

The World's Great Snare (Thriller Classic)

Chapter 12: IX. A NEW PARTNERSHIP

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The stranger pursued his way with some alacrity down the cañon, and eventually reached the level without accident. Here he paused to take breath and look around. To the right the old bed of the river wound through a fertile valley, and here it was that the bulk of the gold-digging was being done. In the distance a few dark figures with lanterns in their hands were still bending over their work, but the great majority had risen the day, and in the dim light the great deserted space, with its occasional mounds of fresh-dug earth, and a few rude shafts standing up to the naked sky, had a weird, ghostly appearance. The stranger, whose nerves appeared to be none of the strongest, shivered and led his mule following the track to the left. He turned round a steep promontory, and found himself at once in the midst of the settlement.

There were about a score of roughly put together wooden shanties, and one long pine-board building, in front of which several oil lamps were burning steadily away in the breathless night. Most of the dwellers in the place seemed to be gathered round the latter building, although a few were leaning against the walls of their shanties smoking alone. A few yards apart, a dozen or two Chinese were squatting on the ground round a tent, playing cards by the light of several ickering candles.

The arrival of the stranger was the signal for a universal stir. The group around Cooper's store all ceased talking, and turning round, stared at him with various exclamations. The men who had been lounging alone forgot their unsociability in the unwonted excitement, and crowded round him. Even the Chinese threw down their cards, and gazed upon the new-come open-mouthed.

"Any more of yer, matey?"

"What's the gang?"

"Say, have you brought the mail?"

"Got a newspaper, pard?"

"Hitch him up; there's a nail!"

There was a momentary silence at last. It was felt that the stranger ought to be given a chance to declare himself. He fastened his mule awkwardly up as directed, and stood on the threshold of the store looking round into the rough, toil-hardened faces by which he was surrounded with some little trepidation. Then he scratched his head feebly and tried to answer their questions. After the deep bass voices which had greeted him, his shrill, quavering tone sounded oddly.

"I'm quite alone," he said. "I had a partner, but he has gone to Christopher's Creek. He went off with all my tools as well as his own. I've been five days on the way from San Francisco. I didn't bring a newspaper. I'm going to get something to eat and drink. I'm afraid it won't run to drink, but if a bottle of whisky—"

"Hurrah!"

"Bravo, little 'un!"

"That's bully!"

The stranger found his speech brought to an abrupt termination and himself carried off his feet in the sudden rush to get inside the store. He stood in no little danger of being knocked down and trampled on, but Mr. Hamilton, with a consideration which was highly creditable, caught him by the middle, and lifting him bodily up, deposited him, limp and breathless, in a chair before a long wooden table. Then he joined the crowd round the bar.

The storekeeper, with the bottle of whisky under his arm, leaned over towards the new-come.

"Seven dollars, guv'nor," he announced, "tip it up, and I open the stuff."

The new-come produced a slender roll of green-backs, and counted out the money. A dozen hands were extended to pass it over, and a great gulp of relief passed through the little crowd when it was seen that the money was to be forthcoming. Blue River prices were high, and there had been some apprehension lest the stranger might withdraw from his generous offer.

The bottle was drained to the last dregs. Then one or two of the men brought their liquor over, and sat down at the table. Mr. Hamilton secured the place next the stranger.

"Dan," he shouted, turning round, "come and take the gentleman's order. Didn't you hear him say that he was hungry? Come and wait on our patrons, you idiot!"

"What's 'e want?" inquired the storekeeper, lounging over the bar. "Can't he give it a name?"

"Whar's the menu? Guess that's what he's waiting for," remarked one of the loungers at the table. "Reckons it's Delmonico's. Fitch the salad, Dan."

Mr. Hamilton brought his stool down on the table with a weighty bang, and glared savagely around.

"Shut up, you blarsted fools! Stranger, there's boiled rabbit and onion sauce. Can you eat boiled rabbit? You can. Good, so can I! Dan, get two platefuls—platefuls, mind, and don't stump it!—of boiled rabbit. We will select the wines later. Mates," he added, looking down the table at the lowering brows, "this gentleman is my friend. You understand!"

He touched his belt. There was no spoken answer, but in a minute or two the table was empty. One by one they got up and lounged over to the only man amongst them whose face was at all kindly glanced at the stranger as he passed, half in contempt, half compassionately. It was plain to him that he could not hear their remarks when they came together outside. It might have spoiled his appetite.

Mr. Hamilton and the stranger were soon alone in the store. Their supper had arrived and was half nished before either evinced any desire for conversation. Then Mr. Hamilton, sitting with his fork, leaned back in his chair, and steadfastly watching his companion, asked a question.

"Name, pal?"

The stranger leaned over. "Eh? I beg—"

"What's your name," I asked?

"Oh! Christopher Skein. What's yours?"

"Hamilton. Jim Hamilton here, Huntly in 'Frisco. Maurice Huntly, Esq., when I'm in luck. What the hell's the matter with you?"

Mr. Skein was evidently nervous. He had dropped his knife and fork, and had disappeared after them under the table. When he resumed his upright position, there was a tinge of dull brick colour in his cheeks, and his little eyes were brighter than ever.

"I'm all right," he declared briskly—"right as nine-pence. Let's have some more liquor! I'll pay! Name it!"

"Brandy!" growled Mr. Hamilton. His companion's suddenly increased hilarity was making him suspicious. It was time to pump him dry.

"Say, what have you come for?" he began, folding his arms upon the table, and leaning heavily forward. "Is it the gold fever that brought you on any little lay of your own, eh? Straight, now; no lies! By thunder, I'm not the man to tell lies to. Just you remember that, my weasels."

An ugly light flashed into his red, bloodshot eyes. He ung a six-chambered revolver down on to the table before him with an unnecessary flourish. The stranger turned pale, and edged his chair away. He was getting horribly frightened.

"Please turn that beastly thing away!" he said peevishly. "It might go off."

Mr. Hamilton stared at him, and then grinned. It was very clear that he had found a greenhorn here.

"Might go off!" he repeated ironically. "Oh, lord! Might go off! Ha, ha, ha!"

He leaned back in his chair, and relapsed into a fit of strident laughter. When it was over, he wiped the tears from his eyes and sat up.

"Go on, young 'un!" he said, almost good-humouredly. "Spin us your yarn!"

Whereupon Mr. Skein told his story, with a few embellishments which recent events had suggested to him. For instance, it appeared that his late partner had stolen both revolvers, and threatened to shoot him dead if he followed him a yard. He liked this story better than the other, and repeated it twice. He had sense enough to know himself that he was a coward, and physically at a miserable disadvantage with the wearisome men who had thronged the store a few minutes ago. At the same time he fully realized the importance of keeping this fact as far as possible from himself.

Mr. Hamilton listened with some appearance of sympathy. At the close of the narration he produced a pipe, filled and lit it, and spat upon the floor.

"You've been pretty roughly used, and no' mistake," he declared. "Why didn't you turn back, though? What's the use of coming here without money, or any-thing? What the hell are you going to do?"

"Who said I hadn't any money, eh?" demanded Mr. Skein, running his fingers through his hair. "I'm not stoney broke yet—not quite."

Mr. Hamilton grew more interested.

"Got a bit o' money, eh?" he remarked. "What are you going to do with it? Mark out a claim, and chuck it away in tools, I suppose. I'm not going to see how you're going to handle the shovel, though, when you've got it. Where's your muscle? Lord! what an arm!"

"I would rather," Mr. Skein remarked, with his eyes keenly watching the other's countenance, "I would rather pay for a share in a claim already being worked, and take a partner. Having no experience, and being as you say not very strong, I should be content with the smaller share, the pro ts."

Mr. Hamilton drained a glass of brandy, and held out his hand.

"Put it there, young man," he said impressively. "I'm the only man here who's working alone, and I've got a claim as good as any of the other to those lucky devils who've been panning out nuggets all day. I've got a shanty all to myself, and there's heaps of room for you. Blame me to take a fancy to you the moment you came in! Plank down the coin, and we're pards."

"What's the gure? I ain't no blooming Vanderbilt, you know; be easy."

Mr. Hamilton meditated.

"I'll take two hundred dollars, and you take a third of the swag, or ve hundred, and go yer halves. That's liberal."

On the banks of the Blue River the men toiled hard by day, and slept heavily at night. But high above their heads, in the little wooden chamber at the head of the gorge, that dull, sickly light shone steadily on.