

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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"Oh, you will," said Mrs. Darnell. "You can combine the pleasure of seeing New York with your little business. Mr. Everett will quickly settle that part of it, and I shall take great pleasure in showing you about Manhattan. I presume you are fond of opera?"

"I have never been to the opera," Ruth responded. "I should love to go, but when I do go I must go all alone," she went on impulsively. "I think opera must be like church—one wants to go all by oneself."

Mrs. Darnell turned very slowly and for the first time in many years revealed a secret thought: "Do you know that my only pleasant memories, my dear, are of myself?"

The bitterness of that confession, with all its implication, wholly escaped Ruth's sensitive but inexperienced mind. Yet there was something in the tone that warmed her heart to this effulgent creature. At least, she was not going into the great city all alone, nor confront Mr. Everett by herself. Mrs. Darnell made her feel that she was competently protected.

When they arrived the next morning at the Grand Central station in New York city Mrs. Darnell quietly introduced her to a slim, rather handsome young man, who seemed ill at ease until he had drawn Ruth's companion aside for a moment for a chat while the porter collected their luggage.

"I don't just like this game," he said. "In the first place, Everett is a big man in the city, and this Miss Gallon doesn't look to me like a girl you could fool long. Anyway, I can't understand what you are trying to do, Jean. You must know what sort of a fellow Harry Wilkerson is by this time. Why play his hand for him?"

"I don't notice you holding any trumps in your hand," she returned gently, but with a faint gleam in her eyes which made him draw back.

"This is my game, and I expect you to play your part. You come on now and see George Everett. The girl is as ignorant as a pigeon. Remember what I told you."

"About that stock?" he said sullenly. "Yes, the stock. You understand that she came to New York simply to raise money for this mine. You are supposed to handle the business for her. If you don't learn all that is to be learned about 'The Master Key' mine in the next two days you are more than the fool I take you for."

She drew him back to where Ruth stood amid the suit cases and hand bags and said, "Miss Gallon, Mr. Everett has been telling me that he, too, has heard from John Dorr about your coming."

Ruth scanned him politely. But the interest died in her eyes when she saw what sort of a man he was. He might be a friend of John's; he might be the man to rescue "The Master Key" from bankruptcy, but he did not interest her.

Drake, trying to play the part of the

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busy broker and, being thoroughly and temperamentally an actor, felt the chill of this lack of interest and would certainly have fallen down on his part had he not been prompted by Mrs. Darnell. He was glad to hasten away to find the elusive taxi.

The real George Everett got out of his limousine on the corner of Vanderbilt avenue and hurried through the revolving doors; brisk, debonair, alert, decided; with that happy style which denies foppishness and avoids surveillance. It seemed strange that he should have a photograph in his hand at which he looked intently until he got in the course. There he stopped and, with the picture still in his hand, commenced watching the faces of the people thronging through the gates under the vast dome. As he waited he frowned slightly. "Why had John Dorr sent him during business hours on this wild goose chase?" He thought of this articulately and then smiled to himself. "A wild goose!" he muttered. It brought up darkling sunset vistas, lakes smooth as quicksilver under the evening sky, and slim, gray, beautiful birds homing downward. The frown left his forehead.

"After all it will be good to see somebody from out of doors," he said to himself.

Half an hour later he discovered that he had irretrievably missed the arrival of the Chicago express and with it Ruth Gallon. He went back into his car and drove to his office. Once there he called his head clerk, an ancient and fragile man, as crisp and bloodless as the money that passes on Wall street, and told him to see at what hotel Miss Ruth Gallon was stopping. Then he wired John Dorr:

111 Broadway, New York.
John Dorr, "Master Key" Mine, Silent Valley, Cal.
Could not find Miss Gallon at train. Am seeking for her, as it is important that the business be settled immediately. Wire any possible address.
GEORGE EVERETT.

Far out on Broadway, above the elights, an operator was tacking off another message addressed to Harry Wilkerson. It read:

25 A West Eighty-fourth St., New York.
Harry Wilkerson, "Master Key" Mine, via Valle Vista, Cal.
Everything all right. George met Ruth. She is now with me and waiting further particulars. Have seen Everett under guise of prospective purchaser of stock. The girl is charming.
JEAN DARNELL.

Some houses, like some people, should never be illumined with sunshine, and Mrs. Darnell's residence, overlooking the Hudson, was of this type. Its dull, red stone front, marked by windows that seemed blind to all that went by, was not distinctive in that neighborhood. A thousand doors within a mile would have suggested to the passerby nothing more nor less than the great oak portals within which she lived. To Ruth Gallon, of course, the house seemed tremendously formal and stately. Within she found an atmosphere so absolutely strange and alien to all she had ever known that she shrank within herself and had nothing to say until she had been conducted to her own room on the third floor and a discreet maid was busy unpacking her things. Ruth felt that society had already laid its restrictions on her. She recognized the maid as the "gown and hat" policeman.

This silent, but exceedingly obtrusive personage having retired at last, Ruth studied her surroundings. When she had completed her survey she thought to herself that there were two things wanting. One was a silk haired Persian cat and the other a flaming colored scarf across the bed that completed the altogether of an apartment severely luxurious. Then she tried to analyze the odor, delicate yet insistent, which she was ever afterward to associate with Jean Darnell and her experience in New York.

At last she traced it to some pallid flowers in the great green and dark red vase, whose unwholesome beauty was that of plants whose roots have never been in good, sound soil. They looked to her much like lilies, whose pads had floated on some dark and opaque pool, viscid with odors of the night. She was still staring at these and sniffing their scent through widened nostrils when Mrs. Darnell knocked on the door and entered slowly. She had changed her street gown for a negligee, which instantly caught the girl's appreciative eye.

"You look beautiful," she said quickly. Jean Darnell turned her tawny eyes on her and smiled faintly.

"I am not usually up until noon," she responded, "and—I am getting old, my dear." She threw out her jeweled hands with a sparkling gesture of half comic resignation. Ruth laughed.

"John Dorr says everybody gets old in New York. Don't you like him?"

Mrs. Darnell looked into the clear eyes of the girl and almost failed to follow her baser instinct. But at that loose throat she saw the heavy gold of "The Master Key." As if it had supernatural powers, the sight of that key locked the door of her heart. "Of course I like John," she said easily. "We must get everything fixed up now. George will be here—George Everett, of course. I mean—tonight, and you and he can talk the business over."

"You know, we simply must have the money," Ruth returned earnestly. "The mine isn't paying now, but John knows where we can find the mother lode again; then we'll all be rich."

"Ah!" said Jean Darnell. "You're selling stock, I presume?"

[To Be Continued Monday.]

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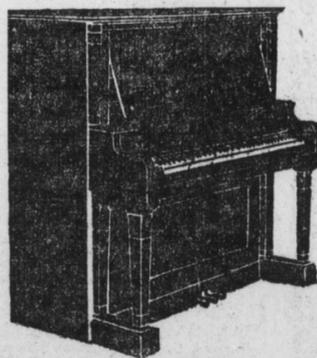
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