The Czar's Spy

The Mystery of a Silent Love

By Chevalier WILLIAM LE QUEUX Author of "The Closed Book," etc.

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CHAPTER I.

His Britannic Majesty's Service.

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

"Oh!" I ejaculated. "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 preceded by a fishing boat that brought the news to harbor. The admiral sent out two torpedo boats, 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?"

"Precisely, signore."

"Sounds curious," I remarked. "There the consul was busy on some 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-lipped clerk with a leer grin, as he twisted his fierce gray moustache. "Perhaps Cardinet was well known character in Leghorn. An honest, good-hearted, easy-going fellow, who for twenty years had occupied the same position under half a dozen different consuls."

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 Cardinet, the pro-consul. The latter, however, had gone down with a bad touch of malaria, and I, 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, a large, handsome suite of huge, airy offices facing the quay-side. The legend painted upon the door, "Office hours, 10 to 2," gives 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.

Cardinet had left me to the correspondence for a half an hour or so, when he re-entered, saying:

"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 signore consule."

"All right, show him in," I said lazily, and a few moments later a tall, smartly-dressed middle-aged Englishman 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 spoke so broken, and I don't know a word of Italian. But perhaps I ought to first introduce myself. My name is Philip Hornby—and he handed me a card bearing the name with the addresses "Wee-croft Park, Somerset——Brooks." Then he added: "I am cruising on board my yacht, the Lois, and last night we unfortunately went aground on the Meloria. Very fortunately for us a fishing-boat saw our plight and gave the alarm to our consul, the admiral sent out two torpedo-boats 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 to Italian 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 assured the idea that he had endeavored to cast away the Lois.

I accordingly did drafts of two letters. "Fortunately, I left my wife in England, or she would have been terribly frightened," he remarked presently. "There was a nasty and blowing all night, and the fool of a captain seemed in no end of a funk about it. 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 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 before, and was familiar 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 plaza to Nada's.

"We shall be here quite a week, I suppose," he said as we were taking our vermouth. "Have an eye down to the Greek island, as my friend Chater wants to see them. The engineer says there's something strained in the stabbing affair, right 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."

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