

THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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Authorized Version of the Motion Picture Drama of the Same Name Produced by the Universal Manufacturing Company. Illustrated With Photographs From the Picture Production.

CHAPTER XI.

John and His Wives.

DORR stood stupidly at the papers which found in the locked of the dresser. His of the desk had only the matter darker, so to the room to puzzle the facts in order first was that Ruth New York to deal with about money for improvements the "Master Key." The second was she had evidently not been able find Everett and had started west again. The third was that she had been in this very room. There lay the papers that represented the mine and its value. But how—where—how could she?

His businesslike senses returned, and he proceeded to wire Everett's office in New York, with the result that he was in possession of his address in San Francisco.

"So Everett's here, too," he muttered. "That is stranger yet. I guess it is time I dropped in. Now to find her."

He thrust the packet of papers in his pocket and then withdrew them and set them again into the dresser drawer. He had a dim notion that she might come back for them. Then he telephoned to the St. Francis hotel for Everett, who was released.

Knowing what his common sense was the logical method of finding the tangle he went down to the street and entered into conversation with the clerk. Meanwhile his eye looked at the register. Opposite the number of the room he now occupied he saw a heavily scrawled "Mrs. J. Dorr and daughter."

"Dorr's secret amazement the clerk was mysterious, leaning across the desk to whisper, "Ah, you know her?"

"I wanted specially to see her," John declared. "Is she here?"

"She is not, and she left in a very early way," the clerk explained. "She came here last evening by her daughter. I gave them the key you have now. Along in the late afternoon she suddenly came down with her unconscious and told me that she had been taken very ill and she was carrying her to a hospital. There a couple of men with her, and the doctor didn't like the looks of her."

"The whole affair, so he followed them." "Was the girl very fair haired and beautiful?" Dorr managed to ask in an indifferent tone.

"Precisely," responded the clerk, suddenly matching his guest's manner. "If you want to find Mrs. Darnell, maybe the house detective got her address—or the address of the hospital they took the girl to."

Presently, in response to a summons, appeared the detective, who scanned John's somewhat bruised face thoughtfully, saying nothing until the clerk explained that Mr. Dorr wished, if possible, to get into communication with Mrs. Darnell.

"The best I can do is to find the taxi driver for you," he said slowly, still studying John's stalwart figure. "He may be out on the stand now. Let's see."

As they passed out the detective continued hesitatingly, "Do you know Mrs. Darnell very well?"

There was that in the man's tone that made John pause before answering. He glanced at the cool, impassive face and caught the glint of the steady eyes. He took a sudden resolution.

"I believe you're really interested in this matter," Dorr said briefly. "Suppose we talk this over before hunting the taxi chauffeur?"

"I was merely curious, that's all," was the noncommittal murmur. "That girl is not her daughter," John continued. "I have reason to believe that it is Miss Ruth Gallon, the heiress to the 'Master Key' mine, whom she is abducting. His passion blazed forth in spite of his self-restraint. 'I must find her and save her.'"

"Might I ask what relation you are to the young lady?" asked the detective mildly. John stared at him and then realized the oddity of his actions and words. He briefly explained his position at the mine and his wardship of the heiress. He also went into detail as to what he suspected Wilkerson of, describing him carefully.

"He was one of them, sure enough," agreed the detective. "But young heiresses ain't being kidnaped days like these out of hotels like this."

"I may be mistaken," John assented wearily. "All I know of Mrs. Darnell is from occasional words dropped by Wilkerson. But I suppose we might get a clue as to where they went anyway."

After some search of the long line of taxis they came to one which the detective identified as the one Mrs. Darnell had taken the night before.

"Driver, take us where you did those fares who were in such a hurry last night," the detective ordered.

The chauffeur shook his head. "You can search me for the address," he returned. "There wasn't any."

The driver leaned out from his seat and went on earnestly: "You know how they jumped in and we rolled off. Well, it seemed it was a case of life and death, according to the woman, and I stepped on the machine and hastened some toward the North Pacific hospital, but when we got into Chinatown one of the men hailed me and told me to drive just as he said. He got out here in front with me, and when we reached a certain spot they all beat it."

"Can you take us to that spot?" "I was just wondering to myself whether I could find it," was the response. "But I'll try."

He threw in his clutch and the car left the line and started up the hill toward California street. John Dorr leaned back against the cushions with a strange sense of at last being on his way toward his goal. He barely heard his companion's murmur, "Evidently they took her into the lower part of Chinatown."

We usually credit the oriental with little or no imagination, pointing to his art, his clothes and his language as evidences. As the fact runs, even the Chinese could use the faculty of imagination more frequently than his white brother on an equal social plane.

Sing Wah, or Wah Sing, as he was indifferently called, was outwardly a stolid, dull-eyed Chinese of uncertain middle age. His picture—it was in the

from Singapore to Philadelphia—was not less changeless of expression, nor more tectum than he. Yet in spite of his somber clothes and general air of blank stupidity, Sing Wah was a man of mark, a man with a history replete with adventure and, not too seldom with crime.

If the ordinary criminal could have an office or a store he would quadruple his profits. But the common run of rascals must steal and fly. Their post-office address is a figment. They are not at home when opportunity knocks. Sing Wah knew this, and it was his boast that for thirty years any one who wanted him, either day or night, could find him.

So he sat at the back of his little store night after night, blinking through the wooden screen at the various customers who came in to trade or barter. And year after year they came to his door, the pirate and the thief, the smuggler and the robber, and he took his toll of them and passed them on. Whither? Sing Wah never told. And because he did not tell they came back with greater loot and richer booty, and he again passed them through his store to vanish utterly from the haunts of men and the purview of the police.

Among the many hundreds who had availed themselves of Sing Wah's aid was Wilkerson, who, during dark periods of his career, had several times run athwart the barriers of the law and been compelled to seek refuge where he could.

Harry Wilkerson was not a fool. In some ways he was brilliantly endowed. He recognized Sing Wah's superiority to all others in the great game of outwitting the law. He perceived beneath the stolid mask the alert, active, studious mind which was ever vigilant, never forgetful, always intelligently watching the world that passed before his filmed eyes. The Chinese had, as well, acknowledged Wilkerson's adeptness and persistency. In several deals they had been partners in their mutual profit.

"You are a very good fellow, Harry," Sing Wah had told him once as they drank tea in a little room in the rear. "You are a smart man—almost as smart as I am. But you are too hungry. You cannot resist your appetites. Now, I—be made a slight gesture of distaste with his lean brown hand—"I have no appetites."

Wilkerson nodded. "I guess you're right, Sing Wah. You even haven't any pride. You talk pidgin English to the tourists and the rest, instead of speaking the perfect English you know."

The dull eyes lit for a moment humorously. "I have always felt that I owed it to Oxford not to flout my education in a small tradesman's shop, don't you know?"

The imitation of the Oxonian drawl had been so natural that Wilkerson had snatched his things in delight. Thereafter he took a peculiar pleasure in watching Sing Wah's assumed stent stupidity, and comparing it with what he knew to be the real person behind the dull features.

It was to Wilkerson that the Chinese had explained his reason for never changing his address, no matter how brisk the police might be. "And I have thought out a scheme which you will like," he went on. "Come with me."

"I was then that he showed Wilkerson the cylindrical room which had a single door and retrieval at a touch on a lever.

"Dangerous stuff!" commented Wilkerson. "If the police find that they'll sure find you."

Sing Wah's cold lips opened in faint smile. "I built it for them. And the Chinatown police know about it and will charge \$10 extra for a trip through the bowers of the underground, as they call it." The Chinese sneered. "Let them play with such things while I use the brain heaven gave me. And yet, sometime that trick room may serve a purpose."

Thus it came about that Harry Wilkerson, driven to his wits' end to accomplish his designs, brought him of Sing Wah and fairly drove Jenn Darnell and Drake before him.

To Mrs. Darnell's credit it must be said that she rebelled strongly. But



"You've got to do the trick."

the stake was too great to risk, and she bitterly consented to Wilkerson's hastily outlined plan of hiding Ruth away somewhere in Sing Wah's precincts until they could once more get their plans into working order.

Before she would leave the place she must indeed see Sing Wah himself. "Will the girl be safe here?" she demanded.

The Chinese looked at her flushed and passionate beauty in silence until she repeated her question. Then he said quietly and in his own exquisitely modulated English: "You need have little fear. The servants are honest and discreet. And"—he let his eyes meet hers fully—"I think it is possible that she is safer now than she has been for some time. Good night, madam!"

While Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell had been hurriedly arranging matters with Sing Wah, Drake had gone in search of lodgings nearby. He found them in what had once been a noted hotel, which had fallen into sad decay. It was in the faded rooms he engaged here that the three met to consult on the future.

"The first thing to do is to get hold of those deeds and papers she has in her grip," said Wilkerson. "I wonder you didn't think to get them before, Jenn."

The woman's eyes lit with dull hatred, but she made no answer. She watched him fuss with the locks of the hand satchel which she had indicated as the one in which Ruth carried her valuables. When it opened and Wilkerson thrust his clutching fingers downward into it Mrs. Darnell leaned forward as if in protest. He paid no attention to her, but continued his search with ever increasing haste. At last he straightened up with an oath so venomous and deadly that even Drake shrank back.

"The deeds aren't here," Wilkerson said thickly. "She's hidden them!"

"But where?" This question seemed to break Wilkerson's almost steely intensity of purpose. The question put his whole problem before him in two words—but where? He shifted his eyes from the emptied satchel to the curtained window. Instantly there leaped before him the picture of the truck turning slowly over in the gulch, of the huge billow of smoke, of the little lances of fire that charged through the dry undergrowth as if to preserve to the flames their prey. Was it for this that he was a murderer? The curtain blew inward before some vagrant wind from the bay, and Wilkerson drew back in terror.

"What is it, Harry?" demanded Mrs. Darnell, instantly taking alarm. "Nothing," he said sullenly. "I was just thinking of something." He turned on Drake. "You've got to do the trick," he went on.

"How's that?" demanded the young or man. Wilkerson eagerly formulated his plan, ticking off the points on the tips of his quivering fingers.

"First you're Everett, turned up at last. You find her—" "In Chinatown?" sneered Drake. "You can easily gain her confidence and get hold of the papers, and maybe—"

Drake laughed ugly. "I look like the kind of joker who would dress up as a banker and then proceed to renew my client's acquaintance in a Chinese joint. How am I supposed to know she's there? I tell you, Wilkerson, that you can't travel straight, even when it pays you. Why in God's name you ever took that girl to that place of Sing Wah's is beyond my comprehension. Any place would have been better. Now you have put the heads of all of us in a noose. You know what people will say when—"

"They'll say nothing," said Wilkerson furiously, and he proceeded once more to argue that Drake could easily continue to impersonate Everett and in that guise carry their scheme to its profitable conclusion. In spite of his eagerness and sophistry he was unable to move either Drake or Mrs. Darnell from their attitude of frightened contempt. At last Drake agreed to do his best to make Ruth trust him.

"But I don't like this impersonation business," he said finally. "I might go to a hotel and hand in my broker's card and ask for an interview, but I haven't lost my senses."

"Well," growled Wilkerson, "just see to it that you worm out of her where those papers are."

CHAPTER XII.

Crossed Wires.

THUS it happened that just when Drake entered Sing Wah's unpretentious door way the taxi with the hotel detective and John Dorr drew up in a side street and stopped.

"It was here they left me," said the chauffeur sulkily. The detective and John got out and stared about them. They were in the lower part of Chinatown, a single tier of blocks that stretched beyond the bounds toward the bay—not in the quarter, but of it.

"Which way did they take the girl?" said the practical detective. The driver led them around the cor-

ner and up an alleyway. He pointed to Sing Wah's door. "I think they went in there," he muttered.

"Ah!" said the detective thoughtfully. "When I was on the police force I used to know that Chinaman. He's the smoothest rascal in America, bar none."

John gritted his teeth in helpless rage. "And she's in that fiend's foul clutches," he growled aloud.

At this moment a policeman came along and arrested John's companion familiarly. In a few words the case was explained to him.

"You won't find anything, of course," the officer remarked. "But just for satisfaction let's have a look see and a chin-chin with Sing Wah."

They entered the shop just as a Chinese was closing a panel door after Drake, who had come to make his promised attempt to win Ruth's confidence. Sing Wah was nowhere to be seen.

After some futile parley with the Chinese, whose ignorance was complete in every detail, the two officers agreed that they were wasting time.

"Old Sing's the boy to see," said the house detective. "Let's wait awhile."

Now, Sing Wah had pondered the affair during the night, and the more he thought over having a lovely white girl in the cylindrical room the less he liked it. It was deadly dangerous. Courts might be lenient with the smuggler and the go-between. Sing Wah knew that if even a suspicion got abroad that a young white woman was imprisoned in his quarters a ravening mob would tear his place stick from stone and hang him without trial. He was determined to get the girl away immediately. So he was unfeignedly glad to see Drake.

Drake attempted to explain what Wilkerson wanted, but the Chinese cut him short.

"Harry is insane," he said quietly. "He is mad over that woman. I have done all I can. You must get her out of here."

"But how?" demanded Drake. "She doesn't know me very well, and she'll scream her head off, and I'll be arrested, and we'll all be in a mess."

Sing Wah nodded thoughtfully. Then he looked up and listened to the low words of one of his clerks. Dismissing him with a single grunt, he turned to Drake.

"There's not much time," he said softly. "They are on the trail already."

"Who?" "The police." He motioned Drake to a chair in the little alcove, where they stood and went on: "Stay here a moment. I will see for myself." He pulled a lever, and the room swung around till the door was opposite him. With long, slender fingers he slipped back the panel and vanished.

Ruth lay on a couch, open eyed and white faced. Beside her a richly dressed Chinese woman crouched, whisper-

ing soothingly. At sight of Sing Ruth Gallon suddenly sat upright in silent horror.

"I beg your pardon, miss," Sing said in his silkiest English. "I have come to take you back to your friends outside."

The girl shrank back. "No, no, no!" she moaned. "They are not my friends."

"Surely Harry Wilkerson"—Sing suggested craftily, to see how the lady lay.

"Wilkerson!" she whispered. "Is he—was he here?"

Her tone conveyed all that he wished to know. He motioned to the woman to leave and when she was gone pulled a cord, which let down a light rope ladder.

"I am sorry, madam," he said quietly, "but I shall have to ask you to climb up this. It is the only safe way out." He laid one hand gently on her arm.

Now, Ruth was California bred, with all the prejudices for and against the Chinaman. She screamed. At that instant there was a crash of a shattered door in the distance and the sound of men talking in excited tones.

"You must come," said Sing Wah. "I will take you to a place of safety. All I ask of you is to follow me and be silent."

His earnestness was unmistakable, and Ruth yielded. A moment later they both stood on a small landing

place above the cylindrical room. Sing Wah carefully drew up the ladder and coiled it again on the wooden trigger that had released it. Then he led the way down a dark passage to stairs lit by a mere glimmer of gas. Ruth drew back, but he indicated that she must go on. Even as she obeyed his imperious gesture there rang out the muffled clangor of revolver shots. Then again came the sound of doors yielding to violence and the shouts of wrathful men.

Sing Wah hurried her on, down steps, along shadowy passageways and



"You must come," said Sing Wah, under low arches till she felt a sudden cool, salt breath on her face. At her feet she saw the glimmer of water and a boat riding to a long painter. Quickly and silently Sing Wah drew the little craft alongside and motioned to her to get in.

By this time the tumult had died down to a mere muttering of shots with an occasional yell, muffled by walls and the distance. She stared fearfully about her, at the great arches of dripping brick overhead, at the little landing under foot, at the dark vista of the tunnel through which the water

streamed in a swishing tide. She drew back and let her voice go in one long, forlorn scream, the pent-up agony of many hours, her final call for help against the dark powers that had seized upon her.

With swift strength Sing Wah reached out his sinewy arms, raised her up and seated her in the stern of the boat. A moment later he had cast off the painter and shipped the oars. The boat slipped silently away on the current into the mark.

After some talk between the officers John Dorr was informed that if he liked they would enter Sing Wah's and make a thorough search.

"Not that I think we'll find anything or anybody," said one of the policemen, "but it never does any harm to take a look-see through Sing Wah's, and the lieutenant is coming down now to take charge."

A moment later that officer arrived, and John Dorr made his tale as convincing as possible. The lieutenant seemed dubious.

"It isn't like the old rascal to run his head into danger that way," he insisted. "I think you are on the wrong trail. Who did you say was the man who did all this?"

"Wilkerson—Harry Wilkerson," John answered bitterly.

"Wilkerson?" repeated the lieutenant. "That puts another color on the matter. Wilkerson and Sing Wah used to be pals. This'll bear looking into. Come on, men."

With wonderful quickness the officer disposed his men so that every known exit was guarded. Then he motioned to John to follow him and went boldly up to the shop door and entered.

Followed again a futile parley with a Chinese who professed to know no language but his own. The lieutenant's quick ear caught a sound of something moving directly behind the impassive clerk. Brushing him aside, he smashed in the door in the partition and strode into the hallway beyond. John Dorr was close at his heels.

The next few moments were to live long in John's memory as the strangest of his life.

"Be careful!" warned the officer. "The rascals may start shooting!"

Even as he spoke there was a ruddy flash down the dark alleyway, and Dorr staggered back.

"Only my arm," he muttered. "Come on! Don't give me another chance at us here! Rush on!"

An instant later they stood in the cylindrical room. John stared about him, but the lieutenant merely remarked, "This room was built merely for tourists' consumption. Let me see that arm of yours!"

Examination proved the wound to be slight. They glanced up from it to see the doorway swing slowly away as the room revolved.

"Trapped by smoke!" said the lieutenant. He held a warning hand on Dorr's arm. "Keep quiet. We've lost our directions and we must wait a moment till we discover where that doorway is."

So they stood hesitant for a few seconds. A panel slipped open in the wall and a woman's face appeared for an instant. Swift as the China woman was, the police officer was quicker and