

THE MASTER KEY

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CHAPTER XXI.

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.



Thomas Gallon and His Little Daughter.

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 marlinpike. 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.

"Some sailor's curio. Well, go on. 'Only an idol,'" she said. "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 a stop upright against the bulwarks, 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 mingling of pity for her tool; 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 fumbling 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

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

had picked it up and taken it to a pawnshop and sold it." She stamped her foot. "Where is it? What has it to do with the plans?" "I don't know where it is," he responded sullenly. "A Hindu rug peddler bought it."

"And Dorr bought it from him?" "Not yet," he said, risking the statement. "Now all I have to do is to find Mr. Peddler and get it back."

Mrs. Darnell flung herself into a chair and laughed hysterically. "You mean to tell me Tom Gallon hid his plans in a heathen idol and that you overlooked them and that a rug peddler has them now?"

He left immediately without uncovering his plans. He knew that the final victory would not be won until he could tell Jean Darnell's soft and ardent palms with glittering gold, heaps of gold, gold that ran over, that spilled in luxuriant streams over her clutching fingers; gold that rang under her feet, that mounted like an enveloping flood about her till her flesh was bathed in it.

That night he paced the floor of his room, dreaming of gold and of blood. So the next morning when John Dorr fared forth on his quest for the rug peddler Harry Wilkerson was not far behind him, watching his every move, studying him, trying to read what was in his mind. And all with the great question before him:

Had John Dorr the idol? While these two were seeking for the strange image of an unknown god there was a third who had found in it the goal of his life's toil. When God conceals himself from us in time of stress and agony, when he has closed his brazen heavens and our prayers die in the empty air it is but man to build for ourselves a tangible God, one whom we can see and feel, into whose face we can look and before whose feet we can lay our offerings and our petitions.

In a far city in India men had died of famine. The earth had turned to iron under their plows and the heavens to brass above them. They had implored a hundred gods for help and made offerings at a thousand shrines. There had been no response. The smoke of the burning ghats by the side of the shrunken river told the sorry tale of prayer unanswered.

And in their last misery men turned, as men will, to one who dreamed. Reality was death. Dreams held out the promise of life. And this dreamer, as do all who follow a vision, made his dream into a god. People listened to his tale of a deity who was merciful to listen and powerful to save. They fed on the dreamer's words and called him a prophet.

Yet still the earth refused food, and the river shrank within its bed. Then they went to the prophet and called on him to save them and to call his god to their aid.

Like many prophets, he found himself forced to materialize his dream in order that the common folk might see and believe, for he had taught them that unless they believed there was no salvation. "How can we believe in a god whom we cannot see?" they cried. "I believe, though I do not see nor feel," he told them. But they were not satisfied and menaced him with death.

So he took metals and fire and made an image of his god and made a shrine for it and set the image in the shrine, where all might see and worship. And the people prayed to this new god and laid offerings at his feet and

looked into his eyes and called upon him to save them, as his prophet had said he was able. Thus, with the folk believing on the god of his vision, the prophet prayed, also to the spirit of the deity, and the rains came from the hills, and the river rose, and the earth grew green.

And when they had been saved and their stomachs were full the people went away and left the prophet alone with a god and his deserted shrine. Yet always in time of trouble and stress they remembered the god who had saved them and returned to his worship, so that in season other prophets of him arose and erected a temple and taught the people to bring offerings at all times.

Thus the image became the image of the tutelary deity of the city and its river, with other images to do him homage and obey his commands. Centuries passed, and the god still maintained his place. His priesthood prospered; his temple was never empty. And one day a drunken sailor wandered into the temple to stare at the heathen wonders, and when he slipped away the niche of the god was vacant.

"He has gone on a journey," said the terrified priests and concealed the theft. But the high priest sent several of his chosen acolytes throughout the world to seek for and recover the image. "How shall we find him?" they asked. "By a path of death and destruction," was the answer. So they set out and found the sailor

who had stolen it dead in a lane with a knife between his shoulders. And his murderer they discovered in a Chinese seaport gaping horribly at the sky, with a rope twisted tightly about his neck.

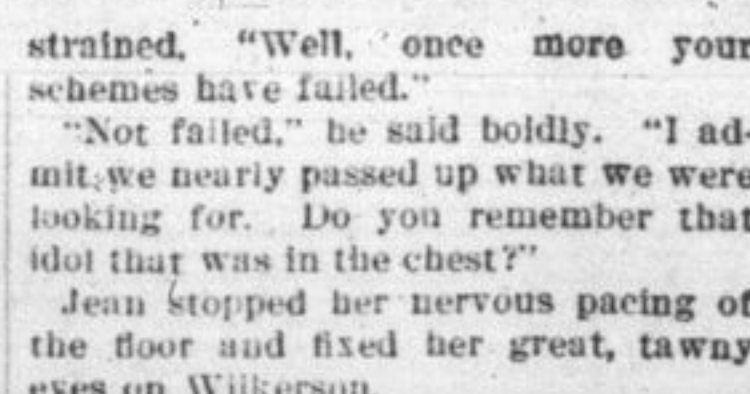
So the image passed from hand to hand, always bringing with it death, until some sailor hid it in his chest, and when he had been washed overboard in a storm and his effects were distributed a captain bought the idol for a curio.

It was in his chest that Thomas Gallon had found it when seeking a safe place to hide his precious papers in time of mutiny and fire.

Now, at last, it had fallen into the hands of one of the seekers, and he took it to his little tenement room and prayed to it and swore that he would return it to its proper place in the temple. There was no response from the image, but when the Indian fell asleep on his rug that night in the alien Amer-

ican city he dreamed that his god appeared to him and spoke of death and destruction yet to follow, commanding him to start instantly for the east. The next day, while Dorr was seeking for a Hindu selling rugs and Wilkerson was shadowing him the new possessor of the idol was hastening to San Francisco to take steamer for India and the city by the river.

The image was concealed with all reverence in his bundle of rugs, and he moved cautiously, because of the dream. Strange destiny that centered old Tom Gallon's plans for his daughter's happiness, Dorr's dreams of love, Jean Darnell's lust for wealth and Harry Wilkerson's passion for a woman without a heart in the possession of a grotesque image made by a dreamer in faroff India centuries before when a city died and a river waned within its bed.



"Wait a moment," he pleaded.



"All she is after is money."



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



A Hindu Selling Rugs.



"I'm going to get that idol."



Wilkerson Stared at It Stupidly.

H.P. SAUCE

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