

Dorin Schumacher

THE FRESHET, 1911 [DIE FLUGT STEIGT]

(The intertitles on the extant print are in Old Dutch.)
Producer: Vitagraph Company of America

Director: William Humphrey

With Ralph Ince, Helen Gardner, Fred Herzong, Robert Taber, and Matty Ruebert

The piece you are about to read is about a silent movie star who will become the country's first actor-producer. Through my extensive critical and film research, I adopt my grandmother Helen Gardner's persona and respond to the script, scenes and other actors. The script is real, the scenes are real, the persona is persona.

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HELEN GARDNER: *We shot the film in November when we were all thinking about the tragic flood in Allentown, Pennsylvania in September. Heavy rains caused a concrete dam to break and the water inundated the boroughs below and killed 80 people.*¹

Here, "Freshet" means the flood of a river from heavy rain or melted snow. The director William Humphrey got dramatic flood scenes and worked his little love story into them.

“You can’t hold it back. It carries everything before it, and you find yourself drawn into a vortex of heart interest with a thrill of palpitating contemplation.”²

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HELEN GARDNER AT THE POPULAR CASINO TODAY

The Home of Good Pictures -- Brightest, Steadiest and Flickerless

The management of the Casino takes great pleasure in announcing to patrons of the popular resort one of the Vitagraph dramas, “The Freshet,” in which Miss Helen Gardner, formerly of Oneonta, takes the part of leading lady and in addition to our regular performance we will give every lady purchasing a ticket a handsome photo of the Oneonta girl, Miss Helen Gardner, as a souvenir. Don’t miss this opportunity of receiving a photo of your favorite. Bring the children and leave them during shopping hours. Come in the afternoon and avoid the evening rush.³

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Intertitle: DER AUSERKORENE IHRES VATERS [THE FATHER’S CHOSEN ONE]

Incidental Music Suggestion:

“During love scenes, play ‘The Small Town Gal’ (Geo. M. Cohan).”⁴

Meg (Helen Gardner), a trim young woman in a ruffled country-girl dress and a braid down her back, leans over a rose bush next to a white shingled house. In the foreground, Tom (Ralph Ince), a slender young man in a suit, doffs his hat to her. She picks a rose, approaches him, turns away shyly, turns back smiling and puts the flower in his buttonhole.

HG: *“Ralph Ince is here shown with me. He was, and I suppose is, a most difficult man for a ‘Lady’ star to act with, owing to the fact that he and his wife had contracted not to speak to actors of the opposite sex. You*

may well imagine that after being snubbed and even wounded by his boorish behavior before the scene, my mind was not the most tranquil when the scene was in progress. Then too, there was always the fear that his attraction to me might make him forget [what he was supposed to be doing].”⁵

In the background, two men in suits and hats start to go in the front door of the house. The older one, Meg’s father, gets an angry look when he sees her pat Tom’s lapel so tenderly. Her father stiffens his shoulders, stalks over and lectures her. Her happy look turns into a frown as he pushes her to the other man. Her chosen one, Tom, gives up, puts his hat on and leaves the scene. Meg tries to follow but her father holds her back. She argues, points in the direction Tom took. Her father makes her take the other man’s hand. She pouts.

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The wide door of a blacksmith workshop. BLACKSMITH & WHEELWRIGHT. Meg rushes up gaily swinging a lunch pail and calls to her father, the owner. She stands in profile in the door and bites into her apple. Tom appears in a blacksmith’s apron. Meg’s father sits on a stool in the door and takes his lunch from the pail she gives him. Tom and Meg gaze lovingly at each other. She offers him an apple with the flat of her hand as though feeding a horse. He takes it and bites. Her father sees their intimacy and orders Meg to leave. She flounces off with a rebellious but happy wave. The father lectures Tom who looks smug and goes back inside.

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Intertitle: DIE HOCHZEITSGÄSTE MACHEN SICH ÜBER DEN UNGLÜCKLICHEN LEHRLING LUSTIG [WEDDING GUESTS MAKE FUN OF THE UNHAPPY APPRENTICE]

Tom comes out of the workshop carrying a molten piece of iron with tongs and fits it onto the broken axle of a wagon. Five couples in fancy dress, the women in large flowered hats, walk across the scene pointing at him as they laugh and jeer.

HG: *A scene that shows class differences. Tom, a worker. The couples, upper class.*

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Intertitle: NACH FÜNF JAHREN MARIE, JETZT EINE WITWE, KOMMT MIT IHREM KLEINEN SOHN, UM DIE SCHMIEDE ZU BESICHTIGEN [AFTER FIVE YEARS OF MARRIAGE, MEG, NOW A WIDOW, VISITS THE WORKSHOP WITH HER LITTLE SON]

Meg, wearing a plain long dark dress and a white cloth bonnet that covers her shoulders, enters left. She holds the hand of a little boy with blond hair in a bowl cut. They walk slowly to the door of the workshop and peer in. Meg turns toward the camera, leans on the left side of the door and smiles flirtatiously at Tom when he arrives and rolls a wagon wheel up. He turns away with a sour look. She reaches out to him, he says no and goes into the shop. She starts to leave, but the boy pulls on her arm. He breaks away and rushes alone into the shop and brings Tom out, still looking sour. Meg leaves with the boy. Tom watches them go, hands on his hips.

HG: *Stubborn male.*

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Meg and the boy climb the steps of a front porch with a railing and a corner post overgrown with vines. Meg, now bonnet-less, stops, turns unhappily toward the left, sadly shakes her head No and sighs a long sigh. They enter the front door.

HG: *What happened to the bonnet from the previous scene? Director's mistake.*

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Intertitle: DER DAMM IST GEBROCHEN UND DAS TAL ÜBERSCHWEMMT [THE DAM BREAKS AND FLOODS THE VALLEY]

Smoke billows around the door of the blacksmith shop. A man in a suit waves his arms and shouts. Tom appears.

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Intertitle: ZUR RETTUNG [TO THE RESCUE]

Incidental music suggestion:

“During the rushing of the freset, play ‘The Storm.’”⁶

Tom struggles out of his leather apron which seems to resist and rushes to the left.

The screen shows flooding water. The water fills the screen. A black and white dog perched on a board floats by. The dog jumps into the water and swims out of the scene. Logs are propelled by the current. A small house with a shingle roof that shows above the water floats by. Meg and her boy are lying on the roof. Meg’s shirtwaist and long skirt are soaked, she is barefoot. She cries for help. She struggles to move herself and her child to the roof’s edge.

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Intertitle: DEN WASSERN AUSGELIEFERT [THE WATER DELIVERED]

Meg pushes the boy onto a small piece of flotsam and he floats away.

HG: *What a terrible thing for a mother to have to do.*

Meg struggles to get to the edge of the roof.

Tree limbs and housing debris rush by. A chicken perched on a chimney passes. Meg’s child on the flotsam. He waves his arm and calls out to her as she lies on the roof.

Two men in a rowboat come alongside, she climbs in, calls to her boy, reaches her arms out.

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The scene is shot from the other side of the flooding stream as tree branches and other debris rush by. A man stands at the far edge. Tom runs up to him, pulls his shoes off and jumps into the flood. He swims against the current with a strange one-handed stroke.

The boy and his flotsam float up. Tom swims to him, takes him in his arms and swims toward shore.

Incidental music suggestion:

“As Tom saves the little boy, play ‘Hearts and Flowers.’”⁷

The scene is shot where Tom entered the water. The normal edge of the stream is marked by bushes with floodwater pooled behind them. Two men stand at the edge. Tom, the child in his arms, swims up and struggles out. One man takes the boy. Tom slips and falls, stands back up. He takes the boy, staggers toward the camera to higher ground.

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Intertitle: WO IST MEIN KIND? [WHERE IS MY CHILD?]

The rowboat carrying Meg lands. She staggers along the same watery path that Tom took.

In his workshop, Tom, soaking wet, wraps a blanket around the boy and holds him in front of the fire which he stokes. Meg, drenched, rushes in and grabs the boy. He is so heavy she almost drops him. She reaches out to Tom but he spurns her. She starts to leave with the child in her arms. Tom, with a look of worry, goes to her.

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Intertitle: SIE KÖNNEN BEI MIR ZUFLUCHT FINDEN [YOU CAN FIND REFUGE WITH ME]

Meg, holding the boy, stands in the opening of the blacksmith shop. She looks tragic, Tom sullen. He points in front of him.

A flashback shows the floating roof she was rescued from.

In the shop, she bends over and buries her face in the boy's neck. Tom clenches his fists, points to his left and exits as she follows him.

The plain front porch of a small house. Tom opens the front door, Meg enters with the boy in her arms, he closes the door behind them and leaves, pensive.

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Back in his shop, Tom hammers a horseshoe and puts it in the fire as he turns the crank of the bellows. Meg and the boy walk in, both in dry clothes that fit perfectly.

HG: *Director's mistake. They dried off in Tom's house.*

Meg, her beautiful profile illuminated by firelight against the darkness of the workshop, reaches toward Tom. He jabs at the horseshoes. The boy runs to him and grabs his legs. Tom picks him up and hugs him, smiles with joy. Meg poses in the profile shot, looks away, then looks up as though in prayer.

HG: *I am so beautiful!*

They speak. She nods yes to him. Tom looks blissful. They embrace with the happy child in his arms.

Incidental music suggestion:

“As they are brought together again, play ‘The Dream Melody’ (Spring Maid).”⁸

Intertitle: ENDLICH VEREINT [FINALLY UNITED]

ABOUT DIRECTOR AND FILM MAKER HELEN GARDNER

She became a star in 1911 as the seductive Becky Sharp in Vitagraph Company of America's three-reel VANITY FAIR. The first American actor to establish her own production company, she produced and starred in the first long feature made in the United States, CLEOPATRA (Helen Gardner Picture Players, 1912).

NOTES

¹“Austin, Pennsylvania Dam Failure – September 30, 1911,” *Wikipedia*, accessed December 31, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floods_in_the_United_States:_1901%E2%80%932000#Austin,_Pennsylvania_Dam_Failure_-_September_30,_1911

²“The Freshet,” *Moving Picture World*, December 2, 1911, p. 693.

³“Helen Gardner at the Popular Casino Today,” *Oneonta Star*, 1911. Helen Gardner's Vitagraph scrapbook, Dorin Schumacher collection.

⁴“The Freshet,” Incidental Music Suggestions for Vitagraph Films, *Vitagraph Life Portrayals*, November 16-December 1, 1911, v1, #10, p. 10.

⁵Gardner, Helen. Handwritten note in green ink on back of a still from “The Freshet,” ca 1950s, Dorin Schumacher collection. The still shows Gardner and Ralph Ince, who is holding a little boy, dressed in a leather apron standing in front of a forge with his blacksmith tools.

⁶“The Freshet,” *loc.cit.*

⁷“The Freshet,” *loc.cit.*

⁸“The Freshet,” *loc.cit.*