

CHAPTER III. THE CONSPIRACY

NO SHORE leave was granted the crew of the Halfmoon while the vessel lay off Honolulu, and deep and ominous were the grumblings of the men. Only First Officer Ward and the second mate went ashore. Skipper Simms kept the men busy painting and holystoning as a vent for their pent emotions.

Billy Byrne noticed that the passenger had abandoned his daylight strolls on deck. In fact he never once left his cabin while the Halfmoon lay at anchor until darkness had fallen; then he would come on deck, often standing for an hour at a time with eyes fastened steadily upon the brave little yacht from the canopied upper deck of which gay laughter and soft music came floating across the still water.

When Mr. Ward and the second mate came to shore a strange thing happened. They entered a third-rate hotel near the water front, engaged a room for a week, paid in advance, were in their room for half an hour and emerged clothed in civilian raiment.

Then they hastened to another hostelry--a first-class one this time, and the second mate walked ahead in frock coat and silk hat while Mr. Ward trailed behind in a neat, blue serge sack suit, carrying both bags.

At the second hotel the second mate registered as Henri Theriere, Count de Cadenet, and servant, France. His first act thereafter was to hand a note to the clerk asking that it be dispatched immediately. The note was addressed to Anthony Harding, Esq., On Board Yacht Lotus.

Count de Cadenet and his servant repaired immediately to the count's rooms, there to await an answer to the note. Henri Theriere, the second officer of the Halfmoon, in frock coat and silk hat looked every inch a nobleman and a gentleman. What his past had been only he knew, but his polished manners, his knowledge of navigation and seamanship, and his leaning toward the ways of the martinet in his dealings with the men beneath him had led Skipper Simms to assume that he had once held a commission in the French Navy, from which he doubtless had been kicked--in disgrace.

The man was cold, cruel, of a moody disposition, and quick to anger. He had been signed as second officer for this cruise through the intervention of Divine and Clinker. He had sailed with Simms before, but the skipper had found him too hard a customer to deal with, and had been on the point of seeking another second when Divine and Clinker discovered him on board the Halfmoon and after

ten minutes' conversation with him found that he fitted so perfectly into their scheme of action that they would not hear of Simms' releasing him.

Ward had little use for the Frenchman, whose haughty manner and condescending airs grated on the sensibilities of the uncouth and boorish first officer. The duty which necessitated him acting in the capacity of Theriere's servant was about as distasteful to him as anything could be, and only served to add to his hatred for the inferior, who, in the bottom of his heart, he knew to be in every way, except upon the roster of the Halfmoon, his superior; but money can work wonders, and Divine's promise that the officers and crew of the Halfmoon would have a cool million United States dollars to divide among them in case of the success of the venture had quite effectually overcome any dislike which Mr. Ward had felt for this particular phase of his duty.

The two officers sat in silence in their room at the hotel awaiting an answer to the note they had dispatched to Anthony Harding, Esq. The parts they were to act had been carefully rehearsed on board the Halfmoon many times. Each was occupied with his own thoughts, and as they had nothing in common outside the present rascality that had brought them together, and as that subject was one not well to discuss more than necessary, there seemed no call for conversation.

On board the yacht in the harbor preparations were being made to land a small party that contemplated a motor trip up the Nuuanu Valley when a small boat drew alongside, and a messenger from the hotel handed a sealed note to one of the sailors.

From the deck of the Halfmoon Skipper Simms witnessed the transaction, smiling inwardly. Billy Byrne also saw it, but it meant nothing to him. He had been lolling upon the deck of the brigantine glaring at the yacht Lotus, hating her and the gay, well-dressed men and women he could see laughing and chatting upon her deck. They represented to him the concentrated essence of all that was pusillanimous, disgusting, loathsome in that other world that was as far separated from him as though he had been a grubworm in the manure pile back of Brady's livery stable.

He saw the note handed by the sailor to a gray-haired, smooth-faced man--a large, sleek, well-groomed man. Billy could imagine the white hands and polished nails of him. The thought was nauseating.

The man who took and opened the note was Anthony Harding, Esq. He read it, and then passed it to a young woman who stood near-by talking with other young people.

"Here, Barbara," he said, "is something of more interest to you than to me. If you wish I'll call upon him and invite him to dinner tonight."

The girl was reading the note.

Anthony Harding, Esq.

On Board Yacht Lotus,

Honolulu

My dear Mr. Harding:

This will introduce a very dear friend of mine, Count de Cadenet, who expects to be in Honolulu about the time that you are there. The count is traveling for pleasure, and as he is entirely unacquainted upon the islands any courtesies which you may show him will be greatly appreciated.

Cordially,

L. CORTWRITE DIVINE.

The girl smiled as she finished perusing the note.

"Larry is always picking up titles and making dear friends of them," she laughed. "I wonder where he found this one."

"Or where this one found him," suggested Mr. Harding. "Well, I suppose that the least we can do is to have him aboard for dinner. We'll be leaving tomorrow, so there won't be much entertaining we can do."

"Let's pick him up on our way through town now," suggested Barbara Harding, "and take him with us for the day. That will be settling our debt to friendship, and dinner tonight can depend upon what sort of person we find the count to be."

"As you will," replied her father, and so it came about that two big touring cars drew up before the Count de Cadenet's hotel half an hour later, and Anthony Harding, Esq., entered and sent up his card.

The "count" came down in person to greet his caller. Harding saw at a glance that the man was a gentleman, and when he had introduced him to the other members of the party it was evident that they appraised him quite as had their host. Barbara Harding seemed particularly taken with the Count de Cadenet, insisting that he join those who occupied her car, and so it was that the second officer of the Halfmoon rode out of Honolulu in pleasant conversation with the object of his visit to the island.

Barbara Harding found De Cadenet an interesting man. There was no corner of the globe however remote with which he was not to some degree familiar. He was well read, and possessed the ability to discuss what he had read intelligently and entertainingly. There was no evidence of moodiness in him now. He was the personification of affability, for was he not monopolizing the society of a very beautiful, and very wealthy young lady?

The day's outing had two significant results. It put into the head of the second mate of the Halfmoon that which would have caused his skipper and the retiring Mr. Divine acute mental perturbation could they have guessed it; and it put De Cadenet into possession of information which necessitated his refusing the urgent invitation to dine upon the yacht, Lotus, that evening--the information that the party would sail the following morning en route to Manila.

"I cannot tell you," he said to Mr. Harding, "how much I regret the circumstance that must rob me of the pleasure of accepting your invitation. Only absolute necessity, I assure you, could prevent me being with you as long as possible," and though he spoke to the girl's father he looked directly into the eyes of Barbara Harding.

A young woman of less experience might have given some outward indication of the effect of this speech upon her, but whether she was pleased or otherwise the Count de Cadenet could not guess, for she merely voiced the smiling regrets that courtesy demanded.

They left De Cadenet at his hotel, and as he bid them farewell the man turned to Barbara Harding with a low aside.

"I shall see you again, Miss Harding," he said, "very, very soon."

She could not guess what was in his mind as he voiced this rather, under the circumstances, unusual statement. Could she have, the girl would have been terror-stricken; but she saw that in his eyes which she could translate, and she wondered many times that evening whether she were pleased or angry with the message it conveyed.

The moment De Cadenet entered the hotel he hurried to the room where the impatient Mr. Ward awaited him.

"Quick!" he cried. "We must bundle out of here posthaste. They sail tomorrow morning. Your duties as valet have been light and short-lived; but I can give you an excellent recommendation should you desire to take service with another gentleman."

"That'll be about all of that, Mr. Theriere," snapped the first officer, coldly. "I did not embark upon this theatrical enterprise for amusement--I see nothing funny in it, and I wish you to remember that I am still your superior officer."

Theriere shrugged. Ward did not chance to catch the ugly look in his companion's eye. Together they gathered up their belongings, descended to the office, paid their bill, and a few moments later were changing back to their sea clothes in the little hotel where they first had engaged accommodations. Half an hour later they stepped to the deck of the Halfmoon.

Billy Byrne saw them from where he worked in the vicinity of the cabin. When they were not looking he scowled maliciously at them. They were the personal representatives of authority, and Billy hated authority in whatever guise it might be visited upon him. He hated law and order and discipline.

"I'd like to meet one of dem guys on Green Street some night," he thought.

He saw them enter the captain's cabin with the skipper, and then he saw Mr. Divine join them. Billy noted the haste displayed by the four and it set him to wondering. The scrap of conversation between Divine and Simms that he had overheard returned to him. He wanted to hear more, and as Billy was not handicapped by any overly refined notions of the ethics which frown upon eavesdropping he lost no time in transferring the scene of his labors to a point sufficiently close to one of the cabin ports to permit him to note what took place within.

What the mucker beard of that conversation made him prick up his ears. He saw that something after his own heart was doing--something crooked, and he wondered that so pusillanimous a thing as Divine could have a hand in it. It almost changed his estimate of the passenger of the Halfmoon.

The meeting broke up so suddenly that Billy had to drop to his knees to escape the observation of those within the cabin. As it was, Theriere, who had started to leave a second before the others, caught a fleeting glimpse of a face that quickly had been withdrawn from the cabin skylight as though its owner were fearful of detection.

Without a word to his companions the Frenchman left the cabin, but once outside he bounded up the companionway to the deck with the speed of a squirrel. Nor was he an instant too soon, for as he emerged from below he saw the figure of a man disappearing forward.

"Hey there, you!" he cried. "Come back here."

The mucker turned, a sulky scowl upon his lowering countenance, and the second officer saw that it was the fellow who had given Ward such a trimming the first day out.

"Oh, it's you is it, Byrne?" he said in a not unpleasant tone. "Come to my quarters a moment, I want to speak with you," and so saying he wheeled about and retraced his way below, the seaman at his heels.

"My man," said Theriere, once the two were behind the closed door of the officer's cabin, "I needn't ask how much you overheard of the conversation in the captain's cabin. If you hadn't overheard a great deal more than you should you wouldn't have been so keen to escape detection just now. What I wanted to say to you is this. Keep a close tongue in your head and stick by me in what's going to happen in the next few days. This bunch," he jerked his thumb in the direction of the captain's cabin, "are fixing their necks for halters, an' I for one don't intend to poke my head through any noose of another man's making. There's more in this thing if it's handled right, and handled without too many men in on the whack-up than we can get out of it if that man Divine has to be counted in. I've a plan of my own, an' it won't take but three or four of us to put it across.

"You don't like Ward," he continued, "and you may be almighty sure that Mr. Ward ain't losing any sleep nights over love of you. If you stick to that bunch Ward will do you out of your share as sure as you are a foot high, an' the chances are that he'll do you out of a whole lot more besides--as a matter of fact, Byrne, you're a mighty poor life insurance risk right now, with a life expectancy that's pretty near minus as long as Bender Ward is on the same ship with you. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Aw," said Billy Byrne, "I ain't afraid o' that stiff. Let him make any funny crack at me an' I'll cave in a handful of slats for him--the piker."

"That's all right too, Byrne," said Theriere. "Of course you can do it if anybody can, provided you get the chance; but Ward isn't the man to give you any chance. There may be shooting necessary within the next day or so, and there's nothing to prevent Ward letting you have it in the back, purely by accident; and if he don't do it then there'll be all kinds of opportunities for it before any of us ever see a white man's port again. He'll get you, Byrne, he's that kind.

"Now, with my proposition you'll be shut of Ward, Skipper Simms, and Divine. There'll be more money in it for you, an' you won't have to go around expecting a bullet in the small of your back every minute. What do you say? Are you game, or shall I have to go back to Skipper Simms and Ward and tell them that I caught you eavesdropping?"

"Oh, I'm game," said Billy Byrne, "if you'll promise me a square deal on the divvy."

The Frenchman extended his hand.

"Let's shake on it," he said.

Billy took the proffered palm in his.

"That's a go," he said; "but hadn't you better wise me to wot's doin'?"

"Not now," said Theriere, "someone might overhear just as you did. Wait a bit until I have a better opportunity, and I'll tell you all there is to know. In the meantime think over who'd be the best men to let into this with us--we'll need three or four more besides ourselves. Now go on deck about your duties as though nothing had happened, and if I'm a bit rougher than usual with you you'll understand that it's to avert any possible suspicion later."

"I'm next," said Billy Byrne.