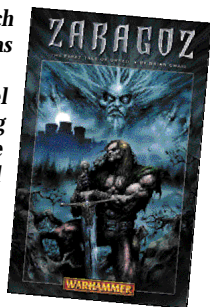


ZARAGOZ

The First Tale of Orfeo • by Brian Craig

THE SPEAKER WAS standing before the doors which had been opened to admit the dry night air. It was Arcangelo, the priest of law.

'I can tell you a tale' he said. 'A tale of the citadel of Zaragoz. A tale of betrayal, which happened long ago, but whose tangled threads extend, as the threads of treason always do, across the years and the centuries to the present day. I come to warn you all that the choice is soon to be made. If justice cannot come again to Zaragoz, then I promise you that Zaragoz is doomed!'



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THE DANCING CAME to an end when the lady Veronique finally signalled to her dutiful host that she was tired. The company, seemingly well-pleased, applauded Orfeo for his confident play. He was confirmed in his opinion that he had done well when Tomas diAvila came to him and told him that the Night of Masks would be celebrated at the castle within the week, and asked him whether he would be content to join the musicians who would play there. Orfeo, suitably proud of himself, agreed that he would.

Rodrigo Cordova, equally pleased with the success of his discovery, asked Orfeo to continue the entertainment by telling a story. The footmen hurried back and forth with the chairs which they had earlier removed, bringing enough to seat the whole company. The large doors which led from the ballroom to the terrace were thrown open to let in the air of the night to cool the ruddy faces of the dancers.

Orfeo laid down his lute, and after a moment's thought he launched into a wild and fantastic tale, which he set for convenience in his native Bretonnia. It featured three magical objects, each of which seemed able to give great opportunities to its owner, but each of which carried a secret curse.

The first object was a mirror of truth, which would show the person who looked into it a true scene from his future. The curse on this mirror was that on the first two occasions when it was used by a new owner it would show a scene calculated to inspire hope and generate profit, but on the third it would discover a scene which would imply damnation and bring despair.

The second object was a magical sword which would make its owner powerful in battle. The curse on this sword was that on the first two occasions when it was drawn by a new owner

it would protect him from harm and make a hero of him, but on the third it would be so bloodthirsty as to make him a reckless murderer, destroyer of all that he loved.

The third object was a pipe which summoned a daemon-slave who would perform miracles to instruction. The curse of this pipe was that on the first two occasions when it was used by a new owner the captive daemon would work to his advantage, but on the third, the daemon would possess the body of the hapless piper, and use it to wreak havoc in the world.

In Orfeo's story these objects came into the hands of a woman and her two suitors; one of the suitors used his gift greedily, and the other altruistically, so as to reveal the falseness of the first and the worthiness of the second. Orfeo so contrived his plot that as the climax of the story approached, and the three characters moved towards their third uses of the objects in their possession, it must seem certain to the listeners that all three were doomed and could not possibly be saved.

But then, by a paradoxical combination of the working of the three unfortunate gifts he managed to bring good out of evil, so that the false suitor's perfidy was revealed and the two lovers were united, to enjoy future happiness without magical aid.

It was, Orfeo admitted to his hearers, a very improbable story – but he reminded them that the great world, taken as a whole, was a very improbable place, and he was sure that many stranger things happened there than the ones which he had described.

At least some of those who had listened were prepared to agree with him, and there were those who applauded the story vigorously. Among those who did not – whose amusement was mingled with contempt – were Estevan Scembra and the woman whose name he did not know. However, the fact that the lady had not liked his story overmuch had not served to lessen the lustful admiration in her stare, and when he had finished she walked towards him, evidently bent on conversation.

Before the woman had a chance to speak, though, there was an interruption. A sharp voice cut through the chatter of the company like an icy knife, compelling silence.

‘That was a very fair story, my friend – but it has little to say to the people of Zaragoza, and there are those here who could not take kindly to its lesson.’

Before the unknown woman turned away from him to see whose voice this was Orfeo saw a strange expression cross her face: an expression of shock and disbelief which struck the colour from her cheeks in an instant. He was certain that the woman had recognized the voice.

The speaker was standing before the doors which had been opened to admit the dry night air. It was Arcangelo, the priest of Law, with his hood thrown back to reveal his bony face and his bald head. In his hand he gripped his plain staff, holding it vertically beside him.

Sceberra started up from his chair with a curse, his hand on the hilt of his sword, but Rodrigo Cordova had stood up beside him, and quickly put out a hand to keep him back.

‘No, Don Estevan,’ he said, mildly. ‘This is a cheerful evening, and I would not like it to be spoiled. If we are to have one more guest, then let us make him welcome. In a louder voice he called to the priest: ‘Enter my house, friend – and if you have a better story to tell us, whose lesson has more to teach us, pray tell it. I am sure we can all be grateful for good instruction.’

Arcangelo came forward, but only a few paces. He stood on the carpet where the company had danced, five yards from any gentleman or servant, and did not seem inclined to come too close. Orfeo watched Sceberra, and saw him make a clandestine signal after glancing upwards. Following the direction of the minister’s glance, Orfeo saw that there was a small balcony at one end of the room, curtained behind. Though he was not quick enough to see who had stood there he could see the curtains still astir, and knew that someone had gone out through a doorway – presumably to fetch assistance. Sceberra, it seemed, was not prepared to deal with the spellcaster with only such help as he had ready to hand.

‘I can tell you a tale,’ Arcangelo said, in a voice which was now less chilling. ‘A tale of Zaragoza. A tale in which this very house is featured – aye, and others you will know. A tale of betrayal, which happened long ago, but whose tangled threads extend, as the threads of treason always do, across the

years and the centuries to the present day. Will you hear it, my lord Cordova?

'Aye,' said Cordova. 'Why not?' But his tone, though light, had a note of threat in it, which said that although he had offered hospitality to this enigmatic visitor, he would tolerate no abuse of his invited guests.

'Once,' said Arcangelo, gravely, 'there was a duke of this realm who ruled it well – better than any before or after him. His justice extended beyond the ordinary business of punishing the guilty, and much that he did was reckoned to improve the lot of the poorest people of the land. I call this justice because that is what he called it, for he would not have it called charity that he tried to better the condition of the worst of his subjects; instead he owned that when any man suffered in his realms, the whole realm was poorer for it, and that when any was hurt, the whole was injured. Alas for the poor, and alas for the realm itself, the work which he did to raise up the poor was seen by the wealthy as a thing which threatened their own position, and to this end they plotted to be rid of their duke.'

'This was not an easy thing to do, for there never was a duke who had such loyalty and devotion from his servants, and from those of his soldiers who were of common birth. In addition to these advantages the duke had good magicians by his side, whose powers of divination were considerable, and who brought him warning whenever evil stirred upon the slopes of the mount.'

'Nevertheless, the plot was brought to fruition, with the aid of foul magic and fouler treachery. The duke was toppled, and his most loyal followers slain by the score.'

'This end was achieved, in part, by the treachery of one that the duke thought was his trusted friend – a learned man, who discovered more about the history of this peculiar mountain than had formerly been suspected by those who built a castle here and called it Zaragoz. Those who leagued themselves against his wizards and diviners could only hide themselves by making pacts with daemons and pleading for the favour of forbidden gods, but those who hated the duke and his justice were not ashamed to do it.'

The castle of Zaragoz was legendary then as now, as a citadel which could never be taken, by virtue of its high position and

the sheerness of the rock on which it stood. It was said in the land that once justice reigned within that fortress then its rule would be absolute and unassailable, but to the great misfortune of the land, it was not so. This rock which seems so solid is rotten at the core, full of caves and hollows, and there was a secret way into the castle – not from the plain, where the common folk live, but from one of the noble houses which cling to the slopes.

‘From *this* house the castle could be reached – aye, and breached as well, by a creeping army which did not mind the darkness and need not fear the dire things which haunted that darkness. An army which had the favour of evil things came treacherously from below, to seize the castle and depose the duke. Though the battle was short and easily won, much bloodshed followed as the usurpers murdered all who seemed to pose a threat to their rule... but they could not murder everyone who had loved the rightful duke, the man of justice, because there would scarce have been a kingdom left for them to rule. They killed the strongest, and the bravest, and the most virtuous, but sought only to cow the rest by taking away their hope, by proving to them that justice never could return, and that where right had once been indomitable, might was now unconquerable in its place.

‘So swift had been their victory that none could strike back at the traitors – not even the virtuous wizards who had taken the good duke’s cause. But even as those wizards died or fled, they cursed the evil which had overwhelmed them. They cursed this house, that its secret ways should never again be used in the cause of evil, and that should dark magic ever be worked inside its walls, the walls themselves must awake and rally to the cause of justice. And they cursed the house of diAvila with a promise that one day that house would be brought to the wretched fate which it had earned by its deceit.

‘All this happened a long time ago, and many generations of noblemen and commoners have come and gone. It might seem that the one-time reign of justice has been forgotten, and that the hope of its return has been eclipsed. But this is not the whole truth, for there are two things we must remember in considering this history. One is that a citadel once captured can never again be reckoned truly unassailable; the other is

that hope for the future can never truly die, for when men think themselves robbed of it, it really remains imprisoned in their hearts, waiting for the key which can unlock it.

'In Zaragoz, that key is but a single word, and when the time is ripe for that word to be cried aloud it will leap from mouth to mouth in an instant, and raise such a hue and cry that the rock itself will shake, and the houses which cling to it will crumble, and the castle itself will fall into ruins, only to rise again when the hand of justice is put to the work of its rebuilding.

'That word which is the key I would speak now, but there is no need – for the time which is not yet come will come soon enough, and there can be none here who does not know, in his heart of hearts, what that word is.'

As he said 'none here' Arcangelo's eyes met Orfeo's, for the briefest of moments, as if to say that even he, the stranger, knew what word he meant. And Orfeo, remembering what Arcangelo had said to him on the road, realized that he did indeed know what word it was.

When Arcangelo had finished speaking, there was a long moment of silence. It was broken by Estevan Sceberra, who said with a sneer: 'Not a priest, after all, but a prophet. I have heard of such, who cry woe to the world and are forever threatening destruction. Madmen all!'

'If I am mad,' said Arcangelo, 'then madness is come among you, and will tear your world apart. I come to warn you all that the choice is soon to be made, and that those who side with diAvila against the claims of justice will die as the friends of justice once died. Only those who will let the word undo the lock which is in their hearts can possibly be saved. If justice cannot come again to Zaragoz, then I promise you that Zaragoz is doomed!'

'Enough of this treason!' said Sceberra, hotly and contemptuously. He turned then to Rodrigo Cordova, and said: 'Have I your permission to seize the rogue?'

The question was put in such a way as to imply no possibility of refusal, and Cordova, whose face was drained of its colour, nodded – though with no great relish.

Sceberra drew his sword at last, and so did three others of the company, while six armed men in the livery of the Duke

came through the open doors behind the priest. But as they reached out to seize their quarry, what had seemed a simple task dissolved into confusion.

Arcangelo lifted his plain staff into his two hands, as a man does when using such a weapon in a fight, and lashed out forward and behind with its two ends.

Orfeo knew that a heavy blow from such a rod could knock a man down, but he also knew that a man who sought to use it in a crowd would quickly find it seized and rendered harmless. He expected to see one or two of the swordsmen take a tumble, but thought that the rest would soon disarm their enemy.

Alas for the swordsmen, it was not so – they seemed as they tried to close in to have become uncommonly clumsy, and fell about before the passes of the staff in a fashion that was almost clownish. The odds were ten to one, and yet the dancing staff wove such a pattern about the priest that none could lay a hand on him – and those assailants who did not trip over their own feet were sure to trip over another's. As fast as they rose they were put down again, and Orfeo was not the only onlooker who burst into laughter at the sight.

Only Sceberra kept his feet during the first bout of tumbling, but when he tried a thrust with his sword it was effortlessly parried, and though he tried to fence and draw the staff into single combat he could not do it, and was sent dizzily staggering away.

The melee was so tightly packed that the tumbling men-at-arms blocked any possible attempt at escape which Arcangelo might have made, but Orfeo quickly saw that the priest had no intention of trying to make for the door, being quite content to stand his ground and make fools of those who sought to arrest him.

Orfeo realized also that there was more in this comedy of errors than immediately met the eye. As it extended he became quite certain that it was no mere silliness on the part of the attackers which condemned them to play the buffoon. Here, for the first time, the spellcaster had put his magic on display, and though it was a petty spell laid at no great cost it was nonetheless a demonstration of considerable cleverness. Most magicians, so far as Orfeo had had the chance to observe

them, were content for their magic to have its effect, and used it relatively brutally; Arcangelo possessed a delicacy of deployment which he had rarely encountered.

Sceberra too must have realized that there was artistry at work, for he showed no anxiety to hurl himself back into the fray when he had once been spun out of it. Instead he paused, touching his head as if to check for a bleeding wound, and then looked up at the gallery. Orfeo looked up too, and saw that a man was standing there, patiently watching the farce which was playing upon the dance-floor.

As soon as he caught sight of the man Orfeo knew that this was a magician, and a very dangerous one. He was as tall as Orfeo, but even thinner (though Orfeo was himself a slender man). He seemed far older, his face being very dark and wizened, the features subtly warped into a dreadful living mask. His hair was very thin, and quite white.

Sceberra, having made certain that the wizard was there, called out to his men, telling them to fall back.

This order was by no means an easy one to obey, for Arcangelo continued to ply his staff, tripping and tumbling the swordsmen as they attempted to retreat in disarray, but the circle around him gradually widened, until none was any longer within his reach, and when that moment came he put up his staff. A subtle smile played upon his lips, but Orfeo could see that he did not overestimate his triumph.

Arcangelo raised his head to look at the magician in the gallery, staring insolently, as though to taunt this new opponent.

The other was not disposed to give Arcangelo any chance to amuse his audience further – without any preliminary he stretched forth a hand and unleashed the power of his will in a blast whose force was felt throughout the room.

Arcangelo moved like lightning to lift his staff, holding it two-handed before him, above the level of his head. If this was intended to make the staff take the full force of the blast it succeeded, but if Arcangelo hoped that the staff would then prove an efficient shield, he had overestimated his own resources. The blast shattered the staff into a dozen pieces, hurling the shards to the four corners of the room with such velocity that several ladies screamed and almost everyone

turned away, shielding their faces with their arms. Only Sceberra, Orfeo and Rodrigo Cordova resisted the impulse to flinch and turn.

Orfeo had seen magical contests before, but never had he witnessed such a violent outburst of power calculated solely to destroy. He knew enough of magic to understand what enormous effort went into the production of such blasts, and he felt sure that this one could easily have drained sufficient power from its sender to render him insensible, if not to kill him.

Yet when he looked up at the balcony, he saw that the magician was still standing straight and tall, holding his expression as rigid as his bones and sinews. Only his eyes moved, and though the distance between them made it difficult to be sure, Orfeo thought that there was a hint of anxiety in the moving gaze.

Orfeo remembered what Arcangelo had said about the effects of working evil magic within the walls of this house, but when he looked about him he could see no difference. He looked back at Arcangelo, thinking to see him burned and broken, but although the priest had been knocked flat his limbs were stirring feebly, and he emitted a faint groan.

No one else moved, so Orfeo went quickly to the stricken man, and picked up his heavy head in his own hand, turning him on to his side so that he would not choke. Within a minute, he was sure that the priest would live, but he was equally sure that the man had been sorely hurt and that all the inner strength had been blasted out of him. Clever spellcaster he might be, but he would be casting no spells at all for some considerable time.

While he still knelt by the injured priest Orfeo felt the point of Sceberra's blade come to rest upon his back, between his shoulder-blades.

'Now, my lanky popinjay,' said the minister. 'I think the time has come when we must make more urgent enquiries about your acquaintance with this man, and your involvement with his treason.'

Orfeo looked up. 'I told you that I did not know him,' he said, calmly. 'It is still true.' Then he looked at Rodrigo Cordova, hoping for support.

The youth seemed uncertain, and was clearly shocked by what had taken place. After a pause for thought he shook his head. 'You may question him if you think you must,' he said to Sceberra, 'but not brutally. I believe that he is innocent, and I would not have any needless injury done to such skilful hands. If the truth of what he says must be properly tested, then Semjaza must use *his* art to do it.'

Orfeo felt a thrill of relief when he heard these words, but when he looked again at Sceberra, he saw that the man was not entirely displeased – and then he knew that whoever Semjaza might be, the attentions of his art were not so very much less to be feared than cruder tortures.

Perhaps, he thought, sourly, it will not be as easy to avoid the sticky clutches of this web of intrigue as I supposed.

The adventure continues in
ZARAGOZ!

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