

OTHELLO

By William Shakespeare

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 great 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, 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 was 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 the sort of person who 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 to assist him 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) 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 was fond of Cassio, and trusted him. 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 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, he hoped, 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, together with the 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 was in charge 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 with 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 to do it, swords were drawn, and Montano, a worthy officer, who interfered to stop the dispute, was wounded. The riot now began to spread, and Iago, who had started the whole thing, was foremost in raising the alarm, causing the castle bell to be rung (as if some dangerous mutiny instead of a slight drunken quarrel had occurred). The alarm-bell ringing awakened Othello, who, dressing in a hurry and coming to the scene of action, questioned Cassio as to the cause of it.

Cassio had now come to himself, the effect of the wine having gone off a little, but he 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 that, while he seemed to make Cassio's offense less, actually Iago 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 rank of lieutenant from him.

And so Iago's first cunning 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 made such a fool of himself. He was finished, for how could he ask the general for his place again? He had lost his reputation. His general would tell him he was a drunkard. He despised himself.

Iago, pretending to make light of it, said that he, or any man living, might get drunk occasionally. It remained now to make the best of a bad bargain. The general's wife, said Iago, was now the general; in other words, she could do anything with Othello; so he better 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 deed 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. Good advice from Iago, if it had not been given for wicked purposes, which will soon appear.

Cassio did as Iago advised him, and made an application to the Lady Desdemona, who was easily won over in any honest suit; and she promised Cassio that she should plead his case with her husband, and rather die than give up his cause. And so she asked Othello to give Cassio his job back. This pleading set in motion a series of misunderstandings leading to the TRAGEDY of OTHELLO.