

The Sea Devil

By W. Bro. William A. Moore

At the time this article was written W. Bro. Moore was serving as master of United Masters Lodge #167 (a lodge of Masonic Research) in Auckland, New Zealand. We regret that W. B. Moore passed this life on Aug. 19, 1988. We are, however, pleased to publish his moving account about the life of Count Felix Von Luckner.

I would gladly live to be a hundred and fifty if I could use all my time to work for reconciliation and understanding between the nations, to work to convince men and women that it's worthwhile to believe in love. Men are too apt to listen to evil, and it's so very necessary that they should listen to good.

There's no shortage of goodness; it's everywhere in the world. Very often it can't be seen because it's hidden by a cloud of misunderstandings. Once the misunderstandings are cleared away it becomes easy to see that fundamentally everyone wants the same thing. Everyone wants to live in peace and happiness and lead a life without fear. If there is still anyone who doesn't believe this let him ask a young mother what it is above all she wants for her child. Her answer will dispose of the last vestige of doubt.

These are the words of a man whose life presents a host of apparent contradictions. It is doubtful that you would expect them from one who was born into a military family and attained rank and world-wide fame in this profession. Sickly in his infancy he was in later life, for a time, a circus strong-man, a wrestling champion and, even when well past his prime, continued to delight audiences with his feats of strength. While achieving amazing results for his country in the field of war, he yet became and remained a hero to countless thousands of his country's enemies! He joined the Freemasons at the age of forty after the career which sealed his fame and made him a household name throughout the world, but his actions had shown him to be a true Freemason before his formal initiation.

He was born 9 June 1881 in Dresden, Saxony. At age thirteen, after being captivated by the menu of a luxury liner, looked to the sea and ran off and shipped as an unpaid cabin boy, on a Russian sailing ship bound for Australia. Life aboard was very different from the pictures evoked by the aforesaid menu. His duties included cleaning the latrines and pig-sties! And he was lucky to survive a fall overboard. Not surprisingly he abandoned ship in Fremantle and for

seven years he roamed the world in a great and bewildering series of jobs, including selling the Salvation Army's War Cry, assistant lighthouse keeper, kangaroo hunter, circus hand, professional boxer, fisherman, seaman, Mexican army guard for President Diaz, railroad construction, tavern keeper and barman. He even spent time in a Chilean goal accused of trying to steal pigs; won a wrestling competition in Hamburg; twice suffered broken legs, was thrown out of a hospital in Jamaica for lack of funds, but was lucky enough to be befriended by some German sailors.

Aged twenty, and with less book knowledge than an average ten year old, he entered a German navigation training school. After qualifying and serving on a South American liner, he was eligible to become a reserve officer in the German navy. In his uniform he returned home to a family which had long given him up as lost. He remained in the merchant marine service, passed his Captain's examination, and in 1912 entered the German navy for active service in the ship Panzer. A visit to German territories in Africa saw him engaged on an elephant hunt. World War I broke out in 1914 but the British blockade of German ports severely limited the German navy's capabilities. In the great battle of Jutland, von Luckner commanded a gun turret on the Kronprinz with skill and cunning. These attributes, combined with the fact that he was apparently the only German naval officer who had served 'in sail' singled him out for a unique command which sailed him into the history books of the world.

The Seeadler (Sea Eagle).

A 1570 ton three masted sailing ship, built in Glasgow 1888 and captured by the Germans while under a British flag, was converted under von Luckner's directions to an auxiliary cruiser, heavily armed and equipped with two 500 H.P. engines, but carefully disguised inside and out as a Norwegian timber ship Inna. Von Luckner managed, during a violent gale in the North Sea 23 December 1916, to break the British blockade, the Inna was inspected and passed and sailed north around Scotland into the Atlantic.

Over the following 88 days his ship, renamed the Seeadler or Sea Eagle, disguise removed, captured eleven Allied ships in the Atlantic, and sank ten without a single loss of life, crew or captive. Even the ships' cats were safe, at one time there were 144 on board his ship! At times up to 400 persons, men and women, were held in the ship until transferred ashore in South American ports. "I had the courage to sink ships", he said, "but I had not the courage to deprive a mother of a child. I fought the war without killing anyone... I always thought of my mother, and imagined what tears and sadness I would cause if I killed the son of some other mother." It is claimed that he once delayed sinking a sailing ship until the Captain's false teeth had been saved! If perhaps you feel that von Luckner was a good self- publicist, Newbolt's History of the Great War tells of a "bold, calculating, and adventurous leader; and we have every reason to believe that he was a kindly and courteous gentleman as well" ... "believing concerted action between (his prisoners) impossible" ... they "had been allowed to roam about their ship as they

wished; and apart from this, Count von Luckner had several times acted graciously and generously".

In April 1917 he rounded Cape Horn and entered the Pacific where three more ships were sunk. On 2 August his good fortunes ran out and Seeadler was cast ashore by a tidal wave onto remote Mopelia Island in the Tahiti group, inhabited only by three Kanaks left by the French to catch turtles. Von Luckner tells of Sunday services conducted by himself to "worship the Great Ruler of the Waves". Beside the Bible rested the German flag plus those of the prisoners. "I wanted our prisoners to feel that the service was as much theirs as ours, and that we did not feel ourselves any more a chosen people before God than any other people."

Von Luckner was involved in many more adventures before returning to Germany as a hero. The highest award made to him was an honor placing him above the scope of German law, usually, the prerogative of only the German Royal family. He was even summoned to Rome by the Pope who called him "a great humanitarian." Between the two world wars, von Luckner and his wife Countess Ingaborg traveled throughout Europe and the United States. In 1938 he again visited New Zealand in his yacht Seeteufel. Tremendous crowds greeted him wherever he went and, ever the showman, he delighted audiences whenever he spoke at public meetings. Some, however, felt that he was a propagandist for nazism, a charge that he denied, claiming to be an ambassador for peace only. Although too old for active service in World War II, Hitler attempted to use him for propaganda purposes but demanded that he renounce Freemasonry. Our hero who had been initiated in Zur Goldenen Kugel Lodge No. 66, Hamburg on 26 May 1921, refused. He also refused to renounce the various honorary citizenships granted him in the United States. In 1943, in Berlin, he saved the life of a Jewish girl by finding her shelter and giving her a passport picked up on a bomb site. She managed to reach a neutral country and then the United States. After the war, when the Count again visited the U.S.A. appealing for the expulsion of the hatreds engendered by the war, she opened previously shut doors by her influence. "I was given an opportunity of reaching the hearts of men and women who had previously rejected me in their own sorrow and refused to listen to what I had to say. They had refused to give me a hearing because I was a German and came from that country whose government had once brought them such terrible sorrow."

Hitler made life difficult for von Luckner, and his bank account was stopped. In remote Halle, where he was living, the citizens seemed to feel that their relative immunity from air-raids was due to the presence in their midst of the Count, who had been given the freedom of so many American cities. In the closing stages of the war refugees from other areas crowded in. The Count was asked by the Mayor and others in April 1945 to seek out the approaching American troops and seek terms. The German General in command disclaimed any responsibility, but permitted him to try. The control officer from Berlin remarked disdainfully: "There's another international Freemason." He did manage to find and negotiate with the Americans, among whom were Masonic friends, and they agreed not to bomb the city. He was able to so advise his

friends in Halle but, on the advice that Hitler had condemned him to death, he was forced to flee into hiding.

Count Felix von Luckner died 14 April 1966, in Malmo, Sweden. Thus ending a career that might have come straight out of the pages of 'The Boys' Own'. His last wish was that it should be said of him, as it had been said of his own hero, another Mason, Buffalo Bill Cody: "He was a great white scout, a loyal and honest man", and this wish was fulfilled in Lodge White Lily, 16 April 1966.

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