

Carmen's Messenger

By Harold Bindloss

Going back to his hotel, he found there was an evening train and decided to leave by it. Edinburgh had attractions, but he could come back and was anxious to get rid of the packet, moreover he grudged the time he spent away from the Garth. There were not many passengers at the station and he found an empty compartment, where he read a newspaper until he got tired and lifting a corner of the blind, looked out. Here and there a light rushed back through the darkness and vanished as the express sped south with a smoothness that was a contrast to the jolting he had been used to in Canada. Indeed, except for the roar when they raced across a bridge and the confused flashing past of lamps as they swept through a station, he could hardly have imagined himself on board a train. There was, however, not much to be seen, and he took out the packet.

It looked somewhat blunter and he examined it carefully, but the cover did not seem to have been removed. It could not have been replaced by another, because the original address was there and he knew Carmen's hand; then there was a seal, which he did not think could have been tampered with. Besides, the man had only had it for a minute or two, and if he had opened it, would probably have taken something out instead of putting something in. Foster decided that he was mistaken about its size and returned it to his pocket.

Then he wanted a cigarette and took out the case he had got in the fur coat. Since he had left the coat in Montreal, the case was the only record of his adventure on the train, and he wondered whether he would ever be able to restore it to its owner and speculated languidly about the man. As the latter knew his name, it was strange that he had not communicated with him at the Windsor, as he had promised. He had obviously not been attacked, because there had been nothing about it in the Canadian newspapers. The thing was puzzling, but after all it did not concern Foster much and he began to wonder why his comrade had not written, particularly as he had brought away a bag of Lawrence's. He had one like it, and as both had his owner's initials stamped outside, he imagined the baggage agent had been deceived by the F when he affixed the check. Lawrence's bag, however, had his name engraved upon the lock.

Foster sat down in a big chair by the fire, and imagined he fell asleep, because it had got nearly dark without his noticing it when the opening of the door roused him. Looking up, he saw Featherstone come in with a letter in his hand. The post did not arrive until the afternoon.

"Ah!" he said, "you have heard from Lawrence."

"No, but the letter's about him," Featherstone replied, and sitting down opposite, was silent for a few moments. His pose was slack and he looked as if he had got a shock.

"I don't see how you can help, but perhaps you had better know how matters are," he resumed and gave the letter to Foster.

It was short, but Foster, who was surprised and disturbed, understood his host's alarm. Daly had written from Hexham, asking, or rather summoning, Featherstone to meet him there next day, although he stated that if this was impossible, he would arrive at the Garth in the evening. There was a threat in the intimation that it would be to Lawrence's advantage if Featherstone saw him soon.

"Well," said Foster dryly, "it looks as if our plot had succeeded better than we thought. We certainly didn't expect the fellow would follow me to England."

Featherstone did not seem to understand, and Foster remembered that, with the object of saving him anxiety, he had said nothing about Daly's having extorted money from Lawrence in Canada. He now explained the situation in as few words as possible.

"But Lawrence ought to have told me," Featherstone exclaimed.

"I don't know that it would have been of much use. You see, Lawrence meant to put Daly off the track, and if he failed in this, I quite agreed."

"But he can't fight," Featherstone objected in a strained voice. "I'd have urged him to do so, if it had been possible. We're not cowards."

"Why is it impossible?"

"You know," Featherstone asked with some surprise.

"I know my partner's in trouble, that's all."

Featherstone hesitated, as if he wanted to take the other into his confidence, but shrank from doing so. Then he said with forced quietness: "If this rogue knows as much as I suspect he can get my son arrested."

"On a serious charge? I don't ask what it is."

"It would mean a long imprisonment, say nothing of the humiliation?" Featherstone answered brokenly, and was silent for a minute with

the firelight on his tense face. Then he went on with an effort: "I must tell you what I can. Lawrence in a desperate moment injured, I had better call it robbed, a relative of ours. The boy had got into difficulties, but hitherto, although he had been a fool, there was a certain generosity in his rashness. He was very hard pressed—I have seen that since—but I can make no excuse for what he did."

"He made good afterwards," Foster interposed.

"We tried to think so, but it looks as if you can't make good. The punishment for a wrong done, or consented to, must be borne. Well, when I learned the truth I went to the man my son had robbed and offered to repay him. He said he would take no money, for reasons that I ought to grasp, and sent me away afraid, because I knew he was hard and very just."

Featherstone paused, and Foster, who murmured a few words of awkward sympathy, waited until he resumed: "I am a magistrate, pledged to do my duty, but I helped my boy to escape, and the man I was afraid of did nothing, though he knew. After a time I went to him again, and he gave me to understand that he would not interfere so long as Lawrence stayed away, but must be free to take the proper line if he came back. It's obvious now that he knew my son's faults and meant to give him the chance of overcoming them by hard work in Canada. At last, when he was very ill, he sent for me and said I could let Lawrence know he was forgiven."

"Ah!" said Foster, "now I understand what my partner meant."

"This was not long before you came," Featherstone continued. "It was a wonderful relief to know the danger was over, and then you told us how Lawrence had grown out of his folly and become a useful man. Although we longed to see him, our satisfaction was complete. Now this letter comes, and I fear my wife is unable to bear the strain again."

Foster was moved by his distress. Featherstone was proud and honorable, and it must have cost him much to help his son to steal away. Indeed, Foster thought what he had done then would always trouble him, and after all it had proved useless. The worse was that his sensitive uprightness might make him an easy victim of the unscrupulous adventurer. But Foster did not mean him to be "victimized." As a rule, he was rather humorous than dramatic, but he got up and stood with his hands clenched.

"This thing touches us both, sir. Lawrence is your son, but he's my friend, and I've got to see him through, which warrants my giving you the best advice I can. Very well, you must show a bold front to Daly; to begin with, you can't go to Hexham."

Featherstone gave him a grateful glance. He felt dejected and desperate, but Foster looked comfortably resolute. At first he had welcomed him for his son's sake, but had come to like him for himself.

"No," he agreed, "I can't go; but that doesn't help us, because he'll come here."

"Yes; he must be met. But do you know how he came to learn about the matter?"

"I don't, but my relative, who was interested in politics and social schemes, had a secretary. I can't remember his name, but this might be the fellow."

"Then it's curious he didn't get on Lawrence's track before. Anyway, he must be met with the bluff direct now."

"How can he be bluffed?" Featherstone asked with a hopeless gesture. "He can have my son arrested if I don't agree to his demands."

"He would first have to tell the police all he knew, and as soon as he did this his hold on you would be gone. Then they'd ask why he'd kept the secret which would be remarkably hard to answer, although he might perhaps take the risk out of malice if he saw you meant to be firm. For all that, you must be firm; you can't buy him off. He'd come back later with a fresh demand. Would your estate stand the strain?"

"My wife and daughter would make any sacrifice for Lawrence's sake."

"The sacrifice would beget this bloodsucker, which is a different thing," Foster rejoined. "Then, even if you impoverished your family, you'd only put off the reckoning, which would come when the fellow had taken all you'd got. In short, he must be bluffed off now."

He sat down and pondered and there was silence for some minutes. He had got dark and he had undertaken a difficult task, and felt daunted because he could not see his way. Still, it looked as if the happiness of these charming people and perhaps his partner's future depended upon him. If that were so, he must not fail them.

"Well," he said by and by, "my opinion is that Daly thinks Law-

rence is here, so to speak within his reach, which must be a strong encouragement. If he learns the truth, he'll, no doubt, go back to Canada and get on his track. I'd like to set him searching for Lawrence up and down Great Britain. There would be something amusing in his wasting his time and money, but at present I don't see how it could be done. However, we have until to-morrow to think of a plan."

Featherstone left him soon afterwards and he stayed in the library until dinner, which he found a melancholy function. It was necessary to appear undisturbed while the servants were about, and he envied his friends' fine self-control. These people had courage and when they talked carelessly about things of no importance he did his best to play up. Still, although they sometimes laughed their amusement sounded forced there was a curious feeling of tension, and he thought Mrs. Featherstone once or twice showed signs of strain.

When the meal was over he made an excuse for leaving them alone, but some time afterwards Alice came into the hall, where he sat quietly thinking. She was calm, but he saw she had heard about the threatened danger. He got up as she advanced, but she beckoned him to sit down.

"My father has told me about the letter, and I understand you know," she said.

"I wish I knew what ought to be done! It's an awkward matter. To tell the truth, it bothers me."

Alice sat down, shielding her face from the fire with her hand.

"You mean you feel you ought to put it right?"

"Something of the kind," said Foster, forcing a smile. "In a sense, of course, that's presumptuous; but then, you see, in many ways, I'm in your brother's debt."

"You like to pay your debts," Alice remarked, fixing a level glance on him.

"When I can; but that's not all. I'm not in Lawrence's debt alone. Foster answered with some diffidence. "I came over here, a stranger, ignorant of your ideas and customs, and you made me welcome. Of course, if I had jarred you, you wouldn't have let me know; but there are different degrees of hospitality."

Alice smiled. "You needn't labour your excuses for wanting to help us, and you are not a stranger now. You must have understood this when my father showed you the letter."

"Thank you," Foster replied with feeling, and was silent for the next few moments. Alice, who was proud and reserved, trusted him, and he must somehow justify her confidence, though, which warrants my giving you the best advice I can. Very well, you must show a bold front to Daly; to begin with, you can't go to Hexham."

Foster made a sign of agreement, for it was plain that Featherstone could not tell his friends about his trouble.

"I begin to think I might; but although I haven't quite made my plans yet, I see some danger. Would you take a risk for your brother's sake?"

The girl's eyes sparkled, and he saw that she had Lawrence's reckless courage. He heard his partner laugh when they faced starvation on the frozen trail.

"I would take any risk to save him or punish the blackmail."

"Very well. I rather think your father will leave things to me, and I have a half-formed plan. There ought to be some humour in the plot, if I can work it out. Daly's plainly convinced that your brother's here, and I don't see why he shouldn't be encouraged to stick to his opinion. In fact, the longer he looks for Lawrence, the more amusing the thing will get. Of course, he may turn spiteful when he finds he has been tricked, but he, no doubt, means to do all the harm he can already. However, you must give me until to-morrow."

Alice got up and when he rose said quietly, but with something in her voice that thrilled him: "I think you like my mother and she knows I mean to talk to you. Lawrence is very dear to her and if he were dragged back into disgrace, now when we thought it was all forgotten and he has made a new start in Canada, I am not sure she could bear the shock. There is nobody else who could help us and we trust to you."

"Then I must try to deserve it," Foster answered with a bow. "But what about your old servant, John? Have you much confidence in him?"

The girl's tense face relaxed. "In a sense, John is one of the family, but if you want his help, you must use some tact and not expect Western frankness. He is remarkably discreet."

Foster opened the door for her, and then went to the gun-room, where he found John, who had driven him from the station when he arrived, pouring out some Ranmore Oil. Sitting down carelessly, he lighted a cigarette.

"I understand you were rather fond of my partner, Lawrence Featherstone," he remarked.

"If I may say so, sir, I was. A very likeable young gentleman."

"I expect you know he got into trouble."

John looked pained at his bluntness. "I heard something about it, sir. Perhaps Mr. Lawrence was a little wild. It sometimes happens in very good families."

"Just so," said Foster. "Would you be surprised to hear he hadn't got out of that trouble yet?"

"Not surprised exactly. I was afraid of something like it, sir."

Foster knew this was as much as he would admit, but felt that he could trust the man.

"Very well. My partner's in some danger, and with Mr. Featherstone's permission I must try to see him through, but may want your help. I suppose you're willing?"

"Yes, sir. If it's for Mr. Lawrence, you can take it that I am."

"You can drive an automobile pretty well?"

"Not like a professional, sir, but now we don't keep a chauffeur I often drive to the station."

"That's satisfactory. I may want the car tomorrow evening, but nobody else must know about this."

"Very good, sir," said John. "When you're ready you can give me your instructions; they'll go no further."

Then he dipped a rag in the oil and began to rub a gun, and Foster went out, feeling satisfied. It was plain that he could rely upon the old fellow, who he thought was unflinchingly loyal to the Featherstones. After all, it was something to have the respect and affection of one's servant.

CHAPTER IX.
The False Trail.

When Foster got up next morning he had made his plan, and spent ten minutes with John when there was nobody else about. The old fellow understood his orders, and although he listened with firmed defiance, the faint twinkle in his eyes showed his approval. After breakfast Foster asked Featherstone to come out on the terrace and while they walked about indicated the line he thought it best to take.

Featherstone agreed, but expressed some misgivings.

"There may be danger in putting Daly on the track, and after all I'm only delaying a crisis that must be faced."

"The longer it's delayed, the better; something may happen in the meantime," Foster replied. "Then, you see, the track is false. When the fellow finds you obstinate, he'll try to get hold of Lawrence, particularly as he got some money from him before, but as he believes Lawrence is in England, he'll have some trouble. The advantage is that he won't be able to bother you while all his time and energy's occupied by following me."

"That is so," said Featherstone thoughtfully. "But you may find it difficult to get away from the rogue, since you must give him some kind of a clue."

Foster laughed. "I don't mind the difficulty, sir. In fact, I think I'm going to enjoy the chase."

"There's a point that must be thought of. If he goes to the police when he can't find Lawrence, it would be awkward for you and I should be no better off than I am now."

"It's unlikely," Foster replied. "So long as he sees the smallest chance of extorting money he'll keep his secret. The reason's obvious."

"Well," said Featherstone, with feeling, "you are doing us a service we can't repay. I frankly don't like the plan, because it can only work at your expense, but it will give us time and I can think of nothing else."

Foster left him with a feeling of pleasant excitement. He was doing his host a favour and this was something, but the adventure appealed to him for other reasons. He had, in Canada, found scope for his energy in profitable work, but there was a reckless vein in him, and it was exhilarating to feel that he could now follow his bent without being hampered by the necessity for making the undertaking pay. After all, there was not much enjoyment in what one did for money, and he thought he was going to get some amusement out of the game. Still, he did not want to leave the Garth.

Alice had treated him with a quiet friendliness he valued and he began to hope he was making some progress in her good opinion. It was, however, comforting to feel that he was going to save her pain, and for the rest of the day he was conscious of a cheerfulness he tried to hide in view of the anxiety of the others had to bear.

When it got dark John put Lawrence's travelling bag under a small table near the door in the hall and arranged the cloth so that it hung

over and covered part of the bag but did not hide it altogether. He took some trouble, and when he was satisfied it looked as if the bag had been carelessly placed where it would be out of sight, but ready to be picked up quickly, if its owner meant to leave the house in a hurry. Moreover, if anybody thought it worth while to look under the table the letters L. F. could be distinguished and Lawrence's name was engraved upon the lock. Foster, who had learned from the railway guide when Daly would arrive, had arranged that he should be left alone for a minute or two in the hall, if the fellow made good use of the time, so much the better.

After putting on a grey waterproof, leggings, and strong boots, Foster stood at the open door of his room until he heard Daly come in. There was silence for the next minute, and then footsteps echoed along a passage as the visitor was taken to the library, where Featherstone would receive him, and Foster pulled out his watch. As there was no hotel in the neighbourhood and Daly would not expect to be asked to stay, he no doubt intended to return to the station across the moor, where he could catch the last train. Allowing for the long drive, he could not stop long at the Garth; but Foster must give Featherstone time enough. The latter had a rather difficult part, because he must allow Daly to state his terms and not reject them until the last moment. He was too honest and too proud to de- ssemble well, but he was not a fool and there was much at stake.

At length, Foster stole quietly down the stairs, and smiled as he remarked that the cloth on the small table had been pulled aside. This had been done cautiously, but a fold that overhung the edge was not in quite its former position. Then he picked up the bag, and went out, making noise enough to be heard in the library as he shut the hall door. When he went down the steps he saw the lights of the car that had brought Daly glimmer on the wet gravel of the drive. The back of the car was next him, for it had been turned round ready to start. Then Featherstone's car came up quietly, and Foster was getting in when he stopped and felt his heart beat as a slender figure appeared on the terrace. He turned, with his foot on the step, and watched until Alice came up.

"I couldn't let you go without a last word of thanks," she said. "It is splendid! We can't forget."

"I believe I'm going to have an amusing trip," Foster replied. "Then, you see, the Garth is a remarkably nice place to come back to, and there's the pleasure of looking forward to my return. But I'm unselfish enough to hope I won't have that satisfaction all to myself."

Alice smiled, but there was something very friendly in her look and her voice was unusually soft.

"You can always be sure of your welcome and we will miss you when you are away. Now I very sincerely wish you good luck."

Foster was seldom theatrical, but felt the occasion justified his doing something unusual. John, who had already grasped the wheel, had his hand on the door, and he took the girl's hand, which rested on the rail, and kissed it. She made a little abrupt movement, and he thought he saw a tinge of colour in her face, but she did not look angry and he felt a strange exultant thrill.

"Make as much noise as you can," he said to John.

The car backed across the rattling gravel and the girl's figure faded into the gloom; then John turned the wheel and they shot forward down the drive. The lights of the other car vanished, there was a space as they swung into the wet road, and Foster pulled the rug around him when he had struck a match and noted the time.

"You needn't hurry her too much," he said. "If I catch the train by about a minute, it is all I want."

"Very good, sir. If I may remark, the other's a powerful car."

"I don't think they'll try to overtake us until we're near the station," Foster answered with a laugh. "But we can't all fit then."

"No, sir," said John. "I quite understand."

They ran down the valley at a moderate speed, and Foster, looking round when they came to a straight piece of road, was not surprised to see a gleam of light in the distance. He lost it a few minutes afterwards, but it flashed out again every now and then, until they plunged into a thick fir wood. They were about half way to the station, but the lights had never got much nearer. He had, however, not expected it to do so, because he thought Daly would be satisfied if he kept his suppositious victim in sight. The danger would arise when they got near the station, and whether they overcome it or not depended on John's coolness and nerve. Foster thought the man would not fall him.

It was a dark night and a damp haze thickened the gloom. Stone walls and ragged thorn bushes leaped up in the glare of the lamps and faded, but one could see nothing outside the bright beam. This was a disadvantage, because Foster could not tell where he was and much depended on his reaching the station with exactly the right time to spare. He was rather anxious about it, since his plan would be spoiled at the start if the train were late. By striking a match in the shelter of the screen, he could see his watch, but it did not seem prudent to distract John's attention often.

By and by the walls vanished and withered, glistening with damp, rolled past the car. They were running through a peat moor, with a deep ditch on one side and climbing an incline, to judge by the heavy throb of the engine. Shallow ruts, filled with water, ran on in the blaze ahead and showers splashed about the wheels. Outside the bright beam, the darkness was impenetrable. Foster, however, was conscious of a pleasant thrill. If one looked at the thing in one way, he was plunging into trouble that might have been avoided; but he had been prudent long enough and found a strange satisfaction in being rash. Besides, no matter what difficulties he got into, he would be repaid by the memory of the look Alice had given him. The way the warm colour crept into her face had stirred him as nothing else had done. Anyhow, he had started on the adventure and was going to see it through.

After a time, they sped across a bridge, where a burn splashed hoisely down a ravine, and John asked: "How long have we got, sir?"

"Ten minutes, if the train's punctual."

"And where's the other car, sir?"

Foster, whose eyes were dazzled by the match he had struck, looked round and saw a misty flash in the dark.

"About half a mile behind, I think."

"Very good, sir. It all depends upon the train now. She's not often late."

The throb of the engine quickened and struck a sharper note, and Foster felt the car leap forward up the hill. Turning in his seat, he watched the flickering beam behind and saw it grow fainter and then gradually get bright. It looked as if the pursuers, who had perhaps lost sight of the front car's tail lamp, were increasing their speed.

"They're creeping up," he said to John, who did not reply.

Foster thought they had now reached the top of the moor, and as they swung up and down across the healthy undulations a streak of light flashed out in the distance.

"That's the train," he said.

"Yes, sir. You can see her for two or three miles."

Then there was a change in the sound and motion, and Foster knew the engine was running all-out. Showers of small stones and water flew up about the wheels and the wind whipped his face, but the following beam was a little nearer when he looked behind. The other car had reached the summit and it would be a close race, but he thought they could keep their lead long enough. Then he looked ahead and saw that the bright streak he had noticed had gone. The fireman had, no doubt, closed the furnace door, but the lights from the carriage windows twinkled faintly across the heath. He could not see the station, but it was obvious that he had not much time to spare.

A few moments later they swept across a low rise and a faint blur of buildings loomed among a cluster of lights. They were now going furiously and he seized the side of the car as they swung round a curve. He felt the rear wheels sink as they crushed through spongy sod and the car tilted, but they got round, and there was a sudden jar when the station lay some fifty yards ahead. Foster jumped out before the car quite stopped.

"Round with her! I'm all right," he said.

"Very good, sir. If I might remark—"

Foster heard nothing more as he ran up the road, carrying the bag. The train was very near; he could hear the roar it made in a shallow cutting, but as he reached the station the sound ceased and the engine rolled past. He took a ticket to Edinburgh, and hurrying across the bridge, picked a compartment that had another occupant and stood at the door, where he could see the steps he had come down. There was nobody on the bridge and he seemed to be the only passenger, but a porter began to drag some packages from the van and leisurely put them on a track. Foster quivered with impatience as he watched the fellow. If he kept the train another minute, it might be too late. Then he glanced back at the bridge. Nobody came down the steps yet, but

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