THE MASTER KEY

By John Fleming Wilson

By special arrangement for this paper a photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Master Key" may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Manufacturing company it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" in this paper, but also afterward to see moving pictures of our story.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

"A Traitor to John Dorr."

RUTH GALLON awakened at dawn and looked about her, trying to remember what had happened and where she was. Slowly there came back to her the scenes of riot in Bhala, the assault on the hotel and their own subsequent flight.

Around her the natives lay in postures of sleep. Not far away, within arm's reach, John Dorr was still unconscious of the new day.

Apart sat Sir Donald, rifle on his knee, bowed in drowsiness after his night's vigil.

She called over to Faversham, and he roused himself, apparently much embarrassed that he had been found watching over the slumbers of his company.

A moment later the whole camp was up, and breakfast was soon dispatched.

"Now for a council of war," the baronet said presently. "So far we have made good our escape from the fanatics, and I believe now it would be wise to turn back and seek civilization again for the sake of Miss Ruth."

"Oh, I am good for any amount of this kind of travel!" she exclaimed. "And I am wild to go ahead and find the idol and the plans."

"So far as we know, they are in Bhala," Faversham remarked, with some brusqueness. "I don't intend that you shall risk your life again in such foolishness."

John Dorr had steadily grown more and more suspicious of the Englishman's attitude, and he now bitterly resented his assumption of guardianship over Ruth, the more so that he realized Faversham had extricated her once from a tangle of his making and was undoubtedly right when he proposed that she be placed in safety.

His first impulse was to insist that Ruth follow his plans, but second thought told him that he would be playing an unworthy part.

"Where shall we take her?" he demanded.

"Back down the river to some city where there are Americans," was the response. "Bombay would be best of all."

"But that would leave me so far away!" Ruth protested. "I know John will insist on keeping after the plans, and I don't want to be left out of everything."

John Dorr joined Sir Donald in arguing that there was little sense in going on a wild goose chase and that she would be far better off with good people of her own race.

"But who?" she demanded at last. "We don't know any one."

"I do," Faversham put in quickly. "I know some awfully jolly Americans, too, missionaries. Then there's your American consul, you know."

It was settled at last, and they returned by easy stages to Bhala and thence down the river.

Sir Donald was as good as his word, and Ruth found herself invited to stay as a guest at several houses.

She chose that of the American consul, a middle aged gentleman, who, with his wife, presided with true eastern hospitality over a little group of business men and missionaries.

Mrs. Reynolds received the girl with open arms, listened to the story of her

"But that would leave me so far away!" Ruth protested.

adventures and thanked God devoutly that Ruth was at last under the protection of fellow countrymen. To John her language was plain:

"What in the world do you mean by dragging this young lady over half creation and making her run all sorts of risks?"

"But"—

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Reynolds severely. "You even let her discharge her maid. And of all the awful things—it's a wonder you haven't got her killed before now!"

John tried to explain that Ruth was a western girl used to looking after herself and that she had insisted on coming along.

The consul's wife sniffed.

"But you didn't have to come," she responded promptly. "I understand that you are merely going on idle gossip anyway. You shan't stir the girl out of my sight, I tell you! Go and find your plans and risk your own life. Miss Gallon stays here."

"And I'm sure there is no place I'd rather leave her," Dorr said gratefully.

To the consul he confided briefly that he was still determined to find the idol and get the hidden plans.

"You may be too late," was the quiet response. "A man named Wilkerson and another man and a lady have already gone up country, and I am informed that they are on the same quest."

"All the more reason why I should hasten," Dorr answered. "Every hour may be precious. I must see Sir Donald immediately."

To his surprise, Faversham was very cold about the second excursion.

"So long as it was a case of getting Miss Gallon and yourself out of a bad scrape, I did my best," he told Dorr. "But I agree with your consul—an excellent fellow—that what you propose is ridiculous. The priests have ample warning, and I am informed that they took measures to secrete the idol. You can gain nothing by further search."

John argued with some temper, but Sir Donald was immovable.

And, as he most evidently had sound common sense on his side, Dorr could not afford to lose his temper.

"I suppose you'll help me out by letting me have that old servant of yours?" he said finally.

"Anything!" said Faversham cordially. "But I must certainly warn

"You may be too late," was the quiet response.

you once more that I shall feel guilty in even letting you go."

John's jaw stiffened.

"I guess it would be beyond your power to stop me."

Faversham shook his head.

"A word from me to the authorities and you would find yourself not only debarred from such a foolhardy expedition, but politely yet firmly made to leave the country."

John grinned.

"I suppose that's right," he agreed. "But you won't be a spoil sport, will you?"

The baronet shook his head.

"No, I won't. But I can't go myself. I'll stop here and have an eye out for Miss Gallon. Then if a rescue expedition is in order I can be here to head it."

For the moment John was blinded by a blaze of jealousy.

While he was risking his life for Ruth's sake Faversham would sit comfortably within the protection of his club and plot ways of winning Ruth.

He curtly accepted the offer of the servant and went off to make his preparations. These made, he sought Ruth.

He found her in a strange state of excitement. Evidently the consul and his wife had not spared pains to impress upon her the dangers of the proposed expedition.

"They're old grannies," was John's disrespectful comment. "Ruth, you know that without those plans we're helpless to make 'The Master Key' into what your father wanted it to be. I set out to get those plans, and I've not come this far to turn back."

"I know," she said miserably. "But everybody says it is all foolishness. Sir Donald"—

"Oh, that quitter!" he interrupted. "I know he prefers sitting around making love to you to doing something really worth while."

There was the glimmer of a smile on Ruth's lips as she answered meekly. "Then you don't think that—sitting around—and making love to me—is—worth while?"

For a moment John stood and stared at her. The blood rushed into his face.

Then the full meaning of her light evasion of his real meaning struck him like a blow between the eyes.

His heart was filled with love for her, a love that had grown and increased since the hour when he had first seen her at old Tom Gallon's door.

He had thought that his devoted service to her interests, his constant attention to the slightest detail that could insure her future happiness, would have published that love to her.

He was minded to tell her now, to forego all else in order to woo her for himself.

"Ruth"— he began. But some subtle change in her manner froze the hot words on his lips.

"Well," he went on, controlling himself by a tremendous effort and trying to speak lightly, "I'll be off. Thank heaven you'll be safe here."

There was a struggle in Ruth's breast too. Yet the memory of her promise to Faversham stilled her.

In that long and terrible moment she realized that John Dorr was all in all to her. Yet she was bound to another who had risked his life on the strength of her promise to marry him, and she could not speak what was in her heart.

She tried to look John bravely in the eyes, and the tears would come in spite of her.

She bowed her head, and so he left her, with bitterness in his soul, but the firm resolve to carry out his self appointed task no matter what the outcome.

Faversham was as good as his word, and the old native agreed once more to risk the hills and guard this stranger who, he was convinced, had lost his mind.

But his duty was plain and Sir Donald's injunctions not to be trifled with. That evening the two of them set forth, following in the track of Wilkerson and his party.

That John should have departed without further farewell hurt Ruth sorely.

It seemed to mark a definite break in their frank relations, and she felt that when he returned with the plans she would have to receive him on an entirely new footing—the footing of a business man with his employer.

And while the hurt was fresh she turned to Sir Donald gratefully. He had acted most delicately in all their experiences together. He had proved his devotion by coming with them to India and during the horrible nightmare, when their hotel had been the center of assault by fanatical natives.

He had accepted her promise without undue exactions. He had seemed to be waiting till he and she could speak more definitely.

Faversham was by no means dull, and he played the part of a kind friend during the first days of John's absence.

He knew that Dorr was in love with Ruth, and he strongly suspected that her feeling for him had once bordered on love.

He would tear open no old wounds. He was devoted, cheerful, always at her call, but never insistent on his privileges.

The American consul liked him from the first and told his wife that Ruth would be a fool if she preferred a harebrained idiot to a solid gentleman with no nonsense about him and assured position in society.

Mrs. Reynolds, having been rebuffed when she sought Ruth's confidences, merely stated it as her opinion that all girls were alike, a dogma the consul was too wise to argue.

But he gave Sir Donald the freedom of the consulate and saw to it that he had every chance to visit with Ruth.

Now, the baronet was not only no dullard, but he had been bred in a school that forbade him to linger too long before claiming Ruth openly as his fiancee.

At exactly the right moment he offered her a gorgeous ring and pressed his suit ardently. He said nothing of the promise he had exacted, and Ruth for very shame's sake accepted the ring and the ensuing congratulations of Mr. Reynolds, his wife and their friends.

Deep in her heart she felt herself a traitor to John Dorr, alone on his perilous errand, gone into the hills without even a stray word of his safety coming back.

It was not long before Dorr, through his servant's ready tongue, learned of the flight of the priests with the idol, their subsequent defeat by Wilkerson and that man's escape, together with Drake. There was but one thing to do—follow Wilkerson.

The native guide received the news of their change of objective with undisguised contentment.

Sir Donald's commands alone had forced him to disobey his own instincts. But in a matter that lay wholly between white men he saw nothing alarming to his own safety or personal dignity.

However, he warned John over and over again that the sacrilege had roused certain fanatical tribes to a pitch where they would ask few questions of wandering Europeans, but seek instant vengeance.

John's prayer was that Wilkerson and Drake might escape till he himself could overtake them.

Otherwise the idol would undoubtedly vanish once more into limbo.

Wilkerson himself was having a difficult time of it. The men with him were almost openly rebellious, and at

"That idol is going back to the States with me."

every attempt to retrace his road to the coast he found himself cut off by wandering bands of hillmen whose attitude was too threatening to be mistaken.

"If you would only drop that idol," said Drake for the twentieth time, "they would be satisfied to take it and let us go."

Wilkerson laughed and shook his head. "That idol is going back to the States with me," he returned.

"But why in heaven's name?" demanded his companion. "You know that these people will never let us alone so long as they think we have it. You have the plans. What more do you want?"

"It brought me good luck and old Tom Gallon bad luck," was the response. "Do you think I don't want to keep it? It's my mascot."

Yet a couple of night alarms shook Wilkerson's resolution, and he agreed with Drake that they should surrender the image.

Here they were confronted with a new difficulty. None of their men had been allowed to know of the presence of the idol, and Drake asserted that to inform them now would be dangerous.

It seemed unwise merely to drop it by the wayside, as it might escape notice, and no good would be done.

It must be delivered to the priests and the condition made that the white men should be allowed safe conduct to the city.

How to do this occupied their minds until the day when they found themselves really attacked in force and had to take refuge in a native hut.

Here their position was so perilous that they had no time for anything but preparations for defense.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Snake in the Image.

"THEY mean business this time," Drake growled as they did their best to barricade the single door and window. "I believe those hills are full of them."

"And our own bullies aren't up fighting with good grace, either," Wilkerson confessed. "These half whites have no sand."

"It's an odd thing," Drake said when the afternoon had passed without an assault, "that we hear firing, but none of it is directed at us."

"That's so," Wilkerson responded thoughtfully. "I wonder who it can be?"

He was soon to know, for after nightfall John Dorr and his single attendant rode furiously up to the hut and tried for admittance.

A few scattering shots told that they had been discerned in their flight.

For the moment Wilkerson did not recognize his old enemy, disguised as he was in native costume, but when he was sure he reluctantly opened the door and admitted him.

John flung himself inside and jammed the door to just as a second hail of bullets rattled on its surface. Then he stared at the man opposite him.

"Wilkerson!" he gasped.

"Yes, it's me," was the snarling response. "What are you doing here?"

"Some hillmen took us for enemies and chased us pretty much all day long," Dorr explained. "We saw this hut, and when it was dark enough to conceal our movements we made for it."

"And now you can make for some other place," Wilkerson said, handling his revolver meaningly.

John laughed.

"I feel myself that the place is too small for both of us. But it's white man against native now. If they get me they'll get you. Our only hope is to stick together now."

"I'll see you dead first!" snarled the other.

But Drake spoke up and silenced him.

"While you two are fighting for the benefit of the servants those hillmen are preparing to assault the hut."

A long look through a crack showed the hillmen closing up about them, and Wilkerson gave in with a bad grace.

He was glad of the help, however, when the firing grew hotter and they were hard pressed in the hut.

The natives proved themselves arrant cowards, and it depended on the three white men to defend the place.

This they did with such success that their assailants slowly withdrew.

"Now is the time for a sortie," said Dorr. "We've got to drive them clean away from here or else we'll be as badly off as ever."

Wilkerson and Drake agreed, and John promptly led them out in a wild rush against the nearest hillmen.

These were so surprised at the boldness of the maneuver that they fled, and soon the coast was clear except for a few too badly wounded to join in their comrades' flight.

Now that the immediate peril was past, Wilkerson and Dorr found themselves again antagonists.

But both were so wearied that by one accord they silently consented to a truce.

Yet Wilkerson could not resist taunting his rival.

"It looks as if you were always a little late," he said, throwing himself back in a settle while John dropped upon a stool by the table.

"I heard you got the idol," John replied in a dull tone.

"Yes, and what was in the idol too!"

Then, despite Drake's gestures of remonstrance, he went on: "I got the deeds and the master key and the idol and the plans Tom Gallon robbed me of. I guess I'm ahead in this game."

John nodded, his fatigue so great that he was unable even to reply.

"I guess that's right," said Wilkerson in an altered tone. "We'll catch a little needed sleep and get away before daylight. Time enough then to talk."

For a little while both men kept their eyes open, watchful each of the other.

Wilkerson was the first to laugh and say: "What's the use? I've got the things and the men to defend them. I'm going to sleep. You'd better do so too. Drake will keep watch."

John nodded carelessly and laid his head on his hands, folded on the table.

A moment later he was asleep, and not long afterward Wilkerson's saturnine visage was turned to the shadowy ceiling.

Drake sat in a corner on the pack sacks, his revolver in hand.

The natives slumbered across from him, apparently oblivious of any danger.

When the hut was completely quiet except for the breathing of the sleepers Drake allowed himself to fall into a deep reverie.

Now that the quest was practically ended he had begun to think about his own part in it and reckon on his reward.

Long association with Wilkerson had shown him that he had nothing to expect from him unless by an appeal to his selfishness.

There was but one person who might reward him—the woman they both loved, Jean Darnell.

His mind went back to his first days of acquaintance with her in New York.

"I'll see you dead first!"

and he seemed again to feel the soft threads of the web she wove about him.

She had found him a young man at the precise point where a woman may either make or mar one for life.

He had been an easy prey for her tigerish desire for a slave. He had spent his little money lavishly upon her, without thought of other reward than to be near her, until Wilkerson had appeared out of the darkness of her past.

Even then he had still been faithful to her, obeyed her every behest, risked life and liberty in her service, even aided Wilkerson in an endeavor whose success meant that he (Drake) would be cast aside as no longer useful.

And now he sat on guard in a hut in a far country among a crowd of aliens whose very tongue was gibberish to his ears.

On guard for whom? For what?

That Wilkerson might finally succeed and win Jean Darnell of the tawny eyes and luxuriant beauty.

In that moment—was it to be too late?—Drake came into his own.

The mine and its wealth were as much his as Wilkerson's.

The plans were his as much as Wilkerson's.

Yet the man asleep on the settle had taken everything to himself and would continue to do so.

And Jean?

Drake laughed silently.

He knew her price. He remembered his last conversations with her, those half confidential talks when she had insinuatingly warned him to keep a watchful eye on Wilkerson.

He had been given to understand that it was the gold she wished. And he (Drake) had the key to that gold in his own keeping for the while.

He set his teeth when he realized how Wilkerson despised him, had counted him altogether as a mere pawn in the great game.

He had not even troubled to conceal from him the hiding place of the plans!

They were once more within the idol, for Wilkerson had boasted that he had put them back and would leave them there till he reached America again.

He recalled his words: "Let the idol keep 'em for me, just as it did for Gallon. It's a poor idol that won't serve two masters."

And the idol lay there wrapped in the bundle under his feet. The price of Jean Darnell!

The thought worked in his mind actively. He could not refrain from following it out to its logical conclusion.

Why should it be Wilkerson who returned with the plans and claimed her? Why should he (Drake) continue to play the slave?

A moment while they slept and the plans were his; then when Wilkerson unsuspectingly presented the idol and pulled out its eye there would be nothing!

It would be George Drake who held the master key to Jean Darnell's avaricious heart.

So he dreamed, open eyed, staring into a future where he played the master and not the slave.

And in his waking dream he touched the bundle and felt beneath the rude covering the hard contours of the image.

Again it ran through his head like a call: You have the price of happiness beneath your hand.

Slowly he yielded to the temptation. Gradually, with eyes constantly fixed on the motionless forms of Wilkerson and Dorr, he got the bundle between his knees; then he unlaced the fastenings tremulously.

The idol came out under his hand, and he stared at it, fascinated by its ugliness and the thought of the secret that it held.

No wonder that at every sight of it natives bowed in abject worship.

It held wealth, power, love, happiness!

He shook it softly. Yes, the plans were still within; he could hear the rustle of the folded papers.

He peered around the hut, and, finding all asleep, he set the idol on his knee and bent over it.

He pulled at the eye which he had seen Wilkerson draw out. It came with difficulty. Then he held it up and looked into the dark orifice. There was nothing there.

He was about to throw the idol down in disgust when a glimmer of something bright within the head caught his attention.

He stooped over again and then froze into immobility. The spirit of the vile god was moving within.

The point of light grew into intense brightness. It approached the dark eye socket and glowed therein with frightful fire.

Drake's whole body oozed sweat; his hands clinched unwillingly about the form of the idol. He could not thrust it away.

Then the socket was filled, and the devilish eye bulged outward, phosphorescent, gleaming with wickedness. Drake felt his heart burst in his bosom.

Then the snake that had lain so long hid within the hollow of the image struck forth and, having struck, slipped away.

"God!" whispered Drake, with thickened tongue, and jammed the moving eye back into place.

Then he huddled the idol itself into its bundle, laced the throngs with stiffening fingers.

"God!" he whispered again. Then he fell across the bundle dead, without a sound to waken the sleepers.

It was three hours before the dawn that Harry Wilkerson awoke and looked about him. All the rest were still asleep.

He rose softly and peered out of the window. It was very dark outside, and he could see nothing.

He turned his gaze within and saw Drake huddled over the packs apparently sound asleep.

"The fool!" muttered Wilkerson. "I've got all out of him I want. But I suppose I've got to take him along a way yet."

He resolved to be rid of the young man so soon as he was through with Dorr. Then he paused, in deep thought, his ugly brows bent on the unconscious object of his hatred.

An instant was sufficient for him to make up his mind. He silently went to work and bound John firmly in his seat.

Then he tried to waken Drake. In shaking him he made sufficient noise to stir the natives, and they sat up and stared, sleepy eyed.

But when Wilkerson raised the swollen, discolored face and shrank back with a muttered oath, the natives rose as one and thrust him aside from the door and pushed through, panic stricken.

Only John's servant remained, kept to his post by the fear of Sir Donald's wrath. But he could not repress a gesture of terror.

"It is the god!" he whispered.

At this John wakened and, finding himself bound, struggled violently.

"Not yet!" snarled Wilkerson. "Here's where you stay!"

In the instant Dorr realized his helplessness. He did not even remonstrate when Wilkerson drove his servant out with curses and bade him begone and fired a shot after him for emphasis.

Nor did he speak while Wilkerson hastily chose the pack containing the idol, kicking Drake's body out of the way, and left on the run.

Speech was useless. He stared down at Drake's contorted form. Beside it lay coiled a lithe serpent, its bright eyes fixed on him, its head weaving to and fro.

Unknowingly Wilkerson had left him not only to famine and thirst, but to sudden death. He bowed his head and cried in agony, "Ruth, Ruth!"

(Continued Next week.)

Somehow it is not always easy to display the same admiration for your wife's new hat after you learn the price.

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