THE CZAR'S SPY

By Chevalier William Le Queux

CHAPTER I.

"There was a mysterious affair last night, signore."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "Anything that interests us?"

"Yes, signore," replied the tall, thin Italian Consular clerk, speaking with a strong accent. "An English steam yacht ran aground on the Meloria about ten miles out, and was discovered by a fishing boat who brought the news to harbor. The Admiral sent out two torpedoboats, which managed after a lot of difficulty to bring in the yacht safely, but the Captain of the Port has a suspicion that the crew were trying to make away with the vessel."

"To lose her, you mean?"

The faithful Francesco, whose English had mostly been acquired from sea-faring men, and was not the choicest vocabulary, nodded, and, true Tuscan that he was, placed his finger upon his closed lips, indicative of silence.

"Sounds curious," I remarked. "Since the Consul went away on leave things seem to have been humming—two stabbing affrays, eight drunken seamen locked up, a mutiny on a tramp steamer, and now a yacht being cast away—a fairly decent list! And yet some stay-at-home people complain that British Consuls are only paid to be ornamental! They should spend a week here, at Leghorn, and they'd soon alter their opinion."

"Yes, they would, signore," responded the thin-faced old fellow with a grin, as he twisted his fierce gray mustache. Francesco Carducci was a well-known character in Leghorn; interpreter to the Consulate, and keeper of a sailors' home, an honest, good-hearted, easy-going fellow, who for twenty years had occupied the same position under half a dozen different Consuls. At that moment, however, there came from the outer office a long-drawn moan.

"Hulloa, what's that?" I inquired, startled.

"Only a mad stoker off the Oleander, signore. The captain has brought him for you to see. They want to send him back to his friends at Newcastle."

"Oh! a case of madness!" I exclaimed. "Better get Dr. Ridolfi to see him. I'm not an expert on mental diseases."

My old friend, Frank Hutcheson, His Britannic Majesty's Vice-Consul at the port of Leghorn, was away on leave in England, his duties being relegated to young Bertram Cavendish, the pro-Consul. The latter, however, had gone down with a bad touch of malaria which he had picked up in the deadly Maremma, and I, as the only other Englishman in Leghorn, had been asked by the Consul-General in Florence to act as pro-Consul until Hutcheson's return.

It was mid-July, and the weather was blazing in the glaring sun-blanched Mediterranean town. If you know Leghorn, you probably know the Consulate, with its black and yellow escutcheon outside, a large, handsome suite of huge, airy offices facing the cathedral, and overlooking the principal piazza, which is as big as Trafalgar Square, and much more picturesque. The legend painted upon the door, "Office hours, 10 to 3," and the green persiennes closed against the scorching sun give one the idea of an easy appointment, but such is certainly not the case, for a Consul's life at a port of discharge must necessarily be a very active one, and his duties never-ending.

Carducci had left me to the correspondence for half an hour or so, and I confess I was in no mood to write replies in that stifling heat, therefore I sat at the Consul's big table, smoking a cigarette and stretched lazily in my friend's chair, resolving to escape to the cool of England as soon as he returned in the following week. Italy is all very well for nine months in the year, but Leghorn is no place for the Englishman in mid-July. My thoughts were wandering toward the English lakes, and a bit of grouse-shooting with my uncle up in Scotland, when the faithful Francesco re-entered, saying:

"I've sent the captain and his madman away till this afternoon, signore. But there is an English signore waiting to see you."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know him. He will give no name, but wants to see the Signor Console."

"All right, show him in," I said lazily, and a few moments later a tall, smartly-dressed, middle-aged Englishman, in a navy serge yachting suit, entered, and bowing, inquired whether I was the British Consul.

When he had seated himself I explained my position, whereupon he said:

"I couldn't make much out of your clerk. He speaks so brokenly, and I don't know a word of Italian. My name is Philip Hornby," and he handed me a card bearing the name with the addresses "Woodcroft Park, Somerset ——— Brook's." Then he added: "I am cruising on board my yacht, the Lola, and last night we unfortunately went aground on the Meloria. I have a new captain whom I engaged a few months ago, and he seems an arrant fool. Very fortunately for us a fishing boat saw our plight and gave the alarm at port. The Admiral sent out two torpedoboats and a tug, and after about three hours they managed to get us off."

"And you are now in harbor?"

"Yes. But the reason I've called is to ask you to do me a favor and write me a letter of thanks in Italian to the Admiral, and one to the Captain of the Port—polite letters that I can copy and send to them. You know the kind of thing."

"Certainly," I replied, the more interested in him on account of the curious suspicion that the port authorities seemed to entertain. He was evidently a gentleman, and after I had been with him ten minutes I scouted the idea that he had endeavored to cast away the Lola.

I took down a couple of sheets of paper and scribbled the drafts of two letters couched in the most elegant phraseology, as is customary when addressing Italian officialdom.

"Fortunately, I left my wife in England, or she would have been terribly frightened," he remarked presently. "There was a nasty wind blowing all night, and the fool of a captain seemed to add to our peril by every order he gave."

"You are alone, then?"

"I have a friend with me," was the answer.

"And how many of the crew are there?"

"Sixteen, all told."

"English, I suppose?"

"Not all. I find French and Italians are more sober than English, and better behaved in port."

I examined him critically as he sat facing me, and the mere fact of his desire to send thanks to the authorities convinced me that he was a well-bred gentleman. He was about forty-five, with a merry, round, good-natured face, red with the southern sun, blue eyes, and a short fair beard. His countenance was essentially that of a man devoted to open-air sport, for it was slightly furrowed and weather-meaten as a true yachtsman's should be. His speech was refined and cultivated, and as we chatted he gave me the impression that as an enthusiastic lover of the sea, he had cruised the Mediterranean many times from Gibraltar up to Smyrna. He had, however, never before put into Leghorn.

After we had arranged that his captain should come to me in the afternoon and make a formal report of the accident, we went out together across the white sunny piazza to Nasi's, the well-known pastry cook's, where it is the habit of the Livornese to take their ante-luncheon vermouth.

The more I saw of Hornby, the more I liked him. He was chatty and witty, and treated his accident as a huge joke.

"We shall be here quite a week, I suppose," he said as we were taking our vermouth. "We're on our way down to the Greek Islands, as my friend Charter wants to see them. The engineer says there's something strained that we must get mended. But, by the way," he added, "why don't you dine with us on board to-night? Do. We can give you a few English things that may be a change to you."

This invitation I gladly accepted for two reasons. One was because the suspicions of the Captain of the Port had aroused my curiosity, and the other was because I had, honestly speaking, taken a great fancy to Hornby.

The captain of the Lola, a short, thickset Scotsman from Dundee, with a barely healed cicatrice across his left cheek, called at the Consulate at 2 o'clock and made his report, which appeared to me to be a very lame one. He struck me as being unworthy his certificate, for he was evidently entirely out of his bearings when the accident occurred. The owner and his friend Charter were in their berths asleep, when suddenly he discovered that the vessel was making no headway. They had, in fact, run upon the dangerous shoal without being aware of it. A strong sea was running with a stiff breeze, and although his seamanship was poor, he was capable enough to recognize at once that they were in a very perilous position.

"Very fortunate it wasn't more serious, sir," he added, after telling me his story, which I wrote at his dictation for the ultimate benefit of the Board of Trade.

"Didn't you send up signals of distress?" I inquired.

"No, sir—never thought of it."

"And yet you knew that you might be lost?" I remarked with recurring suspicion.

The canny Scot, whose name was Mackintosh, hesitated a few moments, then answered:

"Well, sir, you see the fishing boat had sighted us, and we saw her turning back to port to fetch help."

His excuse was a neat one. Probably it was his neglect to make signals of distress that had aroused the suspicions of the Captain of the Port. From first to last the story of the master of the Lola was, I considered, a very unsatisfactory one.

"How long have you been in Mr. Hornby's service?" I inquired.

"Six months, sir," was the man's reply. "Before he engaged me, I was with the Wilsons of Hull, running up the Baltic."

"As master?"

"I've held my master's certificate these fifteen years, sir. I was with the Bibbys before the Wilsons, and before that with the General Steam. I did eight years in the Mediterranean with them, when I was chief mate."

"And you've never been into Leghorn before?"

"Never, sir."

I dismissed the captain with a distinct impression that he had not told me the whole truth. That cicatrice did not improve his personal appearance. He had left his certificates on board he said, but if I wished he would bring them to me on the morrow.

Was it possible that an attempt had actually been made to cast away the yacht, and that it had been frustrated by the master of the felucca, who had sighted the vessel aground? There certainly seemed some mystery surrounding the circumstances, and my interest in the yacht and its owner deepened each hour. How, I wondered, had the captain received that very ugly wound across the cheek? I was half-inclined to inquire of him, but on reflection decided that it was best to betray no undue curiosity.

That evening when the fiery sun was sinking in its crimson glory, bathing the glassy sea with its blood-red light and causing the islands of Gorgona and Capraja to loom forth a deep purple against the distant horizon, I took a cab along the old sea road to the port where, within the inner harbor, I found the Lola, one of the most magnificent private vessels I had ever seen. Her dimensions surprised me. She was painted dead white, with shining brass everywhere. At the stern hung limply the British flag, while at the masthead the ensign of the Royal Yacht Squadron. The yellow funnel emitted no smoke, and as she lay calmly in the sunset a crowd of dock-loungers and crimps leaned upon the parapet discussing her merits and wondering who could be the rich Englishman who could afford to travel in a small liner of his own—for her size surprised even those Italian dock hands, used as they were to seeing every kind of craft enter the busy port.

On stepping on deck Hornby, who like myself wore a clean suit of white linen as the most sensible dinner garb in a hot climate, came forward to greet me, and took me along to the stern where, lying in a long wicker deck chair beneath the awning, was a tall, dark-eyed, clean-shaven man of about forty, also dressed in cool white linen. His keen face gave one the impression that he was a barrister.

"My friend, Hylton Chater—Mr. Gordon Gregg," he said, introducing us, and then when, as we shook hands, the clean-shaven man exclaimed, smiling pleasantly:

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Gregg. You are not a stranged by any means to Hornby or myself. Indeed, we've got a couple of your books on board. But I had no idea you lived out here."

"At Ardenza," I said. "Three miles along the seashore. To-morrow I hope you'll both come and dine with me."

"Delighted, I'm sure," declared Hornby. "To eat ashore is quite a treat when one has been boxed up on board for some time. So we'll accept, won't we, Hylton?"

"Certainly," replied the other; and then we began chatting about the peril of the previous night, Hornby telling me how he had copied the two letters of thanks in Italian and sent them to their respective addresses.

"Phil blasphemed like a Levant skipper when he copied those Italian words!" laughed Chater. "He had made three copies of each letter before he could get all the lingo in accordance with your copy."

"I've been the whole afternoon at them—confound them!" declared the owner of the Lola with a laugh. "But, of course, I didn't want to make a lot of errors in spelling. These Italians are so very punctilious."

"Well, you certainly did the right thing to thank the Admiral," I said. "It's very unusual for him to send out torpedoboats to help a vessel in distress. That is generally left to the harbor tug."

"Yes, I feel that it was most kind of him. That's why I took all the trouble to write. I don't understand a word of Italian, neither does Chater."

"But you have Italians on board?" I remarked. "The two sailors who rowed me out are Genoese, from their accent.

Hornby and Chater exchanged glances—glances of distinct uneasiness, I thought.

Then the owner of the Lola said:

"Yes, they are useful for making arrangements and buying things in Italian ports. We have a Spaniard, a Greek, and a Syrian, all of whom act as interpreters in different places."

(Continued on Tenth Page)