

CHAPTER XXX.

"I thought you loved me too!"

RUTH had listened intently, and now she seemed to draw herself a little out of the conversation. Her change of attitude did not go unobserved, and both Everett and Dorr were puzzled.

Everett saw that there was another mystery of which he knew nothing and instantly in the most businesslike manner turned to Ruth and said:

"Now, all this subject to your approval, Miss Ruth. You know you are practically of age."

She looked at Everett steadily and said in a low tone, "I think Sir Donald Faversham should be consulted."

"But he has nothing," John began.

"He has everything to do with this plan," Ruth said steadily.

"I know he's done a lot," Dorr stammered, feeling the ground give under his feet, "but in this matter—"

"I think Miss Ruth is perfectly right," Everett said quickly, trying not to let the pity he felt for John show in his eyes. "Let us call him, by all means."

Sir Donald had kept himself most discreetly in the background for many weeks. Only the constant oversight for her comfort showed Ruth that she was never out of his mind.

She could not even think of him without a throb of gratitude.

And now when all must be made plain and she must live up to her own promise she steeled herself for the ordeal.

Sir Donald listened to Everett's plan and approved it thoroughly.

"And now that we have decided what to do," he concluded, "I think we should immediately go to the mine and make the deal. I by no means like this affair, and the sooner it is over with the better."

"Good," said Everett, much relieved. "And you and I, Sir Donald, being the third parties, had better handle this deal. Do you agree to that, John?"

"I'd like to just get my hands on that fellow once more," was the hoarse response. "There would be no further need of this deal as you call it."

"Yes and the fat would be in the fire," Everett replied.

Dorr finally agreed to maintain a strict neutrality and Ruth gratefully accepted the offer to conduct her affairs as Sir Donald and Everett should judge best.

That night they left for Silent Valley.

Tom Kane received them joyfully and informed Ruth that Mrs. Darnell had especially seen to it that the bungalow was ready for her.

He was full of other news, but both Sir Donald and Everett put him off and set about their business.

It was a strange conference that met that night in the office. On one side were Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell, on the other Everett and Faversham, the latter looking so intensely bored that shrewd Mrs. Darnell instantly made up her mind that she and Wilkerson would have to accept bitter terms.

Sir Donald was only too evidently waiting for formalities to be over before he said the few words necessary for him to say as Ruth's representative.

Wilkerson himself felt, too, that he was at last playing a game where all



"Yes, and the fat would be in the fire."

the cards were to be face up on the board.

When Everett had coldly and definitely set the situation before them Wilkerson sat motionless and in silence for a moment.

His shifty eyes did not meet the gaze of the three who looked to him for his yes or no. When he spoke it was with a dash of his old effrontery.

"I understand the proposal," he said, working his lean, brown fingers back and forth over a blue print on the desk. "We quit, give you the plans, and you give us"—he suddenly leaned over and darted a bright glance into Everett's eyes—"you give us what?"

Everett was prepared for the question and answered it promptly. "We'll give you \$50,000 cash and won't prosecute you."

Wilkerson shook his head.

"You understand that half this mine was mine by rights when Tom Gallou took it for himself by shooting me and leaving me to die on the desert. Fifty thousand? Pah!"

"And immunity from prosecution," stated Sir Donald impassively.

Wilkerson swung on him, thrusting his lean, furious face close to the Englishman's calm, unperturbed countenance.

"What have you to do with this?" he snarled.

Faversham did not shift his position

nor change his tone. "I have Miss Gallou's promise to marry me."

There was a sudden silence, broken only when Wilkerson's dry throat uttered a triumphant croak.

Mrs. Darnell looked at Faversham with her tawny eyes filled with dull embers of passion. Everett sat as if stunned.

"So John Dorr gets the kicks and you get the halfpence!" said Wilkerson wildly. "I have cursed him; but all my curses couldn't have punished him worse. Why," he went on half hysterically, "the poor fool loves her!"

Again silence.

This time Everett broke it, saying stiffly: "You understand our proposition. Do you accept it?"

Mrs. Darnell laid her hand on Wilkerson's arm, and he seemed to fall into a profound reverie.

They could see the lights and shadows flit over his saturnine visage, the sparkle of his eyes, dying into a mere dreamy glow, the sudden tightening of his thin lips, the working of his hands.

Finally he roused himself as by an effort.

"I think I ought to have more," he said quietly. "There are signs of gold on one part of this property which has never been worked. It is nowhere near the place marked in the plans, as you will easily see. You understand that Tom Gallou and I were partners when he located that rich ore. Never mind. Bygones are bygones. But I want \$50,000 and that little claim. It may not amount to anything, but then again it may. Fifty thousand is soon spent. A mine is a mine."

"The plans!" demanded Sir Donald.

Wilkerson pulled out of his shirt bosom an oilskin folded around a square paper. He laid this on the table.

"There they are," he said, as though driven to bay.

Mrs. Darnell's movement of protest did not escape either Everett or Faversham. They looked at the little packet that had cost so much agony and bloodshed.

"It is a—a gentleman's agreement," said Sir Donald presently, taking out his check book.

The money passed, and then Everett picked up the oilskin packet and put it in his pocket.

"The deeds and the master key," he said gently.

Mrs. Darnell's face became splendid in its futile rage. She tore the ribbon from about her throbbing throat and flung the key on the table.

Sir Donald picked it up carefully and rose. At the same moment Everett pocketed the deeds and started for the door.

He and Faversham passed out into the starry night and vanished, leaving Wilkerson still at the desk fumbling the check.

Suddenly he reached for pen and ink and scrawled his name on the back.

Then he silently handed it to Jean Darnell, biting her red lips and moving almost imperceptibly, like an animal about to spring.

She took the bit of paper and tucked it in her bosom. Then she turned on her companion. He met her very gaze coldly.

"The mother lode is on that little bit I got them to give us," he said calmly. "The plans Everett has are false."

And the look that she allowed him to see in her eyes was such as no other man had ever seen there. It was as if her tortured and lonely, proud soul had found its mate in some darkness made lurid by the flames of hell.

Sir Donald spoke a brief good night to Everett when they had left the office and turned toward the bungalow, leaving the other to go up to where the light burned in John Dorr's cabin and tell him of the events of the evening.

He met Ruth at the door and quietly told her that all was well. She looked up at him with her great eyes filled with unshed tears and he bent over her a little.

Then he drew out the master key and put the ribbon over her head until the dull brass shone on her white throat.

"You are once more the mistress of the master key," he said gently, "and of my heart."

Something in her expression told him he had said enough. With a cheerful word he went away.

But the next day Sir Donald renewed his wooing in such a fashion that Ruth was sorely put to it to keep him from demanding such carresses as her engagement made him rightfully ask for.

The hardest part was that she perceived that John Dorr now knew that she was to marry Sir Donald.

He did not know, nor ever would, what that marriage was the price of.

Everett, of course, had quietly introduced Sir Donald's assertion of his new relation to Ruth into his narrative of what had occurred in the office.

John had taken the blow steadily, but he was not one to walk in the dark. He sought out Ruth and in a few words drew from her the truth.

"Now we all know where we stand," John said bravely, smiling at her.

"But I—I thought you loved me too," she murmured.

"That doesn't alter the matter," he said comfortingly. "Now I must get to work. I've lots to do. Wilkerson has already started work around the spur, and I must begin driving into the place where your father found that rich vein. We may drift into it any day."

Naturally enough the two camps kept pretty much to themselves, but Tom Kane carried the gossip to John Dorr, evidently in an effort to distract his mind.

The old cook knew that John's heart was breaking, and between his love

for each of them he was himself hard pressed to maintain a cheerful countenance.

"Wilkerson's impatient as ever," he told John one afternoon. "He can't wait on tunneling and such, but he's going to blow the whole face of his hill right off. Told his men that dynamite was better than pick and shovel."

"Well," said John, "that may prove all right. At least he'll get a notion of what formation he has to deal with."

Later that same day Kane announced that Wilkerson was going to set off the biggest battery of shots ever tried in the valley.

As a consequence Faversham, Ruth, John, Everett and many others went across the gulch toward evening to watch the show.

Old Tom Kane wagged his gray head doubtfully as he related how



They Saw Man After Man Come Down the Hill Till Only Wilkerson Was Left.

much dynamite had been planted and how Wilkerson's men were actually too nervous to work any longer.

"He has to fix the fuses and fire the shots himself," he said.

True enough, they saw man after man come down the hill till only Wilkerson was left.

Ruth noticed that he worked rapidly and with an occasional glance down toward Mrs. Darnell, who stood near a big rock shading her eyes against the evening sun.

At last the work was apparently done, and Wilkerson waved his arms. At that signal there was a general rush for cover.

Then the man straightened himself up as if master of the demons hidden at his feet, and waved his hand to the woman watching him from below; then he stooped.

An instant later there was a terrific explosion, and a smoky gap appeared halfway up the hillside.

At the foot of the slope lay the body of Wilkerson, tossed there as one might toss an old hat. The smoke on the hill eddied and swirled.

No one stirred. There were a dozen other unexploded shots in that hillside, any one of which would likely bring the toppling crest downward.

With white faces they held their breath. Wilkerson's body twitched slightly, the only moving thing in that amphitheater.

Then there was a wild scream, filled with terror, with passion, with flaming and awful desire, and Jean Darnell ran over the rubble toward the smoking hill, crying:

"Harry! Harry!"

A dozen men started to run to drag her back, and a hundred voices muttered warnings that held them in their tracks.

Jean reached the body and flung herself on it; then she rose and stared up at the great rocky crest.

Did she hear the roar of voices calling to her to flee while there was time? Did she see the death that hung above her. If she did she despised it.

In this final cataclysm her wild heart broke through the bonds of this selfish existence and flung her a full passionate sacrifice on the body of the man who had loved her and given her his all—honor and life!

In the quick silence they who watched heard a single, full throated cry:

"Harry! Harry!"

Then the mountain roared into the air, and the avalanches of rock poured over the two lovers in wave after wave till it had buried them forever.

And as explosion after explosion rocked the earth and filled the evening sky with lurid debris Ruth, struggled from Sir Donald's detaining grasp and fled into the arms of John Dorr, where she clung, sobbing:

"John! John!"

Sir Donald looked at John Dorr's transfigured face and heard that cry, meant for lover's ears alone.

Very steadily he turned away and stared up at the terrific cataclysm which had snuffed both the darling hearted and golden youth.

He found the cook beside him, his gray locks streaming in the gusts of wind from the blasts. He pointed with his stick to a piece of rock that rolled to their feet, and in the dull stillness that followed the terrific uproar he said:

"I really believe, Mr. Kane, that we have uncovered the gold we have looked for so long."

And Tom Kane reached down and picked up the nugget and stared at it. Then he turned to the white faced gentleman beside him.

"The Master Key?" the old man muttered.

"Yes," returned Sir Donald quietly, "it unlocks strange doors."

THE END.

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