

**CLASSICS TO GO**

**A FATAL MESSAGE OR  
NICK CARTER'S SLENDER CLEW**



**NICHOLAS CARTER**

# **A Fatal Message**

**Or Nick Carter's Slender Clew**

**Nicholas Carter**

## **CHAPTER I.**

### **A SUSPICIOUS WIRE.**

Nick Carter leaned nearer to the wall and listened to what the two men were discussing.

The wall was that of a booth in the café of the Shelby House. It was a partition of matched sheathing only, through which ordinary conversation in the adjoining booth could be easily overheard, and both men in this case spoke above an ordinary tone.

Obviously, therefore, they were discussing nothing of a private nature, or anything thought to be of much importance, or serious significance. It meant no more to them, in fact, than it would have meant to most men, to all save one in a million.

That one in a million was seated alone in the next booth—Nick Carter.

The two men were strangers to the detective. They had entered when he was near the end of his lunch, and while waiting for their orders to be served they engaged in the conversation which, though heard only by chance, soon seriously impressed the detective.

“You were a little later than usual this noon, Belden,” said one.

“Yes, a few minutes, Joe, but I thought you would wait for me. My ticker got busy just as I was about to leave. I remained to take the dispatch, Gordon, and it proved to be quite a long one.”

“Something important?”

“Not very. Only political news for the local paper.”

“Belden evidently is a telegraph operator,” thought Nick.

“Anything warm by wire this morning?” questioned Gordon.

“No, nothing,” said Belden; and then he abruptly added: “There was a singular message, however, and an unusual circumstance in connection with it.”

“How so, Arthur?”

“The dispatch was addressed to John Dalton, and we were instructed to hold it till called for,” Belden explained. “I looked in the local directory, but it contained no John Dalton. I inferred that he was a traveling man, or a visitor in town, whose address was not known by the sender.”

“Naturally.”

“Strange to say, however, he showed up in about five minutes and asked if we had a dispatch for him.”

“Why, is there anything strange in that? He evidently was expecting it.”

“It was strange that he came in so quickly, almost while I was receiving the message. That, too, was singular.”

“The message?”

“Yes.”

“Why so?”

“As I remember it, Joe, it read: ‘Dust flying. S. D. on way. Ware eagle,’” said Belden. “It was signed with only a single name—‘Martin.’”

It was then that Nick Carter pricked up his ears and leaned nearer to the wall to hear what the two men were saying.

“By Jove, that was a bit singular,” remarked Gordon.

“I thought so.”

“Dust flying, eh?” Gordon laughed. “The dispatch must have come from a windy city.”

“It came from Philadelphia.”

“I’m wrong, then. Not even dust flies in Philadelphia. Did Dalton send an answer?”

“Not that I know of; certainly not from our office.”

“Or volunteer any explanation?”

“No. It probably was a code message, or had some secret significance. He took the dispatch and departed.”

“A stranger to you, eh?”

“Total stranger. I don’t imagine the message amounted to anything. It appeared a bit odd, however, and—ah, here’s our grub,” Belden broke off abruptly. “The Martini is mine, waiter. Here’s luck, Joe.”

It was obvious to Nick that the discussion of the telegram was ended. He immediately arose and departed. He sauntered into the hotel office, then out through the adjoining corridor, which just then was deserted, of which he took advantage. He quickly adjusted a simple disguise with

which he was provided, and he then passed out of a side door leading to the street. Nick was watching the café when the two men emerged. He followed them until Gordon parted from his companion and entered a large hardware store, where he evidently was employed.

Arthur Belden walked on leisurely alone, and Nick judged that he was heading for the main office of the Western Union Company, whose sign projected from a building some fifty yards away. The detective walked more rapidly, and quickly overtook him.

“How are you, Belden?” said he, slipping his hand through the young man’s arm. “Don’t appear surprised. Pretend that you know me. I have something to say to you.”

Belden was quick-witted, and he immediately nodded and smiled.

“I will explain presently,” Nick continued. “We’ll wait until we are under cover. It’s barely possible that we are observed. You work in the telegraph office, don’t you?”

“Yes. I’m assistant manager.”

“Got a private office?”

“Yes. I receive and send most of the important dispatches.”

“Good enough. I’m going with you to your office. Carry yourself as if it was nothing unusual. Fine day overhead, isn’t it?”

“Yes, great,” laughed Belden, gazing up. “This way. We’ll cross here.”

Nick accompanied him across the street into the building. Not until they were seated in his private office, however, did the detective refer to the matter actuating him.

"I was in the adjoining booth while you and your friend Gordon were discussing a telegram received here this morning," Nick then explained. "I wish to talk with you about it."

"For what reason?" questioned Belden, more sharply regarding him. "Have you any authority in the matter?"

"Yes."

"How so? Who are you?"

Nick saw plainly that the young man was trustworthy. He smiled agreeably, yet said, quite impressively:

"This is strictly between us, Belden, so be sure that you don't betray my confidence under any circumstances. I am in Shelby on very important business. Any indiscretion on your part might prove very costly. You read your local newspaper and must know me by name, at least. I am the New York detective, Nick Carter."

Belden's frank face underwent a decided change. He quickly extended his hand, saying earnestly:

"By gracious, I ought to have guessed it. Know you by name—well, I should say so! I'm mighty glad to meet you, too, Mr. Carter, and to be of any service. The local paper has, indeed, had a good deal to say about you and your mission here, as well as about your running down Karl Glidden's murderer, Jim Reardon. Yes, by Jove, I ought to have guessed it."

Belden referred to recent events. The secret employment of Nick and his assistants to run down the perpetrators of a long series of crimes on the S. & O. Railway, his investigation of the murder of the night operator in one of the block-signal towers, resulting in the detection and death of the culprit, James Reardon, and the arrest of several of his associates suspected of being identified with the railway outlaws, though their guilt could not then be proved—all had occurred during the ten days that Nick Carter, Chick, and Patsy had been in Shelby, and all still were vividly fresh in the public mind.

Nick smiled faintly at Belden's enthusiastic remarks.

"We still have much to accomplish here," he replied, referring to himself and his assistants. "We got James Reardon, all right, and cleaned up that signal-tower mystery, which was what we first undertook to do. That did not clinch our suspicions against some of his associates, however, as I had hoped it would do. I refer to Jake Hanlon, Link Magee, and Dick Bryan, who have succeeded in wriggling from under the wheels of justice."

"But you expect to get them later?"

"I expect to, yes," said Nick. "But my identity and mission in Shelby now are generally known. That has put the railway bandits on their guard, which makes our work more difficult. But that's neither here nor there, Mr. Belden, and I am wasting time. I wish to see a copy of that telegram you were discussing with Gordon and to ask you a few questions about it."

"Go ahead. Go as far as you like, Mr. Carter. I'll never mention a word of it," Belden earnestly assured him.



“Good for you,” Nick replied. “About what time was the telegram received?”

“Precisely ten o’clock.”

“And Dalton called for it almost immediately?”

“Within three or four minutes.”

“That indicates that he was expecting it at just that time,” said Nick. “If I am right, and I think I am, he was acting under plans previously laid with the sender, Martin, or he was otherwise informed just when the message would be sent. Do you recall ever having received another dispatch from Philadelphia signed Martin?”

“I do not,” said Belden, shaking his head.

“What type of man is Dalton? Describe him.”

“He is a well-built man, about forty years old, quite dark, and he wears a full beard. He was clad in a plaid business suit.”

“The beard may have been a disguise.”

“I think I would have detected it.”

“You do not detect mine,” smiled Nick. “He may be equally skillful.”

“There may be something in that,” Belden admitted, laughing. “At all events, Mr. Carter, the man was a total stranger to me. But why do you regard the message so suspiciously?”

“Have you a copy of it?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Let me see it.”

Belden stepped into the outer office, returning presently with a spindle, on which were copies of all of the telegrams received that day. He began to remove them, seeking the one in question, and Nick said, while waiting:

“By the way, Belden, have you received any other telegrams from Philadelphia this morning, or within a day or two?”

“Yes. There was one this morning.”

“Let me see that, also. Was it received before the other, or later?”

“About an hour earlier.”

“Let me see both of them.”

“Here is the first one,” said Belden. “It was received at nine o’clock. See for yourself, Mr. Carter.”

Nick took the telegram and read it:

“GUS DEWITT, Reddy House, Shelby: Ten will hit me. Quickest route.

A. MONAKER.”

It was a message that would have signified very little to most men. It might have been an ordinary business communication, a wire concerning the price and quantity of desired merchandise and the direction for shipping it.

Nick Carter’s strong, clean-cut face, however, took on a more intent expression.

“By Jove, I am right,” he said. “It’s a hundred to one that this was sent to notify Dalton just when to call for the message.”

“Why do you think so?” Belden inquired, leaning nearer to read the telegram.

“For three reasons,” said Nick. “First, the signature—A. Monaker.”

“What about it? It evidently is a man’s name. I see nothing remarkable in that.”

“There is, nevertheless,” Nick replied. “Monaker, Belden, is a slang term for a nickname. Undoubtedly in this case it refers to a fictitious name, or an alias. It means, I think, that an alias would be used in the message afterward sent, signed Martin and addressed to John Dalton, presumably an alias of which Dalton already was informed.”

“By gracious, Carter, you may be right.”

“Ten will hit me told Dalton at just what time he must expect the message. He was, in effect, directed to call for it at that hour. Obviously, too, the business is secret and important, as well as off color, or such a circumspect method of communication would not be necessary.”

“Surely not,” Belden agreed. “But what do you make of the last—quickest route?”

“By wire, Belden, of course,” said Nick. “A telegram is the quickest means of communication when the telephone cannot be wisely and conveniently used.”

“That’s right, too,” Belden readily admitted. “By Jove, you have a long head, Mr. Carter.”