

THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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A Novelized Version of the Motion Picture Dramas of the Same Name Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. Illustrated With Photographs From the Picture Production.

"The Master Key" begins in serial form in this issue of the Observer, and will be run in installments at the Arcade Theatre weekly commencing Dec. 30.—Ed.)

CHAPTER I In Search of Gold.

STRANGE things breed in the deserts of southern California—some of them beautiful, some of them symbolic of endless and terrible thirst. There are three thirsts in this world That for wealth; the one for life; great out of all, the thirst for love. The first and the last expression of our civilization is the locked door, and from the time the primal carpenter laid down his tools and went within his rude house the door has stood for all time a defense and an opportunity. In the long vista of life we find many locked doors and gates—doors to happiness, to life and to love. Fancy to yourselves thirsty men knocking with seared knuckles on these doors. Then realize that sooner or later experience tells them that they cannot enter without a key. "Who holds the 'master key' to all these locked doors?" we cry. This was the silent question in the hearts of two men, wearily struggling through the sage brush toward the sharp ridges of the San Jacinto mountains in southern California. "I wonder," said Thomas Gallon, sn-

dering his prospectus guide. "Whether we will find that gold—the gold the Indians told us about. Yes, I must find that gold." "You don't seem to realize that you have a partner," snarled Wilkerson. "You are always talking about I—I—I. Haven't I got a share in this? Haven't I dug up money? And yet you don't seem to think that I've any concern in this matter." "Excuse me, partner," said the other man, fixing his dim gaze on the mountain. "I'm always thinking of that girl of mine. You know she's in school, and she's got to have a good education, and I've got to work to pay for it. Excuse me, partner; you know I did not mean it that way, but when I remember her mother"—He broke off abruptly, and both men stopped. "Her mother?" asked Wilkerson. "Yes, her mother," choked Gallon. "The girl deserves the best there is in this world. I'm all she's got, and, by heavens"—he shook his fist toward the distant blue hills—"she shall have it if I have to tear that mountain apart with my finger nails." "Well," said Wilkerson impatiently, "let's camp. I'm thirsty." They stopped in the shade of the fallow plume of the Yucca and made their little fire for coffee, but before the blaze was well started Wilkerson picked up the water bag and took a long drink. His companion suddenly flashed in anger. "Say, partner," he said sternly. "that

water has to last us clear to the mountains." Wilkerson flung his head back and laughed. "Why worry? Don't you see the snow there on San Jacinto peak? That means creeks down every ravine and gulch." Instantly Gallon's eyes dulled. He seemed to once more subside into a dream. "There's where they said the gold was," he muttered. "In one of them gulches up there. Gold! Gold! Say, Wilkerson, we'll get that gold, but we must save the water. I didn't mean any harm, partner, for calling you down for drinking that water, but I've got to get that gold." Wilkerson once more reached for the water and took a long draft. "I guess this will last till we reach those foothills," he said. But his companion paid no attention to him, stolidly preparing their slender meal of coffee and beans. When they had eaten Gallon brusquely motioned to Wilkerson to clean up the camp and then silently started up the gulch. "I never heard of finding gold by moonlight," his partner muttered to himself. "Let the old man dig around if he wants to." And immediately once more he yielded to his physical desire, this time for sleep. Gallon steadily trudged around the bluff, following the stream as best he could until he knew that he was absolutely alone. Chance, the master of us all, delights in strange freaks. Now at this moment, when he felt hatred in his heart for his partner, when he knew that he had come on his final quest with a weakening to coddle along, Mistress Chance laid her quick finger on him and whispered, "Here!" He heard that light whisper and dropped his gaze to the ground. A moment later he was furiously hammering at the outcropping of rock that threw its sharp shadow down the hill. Wilkerson turned sluggishly in his sleep. "I wonder where the old man is," he muttered to himself. "He's always prowling round o' nights." What was that figure slinking around the bluff? Something in his partner's attitude as he stopped directly in the full sheen of the moonlight made him pause. "He's got something," he thought. "Why does he not come down to

camp? I think I'll see." So he wrapped himself in his blanket again, but his eyes were open and turned on his partner. A few moments later Gallon came to camp, heavy footed, as if half asleep, dropped his hammer and kicked the fire to a blaze. "If I had a proper partner there would be coffee for me," he said in to some loud enough to reach the sleeper. "What's the matter, old pal?" asked Wilkerson, apparently drowsy. "Ob, nothing," said Gallon. "I just thought you might have left some coffee." "Did not find anything, did you, partner?" asked Wilkerson. "Nope; nothing doing. Guess those Indians did not give me the right bunch." Wilkerson turned over as if once more going to sleep, but his eyes were open, and he saw Gallon marking down some notes on a piece of paper. "Did you say the Indians did not give you the right bunch?" Wilkerson asked suddenly. "How often have I got to tell you we're partners. I believe if you got a strike you wouldn't tell me. Are we partners or not?" "Yes; we're partners all right. I haven't found anything." "What was that stuff you had in your hand?" asked Wilkerson drowsily. "You're always bringing in a lot of dirt and looking it over but I notice you kind of keep that dirt in your hand." Wilkerson once more yielded to his physical desire for sleep, but was awakened by the barking of a coyote on the hill. He suddenly raised himself and let out a curse against the destroyer of his sleep. Then he swiftly realized that Gallon was still awake, sitting by the fire-side, writing with the same stub pencil. "That's my pencil," he thought dully. "There is not another pencil in this desert. How can I write to Dolores if Old Man Gallon walks off?" He took out of his pocket a worn leather wallet and drew out the picture of a woman, whose calm, cold features, unadorned by the photographer's art, were appealing to the man of his appetites. He looked at this a moment, and then all the morbid fire in his blood flamed toward his heart. Love, life and happiness depended upon the possession of gold. Therefore, with this fire in his heart, Wilkerson suddenly got that absolute thirst for gold which traverses deserts, which has killed more people than the armies of Europe. And in his sudden access of physical desire for gold in order to attain this woman he rose to his feet, and there came upon his face a swift expression stealthy but determined. He put the photograph away and, pantherlike, stole into the shadow under the hill and toward the man who had been his partner, but whom he was resolved to kill. He crept along, taking all precautions against disturbing a single pebble, until he stood over Gallon, and in the full moonlight he saw that Gallon was drawing the plans and marking the locations of a mine. "How far," he thought forcefully to himself, "has the old man gone? What gulch is this? What place is this? He has found the gold, and I'm going to have it!" He still watched the pencil and saw him trace in rude letters: "This will make you happy." That moment Gallon saw Wilkerson smiling at him. Smiles and tears, sorrow and laughter have made this world what it is, and the smile on the saturnine visage of Wilkerson stirred Gallon to his depths. Did Wilkerson know? Had Wilkerson seen? Was Ruth to lose the gold that he had found after all these years? Wilkerson had peered over his shoulder. Wilkerson! Wilkerson! Wilkerson! There must be no Wilkerson! He pulled out his revolver and fired at the man smiling at him from the shadow. Wilkerson emptied his revolver at the old man. But Gallon's trained eye, backed up by his overmastering passion, had directed his weapon too surely. Wilkerson realized that his enemy's bullet had gone home. Still with the blood lust in his heart, Gallon pulled out the picture of a little girl and passionately kissed it. "You look like your mother, Ruth," he whispered. But while he was yielding to this queer tenderness his former partner was struggling to his feet—dizzy with pain, absolutely cowed by the shock of finding himself physically helpless, yet driven by instinct to find other human beings. Where were they? There was no sound on the desert except the rustling of the dry leaves of the yuccas and the murmur of the cactus as it died of drought. He was really of two minds. One desire was to find the location of the gold. The other was to save his own life and assuage the bitter thirst which he knew meant death. At last he stumbled to his feet and peered across the mist veiled valley. Far away he saw a light. Gathering all his strength, he started toward it, for it held out to him the prospect of help for his physical injury, and as he fingered his revolver he feverishly dreamed of finding Gallon and so avenging himself. Under the stars he tramped on. As men see their real world in miniature and their ideal world magnified, as we all do, the moon, flooding its light down upon his path, did not appear within his range of vision. It was only the little pin points of stars in the purple black sky that he discerned and in the midst of this firmament, as if horizons had been obliterated, he saw a solitary twinkling light, which meant a human habitation. "I'll get him yet," he muttered thickly. The mere act of articulate speech died in his throat. He realized that he had no water, and the overpowering thirst burned in his very marrow. "I can't make it," he thought to himself. "Gallon has got the best of me. He found that place and made the plan and fooled me." He painfully lifted his clinched hands toward heaven and cursed vehemently until his curses faded into a perfect delirium

of mad dreams. Far away on the hill the coyotes barked dully. No longer stealthily like a man obsessed, but with one desire, he struggled down the hill and out upon the mesa. Yet there was still in his eyes all the innumerable stars, and he could not fix his direction in his mind for to his accentuated sight they all appeared brilliant and peculiar. Thus he got lost. At times, in moments when the deadly thirst which parched his throat allowed him to drink, he saw the one glimmering light, which marked the place where he knew Gallon had gone. Miles and hours became to him as nothing, yet finally through his sharpened senses he smelled water, and as the sun was rising over San Jacinto mountains he fell face downward into a stream. Some instinct told him that towns were built on hills; that consequently to find the town he should go upstream. So he struggled, stemming the current, dragging his feet, his left hand clinched into the folds of his shirt over the wound. In his heart was still smoldering the flame which to the fulness of his physical strength had been hatred of his partner. "I'll get him yet," he muttered.

(To Be Continued Tomorrow.)

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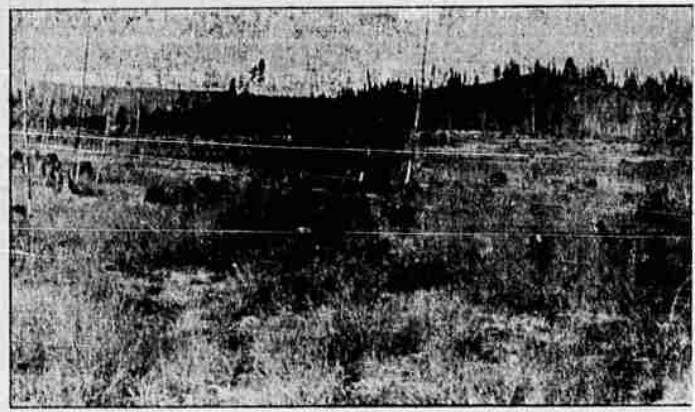
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