The Murder at the Port Helm

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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MY name is Thomas Carlyle Smith, but my professional name is Carlyle Thorn, and I am a crime-investigator. My father named me after the Sage of Chelsea, whom he intensely admired but imperfectly understood, and I adopted my second name and an abbreviation of my first, because it is very necessary in my business to secure a *nom de guerre* which is at once unusual and consonant with the accepted view on private detectives, namely, that preternatural genius invariably runs hand in hand with eccentricity of nomenclature.

I have always had a natural bent for investigation, my childish curiosity, coupled with a nasal organ of an emphatic type, having earned for me an offensive nick-name which I often recall with a smile.

From the first my entry into the realms of detection was crowned with success, with much of which, I must frankly confess, my own ability had little to do. Thus, I discovered the diamonds of Lady Sathell of Sarum by a fluke; I tracked down

George Cutville by the luckiest of accidents; and, with the aid of my friend Trufill, of the firm of Trufill, Colebrook, and Porter (solicitors), I was able to check what might easily have been the most stupendous of blackmailing schemes known to history.

I cite these few out of thousands of very ordinary and fairly uninteresting cases. A detective's life is made up of little things, but, since the main consideration of life is life itself, and since, moreover, the object of my engaging myself in my profession is the securing of an income sufficiently large to make life supportable, I have even welcomed the fifty-guinea fee which accompanies the enquiries of the jealous husband.

Yet there are moments when the artist in me awakens to life, when my whole being thirsts for adventures more poignant than those incidental to watching the suspected *bourgeoisie*.

Such an adventure came in the Port Helm mystery. The story of the crime which startled England may be familiar to my readers, but I will tell it as briefly as possible.

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ON August 9, 1904, a gentlemanly man, whose dusty clothing and hot appearance suggested that he had come from some distance by road, arrived at the Port Helm, towards the evening, and asked for a room. The „Port Helm" is a tumble-down hostelry between Seaport and Colehaven, on the Kentish coast. There was a time when extensive slate quarries in the neighbourhood had justified the existence of this solitary little inn, and when it had enjoyed a thriving trade, but the slate had proved difficult to work, and had, moreover deteriorated in quality as the working progressed, and at the time of which I am speaking the quarries were deserted, the Port Helm depending upon the infrequent travellers who passed along the road between the two towns. It stood on the cliff road, the only building within sight. Two hundred yards before it, the cliff fell four hundred feet sheer to the rocky shore below, and only a crazy hand-rail, doubtlessly erected by the quarry proprietors, protected the night wanderer from instant and terrible death.

At this time the inn was kept by a young man named Hilker, whose character, unfortunately, was not of the best. I say „unfortunately," because it was on his behalf that I was engaged.

It is indisputable that he drank; it is as well established a fact that he had been in trouble with the police over a sheep which had disappeared from a neighbouring farm, the fleece of which was afterwards found in an outhouse of the inn. Hilker, however, strenuously and indignantly denied that he had ever seen the sheep, protested that the circumstance of the fleece being found in his tool-house was explained by the machinations of an enemy, and spoke vaguely of a dark man whose enmity he had earned when he was in Gibraltar (he had been in the army, and had been discharged for striking a non-commissioned officer), and in the end, owing to a flaw in the chain of evidence, the charge of sheep-stealing was dropped.

Hilker lived by himself with one manservant, whose duty it was to „tidy up," so that the evidence I required to prove his innocence on the greater charge was of

the unpromising kind. Indeed, never have I gone into a case where first appearances were so black against the accused.

The dusty stranger who had arrived on the evening of August 9 was Belmont Trair, an eccentric millionaire who spent his life in walking tours. Many extraordinary stories have been told of this gentleman—that he would associate with tramps, live and sleep happily in their company, and willingly undergo all manner of unwholesome privations; but the truth, so far as I have been able to ascertain, is that he had a passion for walking, was something of a nature-lover, and found more joy in his healthy recreation than in more artificial forms of amusement. I think it is a convincing refutation of the tramp and casual-ward story, that he invariably carried a large sum of money on his person, was extremely fastidious as to his fare, and was exceedingly talkative.

The testimony of Hilker is that the traveller arrived at sunset, and ordered-tea and ham. In this he was supported by the evidence of the old man, George Wish, who was, as I have said, general factotum to Hilker.

The landlord further said—and here we have no corroborative evidence—that Mr. Trair complained that he had been shadowed in the last two miles of his walk by „two dark men—one Spanish-looking," and, a rain storm coming up, together with the fear of these men in his mind, he decided to stay the night.

So far the story has corroboration, except in one essential particular. What happened after that is a matter for surmise.

The old attendant went home to his cottage, three miles along the road, at 8.50, at which hour it was raining heavily, and the stranger had expressed in his hearing his intention of staying the night. According to Hilker's statement to the police, Mr. Trail—who was a man of fifty, of very small physique—went up to his room at 10.15. Hilker remembered, he said, looking up at the clock as his guest left the room. At eleven o'clock, when the landlord was preparing to retire for the night, Mr. Trair came hurriedly down the stairs, fully dressed, and in a very agitated condition.

„I must go on," he said, incoherently. (I am giving the purport of Hilker's signed statement.) „I cannot stay another minute here," and with that he put down a sovereign on the table (the conversation described was supposed to have taken place in the landlord's private room behind the bar), and, in spite of the landlord's urging, who pointed out that the rain was still heavily falling, he hurriedly left the house.

Nothing more was seen of him until the following morning, when his body was discovered by the coastguards at the foot of the cliff, with a knife thrust through his heart, the body being terribly battered by the fall.

The police were immediately summoned, and county detectives were on the spot within two hours. When searched, it was discovered that the unfortunate man's watch and diamond ring were intact, and that in the pockets were two sovereigns, nine shillings and sixpence in silver, and a few coppers, but that the notes (some £140, as it afterwards transpired) were missing. A careful examination of the ground was made, but there was no evidence of a struggle, although the guard rail at the edge of the cliff was broken.

A search was made of the inn, and here was discovered a piece of evidence sufficient to hang any man—a large stain of blood recently shed on the floor of the living-room.

Hilker was immediately arrested, charged with the murder, and brought into Seaport.

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AT this time my name was fairly well known. I had appeared in a few criminal trials on behalf of the accused, and I had been instrumental in one case at least in proving the police at fault.

At the same time, I was both astonished and flattered to receive a summons on behalf of Hilker.

It came on the evening of the arrest.

I was preparing to leave my office for the evening, when the telephone bell rang.

I answered it myself.

„Is that Carlyle Smith?“ said the voice; and when I answered that it was, the caller, speaking somewhat peremptorily, said:

„Come at once to 942, Cambridge Gardens.“

Before I could answer, I was rung off.

A little annoyed by the brusqueness of the demand, I was in two minds whether or not I should take any notice of the request, but something within me urged me to accept the invitation, and, jumping into a taxi-cab, I was driven off to the address.

I found it was a house of somewhat imposing exterior. A neat maid-servant opened the door to me, and, without enquiry as to my business, I was ushered straight into a study. It was furnished in excellent taste. I had time to notice that there were two maps of Spain on the walls—a circumstance which struck me as curious at the time—when the door opened and a gentleman came in. He was past middle age, his hair was iron grey, his face white and forbidding. He had the facial lines of a man of chronic bad humour.

He looked at me discontentedly—I can find no other words to describe his attitude—and nodded curtly.

„My name is Hilker,“ he said, motioning me to a chair, „and I am the uncle of the unfortunate young man who, as you may have seen from the evening newspapers, has been arrested for a murder in the South of England.“

I nodded, and he paced up and down the room, his chin on his breast, before he spoke again.

„I do not doubt for one moment but that he is guilty,“ he said, suddenly, and shot a sharp glance at me, „and that the story he tells about the dark, Spanish-looking gentlemen is false.“

He must have seen my eyes wandering to the maps of Spain, for he added hastily:

„I am interested in Spanish mines, and he himself has been in Spain; it was one of the chances I gave him when I found he was going wrong.“

He stopped before me.

„I want you to go down to Seaport and investigate this matter. I will pay you a fee of £600 if you prove his innocence, and £100 if your investigations are futile. Do you agree?“

I nodded again and, with no other word, he sat at his desk and wrote me a cheque for £50.

„This will cover your expenses,“ he said, and struck a bell.

In twenty seconds I found myself in the street, with the cheque in my pocket.

I drove straight to my lodgings, packed a few necessary articles of toilet, and arrived at Victoria in time to catch the 7.5 for Seaport. It was after nine when I walked into the Blue Lion at that port.

I knew it would be impossible for me to see the prisoner that night; indeed, knowing how strict the police are in all such matters, I did not expect to see him at all, but the following morning, by reason of my acquaintance with the inspector in charge, I had the briefest interview.

I must confess that my first impression of him was by no means a happy one. He was a largely built young man of a florid kind; his face told me by unmistakable signs that he was a heavy drinker. He was big, loose-lipped, brutal, and his eyes were of that peculiar shade of light blue to be found in men of an utterly callous and cold-blooded nature.

He was greatly depressed, but vehemently protested his innocence, and repeated the story of the “Spanish-looking” men, but I learnt nothing that I did not already know.

Before leaving the police station I interviewed Detective-Inspector Cass, who had charge of the case.

He was a typical police officer, dull and dogmatic, ready to jump at the obvious, having no mind for the subtle possibilities of such a case as this.

„He did it all right,“ he said, complacently. „You take my tip, Carlyle, and back out of this case; it will do your reputation no good. Why, isn‘t the evidence clear? A rich and eccentric man stops at Hilker‘s Inn, Hilker is in financial difficulties—as he always has been, since I can remember—he murders his guest; and chucks him over the cliff, hoping that the tide will wash away the body and all evidence of his guilt: It‘s as clear as daylight.“

Strangely enough, it was not as clear to me, and I left the station house unimpressed by the self-satisfaction of the inspector.

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IT was whilst walking back to my hotel that chance threw in my way a remarkable clue. I have previously said that the detection of crime is as much a matter of luck as anything else, and here was proof, if proof be needed, of that fact.

In the old-fashioned High Street of Seaport is a gunsmith‘s, and I was passing this, when the door of the shop opened quickly, and a man stepped out.

He was tall and swarthy, with a complexion like old ivory, and one didn‘t need to be especially knowledgeable to recognize that he was a foreigner.

An inspiration came to me.

„*Buenos días*,“ I said.

„*Buenos días*,“ he replied, and looked confused.

I watched him hurrying from the gunsmith‘s.

The old proprietor, spectacles on nose, was behind the counter, which was strewn with revolvers of every conceivable type, from the heavy army Webley to the pocket Browning. It was evident that the Spaniard had been making a purchase.

I asked to see some cleaning brushes, and whilst examining these I managed to start a conversation with the old man.

He was, fortunately, of a garrulous disposition.

„I was afraid you wanted to buy a revolver,“ he said.

„Why afraid?“

„Well, not exactly afraid, but I‘ve lost a good customer in that gentleman that just went out. He‘d chosen one of the best arms I have in the shop, when I asked him for the licence that was necessary before I could serve him. He tried to persuade me that, as he‘s a member of the Spanish Embassy, a licence wasn‘t required, but that yarn didn‘t satisfy me.“

I had learnt all that I wanted.

In a few minutes I was in pursuit of the Spaniard. I had no difficulty in tracing him. He was living at the best hotel—the Marine, facing the sea—and, to my surprise, the story he told about his being attached to the Embassy staff proved to be true. He was at Seaport for his health, and had been there three weeks.

I saw my friend, the inspector, and told him about the revolver, but he did not seem impressed.

„Very likely,“ he said, carelessly; „After, a murder, there‘s usually a scare that drives timid people to the purchase of firearms.“

For myself, however, I was not prepared to dismiss the matter so lightly.

Was it not more than a coincidence that Spain came into this case, so insistently? A sudden thought struck me, and I sent an inquiry wire to my assistant in London.

Without waiting for an answer, I drove out to the Port Helm. It has been described as „lonely“, but that inadequately describes its isolation. It stands back from the cliff road, a gaunt, unlovely building, angular of design, uninviting of aspect. The police were in possession of the house, but again fortune was with me. Had Scotland Yard men been in charge, I could have done nothing; as it happened, the local police were quite willing to oblige the „gentleman from London“.

I made a careful examination of the premises.

They were simple in their arrangement.

There was a bar, a bar parlour, a little sitting-room, and, connected by a long dark passage, a kitchen at the back. There was a small cellar, where Hilker kept his stock of coals, and this comprised the ground floor.

The only other rooms in the house were three upstairs, a large, untidy bedroom, which was Hilker‘s own, a lumber-room, and a room which was a sort of store-room. I returned to the ground floor.

„This is where the murder was committed,“ said the stolid policeman, and showed me the stain on the floor.

„This is where you think the murder was committed,“ I said, sharply, and the policeman smiled.

„He did it all right," he said, with a self-satisfied leer; „anybody who thinks he didn't must be mad."

Since I might want to visit the house again, I did not attempt to argue with the man, but, giving him half-a-sovereign for the trouble I had put him to, I went out.

From the door of the Port Helm to the edge of the cliff was about a hundred yards. I spent over an hour making a thorough survey of the ground, and found nothing—or rather, found nothing until I had given up my search in despair.

From the edge of the road to the edge of the cliff was a „border" of grass, and I was walking back-to the road to enter the carriage I had hired to bring me out to the Port Helm when I saw something glittering amongst the green. I stooped and picked up a tiny ornament. It was in the form of a six-pointed star, and was attached to a ribbon. One glance at it, and my heart leapt with excitement. It was the miniature of the Order of Charles III. of Spain!

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I WENT back to Seaport elated. Here, at any rate, was the beginning of a clue.

When one has a line to work upon half one's difficulties vanish. I determined to call upon the Spaniard, and that night, after dinner, I made my way to the Marine Hotel.

Yes, Senor Don Alberto Fuentes was in, and he would see me.

A dark young man rose to greet me.

He was calm, inscrutable, very polite, and motioned me to a seat.

„What can I do for you, sir? he asked.

He spoke English perfectly.

„I am a detective," I said, „a private detective, and I am investigating a crime which has been committed in the neighbourhood."

He nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on my face.

„You mean the murder committed by Hilker?" he said.

„I mean the murder with which Hilker is charged," I corrected. Then, as a thought struck me, I asked, quickly, „Do you know him?"

He hesitated.

„I know him slightly," he admitted. „I come to Seaport every year. It is the one place in England that is good for my chest."

„And you have met him?"

Again he hesitated.

„Yes," he said. Then, hurriedly, „You observe I hesitate. That is natural, is it not? A member of the Embassy does not care to admit that he knows a man charged with murder."

„Very natural," I said, drily. „Did you know the murdered man?"

„No."

The answer came quickly, emphatically, loudly.

„Do you know of him?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

„As much as anybody knows who reads the papers."

I took from my breast pocket the little decoration and held it in the palm of my hand.

„Do you know this?" I asked.

He looked at it with a frown.

„Yes," he said, „it is a miniature; it was stolen from me."

I met his eye, but he did not quail.

„You might like to know the circumstances," he went on. „I was motoring to London to attend a dinner—it was the King of Spain's birthday, and I carried my kit in the tonneau behind. A few miles out of Seaport I punctured a tyre. I had no mechanician with me, but fortunately, or unfortunately, I was near the Port Helm, and it was Hilker who helped me to patch the tyre. When I got to London I found my suitcase had disappeared."

Again our eyes met.

„You suggest that Hilker stole it?" I said.

„I suggest nothing," he replied, shortly.

He rose to his feet as though to bring the interview to an end.

„One more question, Senor," I said, „and I am finished. Have you purchased a revolver lately?"

„I refuse to answer any more questions," he said, and opened the door.

I returned to London by the last train that night and drove straight to Cambridge Gardens.

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THOUGH the hour was late old Hilker was at work in his study and I was shown in.

He gave me a frowning welcome. „Well," he said, „what have you discovered?"

I gave him an account of my work. I told him of the Spaniard, the miniature decoration, and the purchase of the revolver.

„And what does all that prove?" he demanded. „What is your theory?"

„I think your nephew is innocent," I replied. „I am as certain that the Spaniard knows something about the matter."

„What is his name again?"

„Fuentes," I replied.

„*Fuentes*—nonsense," he said testily. „I know Senor Fuentes—it is ridiculous to suppose that he knows anything whatever about it."

„But the decoration?"

„I'd accept his explanation. Don't I know that my nephew is the biggest villain un—"

He checked himself suddenly.

„What do the police think?" he asked, and I smiled.

„You know what the police are: they jump at the obvious conclusion."

„And quite right!" said old Hilker, violently thumping the desk with his clenched fist; „quite right! It is the obvious that requires detection. You've no more to tell me?"

All the time I had been in the room my eyes had been busy.

I had wondered when I came in what had been the business of such importance to keep a man like old Hilker out of bed at twelve o'clock at night. I had caught a glimpse of the document which had been before him when I was announced. He had swept it aside, but the words „Will and Testament", boldly engrossed, were too prominent to escape my eye.

He had been making his will. Why?

Let me piece together the scraps of information I had secured.

1. Hilker was accused of a brutal murder.
2. He denied his guilt, and talked of a dark man, a Spaniard, who sought his life.
3. A Spaniard, Fuentes, admits that he knows Hilker. Moreover, a decoration belonging to Fuentes is found on the actual scene of the crime.
4. The uncle of the accused man also knows Fuentes, is vehement in protesting the innocence of the Spaniard of any guilty knowledge, and his faith in his nephew‘s guilt.
5. Fuentes purchases a revolver and refuses to discuss the purchase.

I have said that the murdered man was an eccentric, who had spent a great deal of his time on walking tours. By dint of enquiry I discovered that he, too, had lived in Spain; more remarkable still, he had occupied a house in the Calle de Recolletos exactly opposite that in which Fuentes had lived.

At about this time Mensikoff, that brilliant head of the Russian secret police, was in London. I had been of service to him in the collection of evidence against the infamous Spilotski gang, and he had told me that if ever I was in a difficulty I was to go to him.

If ever there was an occasion where such advice should be followed it was surely now, and that night, after leaving the old man, I drove straight to the Russian‘s hotel.

„Well?“ he said, as he gave me a smiling welcome, „What brings you at this hour? Some badness. Yes?“

He spoke English with a little accent, but his diction was mainly remarkable for its curious misuse of words.

In as few words as possible I detailed, the case, and he sat, nodding his great head, as I brought out each feature of the case.

When I had finished he said:

„It looks like Hilk—what you call him?—Hilker.“

„But what of this Spanish clue?“ I protested.

„There is no remarkable, in that, my frien‘; he has been in Spain, so all foreigners are Spaniards to him. If he imagines a foreigner, he imagines a Spaniard, hein? The old man have been in Spain, so he knows Fuentes, who is a prominent man in Madrid. The murdered man, he have also been in Spain—but then he have been everywhere, all over the shop; eh?“

„But the revolver?“ I persisted, and he shrugged his shoulders.

„Over 50,000 revolvers are sold every year in England, yet every man who buys is not a murderer.“

„And you think?“ I suggested, irritably.

„I think Hilker stabbed Belmont Trair and threw him over cliff. Yes, it seems simple.“

He must have seen the look of blank disappointment which came into my face, for he laughed.

„I am police officer—eh?“ He wagged his forefinger at me. „I deal with actual, not fantastic—eh? I see a man, with his han‘s in another fellow‘s pocket. I say. ‹This is a thief›—you, *au contraire*, say, ‹Is this a thief?› an‘ try to find reasons extraordinary for his strange conduct—obvious, my frien‘, obvious—he is the little god of the secret service.“

Descending the stairs I cursed Mensikoff and his infernal „obvious“.

We were getting near the day of the trial, which was to take place at Canterton, the county town, and, hard as I had worked I had not succeeded in getting any nearer the solution of the mystery.

I returned to my fiat dispirited.

A telegram and a letter were waiting for me. It was from my assistant, who had taken charge of the London end of the case. It was brief.

„FUENTES LEFT SUDDENLY FOR SPAIN BY THE NINE O‘CLOCK BOAT TRAIN.“

So he had cleared. „Suddenly,“ said the telegram, which meant unexpectedly. I took up the letter and opened it. It was from old Hilker, and had evidently been written after I had left that night.

> „Dear Mr. Smith“ (it ran). „I am enclosing herewith a cheque for a hundred pounds, the fee I promised you in the event of your failure to establish my nephew‘s interest. I am so satisfied of his guilt that I have this night struck all reference to him out of my will. I am leaving to-morrow morning for Spain, and as I do not intend returning to England until this grisly business is over, I am settling our account.“

So he was going to Spain, too.

I made no further attempt to see him. The next morning he left London. There was nothing for me to do but to sit down and wait. I was refused any further opportunity of seeing my client, and even the solicitor who had charge of the case did not seem disposed to help me in the matter.

By careful inquiry I discovered that the revolver Fuentes could not purchase in Seaport he had secured from London. Through a friend who had the entrée to most of the embassies I found that Fuentes was a man of nervous temperament, but that was the sum total of my discoveries. There was nothing to do but sit tight and learn what the trial revealed.

And it revealed nothing.

It was tried before Mr. Justice Cadbury, and the evidence was the most ordinary I have ever listened to.

The man in the dock sat through it all unmoved. Now and again his eyes would stray to where I sat in the well of the court, and the ghost of a smile would hang about the corners of his loose mouth, then his eyes would go back to the judge, and the jury, and the witness, whichever object of interest held him for the moment.

It was all over in four hours. The jury, without retiring, returned a verdict of guilty, and Hilker stood up with his hands in his pockets, to hear the dread

sentence of the law. His face retained its colour, there was not so much as a tremor to indicate his perturbation as he listened to the sentence.

Then, turning on his heels as the last words were spoken, he went down the stairs, out of the sight of men. I was leaving the court when I heard my name called. It was the solicitor who had defended the man.

„Hilker wants to see you," he said. „Inspector Cass, who has had charge of the case, will take you to him."

I found Cass waiting for me in the corridor beneath the court.

He nodded a kindly greeting.

„He wants you," he said, and led the way.

There was a large reception-room, and in this I found my man.

He was sitting on a form, a warder at each side.

Would he give me the clue?

My heart leapt at the thought.

Now that he was face to face with death, would he drop some hint that would lead me to the right track? I felt, and had felt all along, that he could tell me more than he had done.

He looked up as I entered, and smiled wryly.

„You'll be seeing my uncle, I suppose?" he said.

„Yes," I replied.

„Well, tell him from me," he went on, „that I'm much obliged to him for the trouble he has taken; he's been a mean old dog all his life, but he's played the game at the end."

„Have you any message for Fuentes?" I asked, quietly.

He frowned.

„Fuentes? Who the devil is Fuentes? Oh, I know. The Spanish fellow. No. What message can I have for him?"

A wild fear suddenly seized me.

„But—but," I stammered, „you are not guilty?"

There was scornful amusement in his glance.

„Guilty? Of course, I'm guilty. Any fool could see that!"

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INSPECTOR CASS led the way out. I was dazed, upset.

„Look here, Mr. Smith," said Cass, with a note of irony in his tone, „you ought to write an account of this murder, it would be the most extraordinary crime story ever known."

„Why?" I asked, in astonishment.

„Why?" he repeated, „because the obvious man committed it, and the average policeman detected it."