

# THE MASTER KEY

By JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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A Novelized Version of the Motion Picture Dramas 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 seared 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 toward the sharp ridges 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 mountains. "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—she 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 plum 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.

"Say, partner," he said sternly. "that water has to last as clear to the mountains."

Wilkerson fung 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 staidly started up the gulch.

Wilkerson once more yielded to his physical desire for sleep, but was awakened by the barking of a coyote on the hill. He suddenly raised himself and let out a curse against the destroyer of his sleep. Then he swiftly realized that Gallon was still awake, sitting by the fire, writing with the same stub pencil.

"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 Emperor.

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, stealthily but determined.

He put the photograph away and, pantherlike, 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! Wilkerson! There must be no 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 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 was trapped 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 mere 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 him-



He Pulled Out His Revolver and Fired at the Man.

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"Get your horse, boys."

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 paused 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 Mattias did not get much, and he is considered a pretty smart fellow," was the curt response. "Here comes the sheriff."

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

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"You are under arrest—for the murder of—"

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"I can't make it," he thought to him-

THE B...  
High...  
Always the...  
Special Feat...  
Vau...  
Wednesda...  
Su...  
Stock Cor...  
Saturd...  
Also Alice...  
Monda...  
Admission 5...  
The Copen...  
Sole Importer...  
1010 Market St...  
CHICAGO...  
Importer of...  
French and Eng...  
Manograms & B...  
Edna Stur...  
Massage and...  
by the...  
Tel. 422-3...  
C. M. G...  
PAINT...  
Paper Hanging...  
Telepho...  
217 W. Central Avenue...  
DR. W...  
DENT...  
45 St. Johns Ave...  
Telepho...  
School of M...  
Green Bay Rd...  
Deerfield...  
For terms...  
SISTERS of...  
Chas. E...  
CIVIL ENGINE...  
County Su...  
OFFICE...  
Court House, Whiskey...  
Surveying and Eng...  
graphing Landscap...  
ing Work. 20 year...  
ing, Surveying and...  
PAT...  
Whitten...  
Shoe Pa...  
FINEST QUALITY...  
WHITTEN...  
GILT...  
EDGE...  
DRESSING...  
BLACK...  
SOFTENS...  
PRESERVES...  
LEATHER...  
RESTORES...  
COLOR...  
LUSTRE...  
"GILT EDGE" is the only...  
positively contains...  
never fades and...  
shining, etc. "TRUSS...  
"STAR" combination for...  
restoration of any...  
color of...  
"WINK WHITE" is...  
systems and...  
"ALBO" cleans and...  
SHOE and...  
packed in...  
your dealer does not...  
the price for change for...  
WHITTEN...  
20-28 Albany Street...  
The Old and Largest...  
Shoe Polisher...

Continued next week