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THE MASTER KEY

CHAPTER XXVII.

"A Traitor to John Dorr."

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

Around her the natives lay in pictures 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, bowed in drowsiness after a night's vigil.

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

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 glad 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 India," 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 Bhaia 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 the full meaning of her flight was plain:

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

"But—"

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Reynolds severely. "You even let her discharge her mail. 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 the 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 tight scrape, I did my best," he told Dorr. "But I agree with your cousin an excellent fellow—that what you propose is ridiculous. The priests have ample warning, and I am informed that they took measures to secure 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

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 his 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 exactness. 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 his old wounds if 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 duillard, but he had been bred in 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 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 unobscured 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 sacrifice 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 hiding.

Wilkerson himself was being 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 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?"



"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 haze 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 granules," 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."

"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.

Her, with bitterness in his soul, but the firm resolve to carry out his self-appointed task no matter what the outcome.

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