

# The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 10: VII. A YOUNG MAN FROM THE EAST

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"I beg your pardon, young lady. I am sorry to intrude, but as this is the first sign of a habitation I've seen for several days, I took the liberty in. I'm sorry to have disturbed your siesta."

The voice was a strange one. The new-corners were certainly not the man of whose intrusion she was in such abject dread, nor was, as she had thought, one from the camp below. She rose to her feet and faced him.

"Won't you come in and sit down?" she said.

He staggered rather than walked to the bench, and sank down with a little exclamation of relief. He was evidently completely exhausted, and he poured out some brandy into a cup and gave it to him. He almost snatched it from her fingers, and drained it to the last drop. Then he sat up, and a little colour began to creep into his cheeks. Myra looked at him curiously.

"Had a rough time?" she inquired. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head and pointed down into the valley.

"I have a donkey—I mean a mule—down there," he explained. "Plenty of provisions, but nothing to drink. I've come all the way from San Francisco," he continued. "What a journey! No roads, and not a single inn!"

She laughed gaily.

"Why, you didn't expect hotels all along the track, did you?" she exclaimed. "Seems to me that you're not used to this sort of country. I've never seen you from?"

He leaned forward, his hands upon his knees, an odd little fellow with a sallow, cunning face, and little bright eyes set a good deal too close together. Myra was not in the least afraid of him. She could have lifted him up and thrown him out of the shanty with the utmost ease.

"My dear young lady," he said deliberately, "you have exactly hit it. I am not used to this sort of country, and I don't mind telling you that I should get used to it. I don't like it, and I don't like the people. Now I appeal to you," he continued, waving his hand, and leaning back on his hands with his legs crossed, "I appeal to you, young lady, as an impartial and unprejudiced witness. I come over to San Francisco from—never mind where, but I come over to get gold. I am a perfect stranger to the country, the people, and their customs. Gold seeking being my mission, I desired naturally to associate with—er—people of that profession, or, at any rate, people who knew something about it. For that purpose I frequented a restaurant entitled the 'Ca Josi,' at the back of Seventh Avenue. Perhaps you know the place?"

A slight shudder passed through the girl's whole body. She looked at the stranger with suddenly reawakened suspicion. What did he mean by coming here and talking to her of the "Ca Josi?" He returned her gaze, however, with as much openness as could be expected from a man of such a physiognomy. The earnest, searching light of the girl's black eyes seemed to surprise him a little. That was all.

"I have heard of it," she said shortly, seeing that he waited for some response from her.

"Just so. Well, at that place I met a man who professed to understand the whole rigmarole of gold-digging. We talked of it every night. He was going to start himself almost directly, it seemed. He was just waiting for some money to come in for stores, and all that sort of thing. Boring you, am I?"

"Oh, no," she answered, starting at his abrupt question. "Go on."

"Just so. Well, the long and short of it is, that we arranged a partnership. He was to purchase tools, stores, and everything that was necessary. I was to be the one who was to plank down the brass. See?"

"Perfectly," she answered, smiling. "It's very simple."

"Lord! I was the simple," he groaned. "Ten days ago we left San Francisco on donkeys—I mean mules, and I don't mind telling you, that I let on to that chap, I'd never been on the back of any animal before in my life, except a Margate donkey for about two minutes. But, I forgot, I don't know what a Margate donkey is, of course. Whew! how I did suffer, and how that chap did laugh! We had an animal apiece, and arranged to carry the stores and a tent, and our tools. Well—but I ain't told you about my dream yet, have I?"

"I guess not," she admitted.

"Well, one night, night after I got to San Francisco, I dreamed that I was picking up gold as fast as I could lay my hands on it, lumps and nuggets all big and glittering. Well, there wasn't anything odd in my dreaming that, with my mind all running on gold-diggings, but I'm blown if I don't know the very name of the place. It was the Blue River valley."

She looked up.

"That's where you are now," she remarked.

"Worse luck!" he answered gloomily. "Well, I told this chap I'd fallen in with, when I heard that there was such a place, that the Blue River was the spot that I'd made up my mind for. He tried all he knew to dissuade me. There's a place called Christopher's Creek he was sweet on, and that was where he wanted to go. However, when he saw that I wasn't to be moved, he gave in, and we started for here."

"Where is he now? You said you were alone, didn't you?" she asked.

"In hell, I hope!" he snapped viciously. "Beg pardon. I'm a peaceful man—perhaps because there ain't size enough about me for fighting. It does make my blood boil when I think of that chap. We'd been six days out when we came to a place where the track forked out into two. I was sudden he pulls his mule up short, and whips out a revolver. I thought he'd gone mad, but I wasn't going to sit still to be shot at, so off I jumped. I got behind my donkey. Lord, you should have heard him laugh!"

"Look 'ere, matey," he says, "you're about the queerest pard I ever took up with, and I've had about enough of you. You reckon you want to go to the Blue River valley, don't you? Well, there's your trail straight ahead, and if you lose it, why, make for that mountain there, and you're all right. Christopher's Creek, and I guess we part here."

"What about my stores, and my tools, and my donkey?" I cried out, for he was leading the spare animal, and had got the rope round his neck. "You're going to leave me here, give up my property."

"What did he say to that?" asked the girl, biting her lip.

"Say? He didn't say much, but you should have heard him laugh. He stuck his great brawny fists in his sides, and leaned back on his donkey. Presently he wiped his eyes, and undoing one of our packages, he tossed me some tins and a pound of biscuits."

"Here you are," he shouted. "This'll keep the life in your ugly little carcass till you get to Blue River," and with that he hitched up, kicked his heels, and rode off, laughing till you'd have thought he'd have burst. What do you think of that for villainy, eh?" he asked, his little eyes twinkling.

"Rode off with my mules, my stores, my everything. Why, even the clothes that were on his back were mine, bought and paid for with my money, and he made me change donkeys with him just before, so that he should leave me with the worst. Damn him!"

Myra looked at him in half contemptuous sympathy. He was surely the strangest little animal who had ever wandered into this great world, where every man must fight his own battle, and be ready to fight it at any moment and in any place. His sallow, pallid little face, set with ferret-like eyes, was surmounted by a shock of black, unkempt hair. He wore a black tail-coat, travel-stained and devoid of buttons, the tight boots of a city clerk, and a linen shirt and crushed dirty collar. He was like a parasite of the town. Certainly he had no place in this great world where men needed hearts and muscles of iron, and rejoiced in a stalwart independence. She had lost all her distrust in him—it was merged in contempt. Surely no one would be so mean and debased a thing as to invent such a story as he had told. At his own reckoning he must be as a miserable little coward without mind or muscle. What was to become of him out here?

She put her thoughts into words.

"What are you going to do, now you are here, without tools or anything?" she asked.

"I don't know!" he answered, standing up and stretching himself. "I've got a little money left—just a little. I may buy a share in a claim. I'll let you see them, down there?"

He had strolled to the door, and was looking down into the valley, where the sounds of toil and hoarse voices were growing fainter. She looked over his shoulder with ease, and nodded.

"Yes; all round the bed of the old river," she answered. "They're about through for the day, now. Guess you'd better go down and see your quarters, unless you're going to camp out!"

"Not for me!" he declared fervently. "I've had about enough of that. If money can buy it, I'll sleep upon a bed to-night!"

"You won't find much in the shape of a bed down yonder," she remarked listlessly. Her interest in this odd little morsel of humanity had faded. It was getting near the time for the Englishman to return. Very soon her fate would be decided. It was strange to think that her eyes might be closed the morning break again. She would surely die rather than give herself into his hands again. She did not hesitate about that for a moment. She turned her face towards the great rolling plain. The memory of those awful days and nights rushed in upon her. Better death than to face him—alone! If she was driven out, it should be to die!

"Well, I'm off!" remarked a sharp voice at her ear. "I say!"

She glanced down quickly. The stranger was still standing by her side.

"Yes?"

"Odd thing it would be, wouldn't it, if I was to drop across a pal in this God-forsaken corner of the earth! Know the names of any of the claims here?"

She shook her head.

"I suppose they have names!" she remarked. "They don't use them much out here, though. They call one another anything!"

She chanced to look at him as she finished her speech. His bead-like eyes were fixed upon her, all alight with a keen inquisitiveness. He looked at them at once.

"Well, I should soon find them out, working amongst them," he declared cheerfully. "There are quite a lot of chaps I've knocked up again at different times, who said they were coming out this way. Let me see; there was Churcher—George Churcher, and Bill Dyson, and that fellow Richardson I met on the boat. Ay! and Dick Jenkins and that other chap—what's his name?—Maurice Huntly."

She caught hold of the side of the door, and shuddered. Through the fast gathering gloom, she could see his black glittering eyes fixed upon her.

"There is a man here who used to call himself Huntly," she remarked, looking down the valley. "That's his shanty, opposite!"

"Live alone?"

"Yes."

"About thirty years old. Short and stout; very fair and squints. Eh?"

She shook her head.

"No; he's tall and dark, and I don't think there's anything the matter with his eyes."

He scratched his chin, and appeared disappointed.

"Ain't the same," he remarked. "Didn't see how it could be. The man I mean was the least likely to be here of all the lot. He got married, and Lord, how dark it's getting! Good evening to you, my dear. I shouldn't be in no hurry, I can tell you, if I knew my way down that confounded valley better. Ta—ta!"

He leered into her face without apparently noticing the gesture of disgust with which she turned away from him. Then he scrambled on to the level, and mounting the mule which was browsing calmly by the wayside, he rode off awkwardly enough down the cañon. Once he tried to turn round to wave his hand, and very nearly lost his seat. The girl took no notice. She was standing there, straight and rigid, waiting for her chance.