THE RANSOM OF THE PEASANTS
(A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts and a Tableau)

By A. CREMONA

(Translated by MAY BUTCHER from the Maltese Original).

ACT III

The Summer of the year 1428. The sun has just set behind the cottage
of old Matti, which can still be seen among a few trees and appears
veiled with grief which through poverty and misery has fallen upon it. No
longer is the lewing of beasts to be heard in the cattle-shed. Beyond the
farm-walls all is stripped bare, and bewailes the past. Between the trees
in the distant fields, a plot sewn with a little barley is visible, nearly
trampled down for the peasant has had no heart for reaping. The cumin­
grass still waves alone but its perfume is no longer noticeable. Of the
terrace-plants all are gone except the basil which is nearly dried up with
thirst. The evening breeze does not stir a leaf but, from the threshing­
floor, there rises a kind of black dust to cover all. In the stillness only
one sound is heard – the twittering of the bird which goes alone towards
the nest-hole in the eaves and hides itself from the growing dusk.

XANDRA is coming from the field-path with an earthen-pitche in her hand.
Behind her walks PEDRO with PEPPU, the IDIOT-BOY. XANDRA stands looking
here and there beyond the others who are taking the opposite direction.

XANDRA: [beckoning]
There is nobody to be seen from here.
This morning I saw Matti and Ġanni
going from their field towards Ghajn Tuffieħa.
[XANDRA stands looking, then suddenly calls out]
Pedro, Pedro, Pedro!

[PEDRO looks back. XANDRA quickens her steps to reach him and speaks
to him in a low voice].

XANDRA: From the valley
men are coming down. I see fishermen
going to the bay of Imġarr. O look,
Pedro, Pedro, look! Who are these? –
[Pedro stops, then, without answering, seizes the boy’s hand and walks on. Peppu disengages himself and stands looking. Pedro catches hold of him roughly].

Pedro: What are you waiting for, you abortion. Gazing with that witless eye, standing asleep? — move on, or your misshapen donkey’s back will feel the blows laid on it by my stick.

Xandra: This morning, Pedro, Kozzi and Anni did I see going early towards Mellieha and they said Pietru has gone to lease his lands and farmstead at Qammieh. To be near his betrothed Pietru has taken the large field at Bingemma.

Pedro: [catches hold of Peppu by his arm and throws him to the ground]. You, bastard, I will gouge out your other eye, I will, and feed it to the hens. I will tie you by your arm to the water-wheel in the field unless you answer to your mother and me immediately.

Xandra: [drags him to his feet, pushing her face into his with a threatening look and gesture while Peppu stays gaping foolishly]. If you do not answer instantly, know that I will drink your blood tonight. Which is it to be? — Or for the last time will you listen with this ear? — [pulls him by the ear, puts it between her teeth and bites it].

Peppu: [shouts and screams]. O mother!

mother!

Xandra: I will suck your blood, that sluggish blood of yours I want tonight. Do not shout!

Peppu bursts into tears.

Xandra: [speaking to him in a low voice]. See that not a single cry issues from your mouth nor let your voice be heard or I shall kill you.

[she draws nearer stealthily, looking here and there inside the cattle-]
pen and towards the steps and the cottage. Between the panels of the door, a light is visible. XANDRA goes up and whispers to PEDRO.

The door is ajar. Take Peppu and both go quickly and crouch down among the locust-trees, for in the cottage is the maiden.

[PEDRO goes off, dragging PEPPU with him and conceals himself amid the locust trees. The cottage door is softly closed].

XANDRA: [goes up the steps on tip-toe, peeps through the chinks of the door, knocks and calls out].

Rozi Ta' Qerrieda,
Xandra has come from the landlord's house, from Don Carlos. Open to me, Rozi.

[Silence]

Open the door, Rozi, open to me, it is I, Xandra, I've come for the milk: for the Master of our lands, Don Carlos.

[ROZI comes out with a kerchief on her head and her arms bare with the sleeves tucked up].

XANDRA: And where was our Rozi? —

ROZI: I was kneading,
I am dripping wet with perspiration.

XANDRA: Your face gives evidence of that, my child. Looking at you in this evening darkness, it seems as though I see a blazing bonfire, maiden of happiness! Strong young heifer, I delight in you as you apply yourself steadily to work without ceasing and dream each day of the home which will be yours when, in a new life you shall be settled and your heart bound to your mate for ever. Tell me, Rozi, without misgiving (Don Carlos told you and Don Sidor too as they have just now repeated to me), are you of a mind to take that boy of ours who was servant to the Governor? — He has a fine heap of money laid by that boy. And the Master has agreed that he will give him a large field and a house
so that he may live in Ghajn Tuffieha.
Tell me, Roži, what more do you want than that
and I will tell you, for your own good,
you could never choose a better man.

Roži:
I have never had but one thought: to live
as my heart tells me, thrown into the hands
of God, as I am today.

Xandra:
My dear child,
may you be blessed by the Highest Heaven.
As you see I came tonight for the milk
because Pedro sent me and I expect
him now to come hurrying after me, for
he awaits the Master presently
from the Governor's house at Mdina.
[Roži takes the pitcher from her and goes down the steps].

Beloved Roži, I would not upset
the plans of a girl like you. May God
protect me ever; I would no pangs
disturb my conscience; but hark to what I say;
Yes, listen to what I say, for older
than you am I and have experienced all.
The world today is spoilt and the heart grew cold.
So it is ill a girl like you should choose
beauty without considering what follows
or link herself with a young man whose wealth
is in the hands of the Masters of this land
so miserable, which may from day to day
change hands. Besides, what about
all this trouble fallen on the peasants.
All their cattle and their land some of them
are pawning, all their savings having gone
for the ransom of this unhappy Isle.

Roži: God's will be done, for the keys of all things
on this world are His
[goes into the cattle-pen to milk].

Xandra: [coming up to the gate of the pen and continuing to speak to Roži].
All in His hands, O Rozi dear, all
for ever all men, and kingdom is He,
and for the welfare of our children, we,
from Him await the comfort and the peace.
Do you know anything, Rozi, of how
the distribution of money will be made
among the peasants? —

Rozi: [coming out with the pitcher full of milk].
I have heard nothing.
my dear Xandra, I have heard nothing ...

Xandra: You have not heard how much money was collected? —
It surprises me that you have not heard ...
how much money was collected, and how
into the hands of the Island's overlord
all that money went at once? —

Rozi: O Xandra,
I wept when I saw my bundle of things
leaving our house and on the very day
on which I was to have left my father's home,
and the following week, the flock of sheep
and the calf I had bred up given away
for the ransom, because they said to us
the beasts were better than the field to give.

Xandra: The field in the master's and his children's hands
might have remained. As I heard Pedro say
the profits from the land will be divided up
amongst the peasants who gave their wealth
towards the Ransom of this our Island.

Rozi: From the wealth that has gone, Xandra, I hope nothing
nor desire ought save that I may live
as God wills. Round my neck you see gleaming
no necklace, no golden broach on my breast
nor on my homespun skirt better to grace
my beauty, for my saddened heart this poor garb
prefers. They have only left me a single sheep,
the little shorn darling, the blind one's lamb,
and one kid, the fawn one which I nurtured
when at Hal Dwin in Sika's home. I am fond
of this kid and lamb, foe they are my friends
which have been left for my heart to cherish.

XANDRA: [in a low voice].
From our peasant's wealth, naught will be returned, and, according to Pedro, everything is in the hands of Don Carlos, and he will give a sum of money to Peppu . . .

ENZO: [gives a shout from among the trees].
Who goes there? —

PEDRO: [shouting].
Pedro! Long live Don Carlos!

ENZO: I thought you were a thief of Ėrba in hiding, and of this sword, I would have let you taste the edge, if you had not at my challenge made your voice heard instantly.

XANDRA: 'Tis Enzo, the guard of the master!

ROŽI: [in confusion].
I am going,
Xandra!

XANDRA: Wait a little child, fear nothing.

GUERRINO: [from behind the field-wall].
I told you that our Lord, Don Carlos is behind us, coming from Imdina, on his way to Bingemma. What, tell me, are you doing with this ass's head, among the locust-trees? —

ENZO and GUERRINO burst forth on to the path from among the locust-trees. After them comes out PEDRO laden with a bundle of broken branches, dragging PEPPU with him.

PEDRO: The Master's maid, Angla, asked me for firewood, saying, wood enough I have not got for cooking.

GUERRINO: To obtain firewood, Pedro, you'd better break up your worm-eaten furniture of that old woman, your wife, or burn her with that filthy tongue of hers.
Get away from that tree: your home is not here.

ENZO: [snatches the pitcher from XANDRA'S hands and looks inside the mouth].
What have you got in the pitcher?

XANDRA: Milk,
Rożi milked it just now for the supper
of our Master, for that is all he wants
at night, after dining with the Governor.

ENZO: This milk from Rożi is a lot of use
for old man Pedro's teeth! Nor does it count
with us today, woman. Wine is old man's milk!
But ask your mate whether wine does not still
taste sour, since the night that you left him
alone among the casks in that warehouse.

GUERRINO: We know that you locked Pedro your husband,
in the warehouse, when you found him shelt'ring
with blind Nozzi under the tree and we know
that since the day you quarreled all the wine
in the casks of the Master's warehouse
has diminished to a marvelous extent!

ENZO: On that night Pedro was thoroughly soused
and renewed his bridal nightly song with Xandra,
and, on the morrow, as soon as he found
himself in your arms, he opened his eyes,
and said: This wine is sour!

Rożi remains silent, her blushing face bowed down, her bewildered
eyes seeking a hiding place.

ENZO: [with a laugh].
O Rożi,
Rożi, little peasant-girl, you are still
a small fly for this spider who is spying
round about you.

GUERRINO: [looking towards PEPPU].
And this hideous creature
what does he want, always standing about
in front of us? —

XANDRA: I brought him with Pedro
for the firewood.

PEPPU twisted his lips like an animal chewing the cud, one eye gleaming without movement. At GUERRINO’s words he stays rigid with his gaze fixed on ROZI. PEDRO alarmed, with his load on his back, looking piteously at his companion XANDRA.

GUERRINO: This mis-shapen being before the Maid of Fiddien, what does he want? — Get rid of him at once, and worn your wife, Xandra, not to go near some other ass that no such monster appear again on earth.

PEDRO: I can swear to you that, with lambs alone, Xandra used to play in Dejr il-Bniet, Her farmer-father never let her go out of his sight save to serve as maid to the village priest.

ENZO: [rocks with laughter]. And they gave to you, O bull of Pic Du Midi, this heifer so beautiful and pure, for that face of sanctity and goodness wherewith you overcame the heart of kindly father and of village priest who blessed you.

PEDRO: [with a smile on his lips]. How beautiful Xandra was, ask her mother!

ENZO: Her mother used to share with her companion Kozzi the profit of the eggs and cheese which, to the household of Pellegrino they used to sell ... and she was beautiful, as an old man, servant to the Governor has told me!

PEDRO: Blood tells, as they say, and a branch grafted on a tree from some other, in its fruit reveals the origin; but this branch of a rotten stock is, I swear, a product of some bastard! off-shoot! What do you think?

XANDRA: Hold your tongue, Pedro, hold your tongue, That is better for you, withered face.
Remember that I found you in the dust, 
dying of hunger, and befriended you.
I took you from the doorstep of Vaccaro.
Tell me who your father was? — A dung collector.
Rescued by that Sicilian in the turmoil
with Peralta; he stole his wife's money
and brought here to live on our folk
and to drink the wine of Vaccaro.

PEDRO: I would
my blood might speak but once, and tell the truth
to make my name known and the progeny
of my father who, for my wife, chose you
from all the lovely women whom I knew,
who nourished me with bread and wine, Xandra,
with wine!

XANDRA: Get out or, with this pitcher I
will smash your head!
[Rushes at PEDRO and threatens to hurl the pitcher at his head].

ENZO: Clear off from here, Pedro!
The silent sanctity of this cottage,
blessed by Don Sidor is being appalled
by these your shouts and threats, you cursed pair,
Conceal your ever-vile and dirty deeds
from this bashful maiden of Fiddien,
who is about to fall down dead with shame.
[To XANDRA].
You have forgotten: that pitcher you have
is full of milk. Quick run! Go to your home,
or I will send you there with my boot.

GUERRINO: Throw this old hag down inside the dark cave
to become paralyzed in the water,
and with the red-hot iron, burn out her tongue.

PEDRO: [worked up into a feverish excitement, wants to give vent to his
feelings; he throws down the load of firewood and, emboldened by the
words of GUERRINO, drags his wife along by her hair, shouting:-]
Woman, I would like to kill you. Yes, yes.
Guerrino, burn out her tongue. I will come
with the red hot iron in my hand, help
will I give you. You ulcerated hag,
come out, go into the cave, the dark cave, 
so that the filth of your tongue may be burnt 
with the red-hot iron in my hand. 
O Guerrino, I will come to help you.

All of a sudden, a noise is heard as of the thudding of the sea.
The clatter of horses' hoofs is hastening towards them. A silence falls. 
They look at each other. Rózi raises her head and Peppu, bewildered, 
opens his mouth in a surprised laugh at the face of the girl. As they look round, they find themselves in front of Don Carlos riding with his friend Don José. The horses suddenly pull up, Pedro lets go of his wife's hair and stands looking without a word.

Don Carlos: Remove that drunkard from my sight and 
likewise, Guerrino, this loathsome female 
with her shook of tousled, unkept hair!

[Guerrino takes off his hat and bows. Enzo does likewise].

Pedro: O Master, with her tongue this woman wounds more than with a two-edged sword. And she screams, howls, fights and bites, but I am not in fault. Command, O Master, that this bitch be bound with the thick rope of your severity.

Xandra: O my gentle Master, from this tyrant free me because he flogs me and the tears of my eyes and my blood he dried up, and tears the clothes from off me. See, Master, how my body is lacerated and this bony frame as weak as cotton thread, he has torn me to pieces and, almost, has he killed me with his blows. All my hair, has he dragged out by the roots, my white hair. To cover this death's head of mine, these wisps of hair are all that he has left to me.

Don Carlos: Out of my presence with these imbeciles! 
Away with them, Guerrino, drive them off!

Xandra: O my kind Master ...

Pedro: O Master mine ...

[Enzo picks up the pitcher and drives Pedro off in front of him. Guerrino drags up Xandra roughly for she can hardly rise as she is trembling
with fear].

XANDRA: My kind Master...

PEDRO: O my Master...

DON CARLOS: On the back
of that animal the old hag and on
the back of that other animal
her companion, twelve lashes of the thong.
Lay them on until their yells die away
in their throats for ever and from their hearts
shall issue forth their spirits with their groans.

[XANDRA follows PEDRO – her hair in a tangle, her face buried in her hands. PEPPU stands watching].

DON CARLOS: And this other colt, take him away!
Drag him to the dung-heap to spend the night
with the sow until the morning comes,
and let him feed on mouldy bread and bran,
that, with that pottage, his eye may open.

GUERRINO with one hand gives PEPPU a slap on his face. His face takes on a sullen look: his eyes half-closed and rolls from side to side;
his mouth twists in a half grim, until GUERRINO seizes him and carries him off with him.

DON JOSÉ: [in an aside to his companion].
Eying the girl he stood there, that half-wit.
Though I had thought him of some beast begotten,
that colt is not devoid of human sense,

DON CARLOS: Of Platsmone, that old man, was that branch
begotten; so has Pellegrino said,
our Governor, and from every peasant
round about Imdina one hears the same.
For Xandra, when a girl, used to take
to the toothless fond old man, her sweetheart,
the choicest bunch of grapes from their orchard.
And that boy has the wisdom of the father
and, for this our Roži, a honeyed heart.
[looks at Roži who has remained standing with bent head].
Roži is pensive, her face is aflame
with love for the peasant who had come here
from the Sicilian sea to stir up trouble...
Don José: And does this maiden know what sort of tears and poverty and misery which she, with him is going to inherit together with her people, through Inguanez, who, to rid them of our benefits, into Consalvo's hands has flung their wealth? — Do you suppose this is from compassion for his brethren? — [laughs and winks at his companion].

Don Carlos: Ah, Don José! see how the tears have started from that maiden's eyes! Your harsh remarks have pierced the poor girl's heart. But a kind lord am I, in every house their friend; I who have loved those children of the soil, and when things went well, rejoiced with them, now in this grief would comfort them with kindly words of cheer, and I would say to Roži: Tell me, child, why are you so distressed? — [he stoops from his horse and speaks kindly to her, looking into the girl's face].

I have collected for you your money and I would give you cattle and the field which I have at Balluta and a wise husband; I will give you to this young boy Peppu, because, my girl, child of grief and tears, I am sorry for you.

Roži: [with her head still bowed and scarcely moving her lips] Master, Leave me to live according to God's will. Leave Peppu with his father and mother. Kind-hearted Master, do not be cruel!

Don Carlos: Thrown on the dung-heap to sleep with the sow have had Peppu tonight, for, at you, I will not let him cast a single glance until I see you smiling, till you say: 'Master, for your sake, Peppu I accept.' As for the filthy Xandra, in that she brought her son secretly, as go-between allowing him to look at your pure face and gaze upon you with that lustful eye.
I will have Xandra flogged to death tonight and Pedro with her.

ROZI: Have mercy on them!
You will have mercy on them all poor things
And you will not flog them, O Master!
[raising her eyes, she flings herself on her knees, spreading both hands in a gesture of entreaty. She braves the harsh words of DON CARLOS and relies on the kindness he is showing her].

DON CARLOS: [remains gazing at her, struck by her beseeching, pleading look. He turns and whispers to his companion].
This beseeching look! — How it ennobles her, the peasant girl, humiliating us.
This Rozi is as fascinating as Giovanna who enthralled Frederick 'The Weak',
and that other Nicola d'Acciaioli who brought to her his tribute on his knees.
[to Rozi]
O Rozi child, beautiful child, I've heard the words of compassion which have issued from your mouth and, my darling, I will grant your request. Bring me now something to drink, for I am thirsty: I would like from you a bowl of water. These horses also, water them. All that your heart desires, I promise to you.

[ROZI goes to fill a pitcher with water from the well].

DON JOSÉ: [to his companion].
This maid delights me more than Blanca, daughter of Femando, who in Barcellona gave me the red sash of victory. Had there been cause I would have given my life for her face, in that first fighting at Pentecost when I come to Aragon. This jewel is lost to you in these fields. Try and carry her away, my friend.

[ROZI offers the pitcher of water to DON CARLOS].

DON CARLOS: [in DON JOSÉ's ear].
My heart warns me that in my endeavour
to obtain her, you and I will shed our blood
before you reach the town of Aragon.
[to Roži after drinking].
I thank you, child, for having quenched my thirst,
although each drop increased my wish for you.
I have ridden far, the sun has scorched me
before I reached you. I thought of your eyes,
your smiling mouth. I stopped half-way in thought,
both my horse and I together panted.
Take hold of this pitcher! Let me see your face!

[As Roži stretches out her hand to take the pitcher, Don Carlos gently
tries to catch hold of her face. Roži colours up, bends her head and goes
away thoughtfully to fill the bucket with water for the horses].

Don José: As the sun sets, the shadow hides her face.
With its passing has also set for us
all happiness of greatness through times
which have changed. Tell me truly, from which side
are the corsairs coming? –

Don Carlos: From Pellegrino
comes the bad news of vessels drawing near
this little island. I spoke to him
and he told me that to the West of Ghardex
last night were clearly visible the ships
of the approaching corsairs. This tidings
are through the Castellan.

Don José: It seems to me
this news comes from some empty-headed ass
like Vaccaro.

Don Carlos: All these peasants and the maid’s
people, the sailor among them
are to be seen going out tonight.

While Roži approaches to water the horses, keeping at a distance from
Don Carlos, with her eyes all the time on the ground, Don José bends
down his head to the level of her face, and, smiling, attempts to caress
her by stroking her cheeks with one hand.

Don José: You do not know as yet how beautiful
you are! – Why do you blush and hide your face? –
I will take you away with me tonight,
and you will come with Don Carlos into
a great palace far from this land, a fine house
better than your father's, and this garment
will you strip off you. Silken dresses
of lovely colours have I got and, for
this neck and these fingers, necklaces
of pearls and rings worthy of a queen . . .

While Don José tries to stroke the girl's neck and to catch hold of her hand, she draws back still with her head bent and hiding her face with her right hand, until she plucks up courage and breaks free. Silent and terrified, she escapes into the upper room. The two horsemen remain watching the disappearing girl.

DON CARLOS: A startled bird is this Rozi of ours,
and small is your cunning compared to hers
if you would entice her into the snare,

DON JOSÉ: [stays wrapped in thought. Suddenly he lifts his head and looks fixedly at his companion].
For tonight this peasant-girl, like the sun,
has fled us. Take heed of what I tell you
I, the victor of Blanca, before
the sun shall set on us tomorrow,
I shall bring to you from out of that nest
the bird of your heart.

DON CARLOS bursts out laughing.

DON JOSÉ: I will wager it.
Don Carlos, your hand!

DON CARLOS offers his hand and then, still smiling, rides on with his companion towards the field-path. The approaching darkness enveloped the two riders.

KOZZI comes out from behind the wall of a narrow path above that part where the two horsemen have passed. She looks back and she looks ahead, as though investigating; then, she retraces her steps on tip-toe, passes round the bend of the path and calls out;

KOZZI: Come on out, Pietru!

PIETRU with a spade in his hand, appears, following KOZZI.

KOZZI: Nothing can be seen in the dark. The horsemen went away on this side.
PIETRU: And Rożi, where is Rożi? —

KOZZI: With Zolli and with Betti I left her reaping in the field.

PIETRU: Early this morning I saw her father Matti going out with his wife and later on I saw him lading the beast.

KOZZI: As you know, Anni had arranged with me since yesterday evening to go to Mellieha; she said to me: 'Kozz, you will be going to the broker of the farm at Qammieħ and I am coming with you to Mellieha, because the cow of Anglu of the Valley — the cow which we bartered to him for two links of land with the growing crop — has given birth to two fine calves. That cow was in calf already and ours are the calves, as we told him at the time when the barter was made.

PIETRU: At what time did you see Gawdenz? —

KOZZI: We saw him early in Mellieha on the square, before the sun to our side came round. He was with two fishermen who from Ghawdex came with news for the Night-Watch of this region, Gawdenz came into the field and never in all my life have I seen such a worried face as had your friend. At length he said to us: 'Go and find Ġanni, Pietru also; find all the people round, because I hear the sails of the corsairs are bearing down on Ghawdex.

PIETRU: In Tartarni Ġanni was seen going with Ĉikku with the load of fodder for the cattle being fattened for the Governor.
Kozzi: While we from scarcity are left to die
    amid the poverty 'neath which we groan.
The Governor thinks only of those folk
who are around him, of his entourage.
Where Zolli and Betti are, now I go,
and with them, will escort our Rozi home.

Pietru: Till Ġanni from Imdina comes, I'll wait.

Kozzi: Sidor, Matti and Anni I left
    half-way talking together
    We shall get the proper news from Ġanni.
    [glances round the farmhouse and the fields, leaves Pietru, draws
back and then says to him under her breath].
    All is buried in darkness and not a soul
    can be seen peering from the field.

Pietru stands watching Kozzi walking away until she disappears from
view. He goes up the path between the fields behind the farmhouse and
sits down to rest on a boulder behind the rubble wall which joins on to
the corner of the terrace-parapet and remains with bound head, lost in
thought.

Rozi peeps out of the door of the upper room on the terrace, inves-
tigating with a frightened look. She comes slowly down the steps, snatches
the pitcher of water, goes up again to water the basil-plant in its flower-
pot. She cuts off the dead leaves, throws them away and waters the plant.
She pauses suddenly, she has perceived Pietru, she becomes confused,
puts down the pitcher, claps her head with both hands, she cannot move,
with her left hand she seeks to open the door of the upper room so that
she may go and hide, but her face cannot turn away from Pietru's face:
be seems to hold her with his eyes so that she cannot stir. The eyes of
the two remain steady, fixed. Rozi cannot speak, the words die away on
her lips.

Rozi: Pietru ... alone, are you alone? ... how came you here? –

Pietru: Rozi, you are here all alone tonight? – ...

Rozi: Because with Zolli and with Betti, I
    have been reaping. For my mother have I
been waiting since sunset, with my father
is she returning. I left the others
in the field and I came on to water
our cattle and knead the dough.
PIETRU: How changed is your face, Rożi, as from day to night! In your eyes there shines no longer the star of love for me, Rożi, for me You used to hold me only in your heart, Rożi, only me.

ROŻI: From Mellieha my mother has but now returned, also my father will be coming with her from the field and my brother Ġanni also will soon be back from Hal Tartarni, for the hour of rest is now on and darkness has quite fallen.

PIETRU: Your voice, Rożi, your voice let me hear from your heart, don’t hide from me, do not avoid my eyes. Rożi, you well remember how often in former days I have waited for you coming home alone from the field because my wearied heart longed for you, ever questioning of how you regarded our secret love concealed from your mother, from your father Matti.

These silent lips, this veiling of your face, tell me what does it mean? –

ROŻI: Leave me, Pietru. I would be alone.

PIETRU: Alone by yourself in your mother’s home, that dream delighted your heart when once I alone occupied your thoughts. You saw me on this boulder, thoughtful, cast down.

ROŻI: Leave me, Pietru, alone. I can’t tell you what’s in my heart; leave me, Pietru leave me …

[She turns away her face, casts her eyes to the ground and attempts to go indoors].

PIETRU: You are going? – O Rożi, one word, only one word I want …
[He gets up from the boulder and affectionately goes up to the parapet. Roži's one hand is still resting on it. Pietru siezes it in both his hands].

Believe me, my whole life lies in your hands!
Save me, dear Roži, from drowning in this rough sea in which I find my life. From your lips once I heard your word, clear and sincere, come forth.

Roži: [covers her face with her other hand.]
Pietru!

Pietru: The word, Roži, the word, repeat it to me, for I fear it was a dream ...
I remember well when I chanced to see the reel on the roof betokening a maid within was waiting for a mate.
I stopped to look, my spade was in my hand.
You looked out from the window: I beheld your face and those charming eyes. Then daily you used to see me on this boulder till old Kozzi came and she, as go-between, to your mother spoke. Kozzi said to me: 'That girl loves you. It is on your account she hides herself from other eyes, Roži in the fields you do not see but, at home, she is always working on her marriage-outfit for her own home, and, ever in the coffer, laying all away with smiling lips.
Your name is ever in her happy tongue, calling you: "that darling Pietru of mine."'
Roži, I remember well for it seems but yesterday I left this land, sailing away and bearing with me you, in heart and mind, pledging you my word that on return I would claim you. You did not speak but fled indoors to your mother, sobbing out your heart.

Roži, fearful that she could be swayed by Pietru's words, covertly dries her tears, roughly drags away her hand from his clasp, covers her face with both hers, turns her back on him and stands speechless. Pietru, in bewilderment, looks all round to see whether some one may be coming, then softly jumps on to the terrace-wall and seats himself near Roži with one foot dangling.

I remember well, for but yesterday
it seems. Why so cruel, Roži, did you feel
that parting? — Why did that pure word pass your lips
and give me the kerchief as Love’s Pledge? —
Why, time and again, did you let me sing
that song in the field near Wied Ġnejna
when you saw me going to the threshing-floor? —
Once and twice I stopped to gaze upon you,
when I sung for you the lovely song:
the song of the departing sailor ...

'— At sunset, on a fallen tree-trunk seated
I saw you on the sky-line — a Vision
of the Past: you kept your gaze upon me
until the darkening colour died away
suddenly behind the hill ...

— Quiet in the twilight you remained
like a grey shadow covering the eyes
leaving my heart to live in hope ...

— I asked; “Where are your days, O wretched Youth,
the brightness of your eyes and of your face,
where has its beauty gone? — Where are they,
your lovely looks? — O the days of the past,
with my mother’s spinning wheel, oh, how
have I longed for you when ploughing in the field!

— Maid of the roof, at dawn
I used to see you often watering
the basil-plant; on the threshing-floor
have I seen you: I remember you
with gleaming spade at the well, and at eve,
coming from beneath the vine: I recall
you with that pitcher brought to quench my thirst ...
... the blackness of your eyes and in your bashful face
the joy as you bent your head giving me your hand ...
the gladness, the desire ... for in my heart
I loved you, though denied your sweet kiss.

— Dawn of my life, delight of my home,
for your good fortune, I have left my house,
and at once you have forgotten me, in you
they promised me good luck, I brought you rings,
jewels and gold, and now my heart is broken
in tears of blood I wrote to you...

- I sung for you the long song of my love,
  the news-bee came fluttering over my head
It said to me: This poisenous land for you
  is cruel; sailor, think of it no more.

- O Shadow, so you spoke, and as I left
  my home, in that last glance
you came before me and said: With love and time behind you,
sail away my lad, that's my advice to you.
Sailor, this is my word. "

At Pietru's words: 'With love and time behind you', Rożi opens the door of the upper room tiptoes inside and closes it behind her.

Pietru: This is my word.

Remains motionless with bowed head without uttering any other words...
... waiting a gentle answer. A deathly silence follows and the covering darkness gives Pietru the aspect of a man wrapped in sorrowful thought at the grave of one who had been the dearest woman in the world and had left him...

The barking of a dog can be heard from the nearest farmhouse. In the distance Kozzi and Zolli appear coming along with Betti.

Kozzi comes on ahead, she looks at Pietru in great surprise, she comes up to him and questions him. Pietru seems stunned and does not open his mouth.

Kozzi: Tell me, sailor, what are you doing here
  on the edge of the parapet alone? —
Do you still await the girl's return?
Why so lost in thought that to Kozzi you
  do not reply? — For Rożi I am still
searching. They told me that at set of sun
she to her mother's house has gone, since then
no more has she been seen. Stand up, Pietru!
Tell, o sailor, have you seen her here? —

Pietru: [raises his head and gazes at Kozzi, then he speaks in a low voice].
Why do you thus question me? — I saw her
on the horizon in the reddening sky
at sunset on these fallen walls. She stood
there for a while until her sun-tanned face
THE RANSOM OF THE PEASANTS

lost its glory in the darkening night,
and therewith was the light extinguished.

KOZZI: Let not this dream of the past, as lightning flash,
pass from your mind since, with love, for you
Anni's daughter glows.

PIETRU: You still question me,
of me, the sailor, you ask for Roži? —

KOZZI: Only from your lips can I learn this news,
for Pietru's eyes, his spirit and his heart
follow Roži everywhere she goes.

PIETRU: [points to the door of the upper room].
Within the room, extinguished is the lamp
and cruel darkness has concealed the maid.

KOZZI starts, wonders, comes down from the field-path and goes up the steps, while PIETRU gets down from the terrace, picks up his spade and sadly takes the field-path and passes out of side. KOZZI knocks at the door and calls ROŽI softly. The door half opens. Behind her ZOLLI and BETTI come quietly up the steps and together they enter the upper room.

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DUN SIDOR, MATTI and ANNI come along slowly, conversing. The priest halts at the end of the lane and points towards the west with his stick.

DUN SIDOR: They have arrived, as they said, around the isle of Ghawdex. From this side the enemy will land.

ANNI: May our Lady of Mellieha hear our prayer and drive away these our foes. She who from hunger has delivered us.

DUN SIDOR: Poor is the island today and lacking in people.

ANNI: More heavily than ever weighs misery today.

MATTI: The day has come; upon us is the day of savagery.

DUN SIDOR: I fear by now the enemy has landed
on Kemmuna. There a strong tower once
was to have been built with our money
as a defence against the enemy.
The Great King with our money, as they say,
bought slips and mercenaries and we were left
to battle with the pirates hand to hand
that, thereby, we might block for him the road
to Sicily. Nava, the Custodian
of the Castle, yesterday told me this
when I enquired of him concerning
our petition to the King to ransom
the Island by ourselves. He said also:
The King has met our wishes, since from our masters
he has freed us and has made Inguanez
surety for the ransom, and his two sons
in the Coast-Castle as hostages are kept
until the Lord Consalvo be repaid
the purchase price he, for this Island, gave.
'Congratulate', said he to me, 'your peasants
that for the island's sake they have renounced
all their possessions. But, of our poverty
in men and gold, the enemy has learned
and, as a thief, he now descens on us . . .

Matti: They have oppressed us, of strength have robbed us
and into the jaws of the enemy
have those masters cast us. Behold how now
they have deserted us and fled!

Anni: What will
befall our poor children, what? —

Dun Sidor: Let us pray
to God Almighty that he may save us
quickly from this trouble and give power
to our sons.

[he bows his head gravely, makes the sign of the cross and moves his
lips in prayer while the other two old people follows his example, —
Silence].

Three Peasants come running from a distance, panting out of breath.
They leap over the field-wall. Towards the west appears a beacon-light
on the Mellieha height and, of a sudden, it blazes up.
THE RANSOM OF THE PEASANTS

FIRST PEASANT: From every side there reached us
the barking of the dogs, but not a sound
did we hear. We saw afar the lighted beacon ...

SECOND PEASANT: We thought something must have occurred.

THIRD PEASANT: We are sleeping
on the threshing floor.

FIRST PEASANT: We started out
for Il-Balluta to arouse the people.

SECOND PEASANT: And we run to Maghtab beyond Pwales.
We heard the tocsin sounding from the church.
It was to summon the peasants.

THIRD PEASANT: Forth they poured
from every house and farm, weapons in their hands,
some with daggers, and some with cudgels.
Soon there came to us the Officer
of the Coastal Sentries: 'Hasten, brothers,
hasten to Mellieha', he said to us,
for from L-Ahrax is the foe descending'.

FIRST PEASANT: When the tocsin rang, all riding on their mules
the men appeared from Hal Mejn and Wied Qannotta.

DUN SIDOR: [stands in amazement without a word. At length he raises both
his hands to heaven].
Look down, O Lord from Heaven, King of Kings,
Look down on these unhappy sons of grief,
Look down in Thy mercy: to Thy servants
bring salvation with Thy Hand and Power,
strike with fear this great foe of soul and body.

ANNI: [terrified, goes close to MATTI still standing in thought].
Come on! We will call the children, Matti,
let us call the children. Old as we are,
we will do our duty. Naught else is left,
one comfort only — to call the children
and send them ...

MATTI shuffles along after his wife. By the time the two old people
have reached the bottom step of the flight leading to the upper room the
summons is heard from afar.

VOICE FROM AFAR: That is for us! See
how it blazes up there. They have landed.

VOICE FROM AFAR: They are upon us!

Silence. Matti and Anni stand gazing, Ganni and Cikku are observed in the distance running up at full tilt. All turn their heads; the women come out of the upper room on to the terrace.

Ganni: The enemy is here!

See the blazing beacon from Mellieha.

And from Bingemma appeared the first one, shining like a star in the darkness with its crimson trail, the colour of blood, telling of great danger. The beacon on Bingemma and the other hills call for urgent help.

Let me set off to where my comrades are.

O father, dearest mother, my dear home, the coming fearsome hour calls for us young men, lusty and of will, courageous,

Give me your blessing, for I go to join my fellows, and place upon my breast the medallion of our Blessed Lady with an olive leaf, so that if I fall, heavenward facing shall I then be found.

There 'monst the wounded will be recognized the son of the Peasant of Qerrieda when, face upwards, they shall find Ganni, dead...

[he comes out from the group of his fellow-peasant, his face red as fire; he goes up the steps into the upper room. Betti in a paroxism, calls out from the doorstep of the upper room].

Betti: O Ganni, why are you going away?

Why are you bundling up so hastily your things in your handkerchief? — Tell me whether I no more shall see you, no more hear your voice? — With my mother, let me come with you, O let me come! Without you I shall die.

Amongst those murderers Berbers you are going. I see you choose the blade wherewith to kill and the lethal blow and quiver on your arm I see you take, that you may wound, O Ganni.

Mother, mother, I will go, let me go that Ganni, by the Berbers, be not slain.
GANNI steps out on the terrace, dressed and armed with a cudgel. His waist is encircled by a broad sash from which, on one side, proceeds the haft of the dagger; sandals are on his feet laced with cord to his knees. ROZI takes from him the open bundle of things and, while wiping the tears from her eyes, folds them, lays them in order and ties the bundle up and fastens it on his back.

GANNI: [turns to BETTI].

I go, my betrothed, that I may bring joy through victory and freedom from the claws of this destroying vulture, who like a whirlwind, comes to rob us our island so well beloved. Do not weep; I will die with you in my thoughts, you will live in mine. Say with the death of your heart's beloved all the blood of the enemy was spilled. Say with the ransom of this land enslaved is your life bound up, Ġanni's precious life. And do not mourn my death. Mother, father, I beseech your blessing. [comes down the steps to embrace his mother and father].

ANJI, from her bosom pulls out a sacred amulet, fastens it round his neck and kisses him. ZOLLI, BETTI and ROZI quietly follow him down, drying their tears. ĠANNI, after parting from his mother and father, without a word comes in front of the priest, kneels down and kisses his hand.

DUN SIDOR: [sadly but with a firm voice].

Bless you, my son, go and bring us victory. May this arm so brave be blessed with strength from God.

ĠANNI rises to mingle with his comrades. All the peasants march after him. The women and others follow them in a silent absorbed gaze.

After a while they appear in the distance only like a black shadow.

ROZI has remained apart, standing at the bottom of the steps: and gazes downwards towards the valley, without moving her eyes. PIETRU appears carrying mace and girded for battle. ROZI sees him turn into the farm from under the field-wall and come up to her side. The girl's eyes shine with a great gladness on facing that brave lad going out against their lifelong enemy; trembling, she clasps her hands. Her betrothed looses the
kerchief from his neck, knots it and throws it at her feet. She picks it up, clasps it to her breast and kisses it. PIETRU plucks up courage, comes nearer and lays both his hands in hers, in the hands of the maid from whom death alone can separate his thoughts. RożI crushes them in hers and, of a sudden, lets them go. PIETRU dashes away. RożI parted from him so unexpectedly, almost faints ... a thought comes to her ... she kisses the kerchief and thrusts it into the bosom of her dress, draws forth a rosary, takes hold of the pendent cross, kneels down and says:-

To Thee, O Holy Cross, I pray, bring him back safely, Cross of our Redemption.
O Great King, bring him back safely, Holy Cross.
Victorious in Thy strength, bring him back safe and joyful to my arms!

DUN SIDOR is seen at a distance, standing in the middle of the kneeling women, looking up to heaven ... The Guards pass along the field-path with great torches flaming in their hands.

End of Act III