

The Greatest Story of a Decade

THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON

A Romance of Love, Life and Money



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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 I In Search of Gold.

STRANGE things breed in the deserts of southern California—some of them beautiful, some of them symbolic of endless and terrible thirst.

There are three thirsts in this world: That for wealth; the one for life; greatest of all, the thirst for love.

The first and the last expression of our civilization is the locked door, and from the time the primal carpenter laid down his tools and went within his rude house the door has stood for all time a defense and an opportunity.

In the long vista of life we find many locked doors and gates—doors to happiness, to life and to love.

Fancy to yourselves thirsty men knocking with scared knuckles on these doors. Then realize that sooner or later experience tells them that they cannot enter without a key.

"Who holds the 'master key' to all these locked doors?" we cry.

This was the silent question in the hearts of two men, wearily struggling through the sage brush to the mountain side of the San Jacinto mountains in southern California.

"I wonder," said Thomas Gallon, fingering his prospector's guide, "whether we will find that gold—the gold the Indians told us about. Yes, I must find that gold."

"You don't seem to realize that you have a partner," snarled Wilkerson. "You are always talking about I—I—I. Haven't I got a share in this? Haven't I dug up money? And yet you don't seem to think that I've any concern in this matter."

"Excuse me, partner," said the other man, fixing his dim gaze on the mountain. "I'm always thinking of that girl of mine. You know she's in school, and she's got to have a good education, and I've got to work to pay for it. Excuse me, partner; you know I did not mean it that way, but when I remember her mother— He broke off abruptly, and both men stopped.

"Her mother?" asked Wilkerson. "Yes, her mother," choked Gallon. "The girl deserves the best there is in this world. I'm all she's got, and, by heavens—he shook his fist toward the distant blue hills—"she shall have it if I have to tear that mountain apart with my finger nails."

"Well," said Wilkerson impatiently, "let's camp. I'm thirsty."

They stopped in the shade of the fallow plume of the Yucca and made their little fire for coffee, but before the blaze was well started Wilkerson picked up the water bag and took a long drink. His companion suddenly flashed in anger.

"Sny, partner," he said sternly, "that water has to last us clear to the mountains."

Wilkerson flung his head back and laughed. "Why worry? Don't you see the snow there on San Jacinto peak? That means creeks down every ravine and gulch."

Instantly Gallon's eyes dulled. He seemed to once more subside into a dream.

"There's where they said the gold was," he muttered. "In one of them gulches up there. Gold! Gold! Say, Wilkerson, we'll get that gold, but we must save the water. I didn't mean any harm, partner, for calling you down for drinking that water, but I've got to get that gold."

Wilkerson once more reached for the water and took a long draft.

"I guess this will last till we reach those foothills," he said. But his companion paid no attention to him, stolidly preparing their slender meal of coffee and beans.

When they had eaten Gallon brusquely motioned to Wilkerson to clean up the camp and then silently started up the gulch.

"I never heard of finding gold by moonlight," his partner muttered to himself. "Let the old man dig around if he wants to." And immediately once more he yielded to his physical desires, this time for sleep.

lutely alone. Chance, the master of us all, delights in strange freaks. Now at this moment, when he felt hatred in his heart for his partner, when he knew that he had come on his final quest with a weakening to coddle along, Mistress Chance laid her quick finger on him and whispered, "Here!"

He heard that light whisper and dropped his gaze to the ground. A moment later he was furiously hammering at the outcropping of rock that threw its sharp shadow down the hill.

Wilkerson turned slyly in his sleep.

"I wonder where the old man is," he muttered to himself. "He's always prowling round o' nights."

What was that figure slinking around the bluff? Something in his partner's attitude as he stopped directly in the full sheen of the moonlight made him pause.

"He's got something," he thought. "Why does he not come down to me?"

And in his sudden access of physical desire for gold in order to attain this woman he rose to his feet, and there came upon his face a swift expression, stealthy but determined.

He put the photograph away and, panting, stole into the shadow under the hill and toward the man who had been his partner, but whom he was resolved to kill. He crept along, taking all precautions against disturbing a single pebble, until he stood over Gallon, and in the full moonlight he saw that Gallon was drawing the plans and marking the locations of a mine.

"How far," he thought forcefully to himself, "has the old man gone? What gulch is this? What place is this? He has found the gold, and I'm going to have it!" He still watched the pencil and saw him trace in rude letters:

"This will make you happy."

That moment Gallon saw Wilkerson smiling at him.

Smiles and tears, sorrow and laughter have made this world what it is, and the smile on the saturnine visage of Wilkerson stirred Gallon to his depths. Did Wilkerson know? Had Wilkerson seen? Was Ruth to lose the gold that he had found after all these years? Wilkerson had peered over his shoulder. Wilkerson! Wilkerson! He pulled out his revolver and fired at the man smiling at him from the shadow.

Wilkerson emptied his revolver at the old man. But Gallon's trained eye, backed up by his overmastering passion, had directed his weapon too surely. Wilkerson realized that his enemy's bullet had gone home.

Still with the blood lust in his heart, Gallon pulled out the picture of a little girl and passionately kissed it.

"You look like your mother, Ruth," he whispered.

But while he was yielding to this queer tenderness his former partner was struggling to his feet—dizzy with pain, absolutely cowed by the shock of finding himself physically helpless, yet driven by instinct to find other human beings. Where were they? There was no sound on the desert, except the

"That's my pencil," he thought dully. "There is not another pencil in this desert. How can I write to Dolores if Old Man Gallon walks off?"

He took out of his pocket a worn leather wallet and drew out the picture of a woman, whose calm, cold features, unadorned by the photographer's art, were appealing to the man of his appetites.

He looked at this a moment, and then all the morbid fire in his blood flamed toward his heart. Love, life and happiness depended upon the possession of gold. Therefore, with this fire in his heart, Wilkerson suddenly got that absolute thirst for gold which traverses deserts, which has killed more people than the armies of Europe.

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But while he was yielding to this queer tenderness his former partner was struggling to his feet—dizzy with pain, absolutely cowed by the shock of finding himself physically helpless, yet driven by instinct to find other human beings. Where were they? There was no sound on the desert, except the

rustling of the dry leaves of the yuccas and the murmur of the cactus as it died of drought. He was really of two minds. One desire was to find the location of the gold. The other was to save his own life—and assuage the bitter fast which he knew meant death.

At last he stumbled to his feet and peered across the mist veiled valley. Far away he saw a light. Gathering all his strength, he started toward it, for it held out to him the prospect of help for his physical injury, and as he fingered his revolver he feverishly dreamed of finding Gallon and so avenging himself.

Under the stars he tramped on. As men see their real world in miniature and their ideal world magnified, as we all do, the moon, flooding its light down upon his path, did not appear within his range of vision. It was only the little pin points of stars in the purple black sky that he discerned and in the midst of this firmament, as if horizons had been obliterated, he saw a solitary twinkling light, which meant a human habitation.

"I'll get him yet," he muttered thickly. The more act of articulate speech died in his throat. He realized that he had no water, and the overpowering thirst burned in his very marrow.

"I can't make it," he thought to himself. Gallon has got the best of me. He found that place and made the plan and fooled me. He paid fully lifted his clenched hands toward heaven and cursed vehemently until his curses faded into a perfect delirium of mad dreams. Far away on the hill the coyotes barked dismally.

No longer stealthily like a man obsessed, but with one desire, he struggled down the hill and out upon the mesa. Yet there was still in his eyes all the innumerable stars, and he could not fix his direction in his mind, for to his accentuated sight they all appeared brilliant and peculiar. Thus he got lost.

At times, in moments when the deadly thirst which parched his throat allowed him to drink, he saw the one glimmering light, which marked the place where he knew Gallon had gone. Miles and hours became to him as nothing, yet finally through his sharpened senses he smelled a water, and as the sun was rising over San Jacinto

mountains he fell face downward into a stream. Some instinct told him that towns were built on hills; that consequently to find the town he should go upstream. So he struggled, stemming the current, dragging his feet, his left hand clung into the folds of his shirt over the wound. In his heart was still smoldering the flame which in the fullness of his physical strength had been hatred of his partner.

"I'll get him yet," he muttered.

CHAPTER II

"You are under arrest."

Far away on the same dimly lit desert another man was seeking the same light. Thomas Gallon had realized that he

was a murderer. What would happen to Ruth if he were convicted of killing his partner? This was the thought which drove him on—onward toward the little speck across the mesa. Careless of the cactus, of the sagebrush, absolutely unmindful of the little gullies made by last year's rains, he tramped steadily onward, and as he did so there was formulated in his mind a plan not only to save the gold for his daughter, but to save her father's honor.

It is true of lights and ideals that the farther you follow them the fainter they grow, and it was with astonishment that Thomas Gallon suddenly found himself in the street of Valle Vista.

There is a lot of silent influence in the mere sight of closed doors. Gallon looked down the street, and every door was closed except one. No hospitality. One single sign showed that law and order, always vigilant, held their way. He staggered on toward the green light which marked the sheriff's office. In there he found an alert deputy.

"Who are you?" "I am Gallon," he said firmly. "The outlaws have got my partner and nearly got me!"

The deputy looked at him shrewdly a moment and seemed satisfied. An instant later he was on his feet, buckling on his belt and revolver, and in a second instant he had brushed his way past the old miner and was bawling out into what apparently was a vacant street. Gallon dimly heard his call. His one thought was to play his part to the end. Would these men find by accident his gold? A moment later a curtain on the saloon across the street was lowered and the door opened.

"What's the matter?" yelled a half drunken fellow, reeling out. "Matias is out again!" cried the deputy. "Get the sheriff. They have got this fellow's partner." Then he turned to Gallon authoritatively and said, "How much did you have?"

"Nothing," said Gallon. "We did not strike anything, but they thought we had."

But with a quick gesture the deputy grasped Gallon's wrist and opened his hand, disclosing a nugget. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

The old man stared down stupidly at that bit of gold. He had carried it clear across the mesa, emblem of his thirst, symbol of his undying desire. For the moment he did not know what to answer. Then he recovered himself and said quietly, "I was going to—"

He passed a moment and looked straight into the eyes of the man opposite him. "I was going to save all I had."

"If that's all you had Matias did not get much, and he is considered a pretty smart fellow," was the curt response. "Here comes the sheriff."

In the west his ordinary speech is deeds, not words. Appeared other men and then the bulky figure of the sheriff. This man wasted no time in preliminaries, but quickly roared, "Which way?"

"At the foot of San Jacinto mountain, on the upper level," Gallon stam-

pered. "Get your horses, boys," ordered the sheriff.

It was not but a few minutes until the posse, Gallon riding stolidly on an extra horse, was scampering through the streets toward the mountains, now absolutely dark, as the moon had set. Sheriff Hawkins was not aware that as they crossed a wash a panting, growling man was crawling on his belly toward the solitary light which marked Valle Vista. Nor did Gallon, dumbly riding toward the darkness which hid the scene of his crime, realize that Wilkerson was within ten yards of him as they splashed through the stream.

Then suddenly appeared in the sky a spot of white, which spread until the murk of the night had turned to dusk.

"Well, thank God it's daylight," said the sheriff to Gallon. "I guess we can get your partner all right now." And even as he spoke the dusk suddenly became enriched by the light of the sun rising in the east. The moment it struck the brass on his pony's bridle Gallon involuntarily reined in. Through his blistered lips he muttered: "Gold! Ruth!"

Inquiring eyes were turned on him. The sheriff shoved his horse over and asked, "What gold?"

At the same instant came the deputy on the other side of him.

"Say, chief, he says there was no gold."

A sneaky arm reached out and took Gallon's gun away from him. "I think I better keep this," said the sheriff, his dark countenance growing stern.

So this cavalcade made its way through the fresh California dawn until there was a sudden break in the mesa. The deputy threw out his hand. "There are a hundred gulches in these mountains. Which one is it, pardner?"

At the word "pardner" Gallon pulled himself together. The glitter of the brass on the horse's headstall and that word, should he tell them the location of that gulch? The stroke of one horse's hoof might disclose the mother-lode, and yet he had told them the outlaws had killed Wilkerson.

His horse stumbled and threw him. When he got up he gropingly pointed his hands toward the hills and muttered, "That way, boys—that's where they got him."

Half an hour later the posse was groped about the dead fire, and the sheriff was staring at a blood stained blanket.

"There has been trouble," he said abruptly. Then he turned to Gallon. "Why is this coffee hot?" he said, lifting up the pot. The brusque tones of the sheriff cut the silence that followed.

"I don't see your man. I don't understand this. You are under arrest—for the murder of—"

He looked at Gallon, and the old man involuntarily said, "Wilkerson."

All day the sheriff, with Gallon, his arms pinioned behind him, searched the gulches and gulches for the man whose blood stained blanket they had found. The old man, taciturn as ever, merely said, as if repeating by rote, "The outlaws got him."

When the full moon had risen and the night life of the desert had begun, grotesque life, built of feeble forms and bizarre shadows, the sheriff called a halt up the canyon.

On one side of the gulley on which they were camped the sheriff's men had built a fire. It was against a rock, which rose whitely under the moon. Gallon saw his chance. He worked his way to the fire and in spite of the pain held his hands out over the blaze until he felt the strands of the rope weaken and finally part.

A moment later he was making his way to where the horses were tied. He leaped upon the nearest one and within a second was on his way down the hill into the mist which filled the valley.

But the noise of his horse's hoofs on the rough shale of the hillside awakened the guard.

"I think I will have a cup of coffee," he said to himself sleepily and sluggishly stretched himself. A moment later he flung the empty coffee pot into the darkness. "Sheriff," he cried, "he's gone!"

The sheriff lifted his lanky form as if by a single movement. "Who's gone?" he yelled.

"That man, Gallon," replied the guard.

"We must get him, boys!" the sheriff said. They rode to the edge of the hill and looked down into an iridescent sea of mist, a mere pool of curdling moonshine.

"He's got away from us, boys," said the sheriff. "We'll never find him there."

Gallon rode quickly on, no longer seeking for a light, but for darkness, and yet as he felt the pony quiver under him he himself felt a strange tremor—Wilkerson was still alive—somewhere behind that veil was his enemy and the man who knew the location of the richest mine in all golden California.

Mission Street pier marks the point on the San Francisco water front where sooner or later every one in this world passes, and among the multitudes strange, subdued and unsubdued by the tremendous forces which make our civilization, Gallon found himself absolutely unobserved in this throng—he was as he hoped to be. Berthed at the pier was a steamship, quartermasters at the gangway, and a sign hung on the rail saying, "We sail at 9:45 p. m."

When he reached his cabin Gallon stealthily took out from his pocket a folded paper and looked at it. He laid

it on the white covering of the bunk and once more dipped into his jacket. This time it was the picture of a girl.

"I will save it for you," he murmured to himself. The bare room held but one movable article of furniture—a chest of strange workmanship and redolent of alien lands. Gallon stooped over and pulled at the lid. It came open to his touch, and he saw then a strange conglomeration of articles. An idol lay there, inanimate, but important. He picked it up, and as he did so one of its coral eyes fell out.

To him it was a sinister omen, and he stared for a moment, clutching at his breast. Then he gave way to the hysteria of the hunted and the haunted.

"I don't know whose god you are," he muttered, "but if you must have it—take it." And into the open socket he thrust the paper that held the secret of his mine.

That sleep which is like a shot in the heart overtook Gallon before the Santa Clara was well to sea. He was awakened from it by the sound of an altercation.

"You've got to put back to port," said a voice in an ugly tone.

There was a fusillade of shots, and then the deck beneath him tilted slowly. The chest slid down the deck toward shore. Gallon locked the chest, dragged it across the sill and then looked back to see an enormous wall of water. This wall crumpled, faded,

yet left him breathless. What was the matter? Then he saw huge columns of smoke pouring out from the after part of the ship. It was not the inexorable and avenging sea, but fire. He saw the boats go over the side. He saw two men struggling in the tops—yet it was a dream. His consciousness held but two facts—one the chest that contained the secret of his mine, the other the key that had locked within that strange and alien depository the picture of a girl.

Six hours later a heavy sea drove a piece of wreckage up the crumbling beach beneath a cliff on the Oregon shore. On it was a man—brine drenched, almost unconscious, but still able to crawl beyond the reach of the fingered breakers, clutching a key. It was Thomas Gallon.

He sat down and stared at the burning ship he had left. Dimly he remembered those strange numbers that marked the position of that vessel flaring to destruction far out on the horizon.

137, 23 west; 31, 27 north.

But how to remember them? How to keep this precious information in his head. His groping fingers found the key. A moment later he was scratching the numbers on its soft surface.

"This," he said through his salt parched lips, "is the master key." He stared up at the blue sky, and then bowed his head in utter weakness.

"If Wilkerson is alive he knows. Every day is the same. When can I find the secret of 'The Master Key'?"

Thomas Gallon then picked up his letter file and dully looked over its contents.

"Funny," he thought to himself, "that that engineer that I wrote to Drake about has not turned up." He fumbled the letter uncertainly, but the name caught his eye—John Dorr.

At that very moment the motor stage chugged slowly into camp, and a tall, heavily built man swung down into the street, suit case in hand. He looked about him with a trained eye. He saw the opening of a mine upon the hill—the trestle crawling toward the dump, the pump house—all the paraphernalia of an active mine, but he also perceived that the stamp mill was silent.

"I'll bet they've lost the lode!" he thought to himself. He turned to a miner who was passing and asked, "Where is Mr. Gallon?"

"Up there in that bungalow," was the reply.

John Dorr straightened himself up and went quietly up the acclivity, until he finally arrived before a typical California house. To his great astonishment a slender, fair haired girl confronted him, instead of the brusque, rude miner he had been led to expect he would meet on his arrival at "The Master Key."

"I'm John Dorr," he said awkwardly. "I came to see Mr. Gallon. I am the new mining engineer."

Ruth looked at him critically. It was nothing like the men she was used to. His clothes were good. He fairly breathed soap and water, and his very apparent strength glowed beneath a clear, smooth skin and well proportioned limbs. Then she met his eyes in frank admiration.

"I'll call father," she said, but she still hesitated. That gentle pause brought the blood to John Dorr's face. He realized that this was a moment he would always remember.

(Continued next Sunday.)



Pulled Out His Revolver and Fired at the Man.

