

THE MASTER KEY

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CHAPTER XXV.

The Escape of Ruth.

AFTER his experience in rescuing John Dorr from the hands of the outraged priests of Bhaia, Sir Donald Faversham prepared to start the new day. He could not well realize just what had happened in the twenty-four hours that had just ended. It needed the commonplace details of a morning's toilet to make things seem actual.

And what facts they were that changed his whole future!

Ruth had promised to marry him! Faversham belonged to that great class of Englishmen who unite the virtues of careful training with an adaptability to circumstance which has made Great Britain the colonizer of the world.

He was an orphan in many ways as a child. In others he could amaze the most impulsive and impressionable adventurer.

When he first met Ruth he had had not the faintest notion of wooing her. His admiration had been frank and unreserved, but without any underlying depth of feeling.

His volunteering to join John Dorr and Ruth in this wild search for the missing idol had been what he called a lark.

It was only long association with her, the constant view of her pretty innocence and an occasional glimpse of her profounder and womanly nature that had touched his heart and awakened in him feelings that he had refrained from confessing to himself.

Then came the moment when she had turned to him for help and he had been the single person in the world who could save John Dorr.

Sharp and brief as had been the struggle in his own mind, it had brought him to an acknowledgment of the fact that she was the only woman he wanted for his wife.

On the very tick of her hour of trouble he had ventured to ask his reward for service.

She had promised, and now he, baronet and retired officer of the British army, shook like a boy at the thought of the happiness that awaited him.

They met at breakfast, Dorr still showing the effects of his night's adventures, Ruth bright-eyed from want of sleep and Sir Donald alone presenting the appearance of one who had begun the day aright after a sound night's rest.

Their natural topic of conversation was of Dorr's attempt to capture the idol and Sir Donald's rescue of him.

John could not give little satisfaction to Ruth's minute inquiries, and the Englishman confessed that he himself, though much more familiar with the native ways and native temples, had not much notion of exactly how it had all come about nor how he had found Dorr and extricated him.

"The only thing I gather from it all is this," he said amiably. "You had better take my advice in this country and not try to perform any of your western feats. India is a very odd country, and they resent here anything that doesn't follow the good old lines."

"I suppose I was very foolish," John confessed ruefully. "But when I saw that image right within reach I simply couldn't resist the temptation to grab it and try to escape."

Sir Donald looked at Ruth meaningfully. "I can't say that I'm a bit sorry, old chap," he told Dorr. "After all, as you say, it's an ill wind that blows no one any good."

Instantly Ruth caught his meaning, and her eyes fell. Yes, she had promised, and this brave gentleman who had risked his life for her sake should not be without his reward.

But she stared miserably at her plate until John rallied her and swore that he would yet get the plans.

"And here comes the fellow who will tell us what really did happen," Sir

but you certainly stirred up the priests, Dorr."

"Well, what do they intend to do?" inquired John, undisturbed, except that he did not understand a glance exchanged by Ruth and Sir Donald.

"It seems they have started a kind of holy war against us," the baronet answered grimly. "You desecrated their idols and they've excited a lot of the people against you and—"

"And what?" demanded John impatiently.

With a meaning look toward Ruth, Sir Donald faced Dorr. "This is not a piece for Miss Gallon," he said formally.

"We shan't interfere with Ruth's getting away, shall we?" John responded.

There was a glimmer of admiration in Faversham's eyes as he spoke his head.

"No. Achmet will take her his own way. We go an entirely different one—If we escape the mob."

He had hardly spoken when the outer gate swung inward and there was a wild crush of struggling bodies between the high pillars. A stone struck the foot between the two Europeans.

"Come with me," said Faversham, and drew Dorr around a corner and then into a small entry. Another entry giving off this offered escape and they darted down it. An instant later they were in an empty courtyard.

"I know where I am now," Faversham said coolly and opened a gate in the opposite wall which led into a garden. Five minutes later the two men were strolling along a quiet lane out of sight and sound of the mob.

"They will destroy all our things," Dorr suggested.

"No. The hotelkeeper and the police will see to it that they don't. All they wanted was you and me. Failing to catch us, they will disperse."

"But where shall we find Ruth?" John went on eagerly.

"Achmet will take her to a camp of beggars outside the city," he answered.

"But how? She won't be safe with only a native."

"Safer than with a regiment of soldiers," was the response. "I know where the place is. Let's go to it. I guarantee that we shall find Miss Gallon safe and sound. I know Achmet of old. He is specially trustworthy because he is a Mohammedan and he doesn't respect idols any more than you and I do."

They finally reached the camp up the bank of the river and Achmet saluted before them.

"Where is the maiden?" demanded Faversham.

The servant rose and took the covering off a large basket. Ruth smiled up at them.

"I heard your voices," she said, laughing. "Achmet thought I ought to get out right away, but I wanted to surprise you."

"And that is the way you got out of the hotel?" demanded John.

"Yes, Achmet tucked me into this basket and carried me right through all those terrible people."

"What is to be done now?" John demanded presently.

"I'll have Achmet get our belongings," said Faversham. "This gang here is his, he says. We can't do better than stick with them for awhile. I believe they are going up into the hills anyway. So much the better for us. Bhaia is no spot for you and me just now."

"But the idol and the plans?" protested John. "We know where it is today. Tomorrow it may be a hundred miles away or hidden past our ever finding it!"

"That is true," said Sir Donald. "But the safety of Miss Gallon is paramount. I will do what I can. Possibly I'll be able to do more than you think."

With this Dorr had to be content, but later when he and Ruth were alone he brought the subject up again.

To his amazement, Ruth seemed little interested and her manner was an odd mixture of reserve and timidity.

Gone was the old frankness and intimacy.

At last John said quietly, "I hope you don't think I was wholly careless of your safety last night. My only object was to get back your papers."

And Ruth, with Sir Donald's flushed face before her eyes and his voice in her ears, remembered her promise and was silent.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WILKERSON Again on the Trail.

It had not been difficult for Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell to trace Faversham and his party from the time they landed to their arrival in Bhaia. But the idol itself, the object of their quest, still concealed its whereabouts in spite of the most minute inquiries.

"We'll simply have to wait Dorr," Wilkerson said at last. "We know he



She Impulsively Turns to John.

ly. "The truth of the matter is, we are known to be stopping here and the mob will undoubtedly visit us shortly."

"But the police?"

Sir Donald looked very uncomfortable indeed. "My dear fellow, don't you realize that what you and I did last night was purely and simply indefensible? We tried to rob a temple, to be frank about it."

"I tried to recover some papers belonging to us," he protested.

"We would have a stiff time trying to prove that to the officials here," was the reply. "As a matter of fact, I can't afford to bring this up. I'm still practically an officer and I should have a deuce of a time clearing myself. You can't afford to call in the police because you're an American, and you broke British law, and I very much fear killed a British subject or two."

"I see," Dorr assented thoughtfully. "But what are we to do?"

"Precisely, precisely the question," said Sir Donald. "You and I could slip away, but there is the young lady to consider."

"And the plans," said John doggedly.

Sir Donald flushed angrily. "I am considering the young lady in this matter."

"And I, as her guardian, have to think of her best interests," was the retort.

Faversham tugged at his mustache in perplexity. Then he said quietly, "I think Miss Gallon has really put her interests in my charge."

"What—what do you mean?" stammered Dorr.

At this moment there came from the street outside the sound of cries and yells and tramping feet. The two men looked at each other. With one accord they withdrew inside the hallway.

"That's the mob coming!" Sir Donald said hoarsely. "Now for it!"

"We must save Ruth at all events!"

"Certainly," said Faversham coldly. "But I must plan quickly. Ah, here comes my faithful Achmet!"

The servant spoke rapidly in the vernacular, and Sir Donald answered in the same tongue. Then he turned to John.

"Bring Miss Gallon here quickly," he commanded. "Don't alarm her needlessly."

Ruth responded to the summons without a tremor, and when a few hurried words had informed her of what was afoot she turned to the Englishman and said simply, "What shall we do?"

"I am going to put you in charge of my old servant Achmet," he told her. "I trust him, and he will see you safe. Dorr and I shall have to go a separate way."

By this time the mob had filled the street without and was yelling for vengeance on the sacrilegious white men, punctuating its demands with an occasional stone against the wall.

Achmet bowed low before Ruth and with a gesture indicated that she was to follow him. She hesitated.

Sir Donald curried said, "Hurry!"

She impulsively turned to John, and he saw her eyes filled with anxiety for him. That anxious, pleading look, and he urged her on.

When she had disappeared in the wake of the hastening servant Sir Donald glanced at Dorr and then said abruptly, "Come ahead! We'll try a back way out."

ing on his own hook. He was once more completely under the woman's domination, and he dreamed of finding the precious papers himself and so putting Wilkerson out of the running.

Strangely enough, the man, weakly vicious as he was, was possessed by an honest and whole souled love for John.

She knew this, and at times her tawny eyes rested on him with unmistakable affection, but she knew perfectly well that she would choose Wilkerson provided he made good by gaining the master key and uncovering the wealth of the great mother lode.

It was Drake who brought the news of the riot in the temple and the outcome of Dorr's attempt to steal the idol.

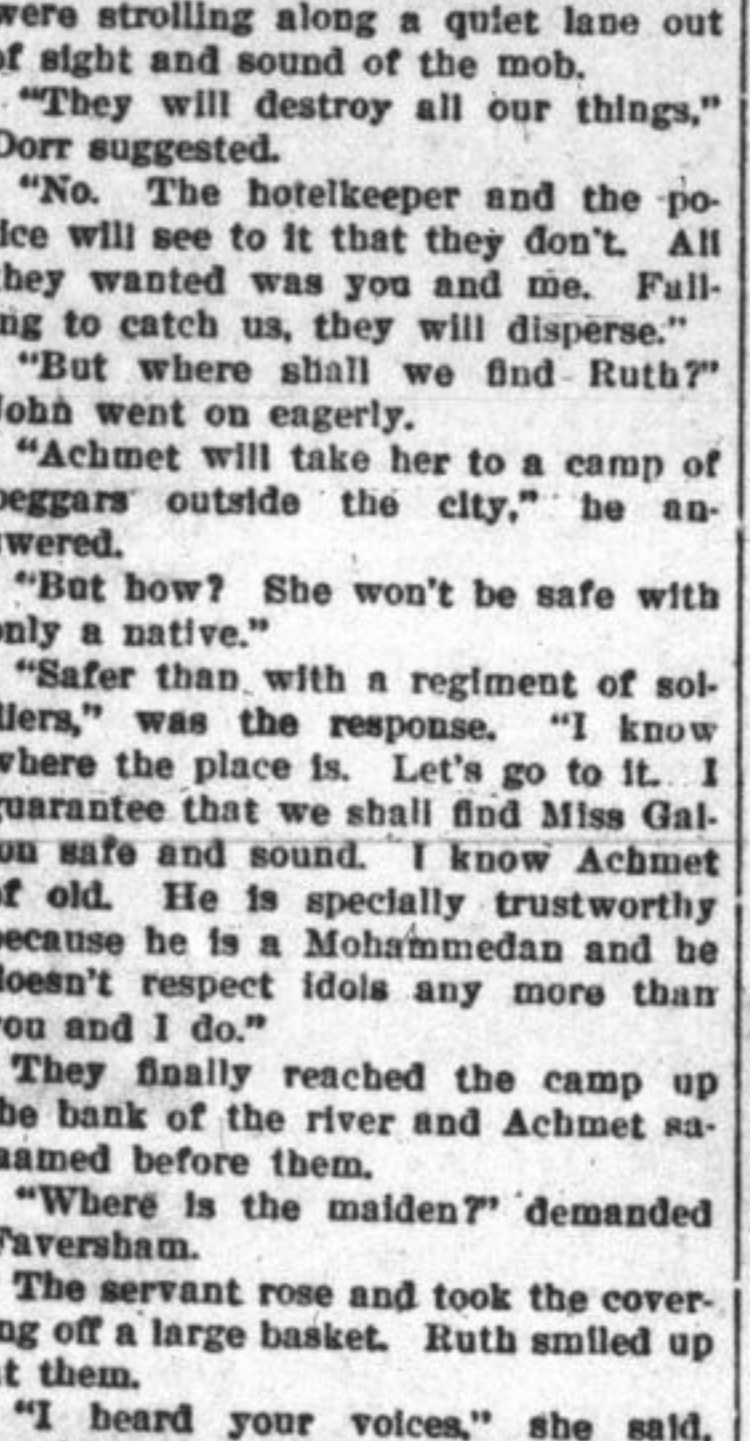
"He was disguised and thought he could get away with it," he went on. "But the priests were too quick for him."

Wilkerson's shifty eyes narrowed. "I'll get that idol!" he boasted.

"I forgot to tell you that the idol isn't there any longer," Drake continued. "From what I could learn the temple wasn't considered a safe place for it, and it's disappeared."

"Where to?" demanded Wilkerson.

"That I couldn't find out. It was rather risky asking too much anyway,



"The idol isn't there any longer," Drake continued.

but a white man who lives with the natives hinted that they had taken it up the river into the hills."

With this slight clue both Drake and Wilkerson toiled unwearyingly until they had established the fact that the idol had indeed been sent into another part of the country for safe keeping.

Then they prepared to follow, having found out that Dorr and Faversham had vanished and were supposed also to have gone hillward.

Mrs. Darnell most unwillingly consented to stay behind, but yielded when Drake set before her the difficulties and perils of the road they must take.

Both men promised to be gone only so long as would be needful to recover the idol, and to both separately she made it plain that she had gone as far as she would in helping them.

The two men found a couple of half-bloods to their liking and by judicious expenditure of money managed to get together a small band to accompany them into the hills.

It was impressed upon them that the trip was dangerous and that the hill-men frequently dropped what small pretenses they offered of peaceableness and warred on friend and foe alike.

It was through these also that they learned more specifically the route taken by the priests in charge of the idol.

Equipped at last, they started forth and for two days kept pretty closely to the river, which wound about through the hills, mounting slowly to its source in the mountains.

Several times they heard of Faversham and Dorr, but Wilkerson refused to turn aside or delay once on the trail of the idol. And at last they came within view of the little cavalcade which was escorting the god to a place of safety.

Vile as were the men he had hired, Wilkerson dared not trust them too far. He knew that they were superstitious, and he feared that when it came to a battle between avarice and inborn terror of the supernatural he would be left in the lurch.

So he warned Drake not to appear too anxious and by no means to let their followers know that they intended to seize the image and take it away with them.

"But if the papers are in that idol," Drake protested, "we ought to be able to get them and replace the idol image, with nobody a jot the worse."

"That may be possible," was the response. "On the other hand, the plans may be concealed so that it will take time to find them."

They discussed a dozen plans and finally decided that the next night the two of them, accompanied only by their guide, should make the trial.

"But supposing they have the image, where shall we find it?" questioned Drake. "They have a lot of stuff in their packs, and you may be sure they have concealed the idol well. Unless they feared its being stolen again they wouldn't be going to all this pains."

"We'll find it all right," was Wilkerson's sole response.

The evening came, when they were to put their scheme to the test. Their own little company made camp and after supper gradually went to sleep.

It was 10 o'clock when Wilkerson nodded to Drake, and they quit their place of abode.

Outside of the circle they met the man who was to guide them, and one glance at his brutal face showed Wilkerson that he was once more confronted with a problem.

The man made no bones of demand-

ing a large extra sum in compensation for his risks and intimidated with extreme plainness that in case his exorbitant blackmail was not paid he would not only not accompany them, but put it out of their power to go alone.

For an hour Wilkerson bargained and begged, but all to no purpose. At last he gave in and practically stripped himself of coin, which the other pocketed without a thank you.

The three of them started forth under a glimmering moon toward the priests' camp, a mile or so away by a spring.

Half an hour's steady tramping brought them within eyeshot of the place, and Wilkerson went ahead to spy out the lay of things.

When he came back he roughly told Drake, in reply to his question, that the idol must be in one of the pack sacks lying about.

"It's a case of sneak up and get a sack each of us and then look for the idol in it," he said.

"All right!" Drake growled. "But it's risky business. In case of a muss where'll we meet again?"

"At our own camp," Wilkerson whispered and led the way.

When they came close to the spot where the natives were asleep the three of them paused and listened.

Presently Wilkerson gave a silent signal that no one was awake, and they crept up among the baggage.

The first two sacks yielded nothing and Wilkerson was reaching out for one that seemed bulkier than the rest when their guide coughed and instantly a couple of the priests awakened.

Seeing strangers, they gave an alarm, and one, apparently a soldier, fired off an ancient musket so close to Drake that he incontinently dropped his burden and fled.

He heard Wilkerson cursing behind him, a couple of more shots and then took to his heels in good earnest as he heard rapid footsteps.

A moment later Wilkerson had caught up to him, panting and dragging the sack, which he had refused to surrender.

Between them they carried it on further and then rested in a slight hollow till their guide came up.

"If the idol isn't in this sack," Wilkerson said with a snarl, "I'll go back and shoot up the whole outfit and get it."

When the things were cut and the great bag opened the first object that met their eyes was the image they sought, glimmering in the half light.

The moment he saw it and knew that his quest was ended Wilkerson flung the rest of the stuff away and boldly got to his feet.

"Now for our own camp. We'll just see where those plans are," he growled.

Drake and the guide both protested in vain.

Safely away from pursuit, they lit a light and examined their find.

"It's the same one," Wilkerson said triumphantly.

"Made of metal, too," said Drake slowly. "Now, where are the plans?"

"Inside of it!" announced his companion, beating on the idol with his knuckles. "Now to find out the opening."

It did not take long for him to discover the movable eye, and when he had pulled that out he thrust his finger in and withdrew it with a folded paper.

"Safe and sound," he exulted, dropping the image to the ground, where



Jean Darnell Sullenly Agreed.

was on the trail, and we'll just follow him. Sooner or later we'll catch him."

Jean Darnell, sullenly agreed, but privately confided to Drake that she thought Wilkerson had lost his nerve. The climate did not suit her, nor the food, nor the primitive modes of travel, and her temper grew worse and worse. Drake promised to do some investigat-

on account of them? They're mine! All that gold is mine! Mine! Mine, I tell you!"

This last he almost shouted into the still air, and Drake drew back.

The man was mad.

"At least let them have their idol," he muttered, picking it up.

Wilkerson snatched it away from him with a gesture at once childish and murderous.

"I think I'll keep this for a memento," he cried, careless of what might hear him.

He stood up, the image in his grasp, and before the sound of his blasphemy



"Give you a copy!" he snarled.

Drake and the guide crept away in silent horror.

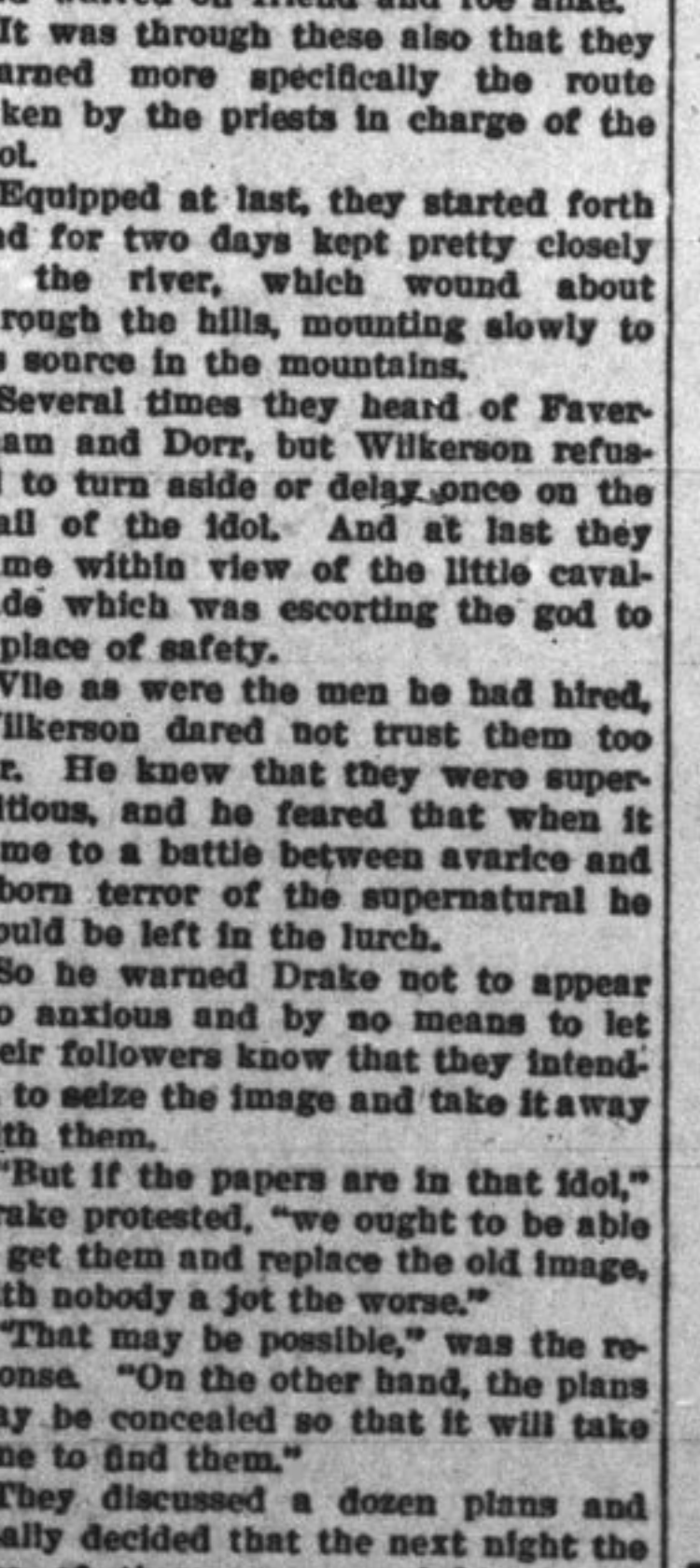
And not far distant Faversham sat vigilant by the side of his camp watching over the sleep of Ruth Gallon.

Possibly it was an echo of Wilkerson's savage cry of triumph that stirred her in her dreams.

She sighed and reached out one slender hand. It touched that of John Dorr and rested there as if she had found safety.

Sir Donald saw that movement, and his eyes burned with jealousy. But he did not move, keeping his ears open for the slightest sound, his eyes for the faintest shadow between his chair and the horizon.

(To Be Continued Next Tuesday.)



The First Object That Met Their Eyes Was the Image They Sought.

Round About Dorking.

The neighborhood of Dorking, where George Meredith lived, has many literary associations independent of its connection with that famous novelist. It was at Burford Bridge, near Dorking, that Keats completed "Endymion" in November, 1817; close by, at the Rookery, was born Father Mathias, the popular economist, and at West Humble Frances Burney, after her marriage with General Arbuthnot, built Camilla cottage with profits of her novel of that name and settled down. Sheridan resided at Poledon and John Sturt Mill at Mickleham, while other illustrious residents in the locality in earlier times were John Evelyn and Daniel Defoe. To most people, however, the chief literary association of Dorking is with Dickens, for was it not at the Marquis of Granby's, variously identified with the White Hart and the Old King's Head, that Mr. Weller, Sr., made the fatal blunder of proposing to a "ridder" Westminster Gazette.

Fewest Battles in December.

December is the least belligerent month in the calendar. A correspondent who has analyzed the dates of over 1,000 battles of the world, from Marathon to Mons, finds that fewer than fifty of them were fought in December, and these few were among the least important and decisive. Scarcely six of them would be known to the proverbial schoolboy. On the other hand, July, as is only fitting, seeing that it is named after a soldier, is the most belligerent, with 132 great battles to its credit or otherwise, and is closely followed by August with 122.—Westminster Gazette.



"I suppose I was very foolish," John confessed ruefully.

Donald remarked, pointing to a much bedraggled native who had entered the compound and was evidently waiting for some one.

"That's my old servant," he continued. "If you will excuse me I'll go and hear what he has to tell us."

Ruth and John watched the two of them for some time, the tall, carefully dressed Englishman and the dirty native.

They could see that the latter was much excited, and toward the last Sir Donald himself seemed to lose a little of his aplomb.

Finally they saw him nod curtly to the native, who squatted down on the pavement. A moment later he had rejoined them. His usually placid face now expressed an anxiety.

"What can be the matter?" demanded Ruth.

"Not anything for you to worry about," replied Faversham. "I'm sure I can arrange everything presently;

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