

OTHELLO

Brabantio, a senator of Venice, had a beautiful daughter, the gentle Desdemona. She was sought after by various suitors, both on account of her many virtuous qualities and for her rich expectations. But among the suitors of her own country and complexion she saw no one whom she could love, for this noble lady, who regarded the mind more than the features of men, had chosen for the object of her affections a Moor, a black man, whom her father loved and often invited to his house. His name was Othello.

Now Othello the noble Moor lacked nothing which might recommend him to the affections of the greatest lady. He was a soldier, and a brave one; and by his conduct in bloody wars against the Turks had risen to the rank of general in the Venetian service, and was esteemed and trusted by the state.

He had been a traveler, and Desdemona (as is the manner of ladies) loved to hear him tell the story of his adventures, which he would run through from his earliest recollection: the battles, sieges, and encounters which he had passed through; the perils he had been exposed to by land and by water; his hair-breadth escapes, and how he had been taken prisoner by the insolent enemy, and sold to slavery; how he demeaned himself in that state, and how he escaped.

All these accounts, added to the strange things he had seen in foreign countries, the vast wilderness and romantic caverns, the mountains whose heads are in the clouds; of the savage nations, the cannibals who are man-eaters, and a race of people in Africa whose heads grow beneath their shoulders.

These travelers' stories would so enchain the attention of Desdemona that if she were called off at any time by household affairs she would dispatch with all haste that business, and return to listen again to Othello.

And once he drew from her a prayer that he would tell her the whole story of his life, of which she had heard so much, but only by parts. To which he consented, and reduced her to tears when he spoke of some distressful stroke he had suffered in his youth.

His story being done, she gave him for his pains a world of sighs. She swore a pretty oath that it was all so strange and pitiful, wondrous pitiful. She wished (she said) she had not heard it, yet she wished that Heaven had made her such a man; and then she thanked him, and told him, if he had a friend who loved her, he had only to teach him how to tell his story and that would woo her. Upon this hint, delivered with more frankness than modesty, accompanied with certain bewitching prettiness and blushes, which Othello understood, he spoke more openly of his love, and in this golden opportunity gained the consent of the generous Lady Desdemona privately to marry him.

Neither Othello's color nor his fortune was such that it could be hoped Brabantio would accept him for a son-in-law. He had left his daughter free; but he did expect that, as the manner of noble Venetian ladies was, she would choose before long a husband of senatorial rank or expectations. But in this he was deceived. Desdemona loved the Moor and devoted her heart and fortunes to his valiant qualities. She was so devoted to the man she had selected for a husband that his very color was, by her esteemed above all the white skins and clear complexions of the young Venetian nobility, her suitors.

Their marriage, which, though privately carried out, could not long be kept a secret, came to the ears of the old man, Brabantio, who appeared in a solemn council of the senate as an accuser of the Moor Othello, who by spells and witchcraft (he maintained) had seduced the affections of the fair Desdemona to marry him, without the consent of her father, and against the obligations of hospitality.

At this time it happened that the state of Venice had immediate need of the services of Othello, news having arrived that the Turks with mighty preparation had fitted out a fleet, which was making its course to the island of Cyprus, with intent to regain that strong post from the Venetians, who then held it; in this emergency the state turned its eyes upon Othello, who alone was deemed adequate to conduct the defense of Cyprus against the Turks. So that Othello, now summoned before the senate, stood in their presence as a candidate for a great state employment and as a culprit charged with offenses which by the laws of Venice were punishable by death.

The age and senatorial character of old Brabantio commanded a most patient hearing from that grave assembly; but the incensed father conducted his accusation with so much intemperance, producing likelihoods and allegations for proofs, that, when Othello was called upon for his defense, he had only to relate a plain tale of the course of his love; which he did with such an artless eloquence, recounting the whole story of his wooing of Desdemona, as we have related it above, and delivered his speech with so noble a plainness (the evidence of truth) that the duke, who sat as chief judge, could not help confessing that a tale so told would have won his daughter, too, and the spells and conjurations which Othello had used in his courtship plainly appeared to have been no more than the honest arts of men in love, and the only witchcraft which he had used the telling a soft tale to win a lady's ear.

This statement of Othello was confirmed by the testimony of the Lady Desdemona herself, who appeared in court and, professing a duty to her father for life and education, challenged leave of him to profess a yet higher duty to her lord and husband, even as her mother had shown in preferring him (Brabantio) above her father.

The old senator, unable to maintain his plea, called the Moor to him with many expressions of sorrow, and, as an act of necessity, bestowed upon him his daughter, whom, if he had been free to withhold her (he told him), he would with all his heart have kept from him; adding that he was glad he had no other child, for this behavior of Desdemona would have taught him to be a tyrant.

This difficulty being got over, Othello, to whom custom had rendered the hardships of a military life as natural as food and rest are to other men, readily undertook the management of the war in Cyprus; and Desdemona, preferring the honor of her lord (though with danger) before the

indulgence of those idle delights in which new-married people usually waste their time, cheerfully consented to his going.

No sooner were Othello and his wife landed in Cyprus than news arrived that a terrible storm had dispersed the Turkish fleet, and thus the island was secure from any immediate attack. But the war which Othello was to suffer was now beginning; and the enemies which malice stirred up against his innocent wife proved in their nature more deadly than strangers or infidels.

Among all the general's friends, no one possessed the confidence of Othello more entirely than Cassio. Michael Cassio was a young soldier, a Florentine, relaxed, charming and of pleasing personality, favorite qualities with women. He was handsome and eloquent, and exactly such a person as might alarm the jealousy of a man advanced in years (as Othello in some measure was) who had married a young and beautiful wife. But Othello was as free from jealousy as he was noble, and as incapable of suspecting as of doing an evil action.

He had employed this Cassio in his love affair with Desdemona. Cassio had been a sort of go-between, fearing that himself had not those soft parts of conversation which please ladies, and finding these qualities in his friend, would often ask Cassio to go (as he phrased it) a-courting for him, such innocent simplicity being rather an honor than a blemish to the character of the valiant Moor. So that no wonder if the gentle Desdemona loved and trusted Cassio. Nor had the marriage of this couple made any difference in their behavior to Michael Cassio. He frequented their house, and his free and rattling talk delighted Othello, who was himself of a more serious person. And Desdemona and Cassio would talk and laugh together, as in the days when he went a-courting for his friend.

Othello had lately promoted Cassio to be a lieutenant, a position of trust, and nearest to the general's person. This promotion gave great offense to Iago, an older soldier who thought he had a better claim than Cassio, and would often ridicule Cassio as a fellow fit only for the company of ladies and one that knew no more of the art of war or how to set an army in readiness for battle than a girl. Iago hated Cassio, and he hated Othello as well for favoring Cassio, and he had a completely unfounded suspicion that the Moor was too fond of Iago's wife Emilia. From these imaginary provocations the plotting mind of Iago conceived a horrid scheme of revenge, which would involve Cassio, the Moor, and Desdemona in one common ruin.

Iago was artful, and had studied human nature deeply, and he knew that of all the torments which afflict the mind of man (and far beyond bodily torture) the pains of jealousy were the most intolerable and had the sorest sting. If he could succeed in making Othello jealous of Cassio he thought it would be an exquisite plot of revenge and might end in the death of Cassio or Othello, or both; he cared not.

The arrival of the general and his wife in Cyprus, meeting with news of the dispersion of the enemy's fleet, made a sort of holiday in the island. Everybody gave himself up to feasting and making merry. Wine flowed in abundance, and cups went round to the health of the black Othello and his lady, the fair Desdemona.

Cassio had the direction of the guard that night, with orders from Othello to keep the soldiers from excess in drinking, that no brawl might arise to fright the inhabitants or disgust them with the new-landed forces. That night Iago began his deep-laid plans of evil. Under color of loyalty and love to the general, he enticed Cassio to make rather too free with the bottle (a great fault in an officer upon guard). Cassio for a time resisted, but he could not long hold out against the honest freedom which Iago knew how to put on, and kept swallowing glass after glass (as Iago still plied him with drink and encouraging songs), and Cassio's tongue ran away in praise of the Lady Desdemona, whom he again and again toasted, affirming that she was a most exquisite lady. Until at last the enemy which he put into his mouth stole away his brains; and upon some provocation given him by a fellow whom Iago had set on, swords were drawn, and Montano, a worthy officer, who interfered to stop the dispute, was wounded. The riot now began to be general, and Iago, who had set on foot the mischief, was foremost in spreading the alarm, causing the castle bell to be rung (as if some dangerous mutiny instead of a slight drunken quarrel had arisen). The alarm-bell ringing awakened Othello, who, dressing in a hurry and coming to the scene of action, questioned Cassio as to the cause.

Cassio had now come to himself, the effect of the wine having a little gone off, but was too much ashamed to reply; and Iago, pretending a great reluctance to accuse Cassio, but, as it were, forced into it by Othello, who insisted on knowing the truth, gave an account of the whole matter (leaving out his own share in it, which Cassio was too far gone to remember) in such a manner as, while he seemed to make Cassio's offense less, actually made it appear greater than it was. The result was that Othello, who was a strict observer of discipline, was compelled to take away Cassio's place of lieutenant from him.

And so Iago's first artifice succeed completely; he had now undermined his hated rival and thrust him, out of his position; but a further use was soon to be made of the adventure of this disastrous night.

Cassio, whom this misfortune had entirely sobered, now lamented to his seeming friend Iago that he should have been such a fool. He was finished, for how could he ask the general for his place again? He would tell him he was a drunkard. He despised himself. Iago, affecting to make light of it, said that he, or any man living, might be drunk upon occasion; it remained now to make the best of a bad bargain. The general's wife was now the general, and could do anything with Othello; that he were best to apply to the Lady Desdemona to mediate for him with her husband; she was of a frank, obliging disposition and would readily undertake a good office of this sort and set Cassio right again in the general's favor; and then this crack in their love would be made stronger than ever. A good advice of Iago, if it had not been given for wicked purposes, which will soon appear.

Cassio did as Iago advised him, and made application to the Lady Desdemona, who was easy to be won over in any honest suit; and she promised Cassio that she should be his solicitor with her lord, and rather die than give up his cause. This she immediately set about in so earnest and pretty a manner that Othello, who was mortally offended with Cassio, could not put her off. When he pleaded delay, and that it was too soon to pardon such an offend-er, she would not be beat back, but insisted that it should be the next night, or the morning after, or the next morning

to that at farthest. Then she showed how penitent and humbled poor Cassio was, and that his offense did not deserve so sharp a check.

And when Othello still hung back:

"What! my lord," said she, "that I should have so much to do to plead for Cassio, Michael Cassio, that came a-courting for you, and oftentimes, when I have spoken in dispraise of you has taken your part! I count this but a little thing to ask of you. When I mean to try your love indeed I shall ask a weighty matter."

Othello could deny nothing to such a pleader, and only requesting that Desdemona would leave the time to him, promised to receive Michael Cassio again in favor.

It happened that Othello and Iago had entered into the room where Desdemona was, just as Cassio, who had been imploring her intercession, was departing at the opposite door; and Iago, who was full of art, said in a low voice, as if to himself, "I like not that." Othello took no great notice of what he said; indeed, the conference which immediately took place with his lady put it out of his head; but he remembered it afterward. For when Desdemona was gone, Iago, as if for mere satisfaction of his thought, questioned Othello whether Michael Cassio, when Othello was courting his lady, knew of his love. To this the general answering in the affirmative, and adding, that he had gone between them very often during the courtship, Iago knitted his brow, as if he had got fresh light on some terrible matter, and cried, "Indeed!" This brought into Othello's mind the words which Iago had let fall upon entering the room and seeing Cassio with Desdemona; and he began to think there was some meaning in all this, for he deemed Iago to be a just man, and full of love and honesty, and what in a false person would be tricks in him seemed to be the natural workings of an honest mind, full of something too great for utterance. And Othello prayed Iago to speak what he knew and to give his worst thoughts words.

Then Iago went on to say, what a pity it were if any trouble should arise to Othello out of his imperfect observations; that it would not be for Othello's peace to know his thoughts; that people's good names were not to be taken away for slight suspicions. And when Othello's curiosity was raised almost to distraction with these hints and scattered words, Iago, as if in earnest care for Othello's peace of mind, told him to beware of jealousy. With such art did this villain raise suspicions in the unguarded Othello, by the very caution which he pretended to give him against suspicion.

"I know," said Othello, "that my wife is beautiful, loves company and parties, is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well; but where virtue is, these qualities are virtuous. I must have proof before I think her dishonest."

Then Iago, as if glad that Othello was slow to believe ill of his lady, frankly declared that he had no proof, but begged Othello to observe her behavior well, when Cassio was around; not to be jealous nor too secure neither, for that he (Iago) knew the ways of the Italian ladies, his countrywomen, better than Othello could do; and that in Venice the wives let Heaven see many pranks they dared not show their husbands. Then he artfully insinuated that Desdemona deceived her father in marrying with Othello, and kept the secret so closely that the poor old man thought

that witchcraft had been used. Othello was very much moved with this argument, for if she had deceived her father why might she not deceive her husband?

Iago begged his pardon for having worried him; but Othello, assuming an indifference, while he was really shaken with inward grief at Iago's words, begged him to go on, which Iago did with many apologies, as if unwilling to produce anything against Cassio, whom he called his friend. He then came to the point and reminded Othello how Desdemona had refused many suitable matches of her own clime and complexion, and had married him, a Moor, which was unnatural, and proved her to have a headstrong will; and when her better judgment returned, how probable it was she should start comparing Othello with the fine forms and clear white complexions of the young Italians, her countrymen. He concluded with advising Othello to put off his reconciliation with Cassio a little longer, and in the meantime to note with what earnestness Desdemona should intercede on his behalf; for that much would be seen in that. So mischievously did this artful villain lay his plots to turn the gentle qualities of this innocent lady into her destruction, and make a net for her out of her own goodness to entrap her, first setting Cassio on to entreat her mediation, and then out of that very mediation contriving stratagems for her ruin.

The conference ended with Iago begging Othello to believe his wife innocent until he had more decisive proof; and Othello promised to be patient; but from that moment the deceived Othello never tasted peace of mind. Poppy, nor the juice of mandragora, nor all the sleeping potions in the world, could ever again restore to him that sweet rest which he had enjoyed only yesterday. His job began to sicken him. His heart, that used to be roused at the sight of his troops and banners and battle array, and would stir and leap at the sound of a drum or a trumpet or a neighing war-horse, seemed to have lost all that soldierly pride and ambition; and his military ardor and all his old joys deserted him. Sometimes he thought his wife honest, and sometimes he thought her not so; sometimes he thought Iago correct, and at times he thought him not so; then he would wish that he had never known of it; he was not the worse for her loving Cassio, so long as he knew nothing about it. So torn to pieces with these distracting thoughts, he once laid hold of Iago's throat and demanded proof of Desdemona's guilt, or threatened instant death for his having maligned her. Iago, pretending indignation that his honesty should be taken for a vice, asked Othello if he had not sometimes seen a handkerchief spotted with strawberries in his wife's hand.

Othello answered that he had given her that handkerchief, and that it was his first gift.

"That same handkerchief," said Iago, "I saw Michael Cassio today wipe his face with."

"If it is as you say," said Othello, "I will not rest till a wide revenge swallows them up; and first, as proof of your fidelity, I expect that Cassio shall be put to death within three days; and for that fair devil [meaning his wife] I will devise some swift means of death for her."

Trifles light as air are to the jealous proofs as strong as holy writ. A handkerchief of his wife's seen in Cassio's hand was motive enough to the deluded Othello to pass sentence of death upon them both, without once inquiring how Cassio came by it. Desdemona had never given such a present to Cassio, nor would this constant lady have wronged her lord with doing so naughty a thing as giving his presents to another man; both Cassio and Desdemona were innocent of any

offence against Othello: but the wicked Iago, whose spirits never slept in contrivance of villany, had made his wife Emilia (a good, but a weak woman) steal this handkerchief from Desdemona, under pretense of getting the work copied, but in reality to drop it in Cassio's way, where he might find it, and give a handle to Iago's suggestion that it was Desdemona's present.

Othello, soon after meeting his wife, pretended that he had a headache, and asked her to lend him her handkerchief to hold to his temples. She did so. "Not this," said Othello, "but that handkerchief I gave you." Desdemona did not have it with her (for indeed it was stolen, as we have related). "What?" said Othello, "this is a fault indeed. That handkerchief an Egyptian woman gave to my mother; the woman was a witch and could read people's thoughts: she told my mother, while she kept it, it would make her amiable, and my father would love her; but, if she lost it, or gave it away, my father's fancy would turn, and he would loathe her as much as he had loved her. She – dying – gave it to me, and told me, if I ever married, to give it to my wife. I did so; take heed of it. Make it a darling as precious as your eye

Desdemona, hearing the wondrous virtues of the handkerchief, was ready to die with fear, for she plainly perceived she had lost it, and with it, she feared, the affections of her husband. Then Othello started, and looked as if he were going to do some rash thing, and still he demanded the handkerchief, which when she could not produce it, she tried to divert her husband from too serious thoughts, and cheerfully told him she saw all his talk about the handkerchief was only to put her off from her suit about Michael Cassio, whom she went on to praise (as Iago had foretold), till Othello in perfect distraction burst out of the room, and then Desdemona, though unwillingly, began to suspect that her lord was jealous.

What made him like this she did not know, and then she accused herself for accusing the noble Othello, and thought surely that some bad news from Venice, or some state troubles had puddled his spirits, and made his temper not so sweet as formerly. And she said, "Men are not gods, and we must not look for that observance from them when they are married, which they show us on the bridal day." And she criticized herself for so unkindly judging of his unkindness.

Again Othello and Desdemona met, and he accused her more plainly of being unfaithful, and of loving another man, but he did not name whom: and Othello wept, and Desdemona said, "Alas! How awful! why do you weep?" And Othello told her, he could have borne all sorts of evils with fortitude — poverty, and disease, and disgrace; but her infidelity had broken his heart: and he called her a weed, that looked so fair, and smelled so sweet, that the sense ached at it; and wished she had never been born. And when he had left her, this innocent lady was so stupefied with wonder at her lord's untrue suspicion of her, that a weight-like sleep came over her, and she only asked her attendant to make her bed, and to lay her wedding-sheets upon it, saying, that when people teach their babies, they do it by gentle means and easy tasks, and Othello should have treated her so; for in good faith she was but a child herself. And this was all the complaint which this gentle lady made.

Desdemona retired to bed expecting her lord would follow her, soon fell into a troubled sleep. Othello entered the chamber, full of the black purpose which he had meditated of putting his lady to death. But when he saw her asleep, he thought he would not shed her blood, nor scar that

white skin of hers, more white than alabaster. But he was resolved she should die; else (as he said) she would live to betray more men, as she had done him. Then he kissed her for the last time (as he said), and that kiss was so sweet, that he had to kiss her again: and he wept, but he said they were cruel tears.

Desdemona was awakened with his kisses, and she looked upon Othello, and she saw him gnaw his lower lip, and roll his eyes, and she knew he was always dangerous when he looked so: and he told her prepare for death, and to say her prayers, for he would not kill her soul. And this innocent wife, as she lay at his mercy, begged for compassion, and to know her fault, and then he named Cassio, and the handkerchief which (he said) she had given him; and as the guiltless lady was proceeding to clear herself he suddenly would hear no more, but covering her up in the bed-clothes, he stifled her till she died.

In this instant of time Cassio was brought into the house, wounded and bleeding. Iago had set one of his creatures on him; but the fellow not succeeding in his attempt to kill Cassio (whom he wounded, but not mortally,) and being himself killed by Iago to prevent discovery, in his pockets were found certain letters, which made the guilt of Iago, and the innocence of Cassio, clear beyond all doubt; and Cassio now came to beg pardon of Othello, and to ask how he had offended him, that he had employed Iago to murder him.

This discovery was as a thunder stroke to Othello, who now plainly saw that he was no better than a murderer, and that his wife (poor innocent lady) had always been faithful to him; the extreme anguish of this discovery making life insupportable, he fell upon his sword, and throwing himself upon the body of his dear Desdemona, he died.

These rash acts raised much passion of horror and amazement in the bystanders, for Othello had a fine reputation, and till he was worked upon by the arts of a villain, which his own noble nature never allowed him to suspect, he was a loving and a doting husband. He had loved not wisely, but too well.

And when he was dead all his former merits and his valiant acts were remembered. Nothing now remained for his successor but to put the utmost censure of the law in force against Iago, who was executed with strict tortures; and to send word to the state of Venice of the tragic death of their great general.