Othello

Edith Nesbit (Story from Shakespeare)

Four hundred years ago there lived in Venice an ensign named Iago, who hated his general, Othello, for not making him a lieutenant. Instead of Iago, who was strongly recommended, Othello had chosen Michael Cassio, whose smooth tongue had helped him to win the heart of Desdemona. Iago had a friend called Roderigo, who supplied him with money and felt he could not be happy unless Desdemona was his wife.

Othello was a Moor, but of so dark a complexion that his enemies called him a Blackamoor. His life had been hard and exciting. He had been vanquished in battle and sold into slavery; and he had been a great traveler and seen men whose shoulders were higher than their heads. Brave as a lion, he had one great fault--jealousy. His love was a terrible selfishness. To love a woman meant with him to possess her as absolutely as he possessed something that did not live and think. The story of Othello is a story of jealousy.

One night Iago told Roderigo that Othello had carried off Desdemona without the knowledge of her father, Brabantio. He persuaded Roderigo to arouse Brabantio, and when that senator appeared Iago told him of Desdemona's elopement in the most unpleasant way. Though he was Othello's officer, he termed him a thief and a Barbary horse.

Brabantio accused Othello before the Duke of Venice of using sorcery to fascinate his daughter, but Othello said that the only sorcery he used was his voice, which told Desdemona his adventures and hair-breadth escapes. Desdemona was led into the council-chamber, and she explained how she could love Othello despite his almost black face by saying, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind."

As Othello had married Desdemona, and she was glad to be his wife, there was no more to be said against him, especially as the Duke wished him to go to Cyprus to defend it against the Turks. Othello was quite ready to go, and Desdemona, who pleaded to go with him, was permitted to join him at Cyprus.

Othello's feelings on landing in this island were intensely joyful. "Oh, my sweet," he said to Desdemona, who arrived with Iago, his wife, and Roderigo before him, "I hardly know what I say to you. I am in love with my own happiness."

News coming presently that the Turkish fleet was out of action, he proclaimed a festival in Cyprus from five to eleven at night.

Cassio was on duty in the Castle where Othello ruled Cyprus, so Iago decided to make the lieutenant drink too much. He had some difficulty, as Cassio knew that wine soon went to his head, but servants brought wine into the room where Cassio was, and Iago sang a drinking song, and so Cassio lifted a glass too often to the health of the general.

When Cassio was inclined to be quarrelsome, Iago told Roderigo to say something unpleasant to him. Cassio cudgeled Roderigo, who ran into the presence of Montano, the ex-governor. Montano civilly interceded for Roderigo, but received so rude an answer from Cassio that he said, "Come, come, you're drunk!" Cassio then wounded him, and Iago sent Roderigo out to scare the town with a cry of mutiny.

The uproar aroused Othello, who, on learning its cause, said, "Cassio, I love thee, but never more be officer of mine."

On Cassio and Iago being alone together, the disgraced man moaned about his reputation. Iago said reputation and humbug were the same thing. "O God," exclaimed Cassio, without heeding him, "that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!"

Iago advised him to beg Desdemona to ask Othello to pardon him. Cassio was pleased with the advice, and next morning made his request to Desdemona in the garden of the castle. She was kindness itself, and said, "Be merry, Cassio, for I would rather die than forsake your cause."

Cassio at that moment saw Othello advancing with Iago, and retired hurriedly.

Iago said, "I don't like that."

"What did you say?" asked Othello, who felt that he had meant something unpleasant, but Iago pretended he had said nothing. "Was not that Cassio who went from my wife?" asked Othello, and Iago, who knew that it was Cassio and why it was Cassio, said, "I cannot think it was Cassio who stole away in that guilty manner."

Desdemona told Othello that it was grief and humility which made Cassio retreat at his approach. She reminded him how Cassio had taken his part when she was still heart-free, and found fault with her Moorish lover. Othello was melted, and said, "I will deny thee nothing," but Desdemona told him that what she asked was as much for his good as dining.

Desdemona left the garden, and Iago asked if it was really true that Cassio had known Desdemona before her marriage.

"Yes," said Othello.

"Indeed," said Iago, as though something that had mystified him was now very clear.

"Is he not honest?" demanded Othello, and Iago repeated the adjective inquiringly, as though he were afraid to say "No."

"What do you mean?" insisted Othello.

To this Iago would only say the flat opposite of what he said to Cassio. He had told Cassio that reputation was humbug. To Othello he said, "Who steals my purse steals trash, but he who filches from me my good name ruins me."

At this Othello almost leapt into the air, and Iago was so confident of his jealousy that he ventured to warn him against it. Yes, it was no other than Iago who called jealousy "the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on."

Iago having given jealousy one blow, proceeded to feed it with the remark that Desdemona deceived her father when she eloped with Othello. "If she deceived him, why not you?" was his meaning.

Presently Desdemona re-entered to tell Othello that dinner was ready. She saw that he was ill at ease. He explained it by a pain in his forehead. Desdemona then produced a handkerchief, which Othello had given her. A prophetess, two hundred years old, had made this handkerchief from the silk of sacred silkworms, dyed it in a liquid prepared from the hearts of maidens, and embroidered it with strawberries. Gentle Desdemona thought of it simply as a cool, soft thing for a throbbing brow; she knew of no spell upon it that would work destruction for her who lost it. "Let me tie it round your head," she said to Othello; "you will be well in an hour." But Othello pettishly said it was too small, and let it fall.

Desdemona and he then went indoors to dinner, and Emilia picked up the handkerchief which Iago had often asked her to steal.

She was looking at it when Iago came in. After a few words about it he snatched it from her, and bade her leave him.

In the garden he was joined by Othello, who seemed hungry for the worst lies he could offer. He therefore told Othello that he had seen Cassio wipe his mouth with a handkerchief, which, because it was spotted with strawberries, he guessed to be one that Othello had given his wife.

The unhappy Moor went mad with fury, and Iago bade the heavens witness that he devoted his hand and heart and brain to Othello's service. "I accept your love," said Othello. "Within three days let me hear that Cassio is dead."

Iago's next step was to leave Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room. Cassio saw it, and knew it was not his, but he liked the strawberry pattern on it, and he gave it to his sweetheart Bianca and asked her to copy it for him.

Iago's next move was to induce Othello, who had been bullying Desdemona about the handkerchief, to play the eavesdropper to a conversation between Cassio and himself. His intention was to talk about Cassio's sweetheart, and allow Othello to suppose that the lady spoken of was Desdemona.

"How are you, lieutenant?" asked Iago when Cassio appeared.

"The worse for being called what I am not," replied Cassio, gloomily.

"Keep on reminding Desdemona, and you'll soon be restored," said Iago, adding, in a tone too low for Othello to hear, "If Bianca could set the matter right, how quickly it would mend!"

"Alas! poor rogue," said Cassio, "I really think she loves me," and like the talkative coxcomb he was, Cassio was led on to boast of Bianca's fondness for him, while Othello imagined, with choked rage, that he prattled of Desdemona, and thought, "I see your nose, Cassio, but not the dog I shall throw it to."

Othello was still spying when Bianca entered, boiling over with the idea that Cassio, whom she considered her property, had asked her to copy the embroidery on the handkerchief of a new sweetheart. She tossed him the handkerchief with scornful words, and Cassio departed with her.

Othello had seen Bianca, who was in station lower, in beauty and speech inferior far, to Desdemona and he began in spite of himself to praise his wife to the villain before him. He praised her skill with the needle, her voice that could "sing the savageness out of a bear," her wit, her sweetness, the fairness of her skin. Every time he praised her Iago said something that made him remember his anger and utter it foully, and yet he must needs praise her, and say, "The pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!"

There was never in all Iago's villainy one moment of wavering. If there had been he might have wavered then.

"Strangle her," he said; and "Good, good!" said his miserable dupe.

The pair were still talking murder when Desdemona appeared with a relative of Desdemona's father, called Lodovico, who bore a letter for Othello from the Duke of Venice. The letter recalled Othello from Cyprus, and gave the governorship to Cassio.

Luckless Desdemona seized this unhappy moment to urge once more the suit of Cassio.

"Fire and brimstone!" shouted Othello.

"It may be the letter agitates him," explained Lodovico to Desdemona, and he told her what it contained.

"I am glad," said Desdemona. It was the first bitter speech that Othello's unkindness had wrung out of her.

"I am glad to see you lose your temper," said Othello.

"Why, sweet Othello?" she asked, sarcastically; and Othello slapped her face.

Now was the time for Desdemona to have saved her life by separation, but she knew not her peril--only that her love was wounded to the core. "I have not deserved this," she said, and the tears rolled slowly down her face.

Lodovico was shocked and disgusted. "My lord," he said, "this would not be believed in Venice. Make her amends;" but, like a madman talking in his nightmare, Othello poured out his foul thought in ugly speech, and roared, "Out of my sight!"

"I will not stay to offend you," said his wife, but she lingered even in going, and only when he shouted "Avaunt!" did she leave her husband and his guests.

Othello then invited Lodovico to supper, adding, "You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!" Without waiting for a reply he left the company.

Distinguished visitors detest being obliged to look on at family quarrels, and dislike being called either goats or monkeys, and Lodovico asked Iago for an explanation.

True to himself, Iago, in a round-about way, said that Othello was worse than he seemed, and advised them to study his behavior and save him from the discomfort of answering any more questions.

He proceeded to tell Roderigo to murder Cassio. Roderigo was out of tune with his friend. He had given Iago quantities of jewels for Desdemona without effect; Desdemona had seen none of them, for Iago was a thief.

Iago smoothed him with a lie, and when Cassio was leaving Bianca's house, Roderigo wounded him, and was wounded in return. Cassio shouted, and Lodovico and a friend came running up. Cassio pointed out Roderigo as his assailant, and Iago, hoping to rid himself of an inconvenient friend, called him "Villain!" and stabbed him, but not to death.

At the Castle, Desdemona was in a sad mood. She told Emilia that she must leave her; her husband wished it. "Dismiss me!" exclaimed Emilia. "It was his bidding, said Desdemona; we must not displease him now."

She sang a song which a girl had sung whose lover had been base to her--a song of a maiden crying by that tree whose boughs droop as though it weeps, and she went to bed and slept.

She woke with her husband's wild eyes upon her. "Have you prayed to-night?" he asked; and he told this blameless and sweet woman to ask God's pardon for any sin she might have on her conscience. "I would not kill thy soul," he said.

He told her that Cassio had confessed, but she knew Cassio had nought to confess that concerned her. She said that Cassio could not say anything that would damage her. Othello said his mouth was stopped.

Then Desdemona wept, but with violent words, in spite of all her pleading, Othello pressed upon her throat and mortally hurt her.

Then with boding heart came Emilia, and besought entrance at the door, and Othello unlocked it, and a voice came from the bed saying, "A guiltless death I die."

"Who did it?" cried Emilia; and the voice said, "Nobody--I myself. Farewell!"

"'Twas I that killed her," said Othello.

He poured out his evidence by that sad bed to the people who came running in, Iago among them; but when he spoke of the handkerchief, Emilia told the truth.

And Othello knew. "Are there no stones in heaven but thunderbolts?" he exclaimed, and ran at Iago, who gave Emilia her death-blow and fled.

But they brought him back, and the death that came to him later on was a relief from torture.

They would have taken Othello back to Venice to try him there, but he escaped them on his sword. "A word or two before you go," he said to the Venetians in the chamber. "Speak of me as I was--no better, no worse. Say I cast away the pearl of pearls, and wept with these hard eyes; and say that, when in Aleppo years ago I saw a Turk beating a Venetian, I took him by the throat and smote him thus."

With his own hand he stabbed himself to the heart; and ere he died his lips touched the face of Desdemona with despairing love.