

Bat Wing

by

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1. Paul Harley Of Chancery Lane

Toward the hour of six on a hot summer's evening Mr. Paul Harley was seated in his private office in Chancery Lane reading through a number of letters which Innes, his secretary, had placed before him for signature. Only one more remained to be passed, but it was a long, confidential report upon a certain matter, which Harley had prepared for His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department. He glanced with a sigh of weariness at the little clock upon his table before commencing to read.

"Shall detain you only a few minutes, now, Knox," he said.

I nodded, smiling. I was quite content to sit and watch my friend at work.

Paul Harley occupied a unique place in the maelstrom of vice and ambition which is sometimes called London life. Whilst at present he held no official post, some of the most momentous problems of British policy during the past five years, problems imperilling inter-state relationships and not infrequently threatening a renewal of the world war, had owed their solution to the peculiar genius of this man.

No clue to his profession appeared upon the plain brass plate attached to his door, and little did those who regarded Paul Harley merely as a successful private detective suspect that he was in the confidence of some who guided the destinies of the Empire. Paul Harley's work in Constantinople during the feverish months preceding hostilities with Turkey, although unknown to the general public, had been of a most extraordinary nature. His recommendations were never adopted, unfortunately. Otherwise, the tragedy of the Dardanelles might have been averted.

His surroundings as he sat there, gaze bent upon the typewritten pages, were those of any other professional man. So it would have seemed to the casual observer. But perhaps there was a quality in the atmosphere of the office which would have told a more sensitive visitor that it was the apartment of no ordinary man of business. Whilst there were filing cabinets and bookshelves laden with works of reference, many of them legal, a large and handsome Burmese cabinet struck an unexpected note.

On closer inspection, other splashes of significant colour must have been detected in the scheme, notably a very fine engraving of Edgar Allan Poe, from the daguerreotype of 1848; and upon the man himself lay the indelible mark of the tropics. His clean-cut features had that hint of underlying bronze which tells of years spent beneath a merciless sun, and the touch of gray at his temples only added to the eager, almost fierce vitality of the dark face. Paul Harley was notable because of that intellectual strength which does not strike one immediately, since it is purely temperamental, but which, nevertheless, invests its possessor with an aura of distinction.

Writing his name at the bottom of the report, Paul Harley enclosed the pages in a long envelope and dropped the envelope into a basket which contained a number of other letters. His work for the day was ended, and glancing at me with

a triumphant smile, he stood up. His office was a part of a residential suite, but although, like some old-time burgher of the city, he lived on the premises, the shutting of a door which led to his private rooms marked the close of the business day. Pressing a bell which connected with the public office occupied by his secretary, Paul Harley stood up as Innes entered.

"There's nothing further, is there, Innes?" he asked.

"Nothing, Mr. Harley, if you have passed the Home Office report?"

Paul Harley laughed shortly.

"There it is," he replied, pointing to the basket; "a tedious and thankless job, Innes. It is the fifth draft you have prepared and it will have to do."

He took up a letter which lay unsealed upon the table. "This is the Rokeby affair," he said. "I have decided to hold it over, after all, until my return."

"Ah!" said Innes, quietly glancing at each envelope as he took it from the basket.

"I see you have turned down the little job offered by the Marquis."

"I have," replied Harley, smiling grimly, "and a fee of five hundred guineas with it. I have also intimated to that distressed nobleman that this is a business office and that a laundry is the proper place to take his dirty linen. No, there's nothing further to-night, Innes. You can get along now. Has Miss Smith gone?"

But as if in answer to his enquiry the typist, who with Innes made up the entire staff of the office, came in at that moment, a card in her hand. Harley glanced across in my direction and then at the card, with a wry expression.

"Colonel Juan Menendez," he read aloud, "Cavendish Club," and glanced reflectively at Innes. "Do we know the Colonel?"

"I think not," answered Innes; "the name is unfamiliar to me."

"I wonder," murmured Harley. He glanced across at me. "It's an awful nuisance, Knox, but just as I thought the decks were clear. Is it something really interesting, or does he want a woman watched? However, his name sounds piquant, so perhaps I had better see him. Ask him to come in, Miss Smith."

Innes and Miss Smith retiring, there presently entered a man of most striking and unusual presence. In the first place, Colonel Menendez must have stood fully six feet in his boots, and he carried himself like a grandee of the golden days of Spain. His complexion was extraordinarily dusky, whilst his hair, which was close cropped, was iron gray. His heavy eyebrows and curling moustache with its little points were equally black, so that his large teeth gleamed very fiercely when he smiled. His eyes were large, dark, and brilliant, and although he wore an admirably cut tweed suit, for some reason I pictured him as habitually wearing riding kit. Indeed I almost seemed to hear the jingle of his spurs.

He carried an ebony cane for which I mentally substituted a crop, and his black derby hat I thought hardly as suitable as a sombrero. His age might have been anything between fifty and fifty-five.

Standing in the doorway he bowed, and if his smile was Mephistophelean, there was much about Colonel Juan Menendez which commanded respect.

"Mr. Harley," he began, and his high, thin voice afforded yet another surprise, "I feel somewhat ill at ease to--how do you say it?-- appropriate your time, as I am by no means sure that what I have to say justifies my doing so."

He spoke most fluent, indeed florid, English. But his sentences at times were oddly constructed; yet, save for a faint accent, and his frequent interpolation of such expressions as "how do you say?"--a sort of nervous mannerism--one might have supposed him to be a Britisher who had lived much abroad. I formed the opinion that he had read extensively, and this, as I learned later, was indeed the case.

"Sit down, Colonel Menendez," said Harley with quiet geniality. "Officially, my working day is ended, I admit, but if you have no objection to the presence of my friend, Mr. Knox, I shall be most happy to chat with you."

He smiled in a way all his own.

"If your business is of a painfully professional nature," he added, "I must beg you to excuse me for fourteen days, as I am taking a badly needed holiday with my friend."

"Ah, is it so?" replied the Colonel, placing his hat and cane upon the table, and sitting down rather wearily in a big leathern armchair which Harley had pushed forward. "If I intrude I am sorry, but indeed my business is urgent, and I come to you on the recommendation of my friend, Senor Don Merry del Val, the Spanish Ambassador."

He raised his eyes to Harley's face with an expression of peculiar appeal. I rose to depart, but:

"Sit down, Knox," said Harley, and turned again to the visitor. "Please proceed," he requested. "Mr. Knox has been with me in some of the most delicate cases which I have ever handled, and you may rely upon his discretion as you may rely upon mine." He pushed forward a box of cigars. "Will you smoke?"

"Thanks, no," was the answer; "you see, I rarely smoke anything but my cigarettes."

Colonel Menendez extracted a slip of rice paper from a little packet which he carried, next, dipping two long, yellow fingers into his coat pocket, he brought out a portion of tobacco, laid it in the paper, and almost in the twinkling of an eye had made, rolled, and lighted a very creditable cigarette. His dexterity was astonishing, and seeing my surprise he raised his heavy eyebrows, and:

"Practice makes perfect, is it not said?" he remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped the extinguished match in an ash tray, whilst I studied him with increasing interest. Some dread, real or imaginary, was oppressing the man's mind, I mused. I felt my presence to be unwelcome, but:

"Very well," he began, suddenly. "I expect, Mr. Harley, that you will be disposed to regard what I have to tell you rather as a symptom of what you call nerves than as evidence of any agency directed against me."

Paul Harley stared curiously at the speaker. "Do I understand you to suspect that someone is desirous of harming you?" he enquired.

Colonel Menendez slowly nodded his head.

"Such is my meaning," he replied.

"You refer to bodily harm?"

"But yes, emphatically."

"Hm," said Harley; and taking out a tin of tobacco from a cabinet beside him he began in leisurely manner to load a briar. "No doubt you have good reasons for this suspicion?"

"If I had not good reasons, Mr. Harley, nothing could have induced me to trouble you. Yet, even now that I have compelled myself to come here, I find it difficult, almost impossible, to explain those reasons to you."

An expression of embarrassment appeared upon the brown face, and now Colonel Menendez paused and was plainly at a loss for words with which to continue.

Harley replaced the tin in the cupboard and struck a match. Lighting his pipe he nodded good humouredly as if to say, "I quite understand." As a matter of fact, he probably thought, as I did, that this was a familiar case of a man of possibly blameless life who had become subject to that delusion which leads people to believe themselves threatened by mysterious and unnameable danger.

Our visitor inhaled deeply.

"You, of course, are waiting for the facts," he presently resumed, speaking with a slowness which told of a mind labouring for the right mode of expression. "These are so scanty, I fear, of so, shall I say, phantom a kind, that even when they are in your possession you will consider me to be merely the victim of a delusion. In the first place, then, I have reason to believe that someone followed me from my home to your office."

"Indeed," said Paul Harley, sympathetically, for this I perceived was exactly what he had anticipated, and merely tended to confirm his suspicion. "Some member of your household?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you actually see this follower?"

"My dear sir," cried Colonel Menendez, excitement emphasizing his accent, "if I had seen him, so much would have been made clear, so much! I have never seen him, but I have heard him and felt him--felt his presence, I mean."

"In what way?" asked Harley, leaning back in his chair and studying the fierce face.

"On several occasions on turning out the light in my bedroom and looking across the lawn from my window I have observed the shadow of someone--how do you say?--lurking in the garden."

"The shadow?"

"Precisely. The person himself was concealed beneath a tree. When he moved his shadow was visible on the ground."

"You were not deceived by a waving branch?"

"Certainly not. I speak of a still, moonlight night."

"Possibly, then, it was the shadow of a tramp," suggested Harley. "I gather that you refer to a house in the country?"

"It was not," declared Colonel Menendez, emphatically; "it was not. I wish to God I could believe it had been. Then there was, a month ago, an attempt to enter my house."

Paul Harley exhibited evidence of a quickening curiosity. He had perceived, as I had perceived, that the manner of the speaker differed from that of the ordinary victim of delusion, with whom he had become professionally familiar.

"You had actual evidence of this?" he suggested.

"It was due to insomnia, sleeplessness, brought about, yes, I will admit it, by apprehension, that I heard the footsteps of this intruder."

"But you did not see him?"

"Only his shadow"

"What!"

"You can obtain the evidence of all my household that someone had actually entered," declared Colonel Menendez, eagerly. "Of this, at least, I can give you the certain facts. Whoever it was had obtained access through a kitchen window, had forced two locks, and was coming stealthily along the hallway when the sound of his footsteps attracted my attention."

"What did you do?"

"I came out on to the landing and looked down the stairs. But even the slight sound which I made had been sufficient to alarm the midnight visitor, for I had never a glimpse of him. Only, as he went swiftly back in the direction from which he had come, the moonlight shining in through a window in the hall cast his shadow on the carpet."

"Strange," murmured Harley. "Very strange, indeed. The shadow told you nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

Colonel Menendez hesitated momentarily, and glanced swiftly across at Harley.

"It was just a vague--do you say blur?--and then it was gone. But--"

"Yes," said Harley. "But?"

"Ah," Colonel Menendez blew a cloud of smoke into the air, "I come now to the matter which I find so hard to explain."

He inhaled again deeply and was silent for a while.

"Nothing was stolen?" asked Harley.

"Nothing whatever."

"And no clue was left behind?"

"No clue except the filed fastening of a window and two open doors which had been locked as usual when the household retired."

"Hm," mused Harley again; "this incident, of course, may have been an isolated one and in no way connected with the surveillance of which you complain. I mean that this person who undoubtedly entered your house might prove to be an ordinary burglar."

"On a table in the hallway of Cray's Folly," replied Colonel Menendez, impressively--"so my house is named--stands a case containing presentation gold plate. The moonlight of which I have spoken was shining fully upon this case, and does the burglar live who will pass such a prize and leave it untouched?"

"I quite agree," said Harley, quietly, "that this is a very big point."

"You are beginning at last," suggested the Colonel, "to believe that my suspicions are not quite groundless?"

"There is a distinct possibility that they are more than suspicions," agreed Harley; "but may I suggest that there is something else? Have you an enemy?"

"Who that has ever held public office is without enemies?"

"Ah, quite so. Then I suggest again that there is something else."

He gazed keenly at his visitor, and the latter, whilst meeting the look unflinchingly with his large dark eyes, was unable to conceal the fact that he had received a home thrust.

"There are two points, Mr. Harley," he finally confessed, "almost certainly associated one with the other, if you understand, but both these so--shall I say remote?--from my life, that I hesitate to mention them. It seems fantastic to suppose that they contain a clue."

"I beg of you," said Harley, "to keep nothing back, however remote it may appear to be. It is sometimes the seemingly remote things which prove upon investigation to be the most intimate."

"Very well," resumed Colonel Menendez, beginning to roll a second cigarette whilst continuing to smoke the first, "I know that you are right, of course, but it is nevertheless very difficult for me to explain. I mentioned the attempted burglary, if so I may term it, in order to clear your mind of the idea that my fears were a myth. The next point which I have concerns a man, a neighbour of mine in Surrey. Before I proceed I should like to make it clear that I do not believe for a moment that he is responsible for this unpleasant business."

Harley stared at him curiously. "Nevertheless," he said, "there must be some data in your possession which suggest to your mind that he has some connection with it."

"There are, Mr. Harley, but they belong to things so mystic and far away from ordinary crime that I fear you will think me," he shrugged his great shoulders, "a man haunted by strange superstitions. Do you say 'haunted?' Good. You understand. I should tell you, then, that although of pure Spanish blood, I was born in Cuba. The greater part of my life has been spent in the West Indies, where prior to '98 I held an appointment under the Spanish Government. I have property, not only in Cuba, but in some of the smaller islands which formerly were Spanish, and I shall not conceal from you that during the latter years of my administration I incurred the enmity of a section of the population. Do I make myself clear?"

Paul Harley nodded and exchanged a swift glance with me. I formed a rapid mental picture of native life under the governorship of Colonel Juan Menendez and I began to consider his story from a new viewpoint. Seemingly rendered restless by his reflections, he stood up and began to pace the floor, a tall but curiously graceful figure. I noticed the bulldog tenacity of his chin, the intense pride in his bearing, and I wondered what kind of menace had induced him to seek the aid of Paul Harley; for whatever his failings might be, and I could guess at the nature of several of them, that this thin-lipped Spanish soldier knew the meaning of fear I was not prepared to believe.

"Before you proceed further, Colonel Menendez," said Harley, "might I ask when you left Cuba?"

"Some three years ago," was his reply. "Because--" he hesitated curiously--"of health motives, I leased a property in England, believing that here I should find peace."

"In other words, you were afraid of something or someone in Cuba?"

Colonel Menendez turned in a flash, glaring down at the speaker.

"I never feared any man in my life, Mr. Harley," he said, coldly.

"Then why are you here?"

The Colonel placed the stump of his first cigarette in an ash tray and lighted that which he had newly made.

"It is true," he admitted. "Forgive me. Yet what I said was that I never feared any man."

He stood squarely in front of the Burmese cabinet, resting one hand upon his hip. Then he added a remark which surprised me.

"Do you know anything of Voodoo?" he asked.

Paul Harley took his pipe from between his teeth and stared at the speaker silently for a moment. "Voodoo?" he echoed. "You mean negro magic?"

"Exactly."

"My studies have certainly not embraced it," replied Harley, quietly, "nor has it hitherto come within my experience. But since I have lived much in the East, I am prepared to learn that Voodoo may not be a negligible quantity. There are forces at work in India which we in England improperly understand. The same may be true of Cuba."

"The same is true of Cuba."

Colonel Menendez glared almost fiercely across the room at Paul Harley.

"And do I understand," asked the latter, "that the danger which you believe to threaten you is associated with Cuba?"

"That, Mr. Harley, is for you to decide when all the facts shall be in your possession. Do you wish that I proceed?"

"By all means. I must confess that I am intensely interested."

"Very well, Mr. Harley. I have something to show you."

From an inside breast pocket Colonel Menendez drew out a gold-mounted case, and from the case took some flat, irregularly shaped object wrapped in a piece of tissue paper. Unfolding the paper, he strode across and laid the object which it had contained upon the blotting pad in front of my friend.

Impelled by curiosity I stood up and advanced to inspect it. It was of a dirty brown colour, some five or six inches long, and appeared to consist of a kind of membrane. Harley, his elbow on the table, was staring down at it questioningly.

"What is it?" I said; "some kind of leaf?"

"No," replied Harley, looking up into the dark face of the Spanish colonel; "I think I know what it is."

"I, also, know what it is," declared Colonel Menendez, grimly. "But tell me what to you it seems like, Mr. Harley?"

Paul Harley's expression was compounded of incredulity, wonder, and something else, as, continuing to stare at the speaker, he replied:

"It is the wing of a bat."

2. The Voodoo Swamp

Often enough my memory has recaptured that moment in Paul Harley's office, when Harley, myself, and the tall Spaniard stood looking down at the bat wing lying upon the blotting pad.

My brilliant friend at times displayed a sort of prescience, of which I may have occasion to speak later, but I, together with the rest of pur-blind humanity, am commonly immune from the prophetic instinct. Therefore I chronicle the fact for what it may be worth, that as I gazed with a sort of disgust at the exhibit lying upon the table I became possessed of a conviction, which had no logical basis, that a door had been opened through which I should step into a new avenue of being; I felt myself to stand upon the threshold of things strange and terrible, but withal alluring. Perhaps it is true that in the great crises of life the inner eye becomes momentarily opened.

With intense curiosity I awaited the Colonel's next words, but, a cigarette held nervously between his fingers, he stood staring at Harley, and it was the latter who broke that peculiar silence which had fallen upon us.

"The wing of a bat," he murmured, then touched it gingerly. "Of what kind of bat, Colonel Menendez? Surely not a British species?"

"But emphatically not a British species," replied the Spaniard. "Yet even so the matter would be strange."

"I am all anxiety to learn the remainder of your story, Colonel Menendez."

"Good. Your interest comforts me very greatly, Mr. Harley. But when first I came, you led me to suppose that you were departing from London?"

"Such, at the time, was my intention, sir." Paul Harley smiled slightly.

"Accompanied by my friend, Mr. Knox, I had proposed to indulge in a fortnight's fishing upon the Norfolk Broads."

"Fishing?"

"Yes."

"A peaceful occupation, Mr. Harley, and a great rest-cure for one who like yourself moves much amid the fiercer passions of life. You were about to make holiday?"

Paul Harley nodded.

"It is cruel of me to intrude upon such plans," continued Colonel Menendez, dexterously rolling his cigarette around between his fingers. "Yet because of my urgent need I dare to do so. Would yourself and your friend honour me with your company at Cray's Folly for a few days? I can promise you good entertainment, although I regret that there is no fishing; but it may chance that there will be other and more exciting sport."

Harley glanced at me significantly.

"Do I understand you to mean, Colonel Menendez," he asked, "that you have reason to believe that this conspiracy directed against you is about to come to a head?"

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