The Scarlet Runner

Dramatized and Produced by the

Vitagraph Company

From the Popular Novel of the same name
by C. N. and A. M. Williamson

Everything You Read Here Today You Can See This Week

At Leading Motion Picture Theatres in Vivid Motion Pictures

with

MR. EARLE WILLIAMS as CHRISTOPHER RACE
MISS LILLIAN TUCKER as ELOISE DAUVRAY

Next Week Another Story and New Pictures

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CHAPTER III.
THE MASKED BALL

CHRISTOPHER drew up Scarlet Runner before the door of the new Athenaeum Restaurant just as the tall porter in dark green and gold lace was giving his services to a lady who was alighting from the motor in front of him. Her face was so striking that for a few seconds he forgot that he was stiffly and mechanically holding up a letter designed for delivery to the magnificent porter for a luncheon guest. It was not only her beauty which Christopher found arresting.

"That girl can't be more than twenty-four, if she's that; yet the whole history of the world seems looking out of her eyes—anyhow, all the art, and music, and drama of the world," was the curious thought that tumbled into his head.

Two men standing in the doorway seemed equally interested in the girl. One of the men, an elderly major, friend of his rich uncle, he knew slightly. The other, who was young, exceedingly well dressed, and so good-looking as to be almost picturesque, had pale olive features which seemed vaguely familiar to Christopher.

"Yes, sir; you called me, I think, sir?"

It was the voice of the green and gold porter. He had handed the lady out of the motor car; the motor car was gliding away; the major was shaking hands with the picturesque young man.

"Oh—er—yes." Christopher answered the giant briskly. He thought that he would not be sorry to escape a broadside from the retired officer. "I want to leave this letter for Lord Arrowdale. He's to lunch here, I believe, and will be inquiring for a letter.

"Very good, sir," said the porter, and took the envelope. But he was not quick enough to save Christopher from the major, who came forward and said all the things that Christopher had known he would say—given the chance. The young man answered civilly, and even explained without petulance his mention of Lord Arrowdale's name, which the elderly gossip had caught. "No, I don't know him; never met him in my life. A friend wanted him to try my car. Promised to leave a note here making an appointment."

As he talked on, from the tail of his eye he watched the progress of the lady. She had been met in the doorway by the picturesque young man, and they were speaking together now with a kind of suppressed eagerness. If it had not seemed too ridiculously conceited to fancy such a thing, Christopher would have had the idea that he was the subject of their conversation.

"Well, ta, ta. Next time I write old Jamey I'll tell him his nephew's looking prosperous," said the major, and sidled off without a backward glance. As he did so, before Christopher could guide Scarlet Runner away, the picturesque young man had left the girl standing in the door and hurried forward.

"I beg your pardon, but may I speak to you?" he explained.

Christopher paused, a foot on the clutch-pedal. Another car lurked ready for Scarlet Runner's place, or must slip in ahead.

"What I want is to ask if you will lunch with us," the stranger rushed on, by way of holding the motorist's attention.

"Lunch with you?" echoed Christopher astonished. "You mistake me for someone else——"

"No, no," said the other. "Major Norburn has told me everything. You like adventures? You are invited to arrange one."

That caught Christopher, as it was meant to. "Very well, I'm with you," said he. And perhaps he thought of the lady, hoping to be with her as well. "I'll get out of the way here, drive my car to the garage close by, and come back."

"Without fail?"

"Without fail."

Five minutes later Christopher returned, walking so rapidly round the corner that he took his host and hostess unawares. They were still standing in the wide doorway of the fashionable new restaurant, and had not expected him back so soon, for they were deep in conversation.

It was only as Christopher came close upon them that she looked up and saw him, with a start of surprise, evidently not wholly agreeable, though she half-smiled civilly. The start warned her companion, and he turned to welcome his guest with an impulsive air which was rather engaging. Yes, certainly, he was extremely good-looking. Christopher would barely have guessed it possible for an Englishman to be so picturesque in ordinary frock-coat and silk hat; yet this man was English. "You'll think I'm mad," he said smiling. "But even that's better than to be commonplace, isn't it?"

"Assuredly," said Christopher.

"I thought you'd be of that opinion, Mr. Race."

"You know my name?"

"From Major Norburn. Even the name of your splendid car. It's the same as an introduction. And now I will introduce you to Miss Dauvray. Then I'll introduce myself. My name is Ponsonby Fitzgerald; and if someone else were introducing me, he'd probably tell you that I don't do anything in the same way as other people."

Ponsonby Fitzgerald! The young man's handsome face and figure appeared upon its own background now. He had written a queer novel, which made a sensation on the strength of its queerness; and out of the novel he had woven a play which owed its success to the same quality. People knew him and talked of him still, though he had not since written another novel or another play. There were things about him in the papers sometimes. He went to country houses, and was said to be entertaining.

They went in to luncheon. Mr. Fitzgerald had engaged a table which was laid with two covers, but in an instant it was rearranged for three. "And now for business," exclaimed Fitzgerald in his lively, enthusiastic way, which made him seem very boyish, though his years might have been twenty-nine or thirty. "Miss Dauvray and I have an important job on for the last day of March—or rather, it will be the first of April by the time it's found out; wherein will lie the joke. And we're going to propose that you shall be the 'Co.' in our partnership."

The Southern girl neither assented nor protested, though Fitzgerald challenged her with his great, daring black eyes. She trifled with a bunch of violets beside her plate, her lovely face unsmiling. It occurred to Christopher that she had scarcely spoken at all, yet to him, at least, she dominated the scene.

"I'm to be sleeping partner?" asked Christopher, wishing himself elsewhere, though his interest was entangled.

"On the contrary, you're to be very wide awake. But I'll tell you all about it. Of course you've heard of the Van Bouten ball next week?"

Of course Christopher had, and said so. For the past fortnight the papers had rained paragraphs about the Van Bouten ball. It was to be a masked ball, and was planned to rival in magnificence the historic affair at Devonshire House in Diamond Jubilee year. Miss Van Bouten, a patent yeast heiress, was as renowned for her beauty as for her millions. She and a carefully selected aunt had taken and restored a fine old Abbey of Henry VII.'s day, conveniently near London. A year ago the young heiress had been presented and captured society; also she had captured, or was on the point of capturing, the Marquess of Arrowdale. Now she and the aunt were giving this ball, at which, it was said, after the unmasking, her engagement to Lord Arrowdale would perhaps be announced.

"We have a scheme for the night of the ball which will be the sensation of the century, if we can only carry it out," Fitzgerald went on. "It falls on the last of March, as I said; so that at midnight we shall have the 1st of April, or All Fool's Day, you know. But that gives you no hint of our brilliant idea—though it did give us our inspiration. We had reason to believe up to last night that the plan was in the best working order; but—the schemes of mice and men! One of our best mice suddenly failed us—influenza or something obvious. The wheels wouldn't go round without him—literally; because he's a motorist. I was upset; but I reflected, 'When in doubt, always consult an American girl,' so I called Miss Dauvray into consultation. 'No chaperon,' I said; and, having the courage of her convictions, she consented to a lunch at the ultra-respectable Athenaeum. While I waited for her I saw you—and your car. 'What a beauty!' I said to myself. (Don't blush; I mean the car). 'Now, if only we had a motor like that to do our trick!'

"Just then came along Major Norburn. In six words he told me your car's history. Your audacity and originality captivated my imagination on the instant. I felt you were the man for us, if we could secure you.

"We want you to take us—Miss Dauvray, myself, and several friends—to St. Ronan's Mount for the ball in your ripping motor car. We don't mean to stay late; in fact, we can promise that you'll be back in town before most of the guests have stopped dancing. Now, what do you say, when, in addition to 'short hours,' you'll be in for a splendid adventure—just the sort of thing to appeal to you?"

"It's rather odd," said Christopher, "but my errand here this morning was to leave a note from Lord Arrowdale, making an appointment for a talk about motoring a party of his friends to St. Ronan's for the ball."

Miss Dauvray looked up suddenly, and was nobly beautiful with the ivory curve of her cheeks stained a deep rose-color. Still she did not speak.

Christopher was glad when she looked up. It gave him his first real chance to see what her eyes were like. No; it was not necessary for a woman with such eyes to say much with her lips. Still, what did the eyes say? Something, very expressively, very ardently—but what? Was she pleased to hear that there was a chance of his being engaged to take another party to the ball? Why did she flush when he mentioned an appointment with Lord Arrowdale?

Christopher noticed now that she was looking tired. Her eyes were gentle and sad, and oddly wistful, as she turned them to his in support of her one word. It was as if she appealed to him. But—did she want him to consent or refuse? He felt suddenly a passionate desire to understand her. The way to do so was to see more of her. He would see more of her. "In that case," he said, "I am at your orders."

"It's settled—you're one of us!" exclaimed Fitzgerald.

"Yes," said Christopher.

"Then you shall hear the whole thing. Well, as you've heard all about the ball, you know that Milly van Bouten—or her aunt, who poses as hostess—has offered the Scrope blue diamond as a prize for the greatest sensation of the evening."

"Meaning the handsomest costume?"

"Not exactly that, for it can even be won by a party. Indeed, I think it will be won by my party. What she means is to give the diamond to the person or group of persons whose appearance and manner of entrance creates the greatest sensation.

"Naturally, everybody wants to get that diamond, which Milly van Bouten bought at Christie's on purpose to offer in this way. Myself, I rather think she hopes Arrowdale may get it, as it would please him, and then there'd be a chance of its coming back to her in the end—though I know for a fact that he hasn't proposed yet, in spite of all the talk. For my part, I want to get it. I discovered that Miss Dauvray had also set her heart on annexing it. This suggested our putting our heads together. Milly got the diamond at a bargain, and the day after she was offered three times what she paid by the American millionaire, Jim Scrope-Saunders, who fancies himself to be an offshoot of the real Scropes. She wouldn't sell it; what was twelve thousand pounds to Milly? But it's something to us; and if we get the prize, as we shall, our idea is to sell to Scrope-Saunders and divide among our assistants—the biggest portion for ourselves, as is only fair, since we're the originators of the idea. There'll be five in it, including yourself now, and two men who are friends of mine. Whatever happens, you're sure of adventure and whatever you like to charge for your car and your services. If we get the diamond, your share will be five hundred pounds. How does that strike you?"

"As most generous—too generous for me to accept," said Christopher.

"We'll force you to accept. But never mind that part now. I told you that a friend with a motor had failed us. A motor is necessary because, when we've made our sensation, we must be able to dash away, as up-to-date highwaymen should. But, oh, perhaps I forgot to mention that we're to be highwaymen?" And he laughed out boyishly.

"You did forget that part." Christopher laughed too. "And Miss Dauvray"—he could not resist bringing her in—"is she to be a highway woman?"

"She's to be an abbess," Fitzgerald answered for the girl, without giving her time to speak. "We're all to be monks at first, we four men. At the right moment we're to throw off our cowls, but she's to remain an abbess.

"Then, when we've made our effect," said he gaily, "we suddenly throw off our monkish robes and appear as masked, top-booted, belted highwaymen from the Wild West of America. We shall be bristling with bowie knives and big revolvers (not really loaded, of course), and while two of us—you, perhaps, and one other—guard the exits, the other two will hold up the crowd and make 'em hand over their valuables in the most realistic manner just about midnight."

"By Jove!" said Christopher, looking blank.

"Ha, ha! If you don't understand, prepared as you are, how much less will they? It will be the great April fool trick of the world."

"For you. But won't it spoil Miss van Bouten's ball?"

"Make a guess as to what we mean to do next."

"I swear I'm in the dark."

"All this will happen just before supper. There's to be a grand sit-down supper, and unmasking. People will be in the most awful quandary. By that time they won't know whether they've been the victims of a grand joke or whether they've been robbed of their little all; but—they'll go in to supper, except the poor detectives, who'll be scurrying around like mice for news of the mysterious motor. Then after midnight will appear a great dish—a pie with a wonderful cover. It will be set down by a servant (he'll be in our pay; not Miss van Bouten's, by the bye) on the principal table, with a request for Miss van Bouten herself to cut it. She will do so; and in that pie will be all the stolen jewels, with our visiting cards on top, and a sort of round robin dated All Fools' Day and claiming the prize for ourselves. Your name needn't be there, unless you like, as you don't know Miss van Bouten and aren't one of her invited guests; but you'll get your share all the same. Everyone will vote us the prize—or be voted without a sense of humor. Now, there's an adventure for you, n'est-ce pas?"

"It's a regular boy-and-girl adventure—nothing grown-up about it," said Christopher, surprised and amused at the childishness of the "great game."

"That's the charm," retorted Fitzgerald; and Christopher admitted that perhaps he was right.

In any event, he was committed to the affair now, and he was so eager to find out whether the beautiful Miss Dauvray were bored with it all, or vexed with him for being in it, that he woul dnot have backed out even if he could.

When the great night came Christopher could have laughed at himself for the boyish excitement which ran through his veins. He was thoroughly in the spirit of the adventure at last—as thoroughly as Fitzgerald.

He arrived early at the rendezvous, but not early enough to be the first on the scene. There was a garden with rather a high wall, and as Scarlet Runner teuf-teufed round the corner of the quiet street the gate opened, and Fitzgerald looked out from under a dim, hanging light. Stopping the car, Christopher saw that there were two other men with him, both already wearing motor goggles, which disguised them enough even for an appearance at the masked ball.

"We've all been dining here," said Fitzgerald, "and are so impatient to be off we've been ready for the last ten minutes. Mrs. Dauvray, our friend's grandmother, can't bear the smell of smoke, so we've had a cigarette apiece in the garden, expecting you. I'll call Miss Dauvray. Oh, here she comes now. She must have heard the car."

The opening door threw out a stream of light, and the cloaked figure of a tall girl appeared, attended by a maid. Miss Dauvray had covered her face with a thick chiffon veil as a protection against wind (there was no dust), but under the hanging lamp at the gate, he caught a gleam of eyes that searched for his.

Fitzgerald would have helped her into the tonneau of the car, but somehow she slipped past him, and Christopher had an odd yet strong conviction that she wished him to put her in. Without an instant's hesitation he held out his arm as a support for her hand, and she laid her fingers lightly upon it. At the same time, with her other hand, hidden under a loose cloak, she thrust something as far as she could up the young man's sleeve.

It was a thing that felt large and singularly cold, but, surprised as he was at the girl's act, Christopher kept his countenance perfectly. By a movement of his wrist he held the thing—whatever it was—well concealed, and prevented it from slipping down.

With Fitzgerald safely in his seat, and the bonnet as a screen, he contrived to slide out of his sleeve a Smith and Wesson revolver. A folded bit of white paper was kept in place on the barrel by means of an innocent little red rubber band. As he slipped the revolver from his hand into a deep pocket of his motor coat, Christopher pulled off and unfolded the paper. On one side a few words were written, which he absorbed in a second in the eye of Scarlet Runner's blazing lamp.

"To use instead of your unloaded one, in case anything should go wrong," were the instructions flashed into his mind before he crumpled up the paper into a ball and dropped it into his pocket after the revolver.

"In case anything should go wrong." What could she mean? What could possibly go wrong which would excuse his substituting a loaded revolver for the harmless toy he had in his belt? There was little time to think, as Ponsonby Fitzgerald at his side kept up a running fire of chaff, and there would be no chance to ask questions. If Miss Dauvray had hoped for any later opportunity to communicate her secret ideas to him she would have said so in her note. He might take it that this was her final word, and he must trust to luck and his own wit to find the clue.

The young moon had gone to sleep long ago when Scarlet Runner wheeled through the open gates at St. Ronan's Mount, past the smiling lodge-keeper; and a thin, milky haze veiled the stars. With so much time to spare, they had not traveled fast, and a distant church clock told them, as they spun round the drive, that they had arrived at a quarter after eleven. The music of the White Hungarians in the ballroom drowned the thrumming of the motor, and it was as if Scarlet Runner made no sound as she ran under the ballroom windows and turned a corner.

"We're here at exactly the right time," said Fitzgerald. "Every soul but ourselves has come and is in the ballroom. We shall make our sensation! Now, Mr. Race, can you turn your car round, ready to get away on the instant? That's it. There's our door, you see, through which we have to make our dash when we come out, laden with spoils. The light looks pretty coming through those gold-colored curtains. Now to get out of our motor-coats and into our monk's robes."

"Don't Mind What I Said," Laughed Eloise.

Ten minutes later a procession of five dark figures was flitting on foot round a short cut to the front door. They were admitted by footmen, and in the oak-lined vestibule a civil gentleman in evening dress asked to see their invitation cards.

"I have one for myself and party of four friends," said Miss Dauvray, lifting for an instant, as required, her abbess's veil, and also showing an illuminated square of pasteboard.

So Fitzgerald had had no separate invitation! was the thought which slipped into Christopher's mind as they were allowed to pass on without question. Well, what of that? But what of Miss Dauvray's gift, which he wore in his belt now! He had had no inspiration yet. He was no nearer guessing than at first what she had meant him to do with it.

The last guests were ushered into a fine hall, where the two hostesses had stood to receive their friends earlier in the evening. Now they had gone into the ballroom, and the hall was empty.

"There's the door," said Fitzgerald. "There's only that one, and the glass door at the far end, through which we go when all's ready. M'Clellan, you must keep this door. I want Race at the other, as he's chauffeur and should be out first to start the car for us. The minute we get in see if there's a key in the lock of your door, McClellan, and if there is, turn it and pull it out if you can, so that we shall have everybody penned before the fun begins. You all three remember the signal for throwing off our robes?—when I say Pax vobiscum to Miss van Bouten, who'll be Undine, in pale green, with showers of diamonds and pearls—as we know for certain, thanks to Miss Dauvray."

At the sound of her name the girl stopped on her way to the door as if to answer. But she did not answer. She simply touched Christopher's arm with her arm, as if by accident, and went on.

A moment after they were inside the ballroom in a blaze of light, Christopher's eyes dazzled by a scene of enchantment. All the fairies of fairyland and the kings and queens of earth since the world began wove themselves into jewelled patterns as they danced. It was the end of a waltz, and the music died as if in reverence for the monkish band who entered the last guests, with the last note.

One monk lingered by the door. The other three and the abbess wound through the brilliant crowd towards the gold curtains at the far end of the room. Christopher went on, answering jests that were tossed to him as he passed; and he reached the glass door and turned just in time to see Fitzgerald accost Undine. She, a charming girlish figure, shook her head and pointed to a Louis XIV., gorgeous as a sun-god.

"Pax vobiscum!" cried the discarded monk raising aloft his rosary. And with that there were suddenly four highwaymen—masked, belted and slouch-hatted—where four reverend friars had stood.

Now was Fitzgerald's great chance, and with all that was in him of dramatic talent he made the most of it. He had but one assistant in the blithe game of holding up the company, for M'Clellan kept one door and Race the other; but Jack Sheppard himself could not have cut a braver dash than gay Fitzgerald.

The giggling, excited cries of women and the laughter or attempted protests of men drowned the music of a new waltz, which stopped almost as soon as it had begun. Ordered by two tall, masked highwaymen to give up their jewels, some people yielded lightly to the humor of the jest, while others, disliking it, would have slipped from the room had not another masked robber held the door. Here and there ran forward a conscientious man whom Christopher took for a detective, but Undine herself checked their zeal. "We must yield to the bold highwaymen!" she cried, unlooping from her white neck a triple rope of pearls. Then, recognizing their hostess' voice (she had worn a domino when receiving them), her guests laughed more loudly and followed her example, free from all lurking fear. Fitzgerald and his masked follower were reaping a rich harvest, dropping necklaces, dog-collars, bracelets and tiaras into the big leather pouches that hung from their belts.

There was no longer any thought of resistance or escape, and from afar off Christopher saw M'Clellan leave his post at the door, from which he had doubtless taken the precaution to remove the key. In a few minutes now the play would be over and the actors would be running off the scene. Nothing had gone wrong, Christopher was saying to himself, when suddenly the blood mounted to his head in a wave that, for a second, turned him giddy. Had nothing gone wrong? What if this were not a joke, but deadly earnest? What if these laughing women should never see their jewels again? By this time the contents of those leather pouches might be worth two hundred thousand pounds. If, under his charming airs of bonhomie, Fitzgerald were a rogue—well, the game would be well worth the candle for a man in financial troubles of any sort. And that poor, happy child, the hostess—what a humiliation for her if at her house, led on by her example, all these people lost their dearest treasures! She would never be forgiven—could never live down such a calamity. She might even lose her lover through it.

"In case anything should go wrong—" If Miss Dauvray had meant this—meant him to guess, meant to give him something by which, if his wits were quick and his courage high, he could stop the game!

Suddenly his head was clear as a bell. If he did the thing which had sprung into his brain he would not spoil Fitzgerald's chance of the prize, in case the play were a genuine frolic after all. But if it were earnest he might save the situation for Miss van Bouten, save the jewels, and—unless Fitzgerald were a fool—no one need ever know the truth.

He decided to act, and the moment had come.

Fitzgerald had finished. He and his assistant were beginning their dash towards the glass doors. But instead of unlocking it, as Christopher had been told to do, he tried it quickly, found it fastened, and slipped the key into his pocket. Then, with his back to the gold curtains, he fired one barrel of Eloise Dauvray's revolver at the ceiling.

This was to let Fitzgerald know that he was formidable—that he carried no harmless toy at his belt; and the effect was overpowering. All the women screamed (he hated frightening them, but it was for their own good), and even Fitzgerald and his follower were taken aback for an instant.

It was but for an instant though. They sprang forward; but Christopher stopped them with his levelled revolver before they could touch the triggers of their.

"Hands up, or I fire!" he shouted.

Their weapons had death in them, too—he was sure of that—but his could speak first, and if it spoke there would be an end of one man. The danger was that he could not be sure of covering two at a time, and the third was not far off now; but that was the risk he had been ready to run, and on the instant he was called upon to face it. From behind Fitzgerald the other man would have taken the chance and fired, but someone knocked up his arm (no one but Christopher saw that it was a veiled abbess), and Lord Arrowdale, as Louis XIV., alert and grave enough now, took advantage of the fellow's brief confusion to seize the revolver from behind.

With that Fitzgerald burst into a loud laugh and tucked his weapon in his belt. (Was it because he knew the game was up, and the only hope lay in saving appearances, or was he merely ready to end his harmless play for the prize?) "Don't be frightened, anybody, and spoil sport," he cried, his voice breaking with laughter. Then, snatching off his mask and looking handsome and gallant in his slouch hat, he ran and knelt at Undine's feet, calling his comrade to follow.

"Our leather pouches, and all that is in them is," he exclaimed, "in exchange for the prize, fair lady."

And Miss van Bouten took off her mask also, smiling and beautiful, though a little pale.

"Shall he have the prize, my friends?" she cried aloud.

And the company, unmasking, answered with many voices that the prize must belong to the highwayman.

"It's to be put to the vote, you know, at supper," she said.

Fitzgerald and his friend, having given up their bags of spoil to their hostess, rose from their knees.

Then Fitzgerald came to where Race still stood by the door. Everyone was listening, but all he had to say was to thank Christopher for his "dramatic conception of his part."

"Your one slight mistake," he finished, "has proved a blessing in disguise, for it enables me also to change my mind at the last minute. I and my friends will stay to supper and hear our fate—in the matter of the blue diamond. You are free to do as you choose."

"I must be getting back to town."

"With your car? Very well; we will meet later."

Fitzgerald was the hero of the occasion; and one of the young men of Miss Dauvray's party presently slipped away unnoticed. Perhaps two others did the same—Christopher did not know. But when he reached Scarlet Runner, to his intense surprise there sat Miss Dauvray in the seat next to the driver's.

"Will you take me home?" she asked.

"With pleasure," he said.

"And quickly?"

"If you wish."

They started, and for a few moments neither spoke. Then Christopher asked, "Did I do the thing you wanted?"

"Yes," she said. "I thought you would do it."

"You hypnotized me, perhaps. But—was it a game, or——"

"Oh, a game, if you like. But a terrible game. I would have given my life to stop it, or—yours. You've saved both. I can live now, I think. If he wins the prize he'll let me alone for awhile. But if he'd succeeded to-night I—couldn't have borne it. What would there have been for me? Only to disappear, as he meant to do, or—disappear in another way, a quieter way. I should have chosen that. I'm so very tired, you see."

"Tired of what?" Christopher questioned her almost fiercely.

"Of playing cat's-paw for him. I'm a coward. I'm horribly afraid of him. He could ruin me. I've helped him several times—in country houses where I've been staying. It's nearly killed me, but I had to do it. This would have been worst of all, though. I love little Milly van Bouten. I bear her no grudge for taking Arrowdale from me, because I didn't love him. It was only his money and title I wanted—needed, if you like. Fitz thought I'd be glad of revenge, but I'm not vindictive. I helped only because I was forced to."

"Why?"

"Oh, it all began with the most awful losses at bridge, and a hundred outside debts to drive me half mad. Once—I was mad then, I think—I cheated. Fitz saw, and saved me, for—this kind of thing. He's in awful straits too. But the blue diamond will save him, if he gets it. For your sake I hope he will, as well as for mine. He doesn't forget easily."

"How did he mean to rid himself of me to-night?" asked Christopher quietly.

"You can guess, I think. Of course, the story of the pastrycook and the pie, and giving back the jewels, was a fiction for your benefit. But you would have been asked to stop your car at a certain place, I believe, as if to meet the 'pastrycook,' and then—then—they wouldn't have killed you, for Fitz was going to disappear and you couldn't have identified the other man. But you would have had a knock on the head, and Fitz would have driven your car where he liked. He can drive one or two makes of cars, and he's been taking lessons with your kind for the last three days. But now don't ask me any more questions, will you? I'm so tired. If you are kind, let me rest."

Christopher obeyed and sat silent, driving fast. Neither spoke again until he had brought her to her own door in Regent's Park.

Then, as he stopped Scarlet Runner, he broke out:

"All this time I've been thinking of what you've said. I——"

She burst into merry, if nervous laughter. "What I've said? Surely you didn't take all that wild nonsense seriously! Of course I was joking. It was a fairy-story from beginning to end, believe me."

"I can't," said Christopher.

"Then you are the April fool after all, aren't you? But thank you, nevertheless, a thousand times, for bringing me home. And take care—Fitz won't be too pleased with you for changing the end of his game."

Stunned, Christopher let her slip away from him. Had it been a joke, then, the whole thing? He would never quite know, it might be. But he had a very strong theory; and that theory did not prevent him from wishing to see Eloise Dauvray again.

(A New Adventure Next Week.)