

[The Vanished Messenger](#)

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Chapter 2

The young man sat on one side of the saloon and Mr. John P. Dunster on the other. Although both of them were provided with a certain amount of railway literature, neither of them made any pretence at reading. The older man, with his feet upon the opposite seat and his arms folded, was looking pensively through the rain-splashed window-pane into the impenetrable darkness. The young man, although he could not ignore his companion's unsociable instincts, was fidgety.

"There will be some floods out to-morrow," he remarked.

Mr. Dunster turned his head and looked across the saloon. There was something in the deliberate manner of his doing so, and his hesitation before he spoke, which seemed intended to further impress upon the young man the fact that he was not disposed for conversation.

"Very likely," was his sole reply.

Gerald Fentolin sighed as though he regretted his companion's taciturnity and a few minutes later strolled to the farther end of the saloon. He spent some time trying to peer through the streaming window into the darkness. He chatted for a few minutes with the guard, who was, however, in a bad temper at having had to turn out and who found little to say. Then he took one of his golf clubs from the bag and indulged in several half swings. Finally he stretched himself out upon one of the seats and closed his eyes.

"May as well try to get a nap," he yawned. "There won't be much chance on the steamer, if it blows like this."

Mr. Dunster said nothing. His face was set, his eyes were looking somewhere beyond the confines of the saloon in which he was seated. So they travelled for over an hour. The young man seemed to be dozing in earnest when, with a succession of jerks, the train rapidly slackened speed. Mr. Dunster let down the window. The interior of the carriage was at once thrown into confusion. A couple of newspapers were caught up and whirled around, a torrent of rain beat in. Mr. Dunster rapidly closed the window and rang the bell. The guard came in after a moment or two. His clothes were shiny from the wet; raindrops hung from his beard.

"What is the matter?" Mr. Dunster demanded. "Why are we waiting here?"

"There's a block on the line somewhere, the man replied. "Can't tell where exactly. The signals are against us; that's all we know at present."

They crawled on again in about ten minutes, stopped, and resumed their progress at an even slower rate. Mr. Dunster once more summoned the guard.

"Why are we travelling like this?" he asked impatiently. "We shall never catch the boat."

"We shall catch the boat all right if it runs, sir," the man assured him. "The mail is only a mile or two ahead of us; that's one reason why we have to go so slowly. Then the water is right over the line where we are now, and we can't get any news at all from the other side of Ipswich. If it goes on like this, some of the bridges will be down; that's what I'm afraid of."

Mr. Dunster frowned. For the first time he showed some signs of uneasiness.

"Perhaps," he muttered, half to himself, "a motorcar would have been better."

"Not on your life," his young companion intervened. "All the roads to the coast here cross no end of small bridges - much weaker affairs than the railway bridges. I bet there are some of those down already. Besides, you wouldn't be able to see where you were going, on a night like this."

"There appears to be a chance," Mr. Dunster remarked drily, "that you will have to scratch for your competition to-morrow."

"Also," the young man observed, "that you will have taken this special train for nothing. I can't fancy the Harwich boat going out a night like this."

Mr. Dunster relapsed into stony but anxious silence. The train continued its erratic progress, sometimes stopping altogether for a time, with whistle blowing repeatedly; sometimes creeping along the metals as though feeling its way to safety. At last, after a somewhat prolonged wait, the guard, whose hoarse voice they had heard on the platform of the small station in which they were standing, entered the carriage. With him came a gust of wind, once more sending the papers flying around the compartment. The rain dripped from his clothes on to the carpet. He had lost his hat, his hair was tossed with the wind, his face was bleeding from a slight wound on the temple.

"The boat train's just ahead of us, sir," he announced. "She can't get on any better than we can. We've just heard that there's a bridge down on the line between Ipswich and Harwich."

"What are we going to do, then?" Mr. Dunster demanded.

"That's just what I've come to ask you, sir," the guard replied. "The mail's going slowly on as far as Ipswich. I fancy they'll lie by there until the morning. The best thing that I can see is, if you're agreeable, to take you back to London. We can very likely do that all right, if we start at once."

Mr. Dunster, ignoring the man's suggestion, drew from one of the voluminous pockets of his ulster a small map. He spread it open upon the table before him and studied it attentively.

"If I cannot get to Harwich," he asked, "is there any possibility of keeping straight on and reaching Yarmouth?"

The guard hesitated.

"We haven't heard anything about the line from Ipswich to Norwich, sir," he replied, "but we can't very well change our course without definite instructions."

"Your definite instructions," Mr. Dunster reminded him drily, "were to take me to Harwich. You have been forced to depart from them. I see no harm in your adopting any suggestions I may have to make concerning our altered destination. I will pay the extra mileage, naturally."

"How far did you wish to go, sir?" the guard enquired.

"To Yarmouth," Mr. Dunster replied firmly. "If there are bridges down, and communication with Harwich is blocked, Yarmouth would suit me better than anywhere."

The guard shook his head.

"I couldn't go on that way, sir, without instructions."

"Is there a telegraph office at this station?" Mr. Dunster inquired.

"We can speak anywhere on the line," the guard replied.

"Then wire to the station-master at Liverpool Street," Mr. Dunster instructed. "You can get a reply from him in the course of a few minutes. Explain the situation and tell him what my wishes are."

The guard hesitated.

"It's a goodish way from here to Norwich," he observed, "and for all we know -"

"When we left Liverpool Street Station," Mr. Dunster interrupted, "I promised five pounds each to you, the engine-driver, and his mate. That five pounds shall be made twenty-five if you succeed in getting me to the coast. Do your best for me."

The guard raised his hat and departed without another word.

"It will probably suit you better," Mr. Dunster continued, turning to his companion, "to leave me at Ipswich and join the mail."

The latter shook his head.

"I don't see that there's any chance, anyway, of my getting over in time now," he remarked. "If you'll take me on with you as far as Norwich, I can go quietly home from there!"

"You live in this part of the world, then?" Mr. Dunster asked.

The young man assented. Again there was a certain amount of hesitation in his manner.

"I live some distance the other side of Norwich," he said. "I don't want to sponge on you too much," he went on, "but if you're really going to stick it out and try and get there, I'd like to go on, too. I am afraid I can't offer to share the expense, but I'd work my passage if there was anything to be done."

Mr. Dunster drummed for a moment upon the table with his fingers. All the time the young man had been speaking, his eyes had been studying his face. He turned now once more to his map.

"It was my idea," he said, "to hire a steam trawler from Yarmouth. If I do so, you can, if you wish, accompany me so far as the port at which we may land in Holland. On the other hand, to be perfectly frank with you, I should prefer to go alone. There will be, no doubt, a certain amount of risk in crossing tonight. My own business is of importance. A golf tournament, however, is scarcely worth risking your life for, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know about that!" the young man replied grimly. "I fancy I should rather like it. Let's see whether we can get on to Norwich, anyhow, shall we? We may find that there are bridges down on that line."

They relapsed once more into silence. Presently the guard reappeared.

"Instructions to take you on to Yarmouth, if possible, sir," he announced, "and to collect the mileage at our destination."

"That will be quite satisfactory," Mr. Dunster agreed. "Let us be off, then, as soon as possible." Presently they crawled on. They passed the boat train in Ipswich Station, where they stayed for a few moments. Mr. Dunster bought wine and sandwiches, and his companion followed his example. Then they continued their journey. An hour or more passed: the storm showed no signs of abatement. Their speed now rarely exceeded ten or fifteen miles an hour. Mr. Dunster smoked all the time, occasionally rubbing the window-pane and trying to look out. Gerald Fentolin slept fitfully.

"Have you any idea where we are?" Mr. Dunster asked once.

The boy cautiously let down the window a little way. With the noise of the storm came another sound, to which he listened for a moment with puzzled face: a dull, rumbling sound like the falling of water. He closed the window, breathless.

"I don't think we are far from Norwich. We passed Forncett, anyhow, some time ago."

"Still raining?"

"In torrents! I can't see a yard ahead of me. I bet we get some floods after this. I expect they are out now, if one could only see."

They crept on. Suddenly, above the storm, they heard what sounded at first like the booming of a gun, and then a shrill whistle from some distance ahead. They felt the jerk as their brakes were hastily applied, the swaying of the little train, and then the crunching of earth beneath them, the roar of escaping steam as their engine ploughed its way on into the road bed.

"Off the rails!" the boy cried, springing to his feet. "Hold on tightly, sir. I'd keep away from the window."

The carriage swayed and rocked. Suddenly a telegraph post seemed to come crashing through the window and the polished mahogany panels. The young man escaped it by leaping to one side. It caught Mr. Dunster, who had just risen to his feet, upon the forehead. There was a crash all around of splitting glass, a further shock. They were both thrown off their feet. The light was suddenly extinguished. With the crashing of glass, the splitting of timber - a hideous, tearing sound - the wrecked saloon, dragging the engine half-way over with it, slipped down a low embankment and lay on its side, what remained of it, in a field of turnips.