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### MASTER KEY.

Shown at the Arcade. Wednesdays and Thursdays.

(Continued from Yesterday.)

#### 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 wittles 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."

He was soon to know, for after night-fall 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.

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 saturnal visage was turned to the shadowy ceiling.

Drake sat in a corner on the pack snags, 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.

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 Jenn?

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 avacious 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 silent 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, phospho-

rescent, 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 throats 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



John Led Them Out in a Wild Rush Against the Nearest Hillmen.

with a muttered oath, the natives rose as one and thrust him aside from the

(Continued on Page 6.)

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