

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 IV

On the horizon at the foot of the hills, the morning is beginning to lighten, giving a bluish tinge to the dawn. But the splendour of the light which dispels the darkness is as yet slow in coming forth altogether from the wrappings of night. Beneath the sky, the earth with her tangled verdure of field and valley lies silent and shadowed with broken-hearted grief; it is as though she were mourning even yet for those peasants who had left her desolate and who, in other days, used to appear each day at dawn, setting forth to cultivate her, happy and contented. Amid all this poverty, beneath the weight of sorrow, Matti's cottage is seen solitary in the silence of the morning. The first rays of the sun break forth and strike upon it. Rozi and Betti appear coming down the field-path with kerchiefs on their heads, each is carrying a basket of fodder, their heads are bent earthwards and they walk slowly towards the farmhouse. Kozzi follows them, her eyes scanning the slopes of the hills. Rozi goes into the field behind the cottage, in a scared way she examines every nook and cranny, comes over to the cattle-pen to peer through the wooden gate, goes up the steps and listens at the door of the upper room. Betti stops to wait for Kozzi.

ROZI: [*comes down*]

I hear nobody: of the upper room,
the door is shut and likewise the gate
of the cattle-pen. I think Zolli's eyes
have deceived her.

BETTI: Yesterday, at sunset,
she saw two persons coming down into
the field and she said they were enemies
crouching behind the wall.

KOZZI: Zolli has eyes
like a hawk. They have not deceived her,
I tell you. If it was not the enemy,
they were our own militia-men.

BETTI: Others said
that some of the enemy were seen
coming up from Ćnejna.

KOZZI: If it were
the enemy, that is a sign of grave
danger, all hope is gone — Let us go
into the cattle-pen and give a look
to the animals.

[ROŽI and BETTI open the wooden gate and go into the pen, taking the baskets of fodder with them. KOZZI remains in the doorway].

KOZZI: [to BETTI as she enters]
Pass through the courtyard
and search every nook. Do not open, Betti,
the outside door. For the water am I
coming.

[She catches up the pitcher and goes to fill it at the well. Suddenly she lets go the rope and stops to look in the direction of the locust-tree: she runs to the door of the cattle-pen and speaks in a low voice].

 Come upstairs into the upper room
and do not show yourselves now. Call Betti!
Roži, call Betti in from the courtyard!
Under the tree are the guards of Don Carlos
lying asleep ... do not make a sound! ...

[as she shuts the gate, she looks back terrified and goes to the well to listen].

ENZO: I find this damp night air cold. This bed
of leaves and tree-roots feels to me as though
one's bones were being pierced by thorns ...

GUERRINO: That wine
we had last night was really good.

ENZO: When I closed
my eyes, with my head upon my mantle,
I felt the wine mounting up and I dream
even yet of the weeping maiden's face

and of the impassioned look of our master.

GUERRINO: That old raven Xandra went to Don Carlos to fill him up with empty tales. I tell you Rozi, her mother and father have left for Imdina.

ENZO: Better with the Spaniards of Cordova than a slave of our master.

GUERRINO: This time, my friend, the bird has escaped from the snare. Curse the black eyes of the maids of the Island and to hell with our masters! I shall not see Colubrina in Seville, unless I clip that swallow's wings tonight.

[KOZZI quickly moves away, hurriedly opens the gate of the cattle-pen, shuts it behind her and conceals herself]

GUERRINO: [*jumps over the wall and enters the courtyard of the farmhouse. ENZO appears behind him*].
I thought I heard a sound.

ENZO: It was the noise of a door, closing.

GUERRINO: It was a slam.

[*A door is heard opening within the cottage. Then complete silence*].

ENZO: Doors are being opened. Did you hear them, Guerrino? —

GUERRINO: They have come in through the door which opens on the valley road. We have been recognised.

[*flings open the gate of the cattle-pen to go in and immediately KOZZI appears on the threshold with a basket in her hand. GUERRINO and ENZO stand staring without a word*].

GUERRINO: We were just thinking of you.
Tell us, what are you about at this hour in the stillness of this cottage?

KOZZI: Anni sent me to feed the animals for her.

GUERRINO: And where is she? And old farmer Matti,

where is he and where is his daughter?
 Since yesterday our master has been making
 enquiries about these people and to look
 for them he has sent us here and to find them
 without delay, because he feared that they
 by the enemy had been carried off.
 All night, round about the fields,
 have we been on guard. Can you give us news?

KOZZI: I do not know for certain where those two
 old people with their daughter are concealed.
 This morning I saw Anni in the Valley,
 for she was on her way to me; she said:
 Kozzi dear, go to the cottage for me
 to feed the animals. I am afraid
 to do so.

GUERRINO: I do not believe that you
 are telling the truth. Tell us at once, Kozzi,
 do not prevaricate and remember
 our master wishes, from the enemy,
 to set the peasants free.

ENZO: Not a word of truth
 will you ever get from the lips of this
 devil of a hag.

GUERRINO: I do not wish to swear in vain but this time,
 I tell you, if I do not bring this bird
 into the snare, my hands will be cut off
 and with them shall I also lose my tongue.

ENZO: Out of the corner of my eye, I saw
 that old woman listening. She has not moved
 from the wooden gate of the cattle-pen.

GUERRINO: We will go in, and, every corner search.

*[The Guards go into the cattle-pen. After a little, KOZZI appears peep-
 ing from behind the wall of the path and comes towards the farmhouse;
 she listens, she closes the gate of the cattle-pen and hurries up the
 steps of the upper room. She knocks very softly at the door and calls
 through the keyhole].*

KOZZI: Rozi and Betti, come, do not delay! [*silence*]
 O Rozi and Betti, open to me,

it is I, Kozzi, I have come for you;
some people have come into the cottage.

[*listens*]

Yes, it is I, Kozzi, open the door.

[*The door is opened and BETTI appears on the terrace, trembling and terrified, she catches hold of KOZZI's hands*].

BETTI: I am terrified, I feel too weak to stir.

KOZZI: Where is she, tell me, where have you left Rozi?

BETTI: By the door of the courtyard, I left her.

KOZZI: Alone?

BETTI: Xandra was talking to her.

KOZZI: Saw you naught of the guards in the cattle-pen?

BETTI: I saw nothing.

KOZZI: I did not see Xandra here,
I think she came from the valley road.

KOZZI: My children, I would
tell you willingly without a trace of fear;
for your master I have a great respect.
Anni left her cottage in my charge, for
she and Matti to Imdina had to go.

GUERRINO: In Wied il-Ġnejna do you think
at this hour she would be?

KOZZI: I am going
to Zolli's house.

GUERRINO: Hurry up and do not
delay, Gawdenz is waiting for the girl
Rozi at the master's house: he has come
with news of her Pietru.

KOZZI: What news has he?
Gawdenz come! What did he say of Pietru
and Ġanni and about the enemy?

GUERRINO: This evening Gawdenz arrived secretly
at the house of our master Don Carlos:
he could scarcely speak, he was alone,

it seems he had escaped. The enemy had come in from Ahrax at Mellieħa and reports tell of a fierce battle there. Of Pietru and Ġanni I know nothing, Kozzi. It is said the foe's ships also have been seen in Wied il-Ġhajn.

KOZZI: I will run
to tell Zolli and find those old people.

[KOZZI moves away, stands looking back and disappears].

ENZO: The hag has vanished. Do not wait, Guerrino,
for the girl.

GUERRINO: With the tidings of Gawdenz,
has she gone. What do you think, Enzo?

ENZO: I think that Kozzi has made fools of us!

XANDRA: Leave it all to me.

GUERRINO: Only beware of that poisonous Kozzi!

XANDRA: Leave it all to me, go!

[GUERRINO and ENZO envelop themselves in their black mantles from head to waist, they pass into the field-path, glance to right and left and descend to the valley].

ROZI: Where are the guards?

XANDRA: They have gone, Rozi darling. Those Berbers
are coming, it seems, and, I am not joking.
danger will come with them.

ROZI: Where is Betti?
I see her nowhere. The door is open
of the upper room.

XANDRA: Where did you leave Betti?

ROZI: She went into the upper room, I left
Betti there.

XANDRA: Alone?

ROZI: Alone, I left Betti.
I hear no sound from her. Go and see, Xandra.

[XANDRA climbs the steps on tiptoe and looks inside the upper room. She shuts the door and comes down again].

XANDRA: She is not there?!

ROŽI: Not there?

XANDRA: Listen Rozi,
let Betti be for the present; listen
to what I have to tell you ...

ROŽI: No, I will not.
I want to see Betti and, without Betti,
I will not move from here.
Xandra, let me go and find Betti.

BETTI: As soon as she saw us through the gate-chink,
she shouted to Roži who opened to her.
Then I went up the steps to hide.

KOZZI: [*gravely*]
The guards
have been here: they came to tell us Gawdenz
has come alone from Mellieħa
with news for Roži. I think that those guards
are secretly engaged by the master.
What did Xandra say?

BETTI: I was crouching in
the upper room, terrified, alone. I
at first heard nothing of what Xandra said
but I thought Roži's voice said: 'They left us
our cottage with the animals: I came
to feed them'. Then I heard Xandra saying ...

[*Noise of doors opening and a confused talking of people inside*].

GUERRINO: Let us go out, because the enemy
approach and it is for them we came to watch
to-night.

KOZZI: The voice of Guerrino.

[*BETTI, covering her head with a kerchief, catches hold of KOZZI's hand. The two go down the steps and stealthily take flight towards the field-path. They disappear. GUERRINO and ENZO come out of the cattle-pen. XANDRA is between them, — presently ROŽI follows, very bewildered. GUERRINO grabs XANDRA by the arm and draws her aside. He whispers hurriedly to her*].

ROŽI: And what
 had he to say about the enemy?
 How did he come alone? What brought him here?

XANDRA: What brought him here? The desire to see you
 for, daily, death is present to his eyes.

ROŽI: Pietru is brave, and I tell you never,
 never does he see death before his eyes.
 Into a blazing fire without a thought
 would he fling himself, first for this Island
 and secondly for me. I know Pietru.
 In his heart Death and I are bound up with
 the thought of our ransom. I know Pietru.
 The wind that would catch the thought of his mind
 must be swifter than terrified horses
 in flight ...

XANDRA: That boy is like a lightning-flash.
 To see him is to say: 'God bless him!' His eyes
 with the light of enthusiasm shine
 and the fury in his flushed face, without
 a word from you, speaks to you and kindles
 a responsive fire. Had you seen him,
 Roži, had you seen him, you would have said:
 'Truly, in giving me this lad, Heaven
 has given me cause to rejoice!'

ROŽI: Xandra!
 But one word only will I say to him,
 only this: 'To the attack go forward
 and only think of Roži when you fall.
 For if you should die, you die with Roži
 and dead will be this heart which knows not how
 to live without you'.

XANDRA: The time is passing
 and I am afraid those guards will come back.
 Let us go, Roži my love.

ROŽI: My mother
 I left with Zolli.

XANDRA: Do not be worried.
 I am taking you to Zolli.

ROŽI: Without Betti?

XANDRA: Betti went with Kozzi. [*looks back*]

I see two peasants
coming out of the cave.

[*She seizes ROŽI's hand and leads her to the field-path. Both of them peer out over the fields on each side as they proceed, until they disappear*].

GAWDENZ and ČIKKU appear in the distance coming along, they jump over field-walls, look about cautiously and then approach the farmhouse. GAWDENZ stays at the end of the field-path while ČIKKU comes on ahead to listen at the gate of the cattle-pen, he slowly climbs the steps and knocks at the door of the upper room. He listens. Silence. He comes down the steps and calls out to GAWDENZ.

ČIKKU: I do not hear
the sound of a living creature; within
this cottage, there is not a single soul.
I would say that, with their daughter Roži,
the two old people have just this moment left.

GAWDENZ: Those were women, the two whom we first saw.

ČIKKU: Those two were women and came from the valley;
their heads were covered and their gait hurried,
as though they were avoiding being seen.

GAWDENZ: I think by this time Pietru has arrived
with the others on the Mosta Road
beyond the Bay of Bur Marrad from whence
the enemy are climbing to attack.

ČIKKU: Throbbing with apprehension is my heart
for those unhappy . . .

GAWDENZ: They are nowhere here!

ČIKKU: We shall have to go to Kozzi.

GAWDENZ: Let us take
this lane that leads to Fomm ir-Riħ, because
a while ago I saw the guards descend
into the valley close at hand and they
were spying round in all this neighbourhood.

[*They set out on the way and disappear*].

[KOZZI and BETTI come out from the path looking terrified and go towards the cottage. The girl BETTI is weeping].

KOZZI: Do not cry, child! . . . I hear no further sound of those guards. Rozi is in the upper room or in some hiding-place. Tell me where you left Rozi with Xandra.

BETTI: I left her
in the yard. Xandra and Rozi were talking
together alone.

KOZZI: No one else with them?

BETTI: No one else.

KOZZI: Nor did you hear the guards' voices
when I called to you? when I said: 'Open!
I have come to fetch you both, open the door.
I have come for you, because people
have entered the cottage!'

BETTI: Breathless with terror,
I remained there crouching in the corner.
All I wished was Xandra to avoid.
I only heard her say to Rozi: 'Where
has your mother gone? Why are you alone
here, Rozi? Come away! the enemy
are near.' And nought else did I hear her say
to Rozi, save the words 'Come on!' Then,
after a short silence, I heard confused
sounds as though, unexpectedly, people
had come upon them and, at that instant,
I heard you knocking at the door, saying:
'Open the door, it is I Kozzi!'

[KOZZI remains grave, without a word].

BETTI: To go upstairs I am afraid, to call out
I am afraid, because those murderers
are hidden somewhere hereabout, I fear.
Leave me not alone. I will come with you.
Together we will go upstairs to see
whether Rozi be not in the upper room.
Leave me not alone.

[KOZZI goes to look in the cattle-pen, peers about to right and left, goes up the steps to the upper room with BETTI clutching at her skirts; she listens at the door, knocks again and again. No answer, KOZZI, disappointed, comes down the steps and does not speak, BETTI, without a word, bursts into tears.

XANDRA approaches the farmhouse with an enquiring look. She perceives KOZZI and BETTI, strengthens her resolution and goes up to them].

XANDRA: Standing here: one grave
the other tearful, what is this I see?
And why are you until now alone here?
Do you from one moment to another
await destruction by the enemy
or that this unhappy roof upon you fall?
Go back to your homes, and your things, collect.
Warn Anni and Matti to go at once,
to flee from here. Don Carlos has proclaimed
that, on their way here, are the pirates now;
from the Coastal Commandant he learned this,
it is said, as well as from Gawdenz.
Before sunset will they be upon us.
I am going to let Pedro know and
then, to Hal-Tartami, upon the ass
will I ride off with my possessions
to my old friend's house. Betti seems tearful;
you, Kozzi, why are so serious?
Let us go, my sisters, let us go.
Come on, Kozzi, and bring Betti with you.

KOZZI: Betti will not come. Betti will not come.

XANDRA: But what is the matter with her? These tears,
what is the reason for them?

KOZZI: Because she
left her friend behind her. Can you not say
whether you have seen Rozi? Those eyes of yours
which always love to spy out everything
around this neighbourhood, tell us whether
this unhappy girl you have not seen. At dawn
this morning you were watching with the guards
over this farmhouse, for very precious
to your heart is this home of Matti's and,

from the enemy, as though it were your own,
 you wish to guard it. A little while ago
 you were seen with Roži. Tell me, Xandra,
 when did you go out with Roži and where
 have you left her?

[XANDRA stands looking as though she were astounded. DUN SIDOR is seen coming down from the field-path in conversation with GAWDENZ and ČIKKU. The Old Servant of DUN SIDOR is holding the reins of the mule laden with sacks full of articles. ZOLLI, MATTI and ANNI are walking behind them, with heads bowed].

XANDRA [looking back, sees all the people coming. Terrified and scarcely able to speak].

Kozzi my dear, I saw
 Roži alone in the yard of this cottage
 when I informed her of the advent
 of the pirates and of their ferocity;
 then I advised her to leave and go back
 to her mother, but her mind was set on
 seeing Pietru on his way to Mosta
 and, Kozzi my dear, in fear and trembling
 I accompanied her to the bottom
 of the valley on the way to your house.
 Of the rest, Kozzi, I know nothing, nothing,
 because after that Pedro came to me
 in terror and said that we must fly.
 I am going, Kozzi dear, I am going.
 Trust in God, even as do I, that He
 may free us this time from all this danger.
 Take everything with you. I am going.
 May God bring us home safely and protect us.
 We will pray, Kozz, we will pray. [*leaves hastily and disappears*].

KOZZI: Soft-tongued,
 soft-tongued is this Xandra but deceitful
 is her heart to no small degree. This devil
 of a woman asks me to trust in God.
 I trust that God may deliver Roži
 from your claws at length, O you evil soul! . . .

BETTI: [*as she looks back*]
 Down the path are coming Pietru's comrades

towards us; Ćikku, Gawdenz and Dun Sidor,
behind them, with my mother, come Anni
and Matti but I do not see Roži
with them . . .

KOZZI: Say nothing about Roži yet,
let us see what has become of her,
for those old people will die of grief
before we ever reach Imdina . . .

BETTI: My very blood is running cold, I have
no strength to talk. Believe me. I would wish
the earth might swallow me before I stand
in front of that poor father, that poor mother.
Tell me what am I to say to them?

KOZZI: Be quiet, Betti, and control your tears
as best you may. We will pray to God,
Great Father of Compassion; we will trust
in Him, my child, we will trust in Him.
He will bring us comfort at the last . . .

[BETTI *bides her face; almost bursts into bitter weeping. She restrains
her tears with an effort. GAWDENZ and ĆIKKU join them with DUN SIDOR*].

GAWDENZ: A fishing boat from Ghawdex saw the galleys
of the Berbers nearing Qawra Point
and the boat turned round upon its course,
rowing back again that the news might thus
be brought to us . . .

ĆIKKU: A Sicilian vessel,
with all sails set, came into the bay
of Wied il-Ghajn and told of five war-galleys
which had encircled it. The force of the wind
drove them towards Bur Sqallin.

GAWDENZ: The enemy
disembarked at once and in the darkness
of the night they found the open doorway
OF OUR COASTS.

DUN SIDOR: And no further news has reached us
of these Berbers? Does no one from Sicily
know anything of how these sea-robbers

have fallen upon us? has there been no word
as yet of assistance from the King?

GAWDENZ: That Kemmuna, which should have been our strength
and bulwark to defend us from the foe,
is today swarming with the enemy.

ČIKKU: How many blows have we not fearlessly
had to face up to unarmed, in our hands
nought but stones as weapons. How many foes
have we not fought hand to hand: at our feet
we threw all who came to slay; finally
their overwhelming numbers conquered us.
Men, houses, cattle, farms, the growing crops,
trees and orchards, all were burned and pillaged.
How, from Mellieħa descends the foe
and by destruction is his passage marked,
by ravished homes, by looted flocks and herds,
all who oppose his path are wounded, slain
with firearms or, by the shining steel
he carries in his hand, are menaced,
to the mountains they, by fear, are driven.
We have left our dead behind us, we come
to unite ourselves with those of Mosta
that we may block the passage of the foe.

[ANNI, MATTI and ZOLLI draw near to listen enthusiastically to the
words of ČIKKU.

DUN SIDOR, with bowed head, stands thoughtful, KOZZI and BETTI re-
main apart behind everyone. Silence falls].

DUN SIDOR: Let us go over to the capital,
my children, let us go away from here;
because the enemy is in control.
We will collect our things and the cattle.
Our lives, my children, we must think of now,
within the bastions we shall be besieged
by the enemy before tonight.

ANNI: [*tearfully*]

There, in the upper room, all is collected.
Go, Gawdenz, take them, load them on the mule.
I have not the heart to go in there myself
and see, dismantled, that unhappy room.

GAWDENZ: Ćikku is bringing out the animals
and we will escape from here at once.
In companies, from Pwales and Balluta,
the laden peasants are all coming thence . . .

MATTI: That I should be compelled to leave my home
in my closing years; how harsh this parting
is, alas, how harsh! I had desired here
to close my eyes where I had opened them,
in this dear nest in which as child I grew,
cottage of happiness and lifelong love
which, by tears, never had been stained. Ah why,
from the sheltering home in my old age, now
must I flee? . . . It seems as though the curse
of all sinners is about to fall on thee.
Faultless, dear house, faultless I fly from thee!
All thy doors have been left open to the foe
That these thy cruel lords, who maintained thee but
that, by thy wealth, their wallets might be filled
and thy sons be left behind to starve.

[ĆIKKU goes into the cattle-pen and leads out the animals, some sheep,
a calf and a mule, waters them and ties them up. He loads the mule with
full sacks which GAWDENZ hands out to him from the upper room, while
ANNI assists him with tear-filled eyes].

MATTI: [is seated on a boulder in thought; he raises his head and looks
about all round him as though he had become aware of something].
And Roži, where is Roži? —

KOZZI: Old Matti
is raving over his daughter Roži!

MATTI: [rises like a man in bewilderment and with an angry look].
Roži! I want Roži, tell me where she is,
tell me where my daughter is! Where is she?

[Everybody stands looking, without knowing how to answer].
Everyone is silent, every mouth shut
and nobody is able to answer me?

ANNI: [with a cry of fear]
Roži! . . .

MATTI: I call to Roži because you,

my friends, leave me unanswered. Tell me,
somebody tell me, where is she?

[ANNI, bewildered, runs up the steps, goes into the upper room, comes down again, goes into the cattle-pen and, beside herself with grief, stops in front of KOZZI, trembling all over. KOZZI clasps both her hands. BETTI bursts into violent weeping].

KOZZI: Rozi is lost!

END OF ACT IV