

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Loredana

Lauro Martines

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## About the Book

In 1700, a Venetian priest, Fra Benedict Loredan, compiles an assembly of documents - letters, written confessions, top-secret state files, diary excerpts, pieces of a secret chronicle - which together tell the story of two lovers caught up in a dangerous and controversial revolutionary movement which attempted to do away with the two-tiered city of Venice: Leonardo da Vinci's architectural dream to segregate the rich and the poor described in his Notebooks and realised in this novel. At the centre of the narrative are two written confessions, one by a young girl from an aristocratic family - Loredana Loredan Contarini - who writes of her disastrous marriage to a sadomasochistic tyrant and her subsequent involvement with a revolutionary Friar - himself the second confessor. As both struggle to tell their tales and confess their sins, we are shown around the city of Venice as it might have been in the sixteenth-century and given pieces of a narrative which together form an explosive whole.

## About the Author

One of the world's foremost authorities on the Italian Renaissance, Lauro Martines was born in Chicago, has a Ph. D from Harvard University, but has lived in London since 1970. Until recently, he commuted to Los Angeles, where he was Professor of European History at the University of California. He and his wife, the novelist Julia O'Faolain, lived for some years in Florence. His books include *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence*, *Power and Imagination: City States in Renaissance Italy*, *Society and History in English Renaissance Verse*, *An Italian Renaissance Sextet: Six Tales in Historical Context*, *Strong Words: Writing and Social Strain in the Italian Renaissance*, and *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici*. This is his first novel.

ALSO BY LAURO MARTINES

Non-fiction

*April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici*  
*Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*  
*Strong Words: Writing and Social Strain in the Italian Renaissance*

*An Italian Renaissance Sextet: Six Tales in Historical Context*

*The Social World of the Florentine Humanists*  
*Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence*  
*Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200–1500*  
(editor)

*Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*  
(with Julia O'Faolain)

*Society and History in English Renaissance Verse*

For my agent, Kay McCauley  
And again for Julia O'Faolain

# Loredana

A Venetian Tale

Lauro Martines



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

*Let the upper streets be for the use only of the nobility, the lower streets for carts, pack animals and the common people . . . The city should be built near the sea or a big river, so that the filth can be washed away.*

*Leonardo da Vinci, Notebooks (a  
new city)*

*Any city, however small, is really two cities, one for the poor and the other for the rich.*

*Plato, The Republic*

## Entrée

*OF THIS LOVE story and political tale, belonging to the sixteenth century, only a single manuscript exists. How it came out of Italy cannot be told here, because the transaction was probably shady. Italian law bars the export of the nation's old masters and historical papers, unless they have first been vetted by the Ministry of Culture. The volume in question, however, would not have been approved for export: it includes a major run of state papers, all taken from Venetian government archives in the 1690s. The collection then passed quickly to a great family, and remained in their library for three centuries, until a year ago, when needy descendants secretly sold and spirited all their historic papers out of the country.*

*The form of the tale is unusual. It reaches us as a composite of documents, assembled around 1700 by a priest and archivist, Fra Benedict Loredan. Springing from the Loredan lineage, like Loredana herself, he had heard the old story, and resolved to get at the true account by trawling through family and archival records. In the course of his researches, he took a surprising turn. Selecting complete documents or key passages, he decided to let the voices of the protagonists speak for themselves, and had no qualms about pilfering original records or using scissors and paste. With an eye to the shape of the unfolding tale, he also broke up the flow of testimony by moving parts around, or cutting and splicing as he saw fit. Thanks to his friar's holy vows and archival expertise, he must have had free access to all documents.*

*I surmise that his theft of state papers was driven by his descent from the ancestral house at the heart of the tale. He felt, perhaps, that he was doing little more than retrieving family honour and property. And the better to seal his secret, or to cover his tracks, he bound the documents together by making a fine use of needle and thread.*

*The codex, however - if it may be so called - requires a few preliminary words. In piecing it together, Fra Benedict became so fixated on the story that he took a rich background entirely for granted. He was still close enough to it to do so. The documents, therefore, smack of something strange. And modern readers are likely to be daunted when they learn that Venice in its great day was a two-tiered city: the city of the sun and the shaded or shadowy city below, one looming above the other. In emergencies, the Republic of Venice, la Serenissima, could turn itself into a police state. The use of torture was common, as it was throughout Europe. Capital punishment was turned into theatre: the occasion for grand educational spectacle. Most people had no proper family or surnames. And I could go on citing many another oddity - such as the daily use of a language of bells, municipal trumpets and coats of arms - with a view to preparing the reader of this tale for entry into a world different from our own.*

*The question naturally arises, can we trust the documents collected in the priest's codex? Everything about them turns out to be reliable: the paper and watermarks; the harsh, acidic ink; the sixteenth-century script; names and dates; not to mention mores, official procedures and the principal historical facts. Venetians were superior record keepers. Thanks to the scale of their shipping and overseas trade, they were in the daily habit of putting pen to paper.*

*All written history is a mosaic. Once a historian has combed through a variety of sources, he constructs an account with something like a beginning, a middle and an end. It involves descriptions, statements, hunches and*

*stretches of analysis. But the resulting picture has to be reconstituted by the reader's imagination, as he or she, turning pages, moves through the narrative. In this sense, every reader of history is a historian.*

*For all his labours on the text of Loredana (although he left it nameless), Fra Benedict's words turn up only in interpolations [bracketed thus] and only to list the name of the given archival source or the year of the event. His voice is nowhere in the narrative. We are offered, instead, the mosaic itself - an affair of raw testimonials. Each document is a part of the whole tale, with the pieces strung together so as to give us the sense, now and again, that we are being borne through city streets and, in effect, through a whole society.*

*Curiously, too, as if seeking to fix the many shards of a shattered vase, Benedict Loredan numbered each document as he sewed it into his collection, thereby giving the movement of events a particular order. So that just here, in this hard feature, is where we may detect his personal stamp.*

*I undertook to edit and translate the tale because I was astonished by it, by Loredana's character, and by the tenacity of the young Orso, her lover. In working with the codex, I also edged my way towards a strange reason for admiring Benedict.*

*The so-called 'Myth of Venice' refers to the history of a wise, long-lasting, and serene republic, full of justice, moderation, wonderful rituals and beauty. This myth is trampled by the story of Loredana and Orso - the work, really, of its compiler. Yet I have not come to love Venice any the less. In some ways, disturbingly, the story has made me more ready to accept our 'fallen lot'. And hence, for having salvaged it, Friar Benedict - I passionately feel - deserves our worldly benedictions.*

*In the quest for something of radiant value, we often turn Renaissance Venice and Florence into glorious historical*

*plateaus - imaginary places where justification for the human animal is more easily found. We desperately need such places, of course, and yet they are an escape. I suppose I want to say that we should have the grit to stop transforming the inadequate present into a distant golden age. Better to grapple more honestly with our inglorious world.*

Lauro Martines

# Archives of the Tale

*Italy in the 1520s.*

THE RENAISSANCE IS *in full swing, and so too are the banners of dark forces. German, Spanish, French and Swiss soldiers occupy parts of the peninsula. Anxiety and melancholy course through the life and letters of Italian princes and noblemen. The Church has long been under the rule of popes who sell its graces and offices while also heaping dignities on relatives and friends, and reserving major appointments for the favourites of great lords and political elites. In Germany, Martin Luther and his princely supporters are having little trouble shattering the unity of the Catholic Church, and Protestant heresy has already seeped into the Italian peninsula.*

*The aristocratic Republic of Venice is the leading Italian state. In Tuscany, the last Florentine Republic, cherishing open political debate, is fighting desperately to avoid the despotic return of the Medici house. Farther south, the Papal State straddles central Italy, and Rome is the city of Pope Clement VII. Up north, the powerful Duchy of Milan is the contested prize in the fierce rivalry between the King of France and the German-Spanish Habsburg Emperor, Charles V, who also rules the Kingdom of Naples in the far south.*

*Large parts of Italy, in short, have been turned into battlefields for ravaging foreign armies. Yet daily life appears to go on as before, chiefly in the pursuit of local concerns. The great questions remain the business of rulers. Vendramin, the following diarist, was born into one of Venice's foremost families.*

1. [Pietro Vendramin, extract from his DIARY]:

xii September [1529] . . . The appointed time was yesterday at the sixth hour. The Ten [*Venice's secret political police*] had the perfumer and counterfeiter Sardesco rowed to the Rialto. A great crowd waited for him. It was a sunny day. The town criers, trumpets blaring, came first. When the executioner's party arrived at the square of silence, a goldsmith melted down the counterfeit ducats. Holding him down, constables then forced Sardesco's mouth open with tongs. The executioner poured a fine stream of red lead into the hole of his mouth. My God. His feet jerked and kicked. People pulled back. Someone cried, *Look*. The forger's hands like claws poked up once, sharply. His eyes were wide open. And the crowd also, me too, we were all eyes. No sounds came out of him, not even a cough. He just went straight and stiff and died right there on his back.

I say, would to God that others would learn from this lesson. Amen. Amen.

Afterwards we needed a glass of wine. I was with Jacopo [*Loredan*]. We also wanted to pick up the gossip. So into the Golden Falcon we went with a few foreign merchants. One told us that twenty months ago in Milan a priest was caught at the same game, though his trick was to debase silver. Well he paid for it. A cage was lowered from the high windows of the government palazzo. He was inside, strung upside down. It took him two days to stop moving. On the third he died. But a Milan merchant, who was sitting nearby, overheard the story. No sir, he corrected. It hadn't been quite like that. There was more: the priest had also sullied himself with murder. He had helped a noble lady to kill her husband - she, his parishioner and fornicator. They used poison. Without the husband they could more safely and more often become the beast with two backs, and they burned to do so. Well in the end they didn't burn. The priest went into the cage and she lost her head on a sharp blade.

*The second of the following missives was in code, with numbers representing letters and capital letters standing for certain words. Code was common in Renaissance Italy, especially in diplomacy and in communication between political exiles.*

2. [Bernardo Loredan, LETTER]:

In dei nomine.

Dear Pandolfo, I beg you to reply at once. Is it true that the friar is in these parts? In God's name, what does he look like? I need an exact description. Christ have you. Venice. xviii Septembris [1529]. Bernardo

3. [Pandolfo, surname unknown, LETTER in code]:

To Bernardo Loredan in Venice.

Esteemed Bernardo, the worst has happened. Another Judas has surfaced and the kiss is on its way. I have the proof. Take heed. There is no time for details. I pray this warning reaches you first, before you hear in Council. In Christ. Vicenza. xix Sept. 1529. Pandolfo

*The next entry, a religious confession, introduces the story's chief personage. Penitential confessions were, of course, spoken directly to the confessor; but in the most exceptional circumstances, they might be set down in writing.*

*Since Loredana's confession runs on - she used few paragraphs or full stops - some paragraphing and punctuation marks have been added. But her use of the comma as full stop has been let stand.*

4. [Loredana Loredan Contarini, CONFESSION]:

Honoured father Clemence pray please bless me for I have sinned.

You do not know me and you've never even seen me because I need a confessor who doesn't know me, so please read on and I ask you to forgive me for coming to you this way with no warning, but you do know fra Orso, he told me

so. This confession rolled up together with his will be put into your hands by my cousin and dear friend sister Polissena Giustiniani, and after you read all I write I pray you'll want to talk to me and be so kind as to tell sister Polissena when I can see you.

Here at once at the beginning I have to say that I hope you'll be able to release me from my deep sins. The lady called madonna X in fra Orso's confession is me and my confession should be read next to his by the same servant of Christ, you'll see why. With all my heart I thank you truly.

Orso gave me his confession before he went into hiding, and he wanted me to read it before I give it to you but he also wanted me not to tell you who I am, only I decided that for you not to know isn't right, I'm trapped in the same sin with him so that we're almost one and this should be known too so you can see what truly happened. I have found in fra Orso's confession the courage to write down my own frightening story, *rendering an account*, as preachers call it, and to confess all the things I did that were weighed down with shame and sin a long time ago, including all the brute and ugly words. These were loaded with sin. I tremble holding this writing pen as I start to remember some of the things I'll have to tell about, my God. There are too many deeds which I never confessed and you'll see why, but now all must be brought out and seen so as to save myself and to help save Orso if possible. I think women never write more than a few words or a page at a time, maybe only religious women write more, but I'm writing this confession down here because I couldn't tell it or write it in front of you, not in front of anyone. Too many shames and low acts are going to come out, and I couldn't even bear to be near someone reading it and then looking at me - that no. But now as I get started I think I don't know where to begin because I have to tell you about all my life the way fra Orso told about his. That was the right thing to do, it brings out

everything, so I'll give names first and next tell about my family.

I am Loredana Loredan of the upper city, the widow of Marco di Domenico Contarini and daughter of Antonio di Francesco Loredan, names that tell a whole story. I won't say anything about my childhood - I can't remember anything sinful there because I was brought up with many eyes always on me, with a nurse and maid-servants and other women and my mother always close by, and we went to church once-weekly at least. There was also a great pile of needlework to get at all the time and you don't get into trouble doing that. My two brothers died when they were little, then death took my doting mother when I was eleven, a terrible thing which left me at home with my sister Quirina who was two years older and died last spring. Our father sier Antonio did not marry again because he was always too busy at the Palace and loved it too much, you can imagine, with all their big affairs there. Oh, and we also heard, heaven knows how, that he had a woman in the lower city - yes.

Now into the important things. My sister Quirina was married at nearly sixteen to a gentleman from the Mocenigo house but then it came out that she had an impediment, that's what they called it, which I suppose somebody touched (you couldn't see it). I mean an impediment in her parts for having children, and she was examined by doctors who said it was true, so the poor thing was considered not to have married at all and had to come back home to us. There she was then, married but not married and just plain Quirina again. Well what a burning shame that was for our family and how ugly that the scandal was all about that impedimented part. We were too ridiculous and lost honour at the Palace, so we were stone quiet about the disgrace as if trying to keep it a secret. But how could you good heavens with names like Mocenigo and Loredan? You might as well deny the stars. The whole city knew and prated about it,

enemies were paying us back, they whispered rimes, they sang ditties, people laughed behind our backs and this was a knife in my heart because I was also ready for marriage. Remember I was fourteen years old at the time so I did worry extremely, I was afraid and cross too, I couldn't sleep at night, I had nightmares and who could I talk to? My mother was dead and my aunts - you can't count on your aunts, they had their own daughters and worries. Besides, they felt the ugly shame too, they felt it most definitely, and my father wouldn't talk about it because he was too angry about the laughter he knew was out there. Anyhow he offered a large dowry for me but he always meant to do that, good heavens it was expected, and though I was considered to be beautiful and fine and I was also in perfect health and we are a great family always in the top offices, I wasn't married till I was nearly nineteen! Which in families like mine is old and a disgrace, but partly too I think to tell the truth my father wanted to keep me at home. He did sacrifice me a bit, Quirina was too pious for him and she unsettled him and wouldn't go into a convent, though he often said he could force her into one. After her great shame and the ongoing scandal she took to praying all the time and was full of talk about Saint Ursula and Saint Barbara and we were worried that she would throw herself out of a top window to make a show of her virginity, like the fifteen-year-old virgin Saint Margaret of Antioch.

Before I tell about my marriage to Marco of the Contarini family, God rest his tormented soul, I want to get in some things that happened before that. My early life is as clean paper, no writing on it because I was brought up like every Venetian girl of the upper city to let all honour and virtue be in our white-as-snow chastity, in the special parts where poor Quirina had her impediment. How else can I say this if I'm being truthful? Families talk about honour, priests talk about virtue and giving alms and doing what is right, but for girls all such talk comes down to keeping those parts (the

treasure of our bodies) away from every man except your husband when you get married. We look up to take orders and down to guard virtue, and you'll come to see why I seem cross about this. Why do you think that unmarried girls in Venice go around so covered up that visiting Germans and other foreigners can't make out how we can even see the ground to walk along the streets? Well, but you know this better than I do and yet I have to say it. We wrap ourselves up as if we are covering and protecting our Saint Mark's treasury, our chastity, and so my idea of what it was to be good was first about the chaste parts, everything else came after that, like hearing mass on Sundays, making donations at church and maybe giving charity to fallen noble families or even to poor people from the lower city, though I wonder if you know that only older ladies ever go down there unaccompanied, not young or unmarried ones.

Our father brought in nuns to teach Quirina and me to read and write, and one of our aunts who loved numbers was very good at teaching us to cast accounts. This was something special and I took to it with glee, but as to reading, we read mostly religious things like *The Flower of Virtue* and *The Mirror of the Cross*, and also a few things about good conduct and then later on some safe tales and poetry. I think I'm telling you all this to say that to be good added up like a row of numbers to something as narrow as we were meant to keep our parts for having children. Even then I asked myself, is that all they mean by preachy words like virtue and chastity? I know my talk about narrow parts is low but I'm still bitter about these things because later, after my evil marriage and after I started really thinking, I began to see little by little how girls are kept ignorant and how innocent and unready they are for anything in the world except sewing and looking well and gossiping and giving orders to servants and being told exactly what to do. Why did they do this to us? Girls need to know things too. I didn't know enough then to be cross with anyone and I was too

afraid of my father, too respectful (they come to the same thing) to ask questions. But the thought comes to me here that you may think I got these notions from fra Orso. No, we never talked about such things, never. We've had so little time together dear God that I want to break down here in a passion of tears. I have to stop a while.

I'm going to write down next a shameful happening in my life which tells you exactly what I mean about being innocent and not ready, and anyway the beginning of sin can be in innocence. Quirina and I used to go to confession on Saturdays about once every six or seven weeks, and until my mother died we went with her and a maid, then we used to go with our father sier Antonio and later with two maids because father got to be too busy. I suppose the priest was waiting for that, for us to come to him with servants and no one else because one Saturday about a year after Quirina's impediment (yes it must have been a year or a little more) my turn came to confess, and you know the things unmarried girls that age are likely to confess, mostly trivia about being cross with someone or resenting something too much. So all swathed nearly to the eyes, with wrappings and a headdress and such for girls of my sort, I stepped up to the usual place and kneeled down and started talking. It was a quiet day and there was no one else about in that part of the church aside from Quirina and our two maids all standing behind me at some distance. And here's the point. I was telling the priest I don't know what in my confession when all of a sudden without saying anything or so much as making a sound father Ludovico, that was his name, put a thing in front of my eyes such as I'd never seen before in all my life. It was straight and pointing right at me. I was so frightened that my throat closed up like a fist. I tried to make a noise, I think I wanted to shout and say NO, but no sound came out, I was still kneeling remember, and as quick as a lizard he put it against my hands which I'd been holding up pressed together in front of me in prayer and it squirted

on them and over the front of me. I don't know where it came from but the thing had been so close to my face that I saw the veins and ridging and small eye. Then he growled, *Now go, eh eh, and if you tell anyone there'll be a scandal, and you don't want any more scandals in your family do you?* He was pushing and hiding his object down under his loose cassock between hairy legs, biting his lip and scowling, and he looked as if he was scolding someone. It was all a violent slap on the face and I got up confused or cross, no, I'm adding that now. It happened so fast there was no time to be cross. I was stunned and frightened and I pulled my cloak tightly around me to hide his beastly liquid and rushed home with Quirina and the maids trailing behind, I had to wash that pasty stuff off me and get it off my cloak, and I felt my hands were stained and I hated that cloak evermore because I thought of it as shameful and I can still see myself rubbing away at the foul stains with cold water.

Pious Quirina and the maids never knew what happened, I didn't say anything to anyone but I told Quirina I wasn't going back ever to confession to that beast father Ludovico. I didn't call him a beast to her, I simply said that I hated the way he treated me, that he had terrible smells (which was true) and that I was going to find another confessor. She accused me of being too wedded to this world (what did smells matter?) but in the end she followed me to another neighbouring church and you can be sure that from then on I was chary of priests, I thought about that man's base action for a long time and about what I ought to have done but still I kept quiet about it, scandal frightened me too much. At fifteen I had to think of marriage and my prospects, what choice had I? Who would I be married to, when oh Lord when, that's all I knew, that's the way I was brought up, and I couldn't go to my father with a disgusting story about a priest poking his member into my face, besides, what could he have done about it, got the man put

out of the parish or even the city? And how keep it quiet? Look, the harm had been done, as quick as you please that priest father Ludovico had filled me with fear and secret shame. I told my cousin Polissena about it, the one you'll have met, who was already in the convent of San Zaccaria and she was taken aback but her advice was for me to be silent. The Quirina scandal was still on everybody's tongue. That father Ludovico had certainly known how to do his deed and she said that talking about it would do our family and me no good, that there was much worse about, like boys and priests coupling. I had to ask her what this meant and I was amazed by her answer, for some reason she always knew more things than I did, more about what went on in the world even though she was in a convent.

That deed by father Ludovico which naturally I never confessed (how could I tell one priest that sort of thing about another priest?) taught me to hold my tongue about things. You go on as if nothing happened otherwise you make things worse for yourself and your family, but then much later when it was too late alas I found that little by little this was the beginning of rot because it was the way to store up evil things, unconfessed sin, and that stored-up sin could turn into fear or shame of a kind that became nearly interesting, a fear that interested you. Do you know what I mean? If I had denounced father Ludovico (but then what about the resulting scandal? Why would he hold his tongue? And surely he'd lie about things), maybe I'd have got his low deed out of myself for ever but instead I brooded about it and the memory of that veined thing kept slipping back into my thoughts.

But thank God I had many other thoughts too, I was reading more and seeing more people. At parties with my cousins and their friends the men stared at me, and we danced and there was sometimes a secret squeezing of hands, especially with the handsome young men who dared to squeeze, but we didn't say much at all because my father

and aunts were always very close by and also there was no point in it when you're waiting for your father to pick a husband for you and you have no idea of who that's going to be. Still I regretted not being able to see some of those faces more than twice in a year and I was ashamed of the stupid things I said when we did utter a few words. It was childish talk, but I *was* a child and so were all the other girls I knew, except for Polissena who was in a convent and three years older than me.

There were a few stories naturally, not important or I'd write them down but I'll tell you about one so you can see the way things were at that time. A red-headed young gentleman, very bold, the distant cousin of a cousin, tried four times to hand me a secret letter, once in church as I was leaving with Quirina and the servants, but I wouldn't touch it and I turned away from him. I heard he was a good man and maybe he was, but it wasn't honest to hand me letters, I knew this because I knew about the trick, we had been warned about it many times. Never accept letters. A letter to a young woman can only be a danger and dishonest, so we were never to accept one because it had to be a trap laid against chastity. Then I heard that the red gentleman had wanted me in marriage and that his family sent word to my father through another family, but sier Antonio wanted nothing to do with them, they were not of the right sort at the Palace, yet he never mentioned this to me and I only heard about it the next year from Polissena, and for all I know there were other interested families too but it was none of my business was it? Think of it, what did I know in those days, so how could I have anything to say about something as important as getting married?

Listen father Clemence, I'm now ready to talk about my marriage and my dead husband Marco di Domenico Contarini who drowned more than fifteen years ago. It was a strange drowning, but first I have to tell you about the things that led up to it. Since the Contarinis and Loredans

are counted among the greatest houses in Venice, a marriage between them cannot be a small thing. There was I eighteen or nearly nineteen and with a magnificent dowry, not just cash and houses and market rents, but farms and woodland too, also good-looking and with the most glorious smile in Venice (everyone said), when my father sier Antonio finally turned up the perfect match for me. As nearly all girls marry at fifteen and sixteen, I thought it was time and more than time, in fact a horrid embarrassment too considering the impediment scandal or maybe because of it. Actually I'd never seen him before but Marco the match looked as if he'd come out of a panel by the dreaming Giorgione, he was so wonderful-looking, a vision from heaven, and everyone seeing us together said that we looked as if we'd come out of paradise and that by comparison everybody else looked plain and dull. All the bells of Venice rang out, and you can picture the wedding parties, the crowds of relatives and friends and heaps of gifts, but don't worry, I'm not going to tell you about all this, you know what happens when families like that have a marriage. Besides, our sin (mine and Marco's) wasn't in those things.

5. [Vendramin, DIARY]:

xxii September [1529]. It happened at dawn today. I must get this right. The night-watch pounced on three men in the lower city. One got away. Minutes later the other two were dead. A mystery. These tidings come to me from a witness at the Palace. The [*Council of*] Ten were called in, and this afternoon they put out a secret and strange order. All guardsmen are to observe it strictly. Any man hereafter arrested in lower Venice is at once to be grabbed by the throat. Grabbed, tightly held and not allowed to swallow. Not till his jaws have been wrenched open and fingers thrust into his mouth to search for hidden poisons.

How can a poison be hidden in the mouth?