

One day had followed another, and February had become March. The war had plodded along, appearing to be eternal in the minds of some, and nearly a year had passed since André Frodel and Franki Mrowicki had met with their friend Padre in Rome – since they had planned their visit with the Perantonis in Mantua, an event that had never been given an opportunity to occur.

But now in Northern Italy, Allied forces – André and Franki being among them – have crossed the Po River; *Operation Grapeshot* having initiated their penetration into the Lombardy plain. Ahead lies the town of Bologna, geographically the next of the Allies' premium targets, the battle for which would begin on the 9th of April. And not far south from there, the two reluctant warriors find themselves but about 65 miles from Mantua.

It was then close by San Lazzaro di Savena, a small town a few miles southeast of Bologna and at a little farm, where they proved to be among Fortune's favorites; where chance alone had put them in company with a fellow postal worker. For upon his learning that Franki had also worked briefly for the postal service, and that he was, as well as André, a fellow philatelist, a warm friendship was struck. And when they had explained to him their desire to contact a friend in Rome, he had made clever use of avenues with which he was familiar, and had thereby reestablished their communication with Padre Michele at the Vatican. That having been done, the three Lwówians planned again for a visit, the long awaited visit, to the Perantonis in Mantua; this for stamps, songs, pastasciutta and red wine.

Only hours later in Rome, Padre had been nearly beside himself; it had been so many months. Effervescing with excitement and not allowing for a moment's delay, he

could have been seen packing his bags. Having also learned from his friends that an Allied offensive was imminent, he reasoned that traveling to Mantua during such heightened military activity would likely be difficult, perhaps even dangerous. And there would need to be a valid reason as well. Therefore he packed extra priestly garments, because strategy too had been uppermost in his mind. He remembered also André's incomparable skills as a printer *and forger*. So packing an assortment of blank Vatican forms and climbing into a car sporting Vatican plates, one that few could afford – a white 1938 Lancia Astura Cabriolet, with convertible top, skirted rear wheels and rakishly inclined grill – he put the top down and headed north.



It was a joyous reunion.

“Carissimi amici!” Padre shouted, leaping from the car upon arriving.

Then throwing his arms around his friends' shoulders, he rattled on in Italian, “Despite all you’ve been through, the two of you look wonderful, absolutely magnifico!” Then turning to the postal worker and extending a hand, “And who is this?”

“This is Guido,” Franki explained. “He’s the reason you’re here; he made it possible to get in touch with you.”

“Guido, I am in your debt,” Padre said emphatically, clapping his hands together, his eyes sparkling with appreciation.

Then shaking a finger at the man he said, “And for you I have brought something.”

Turning quickly back to the car and reaching into the back seat, he took out two packages. Handing them to Guido he said, “These, mio amico, are for you.”

The man was speechless. When he hesitated, Padre said, “Please! Open them. As I’ve said, they are for you.”

When the wrappings had finally been torn away, Guido was seen to be holding a giant Italian salami, a *Roman* salami, while on the car’s hood lay an autographed photo of the pope.

“Oh, Padre mio,” he said, his tears brimming. Humbly he muttered, “But I cannot accept these. These are ...”

“These are just what they should be,” Padre interrupted softly. “You’ve risked your life, Guido, in your caring for my friends and in helping to get us together. So these are but nothing.” And for almost a full minute there were no words.

“Now then,” Padre remarked sharply. “We have much work to do, much work. When is it that the Allies are pushing for Bologna?”

“It’ll begin tomorrow; on the ninth,” Franki responded.

“Tomorrow!” Padre exclaimed, startled. “Well, the two of you can’t go driving about the country like a pair of tourists. Good Lord! I’m glad I brought what I did.” And the work began.

The next few hours were little short of panic. As a halfway believable story was concocted, André busily falsified Vatican documents. From his skilled hands came special travel orders for three clergymen. And as though by some manner of wizardry, along with those papers there appeared also a purchasing order, an order allowing for the acquisition of a special purified wine – a sacramental wine – from a certain Carlo Perantoni of Mantua.

As to the quality of the forged documents there was no question, and language would likewise pose no problem: André and Padre being fluent in both Italian and German. Franki, however, was another matter; he was potentially the weak link. He spoke only his native Polish and a smattering of Russian, words he had picked up over the years. But neither would be of any value. It was determined therefore that Franki would become a mute, a monk sworn to silence. His role would be that of a special Vatican wine taster and purification inspector.

As for the plausible story, it would be said that the recent bombings of Rome had damaged the Vatican's wine purification plant. The priests' instructions, therefore, were to transport Perantoni's wine back to the Vatican, there to be consecrated by the pope. At its very best perhaps, the plan was a house of cards.

Even so, thus equipped and rehearsed, late on the following afternoon André and Franki donned their priestly garb. And with Padre in the driver's seat, they said their good byes to Guido. After all of these many months, they were finally on their way to Mantua.

What an evening it was when they arrived!

The ancient Bacchanal itself could not have been more festive. Added to the natural joy of seeing each other after so long a time, was the delight of the surprise. Carlo, Victor and Luigi, busy in the shop when their visitors had arrived, had dropped their work on the instant. Indeed, hardly had the men gotten out from the car before the hugs and kisses began. And there were tears – tears of immeasurable joy. For not since the beginning of the war, almost six years previously, had all of them been together.

And now the very spirit of the Winiarnia was seen to be revived. In the kitchen, Gina cooked pasta al dente. In a large pot, a mouth-watering meat sauce, *a la bolognese*, absolutely reeking of the flavor of Northern Italy, was brought to the level of gourmet perfection. Cheese was set on the table and bottles of wine were uncorked. And with such a lavish board, a cheer-filled evening of – as they were so accustomed to phrasing it – stamps, songs, pastasciutta and red wine began.

As the evening progressed, as the wine worked its Aesculapian alchemy, hearts were made lighter and the war became as if it were not, momentarily fading from their consciousness. Proportional to the wine consumed, the volume of the singing rose, the night air trembling with the sound of their happy voices. And it was then that Victor remembered.

Separating himself from the bubbling merriment, he went into the shop's small office. Finding there the object of his purpose, he returned to the group. It took some time; but as the clamor of the singing subsided only briefly, and standing with one hand behind his back, he interjected his announcement.

“Silenzio, cari amici! Per favore! I have something to say.” And he waited, it taking a moment before the room was sufficiently quiet.

“You will remember, André, and you also Franki, that both of you left something behind in Lwów, at the Winiarnia.” And now the room was as silent as a tomb. “You left it with the hope that it be found and safeguarded.” Victor was now beginning to have difficulty in speaking, his throat thickening as he felt the emotion of the moment.

“I was fortunate enough to find what you had left. I have it with me and I would like you to have it back.” And with that he handed them the stamp collections he had found under the floor of the shattered Winiarnia.

The men were dumbstruck. Their hands trembled as they held the treasures. Tears of deep-seated joy and appreciation welled in their eyes, streamed down their cheeks.

“O, mio fratello!” André said, and they both crushed Victor in a brotherly masculine hug.

With halting words Franki said, “I could not ... I could not have asked for a better gift at a ... at a better time. On this evening, Victor, you have made our joy complete. Grazie, grazie!”

And there was applause before André resumed. “But now I would ask – that is, we would beg – yet another favor. Will you continue to safeguard these for us – until the war’s end? I think it will not be too long.”

“Of course, my friends. “Non c’è problema.”

As Victor walked back to the office, carrying the treasured stamps, the party and the singing resumed. Nor did it end soon, for it continued throughout the following day and evening. It was a reunion that exceeded by far all of their expectations.

Thursday morning however, April 12th, was almost demoralizingly different. Stepping out of the command car that had parked in front of the Perantoni's shop, a polished battle helmet in place of his officer's cap, the Nazi colonel swaggered arrogantly through the front door. At the back of the shop and having seen him arrive, Franki and André scrambled for the wine cellar.

Addressing himself to Carlo, off to one side of the room as the man had entered, the officer announced, "We are going to need your shop as a field hospital. And as I drove up, I noticed that you have a Catholic priest here."

"Well, yes," was Carlo's hesitant reply, "but he is only visiting."

"No matter," snapped the officer. "He will do. Equipment will be brought in and casualties are right behind me; within the hour they will arrive. The fighting has grown very heavy, and we need additional space to care for our wounded." Then with a sweeping gesture and in a tone that brooked no contradiction, he added: "You will make whatever adjustment are necessary." And he stalked out.

It was then less than an hour before Padre, anxious now at being suddenly in the midst of the German army and surrounded with a growing number of casualties, found himself working alongside a German Chaplain, a Lutheran with whom he was at odds nationally, and with whom he felt no spiritual companionship whatever. Apart from the sham in which he was involved, however, his concern for the wounded was genuine, as was his administering of last rites to the dead and dying.

As the hectic hours wore on, and in the ongoing confusion, he worried about the virtually predictable discovery of his friends; that someone would eventually find their way to the cellar and that André and Franki would be found. And it happened.

Arriving at the bottom of the stairs and surveying the two priestly-clad men with suspicion, the patrolling soldier asked why they were there. “Was machen Sie hir?” he barked.

Franki started to turn. Then remembering that he was allegedly mute, he stopped short. Tapping André’s arm and looking back over his shoulder, he displayed *savoir faire* beyond his ability as André casually explained.

“Why, we’re sampling wine for the Vatican; we’re testing for wines suitably pure for sanctification by the Holy Father.” Sounding the least officious as he possibly could under the circumstances, and after reaching into his cassock, he held out the authorization for purchasing.

“Here. See for yourself.”

Turning their backs then, leaving the document in the soldier’s hand and showing as much disinterest as was possible, André muttered to himself as they resumed their pretentious wine testing procedures. But suspicions were in the air now; and following his being informed about the two men in the cellar, and having been shown the forged purchase order, those of the German army chaplain became of particular concern. All of the pretenders felt a great deal of apprehension. Indeed, the air became thick with it.

Sensing this, and in an effort to alleviate matters, Padre Michele acted quickly. Telling the German chaplain that he was going to the basement, he swiveled his way authoritatively among the cots toward the stairs.

In the cellar now, having been followed by the soldier, he personally began to sample the contents of the casks. After several such tries, he handed a sample to the soldier.

Lapsing into German and with a disarming smile he said, “Versuchen Sie hier dies.” Surprised, the man jerked back.

“*Bitte*,” Padre pleaded. “*Dies ist gut*.”

Finally accepting the sample and tasting it, the man grinned. “*Oh, ya!*” he said. “*Das ist Gut! Das ist gross gut! Danke schön!*”

Padre smiled. “*Bitte schön*.” Then turning back to André he said, “Yes, this one will do nicely, and that one over there as well.” And after having approved the two barrels for Vatican use, he made a great show of ceremoniously attaching an official looking label to each one. Then using red chalk, he marked each barrel with a date and his initials.

Upstairs now, he approached the German chaplain. With an air of restrained superiority, and citing a church of some inconvenient distance away, he said very boldly, “I carry no money with me, of course; not in these days.” A knowing smile as he added, “And I’m sure you understand why. It’s much too risky. So it will now be necessary for Signore Perantoni to accompany me to the church for a transfer of the funds. But we will not be long.”

And with that officious summary of matters, he and Carlo climb into Padre’s car.

But an air of anxiety had now settled down upon all who were involved in the impromptu charade. As Luigi and Victor watched the Lancia pull away, and as the German chaplain began expressing his suspicions to the commander of the field hospital, Luigi turned to his brother.

“I think we’d better get these barrels into the van as quickly as we can. Because without doubt, if André and Franki are taken as prisoners – if they’re seen as spies – they’ll be shot ... and we’ll probably be shot right along with them.”

It was now patently clear; their long-planned holiday – their anticipated respite from the war – had itself become part of the war, potentially a matter of life and death. Victor, therefore, with André and Franki crammed into the back of his van, had driven to Luigi's house with as much abandon as seemed allowable. And it was not unlikely, being as he was in the man's hometown, that the name Nuvolari may well have come to his mind.

At Luigi's now, where Padre and Carlo had agreed to park the Vatican's car, they found the two of them in the garage and in the process of removing the Vatican's official plates. Padre looked up as the brothers came in with their friends.

With one plate in hand he said, "We'll be needing these later, when we head back toward Bologna. But right now we need to get out of here and leave this car."

"And what's the situation in Bologna?" Franki asked. "Has the city been captured?"

"I'd have to say that my guess is as good as yours," Padre replied with a shrug. "But with German casualties still coming in the way they are, I'd venture that they still control the city. However, that's really beside the point. Regardless of the situation, you and André need to get back to your unit."

"Perhaps we should leave the car on the street somewhere," André suggested. "That way there'll be no connection to Luigi."

"Oh no, not a good idea," Victor countered soberly. "Any strange car, especially a car like that Lancia Astura, and here in Mantua! Why, it'll draw the German's attention like ... well, like Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* at a rummage sale."

"Or the *Star of David* on the front of the Reichstag," suggested Padre.

"Yeah, like that." And Victor grinned. But I believe I know where we may be able hide it, with no suspicion attached; no questions asked. Let me talk to my father. Meanwhile, we'll take the van over to my house. You Franki, and Padre, can hide up in the attic's *colombaia* for a few days. It was used as a granary for messenger pigeons about fifty years ago, but its very clean now. Actually, Luigi and Dad use it to season the summer's almonds, and the Castagna chestnuts of late autumn. I'll bring some mattresses up there; Gina can cook; we can have some wine ... " Then a cavalier chuckle as he added, "And who knows? Maybe we can even gamble for some stamps." Then becoming nostalgic he said, "Like we used to do at the Winiarnia."

It had grown dark now. With the Lancia parked in front of the home of Carlo's friend, he and Victor climb out. There are no lights in the house, but on the porch now they knock. The man who answers the door is lean, his face angular in the pale shadows.

"We're sorry to disturb you at this time of night, Tazio, but we need your help."

Tazio Nuvolari looked beyond their shoulders, his eyes drinking in the Lancia parked at the curb. A smirking grin played with his face as he said, "I can't believe it, Carlo! You've stolen a car." And then he smiled; a crooked-toothed smile.

"No, it's not stolen," Victor offered, "but the Nazis are looking for it."

And Carlo added quickly, "Actually, Tazio, it belongs to the Vatican."

"Oh ho ho ho! Now that's *really* clever!"

"Yes, well maybe. But we need to hide it, Tazio, hide it where it'll not attract undue attention. As you know, I'm more than aware of your fancy automobiles, and I

thought that ... well, that maybe you could include this one in your collection, for a while anyway.” Then pleadingly, “Can you help us?”

The smile broadened, the eyes sparkled. “Come in, gentlemen, come in. We'll have some wine and we'll talk.”

As it turned out at Victor's home, and in an effort to lessen their fear of discovery and capture, they recreated by gambling for stamps up in the *colombaia*, but in dim candlelight and with less fanfare than before. And three days passed during which they did as Victor had said: they ate Gina's cooking and drank Carlo's wine. But there was no loud boisterous singing as there would have been at the Winiarnia. There was no spirit of the Winiarnia as there had been upon their arrival in Mantua.

Much rather was there a growing feeling of tension, with everyone's focus on the routine street patrols by German soldiers, and the arrangements being made for André and Franki's escape. For while none of them were being sought as a saboteur – as being guilty of espionage – and while the Germans authorities were still uncertain concerning the sudden presence of three priests in the town, along with a *missing* luxurious car with Vatican plates, the situation was both unusual and dangerous at the very least. So while German patrols were searching for them from house to house, Carlo and Luigi were planning on how to alter the wine barrels.

It was then early on the morning of the 14th when Carlo, in the garage with Luigi, rolled one of the two barrels between them; barrels from which they had emptied the wine and from which they had removed one end.

“I’ve given this a lot of thought, Luigi, as I know you have; and here’s my idea.” Then smoothing his hand around the barrel’s opening Carlo said, “I believe we can install a little lip around this inside edge, with an opening on opposite sides.” He pointed as he said, “Here and here. Then if we alter the top, giving it two little ears that will fit into those openings and under the lip, the top can be put in place and turned from the inside to lock it.”

Luigi saw it easily in his mind, and nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, that should work fine, Dad. It can be opened and closed from the inside, but with no outside handles.”

“Exactly. And if we also allow for the bung to be opened and closed from within, there will be no lack of air.”

Again the nod. “Right. I think it should work perfectly.”

“We agree then. Let’s tell the others.”

It was early, shortly after seven o’clock, and the morning sun shone brightly in the kitchen windows of old Victor’s Orlando home. His hand trembled a little as he lifted his coffee cup. Robert sat next to Mary, listening to his father’s telling of the story.

“And that, Beto, is the way your grandfather and your uncle Luigi figured it out. So the next morning, April 15th it was, everyone was ready to chance the escape. Your grandfather had already put the Vatican’s license plates on my delivery van, and Luigi and I were now wearing the frocks and cassocks. I also remember that we felt pretty silly. Now it had been decided that I should be the driver; Luigi would sit next to me up front, and Padre would sit in the back with the barrels. So then, it was just a matter of getting André and Franki – both of them armed and back in uniform now – into the barrels.”

“I’d like to have watched that,” Robert said, chuckling at the thought.

“Oh, you did, but you wouldn’t remember. You were only two months old at the time. But I remember your mother standing there in the garage with us that morning, holding you in her arms and laughing with the rest of us as André and Franki squeezed themselves into the barrels. It was tight and almost comfortable. And since it would be a trip of over fifty miles, it was decided that the barrels should travel on their sides. That way the men could be lying down, rather than in a continuous squat.

“Of course they reeked of wine – the barrels I mean; those staves were soaked with good claret – and it was André who joked that they might well be drunk by the time they reached their destination.”

Visualizing it all in his mind, Robert chuckled softly and Victor continued.

“Anyway, we loaded the barrels; we said our sad goodbyes to Carlo and Gina, and to you, and we piled into the van dressed as clerics. We were on our way to ... Oh! I just remembered something I haven’t mentioned. Padre had sealed the barrels. I mean he’d put flashy red wax seals, with a papal embossing, on each one. So as we left, he was sitting in the back, next to the barrels, and holding an attaché case that contained various documents, including his counterfeit Vatican travel pass and purchasing orders. Now those orders – orders he had drafted – required that he personally maintain visual supervision of the transport of the pope’s purified wine. This would preclude any contamination, as required by Vatican rules.

“Now other than the fact that our adrenaline was running pretty high, it was an uneventful trip until we were stopped by a Wehrmacht platoon manning a checkpoint, a German military outpost about thirty miles south of Mantua. You see, what we didn’t

know was that the German troops throughout Lombardy had been alerted. So now they're on the lookout for three suspicious Vatican emissaries – two priests and a mute monk – but ... they're looking for them to be in a Lancia convertible.

“Anyway, they stopped us, and right away they wanted to know where we were going. So one of them said – probably the one in charge – ‘*Dove state andando?*’ And we thought wow! At least one of them speaks Italian. When we said we were going to the Vatican, they wanted to know about the mute monk. ‘*Dové il monaco muto?*’ says the one speaking Italian. ‘Where's the monk who can't talk?’ Well, *Franki the monk*, now back in uniform, is in the barrel of course.

“So Luigi and I start complaining; I mean we complained loud and long, explaining that the deaf-mute was part of another group, and that their wine cargo had been stolen by – as I recall phrasing it, and in German so they all could understand – by the *barbar Verbindet*, the barbarian Allies, somewhere in the vicinity of Florence.

“So now these soldiers order Padre to open the barrels, to lift the lids. Well now! We couldn't very well do that! So now it's Padre who starts to complain – I mean he's making a show of it! ”

“Really! The Padre, eh!” Robert had crossed the room and was refreshing his coffee.

“Oh yes! Now I'd have to say that it's generally understood that priests don't lie; but Padre Michele stood there and lied like a *veteran*. I mean that if his religion really had a hell, he was guaranteeing himself an uncontested seat. He claimed that we were the fourth group to make this wine procurement trip for the Vatican, and that the pope was highly upset because he'd had to postpone the Holy Easter Sacraments due to the lack of

purified wine; and all of this caused by bungled military interference by – and these were his exact words – ‘*Narren wie Sie;*’ by ‘fools like you.’

“Then he really pressed the point! He told them that if they broke the seals on the barrels they might just as well steal the wine. Because, as he put it, its purity would have been compromised by men of war. Then he went even further. O Beto! He was inventive; he was magnificent! Padre should have been a fiction writer; he should have been an actor! He said they should know that a plane from the Luftwaffe, with neutral Swiss Guard markings, was standing by in Rome, waiting to deliver the sacrament’s holy bread and wine to the Führer himself in Berlin, and that it was already two weeks late!”

Robert sat down with his coffee as Victor said, “And you’d never guess what happened next.” Another few sips of his coffee while he allowed the matter to hang for several long seconds.

Finally Robert, consumed with curiosity said, “So ... ?”

“So you could hear the thumps of mortars and the thunder of the Allied artillery in the distance – to southeast. And these German soldiers – probably all Catholics, or maybe Lutheran; Hitler was a Catholic – were almost terrified; just kids they were. And having no way to check on any of what we said, they bowed down, hugging and kissing the supposedly sacred wine barrels. Can you imagine it, Beto? They even asked us for a special blessing.”

And now a great sigh. “Actually, as I think back on it now, it was really a ... really a very sad time. Amusing now, but back then those were frightened men – frightened kids. There they were, isolated, ordered to wait for the combat that would soon reach them as the Allies advanced. They were just awaiting their doom.

“I tell you, son: although it was a sham on our part, it was really quite moving. Because each of those soldiers at that outpost – perhaps about thirty in all – removed their helmet, they put down their weapon, and they got on their knees – on their *knees*, Beto – while Padre, Luigi and I, hypocrites that we were, acted out a ritualistic blessings for those poor frightened young Nazis.”

A long pause now, Victor’s mind dwelling on the memory while he stared thoughtfully into his cup. Then shaking his head and looking up at Robert he said “I’ll never forget it, Beto. Never.”

Another pause and he continued. “Anyway, an hour later we were stopped by a British infantry patrol. They asked some questions; we asked some questions; and finally – it was only a matter of time – they asked what was in the barrels. Well, when they saw André and Franki crawl out, reeking of wine but totally sober, the Brits started laughing. And the more they laughed the funnier it became, until it was almost hysterical. When we’d all finally regained our wits, and as we’d requested, they very kindly directed us to the Polish Second Corps. And there André and Franki were reunited with their unit.

“And just think; this all happened because Franki and André, and Padre, wanted to visit us at our shop in Mantua. Such a vacation! So now it was just a matter of Padre, Luigi and me driving back to Mantua. But you can bet we used a different route. Oh yeah; and we all wore civilian clothes this time, even Padre.”