

THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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

(This is the second and last continuation of the first installment of this serial which will be seen at the Arcade commencing tomorrow. Hereafter an installment will be published each week until the story ends.—Editor.)

CHAPTER II.

"You are under arrest."

Far away on the same dimly lit desert another man was seeking the same light. Thomas Gallon had realized that he was a murderer. What would happen to Ruth if he were convicted of killing his partner? This was the thought which drove him on—onward toward the little speck across the mesa. Careless of the cactus, of the sagebrush, of the coyotes, of the little white gullies made by last year's rains, he tramped steadily onward, and as he did so there was formulated in his mind a plan not only to save the gold for his daughter but to save her father's honor. It is true of lights and ideals that the farther you follow them the fainter they grow, and it was with astonishment that Thomas Gallon suddenly found himself in the street of Valle Vista. There is a lot of silent influence in the mere sight of closed doors. Gallon looked down the street, and every door was closed except one. No hospitality.

One single sign showed that law and order, always vigilant, held their way. He staggered on toward the green light which marked the sheriff's office. In there he found an alert deputy. "Who are you?" "I am Gallon," he said firmly. "The outlaws have got my partner and nearly got me!" The deputy looked at him shrewdly a moment and seemed satisfied. An instant later he was on his feet, buckling on his belt and revolver, and in a second instant he had brushed his way past the old miner and was bawling out into what apparently was a vacant street. Gallon dimly heard his call. His one thought was to play his part to the end. Would these men find by accident his gold? A moment later a curtain on the saloon across the street was lowered and the door opened. "What's the matter?" yelled a half-drunk fellow, reeling out. "Matias is out again!" cried the deputy. "Get the sheriff. They have got this fellow's partner." Then he turned to Gallon authoritatively and said, "How much did you have?" "Nothing," said Gallon. "We did not strike anything, but they thought we had." But with a quick gesture the deputy grasped Gallon's wrist and opened his hand, disclosing a nugget. "Where did you get this?" he asked. The old man stared down stupidly at that warm bit of gold. He had carried

it clean across the mesa, emblem of his thirst, symbol of his undying desire. For the moment he did not know what to answer. Then he recovered himself and said quietly, "I was going to—" He paused a moment and looked straight into the eyes of the man opposite him. "I was going to save all I had." "If that's all you had Matias did not get much, and he is considered a pretty smart fellow," was the curt response. "Here comes the sheriff." In the west their ordinary speech is deeds, not words. Appeared other men and then the bulky figure of the sheriff. This man wasted no time in preliminaries, but quickly roared, "Which way?"



"Get your horses, boys."

"At the foot of San Jacinto mountain, on the upper level," Gallon stammered. "Get your horses, boys," ordered the sheriff. It was not but a few minutes until the posse, Gallon riding stolidly on an extra horse, was scampering through the streets toward the mountains, now absolutely dark, as the moon had set. Sheriff Hawkins was not aware that as they crossed a wash a panting, groaning man was crawling on his belly toward the solitary light which marked Valle Vista. Nor did Gallon, dumbly riding toward the darkness which hid the scene of his crime, realize that Wilkerson was within ten yards of him as they splashed through the stream. Then suddenly appeared in the sky a spot of white, which spread until the murk of the night had turned to dusk. "Well, thank God it's daylight," said the sheriff to Gallon. "I guess we can get your partner all right now." And even as he spoke the dusk suddenly became enriched by the light of the sun rising in the east. The moment it struck the brass on his pony's bridle Gallon involuntarily reined in. Through his blistered lips he muttered: "Gold! Ruth!" Inquiring eyes were turned on him. The sheriff shoved his horse over and asked, "What gold?" At the same instant came the deputy on the other side of him. "Say, chief, he says there was no gold." A sinewy arm reached out and took Gallon's gun away from him. "I think I better keep this," said the sheriff, his dark countenance growing stern. So this cavalcade made its way through the fresh California dawn until there was a sudden break in the mesa. The deputy threw out his hand. "There are a hundred gulches in these mountains. Which one is it, pardner?" At the word "pardner" Gallon pulled himself together. The glitter of the brass on the horse's headstall and that word. Should he tell them the location of that gulch? The stroke of one horse's hoof might disclose the mother lode, and yet he had told them the outlaws had killed Wilkerson. His horse stumbled and threw him. When he got up he groaningly pointed

his hands toward the hills and muttered, "That way, boys—that's where they got him." Half an hour later the posse was grouped about the dead dra, and the sheriff was staring at a blood stained blanket. "There has been trouble," he said abruptly. Then he turned on Gallon. "Why is this coffee hot?" he said, lifting up the pot. The brusque tones of the sheriff cut the silence that followed. "I don't see your man. I don't understand this. You are under arrest—for the murder of—" He looked at Gallon, and the old man involuntarily said, "Wilkerson." All day the sheriff, with Gallon, his arms pinioned behind him, searched the gulches and gulches for the man whose blood stained blanket they had found. The old man, taciturn as ever, merely said, as if reporting by rote, "The outlaws got him." When the full moon had risen and the night life of the desert had begun, grotesque life, built of fleeing forms and bizarre shadows, the sheriff called a halt up the canyon. On one side of the gulley on which they were camped the sheriff's men had built a fire. It was against a rock, which rose whitely under the moon. Gallon saw his chance. He worked his way to the fire and in spite of the pain he held his hands out over the blaze until he felt the strands of the rope weaken and finally part. A moment later he was making his way to where the horses were tied. He leaped upon the nearest one and within a second was on his way down the hill into the mist which filled the valley. But the noise of his horse's hoofs on the rough shale of the hillside awakened the guard. "I think I will have a cup of coffee," he said to himself sleepily and sluggishly stretched himself. A moment later he was dumping the empty coffee pot into the darkness. "Sheriff," he cried, "he's gone!" The sheriff lifted his lanky form as if by a single movement. "Who's gone?" he yelled. "That man, Gallon," replied the guard. "We must get him, boys!" the sheriff said. They rode to the edge of the hill and looked down into an iridescent sea of mist, a mere pool of curdling moon shine. "He's got away from us, boys," said the sheriff. "We'll never find him there." Gallon rode quickly on, no longer seeking for a light, but for darkness, and yet as he felt the pony quiver under him he himself felt a strange tremor—Wilkerson was still alive—some where behind that veil was his enemy and the man who knew the location of the richest mine in all golden California.

Mission Street pier marks the point of the San Francisco water front where sooner or later every one in this world passes, and among the multitudes strange, subdued and unsubdued by the tremendous forces which make our civilization, Gallon found himself absolutely unobserved in this throng—he was as he hoped to be. Berthed at the pier was a steamship, quartermasters at the gangway, and a sign hung on the rail saying, "We sail at 9:45 p. m." When he reached his cabin Gallon stealthily took out from his pocket a folded paper and looked at it. He laid it on the white covering of the bunk and once more dipped into his jacket. This time it was the picture of a girl. "I will save it for you," he murmured to himself. The bare room held out one movable article of furniture—a chest of strange workmanship and redolent of alien lands. Gallon stooped over and pulled at the lid. It came open to his touch, and he saw then a strange conglomeration of articles. An idol lay there, inanimate, but important. He picked it up, and as he did so one of its coral eyes fell out. To him it was a sinister omen and he stared for a moment, clenching at his breast. Then he gave way to the hysteria of the hunted and the haunted. "I don't know whose god you are," he muttered, "but if you must have it—take it." And into the open socket he thrust the paper that held the secret of his mine. That sleep which is like a shot in the heart overtook Gallon before the Santa Clara was well to sea. He was awakened from it by the sound of an altercation. "You've got to put back to port," said a voice in an ugly tone. There was a fusillade of shots, and then the deck beneath him tilted slowly. The chest slid down the deck toward shore. Gallon locked the chest, dragged it across the sill and then looked back to see an enormous wall of water. This wall cramped, faded, yet left him breathless. What was the matter? Then he saw huge columns of smoke pouring out from the after part of the ship. It was not the inexorable and avenging sea, but fire. He saw the boats go over the side. He saw two men struggling in the tops—yet it was a dream. His consciousness held but two facts—one the chest that contained the secret of his mine, the other the key that had locked within that strange and alien depository the picture of a little girl. Six hours later a heavy sea drove a piece of wreckage up the crumbling beach beneath a cliff on the Oregon shore. On it was a man—brine drenched, almost unconscious, but still able to crawl beyond the reach of the finger breakers, clutching a key. It was Thomas Gallon. He sat down and stared at the burning ship he had left. Dimly he remembered those strange numbers that marked the position of that vessel

floating to destruction far out on the horizon. 187, 23 West; 81, 27 North. But how to remember them? How to accept this precious information to his head. His groping fingers found the key. A moment later he was scratching the numbers on its soft surface. "This," he said through his parched lips, "is the master key. He stared up at the blue sky and they bowed his head in utter weakness. "If Wilkerson is alive he knows every day is the same. When on I had the secret of 'The Master Key.' Thomas Gallon then picked up his letter die and duly looked over its contents. "Fanny," he thought to himself, "that that engineer that I wrote to Drake about has not turned up." He fumbled the letter uncertainly, but the name caught his eye—John Dorr. At that very moment the motor stage chugged slowly into camp, and a tall, heavily built man swung down into the street, suit case in hand. He looked about him with a trained eye. He saw the opening of a mine upon the hill—the trestle crawling toward the dump, the pump house—all the paraphernalia of an active mine, but he also perceived that the stamp mill was silent. "If not they've lost the lode," he thought to himself. He turned to a miner who was passing and asked, "Where is Mr. Gallon?" "Up there in that bungalow," was the reply. John Dorr straightened himself up and went quietly up the acclivity, until he nearly arrived before a typical California house. In his great astonishment a slender fair haired girl came outside him instead of the brusque crude miner he had been led to expect. He would meet on his arrival at "The Master Key." "I'm John Dorr," he said awkwardly. "I came to see Mr. Gallon. I am the new mining engineer." Ruth looked at him critically. He was nothing like the men she was used to. His clothes were good. He fairly breathed soap and water, and his very apparent strength glowed beneath a clear, smooth skin and well proportioned limbs. Then she met his eyes in frank admiration. "I'll call father," she said, but she still hesitated. That gentle pause brought the blood to John Dorr's face. He realized that this was a moment he would always remember.

(Continued next week.)

The Laurentide company of Quebec, producers of pulp and pulpwood, is reforesting its non-agricultural out- over lands. It is also importing reindeer from Newfoundland, to see if they can take the place of dogs in winter woods work.

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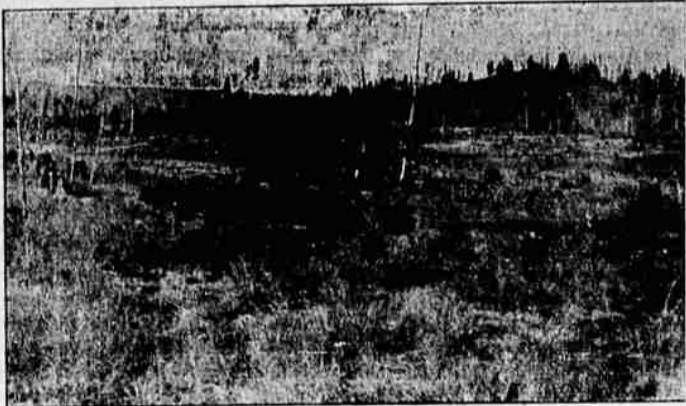
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