

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 II

The morning of August Fifteenth, the Feast of the Assumption. The courtyard of MATTI's farmhouse showing the door on the left which serves as an entrance. By the door is a tree, whose branches climb along the edge of the wall. Opposite the courtyard is the wall of the cottage with its door in the centre; through it, from one side as far as the eye can reach, shines the flickering light of a small lamp in front of an old picture of the Madonna above a high flower-decked chest; in the corner stand sacks filled with cattle-fodder, ploughs, spades and other agricultural implements, and sieves hang on the walls. The branches of the vine completely cover the trellis over the courtyard. Far away in the distance is heard the playing of the bag-pipes.

ANNI opens the door, following her in comes MARI, wife of the Fisherman, then comes KOZZI. They all come from outside and are dressed up in their festive clothes.

MARI: Where is Rozi, sweet Rozi, where is she?
How I long to see her; for on her lips,
I wish to place a kiss.

ANNI: To Hal Tartami
she went this morning with Baldeška to pray
to the Holy Mother. Rozi, poor girl,
is very unhappy and I am also.

KOZZI: Because the girl has been frustrated
in her love. She gets in daily terror
of our enemies. You know what hatred
towards us lies in the hearts of these our lords
who have come unlawfully to rob us
of everything which we possess.

MARI: I heard,
and my Majsi told us, of the theft of land,
and of the corn, the price of which is raised

for us poor people, of the cattle which
they have taken from us, these tyrants,
to work their own fields. My Majsi,
coming from Qawra with his catch of fish,
gave half of it last year to the landlord
when he came to Ghajn Hadid with the wife
of his master, the town lord.

ANNI: Day and night
weeps unhappy Rozi.

MARI: My brother's son,
Xmuni, asked Pietru about his marriage
with your daughter.

KOZZI: The wedding should have been
this week, my dear Mari. Dun Sidor
was to have conducted it in the small
church beyond Ġnejna; all was arranged,
but a cloud has passed over.

ANNI: Did you but know
what a black cloud has passed over us!

MARI: Mother of Mercy, tell me what has happened!

ANNI: A great trouble which none had expected.
Dun Sidor came, he said to us: 'Today
the Lord of Lords and King of Kings has come
to visit you with me. Oh my children,
let the heart oppressed have patience, never
retaliate to injury from man.
Your daughter for the present is not called
of God to separate herself from you
and to unite herself for ever with
her sailor Pietru. Probably the foe
of the blessed God would frustrate the plan,
but, what is to be, can be withheld by none.
Rely, upon my words. Only beseech
our God for the ransom of this Island
and do no harm to those who are in power.
All power on this earth from Heaven descends.

KOZZI: This morning Xandra's Peppu, the half-wit,

came from Imdina where he is servant to the Governor. He was seen coming out of the master's house with his mother, all dressed up and laughing...

MARI: Since birth, they say, but one eye has he had; his parentage none know. Xandra brought him up and Xandra is said to be his mother. He grew up in Fiddien and is now a grown up man; the owner of our farmsteads once sent him to the Governor and, since then, no more has he been seen by us.

KOZZI: He was in church and Xandra was with him, — with mouth open and one great tooth projecting from beneath his lip, always grinning, with his one eye gloating. That wicked old woman, Xandra, stood watching Rozi with the eye of a hawk from the hill in Wardija, and in the ear of the half-wit Peppu, was she speaking. My daughter was listening, and she heard Xandra say to him all at once: 'That is the maiden Rozi, the daughter of farmer Matti, whom Dun Carlos has chosen to be your bride, rich will he make you if you live with her.' — She heard her say...

ANNI: That old man Pedro, as soon as he saw that Pietru has returned from overseas, spoke to Matti also: 'I have been told your daughter finds great favour with the lord of these estates, and if you marry her to the bridegroom of his choice, a fortune in money and goods will be her dowry... Pietru the Sailor, — have I heard aright? has cast his eyes on your daughter Rozi. Because I wish you well, I tell you, Matti, do keep away at arms length from your home our master's enemy.'

KOZZI: What said Matti?

ANNI: Matti, uneasy, made no reply; he looked into the treacherous eyes of that man who is our enemy. Then Pedro said: 'I have but this to say, I have spoken as a friend; I have told you what I heard.'

MARI: And what does Rozi say, unhappy girl, the sweet maid of Fiddien?

KOZZI: Yesterday she went with Zolli to see Dun Sidor, and she said to him. 'I want my Pietru, him alone and no one else do I want. I have loved but Pietru, let me take him.' And our old priest answered her: 'My daughter, what by God Almighty has been written can by no created things be cancelled!'

ANNI: I found the girl awake in the morning and in tears, all day she weeps and laments: she will eat nothing, all night long she prays, sitting in bed earnestly gazing at the kind, gentle face of her comfort, the Mother of Sorrow. That night when came the news of our ransom, the news that we, with our money, must redeem the Land; she said to me lying in my embrace: 'All that I bought for my dowry, mother, will I give; mother, I will strip off my gold and jewellery that, if it be God's Will and for the good of my soul, I will live in poverty, will live in toil with Pietru — Pietru the Sailor, will live with the Conqueror of the Enemy.'

MARI: Would that the Holy Mother of our God might hearken to that poor child's piteous plea on this Holy Day and in her bosom, receive but one of her innocent tears. I will pray for you, Anni, I will pray that 'mid the general troubles that have come upon us all, your hearts may rest in peace in this personal trouble, Miserable

in our poverty, we have had to taste
the whip on our children's backs and bondage
of that Love that cometh from Heaven.

KOZZI: O, what cruel times have come upon us!
I tell you (for I do not remember
all that in my own time I have seen), yes,
I tell you that you will have to suffer
patiently every form of cruelty
before this Land be freed from these rulers.
Dun Sidor said to us: 'Pray, my children,
pray with intensity and patient hearts
nor raise head and angry hand in hatred's oath.
You will be ransomed.' Yesterday was said
to the peasants by Desguanez of Imdina:
'Among the peoples of the world you are
good farmers but with hearts of granite.
O race, proud for the honour of your
sacred Home; all you have, you have given
and have stripped your sons. The heart and courage
you have shown, be blessed to you! No bloodshed,
no fighting, yet have you come forth victors!

MARI: I found Majsi yesterday evening
coming from Imdina very mournful
and he said to me: 'They have asked of us
the gold and rings, the very jewellery,
my wife, which you are wearing: for they
said to me, the island was pledged in pawn
by the King of Aragon, and redeemed
it can only be by our money.
I said to them: 'Our daughter is weeping,
and she will die of grief, her heart will break.'

ANNI: Throughout Fiddien today is going forth
all we possess, our food and our lives' sweat.
At sunrise began the collection:
from our house, the Ransom Party
loaded our beasts with heavy sacks. Then said
my daughter: 'I will even sleep on a sack,
if they will but leave me Pietru, nothing more.'

From without is heard a VOICE like a cry in the desert which is carried

*away on the wind, followed by a confused humming as of a great wind in
the distance.*

A VOICE: Sent by the King from Sicily, the men
of the Ransom Party have come to us:
they have brought this news: This Island will be
freed from the Rulers and will be redeemed
for ever with thirty thousand florins,
as much as it was pawned for by the King.
For ever will the Island be redeemed.

MEN'S VOICE: And whence do you come?

WOMEN'S VOICE: Tell us!

A VOICE: O my brethren,
we come from the west of Wied il-Ghasel,
because to the villages have we been
all round Imdina for the collection,
and we are laden with money and goods
for our Ransom, O brethren, for our Ransom!

KOZZI: [*goes behind the door of the courtyard to listen and looks through
the cracks. A silence falls.*]

These are the Newsbringers, from Imdina
They came to collect our things for the Ransom,
our Island's Ransom. Anni and Mari,
let us open to them.

*ANNI looks up to heaven with tears in her eyes, and sighs, MARI looks
at her without speaking, KOZZI stands listening and on guard.*

WOMEN'S VOICE: Whence do you come?

Tell us.

A VOICE: We will tell you the truth, brethren,
We come from the west of Wied il-Ghasel,
because to the villages have we been
all round Imdina for the collection,
and we are laden with money and goods
for our Ransom, O brethren, for our Ransom!

KOZZI: Anni and Mari, let us open to them!

ANNI: There on my chest is a heavy bundle,
Rozi's wedding trousseau: the silken dress

of my child, my daughter, and her earrings
with it. Take them away. I no longer
wish to see this heartrending memory;
take them, O Kozzi, my friend, take them away!

KOZZI opens the door, Outside gather crowds of peasants with their wives laden with offers round the People of the Ransom Party. A rustling is heard. KOZZI moves away from the door and goes inside the cottage.

MATTI thoughtfully passes out from among the peasants; he stands looking and goes indoors, glancing at his wife, ANNI, who stands speechless with her gaze fixed heavenwards; he notices KOZZI coming out of the cottage looking very unhappy with her arms full of things. Old KOZZI stops without a word while MATTI snatches the bundle from her, opens it, feels each article with one hand and, with the other, seizes the rings and earrings.

MATTI: Go sweat of my brow, utterly destroyed
is our Land and all that I have sown
therein as though it had been choked by thistles.
[going up to ANNI]
Anni, my wife, get moving, don't lie still,
Tell me where she is, where is our daughter?

ANNI, still without moving, wipes away her tears, sighs deeply and remains gazing upwards.

MARI: Your husband Matti is calling you, Anni;
speak to him, dear friend.

MATTI: Anni, my wife,
speak, where is she, tell me, where is our child?

ANNI: Rozi our daughter has gone to pray
to the Holy Mother, because in the arms
of this poor mother who, into this world
accursed, has brought her, she no longer finds
true comfort for her heart. Let me gaze up,
Matti, I have not the heart to watch going,
of all the property of our daughter Rozi,
the treasures I had dearest all my life.
I do not wish to see this memory going,
going from me for ever. May it be
for the good of our Land that bread which we
from our children have withheld, leaving them

to starve! May these dear wedding-dress and gold
be blessed! Given but to our God alone
is this our honour, that hereby the heart
be strengthened against the adversaries
of our life...

MATTI, with bowed head, lets go of all he holds in his hand dropping it into the hands of KOZZI, and stands in thought. The OLD WOMAN goes to hand over the offer to the Ransom Party. A humming noise is heard from people outside the courtyard's door.

Accompanied by the girl BALDISKA, the bride ROZI enters very quietly, her face is sad and downcast, she is dressed in gay attire very much out of tune with that moment of overwhelming grief, which has come as a dead-blow in the midst of all the joy and happiness.

*ZOLLI and BETTI follow her in sorrowfully.
ZOLLI embraces KOZZI.*

KOZZI: My very heart is going
from me with these things, my children: weeping
comes upon me when I see young Rozi
and her mother of their greatest joy bereft.

ZOLLI: In this loss, mother, count our Betti too,
because from our house a complete set
of gold, a memory of my maidenhood,
has gone; it was brought through the beauty
of your daughter Zolli, given to her
by the Lord of Bur Marrad and Qlejgha.

BETTI throws herself into the arms of BALDISKA who does her best to comfort her. ROZI turns to her mother's embrace. Trembling and terrified, she looks behind, sees her belongings going away; she wants to say something, she tries to speak, but nearly bursts into tears, she looks at her silent mother with her eyes fixed heavenwards without uttering a word. ROZI controls herself, dries her tears, twists up her hair flying loosely, runs up to KOZZI, gathers up her courage and snatches from her the open handle of her possessions. The peasants and their wives come surging into the courtyard.

ROZI: Let me open my mouth and cry aloud
at last; let me release my pent-up heart:
I bid farewell and say: O my treasures,
go, all that I have for so long enwrapped

within my heart in preparation for
my greatest joy, the veiled thought of a wish
surging upwards like a sea to kiss
the heavens. O my dowry, I thank you,
sweat of my brow, for you had thought
today to leave my mother's home for ever,
decked out in colours like a butterfly
to flee from my beloved, who had waited
for this morning to see glowing on me
the robe of Love; O dowry, I thank you,
sweat of my brow, you have been my delight,
and I have found in you happy comfort
from tears, tyranny, heartbreak and weeping.
To the dear Holy Mother have I vowed,
in my pure Love have I vowed to give you,
so, Wedding Dress, I am going to kiss you,
gown of tears, of joy, O gown of my heart!
Depart! Go! But let me cover my face
that I see you not vanishing for ever...
Depart! Go to the Powerful, Mighty King:
Tell him the happenings in this enslaved Land,
tell of the Love of the peasant-girl Rozi,
tell him that Rozi wants but her Pietru,
that with him she may live and she may die
in the blessing of God.

*She rises from her knees and, very sweetly, lays her things in the hands
of the people of the Ransom Party.*

THE MEN: Make way, make way
for the Sailor, for Pietru and for Gawdenz
the Merchant, for Ćikku, for Ćanni.

THE WOMEN: They come from the City, from Imdina,
with news from our people held hostage, until
the Ransom shall be in our hands.

THE MEN: Make way,
make way for Pietru and for Ćanni!

PIETRU, ĆANNI, GAWDENZ AND ĆIKKU *push their way through the crowd
of people and enter the courtyard.*

PRIEST OF THE ASSEMBLY:
Pass through, Sons of the Enslavement, pass through!

Pass through, O conquerors of the great enemy!
Tell us what news you bring with you?

PIETRU: Exactly
what is being said, I do not know. All ask,
all pray for the ransom of this land
tortured and enslaved.

ĆANNI: [*in a sitting posture on the stool*]
They want our money
and, that he may for Ransom-money pray,
they have sent the priest to us. With their troops
from Sicily, have they threatened us. They
have admonished us thus: 'Immediately
release the Lady of our feudal Lord
and pay her damages; thousands of coins
must you disgorge this Island to redeem
from tears and misery.' And they have sent
the priest to us to beg us so to do.

MATTI: [*hangs his head like a man weighed down with years and sorrow.
Sad and trembling, in a voice choked with a paroxysm of grief he
says:*]

All, take all, my children, take everything.
Drag away with you this plough, for to their yoke
have they bound us to work like beasts.
From this earth I cannot bear to raise my head
to read the curse upon my children's brow,
nor to see these fallen walls! O People
of the Ransom, tell me, will you today
take away with you my wife, my child?
Leave me alone. A stone, leave but a stone
on which to lay my head that I may die,
and with you drag away the other stones
of this house...

ROZI: [*brokenhearted at her father's words, looks round for her mother
who is still standing gazing upwards. She goes up to her, shakes
her, leads her to her father, embraces her and then cries out in
tears.*]

Dearest mother, do not let
these dreadful words be spoken by my father
lest a curse from Heaven will come upon us.

Speak, dearest mother, for I am ashamed
to tell of the tears of my heart, because
I am ashamed to tell of the events
which have revolved round this poor Love of mine,
for which, and for this Land of ours enslaved,
my dowry have I given; I will give
even my very blood that in our souls
may be redeemed all Love that is bound up
with thoughts of God....

ANNI: [*kissing her daughter compassionately*]
My child, ever sacred,
hold this opinion.

ROZI: [*flings herself at her father's feet, but he has not the strength to raise his head; he tries to speak but his breath fails him. He sits motionless, only his black eyes moving over the faces of his wife and daughter. Tremblingly, he lays both his hands on his daughter's head and remains with his eyes fixed on her. ROZI trembling rises and, to escape from her father's gaze, throws herself into her mother's arms, sobbing and saying:*]

O dearest mother,
hide me from my father's reproachful gaze,
my father's gaze which seems to threaten me...

MATTI attempts to approach his daughter, but his strength fails him, he grows pale, wipes away the sweat, tries to move his legs but cannot do so.

ROZI: [*cries out from her mother's arms*]
Father! Father!

MATTI: [*pauses to listen*]

ROZI: Hear what I would tell you:
Today I was to have left for ever
you, my mother and my home. I loved him,
and I made a vow that in my love, I
would live with him in peace as my mother
once taught me. In all purity I lived.
Today they tell me: Forget your bridegroom,
forget your wedding, give away your things,
for this is God's Will. This, your Motherland,
lies enslaved; joyousness in not for now.
From you, our Island expects her Ransom,

the Ransom of your Love-Dream's happy offsprings.
[*She lifts her head and looks at her father, MATTI, shows his compassion while his daughter, on her knees, clutches him by the hand.*]

So, father, we will bless these our treasures,
given to ransom the lives of ourselves
and of our children.

MATTI: Both they and you, child,
will be blest. Leave me alone, my daughter,
my children's courage I no more can bear
to see. Go away, and in this cottage
where I was born to grief, where I have brought
you up — a woman with a heart as strong
as the locust-tree, let me break my heart.
Ah, how time my health has taken from me!
How it has robbed me of my strength, so that
not even the courage remains to me
tearless to watch you from the ornaments
of your maidenhood being torn away,
and having to reject the happy dream
which glorified your face! Go, my child, go!
Leave me to die in this cottage before
I see its stones demolished by the foe!
And some time you will tell your children whom I
shall never see, how it was all for them
we gave our wealth, our treasures and our blood.

[*too weak to walk, he stretches out his legs, tries to draw back to embrace his daughter, but strength fails him. ANNI raises her daughter from the ground.*]

ROZI: Father! Father!

ĠANNI: [*remains seated, his eyes fixed on the ground*]

MATTI: [*enters the cottage, Silence. Soon after he is heard calling*]

O Ġanni, where are you?
I want you, Ġanni. Listen! Shut the door!
O Ġanni, shut the door for me, shut it!
The voice of the people sent by the King —
I can still hear it sounding in my ears...

[*Silence*]

ĠANNI: [*as though roused from sleep, rubs his eyes. He only hears his*

sister's wailing. He listens unconsciously.]

MATTI: I heard them, I heard them quite distinctly.
Get up! Go and see what they really want.
Do not let that shout echo in my ears!

ĠANNI: [*unfastens from his neck a silver necklace with a sacred medalion and removes from his finger a gold ring letting all fall to the ground as he says to the People of the Ransom Party:*]
See what I have left on the ground for you,
my brethren, and peace be with you!

The People of the Assembly enter and the Priest gathers up everything.

PRIEST OF THE ASSEMBLY: May strength
be given you from Heaven for these gifts!

ĠANNI *remains standing with bowed head. The People scatter and disappear with these words:*

FIRST PEASANT: Ġanni of Qerrieda, the brother
of Rozi, arose at his father's call.

SECOND PEASANT: The heart his mother gave him has been stirred.

THIRD PEASANT: The old man has gone into his cottage.

FOURTH PEASANT: His child, in his mother's arms, left to lament.

FIFTH PEASANT: All that she had, for the Ransom, she gave.

SIXTH PEASANT: She is Ġanni's sister; also bride to Pietru.

SEVENTH PEASANT: Ġanni, they say, would wed Zolli's daughter.

EIGHT PEASANT: Evil times have come on all the betrothed.

In the distance the shouting of the COLLECTOR continues to be heard.

A VOICE: We come from the west of Wied il-Ghasel,
because to the villages have we been
all round Imdina for the collection,
and we are laden with money and goods
for our Ransom, my brethren, for our Ransom!

.....

ĠANNI: [*remains until the shouting dies away altogether. At length, with head still bowed, he walks towards his father's cottage. His*

mother follows him with her gaze. ZOLLI goes to embrace and kiss ROZI, while BETTI tremblingly follows ĠANNI and in a piteous voice calls out:]

BETTI: Ġanni, O Ġanni behold!

[*ĠANNI steps on the threshold of the door, looks round and disappears. BETTI throws herself weeping into KOZZI's arms. The door closes.*]

KOZZI: Do not doubt,
my child, your Ġanni, for he still loves you.

ZOLLI: [*to ROZI*] Tell me what ails you, child. Be comforted!
Gawdenz is here, and Ġikku, and Pietru
is with them, all of them are with you here.

MARI: Poor child, to have to behold such a sight
in the hour of her golden happiness.

ZOLLI: Be comforted, O bride, be not afraid,
the blessed day, but now awaited by
your heart, will yet arrive. Pietru's friends brought
today their lovely sashes of the colours
of Malta's roses. Betti, my daughter,
has brought the guests a basket for the cake.
Laden with nuts and with a flask of wine
my husband's sister is joyfully coming
from the Lord of Dejr il-Bniet, because
she has been told that as a bridal gift
this noble lord, in kindness of his heart,
proposed to give to these our two betrothed
a silver ring, a bridal loom-made outfit,
a cask of wine and a sum of money.

GAWDENZ: [*to ĠIKKU*] At that star-like face shining in the dew
and gloom of night, Pietru silently
gazes and over gazes.

ĠIKKU: Pietru, lost in thought,
seeks in that sweet and smiling mouth
a memory of the dear and sacred day
of the approaching wedding, the holy union
coming nearer every day...

PIETRU *still remains standing absorbed in thought with his gaze fixed*

on the face of his beloved ROZI]

ZOLLI: [*uninterruptedly, she seeks to console the Damsel and her mother*]

Silver scissors

have I brought you that were given
to my mother on her wedding day
by the rich mistress,
Lady Sibilla, sister of the wife
of the Town's Governor Pellegrino.
These scissors have I brought today
for the bridal procession when the guests will snip
your skirts and hem them round with shells of snails.
Look, Rozi, dear maiden, look at me,
look at these faces, full of love for you
amid the greatest grief that ever pierces
the hearts of the peasants.

[*Silence*]

ROZI: [*disengages herself from her mother's arms and, with a deep breath, opens her mouth*]

I thank God

that all has passed from my mind, like a dream,
all has vanished from before my eyes;
each joy hidden within my heart awaiting
in the Hope which had hoped in vain to joy
in my life's happiest hour, as you had wished.
In this cottage leave me alone and quiet:
go for the ransom of this Land, because
gruesome night is drawing on. I desire
to stay with my father today, because
our enemy wants to have not only
our possessions but he wants Rozi too,
the Maid of Fiddien he seeks to steal
from the house of her father and mother;
thus we will beseech the Holy Mother
of her mercy, from the great enemy
of the soul, to defend us. Till sunrise
wait with your children when the joyful news
will come in the morning and you and they
shall say: 'Into our houses came the thief
to rob us of all but not to Rozi,
for Rozi is ours.'

ROZI embraces her mother, kisses her on the brow, raises her right hand, puts it round her neck and walks with her towards the cottage. Before crossing the threshold, she casts a fleeting glance at PIETRU. He makes a movement to follow her. She lays her forefinger on her mouth and makes a gesture to keep back. Her mother knocks at the door. GANNI opens it and appears in the doorway with his head bent.

BETTI: Ganni, O Ganni behold!

KOZZI: Do not fear, my child, for Ganni, for Ganni
still loves you.

END OF ACT II