

# The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 11: VIII. A CORNER OF THE CURTAIN

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The men were late coming from their work that evening. The twilight was merging into darkness, and a few reeds were commencing to droop about in the valley, when she heard their voices approaching. The Englishman and Pete Morrison stood talking for several moments at the door of the latter's dwelling, but though she strained her ears, she could not catch any part of their conversation. Presently, she heard a brief good-bye pass between them, and the Englishman's massive gure came towering through the darkness. She stepped back into the shanty, put the table where his supper was carefully spread, and stood waiting for him with beating heart. There was nothing more she could do. She took up the gown which she had jealously carried with her through all those days of toil and misery, and she had done her rich hair in the manner she liked best. Everything inside the shanty was as neat and tidy and clean as it could be made. She stood there waiting, her eyes soft with love, and the colour coming and going in her cheeks. She could even hear her heart beating underneath her dress. It seemed to her that her fate would be written in his face.

He unlocked open the door of the shanty and entered, stooping low. When he drew himself up, she was unable to decide immediately whether his countenance was favourable or not. He nodded to her kindly, but in an abstracted manner, and—he did not seem to notice her gown. He quivered pitifully.

"You're late, Bryan," she said. "Your supper's all ready."

She came and stood over by his side. He put his arm around her waist and kissed her.

"You're a regular little Englishwoman," he declared, glancing round. "Shouldn't have thought that you'd have been up to roughing it like Jove, Myra, how handsome you are!"

He held her out at arm's length and looked at her. The soft colour glowed in her cheeks, and her eyes ached with joy.

"Am I?" she whispered. "Guess I like you to think so."

He looked at her steadily, and a cloud passed over his face. He was thinking of the future, nearer than ever it seemed to-night, when their parting must come. What would become of her; what manner of life was there in which she could find happiness, and keep herself from sinking deeper into the slough from the borders of which he had snatched her? That very beauty, which it seemed to him that until then he had never properly appreciated, now all the more glorious for its pitiful surroundings, troubled him. It was too fair a thing to be coupled with a life.

"Well, let's have supper," he said suddenly. "I had a huge wash in the river, and I've an appetite, I can tell you."

They sat down together. Her relief was too great for her to eat. But suddenly a cold chill ran through her blood. Her heart sank. Suppose he had not, after all, mentioned the morning's adventure? He happened to be looking at her, and he noticed the change in her countenance.

"What's up, Myra?" he inquired, setting down the tin pannikin which he had been in the act of lifting to his lips. "Seen a ghost?"

She looked at him, and suddenly leaned forward. "Has Pete Morrison told you about this morning?" she asked breathlessly.

He frowned and went on with his supper.

"Yes. That beast Jim came up and frightened you, didn't he? We've been too hard at work to talk much, and Pete isn't much of a hand to like to hear you tell me just what happened."

She stood up and locked her hands nervously in one another.

"Yes, I want to tell you," she said. "I want to tell you very much. You've never heard how it was that I became—what I am. I should like to tell you."

She was very pale, but a dull red spot was blazing in either cheek. Her bosom was heaving and her breath was coming sharply. The Englishman moved uneasily in his chair. He hated a scene, and the girl's agitation distressed him.

"No! I wouldn't talk about it, Myra," he said. "I know that it wasn't your fault, of course."

She shook her head. "I must tell you a little—not all. I shan't make a long story of it. My father was a timber man on the Mellin River, a hundred miles from San Francisco. I lived with him, and I hated it. I had no mother, no sisters or brothers. One day he died, and I was alone in the world. I went to try and find an aunt in San Francisco. I was about sixteen then. She was very poor, and very cruel to me; but I shared her room and worked as a waitress at a restaurant. There was a young man who came there, who offered to marry me. I was utterly miserable, and I accepted him once. I cared nothing for him, and told him so. He did not mind; he wanted me, anyhow. So I married him. In three days I left him. He told me he had another wife alive, that our marriage was only a sham; and when I declared that I should leave him, that very instant, he tried to beat me."

"I went to my aunt. She turned me away with an oath. Then I took another situation. In a week or two he found me out. He begged me to go back, but I refused. He left me money. I threw it at him. He did not break into oaths, as I had expected, but he went away quietly. He sent me money by the post. I would not use it. He came back again, and threw himself at my feet, imploring me to go back and live with him. Again I refused. After that, I lost my situation—through him, I discovered afterwards. I was starving. Then he came to me again. He was quiet, and even gentle. He begged and begged, until at last in despair, I consented to go back to him. He treated me well for awhile. Then I discovered why."

"He had a friend, or rather a master, who had been pleased to admire me. What the hideous compact was, I do not know, but his only way of getting me back was to hand me over to this man—for a price. I was to be sold like an animal. The man who had deceived me was to pay for his master. It was a bargain between them. After weeks of persecution, I came to know of it. I do not try to tell you of the hideousness of it. I dare not let myself think of them. Only if an eternal hell opened before my feet side by side with a renewal of them, I should choose hell over it. God! I cannot bear to think of them!"

She wrung her hands, and a curious strained look came into her features. Her eyes were full of horror. She swayed and would have fallen if the Englishman leaned over and passed his strong arm around her.

"Poor little woman!" he said tenderly.

His tone acted upon her like magic. She fell on her knees, and hid her face upon his chest, sobbing as though her heart would break. When the storm was over, he lifted her easily on to his knee.

"Look here," he whispered. "What's the good of raking all this up? I don't want to know anything about it. I'd rather not."

She shook her head. "You don't understand!" she said. "I must tell you. I shan't mind so much now. Bryan, those men were like ends of the earth made up my mind to die before I gave in. It wasn't that I minded—the actual wickedness so much, but I hated that other man—oh, how I hated him! They treated me sometimes like gaolers, sometimes they brought me diamonds, and sometimes they tried to starve me. One night the other man came in alone. I—I can't go on. I was desperate, and I stabbed him. He wasn't much hurt, but he was frightened, and I got away. I was utterly alone, had not a friend in the world, and no money. I gave up all hope of leading a good life. I came down to Josi's Cabin, and I saw you. You were kinder to me than any one ever had been in my life, and your face was honest. You know the rest of that. We were together for the happiest two months I ever had. Then you left me, and I thought my heart would break. I was afraid to be alone. That other man was pitiless, and he was strong. I was horribly afraid of him. He was rich enough to have a whole army to back him up, and I shivered when I thought of what he might do. The day that letter came for you, and the same day I saw him in his carriage, and a strange man followed me home. I was wild with fright, and you know what I did. I followed you here."

He patted her cheek, and smoothed the hair from her forehead.

"Well, you're safe enough 'here, little woman," he said with gruff kindness. "I don't see what you want to look so scared for."

She lifted her face to his. "I haven't told you yet," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "Bryan, that man you call Jim Hamilton is the man who ruined me. His real name is Maurice Huntly. He is an Englishman."

"By thunder!"

The Englishman's face was a study. The half-vexed sympathy with which he had been regarding the girl upon his knee, had altogether disappeared. His face exhibited nothing but the blankest astonishment and wonder.

"You won't give me up to him?" she whispered.

"No, I won't give you up," he promised absently. "Maurice Huntly! My God!"

She looked at him sadly. A new light was breaking in upon her.

"You know—something about him," she cried breathlessly.

"Not much," he answered, with a short laugh. "Only that he is the man whom I have come five thousand miles to find. Huntly! Maurice Huntly! My God!"