

Lo Spadone
“The Greatsword”
by Francesco Ferdinando Alfieri

1653

Translated by Jeff Vansteenkiste

(rev. 2021-05-24)

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Translator's Introduction

Over a year of global pandemic has given me ample time to explore the academic side of historical fencing. Although I have spent most of my research time translating much longer rapier texts, Francesco Ferdinando Alfieri's *Lo Spadone* ("The Greatsword") caught my eye as both an interesting break from larger projects, and as something new to work on interpreting during what may be another summer of solo practice.

Originally published in 1653 as the third part of Alfieri's *L'arte di ben maneggiare la spada* ("The Art of Handling the Sword Well"), *Lo spadone* is a short treatise on the use of the greatsword. The copy found in the Getty Research Institute which has been digitized by the Internet Archive and generously made available to the public is bound as its own volume and may have been either printed and sold on its own or separated from an original, complete copy. The work consists of twenty-one brief chapters, seventeen of which have an accompanying figure. Interestingly, there are only six illustrations in total, all but one of which are used for more than one chapter.

This translation was done fairly quickly, and errors or at the very least awkward phrasing are likely. I have provided a number of references to supporting material in the glossary but have not done so for the main body, as it is largely self-contained. As the summer goes on and I work with interpreting the material I will continue to revise the text and may provide additional references where extra context would be helpful, but for now I am satisfied and happy to share with others.

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2021-05-24

Glossary of Italian Terms

Some technical terms have been left in their original language, as they are used in ways that do not line up neatly with their English translations or are commonly left untranslated by modern writers on historical fencing. For the reader's convenience they are defined below. Definitions have been drawn from Alfieri's works where possible, and page references have been provided.

debole

The half of the spadone's blade closest to the point. Although Alfieri divides the rapier's blade into five parts (1640, 6-8, 84-85), he only divides the spadone's in two. See Chapter 3.

dritto (pl. dritti)

Any descending cut which begins from the fencer's right side and travels to their left (Alfieri 1640, 58-59, 94-95). As the "default" cut, if a particular cut can be thrown from either the left or right side and Alfieri does not specify (e.g., a fendente), it can usually be safely assumed to be a dritto.

fendente (pl. fendenti)

A downward, nearly vertical, cut which targets the top of the enemy's head (Alfieri 1640, 59, 94-95).

forte

The half of the spadone's blade closest to the hilt. See Chapter 3.

mandritto (pl. mandritti)

See dritto.

montante (pl. montanti)

A nearly vertical ascending cut which travels from the fencer's right side to their left. It travels along the same path as the riverso fendente, but in the opposite direction (Alfieri 1640, 59, 95).

riverso (pl. riversi)

Any descending cut which begins from the fencer's left side and travels to their right (Alfieri 1640, 58-59, 94-95).

squalembro (pl. squalembri)

A downward diagonal cut (Alfieri 1640, 94-95).

spadone

A two-handed sword, and the subject of this work. According to Alfieri, it should be about as long as the average man is tall. See Chapter 3.

sottomano (pl. sottomani)

A nearly vertical ascending cut which travels from the fencer's left side to their right. It travels along the same path as the mandritto fendente, but in the opposite direction (Alfieri 1640, 59, 95).

stramazzone (pl. stramazzone)

A descending circular cut from the wrist which travels in mostly the vertical plane. The technique is mentioned in introductory material but does not appear in the technical content of this work. Even in his earlier work on the rapier, Alfieri mentions the stramazzone only once and does not give explicit details as to its mechanics and use (Alfieri 1640, 122).

stoccata (pl. stoccate)

A thrust.

vita

Although the word vita can also mean “life” or “body”, here it is used to refer to the band of the body above the hips at the waist, i.e., the core.

tempo (pl. tempi)

Literally, “time”. In Italian fencing theory of the early modern period, the conception of tempo is firmly rooted in, and assumes the reader's familiarity with, the Aristotelian idea of time as the measure of a motion between two states of rest (Aristotle 1980, 1:386-87), and following from this, the measure of a rest (Aristotle 1980, 1:404-05). Alfieri further states that in fencing, tempo refers to a moment in which the enemy presents the fencer with an opportunity to wound (1640, 17).

tondo (pl. tondi)

A horizontal cut (Alfieri 1640, 59).

THE
SPADONE

BY FRANCESCO ALFIERI

Master of Arms

OF THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS ACADEMIA DELIA
IN PADUA.

Wherein its use and handling are shown by means of figures

IN PADUA, through Sebastiano Sardi. MDCLIII.

With permission of the Superiors

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CHAPTER I

The Spadone

by Francesco Ferdinando Alfieri

It is a certain thing that, among the exercises and humanly exercised arts, there is not more excellent, more illustrious, nor more useful of them than the art of war, since with this kingdoms are defended, religions are expanded, injustices are avenged, and peace and happiness of the people are established. The ancient and famous republics, which will always serve as an example to us and spur us to set out along the path that brings us to civil happiness, held skill and agility in such regard that they considered those stronger and faster than others blessed. These were judged at their feast days, and they made a show of those gifts that they had received from nature and increased with art. These exercises were still customary up to the first centuries of the Italian nation. The exercise of the spadone will be commended, given that in it the foot is made quick, the vita becomes flexible, the hand acquires strength, and the arms are loosened. If we examine its origins, and who was first to put it into use and expand it, Salust says that it was in the reign of Nino. Then Cyrus, in Asia, the Lacedaemonians and Athenians in Greece, and it was passed to the Romans. After these, they had public academies in which experts trained the youth. Whence, not being doubtful of the ancient and marvellous effects of the spadone and those who wish to handle it perfectly, the exercise of the art is necessary. Otherwise, it does nothing more than tangle and wrap the hands, which does not occur to someone experienced who, going against the enemy, will have prompt resolutions that are appropriate to the circumstance and made bold by virtue, and will accompany them with the revenge. Therefore, to these who understand this virtue without other discourses, it will be an easy endeavour to arrive at the perfection that is desired — observing, however, the lessons of the subsequent figures, which make obvious those particularities that are difficult to declare with words, which is the goal of the present discourse on this weapon.

CHAPTER II

The Art of Operating with the Spadone

In this art the theory and the practice are considered. The theory is the method of how we must operate with the weapons in hand against the enemy: How one must move with the feet and carry the arms, and even how to throw the blows, which we learn in various, diverse manners that serve to offend and defend. So, it is giving the dritti and riversi tondi, the fendenti, montanti, stramazzone, squalembri, performing routs and rotations, whirls, changes of the body, throwing thrusts and cuts in various, diverse forms. On the one hand how you carry, launch, and turn, and on the other standing, advancing, and withdrawing in the many ways that the art teaches. With this exercise and study, one grows bolder in order to defend oneself from bloody, quarrelsome people, ready to do injury. Someone who knows how to avail himself well of this artificial weapon, the spadone, can go against any enemy weapon due to it being very advantageous, and a man can defend himself in any place he were to be assaulted by enemies, in a wide street just as in a narrow one, in the square just as in the countryside, from in front or from behind. In my school this noble exercise is very commonly engaged in by Italian, Polish, French, and German lords, and by others regarded subjects of diverse nations. They do this in order to acquire quickness, strengthen the body, become agile, and awaken naturally sleeping will. However, every studious man-at-arms can make use of this excellent art at need for defence of his life and honour, as we will demonstrate with discourses and figures that teach clearly.

CHAPTER III

The Usage, and the Length, Forte, and Debole of the Spadone

I have strained my abilities to their limit so there is nothing in this very small volume that is not approved by experience, nor experience that is not accompanied by the rule. Thus, the studious gentleman will see through the following figures the variety of situations and postures of the body, feet, and spadone, and in their places the nature of each will be discussed along with the effects that arise from them. The discourses will be such that it can be easily comprehended when the tempo to make use of one or another rule is, and with what advantage and method one must proceed against the enemy. Someone who has science can proceed as he pleases, though, because found in whatever way, good effect will arise due to the understanding of the art, which is the ruler of all the offences and defences. When, however, carrying the spadone in the appropriate way, and one must operate differently according to the variations and opportunities from the adversary, because what is good in one place does not serve in another. Its blade is divided into two parts. The first, near the hand, is strongest, with which one can defend and resist all the most powerful blows. The second, which follows, a little weaker, but in offending is the overall commander of not only the thrust, but the cut. Therefore, the spadone comes to be divided half to defending, and half to offending. Its length must be as long as a proportionate, neither large nor small, man is. It must have two cutting edges and be quite light in order to be an observer of this art, and to throw the blows as cuts and thrusts with greater speed and lesser fatigue. It must also have good furnishings in order to safeguard the hand, principal tool for operating according to the nature and rule of the art.

CHAPTER IV

How the Body and Feet Are Carried in Order to Meet the Enemy with the Spadone

The body must be carried well-disposed and natural, without strain, straight, and with a cheerful face, in a way that after the hand has been put to the spadone one can proceed against the enemy in order to seize any advantage, and to without any danger free oneself from ending up wounded by the enemy.

The gentleman wishing to move in order to proceed against the adversary must begin, and carry his feet in an ordinary pace, exactly as if they were being carried in walking, although with a little greater quickness of motion and briefer steps. It is not necessary to ever enlarge this pace unless the man is to resist against the enemy when he comes to offend — on his own or accompanied. Immediately, with quickness, which is often the mother of fortune closing the [enemy's] way, so that he cannot come forward to wound. Many hold the opinion that in fighting one must aim at the enemy's eyes. I do not know what this is based on, given that I have never seen, nor understood, nor read, that men are basilisks. I say that we must aim at the part of the person we intend to offend, and not otherwise, at the eyes. The observer of this art can proceed against any type of honest weapon, and in order to resist against all the adversary's variations it is necessary to situate the body and spadone in a way such that it is stronger than the enemy weapons. However, it is necessary to be rich in resolutions in order to wound the enemy without stopping, as we will speak of in their places in the subsequent figures.

CHAPTER V

The Method with Which One Must Hold the Spadone When Walking

Coming now to dealing with the method of carrying the spadone, which is a very useful weapon, keeps the enemy at a distance, and is not subject to any prohibition. It is common in all provinces and permitted by every prince. Many carry it as they please and without rule, but, because the manners are diverse, we will show only one among them to be the best, in which the walking of the feet, motion of the step, and disposition of the body is considered. Now, we want to carry it without any trouble or impediment, at night as in the day, alone just as much as when accompanied by friends.

The spadone must be seized with the right hand, as it is more noble. It is placed with that in the left hand, and it will be gripped with that leaning it on the same arm, as the present figure teaches. Standing in this posture the gentleman can continue his journey, and coming to be assailed one-on-one, or by many people, without extra time he can expeditiously grip and pull out the spadone, availing himself of that usage of it required by the occasion.



CHAPTER VI

Gripping the Spadone and Settling into Posture in Order to Assail the Enemy

In this discourse it will be shown that figures quite effectively teach what discourses do not, because seeing the postures and manners that must be observed in order to imitate them illustrated removes all doubts that can arise from the weakness of the oppressed. The following figure represents how one must in one indivisible tempo fix oneself in posture and keep oneself free to wait and assail according to one's will.

The gentleman wishing to perform the first lesson must begin with two main cuts, which are a mandritto and a riverso. They are carried and accompanied by the right and left hand, extending the pace and body, throwing the blows either low or high according to the situation and tempo. These two cuts are thrown interchangeably and repeated multiple times. The mandritto is thrown from the right side, and the riverso is thrown from the left, and whoever well-examines and discourses with intellect will easily find the rules for proceeding against everyone, as we will discuss one in one place, and the other in another in the following lessons.



CHAPTER VII

The First Method of Beginning to Handle the Spadone

This lesson, performed with three cuts, is worthy of being observed for the keenness of its blows and for the skillfulness it requires in judging the effect of the present figure with which one commences the passage. To achieve the honour that is yearned for, the body must be a little bent and disposed to force. The arms must be together, holding the spadone strongly in the fists with both hands. Moving the pace naturally but generously, in one tempo it will form the first blow of the mandritto, and the second of the riverso. Said cuts are repeated multiple times, turning the body, and turning the spadone around over the head with the hands. Thus, continuing in such a way in proceeding forward as much as in returning backward, as will be more effectively shown by the posture.



CHAPTER VIII

The “Head Guard” of the Spadone, for Defending Oneself in an Ordinary Street

The present figure will serve to reawaken your memory in case, due to length of time and little use, the reminders given to you in my living voice had left your mind. I will now present all the lessons to you, which are ordered to the extent that one is chained to the other. Here we learn how the three cuts are thrown, making the head guard with the spadone. This not only serves to show the disposition and skill of the one who exercises it, but it can occur that it is necessary to practice it in combat. Therefore, one will hold the arm extended and give a turn of three mandritti over the head and do similar with the riversi. They must be pushed forward immediately without losing tempo, and second the hands will be turned together, as is seen from the demonstration of the illustration. The blows are extended with the union of the right and left foot, forward just as backward, always having regard for the justness of the pace in order to avoid discomfort that can remove its merit.



CHAPTER IX

How One Must Perform the Three Crosses of the Spadone in a Spacious Place

The present lessons are all taken from real occasions of disputes, which for the most part happen in hot blood. We have come to the method of performing the three crosses, in order to make use of them mostly in times a person were assailed in squares or spacious streets. To do this there requires much judgement, but accompanied by resolution and daring, as the above figure shows.

The first cross is divided into two mandritto cuts, accompanying them with the right foot, turning the body and spadone around, and each blow makes its motion keeping the left foot firm on the ground. The other [foot] travels with the cut twice. Then, stopping the right foot, one starts with the left foot together with two riversi. The two blows finished, one begins again as in the first with the right foot, and will step to the right flank, throwing the same two mandritti. These finished, the right foot is stopped and the left is brought to the left side, and throwing the two riversi one then returns to the same place one began.

The second cross is performed with three mandritto cuts and three riversi. The mandritti are accompanied by the right foot, and the riversi by the left foot, turning the body three times with the spadone, holding oneself, however, to the aforesaid order.

The third cross is performed with four [mandritto] cuts, in the same way, and riversi, repeated four times per side, one forward, the other backward, and the same is done on the side of the right flank and the left, observing the rule that we demonstrated with the preceding discourse.



CHAPTER X

Managing the Thrust and Cut with the Spadone

The ways by which one can resolutely proceed against the enemy without stopping are many, and wishing to do this, it is necessary to have great judgement. Here we will show the lesson of the thrust and cut. The primary motions are the mandritti and riversi, with which their rotations are formed over the head and completed with the union of the body and feet, as is seen in the presented figure. One first begins with the mandritto, and in the passage of the cut the blow is there accompanied by a stoccata, and it is extended forward with the step. The same is done with the riverso, repeating the passage with the cuts and thrusts together this way many times on both sides. One will begin a new approach according to the situation and opportunity, being able to take from that development the entertainment and delight which lovers of virtue feel.



CHAPTER XI

The Spadone's Three Crosses of the Thrust and Cut

I do not fear being tedious in repeating the same things, but becoming obscure in omitting them. Now, what is under consideration is seen by means of the figures in the practical act, yet it will cause great wonder that the design of one resembles the other. This does not make the art different to the demonstration of its actions, however, even though they may be similar in the action of the postures.

The present figure shows a very beautiful invention for performing the three crosses with thrusts and cuts, and because it can be quickly understood by anyone, I will declare it. The first cross is performed with two cuts and a stoccata together. One begins with the left foot placed on the ground and starts turning the mandritto with the right foot. With that, one turns about, and continues until the two cuts are finished. There the stoccata is immediately chained on, turning the spadone behind the lower back, and the blow is brought forward together with quickness of the step. So, it must be performed with two riversi and the stoccata accompanied by the left foot — the same will be done on the right side as on the left. The second cross is of three cuts and one stoccata around, and the same circumstances of the foot, body, and quickness as above are observed. First three cuts and one stoccata are thrown with the right foot. Finished with that, one begins with the left foot and does the same. This will be in front and behind, and to the right flank and left, divided into three tempi. These are made with the right foot and the left. The third cross is made of four cuts and one stoccata similarly around. This is done in front, behind, and to the right and left flank, now with one foot firm and the other turning. Finished with the right, that is firmed and the left is moved, and one continues until the end of the four variations, always assuming that the tempo and the step are proportionate, without which all effort and merit are lost, and nothing but reproach will be acquired.



CHAPTER XII

The Whirl Made with the Spadone in the Cross

All the lessons are ordered. Here we must learn to perform the whirl in the cross. This serves not only to demonstrate the disposition, but the skill of the player. Therefore, the arm must be held extended as the present figure shows, and the passage forward is made with three montanti, and the spadone is turned with a whirl, together with the body, and one returns to the same place. Similar montanti are further performed to the rear, and continued on the left side, then the right, redoubling them as one pleases. Even though all is in of itself very clear, it would nevertheless be difficult to put into practice without a master.



CHAPTER XIII

How One Must Handle the Spadone in “Countryside Sweeping”

In order to perform the lesson of “Countryside Sweeping”, after having performed multiple passages of mandritti and riversi, beginning from the right side the rotations of three steps are performed, with a turn of a mandritto. With equal mastery one returns to bringing the riversi on the left side. They are redoubled many times according to the crowd of men, needing to be continuously in motion, turning the body and spadone now in one place, now in another, as the figure teaches. In meeting the enemy, we must govern ourselves according to what the occasion and place require, because the steps can be driven in many ways from one to the other side, and being placed in a well-regulated pace one will not be held back from becoming known as experienced in this noble exercise.



CHAPTER XIV

How One Feigns the Cut with the Spadone in Order to Deceive the Enemy

Artifice is of very great advantage, adding that it is a rule of the art to feign with a cut and wound with a cut. The figure has no need of many words. It makes a show of giving a riverso and wounds with a mandritto, does the act of wounding with a mandritto and wounds with a riverso. The passages that are learned from a master can be performed in this lesson — the man can go forward and backward throwing the extended blows with his wrist and the strength of his arm, and with well-adjusted steps. The feint is nothing more than deceiving, which, on its own, is odious. The deception of which I speak offends neither justice nor faith but is a precept of the art for easily vanquishing the enemy called a feint.



CHAPTER XV

The Step and Counterstep with the Spadone

In this figure one holds the arms gathered in with the spadone in order to perform the step and counterstep. One makes the body play on one and the other side, making three mandritto cuts and three riversi, changing the feet in the tempo the cuts are made, bringing them around and extending the blows forward, seeing with all judgement to availing oneself of speed, without becoming disconcerted and thus ending up forestalled by the adversary.

The main foundation of this lesson is recognizing one's advantage, crossing now to one side, now to the other, throwing dritti and riversi. Many are the enemies of truth, and they love new, even extravagant, things more. They do this in order to be considered of great spirit, almost reformers of this art, and do not understand that such inventions are entirely ridiculous and pernicious, and someone who does not know to avoid them easily ends up deceived. This that I teach here will always be approved by those with knowledge.



CHAPTER XVI

How One Must Handle the Spadone in a Very Wide Street

Dangers arise less than is believed. Bravery makes us fight, but victory belongs to virtue, for defending oneself from incidents as much in war as in peace. Turning the spadone toward the enemy, one will be arranged in a good guard for resisting every offence. For clarity of the lesson, we show how one begins with the natural pace and moves three steps to the right side to assail the adversary, and walks forward with three mandritti, and proceeds three more times to the left side with three riversi, tormenting the enemy around in order to acquire some advantage over him. Further to this, after having made several mandritto and riverso passages according to the need, many whims, turns, half turns, and other artifices can be performed, which are signature ornaments of the art.



CHAPTER XVII

The Method of Performing the Mandritto and Verso "Serpent" with the Spadone

The following figure teaches the passage of the lesson, "in the manner of a serpent". It begins with a mandritto and finishes with a mandritto with five steps. The same is followed with the verso and finished with the verso. The mandritti are done with the right foot, the versis with the left foot, and this will be repeated multiple times according to the occasion. Found in either a narrow or wide street, a man can defend himself from many people, and just by extending his arm and with a bend of his body can reach the adversary. The movements must always be extremely fast, of the body just as much as of the spadone and feet. Without any doubt this is the safest and most certain rule, so that in a challenge of such esteem life is at stake, any person can defend himself in any place.



CHAPTER XVIII

The Method That One Must Hold to with the Spadone in Order to Perform the Simple and Double Whirl in a Narrow Street

We have come to the method of forming the whirl with mandritti montanti and sottomani. There is neither guard nor blow in fencing that does not come to be adapted to the spadone. Wishing to perform what I plan to teach in the present figure, the student must find himself in the passage of the left or right flank, and with montanti or sottomani turn the spadone and perform the simple whirl, always advancing and following the enemy, or returning backward if one were to have a crowd of enemies. In the double whirl one moves with the same rule, but turns the body around multiple times, accompanying it with the same montanti and sottomani, in going forward as in backward. I firmly hold that assailing is a very great advantage. We leave long discourses to learned persons, because our profession consists of the operation more than of words. One can proceed with the spadone in this way against a polearm, pike, or halberd and defeat it, the effect of which I have shown many different times in the presence of great lords and princes.



CHAPTER XIX

How One Must Operate with the Spadone With the Mandritto in Order to Defend Oneself from Enemies on a Bridge

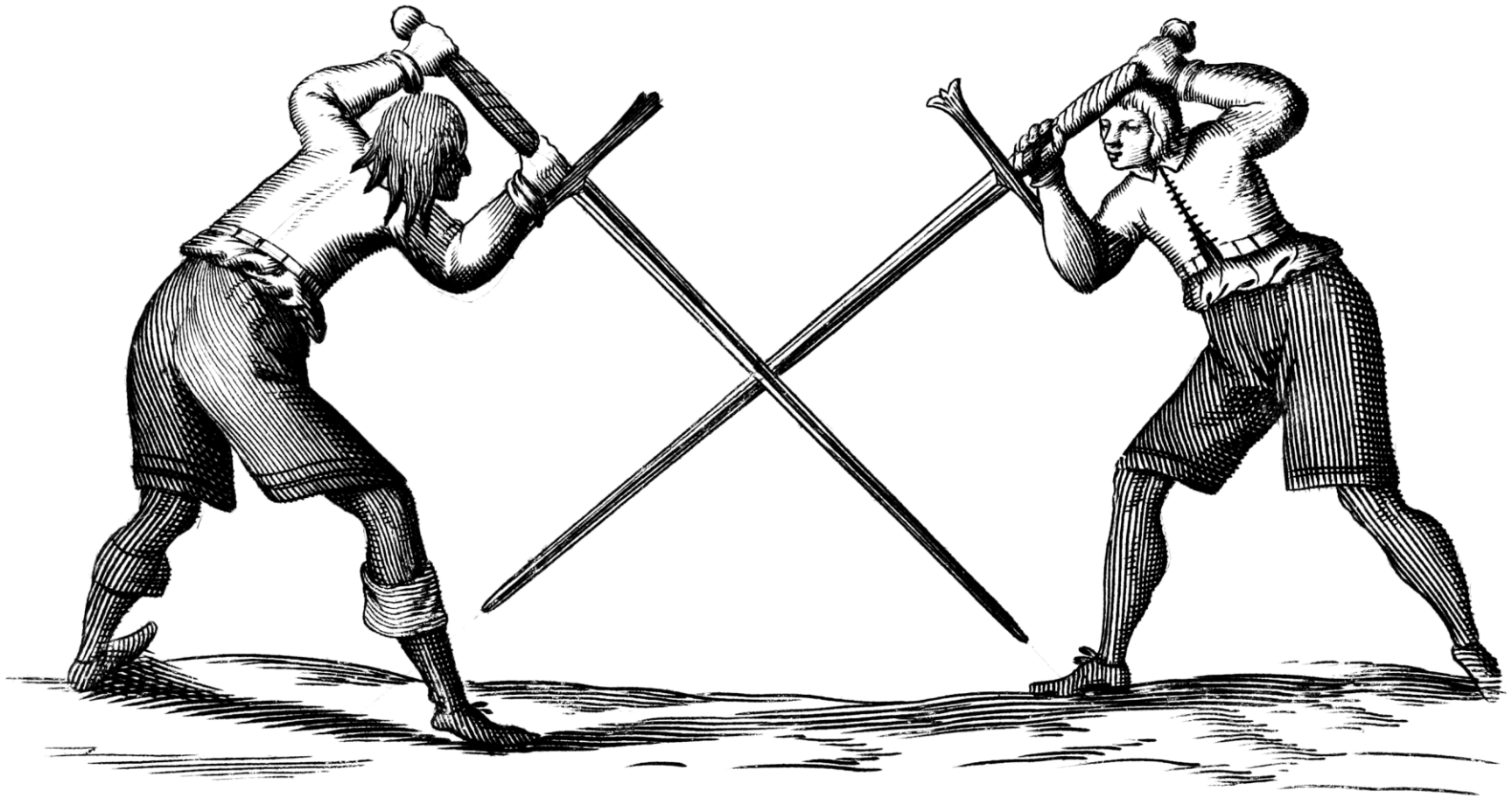
In handling the spadone, it appears that skill and agility prevail against strength. This is manifestly understood in our figure of defending oneself over a bridge. Thus, with mandritto and riverso, beginning with the right foot and then following with the left, turning the body and the step three times around, moving forward and returning backward many times according to the occasion drawn from the enemy, on one side of the bridge just as on the other, always accompanying the blows with the arm and foot, and with artifice. Some feints and other variations can be interspersed here, which serve as ornament to the lessons and to demonstrate the spirit of he who practises them.



CHAPTER XX

The Method One Must Hold to in Order to Defend Oneself with the Spadone One-on-One

The art consists in possessing all that mastery requires of the student to properly handle the spadone against another who has the same weapon. One must use the observation of the measure and tempo against the other, and even investigate the nature and quality of the enemy's play, and the defeat or victory depends for the most part on this observation. Wishing to begin combat against the other, a man must first stop in the enemy's presence, and move with daring according to his movements, backward as forward, or to the right or left flank, and advance thus one like the other, little by little. If the [enemy] throws a mandritto, parry with a mandritto and wound by riverso. If he throws a riverso, defend with a riverso and strike by mandritto, observing the same in the montante and sottomano. One continues in this way until one or the other party rests satisfied. I will not drag things out by repeating what I have already said many times before. The principal method is taught by the present figure, and many of them were omitted which were more for stubborn understanding than for training the youth.



CHAPTER XXI

The End of the Present Work

The spadone is collected by bringing it to the left hand as the following figure shows. The illustration made by a good engraver, if matched with someone who delights in such exercises, my works would have to be greatly appreciated, and I would quite often be untroubled. Here the brief lessons promised by me. Here the summary that I mentioned at the onset. I did not elaborate in the declarations in order to not have to repeat the same thing many times. I admit my insufficiency but will nevertheless serve as a goad to others more knowledgeable to find that which I did not know, and to demonstrate it with that flair of which my wit is not capable. It is difficult to please in this lazy century. Those who examine my spirit will find what they crave, and what I know of myself. A wise man is always fair.



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