

NIGHTMARE ON THE HIGH SEAS

The extraordinary misadventures of a couple who bought a yacht on a whim.

(The Daily Telegraph, 2001)

Simon Connolly and Louise Ellingham are the very model of a modern professional couple. Simon, 42, is a successful criminal barrister who glides to work from their flat in Hampstead on a BMW 1100 motorbike; Louise, two years younger and so chic that she makes *Wallpaper* look like wallpaper, runs her own PR company – or at least she did, until her life was changed by the events related here. Off duty, they are amiable, sociable and ever ready to laugh, and you can easily imagine them sunning themselves on their yacht in Barcelona. What you cannot begin to imagine is the trouble they had getting it there.

Simon and Louise didn't intend to buy a yacht: they were actually looking for a house in France. But they knew that they wanted somewhere near the water, and when their friend Richard Farley mentioned that he was selling his boat, it struck them that *on* the water would be even better.

Shadowfax was an elegant, two-masted 80-footer, whose creation had been a labour of love: Farley, a former member of the Royal Ballet who had danced with Nureyev and Fonteyn, had spent twenty years building it from scratch in his spare time. When, in 1999, he decided to part with it, he could only contemplate selling it to friends.

Louise, though a martyr to seasickness, had crewed for her godfather since the age of 19 on his boat in the South of France; but he too had recently hung up his skipper's hat, and she hated the idea of being landlocked. Simon's sailing experience was minimal, but he was eager

to learn. Above all, he says, he wanted ‘a project’ to occupy him outside court. *Shadowfax* was to do that with a vengeance.

Louise flew out to Marmaris in southern Turkey, where the boat had been in dry dock for two years, to take a look at it. ‘It was like going to an old country house which is beautiful if you look beyond the Miss Havisham cobwebs,’ she says. ‘It looked as if it was tired, but not falling apart – at least, not at first glance.’ She rang Simon to say that they should buy it, and in May 1999 the deal was done.

The repair work, which included repainting the entire boat and overhauling the engines, was expected to take three months, leaving time enough to sail *Shadowfax* from Turkey to the Caribbean for chartering over the winter. First, though, they needed a captain who could oversee the project. Through a website called Crewseekers, they found a Russian ex-naval captain called Vladimir, who came with enthusiastic references. This was the first hiccup: after two days, Vladimir’s autocratic manner was driving everybody mad. Louis sacked him; it took her four hours to persuade him to leave.

Fortunately, an admirable replacement was at hand: Steve Willoughby, a good-natured New Zealander whom Simon and Louise knew from London, and who was to become a close friend as the *Shadowfax* saga progressed. The local workforce was to be headed by a contractor called Ahmet, who charged high rates by Turkish standards, but seemed friendly and professional, and went out of his way to be helpful, even collecting Louise from the airport at four o’clock in the morning.

Simon remembers the first weeks of working on the boat as an idyllic time. ‘It was obviously going to take more time and energy than we had originally foreseen, and a lot more money – almost everything needed to

be redone. But the more we got into it, the more we enjoyed it – and I certainly fell in love with the boat.’

Progress, however, was painfully slow, and when work commitments obliged Simon and Louise to return to England at the end of August, the end was still not in sight. It was then that events took a strange turn.

‘Ahmet started ringing us up,’ says Simon, ‘and saying that Steve was drinking a lot and not getting up till eleven in the morning, and this was making it hard for them to do their work, so could we get Steve to leave the boat?’

Simon and Louise found this picture of their skipper impossible to believe. They asked Steve to sleep ashore, but also to find out what Ahmet was up to. When he reported back, it was to say that Ahmet was systematically cheating them: although they had paid him to use the most paint on the market, he had bought the cheapest, and was watering it down so much that you could see through the top coat. His ruse was literally transparent.

Simon and Louise felt angry and betrayed. They flew out to confront Ahmet, and demanded that he present them with an itemised bill. When he did so, they found that he had not only overcharged them for the paint, but added £10,000 to the figure of £16,000 that they had originally agreed.

‘I was steaming,’ said Simon. ‘We’d given him such a good job, and he would have made a big profit anyway, and he’d just cheated us. I said, “This is not what we agreed,” and he said, “Well, that’s my bill”.’

There was a wider problem too. Wherever they went in Marmaris, Simon and Louise suddenly found an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. Ahmed, they eventually discovered, owed a lot of people money – and had told them the reason that he couldn’t pay up was that

the British couple hadn't paid him. (In fact, he had received all of the agreed fee.)

The carpenter and the electrician working on the boat downed tools; 'Even in a restaurant,' says Louise, 'you felt that people were wondering whether you were going to pay the bill.' The bad vibes were accompanied by veiled threats, to the point where even Steve – a solidly built man who had played rugby for the junior All Blacks – felt the local bars unsafe to visit.

Fortunately, Simon and Louise had made one good friend who was prepared to stand by them. Mehmet had a business running boat trips up the Dalian River, and happened to know Ahmet's paint supplier. With his help, they obtained documents which proved Ahmet's deception.

Ahmet, however, continued to demand payment in full, and they returned home in a quandary. 'If this had happened in England,' says Simon, 'I wouldn't have had any hesitation: I would have gone to the police, he'd have been prosecuted and convicted, and we could have reclaimed half the money we'd paid him. But this was a small community, there'd be a local magistrate, and we couldn't be sure we'd get an honest judgement.'

'Also, if we did go to court, they could impound the boat: it could be there for two years, and we wouldn't be able to use it, and we might have to spend another thirty grand on lawyers. Then there was the matter of going back there with this area of threat in the background: were we safe?'

On Mehmet's advice, they decided that *Shadowfax* should make a run for it. Steve and his crew of four would sail it out under cover of darkness and head for Rhodes. Ahmet, they knew, was keeping an eye on the boat – but what could he do to stop it?

They soon found out. On the October evening in question, Simon and Louise were baby-sitting her niece and nephew in Surrey when the phone rang. It was Steve: *Shadowfax*, he told them, had been intercepted by a Turkish naval vessel. Its guns and searchlights were trained on him as he spoke.

The stand-off lasted for two and a half hours. A boarding party was sent to demand the crew's passports and papers; Steve refused to hand them over. Simon and Louise, trying to monitor developments from hundreds of miles away, imagined their boat confiscated and their friend consigned to a *Midnight Express*-style prison.

The only person they could turn to was Mehmet – and again he came up trumps. Whatever contacts Ahmet had in the coastguard, Mehmet had better ones: in fact, his uncle was the head of it. The gunboat's captain was told that he had no business detaining a British vessel, and *Shadowfax* was allowed to proceed; it just made it to Rhodes before its engines failed.

But if Simon and Louise thought they had heard the last of the matter, they were wrong. Not long afterwards they received a phone call from a friend of Ahmet's in Turkey, asking what they were going to do about their 'debt'.

'He started by being terribly polite,' says Simon, 'but then he got more and more aggressive, and in the end he came out with threats: he said that he knew people in London, and they knew where we lived, and they would come round and collect the money.'

The Turkish criminal community in London has a lower profile than the Yardies and the Triads, but it is not to be trifled with. (It controls, for instance, a large part of the capital's drugs trade.) Simon and Louise didn't know what connection Ahmet's friends might have with it, but

they weren't eager to find out; Louise, who worked from home, felt particularly vulnerable. They went to report the threats at Hampstead police station.

The police were sympathetic, but said that because the threat had been made outside British jurisdiction, the best they could do was monitor future phone calls. 'So we were walking back across Hampstead Heath,' says Louise, 'and we thought we'd stop and have a drink in a pub; and we'd just taken a sip of wine when my mobile rang and this voice said, "I've arrived at Heathrow Airport – we're coming round".'

They rang 999. The police advised them to stay put while a patrol went to their house. Then the phone rang again: this time it was a man with a South London accent, tinged with Turkish. His name was John, he said; he understood that they owed his friend some money.

As a barrister, Simon Connolly was used to prosecuting crimes ranging from fraud to murder. But he observes, 'At work I'm in control – I'm asking the questions. And the whole court scene is slightly sanitised: you're talking about something that has happened, that's history.' To be dealing with such matters in his own life was a new and alarming experience.

Nevertheless, he kept his cool. He explained to John that they had been to the police, and that their calls were being monitored. John rang off; no one appeared at their house.

An interview with the CID followed, but there was still no evidence of a crime committed on British soil. It wasn't until after Christmas that they had another call from Ahmet's friends. This time it was a woman who rang,, claiming to be a solicitor, and saying that 'according to European law' she had to meet Louise face to face.

The CID now saw their opportunity. They asked Louise to set up a meeting with the woman they would then send a long a WPC who fitted

Louise's description, wired for sound. 'And that's when I thought, "I want my life back!"' says Louise. ' "What happened to just being normal?" '

The sting, however, was overtaken by other events. Out riding his motorbike, Simon collided with the back of a truck, and was taken to hospital with a head wound requiring dozens of stitches. Louise, who almost fainted at the sight of him, couldn't put her mind to anything else – least of all catching criminals. She didn't ring the woman back, and she didn't hear from her again.

Meanwhile, back on *Shadowfax*, another drama had been unfolding. After several weeks on Rhodes making repairs to the engines, Steve and his crew – who still felt too close to Turkey for comfort – set out for Malta. But the bad winter weather had already set in, and *en route* they hit a terrifying storm. Suffering further engine trouble (which reduced them to filtering fuel through rice wrapped in a pair of tights), they turned back to Crete, reaching the harbour by the skin of their teeth.

It was now just before Christmas, and the crew wanted nothing except to fly home to their families. Steve hired two cars to take them to the airport, and drove one of them back to the marina himself. It was a dark and horribly wet night; the marina, which was brand new, did not yet have proper lighting or road markings; a gate which should have been closed had been left open. Steve, exhausted and disorientated, drove straight off the edge of the harbour into deep water.

By rights he should have drowned; but thanks to one of those twists of fate which make this truth stranger than fiction, Steve was half Maori, and came from a family of pearl divers. He knew to regulate his breath, and to wait until the pressure inside and outside the car had equalised; then he pushed his way out and swam to the surface.

He was alive, but in a state of shock, and the last thing he wanted was to get involved in police enquiries and insurance claims. He knew that the accident had to be reported to the car company within 24 hours, but saw no reason why he could not do that by telephone from England. He caught his plane back to London as planned.

When Louise met up with him at the Earl's Court Boat Show after Christmas, Steve had decided that the drama of life on Shadowfax was too much for him, and that he was going to resign as skipper. He told her that he wanted to sort out the business of the hire car first, but was worried about going back to Crete. When Louise asked him why, he said he thought he might get arrested.

'And I said, "Don't be ridiculous, I'll come with you"', Louise remembers. 'We flew out to Crete and we went to the car rental company, and they said, "The police want to see you." So we went down to the police station and said "We've come about the car" – and suddenly we weren't allowed to leave'.'

What Steve and Louise didn't realise was how much of a furore the submerged car had caused. It had been a front-page story in the local newspapers; divers had been sent down; there was speculation that the car had contained a dead body. They found themselves being questioned by five policemen, led by an aggressive plain-clothes detective.

Louise was outraged: she had come to the police voluntarily, and had had no involvement with the accident, yet she was being treated as a criminal. When she demanded the right to call the British consul, she was told that this was impossible: the police station had no telephone directories. She would have to hand over her passport, and pay a fine for polluting the harbour.

Luckily, on the flight out, Louise had torn a page of useful information from the Easyjet brochure, including the number of the British Embassy

in Athens. After a long series of phone calls, and six hours of detention without so much as a glass of water, she and Steve were finally released.

The question remained, though, of who was to pay for the car, which appeared not to be covered by insurance. Louse and Simon had no doubt that the marina's owners were liable; but they knew that their yacht needed weeks of repair work before it left Crete, and their Marmoris experience had taught them the importance of local goodwill. They struck a deal with the car-hire firm, which cost them another £3,000.

So convoluted is the story of *Shadowfax* that, in telling it, Simon and Louise are wont to backtrack to include incidents they have neglected to mention, such as the earthquake in Marmoris which hurled Steve from his berth, and the galley fire which burnt off Louise's eyebrows and eyelashes. But the next few months were – apart from an engine which exploded as a result of botched repairs – plain sailing. The yacht made its way from Crete to Malta, and from there to the Balearics. 'It was the most beautiful route,' says Louise. 'We went to Sardinia, and then up to Minorca, and we saw a whale, and we saw dolphins – it was just wonderful.'

In July last year *Shadowfax* reached Torrevieja, where it was to spend four months until it was finally ready for chartering; and here the last episode of its traumatic Odyssey was played out.

The boat required anti-fouling treatment, which involved taking it out of the water and supporting it with wooden props. *Shadowfax*'s hull was made of ferro-cement, a durable but extremely heavy material which gave it a weight of some 65 tons. One day while the crew were having lunch on board, a prop cracked, followed by another; the others held but, under the extra pressure, drove straight through the side of the boat.

‘It was like stiletto heels on a floor,’ says Simon, ‘with so much weight on a few points. It’s a miracle that no one was hurt: the boat could easily have fallen over, and then we’re talking deaths.’

The repair work was enormous. ‘To do it properly,’ Simon explains, ‘they had to work from the inside, which involved taking out the fuel tanks; and to get to the fuel tanks, they had to take out two of the four cabins, which had just been finished.’

‘Simon and I flew out to see the damage,’ says Louise, ‘and I was in so much shock that I couldn’t talk. The boat looked worse than when we had bought it: we stood on the companionway and looked down, and you could see straight through to the ground.’

There was, however, a measure of serendipity in all this. The fuel tanks, which had given problems from the start, could now be replaced with new ones; and the arrival of an expert from Britain to supervise the re-cementing provided the *Shadowfax* saga with a remarkable symmetry. The boat sounded familiar to him; when he saw it, he realised that he had been present on the day that the hull had first been cemented, some twenty years before. He remembered his scepticism when the dancers of the Royal Ballet had arrived *en masse* to lend a hand, and his subsequent amazement at the strength and stamina that they brought to the work.

This May, seven months after the accident, *Shadowfax* arrived in Barcelona, where it is now primed for its first charters. Louise has put aside her PR work to concentrate on this operation; and even though she and Simon can never hope to recoup the money they have spent on the boat, they say that they are glad they bought it.

‘If, two years ago, someone had said, “This is what’s going to happen to you”, we would have said that we didn’t want the boat,” admits Louise. ‘But we’ve become much more philosophical: it’s given us a sense that whatever’s thrown at you, you find a way of dealing with it.’ They are

grateful for the friends they have made along the way, though sad that the CID has advised them not to return to Turkey; and for Louise there has been a further, unexpected benefit: this summer, for the first time in nineteen years, she has found herself able to sail without feeling seasick.