

The Road to Venice

A TALE OF JAMES I. & THE
GUNPOWDER PLOT

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Franz Liebnich and Charlie
Hooper in Padua

The Road to Venice

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Johann Oldcastle

Dedicated to Benjamin Massey
For his help

Chapter 1

The Inn at Splügen

The sword, it is the oddest thing
That lives upon the earth,
It whistles violently around
Making a nasty sound
S. Webster

It was silver - long, thin, sharp and glinting viciously in the light of the crackling log fire. Its Handle was iron wrapped in Linen, and the handguard was a sturdy net of twisting iron bars. It was an English Infantry Sword, almost brand new and it was the first time Franz Lieblich had ever had a sword to his own name—before this he had only used a small, light Spanish bilboa, but, at fifteen he was tall enough to own a full-size sword. But in times to come he was to use it so much that the novelty would quickly wear out, and it itself, too. Carefully he slid it back into its iron sheath and listened as Sir Cranberry Hooper engaged in a fierce argument with Sir



Cranberry Hooper arguing with Sergio Cesarani at the Inn in Splügen

an Italian, Sergio Cesserani. Sergio was cowering in the corner of the inn dining room, his pinched and suspicious face white with fear as the tall Englishman, Sir Cranberry stood tall over him, his well-built form straight up, one fist on his hip, the other in the air, waving at the unfortunate Italian. Sir Cranberry's face was a picture of sarcasm, its wrinkles drawn up into a smirk, his thin lips contorted into an odd-angled smile. His eyes were lit up. Very few people could beat Sir Cranberry Hooper at an argument.

'So you're telling me' he said menacingly, 'That you have never crossed the St. Bernard's Pass in your life?' Sir Cranberry's Italian was excellent and Franz had never heard anyone talk it so fast, but now it was slow and had a very, very clearly English accent purposefully added, to give a note of superiority. And it did,

'That's right' said Sergio, fearfully, in a small voice.

'There are several flaws in that' said Sir Cranberry 'First of all you are an Italian who

has come from Genova. You are going to Lucerne. Explain to me, then, how you did not pass over the St. Bernard's Pass to get here? Did you fly? Oh, doubtless, You being such a bird-like human'.

Sergio was speechless. Sir Cranberry's sarcastic and elastic grin grew. Clearly he was enjoying himself.

'There are no other options unless you decided to take a detour to Splügen for some unaccountable reason. Perhaps to see the view? Unless, of course, they are secret reasons?'

'This is my business and nothing to do with you' snapped Sergio, 'You protestant English just like to poke your long noses into our business. Take it back'.

'Oh, so that's the mood is it? grinned Sir Cranberry. 'Doubtless I was right in supposing them to be Secret Reasons, was I not? And doubtless these secret reasons have something to do with papism? Is it not so?'

'Did you not know?' said Sir Cranberry, 'That it is not lawful for Italians to have secrets in protestant Switzerland?'

'Nor is it for you fools to have any Italy!' snapped Sergio 'And we'll keep our secrets if we like, so we will'

'If you can,' replied Sir Cranberry menacingly. He backed away from the cowering Italian 'And meanwhile' he said looking pointedly at Sergio 'We will cross the pass using the valuable information provided by this Swiss lad here. Doubtless he will tell us a deal more than you did, being experienced in passes, in papists, and such. And you'll find it to your advantage to make no foolish error of tongue wagging this or that side of the mountains, we being well-armed. Do you hear me? Do you understand me? Do you get my meaning?'

'Yes, Sir' replied Sergio in a very small voice 'Nor will you find it to your advantage to lie about anything, either' said Sir Cranberry, sitting down by the fire still looking pointedly

at the Italian. 'Like you were just back then' he added victoriously.

Sergio's mouth opened and shut like that of a fish for a couple of moments. 'Alright' he said in a way that clearly showed he did not mean to. 'Preach away'.

Since you gave me an invitation', the knight said, 'I will take advantage of it and give you a word of warning. That is, that you will find it to your advantage to return to Italy, where you belong. You will find your way blocked tomorrow if you attempt any useless endeavours at getting to Lucerne. I will personally see to it. This is Switzerland, not Austria or Spain. Do you understand?

Sergio withered under the penetrating gaze of Sir Cranberry Hooper.

'Alright' he said nastily again. With a smirk Sir Cranberry turned to the fire, whilst Sergio Cessarani silently slipped out into the cold night outside.

Chapter 2

Approach March

It was fiercely cold in the inn the next morning, as the fire had been all but out all night. Franz awoke feeling drowsy, but was soon, out of bed, and pulling on his hose, woollen breeches, linen shirt, canvas doublet and leather jerkin. He buckled his new sword and its sheath to his hip, slipped on his leather hobnailed boots and came downstairs to the fire in the main room to warm up. Charlie Hooper, Sir Cranberry's twelve-year-old son, who was apparently a choir-boy at Canterbury cathedral, was by the fire already. A strange man, namely Sergio Cessarani, was seated at a table awaiting breakfast looking rather smug, so Charlie und Franz talked in low voices.

'Father wants to start up the pass today' Charlie explained 'He doesn't want to risk getting trapped if there is another fall of snow'.

‘Indeed’ agreed Franz, ‘September is a bad time for having snow on the pass. But not as bad as deep winter. It is practically impassable in January and February, but a couple of people have made it across in those months’.

Charlie was now fluent in German after passing through Germany on the way south. But Sir Cranberry spoke English, Italian, Spanish, French, German, Flemish, Latin and Greek to proficiency. Charlie was nowhere near attaining fluency in most of these. Franz only spoke German, Italian and English, the latter having been learnt off Grand Tourists who often requested his readily available assistance in guiding them across the difficult pass.

Sergio was looking very smug back there at his table and Franz couldn’t help feeling his eyes boring holes in their backs. He was glad they were sufficiently far away not for him to hear their low conversation.

‘I don’t like the look of that Italian’ Franz said, ‘The Italians are Papists on the whole

and do not like the Protestant English or Germans. One has to be very careful in travelling through Italy’.

‘No’ agreed Charlie, glancing back at Signor Cesarani ‘I hope he doesn’t tattle in Italy’

At that moment Sir Cranberry came in with his crew. Mr. Alfred Tub was a very fat Englishman with a jolly laugh, the Reverend Peter Dwinks was a tall, thin and kindly person, Alasdair MacDougall was a powerful and fiery Scotsman, Mr. Justin Hedge was a suspicious-looking Presbyterian with a goat’s-beard and last of all was the German Herr Wagner.

‘Aha!’ crowed Sir Cranberry ‘What have we here? Good morning, signor Cessarani! Be sure I have not forgotten my promise!’

‘Certain’ smirked Sergio.

‘Why, signor Cessarani’ grinned Sir Cranberry ‘You seem to be feeling better this morning. Come, give us some information about the pass’.

‘No information you’d be interested in’ said Sergio glibly

‘Doubtless!’ laughed Sir Cranberry smugly, sitting at a table. ‘Innkeeper!’ he called, now in German. ‘Breakfast! And be quick!’

The innkeeper hurried in with the victuals and set them on the table.

Breakfast was a quick affair, as Sir Cranberry wanted to make a head start. The crossing of the pass could take up to four days and he did not want to hang around.

As soon as all the people had finished breakfast, Alfred Tub called the Ostlers who went to get the horses ready. Sir Cranberry had twelve pack horses loaded with goods he was pretending to take to Venice, under the guise of a merchant. Six horses carried himself and his company whilst a pony carried Charlie. And then there was the sturdy mountain pony belonging to Franz, their guide for the pass. Franz had crossed the pass a good number of times, guiding various caravans of different merchants, over to Italy; but few had been so strange as Sir Cranberry's, and so obviously not merchants. Franz knew well that messengers from

Protestant lands crossing into Italy to go to Venice, which was trying to break away from the Papist church, would disguise themselves as merchants; as would Papists crossing through Switzerland to France. There was also a good network of Spies hanging about the place from both sides waiting to catch an unsuspecting caravan, as both Protestants and Papists played the dangerous game of gambling with secrets. And this in addition to this the danger of highway robbers. Once Franz had guided a caravan across from Italy to Splügen, and they had been attacked by robbers three times at different places. Silk merchants and others carrying valuable goods were particularly at risk from ragged bands of lawless outlaws that live in the high clefts far above 3,000 feet above sea-level. Franz was left to prepare his own pony. The pony was almost as well acquainted with the road as he, a beige beast with a black mane and tail, named Stanzach, after the town in Austria where he (the pony) had been born. Franz gave him a good brush down to

prepare him, and speaking softly to him, strapped on his bridle. In those days only rich people bothered with Saddles and Franz had never even used one. He mounted expertly and quickly and held Stanzach still. Sir Cranberry was shouting orders, which in itself made quite a hubbub to discount the sound of Ostlers madly arguing and Herr Wagner telling them off rather less than good-naturedly, as they strapped the burdens onto the pack-horses. Sir Cranberry's white stallion was rather bad that morning, which did not add to help matters, but eventually the pack-horses were loaded and tied in a long line and the caravan was ready to depart.

'Follow Lieblich!' Sir Cranberry ordered his followers, 'Stray not to the right hand or the left. If you do, you do so in peril of your lives; he knows the route, and you do not. Understand?'

The men agreed cheerfully except Justin Hedge who grunted his grudging approval.

‘And that,’ Sir Cranberry added, looking hard at him, ‘Applies as much to Presbyterians as it does to Anglicans! Move on! move on, you iron-weighted animals! Get up! Now!!’

Tossing their heads in the frosty air, their nostrils blowing steam, the horses strained at their burdens and set out,

following Sir Cranberry and the Reverend Dwinks who

headed the pack animals, flanked at the centre by Alasdair MacDougall and Herr Wagner and goaded at the rear by Mr. Tub and Justin Hedge. Franz went ahead with



Riding through the Valley towards the St.
Bernard's Pass

Charlie to choose the route. The morning was frosty-cold with a twang of autumn in the air. The trees were golden-brown, and all the fields and forests were covered in thick hoarfrost. The sun had not yet come up over the mountains to the east and was touching the mountain-tops with its golden light. The mountains rose vertically from the flat valley bottom, narrow and small, in forest covered slopes to where the treeline ended and snow took its place. leaping and bounding in never ending spirals until, almost lost to the straining eye the mountaintops sat dizzyingly high, peering their lofty heads in the clouds. In a place like this the eye is constantly drawn upward and upwards from one lofty perch to another, and is inclined to forget the valley which in itself holds its own beauty. Splügen was made of a group of large Alpine houses made of wood and picturesquely squatting by the roadside each in its own parcel of frosty land, where cows, recently brought down from the mountain, stood in patient rows, blowing steam and

staring in wonder at the caravan as it passed their fields, winding its way out of Splügen. Farms dotted the upper reaches of the valley, making their small livelihood off the forest, the field and the river that tumbled in frothy torrents from the mountains plunging down the valley towards Lake Lucerne far below, out of sight thousands of feet beneath.

In spring the river would swell to twice its normal size, but would rarely flood its banks and disturb the peaceful farms in the silent clear air of the alpine valley. It was a familiar sight to Franz, who had travelled this route hundreds of times, but for Charlie it was a complete novelty.

'Bavaria was similar' he told Franz. 'But then even there it is not quite as mountainous'.

'In old times' Franz said 'There used to be little need to cross the pass. It was much more of a dangerous journey then, anyway. People were content on the whole to farm the land, and used what they had. But the Romans made it popular to trade and travel much more, and frequented the passes a lot

more. And with the making of trade routes between Rome, Venice and the cities of the North, caravans regularly began to ply the passes. Of course in the days of the Papistry, the pope liked to send cardinals across into Northern Europe to collect Peter's Pence. These days most people are merchants or pretend merchants bringing silk and such to the Italians'.

'In England' said Charlie 'We make a lot of tin. Sir Walter Raleigh has had a big hand in the tin mining in Cornwall; most of the mines belong to him'.

The road wound through fields alongside the rushing river that bonded across waterfalls down the valley towards Splügen. The whole day's march consisted of travelling along the valley. By the time Sir Cranberry ordered a halt they had traversed the upper reaches of the valley and were beyond the farming country. In front of them the river entered a gorge and the road almost shot vertically or do it seems, into the sky before them, up the

edge of an indeterminable cliff, soaring into the gathering dusk.

'Real work tomorrow! exclaimed Sir Cranberry. 'But for now, we will camp here until daybreak. I would not fancy at blind traverse up that cliff. To work, all the loungers! set up my tent!'

'Tether the asses, MacDougall, and make sure they have had enough to drink from the brook'.

The Reverend Dwinks gave order.

'As certain I shall, your Reverence. But doon't ye ken the auld beests need their straw as much as ye need your bread?' replied MacDougall 'See Tub sees tae this'.

With Sir Cranberry supervising, camp was erected for the night, just before the onslaught of darkness. And as the sun plummeted behind the mountains, Sir Cranberry's caravan was tethered and housed for the night beneath the mighty wall of the St. Bernard's pass.

Chapter 3

Noises at night

SERGIO Cessarani followed the caravan at a long distance all day: now night had fallen and a fire burned merrily outside the tents. Maliciously he sat down to await complete night.

Franz laid himself down to sleep in the lee of the tent, wrapped in a thick fur blanket. Being a guide he did not have a place in one of Sir Cranberry's tents. Above him and above the mountains, in the small gap of sky visible between the soaring peaks of the narrow valley, the sky was prickled with stars. A thin slice of moon hung still in the cold sky, shedding weak silvery light over the earth; the sky put the earth into shadows. What star was that, Franz wondered, so much brighter than the rest, just peeping over the ridge in the mountain? Hundreds of thousands of stars prickled even the tiny gap of sky visible to Franz. Today one can count

the stars in the sky, somewhere like London - perhaps twenty at most- and even in the country there are not so many. But in those days, before the electric light was invented, the stars were truly innumerable, swathed in the cold caress of the milky way, bright as a lamp to the eye Putting the black abyss of the valley and all objects there into shadow. The valley was black and foreboding. Not a sound proceeded from in it, save the rush of the river, silent and subdued. But the focal point, that drew the eye, was the heavens. There was Orion, peering over the ridge drawing back his bow with his hunter's dogs at his feet and far to the north the Great Bear, which the hunter's arrow was aimed at, about the strike. As for the others, Aquarius, Pisces and all were rather difficult to pick out in the midst of the sea of stars. Franz found the evensong of the eighth Psalm coming to him, 'When I consider the heavens, the works of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou

art mindful of him, or the Son of man that thou visitest him?’

Perhaps it was on such a night as this, Franz thought, that David had written it, watching over flocks by night at Bethlehem. He pulled the fur blanket around his head as well to hoop warm and protect from frost, and was in moments asleep. The last faint green from the west vanished; it was night. Stanzach, like horses do, did not go to sleep when night came but carried on tearing at the grass for a while; his back lit by palest starlight, and the methodical chewing sounding out through the silence of the Swiss night.

Franz awoke with a start. He wondered what had woken him, and so, cautiously, peered out of the fur cocoon. The frosty air bit him violently. How strange! There was an uneasy commotion among the horses, and they were standing watchfully in a group, as much as their tethers would allow. What had disturbed them? There was a dead silence except the uneasy movement of the horses. Only this and the distant babble and rush of

the river, still hurrying on its way and never pausing even at night in its haste. Then Franz saw it; a black shape moving among the horses, beside the restless form of Sir Cranberry's stallion. There was a flash of something in metal in the moonlight. It was a knife, slashing at the tether that secured the Stallion in place. Franz was at loss for for a moment what to do, but then he knew. He could not let his master's stallion be robbed from not before his eyes. Silently he unravelled the cocoon, and drew his glistening sword: the black shape was mounting up. Franz stood up and ran towards the robber, lifting his sword. The robber was unidentifiable beneath a black mask . 'Giddap!' roared the robber, who was now mounted. The stallion did not budge, but at the sight of the approaching



Sergio robs a Horse!