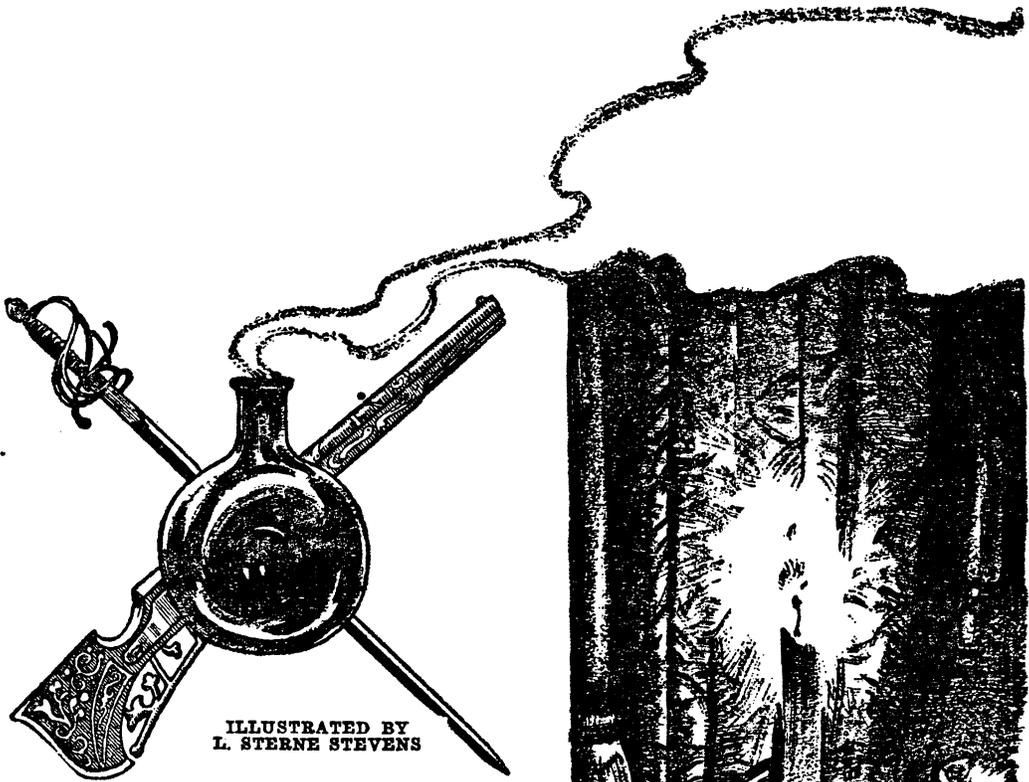


# Of Deadly Weapons

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*TO HIS SERENITY My Lord Duke Pietro IV of Rometia; from His Lordship's Ever-Obliged loving humble servant Luigi Caradosso, sometime Captain of the Guard; this iiij day of December 1580, these:*

Sire;

It is a continual amazement to me how Doctors of no matter what persuasion (naturally I do not mean of religion, but of alchemy, astrology, medicine and such rubbishes) can from generation to generation prevail with God's other images; and not only with the majority of mankind (such as we make into soldiers) but also with nobles and gentry such as Your Highness' Grace, who can write their names and have letters left over and who therefore might be supposed to know better.

But during my nigh sixty years of service with Your Eminence's family I recall a succession of charlatans, each with a scheme or discovery that would not have deceived a child of five, and each entertained right royally until his pretensions came to naught. In the time of Your Grace's grandfather (in whose favor may God make an exception, Amen!) there was a fellow who could make gold. After him I remember a most reverend man who said tertian fever was caused by those stinging flies which arise from swamps at eventide; poor man, he proposed to drain all the marshlands of the duchy and of course died from inhaling the water- vapors—were our ancestors all fools to call this ague malaria, bad air, if it was caused by flies? Then came—or perhaps he had precedence, I forget—a medical lunatic who said the camp fever was caused by lice, which every soldier hath had about him since Caesar's time; *videlicet* myself, who have been scratching most of my days and still survive at fourscore years, to enjoy Your Serene Highness' generosity and bounty in this leaky hut.

I thought at first that the courier who came post-haste yesterday and trampled all

over my turnips (but he will recover) was one charged by Your Highness to do something about the tiles of my roof; but no, he was to tell me that Your Highness hath found a man—another doctor, Heaven give me patience!—with a certain recipe for destroying whole armies, nay, whole cities, in the twinkling of an eye: thus causing wars to cease (with Your Excellency victorious) and the lion to lie down with the lamb, *etcetera etcetera*.



I WILL rehearse the facts laid before me in Your Lordship's gracious message; oftentimes words written or spoken in enthusiasm sound quite different when repeated coolly—as for instance the words of a lover, repeated to him later by the girl's father. Ha ha! This rogue doctor, then, approacheth Your Grace with the claim that gunpowder as we have known it is mere barley-flour, and that he hath, not one explosive, but two, of which either will devastate the earth; and which when used together—the one as it were setting off the other—will turn Italy into a howling desert, of which Your Eminence would presumably be King.

Leaving the desirability of such an empire to Your Lordship's judgment—it takes all kinds to make a world, mostly fools—let us consider what lies within my province as a soldier—the means by which it is to be achieved.

This doctor saith that one of his devastators is made from mercury, by his art transformed into a powder which blows up when stroked with a feather. Feathers in the artillery! But worse remains behind. This miracle, quotha, is not to be used alone, but as an encourager of another explodent which he hath concocted (he hath the sublime impudence to tell Your Serenity) out of acids and the juice of the bones of cows! In proof of these absurdities he produces his face, denuded of human features when his

laboratory blew up; requesting Your Highness to build him another (laboratory, I mean, not face) —and pour the revenues of the Duchy into his project of winning future wars with soup!

Now I have stated the case in its true aspect, Your Grace will doubtless deem it so made as to be without parallel in past time. But while human wisdom flashes across the ages like shooting stars, human folly repeats itself as regularly as the sun rises. So I can tell Your Grace that this is not my first experience of invincible weapons; nay, in the year 1540 (I think it was) my life was made miserable for a time by just such another pretender—though to be sure he had the shame to wrap his method in mystery. He had not, God rest him, the brazenness to tell Gianni di Castello Nero that he could win wars with broth.

(The floor of this cottage hath become so uneven, from the roof-leaks, that my table joggleth whenever I dot an *i*; moreover there is no bedroom for the maidservant, which entraineth regrettable results; but until the flood-waters rise to my neck or the parish priest excommunicate me, I continue; as becomes a recipient of Your Lordship's hospitality.)

I was then in the service of Your Grace's grandfather; the same who fixed the rate of my pension—in florins worth about three times what they are today. He had also assigned me, against the day of my retirement, a house with a whole roof; but at the time of which I write some little pique had caused him to wish to hang me, so that I thought it prudent to go hide in a monastery. Your Grace may not be aware that though a man of war in later life, I was convent bred; having been left on the doorstep in a basket. I was indeed a sort of servant, and, as we say in the armies, mascot, to the monks until my eighteenth year; and learned much from them, not all of it entirely orthodox. The good brethren had (there were some such

congregations in Italy at that time) their own special methods of dealing with the laity; to such an extent that, arriving to seek sanctuary these twenty-two years later, I found with regret that they had been degraded and dispersed by order of the Holy Father; and some of them including my especial friend the Hospitaller, more or less burned alive for heresy, poisoning and so on. Indeed, it appeared that in the legal sense they had never been monks at all, nor that a monastery; which makes it the more remarkable, as Your Highness will agree, that my moral life started under such auspices, should have been as pure as it hath.

But, denied the consolations of religion, I must still live; whereby it came about that a week later—after preliminary negotiations with which I will not weary Your Eminence—I walked into the guardroom of Castello Nero, slapped my sword-blade on the table and invited the lieutenant (who was sitting on a chair there, drinking wine out of a wooden mug) to get up and fight me in the courtyard.

"Hah?" says he, being drunker than an officer should be in mid-afternoon.

"Because" says I, "though unworthy, your eyes now behold the new captain of this guard, appointed over thy head by my lord Gianni. Thou'lt not relinquish promotion without ill-feeling—'tis not to be expected; on the other hand, good feeling and brotherly love are as necessary to me as sun and rain are to a violet. Wherefore, as I said, come forth into the courtyard and I will hew thee into mincemeat."



HE DID not even look up at me; sat there swashing the wine in his pot and shaking his head sadly from side to side.

"Spare thy sweat, Luigi Caradosso," he says into his beard (for I had given him my name, in a loud voice, on entering the

room) : “I’ll not fight for command of this guard, at all events.”

“No?” says I, somewhat surprised (but then I thought maybe the poor man had boils, or a wife, or some other hidden woe): “Then perhaps there is a sergeant who—”

“No sergeant would draw sword for command of this guard,” says the lieutenant (his name was Bertelli), “nor no corporal. Nor no common soldier either. Nor the man who polisheth the equipment. Nor the boy who—”

What with wine and grief, he had embarked on a sort of litany that might go on forever. I therefore pushed his chair over backward, and when he had picked himself up off the floor inquired civilly the reason for these reluctances. Because (I said) it seemed to me a good enough guardship—a decent castle, defensible without too much effort; fair quarters for the officers and for the men lairs comfortable enough to keep them from giving trouble.

“Ah, true,” says Bertelli, “but in a month or so there will be no guard at all. Right in the middle of the fighting season we shall be turned out, with devil a job going in the Free Companies, and—”

“Doth a noble giving up his guard,” says I reasonably, “hire a new captain— and no cheap one, I may tell you?”

“That’s because the people of this town are riotous,” says Bertelli, still swashing his liquor and offering me none. “Once they’re massacred—His Grace won’t trust me to do it because I come from hereabouts—thou and the whole guard will be kicked out o’ doors and this doctor will take our places. All of them.”

“This doctor,” says I, finding the wineskin in a corner and refreshing myself therefrom, “this doctor will replace one hundred and fifty armed men?”

“One hundred and eighty-three,” says Bertelli sulkily. “Thou thyself hast replaced at least four around that wineskin.”

“But whose wine is it?” I asked gently, laying my dagger conveniently on the table. “This doctor, you say, will replace the entire guard? Guns, too?”

“He hath a mode of warfare,” says Bertelli, “which in the hands of one man can destroy whole armies in the field, lay waste cities—”

Doth Your Grace detect some slight similarity between this proposal and the scheme of your doctor with the soup? Aha! We approach the meat of the matter—the soup meat, so to say. See how I can joke though up to the ankles in water!

“And the rioters with whom we’re to deal before we are disbanded?” I broke in.

“They have got wind of this weapon,” says the lieutenant, “and it would seem they have little taste for the same.”

“But why?” I asked. “If one man’s to win all the wars hereabout, will it not save their serving in the army?”

“Unfortunately,” says Bertelli, “they were told that about gunpowder—or their grandsires were—and they found they still had to serve and that more of them got killed than ever. My own father could have no more children after me, all along of them guns.”

“Artillery hath been at least of some benefit to the world, then,” I told him, still hoping against hope for a fight. But it was evident that he (like Your Grace) believed in this irresistible weapon and so had lost all interest in the happier things of life.

“What’s the population of the town?” I therefore asked him.

“About four thousand.”

“And they will riot?”

“They’re on the edge of revolt.”

When a man changes “riot” into “revolt” it means he is in sympathy with the rioters.

“And His Lordship believes in this fairy-tale, this bogey-warfare?”

“If I had the money,” says Bertelli,

“that he hath given to that ape already—” He babbled on while I reflected and finished the skin of wine. At last I arose, resumed my sword and dagger, pulled down my shirt and made myself decent.

“I will go,” I told Bertelli, “and reason with His Lordship.”

## II



BUT there was no reasoning with him.

My Lord Gianni was one of those small men for whom no or no duchy neither, can ever be large enough; he was, further, of a pindling and rickety constitution, with knock-knees. Nobles are not usually of attractive body—excepting always Your Grace’s family by whose bounty I enjoy this Venetian mansion complete with lagoons; but this specimen, being wed to a lady much larger than himself, had thought to show his virility by growing on his upper lip a smudge as though he’d caught his nose on a candle. Naturally he esteemed himself qualified to be Emperor of the World.

Naturally, also, his wits outrunning his reason (as it can even in nobles of better construction), he believed utterly in the power of this Doctor Ignani to clear the way for him; without the expense and delay necessary to the raising and training of armies and the winning of wars. It was astonishing to hear him talk—to me of all people; telling me to my face that my function would be to butcher peasants, so that the survivors would pay taxes to make soldiering a thing of the past!

I pointed this out to him by a statement (quite untrue) that I had yearned to stay in his service for the term of my natural life; and his lordship was pleased to respond with a slight flush, a stutter and the lying promise that I and my myrmidons should not be dismissed, but retained to

provide him with ceremonial guard on his excursions through his new dominions.

This to my very beard! As Your Grace doth not, of course, know, ceremonial duty is the loathing and dread of every guardsman—polished armor, every strap at the last hole, no wine, no scratching on duty, and no women without a lot of argument. A man would be better dead—that is to say, a man; but not being such, Gianni was offering this to me as the height of human happiness—after I should have quelled his riots for him.

Obviously it was of no use to speak further. I retired, resolved to leave this service as soon as I had got my first month’s pay; and the riot broke out a week later, on a very pleasant sunny morning in November.

Meantime I had improved my mind in the society of this Doctor Ignani; and wasted some of my time trying to get from him particulars of his invention. I did gather that his scheme was less military than medical—in other words, that instead of slaying men honestly (as Your Grace’s charlatan proposes to do with his stew) this quack intended to send plagues to the enemy, as God did to the Egyptians, but worse. Armies and civilians alike, it seemed, were to expire in windrows after dire agony; but as to how the plague was to be sent—which was of course the nub of the matter—his learnedness was mysterious to the point of rudeness. When I applied to my lord Gianni, furthermore, for details as to how the plague, once loosed, was to be prevented from spreading to us, I was again rebuffed; not surprisingly, because who but a professional soldier can imagine the calamities of war extending to himself?

Doth Your Serenity, for instance, imagine this slop of mercury and beef-bones transforming Your Highness into a mess of guts and gristle?

Very well, then.

This riot, now.



IT was a small affair, compared with the revolts I had crushed on behalf of Your Grace's grandfather; but then my forces in this case were smaller too, and for the thousandth time I thanked God for my gift of dealing with hostile situations reasonably and without the use of violence. As I have told Your Highness many times, I am not a violent man. Let me put a case to an adversary and let him assent to my proposals immediately, and I am the mildest of creatures. In the instance of this Castello Nero business, furthermore, I had not sufficient men to justify stern action—a bare hundred and thirty, armed only with swords, daggers, pistols, arquebuses, arbalests, pikes, halberds and a score or so of those small bombs I had invented for throwing into crowds. The rest of the guard I had perforce left on that castle wall which commanded the town square where this riot was beginning—fifty men necessary to the service of the guns, which I had had depressed to cover the square and loaded with all available old chain, discarded fetters, doornails, broken spurs and suchlike. It touches me now when I think that to signify my love and goodwill toward the

populace I had had the gun-muzzles wreathed with olive-branches . . .

Despite which, this crowd kept seething up to within twenty ells of where I sat my horse (I had my troops drawn up, of course, across the castle gateway) — and kept roaring confusedly that they wished audience of His Lordship, that they would not be slaughtered, that they were not brute beasts, that they were God's children and so on—interesting, if true, but not to the point. For some time I listened in silence; but when the rioters began to shout “Down with war!” and similar blasphemies, I felt it necessary to address them.

“Silence!” I therefore called out gently, yet so as to be heard clearly at the other end of the square; and at the same time raised my left hand. This was to adjust my helmet, but it served also as signal to the gunners on the walls to drop the screen of olive-branches and let the gun-muzzles grin on the assemblage.

“Brethren,” I asked them, when silence had fallen, “is this meet and proper?”

They could not answer that, though they pushed forward an old syndic or some such, in a furred gown, to speak for them.





Of course I could have no truck with him—even had he had his wits about him, which presently he had not; because when a crowd hath gathered for violence, violence it must have, or break forth again at some other time when one may not be ready for it.

“Brethren,” I called them again, “I stand here for my lord Gianni, the father of his people.”

At this there swept through the crowd a certain ripple which I did not like.

“Let our father speak to us himself!” cries someone.

“Where is Jacopo Salviati?” yells someone else—alluding to a condemned criminal on whom (I had heard) this Doctor Ignani had tried his art.

“Plague-monger!” shrieks a woman far behind—in exactly the high tone which will make a mob move forward. This mob did move; and accordingly I raised my right hand—again to adjust my helmet.

At which signal of course my sergeant of cannoneers on the wall called hoarsely, “Shall we fire, Captain?”

That stopped them.

“Brethren,” I said for the third time, “I am new among you. But I know my lord (whom God preserve!) better than any of you may. And I tell you all his care is for this county. Why should he wish you harm? You are his people.”

“We are his milch-cows!” shouts somebody.

“Just so,” says I. “And pray who kills his own herd?”

They laughed at that, the fodder-shoveling boors—and I sitting there in a muck of sweat.

“On the other hand,” I pursued, “who that hath good sense risks his own life (as you’re doing) to save the herd of a neighbor?”

They laughed at that louder than before. And seeing them in good humor, I

also saw, of course, that it was time for me to become angry.

“I stand here,” I shouted, thumping the pommel of my saddle (for of course I was really sitting), “as champion of my lord his mercy and justice. Who denies the same? Let him step forth!”

There was much pushing and shoving, and cries of “Thou, Pietro!” and “What didst thou say in the wine-shop, Gian?”—but at last some three or four protestants stood before me; including, to my joy, a youth with blazing eyes and no hair on his face. There is one such in every riot; students they are, usually. This was a very fine specimen—looked like a girl.

“So!” says I, at which remark all the unbelievers, save this boy and a great ugly lout in green leather, slipped back into the crowd. I had, formerly, when my voice was deep, a way of saying “So!” which made folks' livers quake.



“BRETHREN,” I addressed the crowd again, “I put a choice before you; at least, His Lordship doth, who abhors strife and bloodshed, at least within his own dominions. You may continue to shout and riot, in which case I shall regretfully fire into the ruck of you. Or you may watch me fight one of these your champions and let God decide whether you or His Lordship are in the right of things. Nay, I’ll fight them both. Now, how say you?” This, of course, was an old trick, never known to fail. Because thus crowds get their bloodshed at no risk to themselves—a manifest gift from Heaven. As for Heaven deciding the issue—well, who but Heaven could have made me the swordsman I then was?

I smiled (into my beard) to see the speed with which the crowd dispersed into ranks around the four sides of the square; they moved faster than they would under

gunfire, and stood three-deep, licking their thick lips in anticipation like ghouls. I left my body-armor with Bertelli, took a couple of swords from arquebusmen, and with these under my arm followed my adversaries into the center of the square. I gave one sword to the youth and the other to the lout in green leather (he wagged it in his hand in a way I thought strange for a peasant) and then I looked slowly around the crowd.

“One at a time,” I said, in the voice to which I have alluded; and then suddenly turned on the fair youth. Him I seized violently by the shoulders, spat in his face, pushed him so that he staggered back four ells; and, as he went, sent a cut that shore a lock of hair from just over his ear. The crowd gasped first, and then moaned; and then it drew in its breath with satisfaction and settled down to watch.

As for the youth, he turned deathly pale, wiped his face and then (as I had intended he should) flew at me like a wildcat.

He was a fine boy—very like one of my own, in Pisa I think it was; or perhaps I am thinking of Rome. Retreating before this youth’s attack so as to keep the sun steadily in his eyes, I amused myself trying to think of the name of my own boy’s mother; a most amiable girl, whom I had been sorry to leave. It seemed odd to have one so like her child and mine, poking and prodding at me with a sword, not to mention slashing at the loins to which he should have touched his hat. I was sorry to see this boy in such case, sweating and with the fear of death in his eyes (because of course he could never send his point within inches of me) but it was necessary that he suffer for the greater good. So I let him fight me—so to call it—until his knees were bending under him and he was about to drop his sword; and then, as I had intended from the beginning, I dropped my own blade, took his next *passado* under my arm, wrung his hilt from his hand, put an

arm around him, kissed him on both cheeks and told him to go home to his mother. He was in tears of shame and rage, but the crowd roared approval—as of course I had known they would.

“Tell her Luigi Caradosso sent thee,” I said, “with His Lordship’s love and service.”

Then I turned savagely on the green-leather man.

“But thou,” says I, picking up my sword again, “art a different matter, fellow.”

“Woooo!” says the crowd.  
“Wooooo!”

The man in green leather seemed marvelous little abashed.

“Yes, Captain,” says he, “I am a different matter. Permit me.”

I wore at that time a strap around my wrist, to give it stiffness in the parry; it was tight drawn now, and an inch or two of leather protruded from the buckle. This lout in green flicked his sword upward and trimmed this fag-end off as neat as if it had been done by a saddler.

“Ha!” says I. “And art thou in the wine-growing or in the cattle-raising, may I ask?”

He smiled.

“I am rather,” says he, bowing, “in what might be called the butchering business, Captain.”

He resembled no butcher that I had ever seen, but this was no time for fine distinctions.

“Shall we engage?” I asked therefore.

“At your convenience,” says he; so we did, and as God’s my judge, within thirty seconds he had almost beheaded me. He was one of those disgusting rascals who can fight with either hand—dozens of them had sprung up in Italy since I had discovered this ability in myself; I knew of them, of course, but had not expected to find one, in green leather, in a mudhole such as Castello Nero.

Aye, aye, he almost had me, but not quite; and while he was overbalanced from his effort I should certainly have pinned him through the lungs had not my point encountered, just under his rustic garb, a resistance I recognized and which caused me to take a black view of mankind. Your Grace will hardly believe it, but he was wearing chain mail!

So horrified was I at this duplicity that I stood petrified for at least the ten thousandth part of an instant; during which he drove a vile thrust at my belly. As sure as I am writing to Your Grace (up to the knees in water now) I should have been a dead man but for the Milanese corselet I always wore under my clothes.



IT was evidently time to take this rascal seriously. I tried to circle him round against the sun—as I had done the boy—but he would none of it, and indeed by severe pressure twice forced me to face the luminary myself. I tried Geminiani's *stoccado* on him and he turned it; I used a parade and *passado* that had cost me ten ducats to learn in Naples, and he twisted them into an abominable attack in tierce; and at last, when I thought him convinced that (in ignorance of his chain mail) I was addicted to his body, I sent in the *colpo di Caradosso*, which, as Your Grace knows, cuts the great vein in the neck.

But it did not cut the great vein in his neck; nay, he leaned back, avoiding my point by a full quarter of an inch; and smiled and said pleasantly, "I have been waiting for that for some time, Captain."

So he was a professional soldier; almost certainly guardsman to some noble (there was no other work for soldiers thereabouts) —but why thus appearing in green leather? He left me, however, no time for puzzles; he was perhaps the most persistent attacker I had fought up to that time, and he had a defense that would have

broken the heart of a brass monkey. It was almost with unbelief that I found —after twenty minutes or so—that I was beginning to sweat; I changed sword-hands, but it was not long until the hilt began to feel greasy again and I realized that the time had come to discard gentility. Mark you, I did not do so without a struggle; I went back at him with the whole succession from *primo* to *ottavo*; I cut at his head like a peasant trimming trees; all would not do—and it was time for my men in the ranks and at the guns to have their dinner.

So, feigning to be wearier than I was, I persuaded the gentleman to rush forward as I staggered back; and when his point had missed me, drove my forked fingers into his two eyes—but gently, not so as to blind him permanently; and with a sweep of my leg against his from behind somersaulted him backward so that his head struck the cobblestone with a crack. Stamping on his stomach so that he might have no wind to continue the combat even should his skull prove thicker than I thought it, I turned pleasantly to the crowd—which was roaring with delight—and asked them if they were now sure of my loving kindness and that of My Lord Gianni.



It seemed they were—which was just

as well for them; indeed the old syndic in his furred gown came forward to express loyalty in the official sense, I suppose; I do not know because, naturally, the privilege of talking belonged to me.

However, I embraced the old man—he smelled of civet—and stood with my arm about his shoulders while I addressed the crowd. I forget what I said—anything would do for them now—something about His Lordship's *terribilta* (including plagues) being directed only against his enemies and theirs; but I ended humorously.

"Not only do I prove my behalf by staying amidst you myself," I said, "but if you ladies will be a little more careless about bolting your doors at night, I'll leave you a dozen children as hostages."

This was just flattery, of course—I had already made my arrangements within the castle; a still-room maid with nice eyes and a genius for getting meat into my salads on Fridays. But it served its purpose. I furthermore slapped the old syndic on the back till he crowed; waved my hand to the multitude which (except for a few husbands) was now laughing and cheering me to the echo; and, motioning two pikemen to pick up the man in green leather, I retired into the castle.

Bertelli brought the guard in after me; the crowd, with occasional glances at the muzzles of my guns, which were still manned, dispersed quietly; I had my prisoner or guest taken to my quarters and cared for; and myself went to His Lordship's cabinet to report.

He had that damned Doctor Ignani with him, boasting of some horrors he had committed on dogs. And from the way His Highness looked at me I saw he thought me thenceforth a thing of the past, and was wondering on just what he should spend my pay.



IT was therefore in a gloomy and receptive frame of mind that I sat down to a skin of wine with my late adversary— Paolo Calvi, his name was, captain to the Count of Monterosso, whose lands adjoined my own lord's to the south. It appeared from his conversation that this Doctor Ignani had first offered his invincible weapon to Monterosso, and then to other lords easterly, north and west of us; coming to Castello Nero (the smallest state) only after the others had rejected him.

"But now," says Paolo heavily, "of course my own lord and all the others are afeared there may be something in the business after all; and Monterosso blames me for not having murdered the fellow while he was on our land."

"Which thou'd atone for," says I, not without feeling, "by trying to murder me."

"Well, as to that, y'see, Luigi," says Paolo, "there were two things; first of all, Monterosso and the others had spent much time and money working up this rebellion of the people—"

"Oho!"

"—and they did not want it crushed— and then again, we captains who have been longer in the district—I am as it were Captain of the Association of Captains—"

I nodded, having been captain of the captains in Your Grace's grandfather's neighborhood. Our object was, of course, to avoid unnecessary killing of each other, while encouraging the common soldiers to do their duty. I explained my comprehension of such matters to Paolo, and he looked woundy embarrassed.

"Then I fear I must apologize to you, Captain," he said, "at the same time freely forgiving you for the damage to my eyes and brains."

I begged him not to mention it.

"The fact is," he said, "we were given to understand that you were in favor of— helping with—this damned scheme to rob honest soldiers of their living."

That would be Bertelli's tale, of course. I resolved to break his nose when next I saw him, but I never did. That is how I have always been, Your Grace—chicken-hearted. Besides, I had no time.

"You take this scheme—weapon—plague—seriously, then?" I asked.

Paolo shrugged.

"A plague that beginneth with colicks," says he, "and continueth with—"

I spare Your Grace the details; they were not pretty. It seemed Paolo had overheard Ignani telling his lord with just what horrors he could afflict a population; horrors not new to me, but which might give Your Serenity bad dreams. There was still no proof that the doctor could convey his pest to whole populations, but—

"It's impossible to take such a possibility gaily," says Paolo, "especially in view of this damned peace conference."

"Peace conference?" says I, aghast.

"Well, to prevent war. Didst not know all their lordships are to meet here next week?" says Paolo.

"His Lordship hath been too busy confecting this weapon," says I, "to tell me aught."

Paolo nodded.

"And didst ever know a peace conference," says he glumly, "that did not start another war?"

I shook my head.

War was well enough; but a war that might kill us without giving us employment—



WELL, we finished that skin of wine and started another.

But there was no cheer for us— what the devil, our occupation gone, not to

mention humanity being wiped off the face of the earth! At the end of the second skin, Paolo was all for going and waking My Lord Gianni and reasoning with him, but I prevailed and we sat down again.

"But there's but one way to stop it!" cries Paolo.

"And that . . .?" I inquired, busying myself with the third skin of wine—the first had not been quite full, so that we were not drinking to excess, Your Grace, under the circumstances.

"Is to show him—them—show them all," says Paolo, swinging his arms and knocking his mug off the table, "that what shlays humanily will shlay them too. Princes can have pox—am I right?"

"Very," says I, picking up his mug and filling it. He emptied it at once and again proposed we should go pull Gianni out of bed and tell him he was mortal. When I had again convinced him that this would entail hanging, he sat for some time muttering that this was the only way; then suddenly laid his face on the table and wept bitterly.

"Luigi," says he, when I had comforted him with another stoup of wine, "we're doomed men. Even that is of no avail. Dosh remember when gunpowder came into use?"

"Not clearly," says I, my memory scarce stretching back two hundred years.

"I do," says Paolo, tapping himself on the chest and winking at me through his hair. He usually wore it long in the back, but now it had fallen forward. "Until then, the noblesh had been safe'n their armor. But the cannon-balls bowled 'em over like ninepins. Did 'at send 'em back to decent weaponry? For a while they blinded cannoneers and cut their hands off, but what then? Why, they learned to command their troops from the rear, the skulking bastards, or from the top of the nearest hill, and we poor devils have been stewing in powder-smoke ever sinch.

Am I right?"

"And now," Paolo goes on, pouring a mug of wine down the neck of his shirt, "There'll be no shtopping this doctor's weapon until it catches a noble and then it will be too late. Every common per- shon will be gone before that. Everybody gone! Goo'bye! Goo'bye!"

He clutched me suddenly by the arm. "Luigi!"

"Yes?"

"Lesh go pull the doctor out of bed and cut his throat."

It was of course an idea that had occurred to me; but as I told Paolo, I had dismissed it as impractical. First, my lord would be hanging-mad—

"Yesh?" says Paolo. "When Ignani ashed two thousand more ducats, an' defied your lord to his face when refused? Only yesterday?"

"I knew naught of this," says I. "Husban's always lash to hear," says Paolo, nodding in a way that infuriated me.

"And then again," says I, "the doctor sleeps behind three barred doors, with an armed man of his own hiring outside each. Didst know that—or hast any expedient?" "We could kill His Lordship!"

"But for the fact," I said coldly, "that I chance to be under sworn oath to guard His Lordship's life, not to take it—and that I never broke oath of that kind yet."

Paolo sat regarding me owlshly for some time; then, shaking his head and heaving a great sigh, he said again, "Goo'bye, goo'bye, everybody!"—and went to sleep.

Putting him to bed in a corner and returning to finish the skin of wine alone, I reflected that, though evidently too fond of drinking, Paolo had the root of the matter in him. He was right, he was right in everything he had said; such a fine brain, and there he lay snoring like a hog.

I shook my head sadly as the dawn

came and I left the castle for a stroll in the dewy fields.

#### IV



The peace conference began the following Wednesday; and was much the same as other peace conferences before and since—I mean that all the participants, having taken oath that they would not harm each other, brought with them tasters to make sure they were not poisoned in their wine, and had their four respective armies posted easy marches outside the four gates of our town. My own lord, being the host, had merely to have the guard alerted, the militia under arms in their homes, and men stationed ready by the tocsin-bells. His instructions to me and Bertelli and two sergeants—as to which of us was to kill which noble in case of trouble—were, he explained to me, just formalities.

"They know I have this weapon that can double them up with gripes," says His Lordship, grinning, "and have them dead and stinking, and their peoples with them, within four-and-twenty hours, and they'll be reasonable, never fear."

It griped me to look at him.

"Hath Your Lordship this weapon, in very fact?" I said.

"I have," says he, slapping his hand flat on the table. "And so, Captain Caradosso?"

His grin said that he had me, and the nobles, and the men and the women and babies of all God's lovely world, flat under that greedy hand; and it was with relish of my plight in particular that at last he drawled out, "Dismissed!"

At the moment, he meant only that I was dismissed to attend the peace-conference; naturally outside the doors of the council chamber; taking care that the captains of his brother-nobles should not

rush in at some signal such as he had arranged with me, and murder him.

We had a very pleasant day together in the anteroom, these captains and I—of course Paolo was one of them; though there was a tendency among them to be glum. As the yellings of their respective masters came ever more faintly through the doors and as the tones of My Lord Gianni came more and more to prevail, they saw more and more clearly—short of final extermination—the giving up of lands by these nobles and consequent reductions in their guards.

“And then to die of colick,” says one.

“There’ll be no soldiering more in Italy,” says another.

“Nor in the whole world,” says Paolo.

“No world left at all, most likely,” says I. “But come—cheer up— What’s that?”

It was their lordships coming out of conference, all looking somewhat pale and distraught save Gianni, who seemed to have gained weight and stature. Instead of following behind his guests, moreover, he now placed himself brazenly at their head and, with me behind him, led the way to the banqueting hall as though he were already liege lord and paramount. At table, furthermore, he seated himself first and commanded them to sit; which aforetime would have got swords drawn, but which now drew no word of protest, even. Their lordships sat there like calves.



It was a gruesome meal, at which no one but my lord Gianni really ate anything. He regaled himself largely, especially on salad, of which he was fond; I remember thinking that he ate the various leaves (after rinsing each in water for fear of poison) as though he were devouring piecemeal the several estates of his guests. He urged them to eat also, asking merrily if they thought he had any need to poison them; but they could not and at last he grew angry and rose and bade them then in God's name to go home. Even so, only one of them had spirit to say a word; and a very mild word it was, and profited him nothing.

"Is it true, as we hear," says this Ugo of Spassone, "that Your Lordship hath had some falling out with this Doctor Ignani?"

He meant, of course, this business of the two thousand ducats heretofore mentioned by Paolo. My Lord Gianni's eyes now glittered and he showed his teeth.

"Would Your Lordship care to presume on that presumption?" he asked, crooking one finger as though to summon all the powers of pestilence.

The lords crept out without another word; he watched them go and then, "Bed!" he snaps to me.



NOW, usually, of course, I should have posted the first guard and gone to bed myself; but tonight His Lordship's greatness was great upon him and he ordained that every four hours I should cross the courtyard posting the reliefs.

'Twas thus it fell out that I was in the corridor just after midnight; when from His Lordship's room came a ghastly shriek and a noise as of a body falling on the floor. I knocked on the door, called, but there was no answer save moaning and sounds as of fingernails scrabbling on planks; so I burst in; and there, in the light of the tapers by the bed lay Gianni of Castello Nero, tied as it

were in a knot with his knees to his chin, and writhing like a snake in a fish-net. As I approached him he gave another shriek, rolled over on his belly and was deathly sick; then tied himself into a knot again and strained till his eyes seemed starting from his head. It was immediately evident to me that he was not well; so, with two men of the guard, I tried (though by this time His Lordship was unpleasant to handle) to lift him and put him on the bed. But he writhed from our grasp and, falling on the floor again, twisted himself into unimaginable contortions while screaming continually like a gutted horse. Her Ladyship came in after some of this, looked at her lord and master, shrieked in her turn and swooned and was carried away. And some of the water they had brought to sprinkle her withal, I now dashed into His Lordship's face. For a moment, it seemed to check the spasms; he lay there panting, with his eyes open; and Bertelli (who had come in) crossed himself.

"How now?" says I.

"Captain," says Bertelli, "are not these the workings of the doctor's plague?"

Indeed they resembled the description. I saw Gianni's eyes widen suddenly, and he tried to speak. But before he could form words his agonies returned, more poignant than before, until really he seemed possessed of seven devils instead of the one he harbored when well. Your Grace will understand that out of consideration for Your Highness' feelings I am putting Gianni's suffering into words that do them no justice—such as I use to describe my own sufferings in this cottage. The difference between the two cases is that while water is killing me, 'twas water, again dashed in the face, which brought Gianni to his senses for the second time.

"Hath the plague got out of the doctor's hands, think you?" asks Bertelli, "or hath his grudge against His Highness—"

I perceived that Gianni was trying

again to speak. I bent close.

“Hang him!” he whispered.

“Hang whom, Your Grace?” I asked.  
“The doctor?”

“Aye. He hath killed me. Hang him!”  
“You hear?” says I to Bertelli; who smiled and licked his lips. “Better take six men. Hang him from his own window—it looks on the square and will amuse the people. Not too thin a rope, mind.” Thick ropes choke slower—as I was about to explain to My Lord; but alas! he was suddenly again beyond all interest in such matters and so remained until about six in the morning, when he broke into a great sweat and seemed easier. By that time, of course, Doctor Ignani—and by the way his bodyguard, who would fight—had been dead some hours. Moreover, exceeding orders in the excess of his zeal, Bertelli had burned every paper and smashed every pot, retort or pipkin he could find; and even hewn the furniture to pieces in search of hidden drawers. When I pointed out to him that My Lord might haply be displeased at this, the lieutenant thought it wise to leave the county, which is why I never found time to break his nose. He rose to be a captain of freelances, I have heard, and was killed in the Romagna. God rest his soul! Who knows but, save for him, some paper might have survived to give Gianni the secret of that invincible weapon and let him lay waste the world?



WHEN I thus reported to his bedside, he made a virtue of necessity and said that never, having experienced the torments himself, would he have let any other human being, be he twenty times an enemy, endure them. Which sentiment I saluted, inwardly thanking God nevertheless for Bertelli and (subject to divine approval) for my old friends the monks.

For among their deplorable habits

had been one of calling on very sick persons and inducing them to leave their property to the convent—which, as I have said, was no convent at all, nor they real monks.

After some time it chanced that Marco the Hospitaller, gathering simples, came upon an herb very like the lambs' parsley we use in salads, but differing therefrom in that it gave hideous cramps—very like those promised by Doctor Ignani—and the fear of death for some few hours, during which a last testament might be made by the sufferer, who then recovered. This benefited the good brethren and harmed no one; but it occurred to Marco later that inheritance might be hastened by the use of real poison—which alas! was how he came to be burned.

In my time, though, he had been just an honest herbalist; I used to gather his herbs for him—which is why I could so easily find this one in the fields about Castello Nero, when I walked in them that dawning while Paolo snored. My little friend the still-room maid—all unwitting—was delighted at fresh lambs' parsley—as she thought it—to put in His Lordship's salad; and what happened thereafter Your Grace is to some extent aware. I seek no credit; let Marco and Bertelli have it all; I have had my reward—thirty years of honest soldiering since then, and now this open-air cottage to die in from the rheumatism. Above all, I have the thought that I was true to my oath to safeguard Gianni's life; for most like he would have died of the plague had he loosed it.

Now if in view of my experience in such matters and my urgent need of a few extra florins, Your Grace would wish me to come to Rometia and look into the claims of this rogue who wants to blow up the world with mutton-bones, I shall hasten to the comparative dryness of Your Excellency's castle and exert every knowledge and ability I possess for the benefit of Your Serenity in

his turn.

Being in all humbleness Your  
Eminence's obliged, wet, respectful loving  
servant

L. Caradosso  
Captain.

ENDORSEMENT BY THE DUKE  
Secretary: Dismiss that alchemist. Tell  
Caradosso of it. Add xxx florins to the old  
devil's pension and give him a dry house  
FARTHER AWAY FROM MY PALACE.

**P. Dvx.**