

OLALLA
AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

Reuben Thomas

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SOLDIER	Baritone
OLALLA	Mezzo-soprano
MOTHER	Soprano
FELIPE	Bass
DOCTOR	Tenor
PADRE	Tenor
MULETEER	Tenor

Note: The DOCTOR, PADRE and MULETEER may be sung by the same performer.

SCENE 1

(A small room. The SOLDIER lies in bed, attended by the DOCTOR.)

DOCTOR

Now my part is done, and, I may say, well done. It remains to get you out of this poisonous city. And I think I can help you: only the other day my old friend the Padre came in from the country, and he applied to me in a matter of distress. This was a family—*they were once great people, and are now fallen to the brink of destitution. All they have left is the residencia. But the house is a fine old place, and stands at a great height among the hills, and most salubriously.* I told my friend I had an officer, wounded in the good cause, and I proposed that his parishioners should take you for a lodger. It was out of the question, he said. Then let them starve, said I, for I have no sympathy with tattered demalio pride. There-upon we separated; but yesterday, the Padre returned and made a submission: these proud people had put their pride in their pocket. I closed with the offer; and, subject to your approval, I have taken rooms for you in the residencia. *The air of these mountains will renew your blood; and the quiet in which you will there live is worth all the medicines in the world.*

SOLDIER

Doctor, you have been my good angel, and your advice is a command. But tell me, if you please, something of the family with which I am to reside.

DOCTOR

I am coming to that, and, indeed, there is a difficulty. These beggars are, as I have said, of very high descent and swollen with the most baseless vanity; and even to-day, when poverty forces them to unfasten their door to a guest, they cannot do so without a most ungracious stipulation. *You are to remain, they say, a stranger; they will give you attendance, but they refuse from the first the idea of the smallest intimacy.*

SOLDIER

There is nothing offensive in such a stipulation, and I even sympathise with the feeling that inspired it.

DOCTOR

It is true they have never seen you, and if they knew you were the handsomest and the most pleasant man that ever came from England (where I am told that handsome men are common, but pleasant ones not so much so), they would doubtless make you welcome. But since you take the thing so well, it matters not. The family will not much tempt you. *A mother, a son, and a daughter; an old woman said to be halfwitted, a country lout, and a country girl, who stands very high with her confessor, and is, therefore, most likely plain;* there is not much in that to attract the fancy of a dashing officer.

SOLDIER

And yet you say they are high-born.

DOCTOR

Well, as to that, I should distinguish. The mother is; not so the children. The mother was the last of a princely stock, degenerate both in parts and fortune. Her father was not only poor, he was mad: and the girl ran wild about the residencia till his death. Then the girl ran wilder than ever, until at last she married, Heaven knows whom, a muleteer some say, others a smuggler. The union was tragically dissolved some years ago; but they live in such seclusion that the precise manner of the man's end is known only to the priest—if even to him.

SOLDIER

I begin to think I shall have strange experiences.

DOCTOR

I would not romance, if I were you; you will find, I fear, a very grovelling and commonplace reality. Felipe, for instance, I have seen. And what am I to say? He is very rustic, very cunning, very loutish, and, I should say, an innocent. *No, no, señor commandante, you must seek congenial society among the great sights of our mountains; and in these at least I promise you will not be disappointed.*

(Exit the Doctor.)

SOLDIER

**Long I lay sick, snow-capped sierras but a view
O'er-canopied in depth upon cold depth of blue
Their flanks mapped forth in provinces of light and shade
At last I go to scale their heights—if I'm not waylaid!**

**I'll move through shadow 'neath the dusky chestnut woods
And skirt the edge of mossy ruins where the floods
Fall rumbling in their rocky beds and hoarsely fade
I'll climb where clouds move free and large—if I'm not waylaid!**

**My beggar hosts of high descent will be well paid
And in return, the mountain peaks—if I'm not waylaid!**

(During the aria, the Soldier gets out of bed, dresses, and packs a few things, including provisions, into a haversack.)

SCENE 2

(As the scene begins the room disappears and FELIPE's cart takes the place of the bed.)

(Enter Felipe. He pronounces his r's as w's (de-rhotacization).)

FELIPE

(Entering)

La! La!

SOLDIER

Are you Felipe?

FELIPE

I am. O, it is dark in here. Come!

(The Soldier shoulders the haversack; they climb on to the cart and set off.)

FELIPE

I once saw a crow in the branches of that tree.

SOLDIER

A crow?

(Felipe listens intently.)

SOLDIER

What did you hear?

FELIPE

O, it is alright.

(To the mule)

La! Hi! La!

(They enter a river chasm; the waters repeatedly swell, and each time Felipe winces.)

SOLDIER

What is the matter?

FELIPE

O, I am afraid.

SOLDIER

Of what? This seems one of the safest places on this very dangerous road.

FELIPE

It makes a noise.

(They emerge into the mountains.)

FELIPE

(Sings in a falsetto voice, "repeating the same note at little intervals")

La! La! La! . . .

SOLDIER

What are you singing?

FELIPE

O, I am just singing!

SOLDIER

The mountain air awakens the appetite! How long it seems since breakfast. And I am stiff from the drive. Shall we stop to eat a bite and stretch our legs?

(Felipe halts the cart. Nearby is a tree. They dismount, and the Soldier sits down, opens his haversack, and gets some food and drink out. He offers some to Felipe, and they begin eating and drinking.)

(Felipe suddenly springs up with a shout. He has spotted a squirrel in the tree! He runs to the tree, climbs it, and seizes the squirrel from the top-most branch, then climbs down with it firmly clutched in a fist. He drops it on the ground and squats to look at it.)

SOLDIER

(Angry, pushes Felipe aside and kills the squirrel.)

How could you so torture an innocent creature? You brute! Begone, I'll walk from here; I choose to travel with men, not vermin!

(Walks over to his haversack and makes to leave.)

FELIPE

(Falling to his knees)

O, I try so hard. O commandante, bear with Felipe this once; he will never be a brute again!

SOLDIER

(Relenting, raises Felipe to his feet.)

See, Felipe, you are strong indeed, but see! Take my hand.

(Felipe takes it.)

Now suppose that I were cruel like you. I only tighten my hold, and see how you suffer.

FELIPE

(Screams.)

SOLDIER

(Lets Felipe go, who falls to his knees, nursing his hand.)

You have learned your lesson. Let us go on as men together.

(They get back into the cart, Felipe all devotion, and drive off.)

SCENE 3

(They arrive at the residencia, and dismount. It is sunset. The MOTHER is half-reclining on the bottom step of a stairway that leads up into the residencia in the dying rays of the sun.)

FELIPE

Come! I will take you to your room.

(Felipe takes up a candle, and approaches the Mother, pretending to ignore her. She sits up, shrinking back as he passes. The Soldier gallantly salutes her, and she acknowledges him, calm but strangely indifferent; the Soldier follows Felipe upstairs and through a door into a bedroom. Downstage, a table and chair stand near a fireplace, and a window looks out over the courtyard; upstage, a bed. Above the bed, a portrait of a young woman hangs on the wall.)

SOLDIER

Well, Felipe! This is a fine room.

FELIPE

A fine room! La!

A very fine room.

And fire too; la!

It melts out the pleasure in your bones.

And the bed, la! la!

See what fine sheets—how soft, how smooth, smooth...

(As Felipe extols the room's virtues, the Soldier is distracted by the portrait. As Felipe breaks off, rubbing his face on the sheets, the Soldier leaps forward to seize the candle, afraid that Felipe will set fire to the bed. He goes to the table, puts the candle down, and pours some wine into a cup.)

SOLDIER

(Offering the cup to Felipe)

Felipe! Come and take some wine.

FELIPE

(Runs over gleefully, but when he sees the wine, draws up short.)

Oh no, not that; that is for you. I hate it.

SOLDIER

Very well, Señor, then I will drink to your good health, and to the prosperity of your house and family. Speaking of which, shall I not have the pleasure of laying my salutations in person at the feet of the Señora, your mother?

FELIPE

(Backing away, as though from a dangerous animal.)

No.

(Exit Felipe.)

(The soldier shrugs, sits down, and starts to eat and drink. His eye is again caught by the portrait. He finishes eating and goes to stand by the bed, gazing at the portrait for a long moment before undressing, climbing into bed, and falling asleep.)

SCENE 4

(A dust storm blows up. Suddenly, from off-stage, there are cries of pain and rage. The Soldier awakes, as if from a bad dream, but as the cries continue he gets up and goes to open the door, which is locked. He shakes it. He listens at the door as the cries continue to swell and abate; eventually, they stop and he returns to bed as the storm continues.)

SCENE 5

(The next day. A sunny morning. The Mother is sitting at the bottom of the stairs. Felipe wakes the Soldier with breakfast, then exits. The Soldier sits at the table, looking out over the courtyard, and eats his breakfast.)

MOTHER

(Brushing her hair)

**I love so to immerse myself in warmth and blaze
Against a pillar seated 'neath the sun's hot gaze
Or in the dark stretched out before the log fire bright
Tender ruddy warmth in which I take such great delight.**

**I thrill so to behold the swooping birds at play
The white doves' wide flights coolly fan the court by day
The long-winged swallows rake the eaves at fall of night
Giddy rapid darts in which I take such great delight.**

**As whirling wind bursts pomegranate blossoms white
So swift to dive on tender warmth is my greatest delight.**

(As she finishes singing, the Soldier leaves his room and comes down the stairs.)

SOLDIER

(Taking off his hat)

A fine day, Señora!

MOTHER

(As if delighted at her own wit)

A fine warm day!

(She suddenly pats his hand, and then sits back as if nothing happened.)

(The Soldier starts to explore the castle. He examines a series of portraits hung in a corridor, then pauses before a mirror hung at the end.)

SOLDIER

**The miracle of the continued race
The creation and recreation
The weaving and changing and handing down of fleshly elements
That a child should be born of its mother,
That it should grow and clothe itself (we know not how)**

SOLDIER (Continued)

With humanity...

(While he is singing, the Mother leaves. He comes to a closed door, and opens it. The room is bare but for a chair and table, and some books strewn about.)

SOLDIER

(Picking up and examining each book)

The Confessions of St Augustine... A History of the Reconquista... Euclid's Elements... but what is this?

(picking up some papers from the table)

OLALLA

(Off-stage)

**Pleasure approached with pain and shame,
Grief with a wreath of lilies came.
Pleasure showed the lovely sun;
Jesu dear, how sweet it shone!
Grief with her worn hand pointed on,
Jesu dear, to thee!**

(Confused and ashamed, he puts down the papers and leaves quickly. He returns to the steps and sits down, lost in thought. Enter the Padre.)

SOLDIER

(Going to meet the Padre)

Good day, father!

PADRE

(Cautiously)

Good day to you, my son.

SOLDIER

We have not met, but I think you know of me already. You suggested to my saviour the good Doctor that I come here to recover my health.

PADRE

I remember. Here you will have found health-giving air and a good Christian family.

SOLDIER

Indeed, sir, the air is good. As to the family, I have met Felipe and the Señora, but I have not yet been introduced to the daughter.

PADRE

(Looking askance)

That is as it should be.

SOLDIER

And. . . last night, I was disturbed by strange cries.

PADRE

(Turns away, as if dismissing the Soldier, then back, offering his snuff-box.)

Do you take tobacco powder?

SOLDIER

No, thank-you, father.

PADRE

I am an old man, and I may be allowed to remind you that you are a guest.

SOLDIER

I have, then, your authority to let things take their course, and not to interfere?

PADRE

Yes.

(Makes an uneasy salute, and exits.)

(Evening falls; the Soldier retires to his room. Enter Felipe, bringing supper.)

SOLDIER

(Sitting down to eat)

Thank-you, Felipe. You know, I never see your sister.

FELIPE

Oh, no, she is a good, good girl.

SOLDIER

Your sister is pious, I suppose?

FELIPE

Oh! a saint; it is she that keeps me up.

SOLDIER

You are very fortunate, for the most of us, I am afraid, and myself among the number, are better at going down.

FELIPE

Señor, I would not say that. You should not tempt your angel. If one goes down, where is he to stop?

SOLDIER

Why, I had no guess you were a preacher, and I may say a good one; but I suppose that is your sister's doing?

(Felipe nods.)

SOLDIER

Well, then, she has doubtless reproved you for your sin of cruelty?

FELIPE

Twelve times!

SOLDIER

Then what were those cries that I heard last night? for surely they were cries of some creature in suffering.

FELIPE

(Looking away)

The wind.

SOLDIER

(Taking Felipe's hand)

The wind, and yet I think it was this hand that had first locked me in.

(Felipe trembles.)

SOLDIER

Well, I am a stranger and a guest. It is not my part either to meddle or to judge in your affairs; but in so far as concerns my own I will be no man's prisoner, and I demand that key.

(Exit Felipe. The Soldier goes to contemplate the portrait. Suddenly, the door is thrown open and a key thrown through it.)

SCENE 6

(The next day. The Soldier comes out of his room; at the same time, OLALLA comes through the door at the far end of the corridor, along which she passes, and steps on to the stairs. She stops. He is transfixed. They gaze at each other for a long moment. He bows, and, disoriented, returns to his room, watching from the window as she turns and goes down the stairs and out of the courtyard.)

SOLDIER / OLALLA

Olalla! / ()

Face to face I have seen her—Olalla! / ()

She glowed in the gallery's shadow, a gem / Olalla!

Her loveliness struck to my heart / ()

Her eyes took hold upon mine and bound us together / ()

Olalla! / Olalla!

And the mountain crags answer—Olalla! / Olalla!

Ah! she is the child of a doom-laden house / ()

But she unites all my desire / Ah!

The portrait's likeness is swallowed up in her life-force / ()

Olalla! / Olalla!

And the dumb azure answers—Olalla! / ()

(The Soldier hurries downstairs and exits, following Olalla.)

SCENE 7

(In the forest. The Soldier is looking for Olalla. He pauses for a moment, gazing into the distance. From behind him, Olalla appears, and walks slowly towards him, her eyes lowered. The Soldier catches sight of her.)

OLALLA

(At the sound of her voice, the Soldier starts.)

You will go away. To-day.

SOLDIER

(Passionate)

I live upon the thought of you.

I sleep only to dream of your loveliness.

I would gladly forswear my country, my language and my friends to live forever by your side.

OLALLA

You will go to-day.

SOLDIER

(Reassuring)

I see in you a pious and heroic spirit, which I long to share and lighten.

Nature is the voice of God—we must be made for one another.

We should be mad rebels against God not to obey this instinct.

OLALLA AND SOLDIER

You will go to-day. / I live upon the thought of you.

You will go to-day. / I sleep only to dream of your loveliness.

You will go to-day. / I would gladly forswear my country, my language and my friends to live forever by your side.

OLALLA

You will go to-day.

No, not to-day. To-morrow!

SOLDIER

Olalla!

(She leaps into his arms. They cling together for a moment, then she thrusts him back and flees.)

SOLDIER

Go? Not I, Olalla!

SOLDIER (Continued)

**You send me away,
yet I have but to call upon your name, and you come to me!
You are not exempt from the weaknesses of girls!
Go? Not I, Olalla!**

**Love burns in me like rage; tenderness waxes fierce;
I hate, I adore, I pity, I revere her!
She is brutal and divine!
Go? Not I, Olalla!
Oh not I, Olalla, my Olalla!**

(The Soldier hurries away.)

SCENE 8

(The residencia. The Soldier arrives in the courtyard. The Mother is sunning herself on the steps as before. The Soldier stops, his ardour vanishing instantly.)

SOLDIER

(Shaken)

Good-day, Señora.

MOTHER

(Vaguely)

Good-day.

(The Soldier goes up to his room, absorbed in his thoughts. He notices a piece of paper on his table, and picks it up, alarmed.)

OLALLA

(Off-stage)

If you have any kindness for Olalla, if you have any chivalry for a creature sorely wrought, go from here to-day; in pity, in honour, for the sake of Him who died, I supplicate that you shall go.

SOLDIER

(The Soldier gazes vacantly at the paper for a moment, then starts to tremble.)

I cannot lose her. I cannot lose her!

(He moves to the window, puts out his hand to open it, and instead pushes his hand through the glass, cutting himself. He presses his thumb to his wrist to staunch the bleeding. He looks around, sees nothing useful in the room, and rushes out. Seeing no-one but the Mother, he turns to her.)

SOLDIER

Pardon me if I disturb you, but I must apply to you for help.

(The Mother looks sleepily up at him, then, noticing the blood, is suddenly alert.)

SOLDIER

(Holding out his hands)

I have cut myself, and rather badly. See!

(The Mother's eyes open wide. She stands, catches his hand, and suddenly lifts it to her mouth and bites hard.)

SOLDIER

(Snatching his hand back, pushing the Mother away.)

Aah!

(The Mother attacks him, crying out with the same noises the Soldier previously heard in the night. She forces him back against the wall. Olalla and Felipe rush in from opposite sides of the courtyard. Felipe wrestles his Mother to the floor, while Olalla supports the fainting Soldier.)

SOLDIER, MOTHER, OLALLA, FELIPE

Aah! / (Bestial noises) / (“Moaning and mourning with dove-like sounds”) / You must be good! You must not be a brute! I try so hard.

(Olalla helps the Soldier to his room and into bed, and locks the door, while Felipe eventually overcomes the Mother and escorts her off-stage. Night falls.)

SOLDIER

Olalla, nothing matters; I ask nothing; I am content; I love you.

(Olalla kneels by the bed and prays silently. The moon shines in. Olalla stands, crossing herself.)

OLALLA

It is for me to speak, and for you to listen. I know; you can but guess. I prayed, how I prayed for you to leave this place.

SOLDIER

I love you.

OLALLA

And yet you have lived in the world.

(She pauses.)

You are a man and wise; and I am but a child.

SOLDIER

I love you.

(He takes her hand and kisses it.)

OLALLA

(She winces a little, and looks sad. Then she takes his hand and, leaning forward, puts it over her heart.)

There, you feel the very footfall of my life. It only moves for you; it is yours. But is it even mine? Have you seen the portraits in the house of my fathers? Have you looked at my mother or at Felipe? Have your eyes never rested on that picture that hangs by your bed?

OLALLA (Continued)

My fathers, eight hundred years ago, ruled all this province: they were a picked race of the Spanish; their flags led in war; the king called them his cousin; the people, when they returned and found their hovels smoking, blasphemed their name. Presently a change began. The breath of weariness blew on their humanity; they began to go down; their minds fell on sleep, their passions awoke in gusts, heady and senseless like the wind in the gutters of the mountains. *You have seen for yourself how the wheel has gone backward with my doomed race. And shall I repeat the spell?*

But my vow has been given; the race shall cease from off the earth. Think of me sometimes as one who had no dearer hope than to forget you, and no greater fear than to be forgotten.

(Exit Olalla.)

(Enter Felipe.)

SOLDIER

Felipe, take me where they will ask no questions.

(Felipe helps the Soldier downstairs and into the cart.
They drive off.)

SCENE 9

(They arrive at a tiny chapel in the mountains. A large cross stands outside. Felipe helps the Soldier in and leaves. The Soldier falls into a swoon.)

(The Padre arrives and tends to the Soldier, who begins to recover.)

SOLDIER

Sir, what of that family?

PADRE

The Senorita is well-informed. But the family has been neglected.

SOLDIER

Will you not be frank with me?

PADRE

What can I say, but that we are all in God's hands, and that His ways are not as our ways?

SOLDIER

Is the mother mad?

PADRE

I will answer you according to my belief. She is not, or she was not when she was young—God help me, I fear I neglected that wild lamb! But these things go on growing, not only in the individual but in the race.

SOLDIER

When she was young. . . was she like Olalla?

PADRE

Now God forbid! God forbid that any man should think so slightingly of my favourite penitent.

SOLDIER

You know I love her; and she ordered me to leave. What must I do?

PADRE

The church. . . but I had forgotten, my child, that you were not a Christian. But would you have my opinion? The Senorita is, in a matter of this kind, the best judge; I would accept her judgment.

(Exit the Padre.)

(The Soldier rises, and hobbles to the hut's entrance. In the distance he can just see the residencia.)

SOLDIER

From here I can make out the place where my life has been so strangely changed. A mist draws across the view. . . but the mountain winds break it up: there is Felipe, no bigger than a fly, going about the garden! Ah, I cannot tell what I should do. . .

(The Muleteer enters, an old peasant wrapped in a mantle.)

SOLDIER

Good day.

MULETEER

Good day.

(He sits down near the Soldier.)

SOLDIER

Pardon me, but you seem to know these mountains.

MULETEER

Aye, I used to be a muleteer. I walked these hills for many a year, but then I followed the army with my mules, long enough to get a pension. I live at home now.

SOLDIER

(Pointing at the residencia)

Do you know that house?

MULETEER

(Looks at the Soldier darkly, and crosses himself.)

Yes, O yes, I know it. I have passed its doors. It was there that one of my comrades sold himself to Satan!

(As if to himself)

There was snow upon the pass, the wind was driving it; sure enough there was death that night upon the mountains, but there was worse beside the hearth. I took him by the arm, Senor, and dragged him to the gate; I conjured him, by all he loved and respected, to go forth with me; I went on my knees before him in the snow; and I could see he was moved by my entreaty. And just then she came out on the gallery, and called him by his name; and he turned, and there was she standing with a lamp in her hand and smiling on him to come back. I cried out aloud to God, and threw my arms about him, but he put me by, and left me alone. He had made his choice; God help us.

SOLDIER

And what became of your friend?

MULETEER

Nay, God knows. If all be true that we hear, his end was like his sin, a thing to raise the hair.

SOLDIER

Do you mean that he was killed?

MULETEER

Sure enough, he was killed! But how? Ay, how? But these are things that it is sin to speak of.

SOLDIER

The people of that house. . .

MULETEER

(Interrupting savagely)

The people? What people? There are neither men nor women in that house of Satan's! In the old days, the church would have burned out that nest of basilisks; but the Padre is old, or bewitched himself; but some day—ay, and before long—the smoke of that house will go up to heaven!

(Calmer)

I must be getting home.

(Exit the Muleteer.)

(The Soldier hesitates, evidently uncertain what to do.)

(Enter Olalla, veiled. For some time she and the Soldier gaze upon each other with a passionate sadness.)

OLALLA

I thought you had gone. It is all that you can do for me—to go. It is all I ever asked of you. And you still stay. But do you know, that every day heaps up the peril of death, not only on your head, but on ours? A report has gone about the mountain that you love me, and the people will not suffer it.

SOLDIER

Olalla, I am ready to go this day, this very hour, but not alone.

(Olalla kneels and prays before the crucifix. The Soldier watches her and studies the crucifix.)

OLALLA

(Standing and raising her veil, with one hand on the crucifix)

I have laid my hand upon the cross. look up for a moment with my eyes, and behold the face of the Man of Sorrows. We are all such as He was—the inheritors of sin; we must all bear and expiate a past which was not ours. Like Him, we must endure for a little while, until morning returns bringing peace.

(The Soldier looks for a long moment at the crucifix, then, slowly, turns and starts to walk away down the path, looking back frequently.)

SOLDIER / OLALLA

I must go now. / Suffer me to pass on upon my way alone.
I will go now. / My only friend Him who is the friend of all the distressed.
I go now. / Thus shall I be happy, having willingly accepted sorrow for my portion.
Adiós! Farewell! / Adiós! Farewell!

(Exit the Soldier.)

OLALLA

Pleasure approached with pain and shame,
Grief with a wreath of lilies came.
Pleasure showed the lovely sun;
Jesu dear, how sweet it shone!
Grief with her worn hand pointed on,
Jesu dear, to thee!

THE END