

# 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 XIII.

#### The Second Story Men.

HARRY DARNELL paced back and forth in the miserable room where Harry Wilkerson had lodged her and her maid pending the outcome of his wild plotting to get possession of Ruth Gallon's precious papers. Her handsome and cruel face was clouded with slow wrath, and she clinched her hands now and again till the knuckles were white.

For one thing, Mrs. Darnell loved the plush life. Physical luxury was her highest wish, the goal of her loftiest ambition, the one price she had set on her soul. The dull surroundings she had been forced to accept assented her. She hated Wilkerson for making her uncomfortable.

So when he came in, walking very slowly and quietly, she turned on him like a wildcat.

"Take me out of here!" she panted. "I won't stay here another hour, Ruth or no Ruth!"

Wilkerson flinched. "I'm sorry," he gasped, "but Drake made a mess of the whole affair, the police are after Sing Wah and that girl got away."

Mrs. Darnell stepped in her almost hysterical walk about the room and stared at Wilkerson with burning eyes. He returned her look defiantly. "I'd never had to do all this if you had done your part long ago and got the papers when she was in your charge," he said. "But there is no use in crying over what can't be helped."

At this moment Drake entered, presenting himself sullenly. He had already received Wilkerson's acrid compliments on his astuteness in failure, and he expected nothing less from Mrs. Darnell. He was ready to quit the conspiracy.

Jean's quick instinct did not fail her, and she instantly smiled on Drake and murmured: "You poor boy! Now tell me all about it!"

When he had finished his relation of the morning's experiences, with much emphasis on the shooting and his narrow escape from Sing Wah's den, she looked at him thoughtfully.

"It was a madman's scheme," she said. She turned to Wilkerson. "Harry, you used to do things better. Use your wits! This isn't the desert. Force won't avail and time is getting short. We must have those papers immediately and raise the money on them and get enough capital ahead to find the old plan to the mother lode of the 'Master Key' mine. Use your wits!"

For a long moment the three of them stood in silence. Then Wilkerson smiled sardonically.

"All right, Jean; I think I understand you. I'll see what I can do today. First I must find out a few things. Drake and I will go together."

"Thanks," said the young man drily. "I have a notion that I'm about fed up with your plans and plots."

Before Wilkerson could respond with the bitter reproaches ready on his lips Mrs. Darnell interposed, curbing her own unruly temper.

"George," she said, looking at him with suddenly soft eyes. "I know just how you feel. But it means everything to me—to all of us. I have trusted you so, and if you fall me now"—She threw out her arms in a gesture of pleading. Then she came closer to him

and whispered, "And are you going to give up the stake you are playing for? You are in love with her!"

"That's but little reason why I should help Harry here out with all kinds of preposterous plans. That one of last night nearly did for us all. If she hadn't escaped as she did the police would be at the door now."

"John Dorr is a stupid fool," Wilkerson broke in. "It's been mere luck that's helped him so far. Nobody ever crossed Harry Wilkerson yet and got away with it. Old Tom Gallon found that out."

Jean Darnell glanced at his feverish eyes and understood him. She knew that the reaction from the thought that he had caused Dorr's death—the sudden surprise of finding him alive and



"I've got my scheme and my man."

in San Francisco—had shaken his nerve. He would hereafter seek the devious and obscure ways he knew so well. Her eyelids almost closed till she was looking at him through narrow slits. She seemed satisfied and turned to Drake. "Please do it for me," she urged again. "I know Harry has some good, safe plan in view."

Wilkerson nodded. "We'll be back before very long, Jean. Better stay right here so that I can get you on the phone if necessary."

"Oh, I'll stay here!" she mocked. "That seems to be my role—staying where you put me."

He stepped very close to her and looked into her stormy eyes. "And if I put you where you most want to be in the world?"

She saw the passion flaming, as if the man's soul were on fire, and drew back fearfully. Wilkerson understood that movement and laughed grimly. She feared him, and he feasted on the terror he inspired, even where he also loved.

Once out on the street, Drake sullenly followed his companion's lead into a still lower quarter of the town. Busy with his own thoughts and still shaken from his own experiences of the morning, he did not notice that Wilkerson was evidently on the lookout for some one. Once or twice he stopped to think. Once he greeted an old acquaintance and carried on a low voiced conversation, of which Drake heard nothing except the name "Pell" and "he usually hangs out around Adam's poolroom."

When Wilkerson rejoined him Drake said peevishly, "Where to now?"

"I've got my scheme and my man," was the reply. "It'll be plain sailing from now on."

A moment later Drake was surprised to see Wilkerson step to one side directly into the path of a pale faced, quietly dressed young man of about thirty years of age. The individual stopped, stared at the man who had so rudely interrupted his walk and then recoiled.

"Harry?" he stammered. Wilkerson smiled cruelly, but said nothing. The other repeated the name and went on. "Are you here? Why are you here?"

His dread was so evident that Drake looked at him curiously. It was strange what a number of queer acquaintances Wilkerson had and how deeply most of them seemed to fear him. He listened intently to his companion's drawing tones.

"Yes, I'm Harry Wilkerson. I was looking for you, Pell."

The man he addressed licked his dry lips and essayed a smile. "Long time I no see you?" he said in an attempt at a jesting tone.

"How long is it, now?" Wilkerson

said as if to himself. "You got five years?"

"For God's sake, man, be quiet!" whispered Pell. "I—no one knows me here, and I'm on the square now too."

"You mean the police don't know you," grinned Wilkerson. "But, then, I know you, old sport. You wouldn't say now that I wasn't an old friend, would you?"

Pell grudgingly accepted the hand held out and shook it feebly.

"We'll just go to some nice place and sit down and talk over old times," Wilkerson remarked pleasantly.

"But I've got a date! I'm working downtown!" protested Pell miserably.

"Working?" demanded Wilkerson mockingly. "Since when has old Sam Pell been working? Answer! Since he was broke." He laughed loudly.

"I came out here to live on the level," pleaded the other, his foxlike face white with fear.

"Things too hot for you in the torrid east? Well, I never went back on a pal, did I, Sam? And I'm not going back on you now. I'm going to put you in the way of some coin."

At this point they turned into a small Greek cafe, and Wilkerson ordered coffee all around. When they had been served and were alone he introduced Drake and Pell and remarked to the former: "Sam Pell is known as the slickest man in his line. Ain't you, Sam?"

"I ain't working that lay any more," was the sulky answer.

Wilkerson leaned across the table, and his lean face held a very evil expression on it. "Not working? But you'd do a turn for an old friend, wouldn't you, specially when there's lots of good, safe money in it?"

As if hypnotized, Pell stared into the dark eyes fixed on him and swallowed chokingly.

"I knew you would," said Wilkerson, willfully misinterpreting his inarticulate groan. "Now to business, Sam!"

"Henry?" gasped the other. "My name's Henry now. Don't call me Sam."

"Well, Henry," said Wilkerson soothingly. "I declare, I do forget names so easily. Now, I want to explain my little proposition. It's just in your line, Sa—Henry."

Pell bit his finger nails and squirmed on his seat. But when the man opposite him casually pulled out a heavy purse and as he heard the clink of gold he subsided.

"Very rapidly and curtly Wilkerson told him of the existence of a bundle of papers that he wished to 'recover.' He laid only enough emphasis on their character to enable Pell to identify them on sight and concluded by saying: 'It's worth money in your pocket to locate them and get them back. Find a girl named Ruth Gallon in one of the hotels here. She has the papers.'"

Pell rose nervously. "Not for me, Wilkerson."

Wilkerson rose, too, quite undisturbed. "We'll just walk down the street aplece with you, Sa—Henry, and I can explain a little more clearly."

The outcome was that half an hour later Pell took \$50 advance from Wilkerson and promised to recover the papers for him. Before they parted the latter made several little jokes which Drake could not see the point of, but which seemed to make Pell sick with terror.

"Who is that fellow?" Drake demanded as they were returning to their lodgings.

Harry Wilkerson laughed bitterly. "The best hotel worker and second story man in America," he replied. "But he's lost his nerve."

"I don't like the way we're getting mixed up with all sorts of crooks in this business," said Drake crossly. "I went into this to oblige Jean and—"

"Help yourself," Wilkerson finished for him. "I notice that Mrs. Darnell and I are putting up the coin and doing the work so far. Where's your kick?"

The evil spell that Wilkerson had cast over so many weaklings closed

about George Drake, and he was absent.

Just how it was that she found herself again in the same room in the hotel Ruth could not have told after her terrible experiences of the night and



The Ex-Thief Spent the Day Searching Hotel Registers.

morning. But John had hurried her into a cab, ordered it driven to the Maxx and quickly made arrangements for Ruth to occupy his room with a maid to look after her.

"All my clothes are with that horrid woman," she whispered. "I'll rig you out, and then we'll go shopping," was the rejoinder.

With the help of the maid and the housekeeper Ruth was presently made presentable for the street, and John, in dry clothes and none the worse for his ducking, met her in the lobby.

"I have engaged a taxi by the hour," he told her. "I think it will rest you more to get the fresh air and dig around in the shops among the pretties than it will to brood in your own room."

Ruth hesitated shyly. "But I have no money, John."

"Oh!" he said blankly, and then a thought came to him. "Why, here I am carrying around a lot of the ranch money which I was going to turn over to you."

Once in the taxi Ruth told him of her experiences from the time she had left the mine. John listened soberly though once in awhile a heavy flush on his cheeks betrayed his deep seated anger at the plotters who had not only tried to deprive her of her mine, but had finally risked her life and liberty.

"It's all that man Wilkerson," he said when she had finished. "He caused your father to make him superintendent of the mine and then hounded him into his grave. He is your bad angel, Ruth. But I am here now, and I'll get busy with Everett and finish things up, and we'll soon be back at the mine and have things going again."

He answered her questions about the situation at the "Master Key" as tactfully as he could, he realized that her nerves were badly shaken. He would trust to the old Tom Kane to hold the fort in the mountains while he transacted the necessary business in San Francisco.

He directed the chauffeur to drive them through the shopping district, and while Ruth spent several hours in replenishing her wardrobe John sat in the taxi and studied things out. But he was continually seeing Wilkerson's dark face before him, and before they returned to the hotel he had determined to find out where he was and what he was doing.

While Ruth went to her room to dress for dinner John sat in the lobby and completed his plans. He did not observe a slender, quietly dressed young man with a very pale face, who sauntered in and out with an occasional trip to the cigar stand to light a fresh cigarette. It was Henry Pell.

The ex-thief had spent the day going from hotel to hotel, searching the registers. It was only at last that he went to the Maxx. There he found the name "Ruth Gallon" on the register and below it "John Dorr." This he reported to Wilkerson, who swore furiously, but emphasized the necessity of getting hold of the papers immediately.

"And I trust you to do it," he said meaningly.

Pell, flushed with drugs, nodded briskly. "I'll get 'em, all right, Harry," he said, but did not add his inmost thought, which was that, with the papers once in his own possession, he would easily get much more from Wilkerson than the \$200 he had promised.

"When will you have them?" Wilkerson went on impatiently.

Pell smiled faintly, but significantly. "I know your address," he remarked. "I'll deliver them there when I get them."

"But when?" growled the other. Pell flicked his cigarette stub into the gutter and whistled. "I never make dates ahead," he said quietly. "But it won't be long."

"Have you your plan all schemed out?"

Pell winked and moved off.

(Continued on Page 6.)

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