

Synopsis

Act One ("The Bandit")

The mountains of Aragon.

Groups of rebels are encamped in the mountains and are resting while waiting for the return of their leader, Ernani. He arrives with a dark, careworn air. The next day, the woman he loves, Elvira, is to marry her old guardian, Ruy Gomez de Silva, whose castle can be seen in the distance. Ernani has decided to kidnap her and he reveals his plan to his companions who say they will be most happy to help him. In the meantime, in a room in Silva's castle, Elvira anxiously waits for Ernani to arrive, impatient to elope with him. Instead of the rebel leader, however, it is Don Carlo, king of Spain, who unexpectedly enters. He, too, is in love with Elvira and, in vain, he tries to persuade the girl to go with him. When the king attempts to drag her away, Elvira manages to seize his dagger and threatens to kill both him and herself. At last Ernani breaks into the room. He hates Don Carlo, whose father had Ernani's father beheaded. The rebel leader challenges Don Carlo to a duel, but the king refuses to fight a bandit. He treats Ernani with a contempt that causes the latter's anger to mount further. While Elvira tries to calm the two men, Silva suddenly enters and is left speechless and dismayed, seeing his future bride harassed by two men. The old nobleman challenges both intruders to a duel, but the king's equerry, Don Riccardo, enters and bows to Don Carlo. Silva is stunned and prostrates himself at the king's feet. Don Carlo explains that he has come to request Silva's help in the election to the imperial throne; at the same time, he saves Ernani, asking him to leave as if he belonged to his retinue. The rebel leader leaves harbouring thoughts of revenge, while Elvira promises him her undying faithfulness.

Act Two ("The Guest")

A magnificent hall in Silva's castle.

Celebrations for the forthcoming wedding of Silva and Elvira are underway. Ernani arrives disguised as a pilgrim and old Silva welcomes him into his home as a guest. On learning the reason for the festivities, the mysterious traveller becomes angry and reveals his identity, but Silva considers his duty as a host to be sacred and does not tell the other guests of Ernani's presence. Elvira tells Ernani that she has only agreed to marry Silva after hearing the false report of his death, but she is firmly resolved to kill herself on her wedding day. Now that everything is clear, they embrace, but Silva enters at that very moment. He would like to avenge his offended honour right away, but the arrival of the king, who is hunting for Ernani with his men, is announced. Silva saves the rebel leader by hiding him in a secret place, and faces the anger of Don Carlo demands that he be handed over to him. In the face of Silva's determined refusal, the king and his retinue leave, taking



Elvira with them as a pledge of the old man's loyalty. When Ernani emerges from his hideout, Silva challenges him to a duel, but he refuses to fight. Upon learning that the king has taken Elvira, Ernani informs Silva that Carlo is the rival of both and he convinces the old man to join the rebels who are fighting against the crown. Silva accepts, but does not forgive Ernani and makes him enter in a grim bond. Ernani gives Silva his horn: when he hears its sound, he will kill himself. Ernani swears to abide by this paradoxical pact with his enemy.

Act Three ("Clemency")

The burial vault of Charlemagne in Aachen.

The king enters and hides behind the tomb of Charlemagne, his ancestor, with the intention of surprising the conspirators who are plotting against him. In the meantime, the elections for the new head of the Holy Roman Empire are taking place in the city. The conspirators, among them Silva and Ernani, enter stealthily; they must choose the man who is to murder the king. Ernani's name is drawn, but Silva promises to forgo his revenge and their pact if the young man will allow him to be the one who murders the king. Ernani scornfully refuses, not wanting to be tainted with the slightest shadow of cowardice. While the conspirators swear an oath of hatred towards the tyrant, three cannon shots announce the election of Charles V, who suddenly and unexpectedly comes out of Charlemagne's tomb. The men are astonished and the new emperor, who is immediately surrounded by the electors and his large retinue, proclaims his intention to take revenge. Elvira comes forward and begs him for a gesture of clemency. Not only does the new emperor grant the conspirators their lives, but he also offers Ernani the hand of Elvira. His authority and clemency are generally acknowledged. Only Silva, in his anger, meditates revenge.

Act Four ("The Mask")

A terrace in the castle of don Juan of Aragon in Zaragoza.

Elvira and Ernani's wedding feast is taking place. A solitary masked man in a black domino moves among the revellers. Once the newlyweds are left alone and are about to enter their wedding chamber, the grim sound of a horn is heard. It is Silva, who removes his mask and reminds the bridegroom of the oath he took. Ernani vainly tries to convince him to forgo his revenge, but Silva simply gives him the choice between dagger and poison. Elvira, distraught, pleads with Silva, but the old man is inexorable. Ernani stabs himself in the heart; the girl faints, whereas the old man rejoices over his rival's body.

(Traduzione di Chris Owen)