The Scarlet Runner

Vitagraph Company

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

Stars of This Episode

MR. EARLE WILLIAMS as CHRISTOPHER RACE
MISS GYPSY O'BRIEN as VIOLET HARDCASTLE

Next Week Another Story and New Picture

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CHAPTER IX.

THE GOLD CIGARET CASE.

"Christopher Race, Motorist, London," was scrawled in pencil and in an uneducated hand on a common envelope; that and nothing more; yet the powers that be in the postoffice had sent it to him without delay. This was a tribute to his fame, but it was not enlightening.

In the common envelope was a half sheet of thick and creamy parchment paper with a monogram in pale blue and silver; a pretty monogram, but so intricate, consisting as it did of three letters, as to be almost impossible for an uninitiated person to decipher. On this half sheet, written in a firm and somewhat original hand, which might be that of a man or a woman, were two sentences and part of another.

"Dear Sir: I have heard of you and your car and saw photographs of both; I know that you are a gentleman and can be trusted. I hope very much that you are free and can come here by Thursday, if possible early in the morning, as it is a matter of life and death to me, to get away—"

Here the letter broke off, giving no clew to the nature of the errand or to the whereabouts of the nameless writer. But Christopher was able to make out the postmark. The scrawled envelope had been sent out from Stoke d'Estcourt, in Warwickshire.

No, there was nothing to do, and yet the last, broken sentence haunted Christopher. He found himself constantly repeating it, and wondering whether his coming with Scarlet Runner really had been a matter of life and death to the writer. Again and again he pondered at the breaking off of the sentence, which, if finished, might have explained all. He studied the monogram, fancying that it must mean V. L. H., and, though the handwriting was uncommonly strong for a woman, the monogram was essentially feminine.

Altogether, from telling himself that there was nothing to do in the affair of the unfinished letter, Christopher went in a few hours to the extreme of determining to do a great deal. The handbook told him that Stoke d'Estcourt was a small but interesting hamlet situated about three miles from a railway station. The church was celebrated for its brasses and a Norman font. The sixteenth century inn, still unspoiled, attracted artists. There were several fine old houses in the village and on the outskirts, also a number of picturesque cottages, and tourists were advised to visit the ruins of a castle in the neighborhood.

This description encouraged Christopher in the somewhat wild idea that by going to Stoke d'Estcourt and making inquiries he might be able to find out who had sent him the unfinished letter.

His journey was smooth and uneventful and it was still early in the murky evening when the blazing rays of his lamps illuminated the quaint front of the old inn of which he had read in the guide-book. Welcoming lights, streaming through red blinds, seemed to speak of warmth and comfort within. He drove his car into a barn which had been converted into a garage and engaged a bedroom.

The first thing he did while his dinner was being prepared was to call for the local directory and pore over its pages in the hope of finding someone with the initials "V. L. H." But he was disappointed. The population of the village and the immediate neighborhood was only a few hundreds and among the Harrises, the Hasboroughs, the Hickses and the Harveys there was none who owne the initials "V. L." This was a check for which he had been quite prepared.

On arriving he had ostentatiously driven Scarlet Runner through the whole length of the village High Street and past the cottages and old Queen Anne or Georgian houses which surrounded the famous green, thus advertising his advent to whom it might concern, and though the country air and strong ale made him sleep he sat up late pretending to read old numbers of magazines, in the hope of receiving a letter or word of some sort from his nameless correspondent. By 7 o'clock he was dressed and it was not yet 8 when he had breakfasted and was starting Scarlet Runner before the door of the inn. The first thing he did was to teuf-teuf conspicuously to the postoffice, where he inquired if there were any letter for Mr. Christopher Race. But nothing of interest was forwarded, and nobody at Stoke d'Estcourt had taken this means of communicating for the second time with the owner of Scarlet Runner.

"Do you ever get letters here for anyone with the initials V. L. H.?" he ventured to ask of the postmistress, who was too pretty and coquettish to snub a polite and good-looking man even if he put eccentric questions.

No, so far as the young woman could remember, none of her "regular people" had such initials. As for the transient folk, she could not pretend to say.

Baffled, as if he had been the villain of the piece, Christopher went out of the postoffice with only one card left in the game to play. He determined to drive Scarlet Runner slowly, temptingly through every street of the village and past the gates of the great houses and even farms of the surrounding country, weaving the car through from road to road as his map made possible.

He sounded his new and singularly sweet-toned musical siren unnecessarily often and faces peered out of cottage windows and fresh-faced girls turned to look at him and his handsome red car in the village streets, but no one beckoned, no one called to him.

He drove out of the village and took the road which, he had been told, would lead him past several gentlemen's houses and outlying farms, past the ruined castle, past General Newcome's place, on to Lord Melden's. Beyond the last estate he did not intend to go, but would turn there in order to pass Sir Edward Leigh's and so go back towards Stoke d'Estcourt by another road.

Here and there he caused his siren to discourse snatches from the opera of La Traviata, but when he came in sight of the castle he forgot to play his own accompaniment, even forgot for a few moments the business which had brought him to Stoke d'Estcourt.

It really was a very fine and striking ruin. Christopher drove very slowly to take in its full magnificence and finally stopped Scarlet Runner in the shadow of the dark, towering walls, though he did not stop its engine.

Looking up from his seat in the gently purring car the huge Norman keep loomed above him. From this point of view the massive shape of the castle showed no appearance of decay and as Christopher's lively imagination pictured moving figures in quaint costumes and gleaming armor suddenly there was framed in a small, ivy-draped window a face as lovely as any for which a knight of old ever did battle.

A girl was gazing down at him—a girl whose yellow-brown hair was bright gold—against a background of darkness. Christopher had just time to catch an impression of a beautiful face, white and large eyed with terror or some other emotion strange for a peaceful English morning, and then an extraordinary thing happened. The large eyes met his in appeal; the lips opened without speaking; a hand and arm were thrust through the aperture, and something small that glittered as it fell was thrown to him.

The thing, whatever it was, was flung with a woman's aim and instead of reaching its intended destination landed noiselessly in a clump of dead grasses and nettles by the roadside.

Instantly Christopher was out of the car. Without minding the nettle's sting, he thrust his hand and arm deep among rough stems and prickly leaves, coming almost immediately upon the object of his search, which his touch told him must be a metal card case or cigaret case. Before his eyes had a chance to inform him further a low, inarticulate cry from the window made him, still stooping over the bed of nettles, lift his head to look up once more. The girl, silent after the one faint sound which had drawn his eyes to her again, was signing to him eagerly to mount and ride away.

Astonished, but ready to obey a lady's command no matter how strange, Christopher sprang into the quivering car and taking off the brakes put on speed which sent Scarlet Runner flying along the road like a red arrow.

It was not until the first turn when the castle towers were hidden from sight by an intervening hill that Race slackened the car's pace and looked at the thing which the girl had thrown to him. Then he saw that it was a very handsome though small cigaret case, made rather flat to avoid bulging out the pocket which held it and ornamented with the letters "M. N." in diamonds. There was one peculiarity which caused Christopher to jump at the conclusion that the thing had been made by special order and for a lady. The inner part of the case was entirely covered on one side with a mirror set into the gold and surrounded by a frame of tiny brilliants, thus leaving place for cigarets on the opposite side only. The fall had cracked the glass across and the loose bits would have fallen out if Christopher had not closed up the case, fastening it with a snap. He then put the dainty little affair into his pocket and drove along his intended route in almost hopeless quest L. H."

of "V. L. H."

that her act, whatever its meaning, had been one of sheer desperation; that she had chosen a course because she could see no other.

She was so beautiful, so altogether interesting that Christopher would gladly have seized upon the theory that she was "V. L. H.," because if that were so she must have known of him and summoned him. But common sense—if common sense had any place here—did not support the theory. "V. L. H.," who had wished to make use of Scarlet Runner for a "matter of life or death," would hardly have sent Scarlet Runner instantly away out of her sight.

In the circumstances Christopher felt constrained for the sake of V. L. H. to carry out his original intentions. But he made his round of the roads and returned to the village by a different way, as he had planned, and no one had come forward to claim his services, to say, "It was I who wrote to you. I am glad that you are here." Nevertheless, Christopher had no thought of leaving the neighborhood. There were two mysteries instead of one to be puzzled into clearness now.

He had kept on his room at the inn and when he had put away Scarlet Runner he shut himself up for another look at the cigaret case. Opening it, the broken pieces of glass fell out and he saw what he had not guessed at before. The mirror concealed a false back to the case and hidden there he found a photograph of a young man. He was an exceedingly good-looking young man, with a strong, clever face softened by the dreamy arch of the eyebrows, over fine dark eyes. And between the photograph and the thin strip of gold which held it in place was a slip of paper on which were written close together and all in capitals the letters TVBXCHTAY.

"A key to a cipher, perhaps," Christopher said to himself. Was he intended to pluck out its secret and profit by what it taught him? He could not tell.

He decided, as the person from whom the girl wished to conceal the cigaret case might have seen a fleeing motor car, that it would be well for her sake to appear on the scene next time in the guise of an ordinary tourist. He therefore exchanged his chauffeur's cap for on of tweed, which matched his clothes, and went out on foot without his motor-coat.

In half an hour he had reached the castle and was knocking at the door of a cottage built up against one of the half fallen walls. This was the dwelling of the caretaker, whose business in life it was to guard the ruins from vandals and to show visitors about.

He was obliged to lift the knocker two or three times before anyone answered, though there was a faint stirring inside the house, and he fancied that he heard suppressed voices. Presently the door opened and an old woman appeared. She was small and bent, though strong looking, with hard features and singularly bright eyes that glittered piercingly out of a yellow network of wrinkles.

Christopher said civilly that he had come to visit the castle and hoped that he had not chosen an hour when it was not to be seen by the public. The old woman, who seemed somewhat agitated, though these requests must have punctuated the hours of her daily life for years, replied that the guardian, her husband, had had an accident and was in hospital, but that she would take the gentleman round. She then unhooked an enormous key from a nail on the wall and led the way out of doors.

To enter the ruins one passed under a portcullis and so on up a gentle slope between thick, broken walls. At the end of this passage an ugly modern door had replaced the old one long ago destroyed, and following his guide Christopher found himself in the castle. They went from room to room, many of which were open to the sky, with mere stony suggestions of what the upper stories had been, but, as Christopher had been led by his late adventure to expect, the keep was in a better state of preservation than the rest. He asked no questions, but going up a steep stone stairway which would lead, he knew, to a certain window, his heart began to beat rather more quickly than usual. He hoped, and more than half believed, that he would find a beautiful girl waiting for him at the top of the steps, but he found—stone walls and emptiness, a silent place where nothing moved save the wandering sprays of ivy which peered and beckoned at the window where she had been.

Deeply disappointed, Christopher walked about, pretending to be interested in the thickness of the walls. The old woman stood still, watching him as he went to the window and looked out. Turning quickly he caught, or fancied that he caught, a cynical expression on the dried-apple face.

"I saw a young lady looking out of the window this morning, whom I took to be an artist," said Christopher, growing impatient. "Very pretty, with yellowish-brown hair and dark eyes—might have been brown or violet. I think she had on a dark blue dress."

"You must have been mistaken, sir," replied the old woman. "I didn't bring any such young lady in this morning."

Christopher asked no more leading questions, but meekly allowed himself to be shown the usual things and told the usual legends. Then he gave the old woman the usual fee, with the usual extra tip, and took his leave. But turning to glance back at the guardian's cottage when the door was shut he saw his late guide at the window peering out. Behind her stood a man, looking over the stooping shoulder, and though, as Christopher's eyes met his, he moved away and was gone in an instant. Race caught a clear enough impression to feel that he would recognize the face again. It was that of a man passing beyond middle age. The eyes and skin were singularly dark in contrast to thick white hair and there was something peculiar—Christopher had not time to see clearly what—about the prominent nose.

quest, he resolved to return to the castle after dark and linger about in the hope that the girl might return under cover of dusk—to demand her property and explain her strange manner of disposing of it. Meanwhile, however, he had half the day to get through, and—save for such interludes as meals, nothing to do with it except to make inquiries concerning the girl.

Describing her, he questioned the landlord at the inn, and afterwards the coquettish young woman at the postoffice, but neither the one nor the other could tell him anything, and when after nightfall he groped his way through a thick mist towards the castle ruins he had still no clew which might help him to find the lady of the cigaret case.

Sauntering as if aimlessly along the road dominated by the vast ruins, Christopher began softly to whistle the air from La Traviata which Scarlet Runner's new siren played. It must have been those musical notes, heard from a distance, which had drawn the girl to the keep-window before he arrived beneath in the car.

If she remembered and recognized them now she would know what they meant, as they fluted a message out of the night. Again he whistled the same air, while he lighted a cigaret which should also have its special meaning for the girl if she were near, as well as giving her a hint of his whereabouts.

Perhaps she wanted a reassuring glimpse of his face before speaking. Well, she should have it. He held up the lighted wax match to the cigaret until its flame began to burn down. Then, as it flared up before the end, suddenly there came to his ears a hiss sharp and wicked as a snake's, and at the same instant he was conscious of a stinging pain in his left arm.

Away went match and cigarette, their sparks drowned in the wet grass and Christopher, surprised and pricked to anger, realized he had been shot at with an air-gun. Suspecting no lurking malice, he had calmly made himself a target for someone to pot at; and with a quick desire for vengeance he started to run in the direction whence the first rustling had proceeded.

A shadow loomed ahead. Christopher sprang at it, only to seize the beetling branches of a young larch or yew tree, and at the same time to receive a blow on the shoulder from behind—a sharp, unexpected blow which sent him pitching forward. Before he could recover his balance, the ground seemed to vanish from under his feet, and he plunged with a great splash into the stagnant water of the moat.

For a few seconds he floundered clumsily, then got to his feet—for the water, though ice-cold, was not deep. By groping he came upon a broken place in the moat wall, where he could get foothold and handhold of a precarious kind. After a slip or two he succeeded in climbing out, and despite the danger of being shot at again, devoted his attention to ridding himself of as many weeds and as much loose mud as possible. The person who had played him these two sorry tricks, one upon the other, had probably exhausted his forces for the moment. In any case, no further attack was made, and after a walk which restored his circulation if not his temper, Christopher regained the inn.

The wound in the arm was not serious, and Christopher, determined to keep his own counsel, attended to it unaided. But he could not help reflecting that it had perhaps been rather a close shave for him. That noiseless air-gun need only to have been a little better aimed to have reached his heart, instead of inflicting some slight damage on his left arm.

Christopher began to see that this affair was of a far more serious and complicated nature than he had supposed at first even when its mystery had most puzzled him. In his own room at the inn he took out the cigarette case and considered it with interest, the while he rid himself of his soaked clothes. Certainly the little gold box was of great value to someone, a value far beyond its intrinsic worth, in spite of weight and sparkling diamonds. Was it for the concealed photograph, or the slip of paper with the queer cipher, that someone had lain in wait to shoot or drown him?

It was after nine when he waked again, and he was much annoyed with himself for wasting time in bed, when he might have been better employed in playing detective. During the long, wakeful hours of the night he had planned, when day came, to find out something about the man who had peered at him through the cottage window, over the old caretaker's shoulder. But when, by his request, a London newspaper and breakfast were brought to his room, a paragraph in the personal column of the "Daily Recorder" turned his attention in an instant from people and events at Stoke d'Estcourt.

"T. V. B." stared at him in large black capitals at the head of that famous column. "Whoever can supply information as to these letters and those following, will be richly rewarded if he communicates with Box 2001, 'Daily Recorder' office," he read with a keen stab of excitement.

"Quick work!" Christopher said to himself. For he did not doubt that he was the person for whose benefit the paragraph had been put in print. He was in a position to supply the wished-for information, but he would not supply it until he could be sure that the advertiser was the rightful owner of the cigarette case, with such secrets as it contained.

Having dressed hastily, he paid his bill at the inn and departed with Scarlet Runner.

En route to town he concocted a telegram, which he would not have thought it wise to send from the Stoke d'Estcourt postoffice, and got it off from a small town where he stopped to lunch.

"Should the advertiser wish to hear more of T. V. B., the only way of doing so will be to call 8 o'clock tonight (Friday) on Christopher Race, who may be able to give information but will accept no reward."

This was all, save for the address of his lodgings, number and street.

The first thing he did in the morning was to open the "Daily Recorder" and cast his eyes down the personal column. "T. V. B." was conspicuous only in absence; but towards the end of the column appeared something else which caught Christopher's attention at a glance.

"V. L. H. is earnestly implored to communicate immediately with one who hoped to meet on Thursday at address V. L. H. knows. Great anxiety. Can't bear suspense!"

So, Christopher Race was not the only person who had been given reason to count upon meeting V. L. H. on Thursday!

Christopher wished very ardently that he as well as V. L. H. knew the address of the anxious advertiser; but as he did not, and could think of no means of finding it out, he could do nothing to match the pieces of the puzzle together.

A Mr. Warren Lockwood wrote from the Laurels, Pleasant avenue, Barnet, saying that friends had recommended Mr. Race and his car. Would Mr. Race be so kind as to drive his Scarlet Runner out to the Laurels, arriving as near 8 o'clock as he could make it convenient? For a week's trip Mr. Lockwood was prepared to offer the round sum of 100 guineas, he stated in a postscript, which also asked for a wire.

Taking everything together Christopher determined that it would be as well, at least, to call at the Laurels, and sent a wire to that effect. Starting from Scarlet Runner's garage at 7, he found the fog so densely thickened that he doubted if he could find the way.

Towards Regents park the fog lifted slightly, but in Finchley road it settled again as densely as ever, and he could go at little more than a walking pace.

Suddenly, at what seemed to be a corner of the wide country road not far outside Barnet, a voice called to him.

"Scarlet Runner?" it shouted; and Race, astonished, answered before he had stopped to think: "Yes."

Next instant a black figure was silhouetted strangely in the pale haze of the car lamps, and three short sharp reports barked dryly in the night. Someone had fired a revolver at his driving wheel tires, and two shots had taken effect, for he could feel the car settling down on the deflated inner tubes. Hot with fury at the outrage, Race leaped from his seat to the roadway, peering into the darkness, tingling to inflict punishment, and reckless of all danger for himself. There was no sound of running footsteps. The scroundrel must be lurking. But the thought was cut short abruptly as the breaking of a thread. As he touched ground, something thick and soft was thrown over his head from behind and twisted tightly round his neck.

Taken by surprise in the heat of his rage, for an instant Christopher lost his breath. He stumbled under the onslaught. Hands deftly, swiftly, tore open the buttons of his overcoat, and he knew instantly with returning presence of mind that he had two men to deal with.

A fierce upward swing of his right arm was just in time to prevent the man at his back from twisting the hood too tightly round his throat. Stepping back heavily on the feet of this fellow he shot out a left arm like a battering ram and caught the would-be pickpocket squarely in the face. There was a grunt of pain, and the prying hands fell away from Christopher's coat.

To attempt pursuit in the fog would be useless. Besides, he had seen the face of neither man. Panting from the struggle he assured himself with some sense of triumph that the cigaret case was still safe in his waistcoat pocket.

By the time the car was ready to go on again, he had made up his mind not to pay the call alone, but to take for a companion a member of the local police.

Most policemen within motoring radius of London had heard the name of Christopher Race, and he was received favorably at the police station in Burnet. Without telling the story of the cigaret case, he confided to the inspector in charge, of the fact that a piece of jewelry in his possession was apparently coveted by an unscrupulous stranger. He showed the letter with the address of "The Laurels," which was written, not embossed, and gave an account of what had occurred to him on his way to keep the appointment.

"Whoever this man is," said the policeman, "he thinks more of his reputation than he does of getting what he wants from you, though he's evidently keen on that. You can count on 'The Laurels' being watched; but my opinion is that the hunt won't come back that way. You'll find the wind blowing from some other quarter, an unexpected one, maybe, and my word to you is consult Scotland Yard."

With this advice still echoing in his ears, Christopher at last drove Scarlet Runner rapidly back to London, the fog having lifted with a hint of breeze. He was tired and hungry, and knowing that he would get nothing to eat at his lodgings, when he had put up the car, he went to his club, where refreshment, liquid or solid, was to be had at any hour.

Two men sat at a table in a corner, talking earnestly, and hearing him enter, they locked up, as if not too pleased to have the room invaded. Both were young, and strangers to Christopher, yet the face of one seemed curiously familiar to him. "Now, where have I seen that good-looking chap before, and lately, too?" Race asked himself.

Then, suddenly the answer sprang into his mind. This was the original of the photograph in the gold cigaret case.

He took the gold cigaret case from his pocket and laid it on the table, where its diamonds flashed in the light of a red-shaded candle. Three minutes later the gleam caught the eye of the young man, and Christopher saw his face go through the changes from astonishment and incredulity to intensest eagerness.

"What will he do now?" was the question in Christopher's mind. But it was almost instantly answered. What the young man did was to jump up, and on pretense of going to the fireplace to warm his hands, pass close to the table where Race sat. He paused and Christopher's eyes and his met. His were honest eyes as well as handsome ones, and any doubt that might have crept into Race's mind concerning the original of the photograph died in a second.

"You will think it very strange," said the young man, "but I must beg you to tell me how you got that cigaret case."

"I don't think it strange," returned Christopher. "When I recognized your face I put the case there hoping you'd ask me that question. I'll answer it with the greatest pleasure and there are also some questions I trust you'll answer me."

The other man got up and came across the room. "You're Mr. Race, aren't you?" he asked.

Christopher assented and added that he had just learned that the other was Fergus O'Brien of Scotland Yard.

"This is my friend—indeed, my distant relative—Mr. Maurice Naylor," said O'Brien.

"M. N.!" exclaimed Christopher impulsively.

"Exactly. We were speaking of that cigaret case, when you showed in. When you've finished your supper——".

"I have finished it," said Race, who had already done justice to a deviled bone.

"Then, perhaps pou'll accept an invitation to my chambers?"

"I'd rather you'd both come to my rooms," replied Christopher. "You'll understand why, perhaps, when we've had a talk about the cigaret case. You won't have far to go."

And they did understand, in a way that was a surprise to all three; for on arriving at Christopher's lodgings, they came upon a scene of wild confusion in his sitting room. Everything had been ransacked and left in disorder, and it was the same in the bedroom. Someone, under cover of the thick fog, had made an entrance, probably climbing across from the balcony of an adjoining house which was unoccupied. Nothing had been taken away, so far as Christopher could tell, but nothing had escaped the most minute examination.

"This is also on account of the cigaret case," said Christopher. "There's a man who wants it badly. I don't know who he is yet, but——"

"I think I can tell you," cut in Maurice Naylor.

"Can you also tell me who is V. L. H.?"

"She is Violet Hardcastle, the niece of the man who probably paid this room a visit while you were out. She—didn't give you the cigaret case?"

"In a way, she did—probably to keep it out of her uncle's hands, as it looks now. Can you tell me where she is?"

"I wish I could. I've been advertising for news of her in the 'Daily Recorder.' My friend, Mr. O'Brien knows the whole story. When we saw you I was consulting him about the best way of reaching Miss Hardcastle, who is engaged to me against her uncle's will."

"Perhaps if I tell you how I got the cigaret case it will help you both," said Christopher; and then, beginning with the unfinished letter, he gave them the whole history of the affair, ending with the episode in Barnet.

"Certainly, it's Hardcastle who has planned it all; if he hasn't done it all," exclaimed Naylor. "I'll bet it was he who grabbed you from behind tonight. He's as big a coward as he is a scoundrel, though O'Brien was saying that I'll have difficulty in proving him a villain."

"He has a good enough reputation as a solicitor," said O'Brien, "but I begin to think from things Naylor has been telling me that he's got into low water—been speculating with his client's money, perhaps, or—"

"He's his niece's guardian," explained Naylor. "Brother of her dead father, who thought everything of him. But Violet's mother was an American, and she never liked the man—never trusted him. The money was all hers, but he's got a lot of it in his hands somehow—against the mother's wish, I fancy—and naturally he doesn't want Violet to marry, as by her father's will he has charge of her affairs until she does. He had her at school in Paris till she was 20, to keep her out of the way of men; but I'm attached to the embassy there, and we met. I fell in love with her at sight—who wouldn't?—and when Hardcastle heard what had happened, he came and carried her off at once. He was clever enough, though, to stop me from making a row by saying he'd inquire about me, and if all was well, would allow the engagement to go on. Meanwhile Violet was to stop with him in some country house he was taking. Hardcastle promised to write, and promised that if everything went as he expected, Violet should too. He'd let me know the address and all that. Well, I heard nothing. I found out his office address and wrote several times, which was a horrid bother; but after a fortnight of worry and suspense, I received a letter from Violet evidently written in great haste. Here it is. You shall see it, Mr. Race."

From an inner pocket Naylor produced a half sheet of paper, at sight of which Race had to restrain an exclamation, for it exactly matched the one which he himself possessed, and the writing, which covered it was the same as that in the letter over which he had so often puzzled.

"Dearest Maurice," he read, "this is in the greatest haste. I've run away from my uncle's house—escaped, I might call it, for, since a dreadful scene we had, I've been practically a prisoner. I've been planning this for days, but have only just succeeded. I've got to a farm house not far from the village, giving a different name, and making up a stupid story about myself, but it answers very well, for they're keeping me as a lodger for a night or two. Really, I'm in hiding here, for I daren't leave the house lest my uncle or that hateful, wicked old valet of his, you saw in Paris pounce down on me like hawks and carry me back again. I tell you, dearest, I'm afraid of them both. I don't know what they mayn't do, and all because of my money. I'm sure uncle must have done something dishonest with it. Anyway, he came to me one night and said that he know my mother had left me a great deal which had never come into his hands, that he'd got information about there being valuable bonds in a bank in New York of which he ought to have known. I admitted that it was true, and that dear mother had given me a letter about the bonds just before she died, saying that they were never to be put in his charge. He said he must have them, that he was in difficulties, but this extra money would tide him over and he she would make it all right afterwards. He begged and pleaded so that I began to give him the letters of the combination lock, and had got as far as TVB when it seemed exactly as if mother's voice spoke in my ear and forbade me to go on. There was a miserable scene between us after that. His eyes were awful and he frightened me. You know, in my little cigaret case, which you gave me with your initials in it and your photograph hidden inside, I told you I would keep the thing most valuable to me after your picture. That thing is the combination by which the safe at the bank which contains the bonds can be opened. No one has opened it and cut the bonds since mother was in New York last, not long before she died. Not a soul living except myself knows the combination, not even the manager of the bank. I'm sure mother was right in not trusting uncle, and that this secret fortune is all I have left. I daren't wait for you to come here, but shall try to get to London by motor, rather than show myself at a railway station, and will go straight to the Savoy. You will get this just in time to meet me there if you start from Paris Thursday morning. I shall finish this letter and write another arranging about the motor, and to do both I've but one sheet of paper. Your loving

"VIOLET."

Christopher stood silently thinking for a minute with the half sheet of paper in his hand. He guessed now that the girl had been interrupted in the midst of her letter to him, by warning of her uncle's arrival. The man had traced her to the farm house she spoke of, no doubt, and Violet, before escaping the second time, must have given the unfinished letter to some one at the farm house, begging that an envelope might be addressed and posted. Maurice Naylor's letter had been posted by the same hand.

All these thoughts passed through Race's mind in the fraction of a minute, and Naylor had hardly time to grow impatient at his silence over the letter before he brought out the other half sheet and matched the two together. He and O'Brien campared deductions and arrived at the same conclusion.

"I think," remarked O'Brien gravely, "that we'd better go down at once into Warwickshire, and pay a surprise visit to Mr. Hardcastle's house, the sooner the better."

"We can go in my car," said Christopher. "And we can start whenever you like—in half an hour if it suits you."

"There's just one thing we must do before we start," said O'Brien, "and that is, get a warrant for Hardcastle's arrest. I can do it through Mr. Race's evidence about what occurred tonight."

"Also," went on O'Brien quietly, "we shall very likely find out that the spinster who's said to own the Laurels is a clinet of Hardcastle's. In that case we would have known about her house standing empty, and perhaps about the convival habits of her caretaker. It's a good thing we can get that warrant, or the man might give us trouble yet, his niece being still a few weeks under age. Besides, if he's got the secret out of her, the first thing he'll do will be to step off to New York and open that box in her mother's bank. I suppose you don't know what bank it is, Naylor?"

"No, I don't; and hang the bonds. I want to get to **Violet,"** answered the young man. "I've got money enough for us both."

"Still, I've a fancy for saving those bonds," smiled O'Brien.

It was 5 o'clock on Sunday morning, and still pitch dark, when they got off in Scarlet Runner, but they had the warrant, and the good car seemed to know that there was stiff work to be done. It flew as it had seldom flown before along the silent, empty roads; and at 9 three haggard mud-spattered men arrived at Stoke d'Estcourt after a non-stop run.

They learned from the first person they passed in the village where to find Mr. Hardcastle's place, and were there within the next ten minutes, flashing through the gates up to a severe gray Georgian house.

Mr. Hardcastle, announced a sour-faced middle-aged woman who opened the door, was not at home.

"Are you his valet's wife?" asked O'Brien sharply.

"What business is that of yours?" was the equally sharp answer. But a look in the woman's eyes told the detective that he had hit upon the truth. Violet Hardcastle had had grim allies.

"We will see Miss Hardcastle, if her uncle is not here," he said authoritatively. And to her surprise and the astonishment of his companions, the servant made no objection. Ushering all three into a handsome if sparsely furnished drawing room, she said that Miss Hardcastle was not well, but should have the gentlemen's message, and would either come down or send word.

"Tell her it's Mr. Naylor," cried the girl's lover. "Mr. Maurice Naylor, who's found her, though she gave him no address, and he couldn't make out the postmark on her letter."

"Will she come?" was the question in the minds of the three men. And in two minutes it was answered by the girl herself, pale and lovely, in a tea gown of white, her beautiful hair disordered as if she had risen hastily from bed.

"Oh, Maurice," she sobbed, running to him, with eyes for no one else.

* * * * * * *

It was true that Mr. Hardcastle was "not at home," as his servant had said. But he had returned early that morning by motor, as O'Brien had guessed, and by threatening to kill Maurice Nawlor, whom he knew to be in London, he had induced Violet to tell her carefully-guarded secret, to save her lover's life. Then with his confidential man her uncle had gone off again in his car.

"But luckily," remarked the detective when he had heard these details from the girl, "he can't sail for New York today."

"I wonder?" she said. "I happen to know that he's lately bought or hired a big steam yacht, but I don't know its name."

"We'll know it before we're very many hours older," O'Brien assured her. We'll know whether its sailed; if so, from what port and for what port. We'll know all there is to know, in fact; and when Mr. Hardcastle steps on shore across the water, he'll find himself under arrest;" which was exactly what happened. Therefore Mrs. Maurice Naylor is a rich woman, as well as a happy one, in spite of the enormous speculation of that now famous defaulter, the solicitor Hardcastle.

Thus, after all, Christopher thought that he might fairly say he had won his bet with himself, so he bought the repeater, and Violet Hardcastle made him a present of the said cigaret case.

(Another Adventure Next Week.)

BY THREATENING TO KILL MAURICE NAYLOR, HE INDUCED VIOLET TO TELL HER CAREFULLY GUARDED SECRET.