon stole on, and as the heat seemed to grow ercer rather than to decrease, she ung herself down upon the bed, and closed her eyes. How long she slept she could scarcely tell, but she suddenly woke up with a start. She found herself trembling in every limb. All the old terror was back again. She knew that it was no idle start which found herself trembling in every limb. All the old terror had awakened her so sure she was not alone. Across the oor on which her startled eyes were riveted, was the long, dark shadow of a man.