

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 XV. The New Plot.

THE morning brought John Dorr, Ruth Gallon and Thomas Kane together to discuss the problems before them. The papers so necessary for the consummation of the deal that Everett had proposed were again lost. Where they were gone, whether they had indeed fallen into Wilkerson's hands, none could tell. But more immediate yet was the need of extricating John. Two plain clothes men already sat near by, ready to take him to prison on a charge of killing Henry Pell.

"It's really only a formality," said the manager of the hotel. "The man was a robber and Mr. Dorr tried to capture him, as he had every right to do, and the man was killed."

This failed to comfort Ruth. To her mind the presence of the burly officers, the fact that John Dorr was under arrest in a strange city, made her feel that her burdens were too great to bear. She sat holding the old cook's hand till Everett should come. He had already telephoned, and she tried to be brave till he should come.

Everett arrived, and the moment she saw him she heaved a sigh of relief. He was so capable looking, so cool, so genuinely cordial to John that even Tom Kane softened his grim visage a little.

"I'm under arrest," John told him. "The officers were good enough to let me stay here till you came. Now I must be off. Let me introduce you all around."

This done, John Dorr went on. "They can tell you all about things, and when you've learned the worst come down and get me out. If you can."

Everett agreed, and Dorr rose, and with a smile said goodby to his companions. As he left the hotel with an officer on either side of him Ruth broke down and cried. Tom Kane comforted her as best he could till Everett suggested that they had best go to some more private place and discuss matters.

In Ruth's room she and the cook explained affairs briefly, Everett following their narrative carefully up to the incidents of the night before. When Ruth had finished and the cook was silent Everett thought a moment, then he laughed.

"I don't mean to make fun of all this," he apologized, "but I've known John Dorr for years and this is precisely the kind of trouble he reveals in."

"But he's in jail!" Ruth protested tearfully.

"True enough," was the reply. "That is the first thing I must do, get him out. I'll be off now and see the district attorney and bail him out."

"Please hurry!" Ruth pleaded.

"Don't worry," was the cheerful response. A moment later he was gone, promising to bring John back with him.

"What do you think of Mr. Everett?" Ruth demanded of Tom Kane.

The old man lit his pipe and scrutinized the ceiling. "Well," he said judicially, "considering the looks of them on Wilkerson's side and them on John's side, I should think that this Everett was on the right side."

With this judgment she had to be content. But she insisted that he tell her all about the conditions at the "Master Key" mine. "I know you have not told me all the truth," she said.

"Well," he answered her, "there's not much to tell one way and a heap in another. The mine's practically shut down. You know first you went away, then John and then Wilkerson. Pretty much all was left was me and Bill Tubbs. Bill, he kind of represented Wilkerson, and I stuck up for John.

The result was that things went to the bad, and the boys they come to me and want to know how long they've got to lay off.

"I suppose I mean how long before a pay day, I says to 'em. 'So far as I know nobody has laid you off.' They agreed with me, but said they couldn't feed their folks without money, and if they got no money for it why work?"

"They haven't been paid, then?"



"Please hurry!" Ruth pleaded.

"No. And Wilkerson cut off all cred it at the store. I guess I got in bad with Tubbs when I divided up a lot of flour and spuds that was in the cook shanty among the worst of ones. There was some ugly talk, and before I could kind of settle the boys' minds they treated Bill pretty roughly. So I just told myself that I would come to San Francisco and explain things. Boy, Wilkerson deserted the camp and the mine was closed down and your people were starving."

"Oh!" mourned Ruth, agitated at the blunt story. "And I seem to have been unfortunate all around, but I know that John will fix things."

Tom Kane fixed his honest old eyes on the girl and shook his head. "I don't want to discourage you, Ruthie," he said quietly, "but until that man Wilkerson is out of the mine for good you can't do more than patch matters up temporarily."

Meanwhile Wilkerson and Jean Darnell were anxiously awaiting news from Henry Pell. It was getting along in the forenoon, and the woman insisted that if he had succeeded in getting the papers he should have been on the ground long before. Her companion

was worried, but laid the delay to Pell's habits and the necessity possibly of avoiding the police.

But when Drake arrived with the morning papers and said nothing articulate and only pointed to the headlines on the first page both Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell knew that something had happened again to spoil their plans. It was Wilkerson who snatched up the paper and read the news:

HOTEL THIEF HURLED TO DEATH.
Guests of the Manx Hotel Have Fierce Struggle With Hotel Robber.

"I don't want to discourage you, Ruthie."

Wilkerson read no further. He turned his ghastly face on Mrs. Darnell and said huskily, "He's dead!"

"Well, he won't tell any tales," was the cold response. "The question is, did he get the papers?"

To this question there was no satisfactory answer until Wilkerson read down further and learned that nothing of value had been found on Pell's body.

"So he didn't get the deeds, and Ruth still has them," Mrs. Darnell said bitterly. "That is the way all your plans succeed."

Wilkerson flushed. "There is one comfort," he said in an ugly tone. "Dorr is to be held for killing him."

"For how long?" sneered Jean. "Until his friends get him out. And mean while you do nothing!"

She continued in this strain for some time, Drake and Wilkerson moodily listening. They knew that if she once threw the affair up they would be helpless and all their time and work and money would have gone for naught. Wilkerson was thinking quickly. Suddenly he interrupted Jean to ask for pen and ink. She got them, and he sat down at the table to write. Drake and Mrs. Darnell kept up a desultory conversation until he had finished.

There was a queer look in Jean's eyes as she took the sheet he handed her and glanced at the writing. "I see you still can do it," she murmured.

"Read it!" he growled.

Mrs. Darnell read it through silently and then aloud:

Dear Ruth—I hate to ask you to come down and see me in the jail, but I have something very important to tell you. Bring the papers too. JOHN DORR.

"Are you sure he is in jail?" demanded the woman when she had finished. "And what is the idea of getting the papers into his hands?"

"He'll just turn them over to Everett," muttered Drake.

Wilkerson smiled slyly. "The idea is that Drake here will disguise himself as a chauffeur, take this note to the hotel, see that it reaches Ruth and then drive her supposedly to the jail, but really to where I'll meet him."

They discussed the plan and at last agreed that it was feasible. Drake himself saw nothing dangerous in it so long as Wilkerson was to meet him and take Ruth off his hands. He promptly proceeded to dress himself as a chauffeur and went whistling away to a garage after receiving explicit instructions as to what streets he was to take and where he was to meet Wilkerson.

It was an hour later that Drake drove his rented car up before the hotel and delivered his note. It found Ruth still deep in conversation with Tom Kane and yet anxious for the return to Dorr and Everett. On the presentation of the note which Wilkerson had forged she instantly took alarm.

"John must be in trouble and Mr. Everett can't get him out," she said. "He's written for me to come down to the jail and see him and bring the papers."

"Humph!" said Kane. "That sounds funny to me."

Ruth nodded, looking at the note. Then she said, more cheerfully: "I'll dress anyway. Maybe he needs me. Now, you old dear, leave me awhile."

Kane departed, and Ruth quickly changed into street dress. While she was doing this the bellboy returned to say that a machine was waiting for her.

"The one that brought the note," he said. "He says he was told to wait."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Tell him I'll be right down."

When the boy had gone she called Tom Kane on the telephone and told

him that she was going. "John sent a car for me," she added.

"All right," came back the answer. "I'll just travel along. Maybe I can help John myself."

So it was agreed and they met in the lobby, where Ruth showed the note to the clerk in her impulsive way. Something in that official's expression made the old cook impulsively take out his revolver and see that it was in good condition. He followed Ruth to the street and into the waiting machine.

This move disconcerted Drake. He had not intended to have two passengers, but he saw no help for it and merely nodded when Ruth ordered him to take her to the city prison. He started his engine and they sped off up the hill.

They rode for some time and as neither of them was acquainted with the city it did not occur to them that they were being rapidly conveyed into a part of town only partly built up and now veiled in dense clouds of swirling fog.

"It's a long way," Ruth remarked several times, but Kane merely granted. He was busily pondering over some method of extricating John Dorr.

Suddenly the car swerved around a corner, dived down a steep hill and came to a stop before a big gray building—the boarded-up residence of an absentee. Reaching back, Drake opened the door, and Ruth sprang out. A figure dashed across the sidewalk, and she felt herself clutched by the arm.

She looked into the gleaming, cruel eyes of Wilkerson.

"I've got you now!" he said triumphantly.

"Oh!" moaned Ruth, shrinking back in terror.

"Yes, indeed," Wilkerson taunted her.

But at that moment he heard another voice, stern, commanding and familiar. He looked around into the muzzle of Tom Kane's revolver.

For the moment they faced each other, while Ruth shrank back still farther. The old man's eyes gleamed, and his trigger finger seemed to rest on the trigger with a precise and delicate touch.

"You here!" said Wilkerson with an oath.

Suddenly the old man's temper flared up. The other saw death in his eyes, turned on his heel and ran as fast as he could up the street.

Without a second's hesitation Kane swung his weapon round till it covered Drake, cowering at his wheel.

"Now you drive us back to the hotel," he said.

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