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THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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A Novelized Version of the Motion Picture Drama of the Same Name Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated With Photographs from the Picture Production.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Only an idol."

WHEN the chest was hove on deck, dripping with ocean slime, corroded and mysterious, Harry Wilkerson stared at it stupidly. His mind went back down the years to that night when Thomas Gallon—scheming for his little daughter—had drawn a plan by candlelight, to the quarrel, to his own desperate flight and escape.

And now he was about to see for the first time the fatal paper—to know the secret of the wealth of the "Master Key." He forgot his surroundings.

It was Jean Darnell who recalled him to the present. She leaned over

his shoulder as he knelt, and the perfume of her breathed into his nostrils. He looked up, laughed and then ordered the box taken aft.

"I was dreaming," he said slowly. Then he looked at her directly, and she saw the flame in his eyes.

"Why dream when things are coming true?" she parried.

"I wonder whether they will all come true," he said moodily and followed the chest aft.

The curious sailors set the box down and waited. It was evident from their attitudes that they expected to see nothing less than great treasure. Otherwise, why this costly expedition?

But Wilkerson did not start immediately to open the chest. Its very appearance seemed to bewilder him, and his hands shook. It was Jean Darnell who stirred him to activity.

"Now you've got it," she said impatiently, "hurry and open it! The other launch is chasing us!"

Wilkerson stared around and picked up a marlinspike. He began to pry at the lock. Mrs. Darnell angrily jerked at his shoulder.

"Harry, you fool, here is the key!" He took the article she handed him and nodded. "Sure enough," he assented, "we have the key! Funny I had forgot that."

With some difficulty he managed to clear the lock and insert the key. It turned with difficulty.

A moment later he had pried the lid back from its setting of rust and slime

and they were all staring at the sodden contents.

There was no sound except the trundling of the swiftly revolving propeller and the heavy breathing of the sailors.

Suddenly Wilkerson swung round angrily and ordered everybody forward. Then he began his slow search.

Old jackets almost disintegrated by the action of water, pulpy papers and

a stop upright against the outwars, when it presented glazed, mysterious eyes.

"No plans!" muttered Wilkerson with a curse.

"Only an idol!" laughed Jean in wild derision.

Then her handsome face flamed with wrath. She turned her back contemptuously on Wilkerson and stared across the water at the launch which was pursuing them.

In the bitterness of her heart was no

various odds and ends came to his hand. The pulp he carefully laid aside as being possibly what he was looking for.

"I'm afraid the plans are gone," Jean whispered.

"We must find them!" he snarled and went on with his task.

Halfway down he came upon a grotesque figure dripping with woody ooze. It stiffly stared up at him as he held it.

"An idol!" laughed Mrs. Darnell. "Some sailor's curio. Well, go on. Idols don't talk."

An hour afterward Harry Wilkerson rose to his feet and kicked the scattered contents of the chest into the scuppers.

The idol rolled away and came to

mingling of pity for her foot: only self contempt that she had depended on him, helped him.

When she could control herself she went forward to get out of sight of the mocking heap of rubbish that had cost so much.

Presently a sailor made excuse to come aft and peered at the pile of junk. The idol caught his eye, and he stealthily caught it up and hid it in his shirt.

"Good in a pawnshop," he chuckled. Thus once more the plans of the mother lode of the "Master Key" mine escaped from Wilkerson's fishing fingers.

When the launch put into San Pedro Mrs. Darnell did not wait for Wilkerson.

"I'm going to Los Angeles," she said. "You'll find me at the hotel—if you think it worth your while."

He looked up from his business of settling with the divers and made a gesture to detain her. He seemed to call out some inarticulate plea.

She merely smiled again and left. She paid no attention to one of the sailors who brushed by her, clutching a concealed object beneath his jacket.

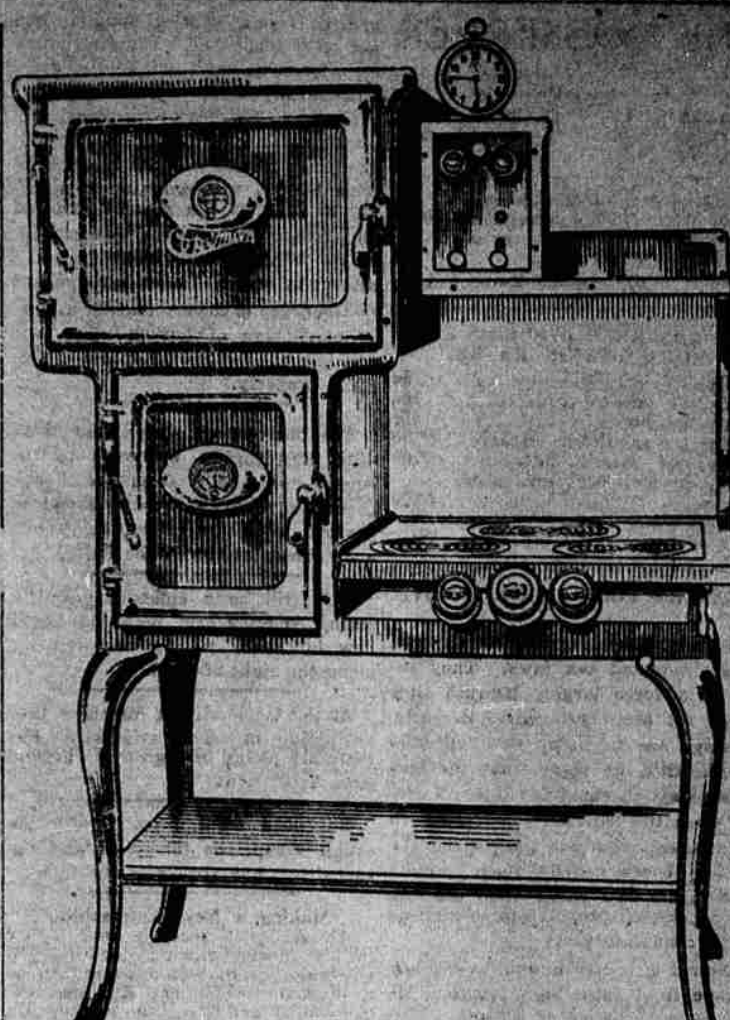
This individual, once clear of the water front, quickly made his way to a pawnbroker's shop, and the idol changed hands for a small sum after much haggling.

Before Wilkerson had settled with the diver John Dorr's launch also made its landing, and the two enemies would have met except that Wilkerson had to go to bank to cash a draft.

As he slipped away he saw the other boat and laughed bitterly. Dorr was welcome to what there was in the old chest.

"There is just one thing to do," John told the broken-hearted Ruth, "and

something. "I wonder just what it was," he went on. "If he knows just where that rich lode is he's concealed his knowledge pretty well, and the eagerness he is showing to get hold of the plans is proof that he isn't sure."
"He is spending lots of money," she sighed. "How much longer can we keep this up, John? Surely we are broke again?"
"Not so long as good old Everett sticks by us," was the response.
"But—maybe father was mistaken, and we can't pay it all back!"
"Nonsense!" he said reassuringly. "I can make the mine pay just as it stands. But I promised your father I'd see that you got all your rights, and he certainly meant for you to have the wealth hidden somewhere in the 'Master Key' mine."
"And we've lost the deeds and the key, and we haven't found the plans," she sighed.
"I'll find that Hindu and his precious idol if I have to go to India," he said promptly. "One thing—we won't have Harry Wilkerson spoiling our schemes. He'll give up now."
But Wilkerson had not given up. On his return from the bank he had learned from the launch captain of Dorr's interest in the idol, and he had promptly followed this clue, with the result that he knew as much about its whereabouts as John and Ruth did, so far as its getting into the hands of an East Indian peddler was concerned. Whether Dorr had recovered the image from him he did not know.



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"I'm going to Los Angeles," she said.

that is to find out what Wilkerson did with what he got from your father's chest."

The captain of the other boat received them, with a good humored grin and in answer to their inquiries pointed to the open box and the articles scattered on the deck.

"So far as I could make out," he went on, "there wasn't anything in the old chest worth the trouble of going after. At any rate Mr. Wilkerson and the lady seemed disappointed and put out."

"Didn't they take anything?" demanded Ruth, peering curiously at the moldy sea chest.

"Not a thing, so far as I could discover," was the reply. "In fact, I heard the two of them kind of quarreling, and the lady went off by herself."

The three of them stared down at the mementos of the long past tragedy, and then the captain suddenly ejaculated. "Yes, there is one thing missing."

"What is that?" demanded John.

"An old idol. But I'm sure neither of them took it."

"But what became of it?" John continued, trying to conceal his anxiety.

"Maybe one of the men picked it up for a curio," the skipper said apologetically. "Everybody seemed to think the old thing was worthless, and you know a sailor will grab at just that kind of thing. Better ask some of the crew."

A few moments later Dorr had learned that one of the sailors had indeed taken the image and gone uptown with it, apparently to sell it.

John thanked the captain, and when he and Ruth were out of earshot he said, "That idol is what we are after, Ruth."

"But where can we find it?" she mourned.

"We must trace the sailor. Ten to one he'll try to sell it to a secondhand man. Our best plan is to look into the pawnshops. I think, Ruth," he answered.

The first places they visited gave up no information of value. The third pawnbroker looked at Dorr curiously when he asked whether a man had been in to dispose of an idol.

"That thing seems to be wanted pretty much," he remarked. "But I bought it in good faith and sold it to a Hindu

a little while after for a rug. Maybe you would like to buy a rug?"

They made it plain that rugs did not interest them and departed with the poor satisfaction of knowing that the object of their search was in the hands of an unknown wandering peddler of rugs, who was presumably an East Indian.

"We can't do any more just now," John told Ruth.

"No," was the response. "But I am going to keep an eye out for a Hindu rug seller. I don't imagine there are very many of them here, so it ought to be an easy matter to pick him up."

As they walked back to the hotel Ruth grew more cheerful. "At any rate, Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell missed it," she remarked.

"I never understood just why that woman mixed herself up in this," John said thoughtfully. "You must have got some notion, Ruth. You were with her some time."

"Yes, I have an idea," she responded. "I'm not sure of all the details, but it seems Mrs. Darnell knew both father and Harry Wilkerson in the old days and—and—"

"And what?"

"Well," she went on, blushing divinely, "father didn't like Jean and wouldn't have anything to do with her nor allow me to either. She always hated father after that."

"Wilkerson is certainly in love with her," John said presently.

"I think he is," Ruth asserted. "But she doesn't care anything about him. I'm sure. All she is after is money."

Later in the evening as they discussed the events of the day John brought up the subject of Wilkerson's anxiety for the papers again and recalled the fact that old Tom Gallon had always insisted on Wilkerson's knowledge of

something.

"I wonder just what it was," he went on. "If he knows just where that rich lode is he's concealed his knowledge pretty well, and the eagerness he is showing to get hold of the plans is proof that he isn't sure."

"He is spending lots of money," she sighed. "How much longer can we keep this up, John? Surely we are broke again?"

"Not so long as good old Everett sticks by us," was the response.

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