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EXPERIENCES WITH THE SECRET SERVICE.
THE DUKE DE MONTEFIORI.

Curacao being one of the international crossroads of trade, it harbored even in times of peace all sorts of strange characters who came and went, but perhaps at no time in the history of the little island were these visitors more numerous than during the war. Because of its intimate relations both in the way of trade and in other ways with the countries bordering on the Caribbean Sea the port became of unusual interest to the allied countries as well as to Germany. It became a favorite rendez-vous for secret agents of the allied as well as of the enemy intelligence service. While most of the agents of our own intelligence service had very little direct contact with diplomatic and consular officers during the war except when such contact became necessary or desirable, there were times when this contact was exceedingly close and sometimes interesting. Some of the men who worked their way into the American service both of the army and navy were extraordinary characters and how they were selected for such service almost passed the comprehension of some of those who had to deal with them. On the other hand some of these agents were men who in civil life before the war had occupied positions of responsibility and importance but who because of special equipment and special knowledge of conditions or individuals presented themselves for service in this field. To many of them the nature of the service itself was not particularly agreeable and the more credit is due to them for the work which they did for our Government.

On one of the steamers of the Red D Line there arrived one day a tall lanky individual who had already left middle life well behind and later I saw him frequently at the Hotel Americano. Although evidently an American he appeared to carefully avoid the consulate and any contact with the Americans who were living in the city. In those days this was rather extraordinary as practically every American who appeared made a visit of courtesy at the office. We very soon began to receive inquiries as to who this individual was and then mysterious murmurs began to come in that there was an American secret service agent in the town who was making all sorts of inquiries but who desired that his identity be kept absolutely secret. By the end of the week practically every negro in Willemstad knew that this strange individual was an American secret service man.

One fine day he appeared at the consulate and insisted that the doors of my office be closed before he talked with me. He was courteously informed that the climate of Curacao was too warm to permit talking behind closed doors and that if he had anything to talk about which should not be overheard the conversation could easily take place without the doors being closed. He was very much perturbed over this and finally informed me that he was an intelligence officer of our Government who had been sent to Curacao for the purpose of reporting on enemy firms and enemy trade and that of course his work must be done with the greatest secrecy as otherwise

it would be entirely useless.

He proceeded to show a long list of firms concerning which he had sent adverse reports by cable to Washington and it was evident that he had spent at least several thousand dollars during his week's stay. It was apparent that the information which he had forwarded was entirely erronous and that it would result in placing most of the leading firms in Curacao on the blacklist. When he was informed that every man, woman and child on the island knew that he was a member of the intelligence service he was deeply surprised and quite unconvinced, as he was quite sure that he had proceeded with the greatest discretion. Realizing the havoc that he had caused, I had to inform him that I would be under the necessity of immediately dispatching a cablegram to our Government suggesting his recall. On the following day the telegram ordering him to the United States arrived with orders that he should proceed to leave by the first steamer, and thus ended his rather short and inglorious career as a member of our secret service. It took weeks of hard work to have removed from the blacklist firms concerning which he had sent this misleading information and it cost our Government at least another several thousand dollars to undo the mischief he had caused.

An even more extraordinary member of our secret service came to us in the person of the brother of an opera singer whose name is a household word in the United States and Europe. This was evidently his sole recommendation for service to our Government. He arrived in

Curacao and settled in the Hotel Americano immediately letting it be known to everyone with whom he came in contact that the mission on which he had been sent was to see that Venezuela received all the goods from the United States which she needed and that it was to be his special care to see that her exports were entirely free so that she would be able to pay for the goods which she would buy. He did not hide the fact that our minister at Caracas was only a puppet in his hands and his favorite expression to indicate his own powers was to say that he was a real czar. His coming was naturally hailed by a considerable number of merchants whose illegitimate operations had been interfered with by our enemy trading regulations and he delighted their hearts by forwarding a telegram to the War Trade Board requesting that an entire carload of white flour be immediately sent to the port of La Guaira. After a brief stay in Curacao he went on to Caracas where reports began to reach us of similar extraordinary proceedings, but it was not until this super-agent began to receive some of his distinguished visitors from the local government when he was clad only in his shirt and amused them by the strains of a Victrola which played the records made by his famous sister that it really penetrated into the minds of the local authorities that the man was irresponsible and that we were able to convince Washington that the man was a raving lunatic. It was with decided relief that we were able to get him on a boat leaving for his own native shore.

These were two sorry examples of what always

takes place when a country is engaged in a titanic struggle and I shall have occasion to speak elsewhere of the splendid services rendered by the more serious agents of our Government with whom I came in contact.

Our Government was not the only one to have in its service during the war men of this type, and the strangest of all the agents with whom we came in contact in Curacao was not one of our own country. The story of the Duke of Montefiori as he told it to me and as it developed to us before our eyes was really an interesting one and helped to divert us from some of the more serious things which preoccupied us during those days of stress. One day the island gossip brought it to us that a really very important individual had arrived and settled at the Americano. He was no less than a duke and bore the high sounding title of Duca de Montefiori. He spent money with a lavish hand but as he seemed to have no particular business he naturally aroused considerable interest. I saw him on several occasions, a short, heavy, swarthy individual, always well groomed, always surrounded, and always apparently with unlimited money to spend. It is needless to say that he soon became a very popular person and was invited about rather generally in the nicer homes on the island. One day I was approached by a rather prominent individual with the request that he might bring the duke and introduce him at the consulate as he had expressed a desire to meet and talk with me. I stated that I had no particular desire to meet this individual but

that there was no reason at all why he should not come to see me at any time if he so desired and that an introduction would not be necessary. The duke appeared the next morning and after speaking about the weather, about the United States, about his travels in South America, and about his wanderings in other parts of the world in the most voluble, enthusiastic and friendly manner, he left. His English was quiet fluent although with a very strong Italian accent, and it seemed to me at times as though his flow of words would never stop.

In fact he talked so much and so rapidly that I paid very little attention to his story but I realized from what he said and from the few questions which were directed to him that he seemed to have visited practically every state in the United States and he seemed to know really in a very familiar way all of our principal cities. All this however aroused no particular interest until I noticed that when he seemed to be caught for a word he used instead of an Italian word a German one. This struck me and I encouraged him more or less to continue and on at least two more occasions during the conversation when he was at a loss for a word he instinctively used a German one.

A few days afterwards the duke appeared again and I had in the meantime given him a bit of thought. He began by stating that it must seem strange to an American consular officer that he, as an Italian subject, strong and healthy, should be apparently leading a useless and inactive life when his country was engaged in a death struggle. He wished above all that

I should be the only person on the island to know who he really was and what he was doing. I hastened to inform him that I already carried so many secrets in my head and so many things that I was supposed to keep confidential that as he was an Italian I really considered it better that he should not unburden himself to me. My object of course was to make him feel that I was not curious and only intended to give him the more rope with which to hang himself, for I had an instinctive conviction that there was something wrong somewhere.

In spite of these protests the duke insisted that I must see his papers, and he took out of his pocket a huge leather wallet from which he extracted three documents. One of these was an ordinary passport issued by the Italian Legation in Soufh America, I forget exactly what city, made out for the Duca de Montefiori. A casual examination of this passport seemed to indicate that it was entirely in order and that it had undoubtedly been properly issued and that it had not been altered in any way. He then proceeded to explain that this was not his real passport but one that he had only secured in South America from one of their legations in order that he might show it when he did not wish to be under the necessity of bringing forth his real documents, and with that he produced another document. This was issued by the Foreign Office in Rome and was addressed to Italian diplomatic and consular officers, being to the effect that the Duca de Montefiori had been given a special mission which was described in a separate document, and instructing

all Italian officials in South America to give him every aid in his mission. The document was signed by Sonnino, then the prime minister, and the photograph attached to it under the usual seals was that of my visitor. While I had not sufficient opportunity of examining the document carefully and did not wish to arouse the duke's suspicions by going into it too carefully, from the fair experience which I had acquired in handling a large number of documents in the nature of passports, I gathered the distinct impression that the document was a genuine one, whether the present holder of it was the one to which it had been originally issued or not. The third document was a long one in Italian giving detailed instructions to him as well as to Italian diplomatic and consular officers concerning him. While my knowledge of Italian is and was at that time very limited indeed, I was able to determine from the casual examination of the document that it gave specific instructions for the holder to proceed to South America in order to purchase certain materials for the use of the Italian Army. The methods of payment and other details were carefully set forth.

There seemed to be no question in my mind that these papers were genuine, but I longed very much to have an opportunity of examining them more carefully, which of course was not possible. I therefore handed them back without comment to my visitor and assured him that if there was any way in which I could be of assistance to him as an officer of an allied government, I should be very glad to do so but that I doubted very much whether my office could

be of any help to him in view of the fact that he seemed to be so well informed, not only about the part of the world in which we then were but even concerning my own country.

He had no sooner disappeared through the door of the outer office of the consulate before I had started the draft of a telegram to Washington in which I recited briefly the claims of this individual and described the documents which he possessed, suggesting further that the Italian military mission at Washington be communicated with to determine whether such an individual or agent was known to them. In a few days a telegram was received to the effect that the Duca de Montefiori was entirely unknown to the mission. This did not seem very satisfactory because if we were to determine whether the man was really an imposter, as I began to believe he was, it would be necessary to have more definite assurance. I therefore again telegraphed stating that in view of the circumstances it would be very useful to know as a guidance for future conduct concerning this man whether the Italian Government at Rome had any information concerning him.

The reply to this telegram was long in coming, in fact at least several weeks passed without news. In the meantime the duke had the habit of coming into the consulate and his questions became more and more searching and more and more indiscreet. Even if he had been an agent of the Italian Government, the fullest kind of cooperation would not have permitted me to give him answers to most of the questions which he put. For the time being I was under the strict necessity of handling him as gently as

possible, and of treating him with all courtesy, without of course giving any information.

The long waited-for telegram at last arrived and from it it appeared that a special passport and instructions had been given by the Italian Government to a trusted agent and that the papers had been made out in the name of the Duca de Montefiori. From the information transmitted by the Italian Government it appeared that this agent had mysteriously disappeared shortly after his departure from Italy, and the description which was given in the telegram of the original holder to whom the papers were issued did not tally at all with the person who was presenting them in Curacao. The telegram suggested that the present holder must be an imposter and assumed that the original agent to whom they had been issued must have fallen into the hands of the enemy who had altered the documents so as to cover the present holder. Future events were to show that this was exactly what had happened. The original holder of these papers had fallen into the hands of the Germans who had substituted with the greatest skill the photographs of the duke then in Curacao. Later developments showed us that he was undoubtedly a German or an Austrian, although in appearance thoroughly Italian. There appeared to be then no question that this man was not only an imposter, but that he was in reality a German agent.

The problem which now came before me was to determine what could be done with this individual so as to make it impossible for him to do any further harm. Curacao was Dutch territory and there was no way either to arrest or detain

him. So far as the local authorities were concerned he had as much right in Curacao as the American Consul. It was evident that the man could be rendered powerless to a considerable degree by getting his papers away from him and this was one solution which was worthy of serious consideration. Failing this, an endeavor could be made to clip his power by making it impossible for him to leave Curacao. After careful consideration it was evident that this latter was the easier and the more practical course to follow, and I immediately took the necessary steps to that end.

In those days, as has been explained elsewhere, every vessel whether of allied or neutral nationality which desired to take coal for bunkers at Curacao had to get a bunker permit from the American Consul. One of the prices which they had to pay for this fuel was that the ship receiving bunkers had to agree that it would not carry any passenger to any destination unless his passport was visaed for the specific voyage by the American Consul at the port at which he embarked. In this way of course the consul could easily prevent the duke from taking passage on any steamer leaving Curacao, and I had needless to say determined that no such visa should be given unless he were to embark on a vessel the next port of call of which after leaving Curacao would be an American one. In this way if he voluntarily placed himself within our jurisdiction we would be able to apprehend him and detain him without difficulty. But steamers were not the sole problem and there were at

least a score of sailing vessels leaving the island every day for Venezuela and Colombia and for other islands in the West Indies. This was a more difficult problem as we had no direct control over them and it was therefore necessary to use some of the more indirect methods which it may be interesting to set forth here.

The island of Curacao and that of Aruba and Bonaire which form the lower group of the Dutch West Indies are all three equally barren and absolutely dependent for food on the outside world. As the principal article of food for the Caribbean Indian and negroes who inhabit these islands is corn meal for which the principal source is the United States, and as the white people live largely on a bread diet, the islands may be said to be entirely dependent on the United States for their food. Venezuela raises large quantities of corn but it is so badly ground that the meal spoils quickly and owing to the control of food exports to all countries during the war Venezuela was not in a position to export to Curacao. The exportation of all food stuffs to the West Indian islands including the Dutch was therefore closely controlled by the consular officers in that territory or by officers of the War Trade Board who might be stationed there, the object being that none of it fell into the hands of German firms or firms known to be sympethisers with or allied to German firms. In Curacao circumstances made me therefore virtually a food dictator for the island. All of the schooners plying between Curacao and the mainland and the other West Indies secured their food supplies at

Curacao, and as they could not get these supplies except through firms dependent in turn for their supplies upon the consulate I was able to let it be known indirectly on the water front that any schooner captain who would take the duke as a passenger would have descend upon him the wrath of the whole American people, and that the supply of food for his crew would be cut off. No threat could have been more serious than this and it worked effectually, for in spite of his many efforts in that direction the duke found that no schooner captain would take him for any price.

As to the duke, we had to let him know that we could be of no assistance to him and while not telling him in so many words that we were aware of the fact that he was holding false papers and was in reality an enemy agent, he was led to feel that this was the situation and that it would be well for him to stay away from the consulate. He then attempted to make efforts as had been expected to take passage by various steamers calling at ports of neutral countries but in each case he was politely put off or informed that he would have to secure a visa from the American Consul on his passport. This he realized he could not get. After finding that the schooner captains in turn would not give him passage to the mainland of South America or to Central America at any price, he realized that the game was up.

When his wings were cut and his usefulness apparently gone, his money began to give out and the supply which had evidently come from the German Legation in Caracas was definitely cut off. His situation became more and more

miserable but he apparently was given just enough money to keep him alive. Several attempts were made to steal his documents but it was found that he kept these in a belt round his waist. The only way therefore to keep him innocuous was to keep him on the island.

Information as to his real identity naturally began to be more and more common knowledge and as the sentiment of the people was distinctly pro-ally, his newly made friends quickly dropped away from him. The principal reasons however probably for their dropping away was the fact that his money was gone. In fact, prior to my departure from Curacao it became necessary for a few of us to supply him indirectly with a small amount necessary for his maintenance as the German Legation in Caracas had evidently abandoned him entirely. The poor man for a while subsisted by selling back letters to the parents of the Curacao girl who had become engaged to him. To such straits was reduced the magnificent Duca de Montefiori who had arrived on the island with such eclat.

Incidents might be multiplied and interesting stories told of the various agents who worked on or passed through the island during the various stages of the war. While the instances which I have cited are of course some of the more exaggerated cases, they were unfortunately too characteristic of the activities of many of the agents in that part of the world. In order that there may not be any misunderstanding however I shall in another chapter

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tell the story of the work done by another agent who covered himself and our intelligence service with glory.