

VERDI

STIFFELIO

English Setting by Donald Pippin

Cast of Characters

STIFFELIO, a Protestant minister

LINA, his wife

STANKAR, her father, a retired colonel

RAFFAELE, handsome young nobleman

JORG, an elderly clergyman

FEDERICO, guest of the castle

DOROTHEA, Lina's cousin

Setting: a castle in Germany overlooking a river, in the early 19th century.

(*Stiffelio*, sandwiched between *Luisa Miller* and *Rigoletto*, got a mixed reception when first performed. The music was highly praised, but the story did not go over well with the 19th century Italians, confronted with a Protestant minister – married, no less – who discovers after a lengthy absence that his wife has been unfaithful. After much turmoil and struggle with his conscience, moved by his wife's fervent remorse, he rises to the occasion and forgives her. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Let us hope that a present day audience would not be outraged by this novel and daring outcome.

Verdi himself thought highly of the music, and seven years later hoped to salvage most of it by reworking the story, leaving it basically identical in outline until the final act, but fatally distanced and weakened. Now called *Aroldo*, the story is set in the remote 13th century. The hero, an English knight, is always accompanied by a holy man, rather as if Horatio were providing Hamlet with his crucial insights. Furthermore, the time span, as well as the location, is greatly expanded, at the expense of coherence and credulity.

No question, *Stiffelio* is far superior. Nonetheless, Verdi recognized that two of its critical arias were not up to his evolving standard, and replaced them with entirely new ones.. In the version here presented, I have stuck to the original libretto but substituted the two riper, more inspired arias that he composed for *Aroldo*. To my mind, this turned an exceptionally fine opera into a great one.

The scene is a castle in Germany, overlooking a river, home of Stankar, a retired but still rugged man of the army, who some time ago gave refuge to a zealous young religious leader fleeing from persecution, named Stiffelio. Lina, Stankar's daughter, and Stiffelio fell in love and were married. Shortly afterwards, Stiffelio was summoned away on affairs of the faith -- a rather prolonged trip from which he is now returning.

Awaiting his arrival, Jorg, a stalwart clergyman, expresses apprehension about this homecoming, fearful that the pleasures of married life will dull his zeal to serve God. But he is greeted apparently with great joy by Lina, his wife, by Stankar, his father in law, and by various guests of the castle, including a young man named Raffaele who seems decidedly ill at ease. In fact, Stiffelio himself has cause for apprehension -- a disquieting story just relayed to him by a boatman who late on the previous night had spotted a couple near the castle window over-looking the river, the lady almost certainly Lina, Stiffelio's wife. Their agitated manner had already roused the boatman's curiosity and suspicion, when suddenly the young man leapt out of the window, taking a long dive into the water below, presumably to avoid discovery. In doing so, a wallet dropped from his pocket -- a wallet containing papers that would surely reveal his identity, papers that the boatman retrieved and dutifully handed over to Stiffelio, papers which he now holds in his hands. The entire company gasps; the guilty couple trembles. Stiffelio magnanimously tosses the papers into the fire unread.

Once alone with his wife, however, he is disturbed by a change in her manner. Distant, evasive, it would tend to confirm the suspicion that has already been planted. When he sees that she is no longer wearing the ring he gave her, the alarm bells are deafening. But before he can probe further, he is called away to greet another group of friends arriving to celebrate the homecoming.

Lina, alone, realizes all too clearly that she has made a terrible mistake -- momentary madness for which there is no explanation, only anguish and remorse. She prays for guidance, and then resolves that the only way she can live with herself is to make a full confession to her husband and plead for forgiveness. She starts a letter, when her father Stankar interrupts and demands that she show him the letter, which indeed confirms his own suspicions. He then demands that she destroy it, insisting that she must deny everything and say nothing. After wronging her husband so shamefully, this is the least she can do. Lina reluctantly bows to his judgment.

But the lover is not so easily manipulated. Desperate to get in touch with Lina, bewildered, angered by her refusal to see him, he too writes a note and slips it into a book -- the old fashioned kind, with a clasp and a lock. He has no sooner done so when another young man, a guest at the castle, comes and borrows the book. All this is observed by Jorg, the vigilant clergyman, who infers that something untoward is going on, but can't quite figure out what.

While the homecoming party is in progress, convinced that Stiffelio should be alerted, he informs him of the tell-tale note locked inside the volume. Stiffelio, already tortured by ever growing fear and suspicion, magnanimous no longer, is by now avid to

DOROTEA: Here was a boatman eager to see you.

STIFFELIO: For me he waited?

DOROTEA: Yes.

STIFFELIO: We have spoken.
Bluff, hearty fellow.
Strange was the story
That he related.

OTHERS: Do share it with us!
We'll be discreet.

STIFFELIO: Of course! In his own words . . .
I hear them yet . . .



Rid-ing the waves as dawn is near break-ing, he spies a win-dow o-ver the riv-er.

Out of the dark
In hasty leave-taking
Steps a young man
All atremble, aquiver . . .

RAFFAELE and LINA exchange brief, uneasy glances.

STANKAR: (As I suspected!)

RAFFAELE & LINA: (Oh, God! Composure!)

JORG: We're all attention.

FEDERICO, DOROTEA: The seed of scandal.
Flagrant disclosure.

RAFFAELE & LINA: (Pray for composure!)

STIFFELIO: Near him a lady
Implores him to hurry.
Wild are her gestures,
Frantic the worry . . .

First hesitating,
He becomes braver,
Peers down below
With look of disfavor.

Then with a mighty
Will to survive,
Into the water
He takes the great dive!

STANKAR: Recent, I gather?

STIFFELIO: Very.

LINA: (God help me!)

RAFFAELE: (Fits to a tee
My own misadventure.)

OTHERS: Who was the man?
Was this not discovered?

STIFFELIO: No, but these papers he dropped were recovered.

OTHERS: You have them?

RAFFAELE & LINA: (Save us!)

STANKAR: Will you not read them?

STIFFELIO: Plain simple proof beyond denial!
All that we need to bring him to trial.

STANKAR: Well done.

RAFFAELE & LINA: (No rescue!)

OTHERS: So what delays you?

STIFFELIO throws the papers into the fire.

STIFFELIO: There burn to ashes
And vanish in flame!

RAFFAELE & LINA: (Praise God, salvation!)

OTHERS: Gesture sublime!

ENSEMBLE:

STIFFELIO: In the leaping flame
So let the culprit's name
Be ever hidden.
In the gospel God has bidden
To thy brother, charity!

JORG, DOR., FED.: Never have we known his equal!
Only do the truly sainted
Act with love so pure, untainted.
Man of God! Oh, heart sublime!

RAFFAELE: Other ways and means are needed.
We must plan our meetings better.
In this book I'll place a letter
Specifying place and time.

STANKAR: Libertine! If you corrupted,
If you led astray my daughter,
Oh, beware! Prepare for slaughter,
For your blood must wash away the crime.

LINA: (May the Lord be praised!
Mighty God!
Taking pity on my folly.
Now I swear by all that's holy,
Faithful ever I shall be!)

A chorus of welcoming friends, first heard from outside, enters.

CHORUS: Welcome, Stiffelio, welcome!

STIFFELIO: A greeting?

JORG: For celebration,
Friends come from all around.

STIFFELIO: For me?

JORG: None other.

CHORUS: To a friend we love and honor
We sing our admiration.
He fights for truth and justice
With stubborn dedication.

Because he walks among us
Our faith in man increases;
To spread the word, he wages
A war that never ceases.

Through countryside and city
His praises have resounded.
With gratitude unbounded
His name we glorify.

LINA: (Remorse, with tooth of tiger,
Pursues me unrelenting;
Too late am I repenting
A deed I would deny.)

STIFFELIO: My friends, to God Almighty
Alone direct your praises:
To Him, whose glory blazes
Across the starry sky.

RAFFAELE: (My conscience ought to kindle
To wrong a man truehearted;
But now that I have started,
I'll woo her on the sly.)

STANKAR: (His conscience ought to kindle
To wrong a man truehearted;
But lest I be outsmarted
I'll keep a watchful eye.)

Stankar, Jorg and the guests disperse, leaving Stiffelio and Lina alone, in an awkward silence.

STIFFELIO: (How strange that she is silent!
Seems so distant . . .)
Now alone at last together!

LINA: Rodolfo . . . Oh, I beg your pardon.
Unaccustomed to saying Stiffelio,
My tongue betrayed me.

Rodolfo Mueller . . . name I fondly cherish,
For so I always called you
When first among us
You fled for shelter

After persecution,
To my father's warm welcome.

STIFFELIO: How I have missed you!
Far away and lonely . . .

LINA: Yet so successful!
And moving in a world full of pleasure,
Charm and refinement.

STIFFELIO: For me? You chide me!
Not without you there beside me . . .



Through-out the world hy- poc- ri- sy, en- vy & ex- ploi- ta- tion!
Both young and aged equally
Mired in degradation.

Merit reduced to misery
As rogues and vandals prosper,
Where gold alone is sacred,
Where power and wealth are wed,
Where people shrug
And say that God is dead.

LINA: Vision of horror!

STIFFELIO: I've seen a mortal sin
Passed off as courage:
A wife who in name of freedom
Breaks her sacred vow of marriage.

LINA: Ah! . . .

STIFFELIO: You are shocked? Forgive me, dear.
The world's awash in squalor.
Here, though, we have each other,
And love in triumph shall reign!

LINA: We can but pray it does so.

STIFFELIO: It shall! Woe if I'm misguided!
God help us all!

LINA: (*timidly*) Your heart is so magnanimous,
A fall you'd surely pardon . . .

STIFFELIO: Pardon does not come easily
After the heart's been wounded.
Who does not guard with lock and key
One pearl of value unbounded?

Curs'd be the hand of treachery
That snatches it away!
If ever it be lost or stolen
I turn into a beast of prey.

You cry . . . you weep . . .
Your cheek is wet . . . you tremble.
Don't deceive me!
A secret burns inside you!
Speak, tell your husband.

LINA: No.

STIFFELIO: No? Then smile and warm my heart again.
Melt me with sweet reassurance.
Recall that day of happiness . . .

LINA: I do . . . (Pain past endurance!)

STIFFELIO: That wondrous day you answered 'yes'!
I took your hand, caressed it,
Placed there a ring . . . it's missing!
How come? Where is it?

LINA: Where is it?

STIFFELIO: The ring . . . you took it off . . .
It is gone!
Explain. Speak out! I want to know!

LINA: (How much I've hurt him!)

STIFFELIO: The truth! I've got to know!
Have you found someone else?
You weep . . . you turn from me . . .

LINA: (Forlorn and wretched! Oh, God!)

STIFFELIO: You're ashamed to speak,
But I must know.



A vow that lasted but a day,
A promise spoken,
And then as soon forgot.

If all is over, if love's gone dead,
If bonds of faith are broken,
May earth beneath me open,
May fire and fury
Fall burning on my head.

LINA: (Oh, fire of fury,
Vent your wrath on me instead.)

STIFFELIO: Your word I took implicitly;
My love has never faltered.
Has yours become so paltry
You'd tear our lives apart?

LINA: (How much I've hurt him!)

JORG enters hastily.

JORG: Friends ask for you. They're waiting.

STIFFELIO: Lead on! I'm coming.
(to Lina) We'll speak more of this later.

STIFFELIO and JORG leave together. LINA is alone, in great agitation.

LINA: Soon returning! Then all is over!
No defense, no explanation!
By remorse and guilt devoured,
No excuse have I to offer.
Unprepared and overpowered,
I was human, I was weak.
What salvation can I seek?

Ah! God of love, receive my prayer.
Heed the sighs of grief ascending
From a well of tears unending.
Though I dare not plead for pardon,
Ease the burden of my sorrow,

Or let me die,
And with my life erase the shame.
Lighten the burden or let me die,
And with my life erase the shame.

He'll come . . . how shall I answer?
What to tell him?
A full confession!
Ah, no! Writing is easier.

She sits down and begins to write.

Rodolfo! So painful!

STANKAR enters unobserved, but slowly approaching her.

STANKAR: (At last to learn the truth! . . .)

LINA: There is no way to ease the blow.

STANKAR: So you're writing him!
A note to your foolhardy lover!

LINA: No, sir!

STANKAR: I'll read it!

He snatches the letter from her and reads:

Rodolfo, no more am I deserving . . .

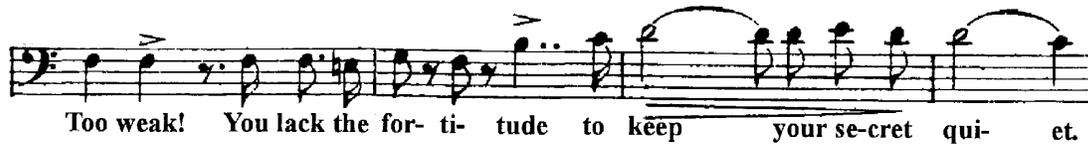
So I was not mistaken,
You've betrayed him!

LINA: I can't go on concealing!
Too great the burden.

STANKAR: And he? Driven to desperation,
The blow will shatter and crush him.

LINA: I know how much I hurt him.
But live out a lie?
A life of horror!

STANKAR:



Too weak! You lack the for-ti-tude to keep your se-cret qui-et.
You'd kill the man with candor
And now try to justify it.

Too weak! You seek the easy way.
You want your burden lifted,
So half the weight is shifted,
Thus putting the load on him.

It's not enough you tricked him!
But shame and grief devoured,
You now have to play the coward.

LINA: Father!

STANKAR: Ah, but wait! There still is time.
He's not to be the victim.
Discard the poison vial
And resort to stout denial.
Be strong. Admit to nothing.

LINA: No! I cannot! Never!

STANKAR: Never?

LINA: No!

STANKAR: How's your father to face society?
Must I swallow insults thrown you?
Bow and grovel, smile at mockery?
Or reply that I disown you?
Child unworthy of a father!
First your husband, now your father:
You betray his faith and trust.

LINA: Oh, this punishment is cruel
For a wrong so much repented.
Do my tears not testify
How sorely I'm tormented?
Blindly from the path I wandered;
I was dragged into the dust.

STANKAR: Let's agree now;
The tears you must stifle.

LINA: No, I cannot!

STANKAR: Do it then to please your father.
For your own reputation . . .
Think of *him*! Would you save or destroy him?
Decide!

LINA: (Lost in darkness! Who to turn to?)

STANKAR:



Un-daunt-ed, walk brave-ly, and yield not to weep-ing.
Your guilt and repentance
Are both in safekeeping.

We'll bury the secret
And blot out suspicion.
You owe it to your husband,
Yourself, your position.

Preserve the appearance
Of love still unaltered.
Though gravely you faltered,
You mustn't fail again.

LINA: The cost is horrendous,
To shroud and to cover,
To lie and dissemble
And smile as I suffer.

Though calm and contentment
Are ever denied me,
Hereafter I'll silence
The tempest inside me.

I faltered, I faltered,
But cherish unaltered
A love so celestial
That burns now in vain.

STANKAR: Your guilty secret

We both now shall guard . . .
We'll guard your guilty secret
So that none shall know.

They both leave. Raffaele enters, in distress.

RAFFAELE: She avoids me!
 Though it's risky to write
 I've got to see her!
 Here's the volume . . .
 I'll lock the note inside it.

He takes a letter from his pocket and places it inside a book -- a weighty volume with a clasp and a lock. He then puts the book back on the table.

JORG: (*eavesdropping*) (An intrigue!)

FEDERICO enters.

FEDERICO: Rafael!

RAFFAELE: Somebody calling?

FEDERICO: Just the book I need
 And now want to borrow.

He takes the book and promptly departs.

The scene changes to the grand reception room of the castle, brightly illuminated and festooned for a celebration.

GUESTS: Rejoice! Rejoice!
 For Stiffelio returns from long travels.
 In song we greet
 Our mentor and guide.
 Home safe!
 Welcome our mentor and guide.

At peace and contented,
In marriage united,
May true love requited
Here ever abide.

The truth that he teaches,
More precious than riches,
Would build better bridges

'tween vassal and lord.

We hail his arrival
With jubilant greeting,
And echo repeating
Our song of accord.

Home safe! Time to rejoice!

STIFFELIO: *(to Jorg)* You're hiding?

JORG: I flee from the sins that surround us.

STIFFELIO: You rail at our revels?

JORG: A pastime for triflers,
A source of temptation,
The work of the devil's!

STIFFELIO: A party?

JORG: I notice, a young man creeps tiptoe,
He opens a volume, then furtively locks it,
A note tucked inside it.

STIFFELIO: A letter?

JORG: Slyly planted, a reply is impending.
I take it for granted,
An amorous rendezvous.

STIFFELIO: Oh, spare me the ending!
Who is he?

JORG: *(indicating Federico)* Book in hand, he's with Lina.

STIFFELIO: Her cousin! Conniving!
I must bring it out in the open!

JORG: Be wary!

DOROTEA: *(to Fed.)* We're hoping you'll join us at chapel.

FEDERICO: Tonight from Stiffelio
We await words of wisdom.
Till later!

(*to Stiffelio*) And what will be your topic?

STIFFELIO: Betrayal of friendship,
The false kiss of Judas!

LINA & RAFFAELE: (A message!)

FEDERICO: A theme with a scope broad and ample.

GUESTS: May all those that hear it
Recoil at the example.

STIFFELIO: Not only the monster
Who bartered our savior,
But all double-dealers
That fearlessly swagger:

 The rogue who with sugar
 Would coat his behavior,
 The friend who is smiling
 While plunging the dagger,

 The guest who can flatter
 A host true and trusting
 While stalking the hostess
 For whom he is lusting.

 Repelled by duplicity,
 I now shall expose
 A person I despise
 With some verse from this volume.

He grabs the book from Federico and tries to open it. . .

 You've locked it!

DOROTEA: But Lina has the key.

LINA: (The viper!)

STIFFELIO: The book, I want it opened!

LINA: But here, sir?

STIFFELIO: You heard me!

LINA: Oh, but . . .

STIFFELIO: Unlock the book, I've found you out!
I abandon hope of error.
Your guilty look of terror
Is proof that cries aloud.

ENSEMBLE:

STIFFELIO: Too far I've gone for turning back,
But storms of fear invade me.
A voice would yet persuade me:
Turn back, seek not to know.

(This is repeated by others, with minor variations.)

STANKAR & JORG: Too far for turning, too far he's gone,
But mounting fear and doubt invade him.
The fatal volume may tell a secret,
A painful secret
It's wiser not to know.

STIFFELIO: You refuse me? Then I'll have to force it.

With his bare hands, he tears the book apart. A piece of paper falls out.

It's a letter!

LINA: (I'm fainting!)

STANKAR quickly snatches the letter from STIFFELIO.

STANKAR: Go no further!
For your eyes the note's not intended.
You shall not know the writer nor reader.

STIFFELIO: *(by now in a frenzy)* Give it to me! . . .
I've got to see! I must!

STANKAR: Trust an old man.

STIFFELIO: I've got to see! I've got to see!

STANKAR: No, no, no, no, no!

STIFFELIO: Rash old fool, you dare to meddle!
Past a point I'll not be goaded.
Once my pent up fire's exploded,
On your head my rage will pour.

LINA: He's my father, spare him, spare him!
Aim at me your indignation.
Pity one whose years declare him
Home from hunting, home from war.

STANKAR: *(quietly to Raffaele)*

Meet me later at the graveyard
For a midnight rendezvous.
Choice of arms I leave to you,
There to reap a grim reward.

RAFFAELE: Save the thunder; cowards fear it.
Sir, you display misguided spirit
If you challenge me by sword.

OTHERS: From deep inside a soul tormented
Cries the demon of suspicion.
Where to find the wise physician
Who can heal a heart so sore?

End of Act One

ACT TWO

The scene is a churchyard at night. Among the blackened tombs there is one that appears more recent. It is the grave of Lina's mother.

Lina enters, almost demented with her burden of guilt, and prays to her mother for comfort. But Raffaele, her persistent, still hopeful lover, has followed her. She demands that either he leave her forever, or she will tell her husband everything. At this point, Stankar, her father, once again intervenes. He chastises them both and challenges Raffaele to a duel. Because of the disparity of age, the younger man refuses to fight, but Stankar will not be put off. He succeeds in goading him into a fury. As swords are drawn, Stiffelio, attracted by the sound of angry voices, rushes in. He rebukes them for fighting and tries to placate them. Stankar is so incensed by the irony of Stiffelio's display of friendship to the very man who has betrayed him that he blurts out the truth.

RAFFAELE rushes in.

RAFFAELE: Lina!

LINA: Be off! You dare to desecrate
This place so private!
Go, leave me to my prayer.

RAFFAELE: So cruel to one who loves you!

LINA: No, I'll not listen,
Nor shall I be persuaded.
Let not those words leave your lips again,
And give me back the ring,
Pledge of love vile and degraded.
Return the ring, then leave me.

RAFFAELE: No, no! I love you!
Sooner die than live without you!
I adore you!

LINA: From the tomb I hear a tremble
That foretells the dead awaking,
Stern and harsh, with finger shaking
As it warns of judgment day.

Coming toward me, lightly clad,
So cold and white, a ghostly shadow,
Steeped in anger, my own mother!
In her eyes a dread dismay.

Off, be gone! Forbear and leave me.
Each delay is fraught with terror.
Cursed be that day of error
When my lonely heart gave way.

Oh, leave me! Simply leave me!

RAFFAELE: (*coldly*) No! I'm staying.

LINA: My husband then shall know the reason.

STANKAR suddenly appears, carrying two swords.

STANKAR: No need resort to that.

LINA: Father! Ah, hear me a moment, father . . .

STANKAR: *(to Lina)* Go, leave us.
(sternly) I have spoken.

She leaves, most reluctantly.

STANKAR: *(displaying the swords)* Choose one.

RAFFAELE: A sword to fight you?

STANKAR: Yes. To the finish.

RAFFAELE: But the odds are far too unequal.

STANKAR: You refuse me?
That tune you'll change when goaded onward.

RAFFAELE: Do your damndest, I'll not be nettled.
All will praise me
For indulgence toward my elders.

STANKAR: You're but scum, a cur, a coward!
So your blood is not yet boiling?
Have you not a shred of honor?

RAFFAELE: Blast away, you'll get no answer.

STANKAR: Let me at him!
Oh, I've not finished.

RAFFAELE: Calm down . . .

STANKAR: And this time I'll make you listen.
To your face I've called you coward,
Vile and loathsome . . .
To you no matter.
Up till now I do but flatter.
There is more to come.
I doubt you'll laugh at it.

RAFFAELE: Stop, I warn you!

STANKAR: Soldier of fortune,
With a past so full of mystery,

Shall I tell the public why
You lack a father in your history?

RAFFAELE: *(finally incensed)* Hand me a sword!

STANKAR: God be praised!

EACH IN TURN: Sword in hand! On guard!
To vengeance!

TOGETHER: Neither demon, no, nor God!
None can bar my deadly aim.
Sword must satisfy my rage.
Blood must wash away my shame.

STIFFELIO enters, drawn to the sound of clashing swords.

STIFFELIO: What's the noise? A duel!
Call a truce! Drop your weapons!

STANKAR & RAFFAELE: Stiffelio!

STIFFELIO: Two Christians!
Drawing sword in a place that is hallowed?
Stamping foot on the graves of the sleeping?
Do you not see the cross straight ahead?

STANKAR: We'll go elsewhere.

STIFFELIO: You cannot hide from God.

STANKAR & RAFFAELE: I'm determined:
Either he or I shall perish.

STIFFELIO: There is no place on earth you'll escape him.

STANKAR: Madman! Dare you prevent us?

STIFFELIO: I speak in the name of the Lord.
He's commanding you to hear and obey.
Drop those weapons!
Let the offense be forgotten and buried.
Be as brother to brother, forgiving . . .

STANKAR: Never!

STIFFELIO: *(to Raffaele)* So much younger,
Go first. Set the example.
Give me a handshake.

STANKAR: *(to Raffaele)* Your gall sets the record!
So you embrace now the man you dishonored!

STIFFELIO: *(his demons reawakened)*

Ah! Dishonored! With Lina?

STANKAR: (I blurted.)
No! I spoke in haste!

STIFFELIO: Speak out! Tell me!
I must know the secret.

LINA enters hesitantly, then comes forward.

LINA: (Noise of fighting!) You meet?

STANKAR & RAFFAELE: Lina!

STIFFELIO: The truth! At last I'll hear it.

LINA: Mercy! Mercy! Stiffelio!

STIFFELIO: Mercy!
(in suffocated tones) Was it *he* in my absence? . . .

STANKAR (All is out.)

STIFFELIO: *(in desperation)* Ah! You confirm it!

ENSEMBLE:

STIFFELIO: Ah, no! No, impossible!
Say I lie, oh say I wrong you.
Be offended!
Give a straw that I can cling to.
Say not guilty, say not guilty, I implore you!

Silence only . . . only silence.
I doubt no longer.
You proclaim yourself a whore!

LINA: Ah, the tempest washes over me;
 On my head the flood is raining.
 Until death my days remaining
 Shall drag onward in despair.

God! Oh, father of all!
 Consoler of the sorrowing.
 Do not deny my lowly prayer.
 Hear my desolate prayer!

STANKAR:
(to Raffaele) By the Lord who observes and judges us,
 He whose eye is on the sparrow,
 You are guilty to the marrow,
 Man unfit to breathe the air.

Though delayed, my blow's infallible;
 When it falls, you'd best beware.
 When it falls, be wise, beware.
 Though suspended, my blow is lethal.
 When it falls, the wise beware.

RAFFAELE: *(to Stankar)* I am ready. What's the obstacle?
 You'll discover to your sorrow
 I'm no rabbit you can scare.

STANKAR: Eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth,
 But spare my unworthy daughter.

STIFFELIO: Too well I know my enemy.
 You drew your sword in payment;
 The debt is mine to render.
(to Raffaele) Beware! I'm taking over.

RAFFAELE: Opposing *you*? Not that!

STIFFELIO: Put up your sword.

RAFFAELE: No, no!

STIFFELIO: With howl and shriek the graves unlock
 To cry a grisly warning.
 Tremble, oh wretch, your time has come.
 Tremble, tremble!
 Your fatal hour has struck!

From within the temple, penitents are heard in prayer. JORG appears at the threshold.

PENITENTS: Non punirmi, Signor, nel tuo furore,
 O come nebbia al sol dileguero!
 Miserere di me, pieta, Signore . . .

JORG: Stiffelio!

STIFFELIO: Voices chanting . . .

The sword falls from his hands.

JORG: Prayers of the true and pious.

STIFFELIO: . . . and praying . . .

JORG: To plead for charity.

STIFFELIO: . . . to heaven. Ah!

JORG: Do the same.

STIFFELIO: *(as if delirious)*

Aflame, I burn in blaze of hell,
I shake with rage possessed!
Your icy hand, your calming words
But chill my fevered breast.

Before the storm of fire can die,
My blood shall turn to water;
And not until my heart runs dry
Shall pale cold reason dawn.

Away from me! Away from me!
My love, my life, my hope destroyed!
The line is drawn.

The penitents continue to chant, sotto voce.

LINA, STANKAR, RAFF. A man tormented!

JORG: They tell you . . .
 Your faith is your salvation.
 Remember your creed as a Christian.

STIFFELIO: Still may I claim the title.

JORG: Oh God of love, inspire my feeble tongue
To speak of peace and pardon.

STIFFELIO: My wife betrayed me!
I'll not forgive.
May heaven damn her!

LINA, STANKAR, RAFF. So livid!

JORG: Gaze on the cross
Where you and I were pardoned by our Savior . . .

STIFFELIO: Our Savior . . . on the cross . . .
I stumble . . . I falter . . . *He faints.*

OTHERS: Proud man of sorrow!

End of Act Two

ACT THREE

The next day, inside the castle, Stankar learns that Raffaele has fled, and also hears a false rumor that his daughter Lina has run away with him. A double loss! Humiliated, ashamed, dishonored, thwarted in his thirst for revenge, the proud old soldier resolves to take his own life, when Jorg appears with gratifying news: Raffaele has been overtaken and brought back to the castle.

Stiffelio, in control of himself once more, with forced calm summons Raffaele to put to him a straight-forward question: what would he do if Lina were given back her freedom? When Raffaele gives an evasive answer, he sends for Lina, and has Raffaele conceal himself and listen.

He then tells Lina that he is leaving her. Their life together has been shattered, their ways must henceforth be divided, he is ready to give her a divorce -- an almost unthinkable option. And it is what Lina wants least to hear, having come to recognize the truth, that she loves Stiffelio and has loved him always. That being the case, it is all the more surprising when she abruptly changes her mind and accepts his offer of divorce, and tells him why -- an explanation that throws a disconcerting light on a concept of marriage still prevalent in some parts of the world: if the legal bonds are dissolved, if they are no longer husband and wife, they can speak to each other freely, as equals. As her husband he can refuse to listen to her, but as her minister, he cannot. -- the minister

who does not refuse even the rapist or murderer. Her plea for an honest confrontation is interrupted by the entrance of Stankar, carrying a bloody sword. He has achieved his revenge.

In the castle.

STANKAR: *(alone)*

Absconded! He writes to Lina,
Begs her to leave her husband.
The scoundrel!
He runs away and deprives me of vengeance.

(drawing out his sword)

Oh, sword! For thirty years my trusty comrade,
Faithful companion of a proud old soldier,
My friend in battle,
Partner in glory,
Now I cast you away,
Worthy no longer.

Shame falls upon my head! . . .
Shame and dishonor!

What good is life to me,
Stripped of my honor?
A blemish, a blot . . . Erase it!
Yes, yes! The work of but a moment,
Then all is over.

But leave behind me
Stiffelio and my daughter?
My all too guilty daughter!
Huh! Do I weep for her?
Tears from the eyes of a soldier! . . .
Oh, sorrow, how much greater than I,
Now weak as water.



Li- na, my gift from par- a-dise, sun- light in grey De- cem- ber,
Laden with joy and happiness . . .
Her laughter I remember.

Wake up! Foolish old dreamer!
Long have I slept, believing.
My slumber now over,
Illusions are shattered past retrieving.

No tears naive and innocent
Shall moist my final resting place.
Slander will stain my monument,
My lasting epitaph: odium, shame and disgrace.
Only shame!

So now to end it!

Moved, he sits down and writes, then takes out a poison vial.

Goodbye, Stiffelio!
Farewell, friend, forever.

JORG: *(entering)* The captive comes.

STANKAR: *(surprised)* What?

JORG: Ah, but where's Stiffelio?

STANKAR: Brooding on his sorrow.

JORG: I'll soon revive him!
I bring him news:
The fugitive is taken.

STANKAR: Success?

JORG: Soon he comes to answer.

STANKAR: He is caught?
Ah, Raffael, Raffael! We meet again.
For you or me
The hour of doom's at hand!



I leap for joy, I float on air, about to burst with rapture.
My fangs are out, my nostrils flare
To taste the blood of capture.

I gloat in wildest ecstasy,
No longer man but demon.
So overcome, I choke with glee,
I gag and pant for breath.

I leap for joy, I float on air,

I gloat in wildest ecstasy.
Oh, rapture! Oh, rapture!
Revenge alone can set me free,
Oh mighty sword of death!

Revenge alone can set me free.
I live to see the scoundrel die.
Oh, vengeance! Oh, vengeance!
I live to see him die.

He leaves triumphantly. STIFFELIO enters.

STIFFELIO: The reckoning approaches . . .
Grant me control to hide my feelings.
Heart, do not betray me!

RAFFAELE enters, with JORG.

RAFFAELE: You insist on a meeting.

STIFFELIO: Yes.

RAFFAELE: No doubt to accuse me.

STIFFELIO: No reproaches.

RAFFAELE: My sword is primed and ready
At your service.

STIFFELIO: I've only a question.

RAFFAELE: Ask it.

STIFFELIO: What would you do
If I gave Lina back her freedom?

RAFFAELE: Her freedom?

STIFFELIO: I'm asking. Answer frankly.

RAFFAELE: To a wild supposition?

STIFFELIO: Jorg . . . Return to Lina
And say I'm waiting.

RAFFAELE: Just what's your object?

STIFFELIO: To learn what most you value:
Your own licentious freedom --
That, or the future
Of her that you've corrupted.
Wait there and listen.

RAFFAELE: (No out!)

STIFFELIO leads him to a side room, where he waits concealed. LINA enters.

STIFFELIO: This final meeting must be now or never.
Soon I am on my journey.

LINA: Ah! You've leaving?

STIFFELIO: Yes . . . yes, this evening.

LINA: So sudden!

STIFFELIO: Forever!
On paths opposing,
By fortune guided,
We part, now strangers,
Our ways divided.

Mine firmly rooted
In pious devotion,
Prayer, meditation,
A life secluded:
This I have chosen.

You with your new love
Shall be united;
Thus damaged honor
For all is righted.

LINA: You're leaving!

STIFFELIO: When on the day we married
Your pledge was spoken,
I gave mine in answer.
That bond is broken,
Melted into vapor.
Those vows ill-fated

Are dead . . . are dead and buried.
This legal paper . . .

LINA: Divorce? Separation?

STIFFELIO: When you have signed your name
I'm on my way.

LINA: Relent! Oh, spare me!
Do not reject me.
Despair would kill me
If shame did not.
Rodolfo, how can I make you hear me?
My tears must tell you;
They're all I've got.
My tears must tell you
What no words can say.

STIFFELIO: You hope with tears of penitence
To right a wrong so rotten?
Remove a stain indelible
And say that all's forgotten?

Must I accept good-naturedly
My name reduced to dust?
Throbbing throughout eternity,
The pain of broken trust!

LINA: (*with sudden decision*) I want the paper! Hand it here!

STIFFELIO: You're signing?

LINA: Yes.

STIFFELIO: (She astounds me!)

LINA: Tears you may take for strategy;
Henceforth, doubt not my feelings.
We now are both at liberty;
Sundered, all ties that bind.
I can speak freely with no restraint.

STIFFELIO: I cannot listen.

LINA: You must!

She stops him from attempting to leave.



Who attends the rapist and murderer,
Withholds from none God's blessing.

As wife I no longer kneel to you;
Here the transgressor stands.

STIFFELIO: You ask too much,
Too much of me.

LINA: Rodolfo! Rodolfo!
Only charity.

You and God alone now hear me:
By the solemn truth I treasure,
Guilty, yes, but not in spirit,
For my grief exceeds all measure.

You propose I wed another
That my honor be protected;
Do you imagine I'd recover
From your heart cast out, rejected?

STIFFELIO: Finish, finish!

LINA: Wed another! Ah! Still blind,
You fail to see the love I bear you.

STIFFELIO: The love you bear me?

LINA: Now and always!

STIFFELIO: Dare you say it?

LINA: Love unchanging,
God be witness!
To God I swear it.

STIFFELIO: What of *him*?

LINA: A moment of madness!

STIFFELIO: He took advantage?

LINA: Yes.

STIFFELIO: Then thrash it out between you.
He's there!

He indicates the room where RAFFAELE is concealed, from which STANKAR now emerges, a blood soaked sword in his hands.

STANKAR: So he *was*!

LINA: *Was?*

JORG: *(who has entered from another door)*

A crime of murder?

STIFFELIO: An act of honor?

STANKAR: A mere repayment!
With my hand I slew the scoundrel;
With his death the secret dies. *He leaves.*

JORG: To the church, Stiffelio, follow!
There the road before you lies.

STIFFELIO: To church! The call is sounding
To flee a house of evil,
In crime and blood abounding,
A place of grief and hurt.

Vile and contaminated,
A source of shame and horror,
A home abhorred and hated,
Oh, crumble to dust and dirt!

LINA: And shall I find no pardon,
No comfort from the living?
No token of forgiving?
Of solace not a word?

O God of love and mercy,
I plead, abject and humble;
Though blind I was to stumble,
Believe me!
It was not my heart that erred.

STIFFELIO leaves with JORG. LINA collapses.

ACT FOUR

Inside the church, Lina and her father, the adulteress and the murderer, both pray for forgiveness. Stiffelio arrives to give his scheduled sermon -- a man in turmoil, distraught, overwhelmed by the recent shocks and revelations, he has nothing to say. Jorg urges him to open the Bible and read . . .

People enter gradually, Federico, Dorothea, then Lina veiled, finally Stankar.

LINA: To thee I turn,
 Oh God above.
 Deny me not
 Thy peace and love.

 Oh God of all
 Oh God above,
 Deny me not
 Thy peace, thy love.

STANKAR: Though I slew a man degraded,
 Honor fortified my sword.
 As to David when he pleaded,
 Grant me pardon, peace, oh Lord.

Throughout, the chorus sings very quietly in the background.

CHORUS: Non punirmi, Signor, *etc.*

JORG and STIFFELIO enter from opposite sides, Stiffelio dazed, in a cloud of confusion, carrying a large bible.

JORG: Stiffelio?

STIFFELIO: Part of him.

LINA: (His words at least I'll hear.)

CHORUS: Miserere . . .

Stiffelio passes close to Lina, whom he does not recognize behind her heavy veil.

STIFFELIO: (A stranger?)

LINA: (He doesn't know me.)

STIFFELIO: *(to Jorg)* Stay beside me.

JORG: Gather courage . . . They wait to hear you speak.

Lina unveils; Stiffelio suddenly sees her.

STIFFELIO: No!

JORG: What's wrong?

STIFFELIO: She's here!

JORG: Here is your home. Remember.

STIFFELIO: I'll try. But my mind's all confusion.
I've not a word to utter.

JORG: Then open up the Bible
And read the word of God.

STIFFELIO: You advise me well.

JORG: Take heart.

Stiffelio opens the Bible and reads to his listeners.

STIFFELIO: *And then he turned unto the populace there assembled,
And saw the adulteress who knelt before him,
And thus he spoke:*

LINA: (Myself!)

STIFFELIO: *"Let he among you that has not sinned
Be first to cast,
Be first to cast a stone at her."*

JORG: Continue!

LINA: *(sadly)* (He fails to finish . . .)

STIFFELIO: *And the woman . . . the woman . . .
Blessed and pardoned, arose!*

JORG: Take heed, Stiffelio!

LINA: Salvation!

STIFFELIO: *(then joined by everyone else)*

Blessed and pardoned!
So let the chapter close!

LINA: Salvation!

The End