

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
LOUISZITA VALENTINE as MARGARET PLANTAGENET

Next Week Another Story and New Picture

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CHAPTER X. THE LOST GIRL.

Christopher was scorching. He had changed to do an impossible thing, or impossible with a car less sympathetic than Scarlet Runner, but he believed that he was going to do it.

He had a tingling rush down a long, straight street of rock when, slowing in a little as he might for a turning, he shot through a wooded common and ran upon something interesting.

Mechanically he came to a stop, so suddenly that speed-waited in yesterday's mud, and put her bonnet where her driving-wheels should have been.

Above its head Christopher's a charming balloon was poised, its anchor attaching it to earth in an adjacent field, while leaning over the edge of its basket-car, at a height of thirty feet in air, a young man drank a cup of tea and smoked down upon the approaching motor.

"Hallo!" said he in the sky.
"Hallo!" replied he on earth.
"That's what you call slide-slip, isn't it?"

"Or it's first cousin," grumbled Christopher, angry with himself and ruffled with the stranger.

"Slide-slip" something we never seen," said the young man in the basket, watching the motorist right his car. "Or tire trouble; or—"

"We don't have to say our prayers every time we want to stop," said Christopher. "Good bye. Hope you'll get somewhere."

"I'm in no hurry to get anywhere," answered the other. "I'm out for fun; aren't you?"

"No; for business. Goodbye again."
"Don't go," urged the balloonist. "Nice red, amazing, you've got—only a bit old-fashioned!"

"Old-fashioned!" echoed Christopher. "Why, she's the latest thing out, she's—"

"Excuse me. I only meant old-fashioned in comparison with my Little Stranger. An automobile's the vehicle of yesterday, a balloon the carriage of tomorrow."

"Well, they'll both be out of date the day after," said Christopher, and smiled, for there was something engaging about the young man in the sky.

"I don't know where you want to go, but I bet I could get you there quicker than you can get yourself."

"What? Could you go from London to Torquay in seven hours? That's what I'm trying to do."

"Shouldn't have to try. Shall I take you?"

"Car and all?"

"Come, I'm serious. Put your red crab up at the village, which I can see not far off, though in your worm-like position on that you can't get a glimpse of it. Shouldn't wonder if there's a garage of sorts."

There was a microbe in Christopher Race's blood which went mad when it came in contact with a balloon. His errand from London to Torquay was an errand of business, as he had hinted and though he had "personally conducted" two short tours and made a little money since he had set up as a gentleman chauffeur, he could not afford to miss any promising chance. An advertisement of his had been answered yesterday by a Mr. Finnington Brown of Finnington hall, near Torquay, inviting him to bring his car on a visit of inspection and be engaged for a month's trip if satisfactory.

It would surprise Mr. Finnington Brown if the ballonist, who had dropped in on him in a balloon, say an hour earlier than expected in a motor car, and explained that—that—but before explanation—say that, owing to unforeseen circumstances Scarlet Runner would appear later.

"I accept with pleasure your kind invitation for tea and a canter," said Christopher aloud. "Will you call for me or do I call for you?"

"Well, make me as punctual," replied the other, "a little lower down—or what you're still accustomed to considering 'down.' When you've put up your crawler, you might just bring along an able-bodied yokel or two to help unhitch me from the stars, eh? I don't want to let myself down, as I can't spare gas."

The news of the "free show" provided for the neighborhood, spread mysteriously, and by the time Christopher and his attendants were out of the village half the able-bodied inhabitants were at their heels. A growing crowd watched the slow hauling down of the balloon, and listened, open-mouthed, to the instructions given by the aeronaut.

As for him, despite the surging audience, he was as calm as the weather, which, in the last matter, he controlled his directions to be obeyed without hitch. His basket car touched earth, light as a swallow dropping from flight. Each of Christopher's assistants got half a crown for the work he would have been enchanted to do for nothing, and while all three village youths clung grinning to the basket's edge the invited guest climbed over it in a luxurious nest stored with rugs, books, maps, food, a tea basket, and a few bottles of wine.

"When I say 'let go' do it all together," ordered the balloon owner, as he pulled in his anchor and deftly fastened the rope round the car. Anyone who hangs on may get translated to another sphere. Farewell, forever. Now—let go!"

And they did let go with scared precision.

"Let's be happy as birds, telling each other our names and impressions of things in general. I'm Paul Western."

"I might have guessed that," cut in Christopher. "You're the Western, winner of the big balloon race last week. Delighted to meet you. As for me, the only race I have to my credit is my name—Christopher Race. 'Ace' they used to call me at college. Would it had been the Ace of Diamonds?"

"I suppose Ace of Hearts would have suited the case better?"

"Never was in love in my life," said Christopher. "Though one has fancies, of course."

"We're hobnobbing about," said Western, "but I'll run her up higher and see if we can't catch that breeze."

He was emptying sand out of a bag; but so far as Christopher could tell, nothing happened except that the mountain range sank out of sight and

others, even wilder, came into view. Also, the air seemed fresher, though not intensely cold.

The sun had set behind leaden clouds. Already, as one says across the channel, it made night; and far below they saw clustering lights, shining like jewels on purple velvet cushions. Though they could feel no wind, as they bent over the edge of the basket the lights in the world below appeared to float rapidly past, as if borne by an onrushing tide.

Sometimes they were hidden by black rags of cloud; but at last these rags were fringed with gleaming silver. The moon was coming up, clear and full, and, as if in obedience to her command, the wind was still; the lights in the purple depths no longer moved on a steady tide, but a river of silver wallowed up the yellow sparks and flooded the purple valleys.

"Good!" said Western. "Now we can descend. We shall have an illumination for our landing, and though there was a sprinkling of mist—a sea mist, I should judge by the salt tang of it—it's so thin that we shall know whether we're dropping on earth or water."

"Have you any idea where we are?" asked Christopher, who had long ago abandoned hope of Torquay or its neighborhood—if he had ever really had any—but, like a true sportsman, was revealing in the adventure.

"Night in Hampshire," suggested Western vaguely. "Oh—well, might be anywhere—near the coast. It's hard to say to thirty miles or so, the way we have been racing."

He had pulled the valve-cord and a steady tide, but a river of silver wallowed up the yellow sparks and flooded the purple valleys.

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the girl. A new puff of wind caught the balloon again, so that both men staggered and fell upon their knees.

So great and so sudden was the strain that the branch broke for a moment and arrested them with a sharp snap, and the balloon, already lightened of ballast, was whirled away like a soap bubble before they had time to speak.

In a second the white girl and the dark battlements had been swept out of sight. Western got to his feet and seized the valve cord, but Christopher, still on his knees, cried out a warning. "Stop!"

"Listen," he said, "what's that sound?"

Western paused with his hand on the cord, his ears alert.

The balloon was in a boiling surf of snowy cloud, lit by the moon. They could see nothing save this glittering froth, but there was a sound louder and more ominous than the harp-like singing of the cordage. From below came at short, regular intervals a deep, reverberating boom.

In his excitement Western had not heard, until Christopher compelled his attention.

"The sea!" he exclaimed. "We're over the sea!"

"Another moment and we should have been in it," added Christopher. "Then that house must stand close to the shore," Western said.

"We're being blown out to sea, aren't we?" finished Christopher.

"I'm afraid we are," the other admitted.

So far, the battlemented house kept its secret; nevertheless, if fortune did not favor them in one way, it did in another, for they discovered a train leaving Southampton almost immediately after the arrival, which would take them across country to Scarlet Runner.

All night the expert balloonist had puzzled over the problem of distances and speed, trying to determine from the map of England how far and in what direction the Little Stranger had drifted after taking Race on board, before the sudden gale had subsided and dropped him, in a rising sea fog, at the lost house. Now, in obedience to Western's calculations, Scarlet Runner's bonnet was pointed upon a southeasterly course, slanting always toward the sea.

When, well on in the afternoon, they came to Weymouth, taking the coast road when there was one, and, when they wandered irrelevantly elsewhere, exploring each side track which might lead to a house by the shore. So darkness fell, and all the searching and all the questionings had been in vain. It was useless to go on after nightfall, and in the sequestered hollow of Lulworth cove they stopped till dawn beckoned them on.

It seemed to Christopher that it would be a delicious romance to find and save her from the horror she had feared, to win her love and eventually marry her about the time that his rich relative should decide to leave him everything, thus making himself forever safe against a wife of his uncle's choosing. Therefore, when Western began to make some such remark, apropos of his own state of mind, Christopher frankly proclaimed his own intentions.

"But I tell you the girl is mine," argued the other, surprised and disgusted, for he had taken Christopher's helpfulness for disinterested sympathy.

"Why is she yours more than mine?" argued Race.

"Because—I saw her first," said Western.

"That would be difficult to prove," said Christopher.

"Anyhow, it was my balloon."

"I was your honored guest. Besides, if you hadn't thrown out sand, we could have stopped and taken her away."

"I laid first claim. You can't deny that. You should have spoken when I first told you how much I admired her. Oh, by every rule, she's mine."

"First catch your hare," said Christopher.

"What a simile! If only for that, you don't deserve her."

"So far as that's concerned, I don't suppose there's much to choose between us."

"I wish I thought you were chaffing me," said the American.

"In no way."

"Then how's this thing to be decided?"

"By the girl—when we find her."

"Yes. But one of us—the one who gets ahead—is bound to have the best chance to guess at which the girl will stick to your company, for I can't get on without your car; it would mean too much to delay now to wire someone and try to hire an equally good one."

"There isn't such a thing," said Christopher.

"Well, one half as good, then."

a dark wail, and a voice hailed them in French.

Both young men could speak the language, Race better than Western, and between them they explained that they were not burglars but balloonists; that they had crossed the Manche, and had found a resting place on the land of monsieur, of whom they begged assistance. Could he give them a cart to the nearest railway station? If he could, they would give him money, much money, in return.

In five minutes more the mayor and the mayor's sons were all out of the house, and some went to gaze curiously at the deflated balloon, while others helped their father get ready the white-covered cart.

Succor and protection for the Little Stranger were promised and the Englishmen were informed that they had alighted within twelve kilometers of Havre. They dashed on to the quay as the last whistle blew for the departure of the night boat, and flung themselves across the gangway just as it was being hauled ashore.

The journey back to England across a turbulent and noisy sea was a vulgar experience compared to their flight with the wind among the stars. But as neither felt in the mood for rest, it gave them time to discuss details of their premeditated quest.

It was 8 in the morning when they touched English soil, and their first thought was to buy a newspaper, of which they scarcely let a paragraph

at your mercy. You wouldn't have seen the girl if it hadn't been for me. You might stand aside and let me propose. Americans think nothing of asking a girl to marry us the first time we see her, if we really want her and some other fellows likely to snatch her out of our possession. But an Englishman could never do the thing offhand like that. He—"

"Nonsense!" cut in Christopher. "I'll come to an agreement with you. If we find the girl—"

"When we find the girl, the one who does the most towards saving her shall have the right to speak first. Do you agree?"

"Yes," said Western, after a moment's hesitation.

Scarlet Runner had sped under the shadow of a ruined castle, and was nearing Ardwanage, when a train which had not yet gathered full speed after leaving the station ran towards them along the line, that here lay parallel to the road. Race had slowed down for a frightened horse, and he was in the act of putting on speed again when Western sprang up in the seat beside him. "Turn—as quick as you can," he stammered. "Catch that train. She's in it!"

"She?" echoed Christopher, bewildered, but obeying.

"She—the girl—my lost girl. I saw her."

"Our lost girl," Christopher amended, and slipped in his four speed. "If

vent school. The girl had come to live with her uncle, and eight or nine months after her arrival both servants—husband and wife had left. The gossip of the countryside was that Sir Digby's growing eccentricity had been too much for them, but others said that having hoped that their master's fortune might become the fortune of his will, jealousy of the beautiful niece had finally compelled them to give notice.

For several months the young girl had acted as her uncle's housekeeper, without assistance. No servants were engaged, no visitors received; no one ever came to the house except two or three privileged tradesmen from Marne, the country town, ten miles distant. The day before the publication of the report a Marne grocer had called at Abbey Court with his cart, as he was in the habit of doing twice a week, to bring milk and other stores which Miss Plantagenet used in her household. Her knocking over remained unanswered, and at last he discovered that a side-door was unlocked. Fearing some tragedy in the strange household, he entered, cried Miss Plantagenet's name, but had no answer. He then ventured on an exploration, and finally made a dreadful discovery; the body of Sir Digby hung half out of a window invisible from the back of the house where the grocer called. The door had been broken and he had been shot in the breast and in the head, though no weapon was to be seen, and Miss Plantagenet, the only other occupant of the house, had disappeared. The grocer at once notified the police, and a search was made for the missing girl. Late in the evening she was found at Weymouth, in a state of collapse, at a small hotel near the railway station, which she had arrived that morning. She was arrested on suspicion of murdering her eccentric uncle, whose hearse she was believed to be, but her weakness and hysterical condition had prevented her from making a statement. Her door cart had happened to call in and announced that Miss Plantagenet would probably be well enough next day to be taken back by train as far as Marne, where she would have to appear at the coroner's inquest.

"She's here now," said Western. "By this time the inquest has probably been begun. Those men I saw must have been policemen in charge of the poor old murderer. We ought to get there. Only think; if I hadn't bought that paper we'd have been off to the next place. This time I am the Ace of Trumps."

"You wouldn't have got to Marne if it hadn't been for me," replied Christopher, and Western had to admit that this was true. "So far it's a tie," he said, "and the grand test is still to come."

The people of the garage where Christopher had bought his petrol knew all about the "murder" (as they prematurely termed it) and were enchanted to point out the way to the coroner's inquest. The more they inquired of themselves as quick as they could get there. Only think; if I hadn't bought that paper we'd have been off to the next place. This time I am the Ace of Trumps."

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