

# Carmen's Messenger

By Harold Bindloss

Half an hour later they caught a train to Hexham, and Foster, who sent Pete to a smoking compartment, was alone when he opened the packet John had brought. Then the blood rushed to his face and his heart beat, for when he unfolded the thin paper he saw a small white glove. Remembering how they had once talked about Border chivalry, he knew what Alice meant. She believed his tale and knew the risks he ran, and had sent him her glove that he might carry it as her badge. He folded the piece of delicate kid carefully and put it in a pocket where it rested upon his heart.

"After this, I've got to put my job over, whatever it costs," he said.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A Difficult Part

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Foster stopped in front of the grimy building where Graham had his office, and looked up and down the street. Close by a cartter stood at the head of his impatient horse, which stamped and rattled its harness, and a host clanked a bale of goods went up to a top story, but except for this the street was quiet. Farther off, one or two moving figures showed indistinctly, for rain was falling and the light getting dim. Foster, who had arrived in Newcastle that morning, had waited, thinking it might suit him better to leave the town in the dark.

"Go back to the end of the street, where you can see the clock," he said to Pete. "If I don't join you in half an hour, run to the nearest police station and ask for a man to search the top office in this building."

"The police are no good friends of mine," Pete replied doubtfully. "I would sooner come for ye my lane. There's an armstronger's room 'n' the corner, where I would maybe get a sharp garden fork."

Foster laughed. "Pete's methods were too primitive, although, in his strong hands, the fork would prove a dangerous weapon.

"I don't expect you'd be able to help much if I'm not back when I said. But you can walk along the street now and then, and notice anybody who leaves the building."

He went in and set his lips as he climbed the stairs, for he imagined he would need all the fact and coolness he possessed. He had made the tool of people who thought him an unsuspecting simpleton, but was uncertain how far it would be safe to trade upon this view of his character, although he meant to do so to some extent. There might be an advantage in hinting that he knew a little about their business; but he must make no mistakes. His steps echoed hollowly along the top landing and there was something daunting in the gloom, for the gas had not yet been lighted and the building was very quiet.

It was possible that he had started on this adventure with a rashness as great as his folly in undertaking Carmen's errand, but he carried Alice Featherstone's glove and it was unthinkable that he should turn back.

There was nobody in the outer office when he opened the door, but after he had knocked once or twice a voice he recognized told him to come in and he strolled carelessly into Graham's room. Sitting down, he offered his cigarette case to Graham, who glanced at him with some surprise but took a cigarette while Foster lighted another. It would be easier to look languidly indifferent if he could smoke. Graham pushed aside some papers on his desk as if impatient at being disturbed. He was dressed and looked like a sober business man, and Foster admitted that it was ridiculous to imagine him to be anything else.

"I'm rather busy just now," he said. "For all that, if I can be of any use to you, Mr.—"

Foster thought he overdid it by pretending to forget his name, but he smiled.

"Foster. You'll recollect I brought you a packet, and as I'm going back to Canada soon, I imagined I might take Miss Austin or Daly a reply. You can see that they thought me a reliable messenger."

"Miss Austin obviously did so," Graham admitted.

"Doesn't this imply that Daly shared her good opinion?" Foster asked.

Graham glanced at him sharply and then picked up a letter and studied it, but Foster imagined he wanted time to think. He had made the plunge and indicated that he knew more than the other supposed; but the rest needed care.

"You expect to meet Daly when you get back to Canada?" Graham inquired, and Foster, who saw that he was cautious, wondered whether he was alarmed.

"Oh no, I expect to meet him

before I start."

"You imply that he's in England?" "Don't you know he is," Foster rejoined.

Graham knocked the ash off his cigarette and looked at him curiously. His appearance was commonplace, he had a slight stoop, and was not muscular, but Foster felt he might prove dangerous.

"I don't know where he is just now. Do you?"

"Well," said Foster, "I believe I could find him if I tried."

The other was silent for the next few moments and Foster waited with some anxiety. If he pretended to know too much, he might be found out, but if Graham imagined he knew nothing, he would hesitate about informing him. The difficulty was that while he played the part of a simpleton who had been made use of by the rest of the gang, he must imply that they had, to some extent, taken him into their confidence.

"To tell the truth, I haven't heard from Daly for a month," Graham replied. "This has disadvantages and I'll own that I'd like to know what he is doing."

"Then it looks as if I was better informed. Mr. Daly's engaged in some private business."

"Private business?"

"Just so," Foster answered smiling. "He imagines it will turn out profitable, but I expect it will take up much of his time."

"But—" said Graham, and stopped.

Foster made a sign of comprehension. "You feel he oughtn't to have any business that might interfere with his duty to the rest of you?"

"What do you know about his duty?" Graham asked.

"Well," said Foster, "I frankly don't know very much. In fact, it looks as if your Canadian friends didn't trust me very far, but just told me enough to make me understand my job. No doubt, that was wise, although it's not flattering. Anyhow, I brought you a packet with some valuable enclosures, which ought to justify your sending back any confidential message to the people it came from by me."

He had made a bold venture, but saw that he was right, for Graham knit his brows, as if he was thinking hard. Then he said, "Very well. As it happens, there are some papers I would like to send, and if you don't mind taking them, I'll give you a letter to Daly and another to Miss Austin."

"Miss Austin, of course, will pass the letter on."

"That's understood," Graham agreed.

Foster carelessly lighted a fresh cigarette, and Graham, leaning forward, opened a safe and took out one or two papers that Foster could not see well. So far, the latter had done better than he had hoped, and for another few minutes would be in the possession of papers that might throw a useful light upon the plot. Yet the strain was beginning to tell and his nerves tingled as he watched his companion write.

A lamp with a broken mantle flickered above Graham's head and the stove crackled, but the outer office, the door of which was open, was dark, and the building was strangely quiet. No sound rose from the narrow street below, which ran like a still backwater among the tall warehouses. Foster, putting his hand in his pocket as if to feel for matches, touched the small Browning pistol he had brought. He was not afraid of Graham, but somebody might come in. At length the man sealed two envelopes and put them beside his writing-pad.

"If you cannot find Daly, you must bring the first back to me. When do you say?"

"I don't know yet; I haven't looked up the steamship companies' notices," Foster answered, and as soon as he had spoken, saw that he had made a mistake.

He had led Graham to believe he was going at once; indeed, this was his excuse for offering to take a message, but he remembered that in order to get a good room on a fast boat it was necessary to book one's passage some time in advance. He thought Graham had marked the slip, although his face was expressionless.

"I don't want the letters carried about for long," he said.

"Certainly not," Foster agreed. "If I'm delayed, or can't get hold of Daly as soon as I thought, I'll bring them back. However, I've kept you from your business and must get off."

Graham did not move, and the letters were out of Foster's reach.

"You have got your instructions from Gascoyne and know what to do if you have any trouble on your

journey."

Foster felt embarrassed. He did not know if Gascoyne was the man he had gone to in Edinburgh, and durst not risk a fresh mistake. Besides, it was possible that there was not such a person among the other's friends and the question was a trap.

"No," he said boldly. "I can get all the instructions that are needful when I meet Daly. Give me the letters."

"I think not. It would be better to wait until we hear what Gascoyne has to say, since you haven't seen him as I thought. He may have something to send with the other documents. Suppose you come back about this time tomorrow."

Foster, who feared he was found out, imagined that if he agreed, he would find the office closed and Graham gone; unless perhaps the fellow waited for him with one or two of his accomplices. Foster was certain he had accomplices. He knew he was playing a dangerous game, but he carried Alice Featherstone's glove and meant to get the letters.

"No," he said. "I'm willing to do you a favor, particularly as I want something to show my friends in Canada that I brought the packet safe. But I'm not going to put myself to much inconvenience. You have written the letters. Let me have them; I must catch my train."

He put his hand on the Browning pistol and was glad to feel it there, though he hardly thought he would be forced to draw it. He was physically stronger than Graham, but it had come to a trial of nerve and he knew he had a cunning antagonist. Besides, he could not tell how much longer they would be left alone and he might be in serious danger if somebody else came in. Still, he must not look anxious and he quietly fixed his eyes on Graham's face.

"I can't take the risk," the latter declared. "Will you wait until I see if I can get Gascoyne on the telephone?"

## CHAPTER XVII

### The Letters

The sky had cleared when Foster left the car at the end of the line, and headed towards open country. On the whole, he thought he was fortunate to get out of Newcastle safe, because there were grounds for believing that Graham had found out the trick. If this were so, he would certainly try to recover the documents. On the surface, it seemed strange that the fellow had let him take them away; but when one came to think of it, as soon as he had written and sealed the letters he was helpless.

In order to keep them, he would have had to over-power Foster, for which he had not the physical strength, while any noise they made in the struggle might have brought in help. Then supposing that Graham had by some chance mastered him, he would not have gained much, because Foster would have gone to the police when he got away. It was, of course, absurd to think that Graham might have killed him, since this would have led to his arrest. He had accordingly given up the letters, but Foster felt he was not safe yet. He might be attacked in some cunning way that would prevent his assailants being traced. It depended upon whether the documents were worth the risk, and he would know this soon.

In the meantime, he was entering a belt of ugly industrial country. Now and then the reflected glare of a furnace quivered in the sky; tall chimney-stacks and mounds of refuse showed faintly in the dark, and he passed clusters of fiercely burning lights and dull red fires. He supposed they marked pithead banks and coke-ovens; but pushed on steadily towards the west. He wanted to put some distance between himself and Newcastle before he stopped.

After a time, a row of lights twinkled ahead and, getting nearer, he saw chimneys, dark skeleton towers of timber, and jets of steam behind the houses. It was a colliery village, and when he passed the first lamps he vacantly noticed the ugliness of the place. The small, grimy houses were packed as close as they could be got, the pavement was covered with black mud, and the air filled with acrid smoke. Presently, however, he came to a pretentious hotel, built of glaring red brick and ornamented with sooty paint. He wondered what accounted for its being planted there; but it offered shelter for the night and he went in.

He admitted that he had slept in worse places than the room he was shown, although it looked far from comfortable, but the supper he got was good, and he afterwards entered a small room behind the bar. There was a bright fire, near which he sat down when Pete went away. The strain he had borne had brought his reaction; he felt tired and slack, and heard voices speaking a harsh dialect and the tramp of heavy boots on boards. The door was open and men with curiously pale faces that

did not look clean passed now and then. Foster thought they were colliers, and he had nothing to fear from them.

He had two or three companions, who sat round a small table and seemed by their talk to belong to a football committee. The landlord treated them with some deference, as if they were important people, but Foster wished they would go. He wanted to examine the letters, but thought it safer to wait until he was alone, since inquiries might afterwards be made about him. At length the footballers went away, and shutting the door he turned his chair so that he could see anybody who came in, without looking round. It was satisfactory to note that the table would be between him and a newcomer.

Before opening the letters, he tried to recollect what had happened in Graham's office. The fellow sat in front of a desk with a row of pigeon-holes, and sides that prevented Foster's noting exactly what he did after he began to write. In consequence, Foster could not tell if he had put anything except the letters in the envelopes, although he had taken some papers from the safe. It looked as if Graham had not meant him to see and had not trusted him altogether from the beginning. Now he probably knew he was an impostor, although this was not quite certain. Foster took out the envelopes, and broke the seal of the first, which was addressed to Daly, without hesitation.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### The Money

"Aweel," said Pete, "I'll feel maasure o' the money when we win oor o' the toon. It's ower full o' poils, and my talents are no' o' much use here."

He had left the station and on reaching a street, where Foster made some inquiries, waited in the door of an office building until a tram-car came up. Getting in, they were carried through the wet and smoky streets towards the city's western outskirts.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### The Game

"I ken what ye feel," the latter remarked. "It's like meeting a keeper when ye hae a hare in the lining o' yer coat."

"Yes," said Foster, "I expect it's something like that. But where have you been?"

"Roon' the toon, though it's no' vera big or bonnie. Then a stopped a bit in the bar o' the ither hotel. Spinnage goes some way, if ye stick to beer."

"I hope you didn't say much if there were strangers about."

Pete grinned. "I said a' I could; about the sheep and bullocks we were going to look at up Bellingham way; but, if it's oany comfort, there's no strangers in the place but a good order from the colliery. Maybe that's worth the money for the beer!"

"It certainly is," Foster agreed. "We'll have a reckoning at the end of the jounney, but here's your sixpence." Then he looked at his watch. "Well, I think it's late enough to go to bed, and you can order breakfast. We had better get off as soon as it's light."

"There's a train to Hexham at nine o'clock, the morn. It might suit ye to start for the station, even if ye dinna get there."

"No," said Foster thoughtfully. "We'll pull out by some by-road before that. You see the train comes from Newcastle."

He went to his room, which was next to Pete's, and after putting the letters under his pillow quietly moved a chest of drawers against the door. The lock was a common pattern and could probably be opened by a key from any of the neighbouring rooms. He was half-ashamed of this precaution, but admitted that he was getting nervous. Hitherto he had found some amusement in leaving a trail for his pursuers, but there was a difference now. For all that, he slept soundly until he was awakened by a noise at the door. It was dark and somebody was trying to get in. Seizing his pistol, he leaned on one elbow, ready to spring out of bed, and then felt keen relief as he heard Pete say, "Dinna keep on knocking! Leave the hot water outside his door."

"Yes; put it down, thanks," said Foster, who got up, feeling angry with himself.

It looked as if the person outside had been knocking for some time, and the landlord's curiosity might have been excited had he heard that his guest had barricaded his door. Dressing by vaslight, he found breakfast ready when he went down, and day broke soon after the meal was over. Foster paid his bill and set off with Pete, taking the main road west until they reached the end of the village, where some men were working on a colliery bank. Pete indicated a lane that branched off to the north.

"You're our way, but I'm thinking we'll gang straight on for a bit," Pete said.

They followed the main road until the men were out of sight, and then crossing some fields, turned into the lane they rose steadily to higher ground. After a time they found another road running straight towards the west. This was the old military road, made when the Romans built the Pic's wall, and long afterwards repaired by General Wade, who tried to move his troops across to intercept Prince Charlie's march. Foster sat down for a few minutes at the corner and looked back at the distant chimney-stacks and trails of smoke.

The railway and the road by which the main traffic went followed the valley of the Tyne, but the military road kept to the edge of the bleak moors. He gathered from the map that it was, for the most part, lonely, and thought Graham would expect him to go by train; the latter probably knew enough about him to anticipate his making for Liddesdale, and as there were not many trains running north from Hexham, would reckon on his travelling by Carlisle. If this was so, and he was being looked for, his pursuers would now be in front of him instead of behind, and he saw some advantage in keeping them there. Still he must not lose much time in finding Daly; for one thing, it would be awkward if the police arrested him while he had the cheques in his pocket. For all that, he meant to visit the Garth, tell Alice he had news of Lawrence, and try to overcome Featherstone's suspicions. Then, if Lawrence had not written yet, he must go back to Canada as soon as he had seen Daly.

Beyond this Foster's plans were vague; he did not know, for example, how he could force Daly to keep Lawrence's secret without promising to withhold evidence that would bring the man to justice. But he might find a way and was tired of puzzling about the matter. In a sense, he had taken a ridiculous line from the beginning and perhaps involved himself in needless difficulties. His partner, however, must be protected, and in the meantime he had two objects; to avoid the police and Graham.

"Perhaps we had better keep the military road until we strike the North Tyne," he said to Pete. "Then, if nothing turns up to prevent it, we might risk stopping for the night at Hexham."

Having the day before them, they set off at a leisurely pace. The air was cold but still, and bright sunshine shone upon the tableland, which rolled north, rising steadily towards distant snow-streaked hills. Nothing suspicious happened, and

late in the afternoon they came down into the valley of the North Tyne and turned south for Hexham. As they did so they passed an inn and Foster stopped. They were some distance from Hexham and he felt hungry, while the inn looked unusually comfortable. He was tempted to go in and order a meal, but hesitated, for no very obvious reason.

"We'll wait and get dinner when we make Hexham, he said, setting off again.

A thin wood, separated from the road by a low fence, ran between them and the river. The light was faint among the trees, the road narrow, and presently they heard a car coming towards them. It was going very fast and when it lurched across an opening in the hedge round a bend Foster put his hand on the fence and swung himself over. Pete followed silently, but when they stood in the shadow among the dry undergrowth Foster felt annoyed because he had yielded to a half-instinctive impulse. He must, of course, be cautious, but there was no reason for overdoing it.

Next moment, the car, which swung towards the fence as it took the curve dashed past, and Foster set his lips as he saw Graham, who seemed to be gazing up the road. Then the car vanished among the trees, and Pete looked at him curiously.

"Is yon the man frae Newcastle?" he asked.

"Yes," said Foster grimly; "I rather think we were just in time. It's very possible that he'd have run over me if I'd been in the road. An accident of that kind would have suited him well. But I thought I was a fool for jumping."

Pete nodded. "I ken! When ye feel ye must do a thing, it's better just to do it and think afterwards." Then he raised his hand. "She's stopping!"

The throb of the engine suddenly slackened, as if the driver had seen the inn, and Foster got over the fence.

"It's lucky we didn't stop for a meal; but, although it may be risky, I'm going back."

They kept along the side of the road, where the ground was soft, but Foster was ready to jump the fence if the car returned; the noise would give him warning enough. After a few minutes they stopped and waited in the gloom of a hedge, where they could see the inn. The car stood in the road and it was empty. Graham had obviously gone in to make inquiries, and Foster wondered whether anybody had seen him and his companion pass. He would know when Graham came out, and moved a few yards farther until he reached a gate, which he opened, ready to slip through. There was no need to warn Pete now the latter understood matters. One could trust a poacher to hide himself quickly.

Foster felt some strain. It was disturbing to find Graham already on his track and he wondered whether the fellow had been to Carlisle. It would be awkward if he went to Hexham. After a few minutes two men came out of the inn and Foster waited anxiously while one cranked the car, but they drove on when the man jumped in. Then, as he was turning round, the throb of the engine stopped again and he beckoned Pete.

"They don't know you and it's getting dark. Go on and see which way they take."

He kept close to the gate when Pete vanished. The car had stopped where the military road cut across another that followed the river into the moors, and Graham apparently did not know which way to go. It looked as if the fellow had ascertained that he was not at Hexham. After a time he heard the car start. It was not coming back, but he could tell which way it went, and waited in the gathering dark for Pete's return.

"They'd gone before I came up, but I heard her rattling on the hill to my left hand," he said.

"That means they've gone west towards Carlisle."

"There's another road turns off and runs north awa' by Bellingham."

Foster frowned, because this was the road he meant to take next day, and if his pursuers did so now, it would be because they expected him to make for the Garth. They were, however, in front, where he would sooner have them than behind, and he set off down the valley for Hexham. He found the old Border town, clustering round the tall dark mass of the abbey, strangely picturesque; the ancient Moat Hall and market square invited his interest, but he shrank from wandering about the streets in the dark. Now he had Graham's cheques, he must be careful; moreover his knapsack and belongings made him conspicuous, and he went to a big red hotel where he took them off.

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