

# 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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"Everett, Everett"—repeated Wilkerson, "who is George Everett?"

Despite John's frowns, Ruth voluntarily explained. When she had finished



"John, are we broke?"

Wilkerson nodded and said: "I'll put the men to work tomorrow, Dorr. Better have your plans ready!" He stamped out.

"You had better go this afternoon," John told Ruth. "There is no time to lose."

"All right," she said. "I'll be ready in an hour."

John smiled. "All right; I'll take you over in the motor truck or shall we ride to Silent Valley?"

"I've never been to New York," she said timidly, and with that inconsequential logic which maidens have, she added, "Let's ride. I'll take Patsy and you can ride Black Joe."

Dorr did not understand at all that in leaving her home for the great strange city she wished her last hours

to be filled with sunshine and a familiar zest of scurrying over dry California on half broken horseflesh.

"All right, we'll ride," he said. "While you are getting ready I'll write a letter to George Everett."

Ruth laid one slender hand on John's shoulder.

"You're always doing things for me, John," she said simply. "Some day I'll do something for you." She slipped away without a backward glance.

Dorr watched her trip down the hill toward her own little bungalow, and it seemed to him as if he held one end of a golden thread that she was spinning through sunshine. It was anchored in his heart. That thread would be 3,000 miles long before she saw good old Everett. He picked up his pen and wrote rapidly:

"Master Key" Mine, June - George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Dear George—When a young, slender, brown eyed, golden haired girl walks into your office and says, "I'm Ruth Gallon," and hands you the papers that she will have in her little hand bag, please see that she gets \$30.00. Ever yours,

JOHN DORR.

He would have added more. His finer instinct told him that Ruth should be the first to put the whole scheme before the cool headed, rather cold hearted George Everett. He addressed the envelope and sealed it. Then he went to the telephone and called up the station at Silent Valley.

"Bill," he said quietly after listening a moment to see if any one was on the line, "I want to send a telegram. Take it over the wire, please. I'll be down in a little while and pay you."

"Sure," floated back a cheerful voice.

"I wish my credit was as good as yours, ten miles away, but it seems as if I have to be always present when I ask for it. Go ahead, John!"

"This is it, Bill," said John:

George Everett, 111 Broadway, New York City:

Miss Ruth Gallon leaves tonight to see you about "Master Key" stock. Meet her and wire me on her arrival. Take good care of her or I'll take care of you.

JOHN DORR.

The operator repeated the message and involuntarily adopted a little of John's savage intonation on the last four words. It woke him up to the fact that he was allowing his feelings to become public. He began to see why it was that men looked at him strangely at times, when it was a question of Ruth's interests. He must restrain himself.

The operator did not hang up immediately, but said hesitatingly: "Say, John, there's a wire here; just came in from 'The Master Key' mine. It does not seem to jibe with yours. Wilkerson sent it."

"I'll play fair," said John to himself, and he called back over the wire, "Bill, that's yours and Wilkerson's business, not mine." If he had listened to the tenor of the message directed to Jean Darnell, in New York, he would have learned what Wilkerson was plotting.

For years Wilkerson had built up for himself a golden image in Jean Darnell. No one realized better than him self that she was a creature of appetite, a lover of silk and velvet. A woman whose eyes widened at sight of a Persian cat. Feminine in every degree, womanly in none. But he himself, dominated absolutely, utterly and completely by his desires, had fallen

under her spell, and he was going to win her, no matter how. It is a strange thing that when a dishonest man finally yields to an honest passion nothing will satisfy him but the utmost observance of the ritual of society. Harry Wilkerson's vision was of walking up the aisle of a great church to meet his bride at the altar.

Yet he had always thought of her in terms of gold; that was a contrast—the pallid, satiny, blue eyed woman, voluptuous, soft—and his image of her built of yellow gold, dragged out of the bowels of "The Master Key" mine.

This image was now before his eyes: instead of the warm, sun blessed California hills, with their faint scent of sage and cactus, he saw a richly furnished room and breathed the odor of attar of roses. Let us not follow him in his dreams. But looking over his shoulder an hour later we read:

"Master Key" Mine, June - Jean Darnell, Astor House, New York City:

Find George Everett at 111 Broadway and meet Ruth Gallon in Chicago on Santa Fe express leaving here this evening. Introduce Drake as Everett after you have seen Everett and keep the girl to yourself until I can arrange matters. HARRY.

"I can't send this through any office near here," he thought, "so I guess I'll ride down to Valle Vista and hand it to the conductor. He can send it from Los Angeles."

Three days later Ruth Gallon settled herself in the seat of a Pullman that was soon to leave Chicago for New York. She was excited. In crossing town from one depot to another through the streets roaring with traffic she had heard sounds that had never met her ears before—the sounds of the world's business which, oddly enough, seemed to be mostly hauled over cobblestones. The faint echo of that noise still rang in her ears. It appalled her to think that she must dwell with men who lived in such an atmosphere; also she felt very lonely. She thought of the mine, of Tom Kane in the door of his cook shanty, of the great ore bucket swinging across the gulch toward the mill, of John, bending over his blue prints and papers; of the grave on the hill where her father lay, still within the precincts of "The Master Key."

It had been so impressed upon her that her mission was of vital importance to the mine, that these tender emotions flowed into the same channel with her really keen business instinct. She pulled the key, warm from her bosom, out of its hiding place and looked at it.

### CHAPTER VIII.

Jean Darnell's Ruse.

"THIS must be Miss Gallon," said a pleasant voice.

Ruth looked up to see a woman of florid beauty and dressed in somewhat extravagant style looking down at her out of great, tawny, velvet eyes. Western bred, Ruth responded amiably to this salutation, though she had not the faintest idea who the woman was.

"Yes, I am Miss Gallon."

"I am Mrs. Darnell," said the woman. "May I sit down? I am an old friend of your friend, John Dorr's. He wired me that I would find you on this train." The lie was so plausible that Ruth merely blushed, thinking that it was one more token of John Dorr's carefulness of her comfort and safety. To her inexperienced eyes this woman represented the tremendous city to which she was going. Her dress, her manner, her jewels, the evasive perfume that she affected were all strange and impressive to her. She moved over a little to allow Mrs. Darnell to sit down.

"John never spoke of you," said Ruth simply. "I did not have the faintest notion that I was to meet any of his friends. Do you live in New York?"

"Yes, I live in New York. I happened to be in Chicago, and through Mr. Everett I heard from John."

"Oh, you know Mr. Everett!" cried Ruth. "He is the man I am going to see in New York," and she went on to tell, as best she could, the gist of her mission.

It was typical of the woman to whom she was talking that she did not interrupt this naive narrative. She sat in silken silence, occasionally allowing her great eyes to rest on Ruth's fair face with an assumption of affection. As a matter of fact, she was profoundly interested. Life had taught Jean Darnell a great many things, and among them had been the great lesson of self preservation—the saving for herself of money, of comfort, of health and of good looks. Now it was a question of money, prime among them all, and her rather keen wits saw precisely the chances which Wilkerson was taking. She recalled his oft repeated statements that there was money in "The Master Key" and his latest letters imploring her to help him get control of the stock.

When Ruth ended up with a gentle "And so I told John I'd come and see what I could do," the elder woman smiled gently. Times were not so good with her as they had been, and if Harry Wilkerson could put this deal through and make money for them all it would simplify many a problem which she dully pondered at night.

"Mr. Everett will meet us at the train," she said briefly, "and then you can tell him all this. Meanwhile, suppose we talk about something else." "But I can't think of anything else," said Ruth. (To Be Continued Friday)

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