THE MASTER KEY

By John Fleming Wilson

By special arrangement for this paper a photo-drama corresponding to the installments of "The Master Key" may now be seen at the leading moving picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Manufacturing company it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" in this paper, but also afterward to see moving pictures of our story.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

Ruth to the Rescue.

IN honor of their engagement Sir Donald Faversham gently insisted that Ruth Gallon attend a ball which was to be given by the British officers. Ruth pleaded to be allowed not to go, but Consul Reynolds and his wife added their urgings to the baronet's, and even the time honored excuse of "nothing to wear" was firmly refused.

Though she said nothing to any one else about her feelings, she really could not refrain from accusing herself of disloyalty to John Dorr.

He was out in the hills risking his life to regain her fortune. Could she dance and take pleasure with a cheerful heart when she did not know whether he was living or dead?

However, she went and received the formal congratulations of a great many natty officers and the informal complaints of certain young Americans, who vowed that she was unpatriotic in choosing an English husband, and danced with Sir Donald and his friends and smiled and blushed at the compliments and frowned laughingly on the flirts and generally conducted herself as a happy bride to be should.

Faversham was delighted and told her so in many ways. And long after midnight, when Mrs. Reynolds was preparing to go home, he took Ruth out under the shadows of the garden trees and would have kissed her.

"Don't!" she said simply.

"What is the matter, darling?" he asked tenderly.

She stared out into the darkness, and he saw the pallor of her face.

"I am sure something has happened to John."

Faversham frowned. It was too bad that this man should always come between him and his betrothed. But his voice was very gentle as he answered:

"That is out of the question. Achmet is very faithful, and if anything had happened I should know of it."

Ruth shook her head and insisted that she was sure. The baronet laughed at her, but she was not to be put off.

"I know John is in trouble," she said determinedly. "If you won't help me I'll go myself!"

Sir Donald argued as strongly as he could and in vain.

"I'm perfectly sure that John Dorr is in trouble," she repeated. "He's all alone up there among those awful natives and"—

"Achmet is with him," interposed Faversham.

—"and some one must go right away and help him," Ruth went on.

"You poor girl!" murmured Mrs. Reynolds. "I know how you feel, but you must get some rest. We'll talk it over later in the morning."

She drew Ruth away toward her room, with a backward glance of whimsical comfort for the baronet.

Faversham watched them go, stood doubtful for a moment, shook his head and departed.

The consul's wife found Ruth too stubborn to handle by herself, for she insisted that, as no one else would go, she would set out herself, and to emphasize her assertion began to change from her ball gown into a riding habit.

The consul came out in dressing gown and slippers when Ruth, fully clad, emerged from her room, still resisting the importunity of his wife.

He added many common sense arguments, but Ruth would not listen.

"I know that he is in trouble," she repeated.

"But if he were, which is most unlikely, you couldn't help him," Mr. Reynolds said bluntly. "In fact, you merely make matters worse."

When they found her obdurate they took silent counsel of one another, told her to wait a moment and vanished.

The instant they were gone Ruth slipped out of the house and boldly turned her face toward the hills now black against the unlit sky.

All day she traveled, strangely alone in a populous country. Many natives she met, but they merely looked curiously at the white girl in western riding clothes, and as she avoided villages she escaped the notice of any one in authority.

"I am sure something has happened to John."

She knew that when her absence was certain both Mr. Reynolds and Sir Donald would come after her.

Night came, and she was still pushing on, though hungry and weary. In the darkness she perforce kept to open paths, and it was on one of these that a panting native found her.

"Achmet!" she whispered when he raised his contorted face to hers.

In a few words he told her what had happened. She said curtly, "I know that. Where is he?"

Sir Donald's former servant looked at her and remembered the strangeness of things done by white women.

He led the way back toward the hut, muttering now and again of the terrible things he had seen.

And while Ruth was thus defying all precedent and going to the aid of the man she loved Wilkerson had found himself again hemmed in, cut off in the darkness from escape to the city.

Though he and Dorr had driven the hillmen away from the hut and quenched their eagerness of assault, they still hovered in the little gullies, and on every hand the fugitive found himself confronted by a heard but unseen enemy.

He stole back to the hut and peered in. John was still bound in the chair, and Drake's body lay huddled on the floor.

He made his preparations quickly, piling some dried grass and fine rubbish against one corner of the hut.

When the pile was once alight he dumped some powder on it and ran swiftly away, hiding a few hundred yards back.

"Achmet!" she whispered.

The hut took fire slowly, but the glare accomplished his purpose. It slowly drew the watchers toward it.

Satisfied that no one would be spying on him now, but that all would have eyes only for the fire, he set forth quickly, careless of the fact that John Dorr must be burning alive.

In the darkness he passed Achmet and Ruth.

The blaze had almost entirely enveloped the hut when Ruth finally staggered in and with a sob of joy cut John's bonds and half dragged him through the swirling smoke into the open.

When she had done this she promptly fainted.

The smoldering embers were sending up blue spirals of smoke into the morning sky when Consul Reynolds and Sir Donald spurred their wearied horses up to where John and Achmet squatted with Ruth between them, still but dimly conscious.

Dorr briefly explained his experiences and related how Ruth had suddenly appeared, just as he had given up hope.

Sir Donald, kneeling by Ruth's side, merely patted her hand.

The next morning Mrs. Reynolds laid down the law in set terms to the party assembled around the breakfast table.

"You must get this young lady back to America," she said, "papers or no papers!"

John and Sir Donald nodded without glancing at each other.

Thus it was that a couple of days later old Tom Kane at the "Master Key" mine received a cablegram reading:

Wilkerson Darnell aboard steamship Pacific, Frisco 30th, with papers. We follow next steamer. DORR.

Thus it was that the struggle between Wilkerson and John Dorr was again transformed to the valley in which lay the "Master Key" mine.

Wilkerson and Jean Darnell, with the precious papers in their possession, slipped away hurriedly, taking the first steamer that sailed.

He had told her about Drake's death, though unable to say how it had happened. Privately he had no regrets.

The young man had served his purpose, and it was by no means doubtful that Mrs. Darnell would have seen to it that he had his reward, for she liked him as much as it was in her nature to care for any man, he thought.

"He was an awfully good sort," she said to Wilkerson one night as they leaned over the rail and watched the long swells from the bow speed fanwise into the infinity of the sea.

"Yes, the fellow had his good points," he admitted.

"I miss him," she said simply. Later she added thoughtfully, "I think he was in love with me."

Wilkerson laughed.

Mrs. Darnell glanced at him with an expression strange on her handsome face. "Yes, I am sure he loved me."

"In vain," he returned lightly.

"I don't know whether it might have been wholly in vain after all," she murmured. "Life has given me little love of that kind. It seems as if I had always been a woman who for mere self protection could not let any one love me or let myself love him."

"I should not have let you love him," was the quiet response. "I have struggled too hard and fought too long for you to allow any one else to have you."

"And what does your love amount to, after all, Harry?" she asked. "Tell me plainly. Has it done either of us any good? Will it ever do us any good?"

Wilkerson stared out at the dark sea, and his face grew slowly very cruel.

"Good?" he repeated. "All that I know is that I love you more than anything else in the universe. You love luxury and jewelry and gold and silk. Because I know what you love I am trying to get it for you, because I want you more than I want anything else. I—I think we are even."

"Even?" she said in a suddenly strained voice. "Yes, we are even—you the felon and the murderer, I the receiver of stolen goods, stolen happiness, stolen life, stolen gold!"

When they finally reached San Francisco Wilkerson found her oddly distrait. She did not know whether to go to the mine or to return to New York.

One moment she was in a tigerish rage; the next hour she was staring at the fog haunted hills with eyes that saw nothing.

He stormed and argued to no purpose. He recalled to her constantly the fact that he had the deeds, the master key itself, the plans of the location of the mother lode.

She either listened listlessly or drove him away with furious upbraidings. Yet in the end she accompanied him to Silent Valley.

It was a bitter moment for old Tom Kane when the stage drove up and Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell got out instead of John Dorr and Ruth.

He had hoped against hope, and now his dreams were in ashes, for Wilkerson instantly took charge, the men, as Tom put it to himself, followed the paymaster, and so far as outward appearance went the "Master Key" mine was firmly in Wilkerson's possession.

Mrs. Darnell here proved herself the shrewder mind. Though she was little seen, her influence was potent.

And more than anything else she worked on Wilkerson so that he did not use the plans and open up the rich vein.

"Wait," she told him. "Don't be impatient. Our whole power here is in the fact that we have the secret. Once that is public we'll likely lose everything."

"But we ought to be at work before Dorr gets back," he would argue.

"Yes, and every court in the land will help him to regain this mine and its wealth. Don't you see? Compromise!"

"Compromise!" he repeated dully.

"Yes, you fool!"

"But how?"

"Wait—wait till John and Ruth get back. They'll be glad enough to buy those plans, Harry."

When John Dorr and Ruth arrived on the following steamer Everett met them at the pier and told them the news as he had gathered it from faithful Tom Kane, whom Jean Darnell had insisted should resume his duties as cook, sagely observing to Wilkerson that it would be well for them to have a witness whose veracity Dorr would not impugn.

Settled in the hotel, Dorr briefly recited the experiences of the past months and then bluntly asked, "What are we to do?"

Everett was ready with his answer, "Compromise!"

The dull red flooded John's face, and he bit his lip. Had all his work gone for nothing?

Everett laid a friendly hand on his knee. "Now listen," he said gravely. "Here is Miss Ruth minus her key, practically ousted from possession of her property and, if we are not mistaken, unable to lay her hands on her most precious inheritance—the plans of the mother lode. They're in Wilkerson's possession."

"And he's digging the gold night and day!" John burst out.

With a swift glance to reassure Ruth, who sat in mournful silence, Everett went on:

"That is the shrewd part of Wilkerson's play. He knows that the law will give Miss Ruth here back her mine and all that it contains. It would take time, but as sure as we are sitting here, and no one knows it better than he—justice would strip him of every ill gotten cent and send him to prison with his accomplice. So what does he do? Hastily uncover the real prize? No. He conceals it still and merely works the original mine."

"But we can put him out of father's mine, can't we?" demanded Ruth.

"And when we do we shall still be no wiser as to the location of the real gold. All our trouble and expense will have gone for naught. Wilkerson will still hold the secret of the 'Master Key.'"

"And how are we going to get it from him?" demanded Dorr, clinching his fist.

Everett smiled. "By buying it from him."

"He will ask millions!"

The broker smiled again.

"Consider Wilkerson's position for a moment. He is liable to arrest, trial and long imprisonment on a dozen charges. Within twenty-four hours we can have him behind the bars. But we wouldn't be helping ourselves much, would we? Yet Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell don't want to go to jail. We hold that club over them.

"They have the secret we must have and we can ruin their lives. Therefore we make a trade. We give them assurance that we will not prosecute them, that we will even enrich them, if need be, and they in return for this, hand us over the plans that Thomas Gallon made."

CHAPTER XXX.

"I—I thought you loved me too!"

RUTH had listened intently, and now she seemed to draw herself a little out of the conversation. Her change of attitude did not go unobserved, and both Everett and Dorr were puzzled.

Everett saw that there was another mystery of which he knew nothing and instantly and in the most businesslike manner turned to Ruth and said:

"Now, all this subject to your approval, Miss Ruth. You know you are practically of age."

She looked at Everett steadily and said in a low tone, "I think Sir Donald Faversham should be consulted."

"But he has nothing"— John began.

"He has everything to do with this plan," Ruth said steadily.

"I know he's done a lot," Dorr stammered, feeling the ground give under his feet, "but in this matter"—

"I think Miss Ruth is perfectly right," Everett said quickly, trying not to let the pity he felt for John show in his eyes. "Let us call him, by all means."

Sir Donald had kept himself most discreetly in the background for many weeks. Only the constant oversight for her comfort showed Ruth that she was never out of his mind.

She could not even think of him without a throb of gratitude.

And now when all must be made plain and she must live up to her own promise she steeled herself for the ordeal.

Sir Donald listened to Everett's plan and approved it thoroughly.

"And now that we have decided what to do," he concluded, "I think we should immediately go to the mine and make the—ah—the deal. I by no means like this affair, and the sooner it is over with the better."

"Good," said Everett, much relieved. "And you and I, Sir Donald, being the third parties, had better handle this deal. Do you agree to that, John?"

"I'd like to just get my hands on that fellow once more," was the hoarse response. "There would be no further need of this 'deal' as you call it."

"Yes and the fat would be in the fire," Everett replied.

Dorr finally agreed to maintain a strict neutrality and Ruth gratefully accepted the offer to conduct her affairs as Sir Donald and Everett should judge best.

That night they left for Silent Valley.

Tom Kane received them joyfully and informed Ruth that Mrs. Darnell had especially seen to it that the bungalow was ready for her.

He was full of other news, but both Sir Donald and Everett put him off and set about their business.

It was a strange conference that met that night in the office. On one side were Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell, on the other Everett and Faversham, the latter looking so intensely bored that shrewd Mrs. Darnell instantly made up her mind that she and Wilkerson would have to accept bitter terms.

Sir Donald was only too evidently waiting for formalities to be over before he said the few words necessary for him to say as Ruth's representative.

Wilkerson himself felt, too, that he was at last playing a game where all the cards were to be face up on the board.

When Everett had coldly and definitely set the situation before them Wilkerson sat motionless and in silence for a moment.

His shifty eyes did not meet the gaze of the three who looked to him for his yes or no. When he spoke it was with a dash of his old effrontery.

"I understand the proposal," he said, working his lean, brown fingers back and forth over a blue print on the desk. "We quit, give you the plans, and you give us"—he suddenly leaned over and darted a bright glance into Everett's eyes—"you give us *what?*"

Everett was prepared for the question and answered it promptly. "We'll give you $50,000 cash and won't prosecute you."

"Yes, and the fat would be in the fire."

Wilkerson shook his head.

"You understand that half this mine was mine by rights when Tom Gallon took it for himself by shooting me and leaving me to die on the desert. Fifty thousand? Pah!"

"And immunity from prosecution," stated Sir Donald impassively.

Wilkerson swung on him, thrusting his lean, furious face close to the Englishman's calm, unperturbed countenance.

"What have you to do with this?" he snarled.

Faversham did not shift his position nor change his tone. "I have Miss Gallon's promise to marry me."

There was a sudden silence, broken only when Wilkerson's dry throat uttered a triumphant croak.

Mrs. Darnell looked at Faversham with her tawny eyes filled with dull embers of passion. Everett sat as if stunned.

"So John Dorr gets the kicks and you get the halfpence!" said Wilkerson wildly. "I have cursed him, but all my curses couldn't have punished him worse. Why," he went on half hysterically, "the poor fool loves her!"

Again silence.

This time Everett broke it, saying stiffly: "You understand our proposition. Do you accept it?"

Mrs. Darnell laid her hand on Wilkerson's arm, and he seemed to fall into a profound reverie.

They could see the lights and shadows flit over his saturnine visage, the sparkle of his eyes dying into a mere dreamy glow, the sudden tightening of his thin lips, the working of his hands.

Finally he roused himself as by an effort.

"I think I ought to have more," he said quietly. "There are signs of gold on one part of this property which has never been worked. It is nowhere near the place marked in the plans, as you will easily see. You understand that Tom Gallon and I were partners when he located that rich ore. Never mind. Bygones are bygones. But I want $50,000 and that little claim. It may not amount to anything, but then again it may. Fifty thousand is soon spent. A mine is a mine."

"The plans!" demanded Sir Donald.

Wilkerson pulled out of his shirt bosom an oilskin folded around a square paper. He laid this on the table.

"There they are," he said, as though driven to bay.

Mrs. Darnell's movement of protest did not escape either Everett or Faversham. They looked at the little packet that had cost so much agony and bloodshed.

"It is a—a gentleman's agreement," said Sir Donald presently, taking out his check book.

The money passed, and then Everett picked up the oilskin packet and put it in his pocket.

"The deeds and the master key," he said gently.

Mrs. Darnell's face became splendid in its futile rage. She tore the ribbon from about her throbbing throat and flung the key on the table.

Sir Donald picked it up carefully and rose. At the same moment Everett pocketed the deeds and started for the door.

He and Faversham passed out into the starry night and vanished, leaving Wilkerson still at the desk fumbling the check.

Suddenly he reached for pen and ink and scrawled his name on the back.

Then he silently handed it to Jean Darnell, biting her red lips and moving almost imperceptibly, like an animal about to spring.

She took the bit of paper and tucked it in her bosom. Then she turned on her companion. He met her fiery gaze coldly.

"The mother lode is on that little bit I got them to give us," he said calmly. "The plans Everett has are false."

And the look that she allowed him to see in her eyes was such as no other man had ever seen there. It was as if her tortured and lonely, proud soul had found its mate in some darkness made lurid by the flames of hell.

* * * * * * *

Sir Donald spoke a brief good night to Everett when they had left the office and turned toward the bungalow, leaving the other to go up to where the light burned in John Dorr's cabin and tell him of the events of the evening.

He met Ruth at the door and quietly told her that all was well. She looked up at him with her great eyes filled with unshed tears and he bent over her a little.

Then he drew out the master key and put the ribbon over her head until the dull brass shone on her white throat.

"You are once more the mistress of the master key," he said gently, "and of my heart."

Something in her expression told him he had said enough. With a cheerful word he went away.

But the next day Sir Donald renewed his wooing in such a fashion that Ruth was sorely put to it to keep him from demanding such caresses as her engagement made him rightfully ask for.

The hardest part was that she perceived that John Dorr now knew that she was to marry Sir Donald.

He did not know, nor ever would, what that marriage was the price of.

Everett, of course, had quietly introduced Sir Donald's assertion of his new relation to Ruth into his narrative of what had occurred in the office.

John had taken the blow steadily, but he was not one to walk in the dark. He sought out Ruth and in a few words drew from her the truth.

"Now we all know where we stand," John said bravely, smiling at her.

"But I—I thought you loved me too," she murmured.

"That doesn't alter the matter," he said comfortingly. "Now I must get to work. I've lots to do. Wilkerson has already started work around the spur, and I must begin driving into the place where your father found that rich vein. We may drift into it any day."

Naturally enough the two camps kept pretty much to themselves, but Tom Kane carried the gossip to John Dorr, evidently in an effort to distract his mind.

The old cook knew that John's heart was breaking, and between his love for each of them he was himself hard pressed to maintain a cheerful countenance.

"Wilkerson's impatient as ever," he told John one afternoon. "He can't wait on tunneling and such, but he's going to blow the whole face of his hill right off. Told his men that dynamite was better than pick and shovel."

"Well," said John, "that may prove all right. At least he'll get a notion of what formation he has to deal with."

Later that same day Kane announced that Wilkerson was going to set off the biggest battery of shots ever tried in the valley.

As a consequence Faversham, Ruth, John, Everett and many others went across the gulch toward evening to watch the show.

Old Tom Kane waggled his gray head doubtfully as he related how much dynamite had been planted and how Wilkerson's men were actually too nervous to work any longer.

They Saw Man After Man Come Down the Hill Till Only Wilkerson Was Left.

"He has to fix the fuses and fire the shots himself," he said.

True enough, they saw man after man come down the hill till only Wilkerson was left.

Ruth noticed that he worked rapidly and with an occasional glance down toward Mrs. Darnell, who stood near a big rock shading her eyes against the evening sun.

At last the work was apparently done, and Wilkerson waved his arms. At that signal there was a general rush for cover.

Then the man straightened himself up as if master of the demons hidden at his feet, and waved his hand to the woman watching him from below; then he stooped.

An instant later there was a terrific explosion, and a smoky gap appeared halfway up the hillside.

At the foot of the slope lay the body of Wilkerson, tossed there as one might toss an old hat. The smoke on the hill eddied and swirled.

No one stirred. There were a dozen other unexploded shots in that hillside, any one of which would likely bring the toppling crest downward.

With white faces they held their breath. Wilkerson's body twitched slightly, the only moving thing in that amphitheater.

Then there was a wild scream, filled with terror, with passion, with flaming and awful desire, and Jean Darnell ran over the rubble toward the smoking hill, crying:

"Harry! Harry!"

A dozen men started to run to drag her back, and a hundred voices muttered warnings that held them in their tracks.

Jean reached the body and flung herself on it; then she rose and stared up at the great rocky crest.

Did she hear the roar of voices calling to her to flee while there was time?

Did she see the death that hung above her. If she did she despised it.

In this final cataclysm her wild heart broke through the bonds of this selfish existence and flung her a full passioned sacrifice on the body of the man who had loved her and given her his all—honor and life!

In the quick silence they who watched heard a single, full throated cry:

"Harry! Harry!"

Then the mountain roared into the air, and the avalanche of rock poured over the two lovers in wave after wave till it had buried them forever.

And as explosion after explosion rocked the earth and filled the evening sky with lurid debris Ruth struggled from Sir Donald's detaining grasp and fled into the arms of John Dorr, where she clung, sobbing:

"John! John!"

Sir Donald looked at John Dorr's transfigured face and heard that cry, meant for lover's ears alone.

Very steadily he turned away and stared up at the terrific cataclysm which had united both the darkling hearted and golden youth.

He found the cook beside him, his gray locks streaming in the gusts of wind from the blasts. He pointed with his stick to a piece of rock that rolled to their feet, and in the dull stillness that followed the terrific uproar he said:

"I really believe, Mr. Kane, that we have uncovered the gold we have looked for so long."

And Tom Kane reached down and picked up the nugget and stared at it. Then he turned to the white faced gentleman beside him.

"'The Master Key!'" the old man muttered.

"Yes," returned Sir Donald quietly, "it unlocks strange doors."

THE END.

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