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How Britain Fought the Spies

SPY MANIA STORIES

THE CASE OF PHILIP DE LASZLO

By An Ex-Secret Service Officer.

(IX.)

WHEN spy mania gripped this country M.I. was faced with one of its most difficult and unwelcome problems. The work of the department and those co-operating with it, particularly the police, was often hampered by spy rumours.

I do not know what really brought about this spy mania. To a large extent it must have been due to the fact that very few people knew that we had anything but an apology for a Secret Service. Moreover, in sensational pre-war novels and in certain newspapers after war had broken out,

spies were depicted with almost human powers and skill. The fact remains that the department was inundated by reports due to spy mania.

Most people will remember the tennis courts in London which were supposed to mask concrete beds for guns.

There was also the report that secret instructions for invading armies had been placed behind numbers of metal signs advertising a certain popular patent food.

Groups of people all over the country spent days taking down these notices and searching for messages. Often the wall to which the notices had been screwed had made marks on the back which the searchers were convinced were code messages. Actually the searchers found nothing of the slightest value, but all their wild suggestions had to be investigated.

Often the authorities had to bow to popular clamour, with the result that people were interned for very little reason. Also we found ourselves up against the emergency legislation which had to be operated frequently with hardship.

Artist's Dilemma

There is the outstanding case of Philip Laszlo de Lambos, the distinguished portrait painter. A single act of ordinary human kindness made this man a victim of spy mania, and placed him within the meshes of the military despotism which was bound to treat great and small alike.

This famous artist is of Hungarian origin, but early in life he became a naturalised British subject. In 1900 he married into one of the best families in this country and ten years later he was created M.V.O. At no time was there any question of his great loyalty to his adopted country. Yet he was interned.

One evening he was sitting in his study when a servant announced that a man who had given no name was waiting outside the door. The man was asked into the study.

He showed that he was suffering and excited.

He spoke, and to the horror of the artist revealed that he was an escaped Austrian prisoner of war. All he asked was that he should be fed and sheltered for the night.

Philip de Laszlo debated with himself whether he should hand the man over to the authorities or let him out in the morning on a chance.

In the end he allowed his humanity to win, and he sent the fugitive off with some food in his pocket and a sovereign.

A few hours later Philip de Laszlo's feelings were calmer, and he realised he had done a very serious thing. He had broken the law, but he did not attempt to hide his innocent breach of the war's law. He remained in his

letters to his relatives, and the courtesy of highly placed friends had enabled him to get the letters through diplomatic channels.

Much, however, was made of these communications, and he was interned as one "whose continuance at liberty was a danger to his Majesty's realm and people."

Even men like Lord Balfour and Lord Esher, his intimate friends, were unable to help him. They spent weeks exerting powerful influences, for they knew how preposterous it was to suppose that the public's suspicions were in any sense justified. They offered guarantees for the artist's good behaviour, but the technical charge was too much for them, and the famous man had to be interned.

The internment was galling, but he survived it with philosophic calm, and within a few months of regaining his liberty he was as popular as ever in London, and further honours were subsequently showered upon him.

London Riots

This case alone is sufficient to show what sometimes happened as a result of spy mania and emergency legislation, but others were more humorous. Some of them will still be remembered by those who served as special constables.

In the early days of the war the following official communique was published, and in my view it did much to cause the wave of spy mania:

In carrying out their duties the Military and Police authorities would expect that persons having information of cases of suspected espionage would communicate the grounds of the suspicions to the local Military Authority or to the local police, who are in direct communication with the Special Intelligence Department, instead of causing unnecessary alarm and possibly giving warning to the spies by letters to the Press.

The authorities began to receive a flood of communications from the public, containing the most fantastic allegations.

Neighbours began to look askance at one another. Anybody with a foreign name was labelled a spy. Rioting broke out in London. The shops of small bakers, news-agents and tobacconists were wrecked. Waiters were regarded with suspicion, and one Swiss waiter who had drawn a plan of his tables on the back of a menu card was accused of having in his possession a plan of an important naval base.

When the "Zepps" Came

Here are a few samples of the "made, old" by patriotic people:

It is stated that on the occasion of one air raid a woman in Streatham had been seen signalling to the invading aeroplanes with "a triangular instrument." Anybody who has seen the earth from a few thousand feet up will realise the utter futility of such a statement.

Another case was that of a woman living in Bermondsey who was a great dog lover. But her dogs did not like Zeppelin raids, and used—like a good many other dogs—to put their heads well back and howl dismally when aircraft approached.

Her neighbours, remarking on the fact that the woman had a foreign name, told the authorities that she had trained the dogs to aid and direct the enemy by howling and barking whenever the Zeppelins