

# 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 IX

#### Master of the "Master Key" Mine.

WHEN Ruth Gallon did not call upon him and he found himself unable to locate her Charles Everett was at a loss what to do. He had wired Dorr of his anxiety about her and had received word in reply that the young engineer had received conflicting messages.

Unhappily for the girl, Everett was called out of town. And so when he found himself forced to make a hurried trip to San Francisco her predicament became the more pronounced.

The fat Everett, George Drake, took it upon himself to call at the Ritz for her mail, and, returning with word that there was none for her, Ruth felt a strange premonition that matters were not progressing as they should.

Mrs. Darnell found her gazing out of the drawing room window, huddled in a pathetic little heap, dejection stamped on features and form.

"Dearie," purred the hostess, "you look as if you had lost your last friend on earth. Do cheer up. What is the trouble?"

Ruth turned her head, but remained in the same queer little attitude, replying in a plaintive voice:

"I do not understand why Mr. Dorr has not written or wired me. Really, Mrs. Darnell, I am beginning to fear that something has happened to him."

Mrs. Darnell looked at her searchingly, but recovered quickly under the questioning return gaze.

"Do not worry, Ruth. Everything will come out all right. Supposing we take a drive. The air and sunshine will do you a world of good."

Every minute was one of delight to the unsophisticated girl, and each new sight and vista opened a new world to her inexperienced mind. After a stop at Grant's tomb they speeded downtown, reaching Columbus circle after a run through Central park.

A blowout of one of the tires caused a delay. Ruth tired of sitting in the car, and, jumping out, she spied a florist's window. Before Mrs. Darnell could think of the possibility of a mis-carriage of her well laid plans the girl was inside. She purchased violets for both and was on her way out when she saw a telephone. Intuitively, rather than from any other motive, she hastily called up Mr. Everett's office. To her amazement she learned that he had gone west.

Her news was even more startling to Mrs. Darnell than it had been to Ruth. Quick action was needed, and, leaving Ruth in the car with a prevaricated excuse, the older woman was soon phoning to Drake, telling him to go west at once and instructing him to meet them in San Francisco, where he was to pose as Everett and continue carrying out the plot to secure possession of Ruth's mining property.

And thus it came about that five days later found them in the metropolises of the Pacific coast, where they were met by Drake, still posing as Everett.

The greatest difficulty lay in reconciling Ruth's mind to the mystery of Everett's sudden departure after she had seen him at Mrs. Darnell's the night before. But the cleverness of

the schemer counterbalanced all doubts, and the girl was therefore persuaded to hasten to San Francisco to carry out her plans.

Accordingly she wired Dorr, but again "the wires crossed," for, although he learned that she was going to the western city, he again learned that Everett had failed to connect with her.

Ruth had been gone many days when John Dorr received another telegram from Everett that made his heart stop its regular beat. Alone in his cabin he pored over it as if there must be some hidden meaning beneath the words. It was unbelievable. After all his pain and his very careful forethought for her comfort and safety something had gone wrong. Everett was brief:

San Francisco, April 2  
John Dorr, Silent Valley, Cal.  
Have been unable to find Miss Gallon.  
EVERETT.

For awhile his mind refused to work logically. All that he could think of was little Ruth Gallon, she of the slender hands and pure eyes, lost in the great city and piteously seeking a familiar face. But he pulled himself vigorously together and called up the agent at the station.

"Bill," he said over the telephone. "This is Dorr. I want to get a wire through to San Francisco."

"All right, John; what is it?" John thought a moment and then dictated this message:

Charles Everett, Call Building, San Francisco:  
Miss Gallon was to have gone to the St. Francis, as I wired you before. DORR.

little girl. But you've got to go to Frisco and help her. Likely she's found herself pretty much a stranger. I got lost in New Orleans once, and I reckon Frisco is bigger."

"I'll go," said Dorr promptly. "I'll leave my papers and my new plans in your charge, Tom."

The old man laid his warm hand on John's arm. "New plans?" he whispered. "Have you found the mother lode? Don't say anything to Wilkerson."

"But he is the superintendent?"

"Not of this shanty. I never trust an egg until I've broken it."

In Harry Wilkerson's dark heart there was what he might in his twisted vocabulary have termed happiness. His plans were working out to perfection. Jean Darnell had wired again that all was well and that she would have news for him in a few days. This meant that she and George Drake had done their part. But he wondered why it was that John Dorr, who must certainly be anxiously awaiting word from Ruth, neither said anything nor displayed a sign of impatience.

It did not escape him that Tom Kane and the young engineer were in consultation several times. What were they planning? He determined to probe boldly. When Dorr came into the office in the afternoon and began to clear up his desk Wilkerson asked quietly, "What's the news from San Francisco? Has Ruth wired?"

John had been expecting this perfectly natural question and was ready with his answer:

"Everything seems to be all right."

"Good!" said the superintendent dryly. "I'd like to get started on that new lead pretty soon." He could not repress a sour smile. "Since the old rate of wages has been restored I guess you and I may have to do with our salaries for a while."

John looked up and caught himself. He was in no position to quarrel with this man. "Pay the men first, of course," he said. He proceeded to get into a package of blueprints and memoranda.

"Going to move?" suggested Wilkerson.

"I'm going for a trip, and I thought I'd look over my notes in the mean while," was the response.

Wilkerson said no more. He went on the alert. From Bill Tubbs he learned that Dorr was going to run into either Valle Vista or Silent Valley with the motor truck.

The superintendent of the "Master Key" belonged to the type that is catlike in its quickness of action, based on intuition rather than on reason. While Ruth Gallon was carefully concealed, it was more than possible that Dorr would do stir things up with the aid of Everett that all plans to seize control of the mine's stock would be futile. He must not be allowed to go to San Francisco.

But how to prevent him? Wilkerson pondered this problem till his dark face was suffused with angry blood. There was no way but the way of violence. Among his sensuous appetites was none for blood, but he nerved himself to his task and shortly after midday called for his horse and rode out, stating that he was going across the divide to see about a fresh supply of wood. In the saddle scabbard he carried a short saw.

Spanning an arroyo between two hills halfway to Silent Valley was a short bridge of considerable height. It was mid-afternoon when Harry Wilkerson threw the bridle rein over his pony's head and climbed down the hill slope till he was directly under the bridge. Then he pulled the little saw out of his shirt bosom and began work. Fifteen minutes later he climbed up to the road, broke the saw in two, flung the pieces into the brush and rode away. He did not go far.

From his place of vantage halfway up the hill he waited. The hour that elapsed before he heard the coughing of the motor seemed an endless succession of dandy seconds, each marked by a stabbing breath. Then he saw the truck emerge from the cut and com-

ing else in the coat, John?" He bent his white head as if to catch a whisper. Instead Dorr gave a raucous shout:

"There was that check from the mine!"

"I saw you yourself give that check to Wilkerson," said the cook soothingly. "But that doesn't change matters any. You've got to get to San Francisco, and you're busted." Tom Kane pulled out an old deerskin poke and from it spilled on the table a few hundred dollars.

"Just as soon as you get able, John," he said huskily, "you take this money and get to Frisco. Find Ruth. That's all that matters—and that little girl."

"Harry!" he whispered. "Wilkerson is gone. He's been gone since mid-afternoon."

"But I am badly hurt," said John Dorr stupidly. Then Kane understood that he must take desperate measures.

Fifteen minutes later Dorr was pounding down the road toward Silent Valley. His head was roughly bandaged, his chest had been tightly strapped with the ripped woolen blanket, and in his nostrils was the pungent odor of ammonia. He was at last awake and knew that in his pocket was a thousand dollars in gold. An hour later he boarded the Sunset express and automatically paid his fare, bought his Pullman ticket and, notwithstanding the porter's earnest inquiry as to his injuries, went to bed as silently as he arrived in San Francisco a day later.

Exultant in his triumph, Wilkerson stifled the small voice of his conscience and strode on. One thought now mastered his every action—he must reach San Francisco and Jean Darnell.

John Dorr was driving. With him was one of the hands.

The heavy truck bumped upon the bridge and in the desert silence the man on the hill saw it quietly away to one side and then plunge downward to the rocks below. Before the sound of that crash could reach his listening ears he saw a sudden burst of flame shoot up a dense swirl of smoke. Then, like the farway crackling of a fire, came the noise of the yielding timbers, followed by a dull boom.

"My God!" whispered Wilkerson to himself. "The gasoline tank exploded and the car is on fire!" He crouched in the brush, waiting to see whether any one emerged from the gulch. No one did. The bridge burned fiercely. At least no one would ever know the cause of this catastrophe, and John Dorr would not go to San Francisco.

Instinct told him to flee the scene. But a stronger passion overcame him; he must see for himself what had happened. He mounted his horse and rode swiftly down the slope.

The truck had turned completely over and lay broken and smoldering across the waterworn boulders. Wilkerson could not see two forms; all he discerned through the eddying smoke was the body of John Dorr, flung some distance from the truck, his pallid face turned to the blissing sky.

"Dead!" muttered Wilkerson, chilled with the horror of the thing he had done. It bit into his very soul, that scene, until he could not stand it longer and rode furiously away toward the other side of the divide. He must go on his supposed errand about the wood and know nothing of this.

On the crest of the mountain he halted and looked back. Far below him a thin curl of gray smoke marked the site of the murder. Knowing that he was safe, Wilkerson experienced a tremendous reaction.

He raised himself exultantly in his stirrups. He was now master of the "Master Key" mine.

### CHAPTER X

#### In the Heart of Chinatown.

WITH quick decision Wilkerson turned his horse toward Valle Vista. He felt in his pockets to see how much money he had. He discovered that through an oversight he had put into his pocket before leaving the office the last San Francisco mint check for something like \$3,000. There was besides this a couple of hundred dollars.

He pulled this out, stared at it, laughed and went on. "Frisco for mine," said he.

The evening sun was pouring a pale blue light through a high Pacific fog when John Dorr came to his senses.

Twenty feet away the machine was smoldering and the smell of oil and varnish lay like a miasma in the gulch. He could hardly breathe. He struggled painfully up the slope toward the road and then lost consciousness again. It was only for a moment, for Tom Kane, desert wise, traveling in the cool of the evening, stopped his burros at the top of the declivity, wondering what the fire was. He saw that the bridge was gone. This might be due to tramps camped in the dry bed of the creek, not attending to their blaze. He led the burros off the road and down the slope, only to stop with an exclamation such as he had not used in years. John Dorr lay there with his fingers clutched into the gray mud.

He stooped over and saw that the body, bulking heavily in the misty light, still held its vital spark.

"Where is Hickman, the driver?" The cook peered around and then once more bent over the motionless form of the young engineer. With great exertion he managed to lift him up and place him across one of the pack saddles. John's arm automatically clasp- ing the little animal's neck. Seeing him secure, and coming to his senses, Kane went down to the smoldering remains of the machine to search for his companion. One glance was sufficient. He quietly went back and started his journey toward the mine. His old hands, seared by years of cooking, patted the almost inanimate form of Dorr.

They were almost to the "Master Key" mine when Dorr came to himself, slipped off the pack saddle and stood up weakly.

"What happened?" he muttered.

"Nothing much," said Kane, putting his arm about him. "You had a bad fall. That bridge never was any too strong."

"Bridge?" said Dorr. "The bridge is gone?"

"Sure," said old Tom Kane easily, whistling to his burros again. "You just come along with me."

"But I haven't got my coat."

The cook looked at him with swift understanding. His coat had been in the seat of the machine and was burned. "I'll get you another coat when we get back to camp," he said con- fortingly. So they progressed the long and dusty road back to the "Master Key." It was dark when they ar- rived, and Kane was able to take his dazed and much bruised charge into the cook shanty without being observed by any of the miners. Dorr was still but half conscious and willingly submitted to being put to bed, though he still protested that he wanted his coat.

"What do you want your coat for?" demanded Kane.

John opened his eyes widely, for the first time cognizant of his surround- ings. Then he leaped from the bed. "All my money is in it!"

Tom Kane sat on the chair beside him, dish towel in hand, as a sort of emblem of authority, and demanded in his careful tones, "There wasn't any-

thing else in the coat, John?" He bent his white head as if to catch a whisper. Instead Dorr gave a raucous shout:

"There was that check from the mine!"

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Jean Darnell! The woman who stirred him to the depths of his innermost soul.

Jean Darnell and the "Master Key!" Arrived at the station he sent her a wire telling of his coming. Two minutes later he was aboard the train. As he gazed backward a band of the rails drew a curtain to his musings, and he turned and entered the car.

Upon their arrival in San Francisco Mrs. Darnell acted upon her decision made during the journey—that they would stop at a less pretentious hotel than the St. Francis, where the chances of her plans being spoiled by chance meetings with the real Everett or perhaps John Dorr were too great. And so they took a taxi to the Manx.

A word with Drake and the older woman stepped to the desk and in a firm, bold hand wrote:

"Mrs. Darnell and daughter, New York."

Quickly she turned to Ruth and, following the lead of the bellboy, escorted her toward the elevators.

No sooner had they removed their wraps in the luxurious apartments than a rap at the door interrupted their talk.

"See who it is," commanded Mrs. Darnell to her maid.

The latter returned with a telegram from Harry Wilkerson saying that he was on his way and would join them soon.

Wearied by the long trip across the continent, Ruth was glad to retire early, and shortly after the dinner hour she was tucked in her bed and sleeping soundly.

Drake hastened to the depot and met Wilkerson, driving him to the Manx with all haste.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Harry," was the effusive greeting he received from Jean.

His heart pounded with the joy of it! After all his scheming and plotting was worth while. He would win the mine and the woman also.

The mine! The "Master Key!" The thought brought him back like the snapping of a whip.

"Where is the girl?" he asked almost brusquely.

"In there," and Mrs. Darnell pointed to the curtains dividing Ruth's room from the other.

Wilkerson started toward the archway.

"Harry!" He turned.

"You mustn't go in there."

"Why not?"

"She's sleeping—won't awaken her."

"Oh, all right," he said, and stepped from Drake to Mrs. Darnell. "Let's get down to business. Where are the papers? Have you got them yet?"

"Sh! Not so loud—and Mrs. Darnell looked apprehensively toward the heavy plush door.

"Oh, that's all right, Jean. But we must hurry this thing up."

In her bed Ruth stirred. The murmur of voices came to her as in a troubled dream. Whose were they? Whom had she heard that voice before? The



Before a Doorway Wilkerson Stopped.

heavy one? She turned on her side and the moonlight shone on her in a white light.

"I tell you, Jean, you must do as I say! If we want to get possession of those papers and secure the mine we must act!"

"Will you be quiet?" Mrs. Darnell's eyes blazed in angered resentment.

What were the voices saying? Ruth sat up, listened, slipped from the bed and tiptoed to the curtains.

"You'll do as I say or—"

"Harry!"

"Oh, come, old man. What's the use of all this argument?" and Drake laid his hand on Wilkerson's arm resolutely. Their eyes met. Wilkerson calmed himself.

"Oh, all right. As you say." And he stepped to Jean and turned her around to him.

"Siam, Siam!"

"Hello, hello!"

With one rush the trio were upon her. Mrs. Darnell seized the affrighted girl and dragged her from the phone. She screamed.

"Stop her yelling! Stop her!" commanded Wilkerson.

"George, for God's sake, do something!"

With her hand over the girl's mouth, Mrs. Darnell held her by sheer strength, while the always cowardly Wilkerson scanned his commands in a louder tone than those of the girl had been.

Her head fell back, and her body became limp.

"She's fainted! Call a taxi at once! We must get her out of this hotel!"

In less than five minutes they were shooting down the elevator. Another quarter minute and Wilkerson, with the unconscious form of the girl in his arms, her face covered by the cape of the maid, was rushing across the lobby, preceded by Drake. Mrs. Darnell stopped at the desk long enough to throw down a twenty dollar bill.

"The girl is sick, and we must hurry her to a hospital!" she managed to gasp.

Before the dumfounded clerk or the amazed guests could stop to act they were out of the hotel and in a taxi.

The house detective sprang from almost out of nowhere and in a second was speeding after the fleeing ones, accompanied by another plain clothes man.

They sighted the first taxi as it rounded the corner of Powell and Eddy streets.

"Keep that car in sight, and catch it if you can!"

The chauffeur made answer with his foot.

As the detectives saw the course the other car was taking they both murmured, "Chinatown!"

Into the realm of the yellow man shot the auto.

Before a doorway Wilkerson stopped. Rapid Pause—rapid! Pause—rapid! A face appeared as the door creaked open, the face of a Chinaman, deeply lined, the almond shaped eyes scarcely visible through the nearly closed lids.

A signal and a whispered word from Wilkerson, and the door widened the opening, and all passed through. With a whisk it closed.

Around bends and corners and down steps, another bend and another flight of stairs. Then along a long corridor, where scarcely a ray of light was visible. All the time the shifting feet of the little yellow man could be heard in the advance.

Then a door stopped the procession. Another series of signals. Another long wait. The door opened with a peculiar rumbling sound. They entered a queerly arranged room. At first glance it seemed very small, but as the eye traveled around its walls its strange shape gave one a feeling of fearsome



Ruth Spied a Florist's Window.

After mulling over the problem he felt that he must confide in some one. Of all the men in the mine he trusted only Tom Kane. He strode down the hill to the cook shanty and found the old man engaged in his task of preparing the noonday meal.

"Look here, Tom," John said abruptly, holding out the telegram. "I haven't said anything before, but Ruth is lost in San Francisco. I've wired Everett before. He can't find her."

Without a word the cook reached for the yellow slip and read it slowly. He glanced up and said with the utmost simplicity, "I reckon you'd better catch this evening's express."

"But my work here—somebody has got to look after the mine and Wilkerson!"

Tom Kane glanced at him and then at the bit of paper. "I know how you feel," he muttered, "but I've cooked years enough to know that if you leave

things on the fire they'll burn. This business won't wait." He smiled magnificently. "And you just leave this to me. I've been here since the mine started, and I guess I can attend to it from cook shanty to Wilkerson. The main thing is to find Ruth. I know she's safe, for nobody would hurt that



Something Had Gone Wrong.

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