

Le Mariage de Figaro

Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

Mozart's opera of the same name was based on the play written in 1778 by the Frenchman Beaumarchais (1732-1799). This selection is the famous denunciation in Act V by the self-made valet, Figaro, of his aristocratic employer and tormentor, Almadiva, with whom Figaro is vying for the affections of Susanah.

FIGARO (*Alone, walking in the darkness, speaks in somber tones*): ... No, Monsieur le Comte, you shan't have her! You shan't have her. Because you are a great noble, you think you are a great genius! Nobility, a fortune, a rank, appointments to office: all this makes a man so proud! What did you do to earn all this? You took the trouble to get born—nothing more. Moreover, you're really a pretty ordinary fellow! While as for me, lost in the crowd, I've had to use more knowledge, more brains, just to keep alive than your likes have had to spend on governing Spain and the Empire for a century. And you want to contest with me—Someone's coming, it's she—no, nobody—The night is black as the devil, and here I am plying the silly trade of husband, though I'm only half a husband. (*He sits down on a bench*) Is there anything stranger than my fate? Son of I don't know whom, kidnapped by robbers, brought up in their ways, I got disgusted with them, and tried to follow an honest career; and everywhere I met with rebuffs. I learned chemistry, pharmacy, surgery, and all the credit of a great noble barely succeeded in putting a veterinary's lancet in my hand! Tired of making sick beasts sadder, I turned to a very different trade, and threw myself into the life of the theater. What a stone I hung around my neck that time! I sketched a comedy about harem life; being a Spanish writer, I assumed I could be irreverent towards Mohammed without any scruples: but at once an Envoy from somewhere complained that my verses offended the Sublime Porte, Persia, a part of India, all Egypt, the kingdoms of Barca, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Morocco; and there was my comedy burned, to please some Mohammedan princes not one of whom I suppose knows how to read, and who keep cursing away at us all as "Christian dogs"—not being able to degrade the human spirit, they take revenge by abusing it. A question came up about the nature of wealth: and since it isn't necessary to own a thing to reason about it, I, penniless, wrote on the value of money and the *produit net*: at once I saw, from the inside of a cab, the lowered drawbridge of a fortress prison at the entrance to which I left hope and liberty! (*He gets up*) How I'd love to get one of these powerful men of four days' standing, so ready with such penalties, just after some good disgrace had fermented his pride! I'd tell him—that printed foolishness has no

importance, except for those who try to suppress it; that without freedom to blame, there can be no flattering eulogies ; and that only little men fear little writings. (He sits *dawn* again) Tired of feeding an obscure boarder, they let me out of prison. I was told that during my economic retreat, there had been established in Madrid a system of free sale of products which included even the press. To profit by this sweet liberty, I announced a periodical, and, thinking to offend no one, I called it *The Useless Journal*. Whew! I had a thousand poor devils of scribblers rise up against me: I was suppressed; and there I was once more among the unemployed. I began almost to despair; I was thought of for a government post, but unfortunately I was qualified for *it*. They needed an accountant: a dancer got the job. All that was left for me was stealing; I set up a faro game; and now, good folk, I supped in society, and people known as *comme il faut* opened their houses to me politely, on condition they kept three-quarters of the profits. I might have gone pretty far, for I was beginning to understand that to gain wealth it is better to have know-how [*savoir-faire*] than to have knowledge [*savoir*]. But as everybody about me stole, while insisting I stay honest, I should have failed once more. I should have left this world . and put a watery grave between me and it, but a kindly God recalled me to my first condition. I took up once more my barber's case and my English leather strop. I traveled about, shaving, from town to town, living at last a carefree life.