

# THE MASTER KEY

CHAPTER XXVII.  
"A Traitor to John Dorr."

**R**UTH 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 Bhata, the assault on the hotel and their own subsequent flight.

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

Apart sat Sir Donald, rife on his knees, toward 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 despatched.

"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 glad to go ahead and find the idol and the priests."

"So far as we know, they are in Bhata," 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. "I 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 Bhata 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

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?"

"What?"

"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 shouldn'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 placidly.

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' hate

single warning. And I am informed that they look in vain to locate the idol. You can gain nothing by further search."

John agreed 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

more when their hotel had been the center of assault by fanatical natives. He had accepted her promise without undue exaltation. 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 bare-brained 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 inured to a school that forbade him to linger too long before claiming Ruth openly as his fiancée.

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 safe-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

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 these people who never let alone so long as they think we have it. You have the plans. What more do you want?"

"I 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.

**T**HEY 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 bullets aren't up fighting with good grace, either," Wilkerson confessed. "These half whites have no sense."

"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 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.

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 men 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 stilled 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 ardent 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 antagonistic.

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 of each 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 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.

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