

## 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 Ġnejna.

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.

*[ROZI 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!  
Rozi, 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 peeping 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 Melliġha  
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-Ġhaja.

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*].

GUERRINO: Take her  
down into the valley. Tell her Pietru  
is waiting for her there and that Gawdenz,  
with news of the Militia, has escaped  
to the master's house.

XANDRA: Betti has gone.

ROŽI: Gone?!

XANDRA: Yes, that girl has gone,  
do not hope to find her; she fled, I think,  
when the guards came in.

ROŽI: I want to get to her,  
I want to get to her because I am alone  
and the road makes me shudder.

XANDRA: Do not be  
afraid, Roži, I am coming with you.  
But, first of all, listen to what I say.  
Now that those guards have gone I can explain  
everything to you. Do not leave Pietru  
waiting for you down there in the valley.  
He asked me to come and let you know, so  
I brought you the tidings immediately.  
Coming from Pwales, he arrived in these parts;  
all night had he walked with a lamp in his hand  
and, from Aħrax, came running to see you  
before returning to rejoin the fight  
ere his comrades from Naxxar assemble  
on the Mosta Road to await the foe  
on their way up to attack Imdina.

ROŽI: [*looking at her in bewilderment*]  
You saw Pietru and he spoke to you?  
You saw him? saw Pietru? Xandra, how was that?

XANDRA: I am telling you the absolute facts.  
Roži, believe me. As I was going down  
into the valley, I noticed Pietru  
early in the morning coming up  
in the direction of this cottage.  
I said to him: 'Do not go there, Pietru;  
those guards are spying round this whole district;  
hide in the cave; to Roži am I going  
now and will tell her about you'.

- 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 ĆIKKU 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 ĆIKKU 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.
- ĆIKKU: 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.
- ĆIKKU: 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.
- ĆIKKU: Throbbing with apprehension is my heart  
for those unhappy ...
- GAWDENZ: They are nowhere here!
- ĆIKKU: 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.  
Wam 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 Rozi. Tell me, Xandra, when did you go out with Rozi 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  
Rozi 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 Rozi  
from your claws at length, O you evil soul! . . .

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

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

KOZZI: Say nothing about Rozi 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 hides her face; almost bursts into bitter weeping. She restrains her tears with an effort. GAWDENZ and ČIKKU 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 . . .

ČIKKU: 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 remain 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: Čikku 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.

[ČIKKU 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 Rozi, where is Rozi? —

KOZZI: Old Matti  
is raving over his daughter Rozi!

MATTI: [rises like a man in bewilderment and with an angry look].  
Rozi! I want Rozi, 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]  
Rozi! . . .

MATTI: I call to Rozi 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

THE BLOUSE

Just the one blouse I made. I'm no good really:  
I'm all thumbs, the needle's much too short  
and the thread gets grey and tangled,  
I don't know why.

The seams are different sizes,  
the sections different lengths, untidy,  
I don't know why.  
Still, it looks pretty enough, from a distance.

It's sleeping now, its body blue and crumpled.  
Of course it's clean, — it's been well washed.  
It looks very pretty, at least it'll do  
for God:

*He* looks at things from a very great distance.

(From the Finnish of Aila Meriluoto:  
included in *Pabat unet*, 1958.)

TRACK

Two o'clock at night: moonlight. The train has stopped  
way out in the plain. Far off, points of light in a town,  
Shimmering cold on the horizon.

Like someone fallen so deep adream  
he can never remember where he's been  
when he returns to his room.

Or like someone fallen so very ill  
That all his days become shimmering points, a cluster,  
cold and faint on the horizon.

Two o'clock: bright moonlight, few stars.

(From the Swedish of Tomas Tranströmer:  
included in *Hemligheter på vägen*, 1958.)

PHILIP RILEY