

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 V

The Bay of Bur Marrad. At the mouth beside the edge of the tongue of black rock is seen half of the stern of a vessel with sails furled as though waiting for someone to depart secretly. The silence of that strip of rock at that lonely hour of night, the moon as yet not having risen, is sufficient to arouse suspicion of flight. The old house, furnished for a summer resort by the Lord Don Carlos, is seen on the right-hand side at the top of the rock which conceals the prow of the vessel; it stands there, encircled by thick walls to withstand the fury of wind and wave. The walls are battlemented and the indentations resemble bared teeth. Beneath, some barred windows show here and there. At a height of ten feet from the rock, whence rises a section of the wall, there is an adequate serving as windows, about two feet high, which is also barred. A shaft of light flickers from it. On the side of the bay, high up on the slope, can be seen in the darkness trees and fields.

GUERRINO comes out from behind the rock, wrapped from head to waist in a black mantle; old PEDRO climbs up after him, a bunch of keys in one hand and a light in the other.

GUERRINO: Take the light to the edge of the rocks and see whether there is anybody on the beach.

PEDRO: [*goes to the edge of the rock and holding the light above his head, peers about. Whispers to GUERRINO*]:
Neither at the rock's edge nor on the beach
can anything be seen and the only sound
I hear is that of the gurgling waves,
lapping up into the cave.

GUERRINO: Who is on watch
in the vessel?

PEDRO: Two sailors are lying
at the bottom of the rowing-boat.

GUERRINO: I think
the enemy are still engaged round about
Imdina. It is now two days since
their galleys left the regions of this Bay.

PEDRO: Xandra told me that they are still engaged
and those peasants besieged within the ramparts
are suffering hunger. No one would have dreamed
men and women had the courage to withstand.

GUERRINO: Where is Xandra?

PEDRO: She has gone to Bur Marrad
from here, to learn from Mari', Majsi's wife,
whether the enemy has sailed away
with the galleys and to get news of those
who remained here hidden in the caves,
the peasants of this neighbourhood.

GUERRINO: Have we
any peasants round Qawra or Pwales?
Did she say? Some who are concealed and watching us?

PEDRO: I cannot tell you this for certain but,
from what Xandra says, no one is hidden here.
The advent of the enemy in this part
induced all those who could not take away
their belongings, to go with their companions
and take refuge within the bastions.
I do not think a soul is here, except
Don Carlos' retinue of people.
Xandra has much sense, she is a good spy
and, like a ferret, she can smell things out.
Without boasting, my dear Guerrino,
and I am telling you the truth, this time
your master Don Carlos with all his guard
would have been deceived, without my mistress
Xandra.

GUERRINO: [*unsheathing his dagger*]
Trim better that tongue of yours or else
this dagger, which in these experienced hands

- has never missed its mark, your breast will taste.
Remember that our master has never
caught rabbits with a treacherous ferret like
your mistress Xandra.

[PEDRO moves away alarmed].

GUERRINO: Come here, answer me!

PEDRO: First I wish to see that dagger returned
to its sheath, for I fear its blade, Guerrino,
like the teeth of the Berber dogs; it makes me
shiver. Let me go unscathed to Huesca
that, whole as she left me, old Susanna
may welcome me back again to her arms.

GUERRINO: Come here and answer me properly.

PEDRO: Oh Guerrino, put away that blade!

GUERRINO: Come here or with this blade will I kill you!

PEDRO: I know you have butchered and massacred
people with Guapos, I know you as murderer
with Colubrina, your mistress with whom
you lived in gaming-taverns, and by the sword
in Saragossa where, hidden in the woods,
you terrified the peasantry, and with
Don Carlos who told me that without you
he could not move a step ...

GUERRINO: [*seizes him by the throat and drags him to the ground*]
You toothless dog,
with these my fingers will I break your neck
and you may weep your last in the bosom
of your mistress, the woman whom you left
with filthy Colmullido, your daughter's
murderer, I will send you ...

PEDRO: Help! Help!
Better your dagger in my throat, Guerrino,
Than those fingers!...

GUERRINO: I will cut out the livers
of both you and Xandra before I hack
to pieces the bodies of those peasants

hidden in these caves, their blood will I drink
with yours and Xandra's ...

[Enter DON CARLOS and his friend DON JOSÉ. PEDRO, with bowed head,
remains on his knees with outspread hands. GUERRINO instantly resumes
his former position and makes a bow].

DON CARLOS: What is that old fool
doing with hands outspread towards Heaven, as though
he kneels in prayer on pilgrimage to Mecca?
Remove this mangy cur from my feet, Guerrino,
remove him from here.

PEDRO: O master, have mercy!
leave me in our country that I, in peace,
may ever praise you, O my master. Know
that, after my wife, after lovely women,
after the wine of Spain, O my master,
it is you I love!

DON CARLOS: Get out of my sight,
you and your mistress Xandra! That vampire
Xandra who, from you, has sucked your blood
and all the courage from your soul; call her
to delay no longer here: speak to her
in my name. Tell her to go bear company
with the peasant-girl, the unhappy maid
from Fiddien, and with her spend the night.
She must persuade her from the ground to rise,
where she has cast herself. Tell her to go
and encourage her.

[PEDRO, without answering, bows and goes off].

DON CARLOS: [*to Guerrino*]
From Sicily, news
has been brought us by a sailor that the seas
all around are open now. Not a sail
appears towards Barbary as far as eye
can see, for their entire fleet is gathered here.
Tell me, Guerrino, from Kemmuna, when
do you expect that Enzo will arrive?

GUERRINO: This morning early Enzo left and, with him,
four Sicilian sailors. They are on guard

round Ghawdex, keeping watch on coast and bays.
They should be on their way back even now:
they will be here tonight, from what he said.

DON CARLOS: We will set sail at midnight. You with us;
go now and summon from the rocky heights
the scattered guards. What news of those besieged
within the ramparts of Imdina?

GUERRINO: Pedro told me he had heard through Xandra
that a fierce battle had those people fought
before the foe could, in Imdina,
shut them up. The enemy descended
to the shore upon the island's western coast
and, thousands, from their galleys disembarked.
Then, from the villages, they chased away
the peasants, emptied the houses, looting
their contents: destroyed the trees, demolished
every stone left standing. Those who remained
bravely met the fire of the foe,
fighting to the last upon the bastions
while, from hacked bodies, like a torrent flowed
the blood; and then, to mock at those shut up
within the city-walls, the enemy
sent them cart-loads of bread as, with hunger,
they did not wish to kill them.

DON CARLOS: I believe
that this time they are conquered by the strength
of the Berbers: in the days yet to come,
they will bewail Consalvo's tyranny.
Poor souls, the famine of the former days
made them crawl upon the earth for bread like swine:
now they must savour bread of the Berbers
which, today, in their brothers' blood is soaked.

DON JOSÉ: Poor wretches, what else would you have them do –
choose to die perhaps, within the city walls?
Mancada's hands they licked for mouldy bread.
Eating the weeds which grew among the fields!
Starving within the walls, how many went
with heads bowed down to gather up the loaves?

GUERRINO: 'Tis said that they returned the bread and, with it
for the enemy they sent sheeps' cheeses,
mixed with milk from their women's breasts to show
that, if die they must, they would all prefer
to starve but their enemies' savagery
never should their resolution break!

DON JOSÉ: [*with a bitter mocking smile*]
Blessed be those breasts that gave them suck
blessed be those breasts so pure and full!
Cursed be the blood, the blood that mixed
with ours that it might not die of shame
of its inheritance of misery!...

[*To DON CARLOS who is lost in thought*].

Do not disturb yourself at all, Don Carlos,
They have denied your blood, those peasants
begotten by your Sicilian forbears
who, with Loria, powerful at sea,
in Imdina won the Maltese hearts
and dwelt with them. Behold how now they banish you,
these slaves of your proud blood; and the Berbers' bread
from their mouths they spew, although they be
to the last extremity reduced.
Tell me, Don Carlos, where is the mother
who would deny her babe her breast, so that
its rightful food she elsewhere may dispose.
I have never seen in any woman
courage such as this displayed by those who,
poor souls, crawl on the ground for bread like swine!

[*DON CARLOS moves forward thoughtfully. DON JOSÉ follows him laughing, while GUERRINO catches up the light and goes with them to show them the path.*

From the edge of a rock overlooking the sea, immediately above the deck of the vessel, peeps forth the tousled head of GANNI with his sleeves rolled up and his shirt open, exposing his chest. He looks about].

GANNI: The nest of that hawk, the peasants' bitter foe,
is here upon this rock and this vessel
testifies that by these wings its master
will be borne away ...

GAWDENZ: [*from below the rock*]
 On the rock I heard
 a voice. Is anybody there?

ĠANNI: I see
 the moving light of those people who
 were talking here and, into the darkness
 of the beach, I see their shadows walking,
 passing into the blackness dividing
 land from sea . . .

GAWDENZ: Ġanni, see whether anyone
 is in the boat.

[ĠANNI *climbs the rock, goes toward the vessel, disappears and then, throwing himself down full length, crawls forward again to hang his head over the edge of the rock*].

ĠANNI: Yes, in the boat there are
 some men asleep.

GAWDENZ: We are coming up,
 we are coming up!

[ĠANNI *stands up and from the top of the rock assists his comrades to climb up, each in turn*].

GAWDENZ: Don Carlos, the tyrannous kidnapper
 of the peasant-girl, has, they say, come to hide
 upon this promontory of rock.

ĠIKKU: Fearful
 of the pirates, he intends to escape
 tonight.

GAWDENZ: Of this rumour of Don Carlos' flight,
 Kozzi is well-informed. And we await
 Kozzi.

ĠANNI: Kozzi is remaining hidden
 in the Qawra cave with that other one,
 Mari', the fisherman's wife.

ĠIKKU: Old Xmun
 of Wardija said to us: 'In the Bay
 of Ghajn Rasul where stands the rock from which
 the spring of pure fresh water ever flows,

Kozzi is waiting for you and, with her,
 is waiting Mari', the wife of Majsji
 the fisherman. Try to go down to them
 when darkness falls, because the hiding-place
 has been at last discovered where Rozi
 is imprisoned.

GAWDENZ: Look!

[GAWDENZ *points. The other two peer about in silence*].

Look over there!
 In the fields, among the trees there flickers
 a tiny light . . .

ĠANNI: The shadows of a man
 and woman are coming towards this house.

ĠIKKU: They look like some of the master's people.

GAWDENZ: Let us move back into the field and hide
 under that shed: we shall hear what they say.
 In those last hours of the cruel lord,
 some sound must be heard of the stolen girl
 from within the walls or rocky cave,
 and, with her voice, our ransom once for all
 will be achieved.

ĠIKKU: Where is Pietru?

GAWDENZ: As yet
 he has not appeared. Together with old
 Matti, he is searching every place.

[*he looks at ĠANNI who stands in thought*].

Of what are you thinking, Ġanni?

ĠANNI: Kozzi.
 I want to see Kozzi. In Ghajn Rasul Bay,
 we have left the old woman still waiting . . .

GAWDENZ: We will shelter behind the shed. Listen,
 Ġanni, to my words. After seeing Kozzi,
 we will take the road leading to the Bay
 and, before the moon rises, we are there.

ĠANNI: Nought will induce me to enter Imdina.

- Leave me here to die. Alone, without her,
Without Rozi, I will not come.

ČIKKU: [*who had moved away, comes running back hastily and says in a low voice*].

I heard
the voices of Pedro and of Xandra
in the darkness. Behind them walking slowly
coming in this direction, I can see
two women.

[*The peasants start off, pass across the rock, take the road and disappear behind the field-walls*].

PEDRO: [*his voice in the distance*]
I saw you with two women
talking in the middle of the road
leading to the Bay.

XANDRA: They were going down
to the Bay.

PEDRO: Tell me who they were.
Your son, whom I had left alone with Rozi,
embracing her upon the ground where she
lay prostrate and asleep ...

XANDRA: [*screams aloud beside herself and moves to hurl the stone at PEDRO's head. He goes forward and catches hold of her two hands; with a great shudder, he takes the stone from her but the old hag, with the fury of a beast, seizes between her teeth the hands with which he has grabbed her. He lets go of her and lets the stone fall, while the woman escapes from him and, with hair flying, rushes to the edge of the rock to peer down into the depths of the sea, yelling with all her might*].

O cruel men!
May Heaven's curse fall on you, on your children,
on that blood which yet will be begotten
by the most cruel brute upon the earth.
Would I were the wave which engulfed my son
that I might swallow down each one of you,
enemies of the peasants; may the Hand
of Hell seize you by the hair of your heads
and bury you in the bottomless pit,
there to groan in everlasting anguish

till the flesh of your bodies be, piecemeal,
torn from you. Would I were the wave to spring
at you and lacerate your sails, before
you touch the land and reach the nest you seek;
at the bottom of the sea you would pray
for the death which never should arrive
to free you from her worst and fiercest pains.
Go, O curse of ours! ...

[*PEDRO goes to seize XANDRA by her one hand, then, by her hair, he drags her under the rock from the path which leads to the fields behind the house*].

XANDRA: [*screaming at the top of her voice*]
At the bottom
of the sea where you threw my guiltless son,
my boy, where have you thrown him? O tyrant,
let me find him; tell me where you killed him!

[*XANDRA's voice is still heard dying away in the distance and in the stillness of the night. It chokes in a groan of great pain*].

.....
.....
[*The moon begins to rise and her quiet silver light spreads itself over rock and sea*.

From the side of the trees and fields two terrified women can be seen approaching who are evidently of importance; KOZZI, one of them, leads the way; she comes out on to the rock, looks about and investigates the vicinity of the house which stands in the full light of the moon. With her right hand, she beckons to her companion MARI, wife of MAJSI, who has stayed behind, seated on a rock near the gate of a field].

KOZZI: Xandra saw our peasants climbing up from Qawra.
She saw them coming early from the top
of the rock in this vicinity.

MARI: Where has Xandra gone? In my ears still rings
that shriek of hers! ...

KOZZI: That tyrant Pedro wants
to kill her ... Xmun, her brother-in-law,
the old man of Wardija who, hidden
in the cave in his field in Wied il-Ghasel,

met with some peasants from this side of Targa who had been trudging day and night in terror, in flight from the enemy following a savage battle with a number of them.

MARI: Those Berbers, do they still surround Imdina?

KOZZI: Since this morning from within the bastions some have issued forth and, of the miracle, I heard them tell which, through our people's prayers, has been wrought by the Merciful Father of us Christians; an astounding miracle which, without bloodshed, left them the victors, because the enemy with fire and steel had almost overthrown the battlements of the city when, blazing above them, a brilliance of fire appeared which cleft the doors of heaven and our Saint Paul, clothed in red, appeared on a white horse with the Conqueror George, each one brandishing a silver sword, quivering they appeared until, in mortal terror, the enemy flung themselves on the ground, scattered and fled embarked upon their galleys.

MARI: Be ever blest
the holy pity of our Father Paul,
of Saint George and the miracle of their
holiness and CHRIST who has redeemed us.
We will go down carefully, we will go down
so that we may show where is imprisoned
unhappy Rozi.

KOZZI: [*points to the house on the rock*]
This is the cottage
of Don Carlos and always has been, it is said.

[*The two of them go down very slowly, looking all round them in great fear.*]

MARI: Yesterday, at this hour,
with Xandra I came here and, thence, we heard
the weeping and wailing of that maiden,
and the voice of Don Carlos most harshly

sounding forth. O with what bitter anguish
was my heart wrung when I heard that piteous cry
beseeching help, and help I could not give! . . .

KOZZI: It is rumoured that he will sail tonight.

MARI: He is leaving with all his people and
our Rozi with them.

KOZZI: Where are those peasants?
Who knows where they are? This unhappy girl
will disappear and, by them, be carried off.
And nobody has come to give her aid.
Our poor Rozi!

[*Far away in the distance singing can be heard approaching. The words of the song are:*]

O the days of the past
with my mother's spinning-wheel, ah, how I
have longed for you when ploughing in the field
or watering! Maid of the Roof, at dawn,
I used to observe you giving water
to the basil-plant.

[*KOZZI and MATTI, struck by this voice, stand listening until the voice stops.*]

KOZZI: Sweetly re-echoed
the peasant's song across the rock: how clearly
in the silence is it heard.

MARI: All the time
it is coming nearer, it would seem.

KOZZI: Let us come out of this ditch and climb up.
The guards will notice us here and, for us,
that will be bad . . .

[*The two women move off and take the path leading to the fields. The song is heard again in a louder voice:*]

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 courage of this peasant heart I may recall and the destruction of your power! . . .

[As PIETRU rises from kneeling on the sailors he has killed, shouts and whistling can be heard].

A VOICE: O Guerrino, summon all the guards,
for the peasants are upon us!

ANOTHER VOICE: And arouse
the sailors!

A VOICE: O Master, Don Carlos,
quick, open fire on them from the roof!

A VOICE CLOSE AT HAND: They have slain the sailors and Enzo also.

PEDRO'S VOICE: [in the distance]
Xandra!

XANDRA'S VOICE: Stay, you dog, your hour has arrived at last.
Let me go, for I am going to kill you . . .

PEDRO'S VOICE: You devil, tell me, where are you going?

[The rifles flash and crackle one after the other from the roof and the loopholes in the walls. The sailors on board the vessel come forth with cutlasses in their hands. The battle is joined between them and the peasants. GANNI with armfuls of thyme and hay sets fire to the vessel. Amid the smoke from the firing on the roof and from the flames of the blazing vessel which is a deep-red conflagration, DON CARLOS bursts forth from behind the battlements, wounded in the head and shouting:]

DON CARLOS: Burn that girl!

[He drops to the rocks with a thud and does not move again while GANNI advances to seize his companion DON JOSÉ, who comes out to give assistance to DON CARLOS.

GANNI is struck by a burst of firing from the roof and falls dead. PIETRU cuts down DON JOSÉ with his cutlass and kills him. The peasants surge forward into the house from the back. The firing ceases.

PEDRO comes out terror-stricken. XANDRA rushes after him, clutches him by the throat, drags him towards the brink of the rock and throws him into the sea. She snatches up a large stone, hurls it at him and shouts at the top of her voice:]

Go, you murderer, and find that poor boy

whom you killed by casting him to the bottom of the sea! Go, you murderer, and find that poor son of the woman whose family you sullied; destroying the happiness of her soul.

[she turns round and faces the fields]

I am that Xandra who,
of Pedro's lust, was the filthy slave!
I have killed Pedro, my sinful partner.
Kill me, my brethren, kill me that I may not
stand before you guilty, my hands spattered
with the blood of so many of your sons!

[PIETRU comes out of a cleft in the rock, bearing the girl ROZI in his arms. Her face is pallid, her eyes are closed, a multicoloured handkerchief is round her head and she wears a long dress down to her feet].

A PEASANT'S VOICE: O you evil men, this blaze will roast you
finely and the stones of this house will fall
and bury you!

[In the distance KOZZI and MARI can be seen thrown to the ground; with their hands clasped together they gaze up to the sky, while far-off in the distance may be heard echoing through the air sung unanimously by the PEASANTS the Hymn to Mary, the Queen O Mercy].

Hail to thee, Queen,
Mother of Mercy, Life, Sweetness,
Our Hope,
Hail to thee, we cry!

TABLEAU

[Under the bastions before the Gate of Imdina. Shortly after the flight of the Berbers. Blood still trickles down from the walls which, here and there, are breached and fallen. Among the stones and dust the enemy's dead are seen on the earth. PIETRU arrives under the bastions on a white mare supporting in front of him the maiden ROZI. He dismounts from the animal, flings himself on his knees and, with the girl in his arms, he calls up with the full strength of his lungs:]

Open the gate, open the gate, Peasants!
Your comrade is here, The Conqueror of the Foe:
He brings the Pledge of your Ransom, Peasants!