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Dramatic Publishing



The Silken Dagger

*From the short story by
Sir Peter Ustinov*

*Adapted by
Jill Pemberton*

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The Silken Dagger

Drama. Adapted by Jill Pemberton from the short story by Sir Peter Ustinov. Cast: 4m. Italy, towards the end of World War II. The dust has not yet settled over Europe: there are corpses still unburied. Here and there, fanatics unwilling to surrender their dreams still resist crazily, preferring the chance bullet to the deliberate. For Giuseppe Gargaglia, the Undersecretary of the Interior, it is too late for speculations of this nature. He had his chance, and he missed it. Captured ignominiously in the clothes of an old woman, he now sits in a cell with nothing but his thoughts for company. To make matters worse, his jailers are Italian, therefore compassionate. They make endless little gestures hoping that he would feel at home. One of them, Arnaldo, even asks him for his autograph. Twenty-four hours after his arrest, Gargaglia receives two offers. The first comes from Quattrospile, the local leader of the partisans, and Gargaglia dismisses it without hesitation. However, he is not in a position to refuse the second offer made by Guido Manasse, a brilliant Jewish forensic orator and lawyer, but it shakes him to his soul. Sir Peter Ustinov's finely drawn characters are vividly brought to life in this dramatic adaptation of his short story. Ustinov's compassionate insight into human behaviour observes emotions ranging from childish spite to soul-crushing vengeance in the struggle to cope with the aftermath of war. One int. set. Approximate running time: 45 minutes.

13 ISBN: 978-1-58342-388-2

10 ISBN: 1-58342-388-5



www.dramaticpublishing.com

Code: SL3

Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel



Printed on Recycled Paper



THE SILKEN DAGGER

A Play in One Act

From a short story

by

SIR PETER USTINOV

Adapted for the stage

by

JILL PEMBERTON



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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Based upon the story *The Silken Dagger* by
SIR PETER USTINOV

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(THE SILKEN DAGGER)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-388-2

“Life is often more brutal than death, for it is rich in time,
death rich only in silence.”

— *Sir Peter Ustinov*

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES

LIGHTING

The cell should have a shabby, neglected feel. Dimly lit corners could achieve this effect, with clear but slightly subdued lighting focused on the actors.

THE SET

There is no scene change.

ACTION

GARGAGLIA remains stage right throughout the performance, except for the occasions when he is pacing the cell. The other characters work opposite him, stage left. At certain times in the action, GARGAGLIA thinks aloud for the benefit of the audience. The characters on stage are not aware of his thoughts. I suggest that the characters “freeze” momentarily at these points.

QUATTROSPILLE's final exit

QUATTROSPILLE and GARGAGLIA look up at the barred window on separate occasions, and the audience needs to see the characters' expressions. This could be achieved by placing an imaginary cell window on the “fourth wall” of the set, and suggesting its presence by lighting on the floor. Alternatively, the window could be placed high up on the back wall, stage right. It is more important for GARGAGLIA's fear to be seen—QUATTROSPILLE's vindictiveness is expressed in his voice as well as on his face.

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A Play in One Act
For 4 Men

CHARACTERS

ARNALDO: Jailer. Fair-haired, pug-nosed youth. Polite, deferential, completely unmoved by the fact that his prisoner could once dispense death at the stroke of a pen.

GIUSEPPE GARGAGLIA: Undersecretary of the Interior
There is no definite description of this character's appearance, apart from him being bald. He was ruthless and unfeeling at the height of his power. He is a great orator. He would never consider the orders he gave as being cruel. He did not even think about the effect they had on people's lives. His present situation has left him confused and uneasy. He covers these feelings with blustering, shouting and anger. If he is executed, he wants to be remembered as a powerful man, and also a brave one.

QUATTROSPILLE: Local commander of the partisans. A chain-smoking intellectual with a perpetual frown and eyes that seem to be looking into the distance. He is extremely casual, slow moving, slow talking. He annoys Gargaglia. Quattrosille knows the position of power has reversed and he has absolutely no fear of his prisoner.

GUIDO MANASSE: One of Italy's great forensic orators and lawyers. It is essential for the audience to know immediately that this character is Jewish. He is fairly tall, looks as though he should have been plump, but he is thin and white. His neck is smaller than his collar, his skin hangs in folds under his jaw. His gestures are stiff, painful. His two rows of teeth cannot decide which should go in front of the other. He wears glasses that make his eyes seem to part company and gaze in different directions, or make him appear to have two pairs of tiny eyes. He is soberly dressed, clasping a hard-brimmed hat and leaning on an ebony stick.

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SETTING: *A dimly lit, dusty prison cell, cell door stage left. A box and stool centre stage, box left, stool right. The cell contains a small, barred window high up on the back wall. Alternatively, an imaginary window could be placed on the “fourth wall” of the set, its presence suggested by barred lighting on the floor. Additional lighting focuses mainly on the actors.*

AT RISE: GARGAGLIA *is sitting on the stool staring incredulously at his jailer, ARNALDO. ARNALDO is standing just in front of the cell door, offering GARGAGLIA a pen.*

GARGAGLIA. My autograph?

ARNALDO (*shrugging*). Eh, you never know which way history will turn. Someday I may be able to give my son your signature and say that it was dedicated to him by Eccellenza Gargaglia, the Undersecretary of the Interior during the last days of the Fascist era.

GARGAGLIA (*smiling grimly*). All right. Give me a pen and paper.

ARNALDO (*grinning*). I have something more suitable than paper. (*He takes a soiled newspaper clipping from his top pocket.*) See, there you are at the front of the bal-

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cony, beside the Duce. Look how he listens to your every word. What a man you were! Your clenched fist high in the air, your face, so determined, so sure, so frightening—so different from now...

GARGAGLIA. For God's sake! Where did you get that?

ARNALDO. There are plenty of old magazines knocking around.

GARGAGLIA (*quietly*). Are you a Fascist?

ARNALDO. No. Never have been. Naturally, we had to pretend.

GARGAGLIA (*writing his name with a flourish*). What's the boy's name?

ARNALDO. Benito.

GARGAGLIA. After the Duce?

ARNALDO. After his mother's father—a martyr to the cause.

GARGAGLIA. The cause?

ARNALDO. We are Communists.

GARGAGLIA. If you hold convictions of that nature, why the hell did you ask for my autograph?

ARNALDO (*pleasantly*). Oh, as I said, you never know. Very few men can control history even for a little while. I may be a Communist, but I'm certainly not one of them. I've no talent; that's why I'm a jailer and not an officer, a man to make decisions, even small ones. But my son likes autographs. He's got several film stars already and one or two celebrities in other walks of life. Now, I love my son. He's young, but through no fault of mine he hasn't seen much of his youth yet. If he wants autographs, the least I can do is to get them for him, and

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they're cheaper than toys. I mean, I don't approve of Hitler, but if there was a chance to get his autograph, I'd leap at it, you understand. I don't know what they'll say about you in years to come. You may be considered a traitor or a man who did Italy a lot of good or else just forgotten. There's no telling with history. So I thought to myself, better be on the safe side, for Benito's sake. That's why I asked you for your autograph.

GARGAGLIA (*wearily*). It's logical.

(There is a brief pause while ARNALDO folds the autographed clipping carefully and puts it away in his pocket.)

ARNALDO. A cup of water?

(GARGAGLIA nods briefly. Exit ARNALDO.)

GARGAGLIA (*despondently*). I hope young Benito will one day have the respect to value my autograph. (*Angrily, jumping to his feet.*) I shouldn't be here! Arrested tottering down the street wearing the clothes of an old woman! The fools couldn't believe it when they saw the enormity of their prize. And now I am trapped in here, waiting for idiots to decide my fate. It was the same with the doctors when I was in hospital. They stood by my bed discussing my condition, inanely cheerful, offering me kind glances every now and then, telling me nothing. I lay there, staring at the interminable fans revolving in the ceiling, while the nuns glided by with their eyes fixed firmly on Heaven! I went under the

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knife placing my life in the hands of morons. I was helpless then, and I am helpless now! At any moment, one of their half-wit guards could come through that door and tell me it is time for my execution. What can I do? Once again, my life is in the hands of incompetents. *(Standing a little straighter, his mood changing slightly.)* But why should I be afraid? After all, what is death but an operation from which a man does not recover?

(At this point in GARGAGLIA's monologue, the lighting at the cell window should fade gradually to nothing, making the stage a timeless place, allowing GARGAGLIA's thoughts to wander.)

I must remember to refuse the handkerchief when it is offered, *that* will make them respect me! It will be useless to protest my innocence; a quiet resignation will give the occasion dignity. I must have the composure and good manners to listen to the consolations of the priest, and convince him that he is a comfort to me. It would be intolerable to let him know that his dronings were falling on deaf ears! I will hold my head high and listen unflinchingly as the commander of the firing squad reads out my sentence as pronounced by the people's court. Perhaps I will allow myself a slight smile; perhaps the curl of my lips will convey my low opinion of the people's court. The priest will begin to speak faster. So many sacred words to rush through in such a short time. They will tie me to the post. They will offer me the handkerchief. "NO!" I will say in a loud clear voice. *(He pauses, thinking.)* Perhaps on second thoughts

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it would be better to say nothing, just shake my head. So, they will tie me to the post. They will offer me the handkerchief. I will shake my head. The commander will take courage from my example and stare at me for a moment in silent admiration. He will raise the sword. This is it! (*He closes his eyes to picture the scene. He opens them suddenly.*) No, no, before this, I must remember to thank the priest. He will be amazed at my presence of mind, and it will reinforce his faith as he sees the magic of his words at work. OK, the commander will raise the sword. The front row of soldiers will drop to their knees. I will look over their heads at the blue Italian sky and reflect on this honour. I will close my eyes. Perhaps I will hear a shout, a long way off. The midday sun will be warm, red behind my eyelids, then red will become black... When I have gone, the soldiers will look at each other and murmur, "There was a brave man." (*He closes his eyes briefly, before resuming his monologue.*) Perhaps when they offer me the handkerchief, I could look deep into the commander's eyes...

(Enter ARNALDO. The lighting at the cell window returns immediately, breaking the mood instantly.)

ARNALDO. Sorry I've been so long, but there's a lot of excitement at headquarters. They've caught General Zaleschi and bank president Mora. Also Gozzi-Parella, the editor of the Fascist youth magazine.

GARGAGLIA. What have they done with them?

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ARNALDO. I don't know. Nothing yet. Zaleschi and Mora were dressed as peasants—but as men. (*GARGAGLIA flinches.*) Gozzi-Parella just walked into headquarters and said that it'd save everyone a great deal of trouble if he just gave himself up. There's no doubt about it, that fellow has guts, even if he has been corrupting our youth.

GARGAGLIA. I suppose they'll shoot the lot of us.

ARNALDO. Couldn't say. You'd have to ask someone with more authority. Up to yesterday, we were shooting without so much as a trial, but they seem to be hanging back today.

GARGAGLIA. What happened to Colonel Gasparone?

ARNALDO. Oh, he came up before the tribunal—the people's court, or whatever they call it—yesterday morning. The trial was very short; ten minutes, no more. Then they took him out and shot him.

GARGAGLIA. How do they perform those little ceremonies?

ARNALDO (*embarrassed*). Oh. Are you sure you want to talk about it?

GARGAGLIA (*snapping*). Of course!

ARNALDO. Well, they take the victim out, they bind his eyes...

GARGAGLIA. There will be no need of that.

ARNALDO. Then they sit him down in a chair, tie his hands behind his back, and shoot him.

GARGAGLIA (*incredulously*). A chair? It is facing the firing squad, of course.

ARNALDO. Oh, no. The executions I've seen, they always shoot them in the back.

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GARGAGLIA (*outraged*). That's revolting!

ARNALDO. You may be able to change it in your case, if it comes to that. I mean, there's no harm in asking; they can only say no.

GARGAGLIA (*blustering*). No harm in asking? No harm in asking? There is no harm in asking them if you can change your guard duty! We are talking about ending a man's life with his back to the firing squad! Bound up in a chair, for God's sake! (*He pauses, lost for words.*) But, tell me, there will be a priest in attendance?

ARNALDO. Not in Colonel Gasparone's case. There was no time to find one. You've got to realize, we're not organized like a regular army. We're just partisans. Our justice is meted out according to circumstances...

GARGAGLIA (*his rage almost uncontrollable*). What circumstances? There are no circumstances on this earth that should deny a man the right to die with dignity, with...with courage. He should be allowed to hold his head high! He should be given the chance to refuse the handkerchief and look his executioners in the eye! A man should die in a way that commands respect, admiration, perhaps even remorse at his passing! Shot in the back? Cowards are shot in the back when they are running away! Slumped in a common kitchen chair, like... like some victim of a burglar? What sort of a memorial is that? And no priest! No one with the intellect to appreciate the quality of my silence! Your desire for revenge and your black hatred is almost blasphemous!

ARNALDO (*completely unmoved by GARGAGLIA's tirade*). I don't think we'd refuse you a priest if there was

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one available, but if there wasn't one available, we'd hardly stay the execution until they could find one.

GARGAGLIA (*quietly, with deep sadness*). My God, you leave a man with nothing.

ARNALDO. I told you we shouldn't have talked about it. It doesn't make for good conversation at the best of times.

GARGAGLIA (*shouting furiously again*). Silence! If I'm accorded a last wish, it will be your silence. (*Clenching and unclenching his fists, his face flushed with helpless rage.*)

ARNALDO (*softly*). You haven't drunk your water. Didn't you want it?

(*Enter QUATTROSPILLE, local commander of the partisans. He knows he is in full control of the situation, and his body language reflects this knowledge. He leans casually against the cell wall smoking a cigarette, watching GARGAGLIA.*)

GARGAGLIA (*shouting, still very angry*). Well?

QUATTROSPILLE. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Quattrosille, local commander of the partisans. Perhaps you already have that information? (*He lights a new cigarette from the stub of his old one, and waits for GARGAGLIA to respond. GARGAGLIA still looks furious, but says nothing.*) What's the matter with you? You have no problems except to wait.

GARGAGLIA. Wait, wait. For what?

QUATTROSPILLE (*sighing*). Ah. I wish I knew. If I had my way, I'd have shot you on sight, immediately when

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we had those women's clothes off you. It would have saved me a headache, and I'm sure you'd have been much happier that way.

GARGAGLIA (*with a gasp*). Are you trying to be amusing?

QUATTROSPILLE. No. I'm saying what I feel. After all, these are tumultuous days, each one of which seems to last a week. We are destroying with one hand and trying painfully to begin rebuilding with the other. It's tough. The problems are so easy during battle; then with the coming of peace, all the problems start again.

GARGAGLIA. Did you come in here to tell me something, or are you just whiling away the time at the expense of my nerves?

QUATTROSPILLE. Me? I'm putting my cards on the table. I'm telling you my problems, the problems of administration, because you yourself were once an administrator and might therefore be able to grasp them.

GARGAGLIA. I always insisted on plain speaking.

QUATTROSPILLE (*smiling pleasantly, then yawning*). Really? Well, what could be plainer than my telling you that, if I had my way, you'd have been shot on sight?

GARGAGLIA (*exasperated*). But what are you telling me now? That you will have your way and I will be shot, or that you won't have your way and I won't be shot?

QUATTROSPILLE (*inhaling deeply on his cigarette and watching the smoke spread in the cell*). The situation is not yet clear.

GARGAGLIA (*aside, impatiently*). Amateurs! When they're in power, nothing will function—trains, electric light, jurisdiction. Nothing.

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QUATTROSPILLE. You see, for the first few days we were on our own. The criminals we captured were shot, and no questions asked. That enabled us to work fast and well. Now the main body of the Allied forces has arrived, not just soldiers but administrators, and not just Anglo-Americans but Italians as well. This inevitably complicated the issue. If I shoot you now, they will want to know why you were not handed over to the ponderous justice of some higher court. I could always say that you were killed while trying to escape, but then there's the risk that some idiot will testify the opposite and I'll be in the soup. (*Glancing at ARNALDO and lighting another cigarette.*)

GARGAGLIA. I am not in a position to be interested in your problems. I can only be interested in your decision. I would be grateful to know what it is.

QUATTROSPILLE (*laughing softly, without humour*). Arnaldo, please wait outside. I will call when I need you.

(*Exit ARNALDO.*)

QUATTROSPILLE. You're quite wrong. I came here to seek your co-operation, to make you an offer, if you will...