

# The Vanished Messenger

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## Chapter 1

There were very few people upon Platform Number Twenty-one of Liverpool Street Station at a quarter to nine on the evening of April 2 - possibly because the platform in question is one of the most remote and least used in the great terminus. The station-master, however, was there himself, with an inspector in attendance. A dark, thick-set man, wearing a long travelling ulster and a Homburg hat, and carrying in his hand a brown leather dressing-case, across which was painted in black letters the name MR. JOHN P. DUNSTER, was standing a few yards away, smoking a long cigar, and, to all appearance absorbed in studying the advertisements which decorated the grimy wall on the other side of the single track. A couple of porters were seated upon a barrow which contained one solitary portmanteau. There were no signs of other passengers, no other luggage. As a matter of fact, according to the time-table, no train was due to leave the station or to arrive at it, on this particular platform, for several hours.

Down at the other end of the platform the wooden barrier was thrust back, and a porter with some luggage upon a barrow made his noisy approach. He was followed by a tall young man in a grey tweed suit and a straw hat on which were the colours of a famous cricket club.

The inspector watched them curiously. "Lost his way, I should think," he observed.

The station-master nodded. "It looks like the young man who missed the boat train," he remarked. "Perhaps he has come to beg a lift."

The young man in question made steady progress up the platform. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, and his forehead was contracted in a frown. As he approached more closely, he singled out Mr. John P. Dunster, and motioning his porter to wait, crossed to the edge of the track and addressed him.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, sir?"

Mr. John P. Dunster turned at once and faced his questioner. He did so without haste - with a certain deliberation, in fact - yet his eyes were suddenly bright and keen. He was neatly dressed, with the quiet precision which seems as a rule to characterise the travelling American. He was apparently of a little less than middle-age, clean-shaven, broad-shouldered, with every appearance of physical strength. He seemed like a man on wires, a man on the alert, likely to miss nothing.

"Are you Mr. John P. Dunster?" the youth asked.

"I carry my visiting-card in my hand, sir," the other replied, swinging his dressing-case around. "My name is John P. Dunster."

The young man's expression was scarcely ingratiating. To a natural sullenness was added now the nervous distaste of one who approaches a disagreeable task.

"I want, if I may, to ask you a favour," he continued. "If you don't feel like granting it, please say no and I'll be off at once. I am on my way to The Hague. I was to have gone by the boat train which left half an hour ago. I had taken a seat, and they assured me that the train would not leave for at least ten minutes, as the mails weren't in. I went down the platform to buy some papers and stood talking for a moment or two with a man whom I know. I suppose I must have been longer than I thought, or they must have been quicker

than they expected with the mailbags. Anyhow, when I came back the train was moving. They would not let me jump in. I could have done it easily, but that fool of an inspector over there held me."

"They are very strict in this country, I know."

Mr. Dunster agreed, without change of expression. "Please go on."

"I saw you arrive - just too late for the train. While I was swearing at the inspector, I heard you speak to the station-master. Since then I have made inquiries. I understand that you have ordered a special train to Harwich."

Mr. John P. Dunster said nothing, only his keen, clear eyes seemed all the time to be questioning this gloomy-looking but apparently harmless young man.

"I went to the station-master's office," the latter continued, "and tried to persuade them to let me ride in the guard's van of your special, but he made a stupid fuss about it, so I thought I'd better come to you. Can I beg a seat in your compartment, or anywhere in the train, as far as Harwich?"

Mr. Dunster avoided, for the moment, a direct reply. He had the air of a man who, whether reasonably or unreasonably, disliked the request which had been made to him.

"You are particularly anxious to cross to-night?" he asked.

"I am," the youth admitted emphatically. "I never ought to have risked missing the train. I am due at The Hague to-morrow."

Mr. John P. Dunster moved his position a little. The light from a rain-splashed gas lamp shone now full upon the face of his suppliant: a boy's face, which would have been pleasant and even handsome but for the discontented mouth, the lowering forehead, and a shadow in the eyes, as though, boy though he certainly was in years, he had already, at some time or another, looked upon the serious things of life. His nervousness, too, was almost grotesque. He had the air of disliking immensely this asking a favour from a stranger. Mr. Dunster appreciated all these things, but there were reasons which made him slow in granting the young man's request.

"What is the nature of your pressing business at The Hague?" he asked.

The youth hesitated.

"I am afraid," he said grimly, "that you will not think it of much importance. I am on my way to play in a golf tournament there."

"A golf tournament at The Hague! " Mr. Dunster repeated, in a slightly altered tone. "What is your name?"

"Gerald Fentolin."

Mr. Dunster stood quite still for a moment. He was possessed of a wonderful memory, and he was conscious at that moment of a subtle appeal to it. Fentolin! There was something in the name which seemed to him somehow associated with the things against which he was on guard. He stood with puzzled frown, reminiscent for several minutes,

unsuccessful. Then he suddenly smiled, and moving underneath the gas lamp, shook open an evening paper which he had been carrying. He turned over the pages until he arrived at the sporting items. Here, in almost the first paragraph, he saw the name which had happened to catch his eye a moment or two before:

#### GOLF AT THE HAGUE

Among the entrants for the tournament which commences to-morrow, are several well-known English players, including Mr. Barwin, Mr. Parrott, Mr. Hillard and Mr. Gerald Fentolin.

Mr. Dunster folded up the newspaper and replaced it in his pocket. He turned towards the young man.

"So you're a golfer, are you?"

"I play a bit," was the somewhat indifferent reply.

Mr. Dunster turned to another part of the paper and pointed to the great black head-lines.

"Seems a queer thing for a young fellow like you to be worrying about games," he remarked. "I haven't been in this country more than a few hours, but I expected to find all the young men getting ready."

"Getting ready for what?"

"Why, to fight, of course," Mr. Dunster replied. "Seems pretty clear that there's an expeditionary force being fitted out, according to this evening's paper, somewhere up in the North Sea. The only Englishman I've spoken to on this side was willing to lay me odds that war would be declared within a week."

The young man's lack of interest was curious.

"I am not in the army," he said. "It really doesn't affect me."

Mr. Dunster stared at him.

"You'll forgive my curiosity," he said, "but say, is there nothing you could get into and fight if this thing came along?"

"Nothing at all, that I know of," the youth replied coolly. "War is an affair which concerns only the military and naval part of two countries. The civil population -"

"Plays golf, I suppose," Mr. Dunster interrupted. "Young man, I haven't been in England for some years, and you rather take my breath away. All the same, you can come along with me as far as Harwich."

The young man showed signs of some satisfaction. "I am very much obliged to you, sir," he dedared. "I promise you I won't be in the way."

The station-master, who had been looking through a little pile of telegrams brought to him by a clerk from his office, now turned towards them. His expression was a little grave.

"Your special will be backing down directly, sir," he announced, "but I am sorry to say that we hear very bad accounts of the line. They say that this is only the fag-end of the storm that we are getting here, and that it's been raging for nearly twenty-four hours on the east coast. I doubt whether the Harwich boat will be able to put off."

"We must take our chance about that," Dunster remarked. "If the mail boat doesn't run, I presume there will be something else we can charter."

The station-master looked the curiosity which he did not actually express in words.

"Money will buy most things, nowadays, sir," he observed, "but if it isn't fit for our mail boat, it certainly isn't fit for anything else that can come into Harwich Harbour. However, you'll hear what they say when you get there."

Mr. Dunster nodded and relapsed into a taciturnity which was obviously one of his peculiarities. The young man strolled down the platform, and catching up with the inspector, touched him on the shoulder.

"Do you know who the fellow is he asked curiously. "It's awfully decent of him to let me go with him, but he didn't seem very keen about it."

The inspector shook his head.

"No idea, sir," he replied. "He drove up just two minutes after the train had gone, came straight into the office and ordered a special. Paid for it, too, in Bank of England notes before he went out. I fancy he's an American, and he gave his name as John P. Dunster."

The young man paused to light a cigarette.

"If he's an American, I suppose that accounts for it," he observed. "He must be in a precious hurry to get somewhere, though."

"A night like this, too!" the inspector remarked, with a shiver. "I wouldn't leave London myself unless I had to. They say there's a tremendous storm blowing on the east coast. Here comes the train, sir - just one saloon and the guard's van."

The little train backed slowly along the platform side. The engine was splashed with mud and soaking wet. The faces of the engine-driver and his companion shone from the dripping rain. The station-master held open the door of the saloon.

"You've a rough journey before you, sir," he said. "You'll catch the boat all right, though - if it goes. The mail train was very heavy to-night. You should catch her up this side of Colehester."

Mr. Dunster nodded.

"I am taking this young gentleman with me," he announced shortly. "It seems that he, too, missed the train. I am much obliged to you, station-master, for your attention. Good night!"

They were about to start when Mr. Dunster once more let down the window.

"By the way," he said, "as it is such a wild night, you will oblige me very much if you will tell the engine-driver that there will be a five pound note for himself and his companion if we catch the mail. Inspector!"

The inspector touched his hat. The station-master had turned discreetly away. He had been an inspector himself once, and sovereigns had been useful to him, too. Then the train glided from the platform side, plunged with a scream through a succession of black tunnels, and with rapidly increasing speed faced the storm.



## 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.

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