

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.

CHAPTER III.

The Runaway Car.

ANY man writes down on paper the things he cannot articulate. Thomas Gallon, dreaming of two women, tactful and silent as he was, wrote down the thoughts which he could not express in speech. His diary, well thumbed, held the history of many a lonely night, but of all these nights there was one that stood out in his mind. It was the darkness enclosing a woman on a bed. He still heard her whispered cry. "You speak of God, Tom, but I have no religion but motherhood." Before his closed eyes came the vision of a lamp lit, then almost an apparition—the face of his daughter. One life had died, possibly appalled by the horrors of a world that recks not of our poor humanity. Yet there was in the dead woman's arms a child, grotesquely asleep, as if unawakened to the sorrows this mother had known. "Ruth!" he cried. There was no answer from the still woman in the darkness, but thus he had christened his only child.

It seemed to him as if that echo still reverberated from the moon washed hills which marked the site of "The Master Key."

"I am getting old," he thought as he turned the pages of the diary as if unconsciously counting the years since a woman had leaned over his shoulder. "Ruth!" he murmured again.

The problem before him was no longer dim and vague, as it had been in the days of his prime, but absolutely distinct and clear—what was to become of Ruth when he died? With his trained business intelligence he set himself to solve this question.

He reviewed in his mind all the men and women he had known. It was a strange procession. They marched before his sharpened vision, old partners, fresh young girls, mature women, men with check books in their hands, men dying of thirst on the desert—and Wilkerson. He sternly put out of his mind the thought of his former partner—the man—was he dead? If he had not died that night in the gulch, if he were still alive, knowing the secret of "The Master Key," who would save Ruth from his vengeance?

Then there rose before his mind the straight, strong, almost austere figure of his mining engineer, John Dorr—youthful, of course, but he had proved himself wholly competent in almost every task that had been given him.

The old man thought more deeply. He recalled his own former years. He himself had broken down the iron barriers of a cold world for the sake of a woman whose image Ruth was. He had seen in John Dorr's eyes the growing flame of love. Long experience had taught the old man that there is no passion so dependable in this world as love.

John Dorr loved Ruth. It needed no monetary bond to assure his fidelity to her interests, and with the sudden, swift, alert step of a man who had made his final decision he went out on the porch and called, "John, John!"

Within the interior of the little house down the hill the engineer of Thomas Gallon's mine had abandoned his blueprints to study the letters on a little pennant which represented his first victory, a touchdown on the football field within the last ten seconds of play. He knew better than any one that his mission to Valle Vista was futile. Using every resource at his command, he could find no paying ore, and yet—there was the pennant, the emblem of victory hard fought and hard won. Should he give up now? He heard a clear, stern call from up the hill—"John, John!"

"I'll win out yet for Ruth's sake," he said as he answered that imperious cry.

Other ears heard that call, and as John hastened down the hill he saw Ruth's figure by the side of the bungalow, and as if by the opening of a shutter he once more saw the lights of Broadway and a table spread with linen, two people sitting there—his evil goddesses.

In this complex and highly organized civilization of ours no man can be as-

ured that at any moment some other man possibly thousands of miles distant is not planning an act whose portent would never occur to him.

At a table in a New York restaurant a man and woman were sitting with the words "Gallon," "Dorr," and "Wilkerson" on their lips.

"Harry Wilkerson has found Tom Gallon," she said quietly. "I wonder what will happen?"

Her companion laughed. "Gallon? I had a college mate named 'Dorr,' who is working for a man named 'Gallon' somewhere out in the mines."

The woman's dark eyes lit up, and she seemed more strikingly handsome as she allowed her sudden passion to flood her somber face with color.

"There is money in that mine, George Crane!" she said. "But this man Dorr—what sort of chap is he? You mining stockbrokers usually have information as to all these engineers."

The slender man with the shrewd face seated opposite her dropped his eyes. "To tell you the truth, Mrs. Darnell, I never liked John Dorr."

"Neither does Harry," she put in quickly.

The stockbroker looked at his plate a moment and then pulled out his memorandum book. "Listen, Jean," he said in a tone she recognized as utterly businesslike. "Shall I buy 'Master Key' stock?"

"There is a girl back there"—she went on intensely.

Crane looked up swiftly. He caught a glint of the jealousy in the woman's eyes. For his own purpose she was most useful, so he snapped the rubber band around his memorandum book, put it back in his pocket and said with finality, "Jean, I'll buy 'Master Key' stock at any price!"

Mastering the cry which had come to him from Thomas Gallon's bungalow and realizing that in it was a tone



"Leave it to me."

he had never heard before. John Dorr strode down the hill. As he crossed the gulch he saw the door of the bungalow open, and Ruth appeared.

"I thought I heard your father call," he said awkwardly.

"He was calling you," she answered quietly. "but he went over toward the dump. I think he wants you there."

Ruth laid her little hand on John Dorr's brawny arm. "John," she said, the swift color rising in her cheeks, "I don't want to say anything to make trouble, but father is worried. He trusts you; but, you know, we haven't recovered the lost vein."

John looked her straight in the eye. "Leave it to me."

Her appealing hands crept up his arms, and for one moment she allowed him to read her soul. She made a potent plea, directed by the instinct of a woman who is loved. "John, look after him. He is doing it for me."

Dorr hesitated a moment. It was the first thing Ruth had ever asked him. He felt that he ought to respond to this appeal in some most convincing way, but he could formulate no phrase that would express at once

his determination to do everything in his power to help her father and his gratitude that she had taken him into her confidence, so he merely smiled, waved his hand and went down the hill toward the dump beneath the head end of the spraddling trestle.

She called him back. "I forgot it was lunchtime," she said shyly. "I must get down to your father," he said rather brusquely.

"Then I'll bring you both down your lunches to the mine," she said. "We can have a little picnic all by ourselves."

As he went up toward the end of the trestle Dorr observed that the engineer running the donkey engine seemed hardly to know his business.

"My dear fellow," he said quietly, "you're allowing too much slack on your cable. It is dangerous. Those ore cars are coming down that trestle too fast. If their brakes give way it means disaster!"

"What's the trouble?" said Gallon, coming up with a piece of ore in his hand.

"I was just telling Bill Tubbs that if he did not keep up the slack on his cable on those cars he would whip them over the end of the trestle," said John.

He turned toward the old man and said in a different voice: "You called me. What is it that you want?"

"Look at this, John," said the older man, handing out the piece of ore—"dirt, not gold bearing quartz. I want to talk to you; I've got something to say to you."

Involuntarily John looked down the street. He saw Ruth coming, swinging the lunch basket in her hand. He remembered her shy appeal that he would do the best he could for "The Master Key."

"I think we had better go into the mine; we can talk there," he said.

"They are setting off a blast," Gallon remarked.

Dorr looked up at the car roaring past them overhead and said suddenly: "Before anything else you ought to fix that trestle. Some day a car will go over on the dump."

Gallon looked up and then glanced at Dorr. "I guess you're right, John; I've thought of that myself. Things have kind of gone at loose ends. Now I'll see to it myself with your help, because I have something to say to you."

"There comes Ruth with a basket of lunch," said Dorr.

"Oh, yes. When I am away from the house she often picnics with me here in the mine. Say, I'm going up on the trestle. Have another talk with Tubbs. He is all right, but he has got careless. Tell him to keep up the slack of his cable. I tell you, John, I have wanted to talk to you for a long time, but first I'm going to look after that cable, because I can see you are right and we might have a bad accident."

As the old man started into the mine, putting one foot after the other with that carelessness characteristic of men becoming decrepit, a man ran out of the mouth of the mine waving his arms. Almost instantly following him came a puff of gray-blue smoke, which soared upward and spread out as if it were the blossom of a cloud warmed into full bloom by the hot sunlight pouring down into the valley.

Ruth let fall the lunch basket and stared upward at that dark, murky hole in the hill. Was John there? Was her father there? She knew that that bulky cloud blooming into the heavens meant death beneath the ground. Unwittingly she cried "John!" Then she remembered her filial duty, and her next word, whispered toward that billowing, eddying mass of vapor was "Father!"

Thus do maidens confess to God the secrets of their heart, but let us see how they conceal from men these same sacred mysteries.

Ruth hastened her pace toward the entrance of the mine. The shale gave way under her little feet, but she struggled upward until she reached the trestle. Having lived all her life in a mining camp, there was no terror for her in anything but falling rock. That effusion of smoke front-

ing over the hillside seemed to speak of disaster. She knew the peril of a premature explosion, and she also knew every working of "The Master Key." And again she wondered whether it was John Dorr or her father or both who were stifling for air within that dark tunnel.

She did not see John Dorr talking to the engineer below her, nor did she see the miner who had just left the mine and was scrambling down the ladder. Her thought was that during this noon hour, when both shifts were off duty, her father had gone in and accidentally set off a blast. What blasting was done in "The Master Key" usually took place during the morning, but owing to carelessness it was sometimes the case that all the blasts were not set off. She had seen men belched out of that dark hole before furious gusts of gas. And yet why was the ore car inside? That, too, spelled disaster.

She dropped the lunch basket and pulled out the pocket electric light which she always carried. It burned only a tiny hole in the billowing smoke. She rushed blindly in, trusting to her long familiarity with the tunnel to find her father.

Thus it was that father and daughter passed each other in the darkness; Gallon grimly but silently cursing the awkwardness of his men, Ruth trying to choke out the names of the two men she loved. Suddenly she came into the free air. The little beam of her lamp



Ruth Hastened Toward the Entrance of the Mine.

showed her nothing but an ore car and the tools dropped by the last shift when they had quit for dinner.

"Father!" she cried, peering into the darkness beyond.

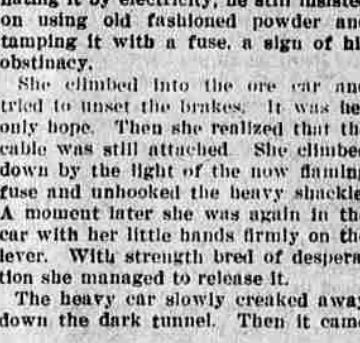
"John!"

She stepped on into the shadow and called again. Her foot slipped on the rough floor of the tunnel, and as she tried to save herself her lamp fell. A moment later she saw a trickle of fire running along toward the heading. It was a fuse leading to a blast that had not yet been shot. With all light gone except that blue flicker, penned in as she was by the ore car, standing there with set brakes, what hope had she? How long would it be before that little gust of flame reached the powder?

Thomas Gallon was old fashioned in many ways. Instead of using 60 percent dynamite everywhere and detonating it by electricity, he still insisted on using old fashioned powder and tamping it with a fuse, a sign of his obstinacy.

She climbed into the ore car and tried to unset the brakes. It was her only hope. Then she realized that the cable was still attached. She climbed down by the light of the now flaming fuse and unhooked the heavy shackle. A moment later she was again in the car with her little hands firmly on the lever. With strength bred of desperation she managed to release it.

The heavy car slowly creaked away down the dark tunnel. Then it came



"The Master Key" Mine.

over Ruth that she was not strong enough to stop its momentum on the long trestle that led to the dump. She was feeling death by fire and gas and rock only to be hurled headlong over the lofty end of the track. A vision rose before her of being flung through the bright California air right at her father's feet. Behind her she heard the sputtering of the last few inches of the fuse. She crouched in the car. Just as it emerged from the tunnel's mouth it was as if a huge hand thrust the car forward. The boom of the explosion deafened her. She stood up now in the wildly speeding car and cried, "John, John!"

AFTER IV.

The Rescue.

AFTER talking to the engineer, John Dorr had missed Gallon and saw him at the anchor age of the ore cable car up the hill, across the gulch from the trestle.

"John," said Gallon, "I am getting old. Years ago there were two partners of us prospected this country, and we found free milling gold. I say 'we,' John, but there was a little girl— I kept the location of that mine to myself. There was trouble, John. He suspected me." He turned his dimming eyes on the stalwart young man in entreaty. "I guess you know why I tried to keep those plans to myself."

"Who is the man?" demanded the engineer, patting the great iron ore carrier with his hand as a man pacifies a restless animal.

At that moment there came a faint cry from a miner on the trestle.

"What does he want?" demanded Gallon peevishly.

John Dorr's eyes saw the miners in the camp, wives and all, streaming out and staring upward. They had got the meaning of that cry. He thought to himself, "Where is Ruth?" It came over him that she was bringing luncheon to her father and himself in the mine. He stared up at that dark hole in the hillside and saw an eddy of smoke. Instantly he knew that she must be somewhere within that dark depth.

With all the force of his lungs he bawled down to the engineer, who was staring stupidly upward, swung himself into the bucket, pulled his signal whistle out of his pocket and blew it furiously.

The engineer seemed to listen for a moment, then kicked off his boots and blew his answering whistle. A second later the bucket was swinging down the lofty cable across the gulch.

It was not clear in John's mind how he could rescue Ruth. The quickest way to get to the trestle was by the bucket; then he would have those long, long stretches of ties to traverse, and when he reached that smoke filled tunnel could he get through? He must. He steadied himself and thought, his eyes fixed on the hole in the hillside.

The bucket was still surging a hundred feet away from his goal when he saw the ore car emerge and in it the slender form of Ruth. No one realized better than he that her strength was not equal to setting those brakes and that she had escaped one death only to meet another.

His trained eye caught sight of one chance. He yelled down to the engineer, "Quick, quick, Tubbs!"

The engineer's blank face upturned toward him seemed that of a man dazed by imminent disaster, but John Dorr's imperious will reached across and down that space. The engineer pulled his throttle wide open, and as he did so John Dorr swung himself over the edge of the bucket and, hanging down by his knees right over the trestle, waited for the oncoming car.

"Ruth!" he cried. "Ruth, come to me!"

He saw her turn toward him, balance herself in the swaying ore car and lift up her arms. He stretched his own down, and as the mass of steel and ore dashed under him, caught her up. He did not hear the crash that followed. All he saw was the upturned face of the girl he loved, swinging a hundred feet above death in his strong arms, safe.

About 3,000 miles away a dark and splendid woman was looking critically at her maid. "Eloise," she was saying, "I don't like to be waked this early in the morning. I have told you often enough about this. What do you mean by disturbing me for a mere letter?"

"You told me, madame, always to call you when there was a letter in this handwriting."

The woman under the roseate coverlets held out her jeweled hand. The maid gave one swift glance at her mysterious avaricious eyes and vanished. As she closed the door after her the envelope, torn into shreds, fell to the floor.

Mrs. Darnell sat up alertly and quickly perused the slow, even script written on the old fashioned blue lined paper of a country hotel:

Dear Cousin Jean—Since you last heard from me I have found Gallon. I am leaving today for Silent Valley. His "Master Key" mine is only ten miles from there. Won't he be surprised to see me? I will let you know later how our scheme comes out.

Goody for now. Keep mum! As ever, HARRY.

When Gallon thought he had killed Wilkerson he became infected with the ineradicable disease of dread. In his conversation with John Dorr he had given first expression to his feelings. The young mining engineer on account of his youth did not fully understand that men do not speak of such things until age—loosener of tongues as well as of the chords of life—suddenly oppresses them—makes them feel helpless, brings them to a realization of what the ultimate fact of death means. He had barely caught the appeal in the old man's voice when he had comprehended Ruth's peril.

The old man, with shaking limbs, had watched the rescue. When he saw that his daughter was safe he also perceived the solution of his problem. Here was a quick mind needed to protect Ruth's property. Somewhere in that hill was the richest of California gold. Once more he said to himself, "John Dorr can find 'the master key.'"

Feeling himself too weak to meet the girl who was now clinging limply to her rescuer and also discerning in his own slowing pulse that his time was short, he went down the hill, crossed the gulch without a word to the wondering miners and entered the bungalow.

A moment later John Dorr came with Ruth in his arms. The old man merely looked on. "Always look after her, John," he said slowly, "and if Wilkerson comes back—"

Dorr looked at the old man with pity in his eyes. "She isn't hurt," he said, gently patting her down on the couch. Then he straightened up. "I'll always look after her," he promised.

Gallon stared over at the white face of his daughter as she lay unconscious on the couch. "Humph"—thus expressing to himself his own comprehension of the fact that there was coming such a period in his own life. He went out without a look backward. When he returned the room was empty. He fingered the books on the table and fell into a state of profound thought. He did not hear the door open behind him.

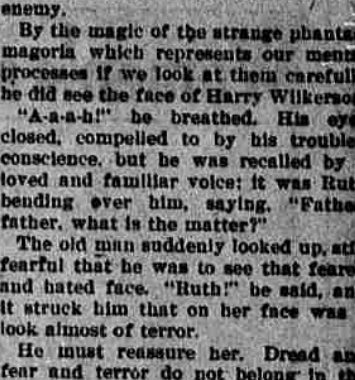
Ruth, freshly clad and wholly recovered from her experience, wondered at her father's attitude. She stepped softly toward him. He did not turn. She went nearer. She laid her soft hands on his shoulder and then, as if the fingers of life long fear were touching the very nerves of his being, Thomas Gallon slowly twisted his head by a supreme effort of will to see the sight which of all things in the world he did not want to see—the face of his enemy.

By the magic of the strange phantasmagoria which represents our mental processes if we look at them carefully he did see the face of Harry Wilkerson.

"A-a-a-h!" he breathed. His eyes closed, compelled to by his troubled conscience, but he was recalled by a loved and familiar voice; it was Ruth bending over him, saying, "Father, father, what is the matter?"

The old man suddenly looked up, still fearful that he was to see that feared and hated face. "Ruth!" he said, and it struck him that on her face was a look almost of terror.

He must reassure her. Dread and fear and terror do not belong in the



"Father, father, what is the matter?"

hearts of maidens. By a tremendous effort he pulled himself together and smiled.

"Why, nothing was the matter, child. I was only thinking."

But there was something in his tone that made Ruth draw back. In her innocence she had not learned to discern the difference between the various rude passions that govern this world. She was still afraid. She crept out the door.

Gallon let his head fall on the table upon his empty arms.

As Ruth closed the door softly behind her she saw a light burning in John Dorr's cabin, and there flooded over her a sense of relief that there was some one to whom she could go. Careless of maiden modesty, western girl as she was, obsessed by the fear of that strange scene she had just left in the bungalow, she fled up the hill toward that one beacon that held out hope of life and—did she know it?—love.

Once at the door she knocked hard because it seemed to her that she had been pursued up the hill by some strange and miserable demon.

"John, John!" she cried.

The door was flung open, and he appeared, his bulk filling the yellow opening from jamb to jamb.

The moment he appeared it came over her that she had done an unconventional thing, yet there was that demon of fear creeping up the hill after her, and she turned her eyes to the kind, brave face of the engineer and held out her slender arms and whispered: "John, I don't understand. Something has happened. I am scared."

John Dorr looked down at her fair face for a moment and shut his eyelids. Was it true that she had really come to him? He, too, felt the presage of dread. Way down the hill, across the gulch drenched in moonlight and shadows, it seemed to him that he saw one of those grotesque and impossible figures, mirages of the desert night. Then he took Ruth into his strong arms.

Thus it is in this world that those whose arms are empty feel the fingers of fear at their throats, and only those whose arms are filled can look boldly into the night and defy the fiends of darkness.

And the man whose arms held nothing, whose hands were clinched in an agony of unmitigated fear, saw through the window a figure of a man on horse back on the crest of the hill!

A tall, dark, stern man, who did not tip the porter, got off the Overland express at Silent Valley. The little hamlet lay there like a mirage of some man's dream. There was but one familiar building in the place, and Harry Wilkerson gazed at it and smiled.

"Well," he said audibly, "this looks like old times! Now to find Gallon!"

It seems that in that clear dusk which marks the border line between life

(Continued on Page 6.)