

The Inn of Treachery



*A Stirring Story of Paduan Days of Old and
the Thirst for Vengeance*

By GUIDO RENGETTI

MY lord, Carlos Catalano, the Duke of Padua, deserved the love of his subjects, if ever a prince did, and for the most part he had it; but it pleased fate to give him as his deadly foe the very man whose intelligence he needed most, his greatest vassal, that plotting, black hearted, consummate villain, Luigi Magnozzi.

For my part there are times when I thank Heaven that I am no crowned ruler, but only plain William Fraser, English soldier of fortune and captain of the best band of mercenaries that ever bore lances.

I can deal with my enemies with cold

steel, and they seldom trouble me twice; whereas a prince, though as mortal as you or I, with full as many loves and hates, must consider policy and duty and the good of his land—that is, if he be a prince worthy of his throne.

Duke Carlos felt little goodwill toward the man who had betrayed him secretly and defied him openly. Nevertheless, when I had stormed Magnozzi's stronghold and brought its master into Padua a prisoner, and he, perceiving that his shrift was likely to be a short one, made a humble plea for pardon, my lord considered several things.

He considered that if Magnozzi met the death he merited, his great lands would descend in inheritance to his daughter. He considered that this daughter had been married for some years to a powerful Venetian noble.

He considered that Venice was the tireless rival of Padua, and that, should Magnozzi's son-in-law possess such wide estates within the Paduan boundaries, the peace of the duchy would surely be menaced. So he pardoned his old enemy and wiped the score clean.

Now all this was, of course, none of my affair, nor did it concern me overmuch if my lord, the duke, chose to believe in this peace pact and to assume that Magnozzi would prove his faithful ally in the future, according to the bond.

But when, some time after, my lord conceived the mad idea of passing the night at an inn situated on Magnozzi's lands and scarcely a mile from his castle, I felt that it was full time for me to take a hand in the game and open his eyes to the risk he ran.

The three of us—Duke Carlos, my Irish lieutenant, Dennis O'Rourke, and myself—were riding back to Padua in the dusk of a sharp October afternoon, after paying a visit of inspection to one of the duke's fortresses. We were late beyond our expectation, and it was now plain that we could not reach the palace until the night was far advanced.

THIS prospect and the nip of the night air set the duke's wits to working. He ended by pointing out to us that there was small sense in journeying through the cold, when, within a few moments, we would pass a hostelry that could shelter us till the morning.

If it were a rude place, so much the greater would be the zest of adventure; and it would amuse him to be served by Magnozzi's people.

At this absurd suggestion I spoke my

mind as freely as ever man did—and had my trouble for my pains.

"Oh, you soldiers are too suspicious, Sir William!" the duke smiled good-humoredly, when I had paused. "Because Magnozzi once fought me, must he always be my enemy?"

"You do not like this gentleman, nor, to be frank, do I; but he has sworn allegiance to me on the honor of his name, and I choose to believe him honest. Besides, he will be quite unaware of our presence at this inn. Why should we fear him, then?"

"My lord," I said bluntly, "you know no more of such gentry than of—let us say the devil, a most appropriate comparison. Even to pass through Magnozzi's lands without a guard, as we are now doing, is an imprudence I should never have counseled.

"As for this other piece of madness, what proof have we that the old knave might not pause at his inn this very evening and discover you there?"

"And what think you he would do then, knowing that you were utterly at his mercy?"

THE three of us exchanged words for a time, each stubbornly set in his own belief. Then the duke ceased smiling and narrowed his eyes.

"Tonight I sleep at the inn yonder. Is my decision clear?" he asked haughtily. "That is well—for I am the master, I think, Sir William Fraser!"

"Aye," said I surlily, "and better for you if you were not, and if we could drag you back to Padua and put you under the guard of my soldiers until it please the saints to give you back your sanity!"

He laughed at that, for what he called my soldier's bluntness always amused him.

"I fancy you would get little help in such an undertaking from O'Rourke, who is madder far than I," he retorted. "Come, I

know why you are so black. You had planned to spend this evening among the roses with Lady Fraser! Ride on to Padua, then, if you choose, and Messer Dennis and I will enjoy the adventure by ourselves."

I shook my head gloomily. "If you are bent on such folly, my place is with you. But in the name of Heaven, grant me at least one boon. Keep your rank and title to yourself, and do not let the people of the inn know who it is they entertain!"

"Very good," he answered after a reflective pause. "You shall have your way, my friend. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Aye, satisfied as Damocles was when the sword hung over his head!" I returned grimly.

So we set spurs to our horses and galloped toward where the distant lights were glimmering through the dusk.

THE inn kept by Magnozzi's people was situated at the crossing of two roads, one of which ran in the direction of Padua, while the other led steeply up a hill to where Luigi's fortress castle perched like an eagle among its crags.

A mean looking, roughly built place, it was by no means inviting; but we were all weary after the day's ride, and the prospect of a fire and a meal was tempting enough to cheer us considerably as we dismounted and hastened in out of the darkness and the cold night air.

It appeared that there were no other guests, and we got a warm welcome from the wizened, shrewd eyed little host and his dark, silent, hard mouthed wife—a rather unprepossessing pair, it struck me, and much the sort of fry that old Magnozzi might have been expected to harbor on his lands.

There was a fire roaring in the chimney place and we promptly gathered around it and began to warm our chilled limbs.

"An adventure, Sir William; a true

adventure!" the duke kept repeating, as he glanced about the mean little room.

PERHAPS to one reared in palaces it was, though, for my part, I had passed too much time among such scenes to find them particularly enlivening. My host had vanished immediately after our arrival, but his wife now appeared with our supper, and we fell on it with a good appetite, while Dennis loudly voiced his satisfaction with the meal.

"Sure and it's yourself can cook to the king's taste, no less!" he informed the woman, "Never did I see a better roast than the one I'm eating now! Come, tell us, are you growing rich at your trade? And do you find him a good master, this Magnozzi, on whose lands you dwell?"

"'Tis mesilf am a stranger to Padua and know little of its nobles, but I'm hearing on all sides naught but good things of your master. A rare nature, they tell me; gentle, charitable, most faithful to those above him. And is it true, now?"

"A good lord," the woman assented, without a flicker of expression on her hard face. If she suspected his irony, she was far from showing it.

"But the Duke of Padua," I suggested with a side glance at my lord, "scarce merits the loyalty of such a one. A tyrant, many people say, a spendthrift, a proud, addle headed rogue who plunges his duchy into troubles of all sorts! I know nothing of this, you understand; I have only heard it. What is your mind in the matter?"

SHE glanced at me quickly, then lowered her eyes.

"I cannot say, signor," she told me composedly. "I have never seen him. Should he come here to my inn tonight and be pleased to conceal from me his name, I would be none the wiser!"

On the last word she left the room and

went back into the kitchen, and we, who remained, stared openmouthed into one another's eyes. Had she recognized us? I thought that she had, the duke maintained she had not, and Dennis declined to commit himself.

"Ye never can tell with a woman," he said solemnly. "Wait till our host comes back and I'll soon reach the bottom of this matter. Bless us all! And what's this?"

It was the sound of galloping hoofs in the near distance. They approached rapidly, there was a noise of voices without, and an instant later the door was thrown open and there appeared on the threshold, with a pair of black-visored, scowling troopers behind him, a white-haired, hawk nosed, keen eyed gentleman in a plumed hat and gold embroidered cloak, whom, with a sinking of the heart, I recognized as Luigi Magnozzi!

In a flash I realized that the very thing I had foretold had come to pass.

At the sound of the opening of the door the duke had turned in his seat, and the eyes of the two men met.

Instinctively I reached back and loosened my sword, half rising from the table as I did so; but what followed gave me a surprise and made me feel rather ashamed of my haste.

Magnozzi stood a brief instant on the threshold, gazing at us in apparent stupefaction. Then his look turned to one of delighted welcome, and, springing across the room with an agility remarkable in a man of his years, he bent his knee before the duke and fervently kissed his hand.

"Welcome, my lord, welcome!" he cried. "I had not known that you were so near me; a thousand pardons that I am so late in greeting you! But why pass a night in such a place as this, when my castle and all in it are at your service? I am but now on my way home after a day afield. Ride with me, then, and let me house you suitably!"

HE turned to O'Rourke and me with a beaming smile, apparently quite forgetful of the not so far distant day when he had ridden to Padua a prisoner in the midst of my White Company.

"All friends of my prince are welcome here," he informed us, "and none more so, Sir Fraser, than you and your brave lieutenant!"

"Is it so, indeed?" Dennis demanded quite audibly. "I recall a time when you hid most rarely what tenderness you felt for us!"

For my part, I left the greeting unanswered, being in an agony lest the duke should accept Magnozzi's invitation and ride to the castle with him. To my relief, however, there proved to be limits to my lord's recklessness.

"I give you all thanks for your courtesy, signor," was his gracious answer, "but what you suggest is impossible. My friends and I are weary from riding and are going to sleep within the hour, while early tomorrow we must be on our way home.

"At some other time I will most gladly enjoy your hospitality. Meanwhile, it has afforded me pleasure to see you for even so brief a moment."

AND he smiled into the fierce eyes of the old man as composedly as if he did not know himself to be in grave danger. He had courage.

Magnozzi assented with protestations of deep regret, and then he flung a thunderbolt into our midst by announcing his intention of not leaving us at all.

"The people of the inn are most honest and trustworthy, my lord," he began, "but nevertheless, when my sovereign honors my lands with his presence, I can surrender to no one else the task of guarding him.

"I will pass the night here by the fire with two troopers; we will not sleep, we will not close our eyes! Ah, my lord, let me prove my devotion, let me make amends for my late

fault to you and show my gratitude for your kindness!"

Had I stood in the duke's shoes I would have replied that to me a guard of lions and tigers would be preferable to one composed of Magnozzi and his men; and I think the old knave read my thoughts well enough in the look I gave him.

Nevertheless, it was perfectly plain that since we were in his power we had better not start a quarrel, and I was not surprised to hear my lord answer graciously, accepting his offer with every appearance of trust.

Seldom in my life have I been more pleased at anything than I was that night when the duke arose and announced his intention of going to bed. The evening had been a well-nigh insupportable one, and had it been prolonged, I fancy it would have ended in a general mêlée, in the course of which our ill-assorted quartette would have cut one another's throats.

Dennis, who possessed no more prudence than was to be expected from one of his nation, had been doing his utmost to exasperate Magnozzi by a series of covert allusions to his late rebellion and downfall; that gentleman had retorted by veiled attacks on me, and I had defended myself with the best wit I could muster. The duke alone, though amused and annoyed by turns, had maintained a pretense of serenity and sought to keep the peace. An hour or two of this congenial chatter had exhausted us, and we were visibly cheered at the thought of separating for the night.

MAGNOZZI guided us above stairs in person and ushered the duke into a room which was, he declared, the best in the place, and later conducted O'Rourke and myself into the one next to it.

"Good dreams, Sir William," he said, lingering an instant on my threshold, "and never fear but that I will guard our prince

well!"

"You had better do so," I responded, with a shrug of the shoulders, "for if any harm came to him there are some of his friends at Padua who would know the reason for it!"

He scowled at me blackly, then turned away.

"You think yourself a clever man, Sir William," he snarled, letting his venom appear openly for the first time that evening, "but there may yet come a time when you will find that others beside yourself can play a winning game!"

Before I could answer him, he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

This vague threat did not trouble me much. Indeed, I was growing easier in my mind, for surely, I thought, had he intended us any active harm he would not have waited so long before attempting it.

Weary but contented, I stretched myself on the rude straw pallet that did duty for a bed.

"Praise Heaven that my lord showed wit enough not to pass the night at the old rogue's castle!" I yawned to Dennis. "That would have been the end of us all, I think. Well, tomorrow we shall be home again and his mad jaunt will be over."

"'Tis the devil of a queer evening we've had, nevertheless," he murmured sleepily. "A meal at an enemy's inn, a pair of innkeepers whom that old spalpeen is after saying he trusts, which is a good reason for suspecting them. Aye, and a night passed with Magnozzi watching over us, save the mark—"

He halted on the very borderland of slumber for a final thrust.

"And there's another queer thing sticks in my mind. Our friend there was after saying he was on his way home, you recall; but I heard the hoofs of the horses in the distance and I could swear on my soul 'twas from the castle and not toward it they came, which proves—"

HIS voice trailed into silence. He was asleep, but he had left his words behind him, and I found that they had banished all my desire for repose. Propping myself on my elbow, I thought steadily for a long time.

I remembered that the innkeeper had vanished immediately after our arrival. Perhaps he had recognized the duke and hurried to Luigi's castle with the news!

The result of my musings was that I rose, took up my sword belt from the floor, buckled it round me, and, bending over O'Rourke, shook him ruthlessly awake.

"What is it you're wanting, anyhow?" he stammered.

"Hush!" I muttered, my hand across his mouth. "Listen to me, Dennis. There is devilry here. I am sure of it. We have been blind not to suspect sooner. Heaven send we are not too late! Now follow me and do it without noise, if you hope to keep this side of the grave!"

BEING wide awake by this time he obeyed me as if it were all the most natural affair possible, and, inch by inch, testing each board lest it should creak beneath our feet, we stole across to the door. Very slowly I unbolted it and swung it open.

Before us stretched the dark line of passage, and I tiptoed noiselessly across it to the stairs, thrust out my head and stared down into the lower room where Magnozzi had informed us he meant to mount guard.

The fire, though nearly extinguished, still lit the place with a faint glimmer, and I saw exactly what I had expected to see. There was no sign of either Luigi or his troopers!

There was mischief afoot, that was certain, and I could think of but one way to cope with it. Rejoining O'Rourke, I beckoned him to follow me, and we stole cautiously to the duke's door. I put my hand on it and swung it open. Yes, he had left it unbolted,

quite as I had expected.

And now he was fast asleep! Had he not been a ruler and therefore accustomed to such predicaments as the present one, I would surely have dubbed him an imbecile, and, as it was, his complete unconcern toward his danger irritated me extremely.

For a little while I stood motionless, accustoming my eyes to the darkness. The couch itself was in the shadow, but part of the room was illumined faintly by the moonlight that poured through the window.

Very slowly and cautiously I made a tour of inspection and found, I must say, little enough to reward me. There was but one door, and it had a firm bolt; the paneled walls seemed strong and solid; the window was high above the ground and barred.

How anyone could enter I was at a loss to conceive, yet I was anything but easy in my mind.

WHEN I had ended my search, I knelt down by the duke's pillow, stretched out a hand to seize his shoulder and had the misfortune to drive it against his eye instead. Naturally enough, he started up with an oath, and as the situation was urgent I ventured to silence him in the same fashion I had used with Dennis.

"It is I, Fraser, my lord!" I hissed, my hand still firmly over his lips. "I have come to implore you to sleep in my chamber and to permit me to sleep here. There is danger tonight, and I have discovered a way to meet it."

He was anything but grateful for my solicitude, and he let me know as much frankly. There was no danger, he maintained, and he was out of patience with my forebodings. Was it not enough that his couch was hard as any stone, and must I rob him of what little slumber he could get?

Throughout this tirade I kept my hand over his mouth, so that he could formulate the

words only in gasps, for I did not mean that he should rouse the house.

“My lord,” I muttered desperately, “do you remember Castagnaro? I won Verona for you that day, and I saved your life as well. If you are grateful, pay me now. Go into my chamber and bolt the door, and leave me to my devices here!”

I had touched the right chord at last.

“Have your way. ’Tis a strange return for such a service, but each man to his taste,” he grumbled, and rose from the couch.

When he reached my room and I heard him bolt the door behind him, I shut O’Rourke and myself into the chamber and began my preparations.

These were of the simplest. I piled the covers of the couch into such a shape as resembled, in the shadow, the body of a man; then I stretched myself in the gloom near it with my drawn sword beside me, motioned to Dennis to do the same and hissed in his ear a command for silence. He obeyed me to the letter, for he went promptly to sleep.

If any man thinks it a pleasant diversion to lie in the dark waiting for he knows not what danger, I wish him the same experience I had that night.

BENEATH that roof, I could have sworn it on my hope of heaven, was some black plot for the sudden removal of the duke and the soldier who was the duke’s right hand. A web had been woven round us, and it was drawing closer and closer beneath the cover of the darkness.

The fact that I did not see how anyone could enter a barred and bolted room made me but the more uneasy, since it lent a sinister note to the affair. The face of old Magnozzi rose before me, lined, bitter, fierce eyed. He was a most consummate villain, and something whispered to me that tonight he played to win.

The minutes dragged by, the night

wore on and still nothing happened. The house was as silent as death; never a board creaked, not a breeze sighed without. I lay very tense and alert, my eyes continually roaming from side to side of the chamber, always seeking for a sign of the peril that would presently come upon me.

Yet, I say it to my shame, no man can remain watchful forever, and at last my vigilance began to relax a little. It was very late now. The moonlight was fading. Perhaps after all I had deceived myself. Perhaps—

Another instant and I believe I would have been in a doze. My eyelids were falling, and beneath them I gazed dreamily at the one spot on the opposite wall where the moonlight still lingered. Praise God that in that drowsy moment I looked there and not elsewhere! The one glance was enough, for it showed me what sent sleep fleeing, and brought me back to my senses with a bound.

Was I mad, or was it true that beneath my eyes the wall was swaying outward? A cold chill swept over me; I pinched my arm to convince myself that it was not a nightmare. The thing was mysterious and ghostly, more hair-raising a thousand times than the clash of arms and the sound of spurs would have been.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the night, but slowly and steadily, under the rays of the moon, the panel swung out and a black void was revealed behind it! Then I understood. There was a secret door in the wall, and our foes were coming through it!

MAGNOZZI was the first of the invaders to appear. As I watched, he stepped lightly into the room and paused for an instant, waiting until the two troopers had emerged in their turn from the dark hole.

Each man carried a drawn sword in his hand, and, if I ever read murder in my life, I read it then in the fierce, pale, twitching face and gleaming eyes of my enemy and the grim, dark countenances of his followers.

Nevertheless, I was now quite calm. I put out my hand and grasped O'Rourke's shoulder, and he stirred slightly, then stiffened, and lastly drew a sharp breath. Satisfied, I released him. Among his other admirable qualities he numbered the power of waking with all his wits about him, and I knew he was already alive to our peril.

Signor Magnozzi tightened his grip on his sword hilt. I could see the muscles of his hand grow tense in the moonlight. He began to steal forward, testing each board before he trusted it with his weight. After him, dark and noiseless, came the troopers. They were approaching the couch in the shadow, where they believed that the duke lay asleep.

AS for me, I did not stir, though the amounting anger in my heart made quiescence well-nigh impossible. Carlos Catalano had pardoned this man, had treated him with the generosity of a noble and princely soul. In return he was to be stabbed in his sleep at a roadside inn!

Magnozzi was very close to me now, crouching, creeping. A moment more and I felt his quick, hoarse breathing almost against my cheek. He bent toward the couch, raised his hand, leaned forward to strike. Then I sprang to my feet, and knocked up his sword with mine.

On the instant bedlam reigned about us. Magnozzi started away with a choked cry of furious bafflement, and I pressed him backward in a frenzy of rage, allowing him small time to collect his wits.

"Ah, would ye then, ye murdering divils!" I heard O'Rourke shout with an exultant laugh, and knew that he had fallen with enthusiasm on the two troopers.

Doubtless they were picked swordsmen and desperate fighters, but I did not think the two of them would get beneath the Irishman's guard.

For my part, though to fight in the dark

is not child's play, I have enjoyed few things as I enjoyed that combat. Since to have killed Magnozzi too easily would have lessened my pleasure, I was glad to find that he possessed an unusual skill. Our blades crossed and recrossed, ringing together sharply. Yes, he was clever and cool, too. Already he had recovered from his fright, and was beginning to attack as well as defend.

I recalled grimly that he was said to have passed much of his life in France. Well, certainly he had studied fencing there.

THROUGH the clash of steel I could hear Dennis laughing and jesting as he fought, but I had small leisure to heed him. Magnozzi's breath was coming fast; he was learning what manner of swordsman he had against him, and his courage weakened as I drove him steadily back.

"Gilberto! Andrea! Aid me!" he panted over his shoulder to the troopers.

"Is it your cutthroat friends you're wanting? Sure, and they're engaged elsewhere and most urgently!" O'Rourke mocked from the other side of the room.

Magnozzi gasped, and I will not deny the sound was sweet to my ears.

"It is best, before you come to stab a sleeping man, to be sure that he is not awake," I said grimly, as I parried his thrusts. "Above all, it is best when the man chances to be Catalano of Padua, a great and noble prince who has true friends as well as cowardly, lying foes_"

"Sir William!" he panted. "Sir William Fraser!"

Until I spoke I think he had not been sure who was at his sword's point, and with the coming of this knowledge all hope of victory plainly left him.

"Yes," said I, "Sir William Fraser, who now intends to kill you like any dog, as you would have killed your master. I have wasted too much time on you already. Say your

prayers, if you can call them to mind!"

Again he gasped hoarsely. He was facing the windows now. The moon, shining across our swords, gave me the light I needed for my thrust, and I feinted once, twice, three times, and ran my blade through his body. He cried out chokingly, then flung up his arms and fell.

Wrenching my weapon free, I sprang over to O'Rourke and found my advent to be a most timely one. He was fighting most brilliantly and enjoying himself to a quite unreasonable extent, but the two against him were no pigmies, and one of them had swung round behind him, and was about to plunge a sword into his back when I interfered. Thereafter, for a time, each of us fought his own man.

The uproar had aroused Duke Carlos from the sleep of the just in the next room, and he was now pounding on our bolted door, and clamoring for an admittance which neither of us had leisure to give him. However, the end was rapidly drawing near, and soon I heard the Irishman's opponent go to the floor with a crash.

"Let in the duke!" I called. And as Dennis drew back the bolt and flung the door open, I got beneath my man's guard and brought him down.

A MOMENT later the duke was standing beside me, holding my hands and peering at me anxiously, while the innkeeper and his wife hesitated on the threshold, she raising a candle over her head and staring at the litter of bodies, he whey faced and extremely weak-kneed. "Sir William!" my lord was crying. "Are you wounded? Where is Signor Luigi? And, in the name of Heaven, what does this uproar mean?"

NOW, though I had been anything but idle during the few minutes, my wits had been full as busy as my sword, and I believed

I understood all that had befallen us that night. Nor could I resist the temptation to play the part of the clever man who unravels the mystery.

"Signor Luigi is there, my lord," said I, pointing dramatically to where he lay huddled on the floor. "As for the meaning of the occurrence, it is what I propose to discover now."

Striding suddenly across to the doorway, I halted beside the startled innkeeper and his wife, and keenly scrutinized their faces in the hope of discovering which of the pair was best suited to my purpose.

The woman, though pale, confronted me with steadiness, but the man was a pitiful sight in his terror, and I promptly addressed myself to him.

"Listen to me, my friend," I said harshly. "The gentleman yonder, he in the center of the floor, is the Duke of Padua. Ah, you did not know? You are astonished? That is somewhat strange, is it not, when you recognized him on his arrival here, and straightway took yourself off to inform Magnozzi of his coming?"

"We, my lord? Never, as the Virgin hears me!" the woman cried, in a desperate effort to divert my attention.

But I never took my eyes off her husband's pasty face.

"Ah, you choose to lie, do you?" I demanded. "You had better beware! If you speak the truth it may be that the duke will show you mercy. If you do not, I swear on my soul that this is your last hour on earth!" And I flashed my bloody sword close before his eyes.

He flung himself on his knees in a panic.

"Pardon, pardon, my lord!" he moaned. "Yes, I confess it."

"Turn your head!" I commanded sternly. "Look at that door in the wall. You are accustomed to lodge those of your guests who

carry fat purses in this room, is it not so?

“And in the night you enter and relieve them of their abundance of this world’s goods, eh? And Magnozzi knew of the trade you ply and permitted it and in return for his complaisance taxed you from your spoils.”

THE man fairly groveled before me. “It is true!” he shuddered. “But how have you guessed this, my lord, in the name of the saints?”

“In place of asking questions,” said I, “you had best go thank Heaven for its mercy toward you! You know what Magnozzi planned for tonight—the murder of the duke, the killing of me who guarded him.

“But you do not know, I fancy, what

he planned for tomorrow. Fools! He would have cried out in horror; he would have haled you to Padua and given you up to justice as the murderers! Do you see? Your master would have been rid of his enemy and at no cost to himself!”

Turning from their horrified faces, I confronted the duke, who was still standing in the center of the room, a good deal more serious than his wont, and obviously as much impressed by my revelations as I could have desired.

“And now, my lord,” said I, “this neighborhood is far too near Signor Luigi’s castle to be a healthy one for us. Let us go saddle our horses and ride back to Padua as quickly as we may!”