Carmen's Messenger

By Harold Bindloss

"Thank you! I came back sooner than I expected," Foster replied rather dryly.

Carmen gave him a quick look, but sat down with languid grace in an easy chair.

"Well, I've no doubt you have much to tell me about your trip, and if you'll talk about Edinburgh and London, I won't let anybody in."

"Aren't you anxious to know I delivered the packet?"

"The packet? I had forgotten it," Carmen said carelessly. "Still, I did think you might have written to let me know you took it safe. But I dare say you had many interesting things to do."

"As it happened, I had," Foster replied with a touch of grimness. "For all that, I delivered the packet and got an answer."

Carmen regarded him with surprise, as if she thought he had not played up. "You can give me the answer afterwards. Tell me about Featherstone's place and his people. I'm curious about them; particularly his sisters. I suppose he has some?"

Foster thought he understood. Carmen was clever and would not have used such obvious means had she wished to learn if Lawrence had a sister who had attracted him. What she wanted was to persuade him that the packet was not important.

"I'd sooner talk about the errand you gave me. Did you know what the packet contained?"

She laughed, but he thought the laugh was forced. "Doesn't that sound rather stupid when I sent the thing?"

"Perhaps it does," said Foster gravely. "Still, I hope you didn't know."

Her coquettish manner vanished and she leaned slightly forward while her eyes got hard. Indeed, there was something feline in her alert pose, and now she had, so to speak, unsheathed her claws, he was glad the advantage was heavily on his side. For all that, he did not want to hurt her.

"Go on," she said sharply.

"Very well. I got an answer, which I opened. I'll show it you, but won't give it up."

"You opened it!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to keep papers that were sent to me?"

"I don't think they were sent to you; that's important."

Carmen smiled defiantly and Foster admired her pluck, since it was obvious that he had found out the trick. Still he thought she did not know how import the papers really were.

"Then you can quit fencing and get down to business," she said and Foster saw that the surface polish she generally wore was thin. The character it concealed was fierce and somewhat primitive. He had suspected that Carmen would not be restrained by conventions if she let herself go.

"If you'll be patient, I'll try to make things plain."

He began by hastily recounting what had happened at the factory the night Fred Hulton was killed. Carmen was obviously puzzled which was a relief to him, but he saw comprehension in her look as he went on to relate how he had been watched by the police and his interview with Graham and subsequent adventures. By degrees, her understanding changed to horror, and when he stopped he saw that she had got a cruel shock. Her face was white, her gaze was fixed, and her eyes were unusually wide open. Still he thought it was through her pride she suffered most. Then she braced herself and looked at him scornfully.

"You surely lost your nerve and got imagining things when you were hiding in the bogs. It's a quite impossible story!"

"It sounds like that, but I have some proofs; money for Daly and another man, which I suppose you were to send on. It's evidently their share of the plunder."

He took out his wallet and held up the cheques, keeping, however, a firm grip on them, because he knew that if Carmen meant to fight for her lover she would not be scrupulous.

"Daly wasn't near the factory the night Fred Hulton was killed. I know where he was," she said in a strained but defiant voice.

"All the better for him," Foster rejoined. "It's pretty clear that he had a share in the thing."

Carmen suddenly leaned back and turned her head. She had given in sooner than Foster expected, but the evidence was overwhelming. He did not look at her for some moments and felt ashamed of the cruelty he had had to use, but there was no avoiding this when a number of people's happiness was at stake. After all, he thought it was rather her ambition than her affection that had been engaged. Then rousing herself with an effort she turned to him.

"Well," she said, "it looks as if I'd had an escape!"

Foster felt comforted, but did not answer, and she resumed: "You haven't told me this for nothing. What do you want?"

"I want to know where Daly is. I've no doubt he called here on his way west and you have his address."

"You can't force me to give it you."

"I don't know if I can or not, but don't want to use force," Foster replied, and while he waited, hesitating to play his last card, Carmen looked up with fear in her eyes.

"Jake," she said, "you mustn't think my father knows anything about this. I sent the packet, without telling him, because Daly asked me."

"But your father and he had some business together that nobody knew about."

"They had. They were really [illegible] recorders turned off the fish-hawk silver claim."

"Ah!" said Foster, "now I understand!"

He was glad to admit that her statement explained Austin's rather mysterious association with Daly. Public feeling had been strongly by the dispute about the mine, whose finders it was believed had been cunningly cheated out of their rights. There were, moreover, hints of foul play about a dangerous accident in the workings that had given the victorious claimants a legal advantage. Foster could imagine Daly's finding scope for his talents in the trickery and intrigue, and saw why Austin did not want his share in it known.

"In a way, it's a relief to find that is all your father had to do with the fellow," he resumed. "Anyhow, I want his address."

"I won't give it you," Carmen answered stubbornly.

Foster hesitated. The shock the girl had got had broken down her self-control. He shrank from turning this to his advantage and dealing her another blow, but could not be fastidious when his partner's safety and Alice Featherstone's happiness were at stake. Besides, it would be better for Carmen that her infatuation for Daly should be altogether destroyed.

"Well," he said, "I'm surprised that you should still feel you ought to protect the man, and must try to convince you that he doesn't deserve it."

Then he related what he had seen in the corridor of the Carlisle hotel and how Miss Huntley had helped Daly to deceive him. Carmen's face paled and then suddenly turned crimson; bue she answered with a quietness he had not expected.

"You're not a liar, Jake, so I suppose this is true. But you're all of you human, and you say the girl is pretty. What you saw mayn't mean very much."

"She wore an engagement ring. I don't imagine it was given her by another man."

Then Carmen flung the last of her self-control away. Her eyes flashed and Foster thought she looked like a wild cat as she indulged her savage rage.

"The cur!" she cried in a harsh voice. "He went to Banff in British Columbia. Now you know, you had better go after him. Do what you like with him; I don't mind!"

Foster went to the door, but es he reached it she called him back and looked at him with a bitter, mocking smile.

"You're smarter than I thought, Jake, but I suppose you think I don't know why you meddled. It wasn't for your partner's sake, though I soon guessed that Daly was getting after him; Featherstone has a sister, and you have fallen in love with her. Well, she can have you with pleasure if she has any use for you, and before long you'll make her deadly tired. You'd bore a live woman crazy in a week; you'll never be rich, because you're afraid of touching a dollar you don't earn, and you've got the morals of a convent-school girl!" She gasped and resumed in a scream "Why don't you go before I throw something at you?"

Foster left and was glad when he shut the door. Carmen was obviously beside herself and had gone further than she meant. If it was any comfort to insult him, he did not grudge it her, but thought he saw where her remarks led. He had been rather fond of Carmen, as she no doubt knew, before he understood her, and their friendship might have ripened until—Well, he was sorry for her, but it looked as if she was not the only person who had had an escape.

When he got outside, he went to the factory and found Hulton alone in the president's room. The man looked worn, but greeted Foster with a reserved smile and gave him a cigar.

"You haven't been away very long," he remarked. "Didn't your visit turn out as pleasant as you expected?"

"In one way, it did not. But why did you send the British police after me?"

"As a matter of fact, I let them know you were all right, but my agent, who had to go to them, thought it might be better if they kept a watch on you. You'd got busy about some mysterious business. What was it?"

"I can't tell you," said Foster bluntly. "It only concerns me and Featherstone, but it led to something else; I'll come to that later. What about the man I helped on the train? If he got through all right, why didn't he send me word?"

"As the fellows who attacked you had got on the wrong track, we thought we'd let them follow it, but they were smarter than we reckoned and we lost them."

"Then you made use of me, at my risk, as the Scottish police did afterwards," Foster rejoined. "I don't know that I've much to thank you for, since it led to my being thrown off the Montreal express and chased across the Border bogs."

"I must allow that we did something of the kind," Hulton owned with a smile. "But we'll let that go. What have you found out?"

Foster handed him Graham's letter and the cheque on the American bank, but not the circular cheque for Daly. Hulton's face showed stern satisfaction and he gave Foster a very grateful look.

"I owe you much for this and am not going to forget the service. These papers prove conspiracy and robbery and clear my boy. But how did you get them?"

Foster supplied a garbled account of his interview with Graham, and Hulton looked at [illegible] thing back, but if it's your or your partner's business, I suppose I can't object. I believe you mean to do the square thing."

"Thank you," said Foster. "What have you found out about Daly?"

"Enough to show he wasn't at the factory the night Fred was killed," Hulton answered with stern self-control. "But he was in the plot and is being watched in England."

"Then you don't know that he's in Canda?"

Hulton stretched out his hand to a bell, but Foster stopped him.

"Wait a moment! You have got to leave Daly to me. Anyhow, you're not to send your agents or the police after him until I telegraph you. I'm going to look for him by tonight's train."

"The train goes west," Hulton answered meaningly.

"It does, but if I think I'm followed I'll spoil the trail."

Hulton's eyes flashed and his face set very hard.

"The man belongs to the gang that killed my son and tried to blacken his name. I don't quit until I've run the last rogue down."

"I mean to see Daly first," Foster answered doggedly.

After a moment or two Hulton made a gesture of agreement. "Very well; I allow you have a claim. But I won't interfere if my agents have already got on his track."

"I must take the risk of that," Foster replied and left the factory a few minutes afterwards.

CHAPTER XXIII.

An Unexpected Meeting.

Daly was not at Banff, and Foster, who made cautious inquiries, found nothing to indicate that he had been there. Indeed, he began to weigh the possibility of Carmen's having deceived him, but rejected this explanation. The girl was clever at intrigue, but he did not think she had acted a part. She had really lost her self-control and told him the truth in a fit of rage. On the other hand, it was possible that Daly had deceived her, but there was no obvious reason for his doing so.

The fellow, however, was not in Banff, which is a small place, frequented mostly by tourists and invalids who come there in summer, and Foster took a westbound train. He was once more at a loss and felt dispirited. For one thing, he had no time to lose, because it would spoil his plans if Hulton's agents got on Daly's track before him.

He left Banff late at night, with a ticket for Vancouver, which he had bought on speculation, partly because the seaboard city is a clearing house for travellers to all parts of the Pacific coast, but did not sleep much as the heavy train rumbled through the mountains. The jolting of the cars and the roar of wheels that echoed among the rocks disturbed him, and he was troubled by gloomy thoughts. He had promised Alice Featherstone that he would clear her brother; but he had also to clear himself, and in order to do so must find Lawrence as well as Daly. Just now he had not much hope of finding either, but he cherished a vague belief in his luck, and it was unthinkable that he should neglect any chance of justifying the girl's confidence. He was ready to follow Daly round the world, sooner than lose that. The trouble was that he could not tell if he was following the fellow or not.

He went to sleep at last and getting up rather late, spent an hour or two trying to knit up broken clues and looking for a light. It was a profitless but absorbing occupation and he vacantly glanced at the majestic panorama of snowy peaks and climbing forest that rolled passed the windows of the car. When his thought wandered from their groove, he saw Alice Featherstone moving with stately calm about the Garth, or standing in the orchard with the sunset shining on her face. He recalled the grace of her tall figure and how her dress harmonized with the mossy trunks, but he loved to dwell upon the look of trust in her steady eyes. Then the memories were suddenly banished, for a whistle rang up the track and there was a jar of brakes.

Foster hurried out to the platform when the long train stopped and saw the conductor talking to the engineer and passengers jumping down into the snow. Pete joined him as he followed them, but he stopped for some moments and looked about. There was no station near. The track, which was marked by cinders and stains on the snow, ran along a desolate mountainside. Dark pines that looked as if they had been dusted with icing-sugar rolled in curiously rigir ranks up the slope, getting smaller until they dwindled to a fine saw-edge that bit into a vast sweep of white. This ended in a row of jagged peaks whose summit gleamed with dazzling brightness against the sky. Below the track, the ground fell away to a tremendous gorge, wehre dark-coloured mist hung about a green river dotted with drifting ice. The sun struck warm upon his face, though the snow was dry.

"We'll find out why they've stopped," he said to Pete and walked forward past the cars.

The engineer, who stood on the step of the huge locomotive had not much information to give.

"Track's gone down not far aheaad; snow-slide, I guess."

He shrugged when Foster asked if it would be a long job. "You can see for yourself, if you like," he remarked, indicating a plume of smoke that rose above the pipes. "There's a construction gang at work round the bend. It's a sure thing we won't pull out before you're back."

Foster set off with Pete and several passengers and the Scot gazed about with wonder.

"I was born among the hills, but never have I seen ought like this!" he exclaimed. "Man, it passes dreamin' o' it's just stupenjious! But I wouldna' say they'll mak' much o' farming here."

"They have some bench tablelands and pretty rich alluvial valleys," Foster answered with a smile. "The [illegible]

Pete glanced back up the track that wound down between rock and forest from a distant notch in the high, white rampart.

"I'm thinking the men who built you line had stout hearts."

"It wasn't an easy job," Foster agreed. "They were up against savage Nature, and she's still too strong for the engineer now and then, as I expect you'll shortly see."

They walked through a gap in the pines and stopped with a sense of awe on the edge of a great red furrow in the mountain. The gash was fringed by shattered trees, and here and there a giant splintered trunk rested precariously among stones ground to fragments. Far beneath, a vast pile of earth and snow dammed the river, and half-way up an overturned locomotive, with boiler crushed like an eggshell, lay among the wreckage. The end of a smashed box-car rose out of the boiling flood. For a hundred yards the track had vanished, but gangs of men were hurrying to and fro about the gap. Farther back, there was clang of flung down rails and a ringing of hammers.

"If they open the road again by tomorrow morning, they'll be lucky," Foster remarked, and stopped a big fellow who was going past with an axe on his shoulder. "Is there any settlement not too far ahead?"

"There's a smart new hotel at the flag station about six miles off," said the man. "You can make it all right walking if you keep to the track and watch out you don't meet the construction train in the snow-shed."

Foster, who knew he would find waiting tedious, went back to the cars for his small bag, after which he and Pete set off for the hotel. They had some trouble to cross the path of the avalanche and then spent time getting past the men who were unloading a row of flat cars. The single-line track was cut out of the rock and one ran a risk of glissading down to the river by venturing outside its edge. Once, indeed, a heavy beam, thrown too far, plunged down like a toboggan, and leaping from the rock's crest splashed into the flood. The men on the cars worked in furious haste, and it was difficult to avoid the clanging rails they threw off.

Foster got past, but did not find walking easy when he had done so. The track wound among the folds of the hills, and where the sun had struck the snow there was a slippery crust, through which he broke. Where it ran past tall crags and between the trees, the snow was dry and loose as dust. They made something over two miles in the first hour and soon afterwards came to the mouth of a snowshed. The opening made a dark blotch on the glittering slope, for the roof was pitched at a very small angle to the declivity and the snow passed down hill over it with scarcely a wrinkle. It was only when they entered they saw signs of man's work in the massive beams and stringers that braced the structure. These were presently lost in the gloom and Foster stumbled among the ties. Shingle ballast rolled under his feet; where he found a tie to step on it was generally by stubbing his toe, and once or twice he struck the side of the shed.

For all that, he pushed on as fast as possible. The warning he had been given was indefinite, but it looked as if a train was shortly expected and the locomotive, with its outside cylinder, would not give them much room. He imagined that refuges would be provided at intervals, but did not know where to find them. Now and then they stopped to listen, but heard nothing. There was deep silence, which was a relief, and they blundered on again as fast as they could. It was rather daunting work and one could not make much speed, but when a faint, muffled throbbing reached them they began to run.

Foster had no means of guessing the length of the shed, and as he slipped among the ballast looked anxiously in front, but could not see the glimmering patch of light he expected. The darkness was impenetrable, but the contour of the hillside had indicated that the shed was curved, and the outlet might be nearer than he thought. In the meantime, the sweat ran down his face and his breath came hard. He was in good condition, for his journeys among the Scottish hills had strengthened his muscles, but the footing was bad among the stones, and he laboured through them awkwardly with set lips and clenched hands. He thought of throwing away his heavy coat, but it would take a few moments to get it off and he must put down the bag, in which there were papers he might need. By and by his foot struck something and lurching forward he lost his balance and came down heavily. The blow shook him and he was a little slow in getting up until he felt a rail he put his hand on quiver. Then he scrambled to his feet, but could not find the bag.

"I hae't," said Pete, who seized his arm and urged him forward.

A deep snorting reached them and a tie he trod on trembled, but as he ran savagely with laboured breath there was an elusive glimmer in the dark ahead. It grew brighter, an irregularly-shaped white patch appeared, and making a tense effort with the ballast rolling beneath his feet, he staggered into the sunshine. Then with a gasp of keen relief he threw himself upon the snow beside the track.

About a hundred yards away, a giant locomotive toiled up the incline hurling out clouds of smoke that streamed far back among the pines. The road bed shook and the hillside rang with the din of wheels. While Foster lay panting, the locomotive laboured past, and then long, flat cars, on which men sat upon the load of jarring rails, clanged by. The black mouth of the shed swallowed them, a cloud of smoke and dusty snow curled about the opening, and the uproar suddenly sank to a muffled rumble. This died away and [illegible] was emphasized by the sound of the river.

"We were not much too soon," Foster said with a breathless laugh. "Now I come to think of it, there's no obvious reason we shouldn's have stopped on board the train and got our lunch comfortably. I seem to have a habit of doing unusual and unnecessary things; it's curious how soon you get into trouble when you indulge a bent like that."

"Yon's a verra true remairk," Pete agreed. "It's a rough and thorny world, and' if ye will not walk in the cleared paths but gang yere air gait, ye must struggle with the briars."

"And scramble through snow-sheds? You Scots are a philosophical lot. But do you call poaching sticking to the beaten path?"

"I'm thinking it's as near it as stravaging through the Border mosses, when ye might gang by train."

"A fair hit! But after all, man wears the regulation paths so deep that he can't get out when he wants. What about the pioneers, who blaze the new trails? Aren't they needed?"

"Whiles, maybe," Pete answered grinning. "For a' that, they maun tak' the consequences. Do ye feel it's yere business to break a new road."

"Certainly not! I'm not a philanthropist and would be quite satisfied with making things a little easier for myself and my friends, but am much afraid I haven's succeeded yet. In fact, there's one friend in England who's very far from grateful. But the question is—Why did I leave the train?"

"Ye just felt ye naa to?"

"I think I did. But why did I feel that?"

Pete chuckled. "There ye have me! This I ken; whiles when I had a hare or a few paltrig in the lining o' my auld coat and cam' to a slap in a dyke, I had a kind o' feeling yon was no' the road for me. I couldn't tell there was a keeper hiding on the ither side; but I didna' gang. Maybe it's better no' to argue but follow yere heart."

"No," said Foster, "I imagine it's really better to follow your head. In the meantime, I've had no lunch and think we'll get on."

They came to a wide hollow in the hills where the snow was deep and loose. The sun was shut out and the frost was keen, while Foster saw by the lengthening shadow of the pines across the river that the afternoon was wearing on. A glance at his watch showed that he had been walking nearly three hours, but there was no sign of the hotel. Dart masses of trees ran up from the water to the line of summer snow, and no roof or curl of smoke broke their sombre monotony. High above, the peaks glittered with a steely brightness that seemed to intensify the cold.

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Their breath hung about them as they plodded on, but at length, when they came to the middle of the bend, where the hills curved out again, there was a break and they stopped at the end of a bridge. The low sun shone into a gap, which was profoundly deep and majestically beautiful. On its farther side, tremendous crags held up the snow, which trickled down their faces in thin grey streaks and stretched back above, steeped in oft blue shadow. On Foster's side, giant pines glimmered a bright green in the warm light, running up to a glittering slope that ended in two rugged peaks, and a river that sprang from a wrinkled glacier foamed through the dusky gorge. Where a small clearing had been cut in the forest, steep red roofs stood out in harmonious contrast with the green of the firs, and a picturesque wooden building with pillars and verandas occupied the greater part of the opening.

"If the place is as attractive inside, it's worth the walk," Foster remarked. "You appreciate your quarters best when you've had some trouble to get there."

"I'm thinking that's true. The peat fire and the auld rush chair in the bit cothouse are weel worth winning to when ye come through the rain and wind over the dark moss. This is a gran' country, but it's no' like that ither anang the Border fells."

Foster stood for a few moments and mused, for he sympathized with Pete. He remembered the satisfaction with which he had seen the lights of a lonely inn or farmstead twinkle when he tramped, wet and tired, across the Scottish moors. They were bleak and often forbidding, but had a charm one felt but could not analyse, with the half-lights that trembled across them and their subdued colouring. In spite of some hardships, he had been happy in the misty, rain-swept land, but he knew it had been touched by the glamour of romance. That was over. He was on his probation in utilitarian Canada, and very much, at a loss; but he meant to make good somehow and go forward, trusting in his luck.

"Well," he said, "I'm hungry and we'll get on. I hope they won't make us wait for supper, though they'll no doubt call it dinner at a place like this."

Five minutes afterwards he stamped the snow on his boots as he entered a glass-fronted veranda in front of the hotel. It was comfortably furnished, warm, and occupied by three people. A lady sat with some sewing at a table, and a very pretty girl, holding a cigarette case, leaned over the side of a basket chair, in which a man reclined. Foster, who imagined he was an invalid by his slack nose was passing [illegible] moved. As he turned to take a cigarette Foster saw his face.

"Lawrence!" he exclaimed.

"Jake!" said the other, and would have got up, but the girl put her hand restrainingly on his arm.

Foster stood still for a moment, overcome by surprise and satisfaction, but understanding what he saw. The lady with the sewing was studying him, but he did not resent this and thought he would like her. The girl divided her attention between him and his comrade, whom she restrained with a pretty air of authority. She obviously knew who Foster was and felt curious, but meant to take care of Lawrence. There was something in her protective manner that Foster found singularly charming. Then Lawrence beckoned and held out his hand.

"I'm uncommonly glad to see you, Jake, but how did you get here?"

"Why aren't you in California?"

They both laughed and Lawrence turned to the lady.

"This is my neglectful partner, as I dare say you have guessed. Mrs. Stephen, of Victoria, Jake."

She gave Foster her hand and he was next presented to Miss Lucy Stephen. Then Lawrence indicated Pete, who waited, looking very big and muscular but quite at ease.

"Who's this and where did you get him? I'll engage that he was born between Ettrick and Liddel."

"He kens!" Pete remarked with a twinkle. "My hame's no' far frae Ettrick, sir."

"My friend, Pete Scott," said Foster. "You have heard the ladies' names, Pete, but this is my partner, Mr. Featherstone, from the Garth."

Pete lifted his hand to his forehead and the movement had a touch of dignity. "Your servant, all; an,' if ye'll alloo it, Mr. Foster's friends are mine."

Lawrence laughed. "A very proper sentiment, and a true Borderer! But you haven't told us how you found him, Jake."

"It's a long tale," said Foster. "Besides, I'm hungry. So I expect is Pete."

Lucy Stephen rang a bell. "Tea ought to be ready. We often take it here."

The tea was brought a few minutes afterwards and when Lucy gave him his cup Foster sat in a basket chair studying his comrade. Lawrence's face was pinched and his pose languid, but Foster thought he was not so ill as he had been. He did not know how much he ought to ask and had decided to wait until they were alone when Lawrence smiled.

"You needn't be alarmed, partner. I'm very much better than I was and will soon be quite fit again."

"We have good ground for hoping so," Lucy Stephen added in a friendly tone, and Foster thought she had noted his anxiety and liked him for it.

Her remark seemed to warrant his looking at her and he approved what he saw. The girl was attractive and had character, but what struck him at first sight was the protective gentleness she showed his comrade. He liked her eyes, which were a soft, clear blue, while her supple figure and warm-tinted skin hinted that she was vigorous. It was plain that she had not Alice Featherstone's reserve and pride, nor he thought the depth of tenderness that the latter hid. She was softer and more pliable, for Alice was marked by an unflinching steadfastness. He smiled as he admitted that for him Alice stood alone on an unapproachable plane.

"But how did you get ill?" he asked.

"I was left on an icy couloir," Lawrence replied. "When they found me I was half-frozen, but it makes a story that's probably as long as yours. I'll tell it you later. How's our Borderer getting on?"

Foster turned to Pete, who had a large, hot Canadian biscuit on his plate. "This kind of meal isn't very common in this country, Pete. Perhaps I'd better warn you that there'll be another by and by."

"Aweel," said Pete, grinning, I've no' done so bad. It's a guid plan to mak' certain when ye hae the chance."

CHAPTER XXIV

Lawrence's Story

When the meal was over Foster began to feel impatient. Pete went away, but Mrs. Stephen and Lucy remained, and Foster, who had much to ask and tell his comrade, was embarrassed by their presence. By and by he saw that Lawrence was watching him with quiet amusement.

"It's like old times to have you with us," Lawrence remarked. "In fact, it only needed your turning up to complete my satisfaction; but you're a disturbing fellow. Don't you think this lucky reunion is rather too good to spoil?"

Foster knew what he meant and was tempted to agree, though he felt this was weak. It was pleasant to lounge, enjoying careless talk, and the society of the two ladies had its charm. They added a touch of domesticity and gave the place a homelike look, while the girl made an attractive picture as she handed Lawrence his matches and cigarettes.

Foster thought it was worth being ill to be waited on like that. Then his chair was comfortable and he could see the sunset fading on the snow.

The sky was a wonderful pale-green and the high peaks glowed against it, softly red. There was a belt where the snow glittered, but lower down it faded to grey and blue. The pines were nearly black, but rose out of the shadow in sharp-cut spires, and far down in the dusky gorge, from which the roar of the flood and crash of ice ascended, there were gleams of livid foam. Still there was much he wanted to learn, and it was something of a relief when Mrs. Etephen picked up her sewing and gave her daughter a meaning glance. To Foster's surprise, Lawrence interposed.

"If you don't mind, I'd sooner you didn't go." Then he turned to Foster with a smile. "It's obvious that you want to unbosom yourself. Jake, but you can begin. You needn't be afraid of mentioning Daly. Lucy knows."

[illegible] plain that Lawrence had asked her to marry him and she had agreed. He imagined that Lawrence wanted Mrs. Stephen to hear somebody else's account of the matter, and although it would have been easier to talk to Lawrence alone, he asked:

"Did you know the fellow was in Banff a day or two since?"

Lucy Stephen made an abrupt movement, and her mother looked interested but not alarmed. She was a quiet lady and more reserved than the girl, but Foster thought her intelligent and firm.

"I did not," said Lawrence. "As a matter of fact, I'm no longer afraid of the fellow and mean to fight. He can't do me much harm—now."

The girl's shy glance at his comrade moved Foster. She knew what her lover meant and valued his trust; but he could sympathize with Mrs. Stephen, who looked disturbed. The latter was practical and no doubt saw that Daly might give them trouble.

"You had better begin at the beginning, and then we'll understand why you came back and how you got on Daly's trail," Lawrence resumed with a hint of resignation.

"Very well; but first, why didn't you write?"

"I wrote twice. Once to my mother and once to you."

"We got no letters. Did you post them?"

"Ah!" said Lawrence, "that was unfortunate. I gave the first letter to a steward to send ashore from a San Francisco boat. Walters put the other in the mail."

"Who is Walters?"

"We'll come to him later. Get on with your story."

Foster told it as clearly as he could, though this took some time, and when he had finished was annoyed by his comrade's smile. Lawrence seldom took things seriously enough.

"Jake is a born meddler," he remarked to the others. "He can't resist the temptation to put crooked matters right."

"It is a useful habit," said Mrs. Stephen quietly.

"Just so," Lawrence agreed. "Still it's a habit that ought to be carefully controlled and not, so to speak, be indulged out of sentimental impulses."

Foster felt embarrassed, although he thought he had said no more about Carmen and Alice than was needed to make his narrative clear.

"First of all," Lawrence resumed, "he takes up my defence, then he must help Carmen, and I think deserved the trouble in which she involved him. Next he seems to have been moved by my sister's anxiety." He paused and gave Foster a curious quiet smile. "I wondered what Alice would think of you and hope she was grateful."

Foster, who saw Lucy's interest, wondered whether he had told more than he meant, but his comrade's amusement seemed uncalled for, and he rejoined: "I imagined I'd made it plain that your siter wasn't the only relative your carelessness alarmed."

"You did. The situation wasn't without its humor, Jake. After you had embarked on a number of strange adventures on my behalf, it must have been galling to be suspected of having made away with me. However, I understand that Alice didn't take this view?"

"She did not," said Foster shortly, and Lawrence rang a bell.

"Get me a C.P. telegram form," he ordered the waiter.

The form was brought, and Lawrence filled it up and gave it to the man. Then he fixed his eyes on Foster and remarked carelessly: "I've sent it in your name, Jake, and not to my father. I thought somebody had better break the comforting news to him, and briefly stated that you had found me."

"Oughtn't you to have added some particulars?" Mrs. Stephen asked.

"On the whole, I don't think so. For one thing, Jake's taciturn modesty rather becomes him, and the charges for an English telegram are high."

Foster said nothing, but he knew the message had been sent to Alice and Lawrence was satisfied with him as his sister's lover. This was something, but after all Lawrence's approval might not count for much.

"That's done with," the latter resumed. "Since you didn't find Daly at Banff, we have to decide if Carmen meant to deceive you and he never intended going there. I rather think we had better leave it to Mrs. Stephen and Lucy."

"I imagine she told the truth," Lucy replied. "If she had loved the man she might, after all, have tried to protect him; but a selfish, ambitious girl who found she had been cheated, would be capable of ruining him in a fit of jealous rage."

"But I didn't state that she was ambitious and felsh, an objected fos ambitious and selfish," objected Foster.

Lawrence's eye twinkled. "You don't realize all your talents, Jake. For one thing, you have a gift for narrative, and the portrait you drew of Carmen with a stroke or two was lifelike. Then when you met and bluffed her into giving Daly away, you couldn't have taken a more effective line if you had been an ambassador. What do you think, Mrs. Stephen."

"Mr. Foster seems to have used all his advantages and the girl got a shock that found out he r weak points. I believe she meant to ruin her worthless lover."

"So do I," Lawrence agreed. "I expect you have made Jake sorry he was firm, but I'd warned him about Carmen and she doesn't deserve much pity. But why did Daly leave England and how did he find out that I'd ben at Banff?"

"If you'll tell me what you have done since you left the Crossing, it might help to solve the puzzle," Foster replied.

TO BE CONTINUED

"It isn't so bad to be a person with one idea, if the one idea is [illegible]