

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 XVII. The Forged Deeds.

WHEN the train pulled into Los Angeles the next morning John Dorr's party got off, and John left Ruth with Tom Kane while he went to engage an automobile to take them to Beverly Hills, a suburb recommended by Everett as quiet and restorative for shattered nerves.

As they stood there Wilkerson, Mrs. Darnell and Estelle also got off the train, still disguised, and were hurrying away when Wilkerson observed Ruth and called Jean's attention to her.

For an instant she was nonplused. Then she said in a low tone: "So much the better. We can keep an eye out on them."

"I must find out where they are going to," Wilkerson returned. "I don't like the looks of it."

He soon came back with word that they had ordered the car to take them to Beverly Hills.

After some inquiry Wilkerson found the address of a hotel that seemed to answer their requirements, and they were soon on their way thither in a taxi. Within an hour the deft Estelle had installed herself and her mistress in a comfortable suite. Wilkerson took a room near by. Then came the question of their disguises.

"There is no need of wearing them any longer," Wilkerson stated. "If need be we can put them on again."

Mrs. Darnell laughed scornfully. "Yes, and all the hotel people saw us come in with our disguises on. What will they think if they see entirely different people occupying these rooms?"

Wilkerson had already started to remove his makeup. Now he paused. But his reckless nature got the better

pose the crime himself. She handed him the papers.

He stared at them and then glanced across at Jean. She was waiting. He cursed her under his breath. She had always been waiting—waiting for him to break the law, to suffer that she might have comforts and jewels and keep unimpaired that beauty that had been his downfall. But the spell worked, as it had worked before.

"I'll have to go out and buy some blink deers," he said laboriously. "I may have to look up some other points, too, about these papers."

As he left the room Jean Darnell looked after him, loxy triumph in her eyes.

"Estelle," she said languidly, "you may dress my hair. I shall go to a matinee this afternoon. If Mr. Wilkerson comes, tell him I am engaged till tonight."

Life at Beverly Hills was a welcome change to Ruth after the strenuous days that had passed since she left the "Master Key" mine.

There were not many at the hotel and the most prominent figure among the guests was a tall, carefully dressed Englishman, so typically the tourist that the old cook insisted on identifying him on the register.

"I ain't seen many of the new kinds of people," he explained. "I've been out in the mine so many years that the styles in real gents has kind of escaped me. I admire to know just what kind of birds I'm roosting with."

"Who is he?" laughed Ruth, as they gazed out at the rising hills.

"He's marked down as Sir Donald Faversham, and he's from the British Isles," Tom Kane rejoined. "He is here for his health, they say. I suppose that's why he has to wear them white ankle warmers on his legs."

"Those are called spats, Tom," said John, smiling. "That eyeglass is a monacle."

"Does he see through it?" inquired Kane, with apparent anxiety. "I reckoned he was near sighted, for I spoke to him a while ago and he didn't even see me."

Oddly enough, Ruth blushed at this. Sir Donald had seen her, and she had been made aware of it instantly; not that Sir Donald had been in the slightest offensive. He had merely silently testified by respectful glances his appreciation of the arrival of a very pretty woman.

John Dorr saw the blush and interpreted it rightly. He, too, had observed the Englishman's sudden interest in the lovely girl. For the first time he felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. He had so long been alone in Ruth's regard that he had not analyzed his own feelings toward her. He determined that Sir Donald Faversham should not impose his company on them.

The very next morning, when Ruth and John came out from the hotel ready for a stroll, Faversham lay in wait for the old cook and asked him for a match for his cigarette. Tom reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a bunch of block matches, which he handed out with an air of doing a service to some one he could not see. Sir Donald looked at the queer matches, not knowing the peculiarities of the western sulphur article, and in spite of himself Kane had to instruct him to pull off one of the matches and strike it. When Sir Donald choked and sputtered over an inhalation of brimstone Tom looked profoundly concerned.

"They're a little strong for some people," he remarked pityingly.

"Strong!" answered Faversham, wiping his eyes. "I should jolly well say they were!"

Their conversation had attracted Ruth's attention, and she and John both looked back. John smiled faintly, but Ruth was indignant.

"Tom did that on purpose," she said. "I'm ashamed of him."

How it happened only Sir Donald could have told, but within three minutes he was exchanging remarks about the scenery with them all. "And there's an awfully jolly bit just over the other way," he said to Ruth.

The ice was broken, and Ruth promptly accepted the implied invitation to see this specially lovely scene and Sir Donald led the way, talking with her. After an instant's hesitation John and Kane followed.

The acquaintance thus made was destined to have a great bearing on the lives of both Ruth and John. It had ripened into a genuine liking on Ruth's part before the dance that night was over.

The next morning John and Tom met Ruth walking with Sir Donald about the hotel grounds, and the young man could not help showing in both voice and manner that he was little pleased that Ruth should have so suddenly taken up with a stranger.

"Remember, she's only a girl," Tom warned him, feeling his mood. "She's been brought up in the mountains, and she's as friendly as a pup. I don't like the way the man puts petticoats on his feet and I'm used to being looked at with two eyes, but Ruth is all right. You must remember that young as she is and inexperienced, she has a good lot of common sense."

"I suppose it's foolish of me," John answered. "But I'm used to activity, and this dawdling about doesn't suit me and that makes me generally cross and unreasonable. If I only knew what Wilkerson was doing! If Everett would only come!"

The wish was fulfilled that afternoon when George Everett turned up and was warmly greeted by both Kane and Dorr. After a few words he asked for Ruth.

"You can see that she's all right," John answered quietly, pointing to her as she came up the steps with Sir Donald. Both were in tennis garb, and Ruth was delightfully flushed.

Sir Donald made a few pleasant remarks and then excused himself. His quick senses told him that Everett had come on business and that he would be one too many.

"I don't know that I have anything new and startling to tell you," Everett told Ruth in answer to her question. "I know a dozen places where I can raise the money to finance your mine, but we must have the deeds, papers and surveys first. And they're gone. I understand."

"Yes," Dorr replied bitterly. "I suppose Wilkerson has them. I ought to have been on his trail long ago."

Everett glanced at Ruth and saw the discouragement on her face. He went quickly on: "However, I've made temporary arrangements which will relieve you of all trouble for the present, Miss Gallon. I'll talk over the business details with John and Tom Kane."

She brightened and laid one hand affectionately on John's arm. "I knew everything would come out all right when John took hold," she said softly.

For two days Harry Wilkerson worked steadily, and secretly in his room. At last his task was done.

"No one can ever prove that old Tom Gallon didn't draw that deed himself," Wilkerson said triumphantly. "And it unites me the owner of the 'Master Key' mine, Jean. And, once in charge, I'll make us both worth millions! Then—"

She shrunk back at the flame in his gaze upon her.

"Now, what are you going to do?" she demanded, attempting to bring the conversation back into business channels.

He bit his nails savagely. "Drake is out, all right," he told her. "You see, Kane didn't turn up to prosecute the case, and they turned him loose. What do you say to my wiring him to go and

take charge of the mine while we decide just what to do? He can see what's going on and warn us."

"Dorr and the rest are still at Beverly Hills," she inquired.

"Sure!" he said scornfully. "They're tiptoeing up with some blooded Britisher they think has money. They figure on getting him to finance them, I reckon. And I happen to know that Sir Donald couldn't finance anybody. We needn't worry about Dorr."

Mrs. Darnell remained in thoughtful silence awhile and then agreed to the suggestion. Wilkerson immediately

wrote the message: Charles Drake, San Francisco, Cal.: Go to Silent Valley at once and take charge of "Master Key" mine until you hear further from me. Am wiring Tubbs, engineer, to this effect.

HARRY WILKERSON. When he had sent this and a message to Tubbs he resumed his gloating contemplation of his forged deeds. He did not see the look of burning scorn on Jean's face as she left the room.

"Why must I always have to use fools?" she murmured bitterly. "A lovely pair—Wilkerson and Drake!"

Drake did not hesitate when he received Wilkerson's telegram. He took the next train for Silent Valley and on arrival there procured a rig and drove to the mine.

On his arrival he was dismayed to see that no work was being done. The machinery was idle, and the miners were loafing about the streets or gathered in little sullen groups. They eyed him curiously, but when he asked for Tubbs they made no comment nor asked any questions.

Following their directions, he soon found himself on the porch of what had been John Dorr's house. He knocked, and there was shuffling of heavy boots; then the door opened, and an unshaved, bloated faced man asked him gruffly what he wanted.

Drake produced Wilkerson's wire, and instantly the engineer showed relief.

"Come in! Come in!" he said. "Come in and have a drink!"

The interior of the cabin showed that Bill Tubbs had apparently been merely camping out in his new quarters without regard to the deconies. But Drake was not squeamish after his long trip and shared a drink with his host. A few words served to put the situation before him.

"There ain't no money to pay the men; the store's closed; the cook shanty ain't running; Wilkerson is away; Dorr hasn't turned up with the money he promised, and I'm just kind of sitting on the lid while the pot boils. I'm mighty glad to see you. Maybe you can do something with these fellows. I've done my best, and I can't do any more."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was the noise of boots on the porch, and Tubbs smiled in sickly fashion.

"I guess they spotted you right off," he said.

"What do they want?" demanded Drake as there came a pounding on the door.

Two miners entered, and Tubbs introduced them to Drake.

"This is the new boss, boys," he said. "Who sent you here?" was the first question asked.

"Wilkerson," responded Drake. "Humph!"

"I'm just here to take charge temporarily," Drake went on hastily, not liking the ugly tone of the man's voice.

The other man took this information, and after digesting it said, "Going to start up and pay wages?"

"I'm not acquainted with the situation yet," was the evasive reply. "I'll go over things with Mr. Tubbs tonight, and then in the morning I'll see what is to be done."

"The first thing is to give us money and food," was the curt answer. The men stamped out, leaving Drake to look at Tubbs in some dismay.

The engineer was so relieved at having some one else to bear the burden of responsibility that he refused to be worried.

"Have another drink, partner," he said familiarly, "and forget it till tomorrow."

After a very poor meal which Tubbs scraped up the two sat down and smoked. Tubbs' tongue gradually loosened under the influence of many more drinks, and before 10 o'clock brought up a waning moon Drake knew a great deal that made him uncomfortable. He resolved to shift the burden to Wilkerson's shoulders as quickly as possible.

The next morning did not bring cheer. His head ached from the fumes of Bill Tubbs' whisky, and the chill of the mountain air was not dissipated by a cold breakfast. And before the sun had risen above the peak of the mountain the miners had approached him with questions.

(To be Continued Tomorrow.)



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