A FORTUNATE DISCOVERY.

One of my first duties after the declaration of war was to get rid of Fensohn, the German Consul who was acting as agent for the Red D Line and who as such was one of the leading business men on the island. One who has not lived in the tropics, particularly in one of the islands more or less separated from the rest of the world, cannot realize what the regular calls of a steamship line from home mean. The Red D Line is one of the few American steamship companies that survived the depression in American shipping. For half a century the ships of this line have been plying between New York and Porto Rico and the ports of Maracaibo, La Guaira, and Puerto Cabello in Venezuela via Curacao. Once every week we could expect to see either the Caracas, the Maracaibo, Zulia, or the Philadelphia, arrive in port. They would stay a day and then proceed to La Guaira and Puerto Cabello, stop at Curacao on the return journey to New York. In addition to these steamers we had the Merida, a small steamer which acted as sort of a ferry between Curacao and La Guaira and Maracaibo. Her Captain, Capt. Johannesen, was one of the most widely known men in that part of the world for he had been master of one steamer after another in this trade.

The captains of these Red D Line ships became our fast friends and lunched or dined with us as regularly as their ship came into port. Food was always a difficult problem on the island as owing to the lack of rain it was impossible to raise cattle other than goats and
what these latter lived on it would be very difficult to determine. They nibbled away at the cactus, pushing away the sharp spines with their fore feet, and in some way they were able to reach the succulent leaves of the few small trees that flourished in spite of the arid soil. The ordinary meat that we consumed was from lean cattle brought from Venezuela and Colombia and slaughtered on the day on which it was consumed. In those days there were no adequate refrigerating facilities on the island to keep meat. The captains of these Red D steamers brought with them in the ice box of the ship choice morsels of beef, of lamb, and veal, which were a rich addition to our larder, and they brought us many other delicacies which we would otherwise have had to go without.

This line of steamers is operated by Bliss Dallett & Company of New York who hold the majority of the stock but as the boats depended to a very considerable extent for the cargo which they received on the rich German merchants in Venezuela and Colombia, the relations of the line with these firms were very close. The Caracas office was largely controlled by German interests although its head was a Venezuelan named Rojas. In Curacao the agent was Fensohn who maintained a large office and took a very active part in the social and business life of the city. When I arrived in Curacao I found what seemed to be an unusual number of bright and intelligent young Germans on his staff. It seemed rather strange that in a place where capable local help was available at so moderate a salary he should have at least
five or six Germans from home with him to whom he undoubtedly had to pay at least two or three times the salary which he would have paid to a Curacao man. I soon found too that Fensohn was assuming a very arrogant attitude not only towards the merchants of the place but towards his consular colleagues.

Immediately after the declaration of war I prepared a report on his firm and transmitted it to Washington recommending that he be placed on the blacklist immediately and be removed as the agent of the Red D Line. Copies of the report were transmitted to our Legation at Caracas and telegraphic instructions arrived immediately from Washington to the Curacao and Caracas offices that the staff was to be re-organized so as to eliminate all German influence. Rojas arrived at Curacao from Caracas and without calling upon me or in any way getting in touch with the consulate, began to re-organize the Curacao office and after about a week's stay called to see me and explained rather briefly and authoritatively what he had done. I had in the meantime learned what the nature of the reorganization in Caracas had been and it was clear that it was mere camouflage and that the German interests were as strong as ever. For some reason however our Legation had not objected to the reorganization but as I saw that the Curacao staff as Rojas had fixed it was merely a show window and that behind the counter the same German influences were running the business, I informed him that his week's labor had been in vain and that a completely new organization would have to be set up which would be entirely clear of all suspicion. He was thunderstruck in view of
his having put it over so easily in Caracas and endeavored to intimidate me. He left the office insisting that he would not change his plan. I merely informed Washington of the situation and he evidently shortly received telegraphic instructions from his principals in New York to set the matter straight for within a few days a proper reorganization was brought about and all German influence eliminated from this important American interest.

Shortly after this had happened, and before our entrance into the war, it had been brought to my attention that one by one the young German employees of Fensohn were leaving rather suddenly and mysteriously. Where they went no one seemed to know. One of them named Westphal had remained behind and shortly after our declaration of war I received a very arrogant message from Fensohn's office to visa the passport of Westphal for Cuba, for which country I then happened to be acting as consul. In view of his German nationality the visa was naturally refused, and to my surprise I learned a few days later that Westphal had mysteriously disappeared in the same manner as his former associates but in the stress of the events which followed I forgot all about him.

Fensohn also had on his staff a man named De Haseth, a tall good-looking Curacaan, of Dutch parentage. He was a typical tropical beau, always well dressed and had the atrocious habit of using perfumes. It was probably the latter and his somewhat effeminate manner that
made him so highly objectionable to me. During the first month of the war De Haseth came to my office on the afternoon of our weekly mail day from the States and handed me with some perturbation an envelope. He said that he had just received this letter that day and was unable to understand what it was all about. After carefully examining the envelope and the letter I found nothing really extraordinary about them. The envelope was addressed to him at his home address in Curacao and had on it a Cuban stamp with the cancellation mark showing that the letter had been mailed in Havana. In the upper left-hand corner was the name of some trading company the exact title of which I now forget, with its address given as Baltimore, Maryland. In the envelope was an insurance policy issued by a Danish or Swedish insurance company with its head office in New York and issued at the branch office in Baltimore. There was nothing extraordinary about this policy as it was the usual one covering a shipment of goods and in this instance it covered a shipment of several cases of merchandise made by Mr. De Haseth to Liverpool. The only unusual feature about the policy was that some of the lines in the printed contract on the policy were underlined, but there seemed nothing extraordinary about this as the underlined words contained the usual war risk clause which was then appearing in these documents. The envelope contained no letter.

I asked De Haseth why he showed this document to me and then he explained that he had left Mr. Fensohn's employ in view of the fact that he was intensely pro-ally in his sympathies.
and could no longer work with a German
and that he was hoping to make his living
by opening a small import and export business
at Curacao. He went on to say that he had
made no shipments from the United States to
Liverpool and therefore had no idea what
this policy which he had received referred
to, but expressed the fear that somebody was
using his name for shipments which might
not be entirely in order and that through
such misuse of his name he might get into
trouble with the American authorities and be
placed on the blacklist and his prospect of
making a living interfered with. It was
suggested to him that he leave the envelope
and its contents at the consulate and bring
to us anything further which might come to
him along the same line. I spent quite a
number of hours pouring over this envelope
and the policy as I had the intuition that
there was something wrong about the matter but
could arrive at nothing definite.

When the next mail steamer from home had
arrived Mr. De Haseth called at the consulate
again in even greater perturbation and showed
another envelope which he had received that day
with its enclosure. This envelope was identical
with the one already described except that the
cancellation mark on the stamp showed mailing
at Havana some days later than the first one.
It contained a letter at the top of which was
the name of the trading company at Baltimore,
the same as on the outside of the envelope. The
letter was dated at Baltimore and addressed to
Mr. De Haseth in the usual manner and consisted
only of a few lines. The exact wording of the
letter I forget but it was something as follows:
"With reference to the shipment which we recently made for your account to Liverpool we send you herewith for your information and files a copy of the insurance policy covering the shipment. Your attention is respectfully directed to the underlined section of the policy referring to the war risks now current and which are not covered by this policy". The letter was signed by some illegible name for the trading company.

De Haseth excitedly informed me that he was now convinced that someone was using his name for improper shipments and he asked that the consulate protect his interests. As I had made discreet inquiries concerning De Haseth in the meantime and had become convinced that he was acting in good faith, he was assured that his interests would be protected so far as it lay in our power, and he was asked to leave the letter and not fail to give us any further such mail which might reach him. He was asked if he had any idea who might be using his name but he said that he knew no one in Baltimore or in Havana. There was one feature however which seemed to worry him. He was a very vain and extraordinarily meticulous person and he said that the way his name was spelled on the letter was not correct and that the only person who had always persisted in misspelling his name in this way was Westphal, one of the Germans formerly associated with him in Fensohn’s office. This mention of Westphal's name naturally brought back his sudden disappearance from the island and the peremptory manner in which we had been asked to visa his passport for Cuba.
While I felt personally convinced that there was a very close connection between the two documents and that there was some reason why the two had been mailed on separate days and in separate envelopes, the matter remained a mystery to us. It seemed strange that the letter should purport to come from Baltimore and yet be mailed from Havana. It seemed quite clear that the underlining of certain words in the policy might mean something, and yet in another way it was entirely natural that to an inexperienced shipper the insurance company might have called special attention to the war risk clause. The only possible clue that we seemed to have was that Westphal had been in the habit of misspelling De Haseth's name in the way it was spelled on the envelope and that the envelopes were mailed from Havana to which place Westphal had evidently wished to go when he had mysteriously disappeared.

After spending many hours during the evening at home in endeavoring to decipher what we felt convinced was a code message in these documents, I took the vice consul into my confidence and he did the same. I literally spent sleepless nights endeavoring to find the solution but after two weeks we were at the same point as at the beginning, and it seemed that the whole matter must be submitted to Washington to the Department with a full explanation of the circumstances as there the Department had experts who would undoubtedly be able to solve the matter if there was anything in it to solve. In those days I had to write all my own letters and despatches on the typewriter and I can remember so distinctly how with a gesture of disgust I turned to the type-
typewriter desk after a last look at the documents to prepare a transmitting despatch admitting defeat. As I was leaving the desk I took a final look at the insurance policy and there was a break in the line under one of the words which I noticed for the first time. I immediately began to examine all the policy for further breaks in this line and within half an hour I had deciphered the message. As I remember it the message went something like this: "Arrived Cuba safely but was slightly injured escaping British cruiser. Extremely important they know I am safe also tell mother. Westphal."

I was somewhat disappointed at the nature of the message as it seemed comparatively innocuous, but I transmitted the documents with the translation and the complete story to the Department that day. It was clear that Westphal was a German agent and that the other young men who had been in Fensohn's office were also German agents who had been gradually disbursed to various destinations as orders came to Fensohn. It was clear too that this code system embodied in this letter and insurance policy was a system of communication between agents in the United States, Cuba, and South America. It was admirably adapted to the purpose as such letter and policy would not be apt to arouse the suspicion of the censors as they had all the earmarks of commercial documents. Westphal evidently desired to communicate with Caracas where the German Minister, Von Prohlius, was the head of the German information service for that part of the world. I learned later that
the ordinary means of communication
had been through Fensohn before we went
into the war as he had special facilities
in his capacity as agent of the American
Red D Line. With our entrance into the war
all mail for Fensohn was of course strictly
censored and in many cases withheld until
the censorship was satisfied that it was
of an innocent character. Knowing De
Haseth's devotion to Fensohn and his simple
nature and assuming that he was still in
Fensohn's employ, Westphal sent these letters
to De Haseth, feeling sure that they would
not be delayed or interfered with by the
censor. Knowing De Haseth's character as
he did he naturally assumed that on reception
De Haseth would take them to Fensohn, who
of course would immediately be able to
decipher the message and continue it on its
way.

I heard nothing from the Department
concerning my despatch but some six weeks
later we saw in the news that some sixty of
the leading Germans in the German information
service organized by Boy Ed and Von Papen
under the direction of Count Bernsdorff had
been arrested in various parts of the United
States and interned. I experienced the
same thrill that all of us had at this news
realizing that it meant a heart thrust at
the well-organized German espionnage system
in our own country and in Cuba. Little idea
did I have that in the far off island of
Curacao we had had anything to do with the
drawing in of this net.

Another few months passed when I received
a despatch from the Department acknowledging my report transmitting the documents already referred to, congratulating me on my "zeal and initiative" and expressing the hope that I would continue my activities along the same line. As the Department in those days was not wont to express appreciation of anything, the instruction made me very happy, but I rather smiled at the ending as even the most casual reader will realize that the discovery of this system of communication had been due not so much to any skill on my part but rather to entirely fortuitous circumstances.

It was not until the end of the war that I learned the most interesting part of the story. I was spending some time in Washington and learned through a friend who had been associated with our intelligence service in an important capacity that the despatch which I had sent the Department and the code which I had deciphered in Curacao was found to be the one which was the favorite means of communication between the German agents in the United States and between these agents and those in Cuba. They had found that these policies passed the censorship without suspicion and it became their almost exclusive system of communication by mail. On the receipt of my report such communications passing through the mails were watched over a period of weeks and when it was felt that the principal agents in practically every part of the country had been spotted at the same hour the net was drawn in in at least a score of cities in the United States and in several cities of Cuba. In citing this little incident
it has been without any desire to set forth the small contribution which I have made in this matter but merely to show how in the most out of the way portions of the world the war was fought as bitterly and as intensely as it was on the battlefields of Europe though with less danger to the combattants.