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OTHELLO L' AMOUR:

or,

The Tragedy of the Handkerchief

By Christopher Marlowe

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FETID AIR hung over the Grand Canal, drifted through the Piazza San Marco, and spread out in a haze over the lagoon. It was a suffocating breeze, hot and moist, the kind that crept through the narrow streets like a feral cat, and uncurled your hair and made you sneeze and left your skin smelling like a mildewed bath-towel in a cheap hotel. But in Venice, anything can happen, even on a night like that. The cuckolded husband still runs his finger along the edge of the carving knife and studies his sleeping wife's pale neck by candle-light. Misbelieving Jews still plot to cut their pound of flesh from gentle merchants; or kidnap children for dark culinary rituals; or scheme to poison whole convents, for a laugh. Turbaned hashashin still huddle together in Turkish coffee houses to smoke cannabis, build petards, and seek the overthrow of Christian civilization.

The one thing you could not do, can never do, in Venice, is get a full glass of beer from an Italian tapster.

Just before dawn I returned to my albergo, across from Il Gobbo di Rialto. A letter was waiting for me—from a senator. His tone was sharp and peremptory. I tossed the paper aside, and stripped and collapsed somewhere, on the rug probably, which was plusher than the mattress, and cleaner. What did I care where I lay? I was dead to the world.

Awakened an hour later, groggy from the little sleep, I could not recall too well what the letter had said—partly because I was hung over and partly because I was trying to put both feet into the same leg-hole. I started again with my left foot, and grunted, and fell back onto the bed. It was no use.

The bells of the Campanile chimed seven—a tremor vast and faint, sinking and swelling, beating in my skull like savage drums. Not my best hour. There was a knock on the door of my room. Again. Someone was out there, someone who wanted in. And it was someone who was able to read my “Do Not Disturb” sign just like I can read ancient Sanskrit in a dark alleyway, on a rainy night, when drunk. I wondered dimly where I had put my gun.

He knocked again, louder—this time, calling my name. I would have to get dressed, to deal with this guest who would not go away. For my own amusement, I roared a few lines from Thomas Kyd’s most popular play as only Ned Alleyn and I can do them: “*What outcries pluck me from my naked bed and chill my throbbing heart, which never danger yet could daunt before? Who calls Jeronimo?*”

“Brabantio, the Senatorè,” said an elderly voice, “calls here on Marlowe.”

“Grazie. Signore Marlowe will have a rasher of bacon. Plenty of juice. One egg, hard-boiled. Rye on the side.”

“Do you not hear me? Open up! I say I am Brabantio.”

“I hear you!” I said, from behind the closed door. “But I don’t care if the moon is full, and the time is right, and the girl has a pretty face. I don’t open up, I’m British.”

“You got a dame in there?”

“Out of line,” I snapped. (I have my standards. Keeping a professional confidence is one of them.) “Come back later.”

The old man would not go away. He rapped on the door with what sounded like a wooden cane. “Open up, now, or I’ll summon officers to break down the door. I tell you, it’s Brabantio, the Senatorè.”

“Brabantio, the *senator*?”

“Sì, sì!”

I knew nothing of Brabantio the senator. Had I sat face to face with him in a gondola, I’d not have known him from Bantio

the janitor or Barbra the chanteuse; but he was not about to quit until I let him in.

I was wearing only my panted slops and one ungartered stocking. I struggled to my feet and opened the door.

The old man, nearly out of breath, hobbled into my room on a cane and collapsed into the only chair, beside the bed. He was very agitated. "You're Marlowe, are you not?"

"Charlie, Christopher, Philip, or Thomas?"

"Christopher. Private dick."

"Yeah. Perhaps. Last time I investigated." My head still throbbed like a kettle drum. I sat back down on the bed.

"Don't get smart with me, mister."

"I see no need for that."

"Don't get stupid, either. You're in Italy, now."

"Yes, sir. For a minute, when I first woke up, I thought I was in Florida."

"I don't have time—"

"Senatorè, pardon. I'm an occasional drinker. I go out for a beer. When I come to, my first assignment is to figure out how I wound up on a different continent, with a full beard and a tattoo. Or else I wake up in a jail cell, with a lump on the back of my head. Or in a booby hatch, with a dry throat and the shakes. Or in a cheap Venetian albergo, with a pain in the ass."

"You came highly recommended as a private investigator, but I find you to be an impudent knave."

"And I find you to be a senator."

"I'm not here for pleasure, Mr. Marlowe. I have come on business."

"Signore, my pleasure is none of your business. Right now, I'm tired, I'm here on holiday, I'm English, and I'm full of no breakfast."

The old man's lower lip quivered. He got misty-eyed. He had been trying to hold something in. He reached forward, put his

hand on my neck as if for support, and suddenly blurted, “My daughter, O my daughter!” His whole body shook when he said it. “My beloved daughter...”

That softened me a bit. “Sorry, Dad,” I said, “but you seem to mistake me for someone else.” As I spoke, I disengaged and hastily pulled a shirt over my head. It smelled of sweat and spilled beer and stale tobacco.

“I say I have lost my daughter, my Desdemona.”¹

“Dead, or misplaced?”

“Dead, to me. Abused, stolen from me, corrupted by medicines bought from charlatans, seduced by spells of witchcraft and magic napkins. If not under the influence of black arts, what maiden so tender, so angelic, so well-loved by her father—and so opposite to marriage that she shunned even the most prosperous young gentleman in Venice—would have run from her happy home to the sooty bosom of a Barbary stallion? I’ll be sworn, he slipped a mickey into her drink.”

“Who’s *he*?”

“The commander of our Venetian armed forces. The black devil who seduced my daughter, and married her.”

“He *married* her? I mean, that’s something to be thankful for, isn’t it? Dolls will fall for a uniform, but when the fort is won, how often do you hear of an officer who actually marries the

¹ *Desdemona* | Senatore Brabantio (1522-1588) is not known to have had a daughter named Desdemona. Perhaps to shield her honor, Marlowe borrows the name, “Desdemona,” from “Un Capitano Moro,” a yarn told by Giovanni Battista Giraldi, a.k.a. Cinthio, in the *Hecatommithi* (1565). Giraldi’s fictional tale bears a few similarities to the historical incidents described by Marlowe. (Desdemona, the white Christian wife of a Muslim captain, is murdered by his ensign; the guilty ensign is put on the rack and pulled to pieces; the Muslim captain is duly tortured, then banished). The young lady whom Marlowe here calls “Desdemona” appears, in fact, to be identical with Lucrezia Magdalena di Brabantio, the senator’s only child by his third marriage. Christened in Venice in 1569, Lucrezia Magdalena would thus have been just 19 years old when she eloped with Othello, only to die three weeks later on the island of Crete.

dame? You haven't lost a daughter, sir. You have gained a son. Think of it that way."

"Think of it this way: I want him dead."

"Not my line of work. What's your son-in-law's name?"

"Othello the Moor."

"Othello l'Amour?"

"The Moor."

"But I thought—where does the commander of the Venetian military fit into this picture?"

"Same man."

"The Venetian Senate has appointed a *Muslim* to defend your Christian Republic from the Muslim Turks?"

"Othello is not actually a Mohammedan—'the Moor' is just a nickname we use, like 'the Jew,' or 'the Redskin,' or 'the Faggot.' He used to be a Muslim but we made a Christian out of him. It's what we do best. We also made him our commander because he is a professional tactician and, I might add, a savage killer. It's what *he* does best. But Othello also happens to be a Negro. Nothing we can do about that, I'm afraid."

"Why is that a problem?"

Brabantio shook his head, as if his daughter's marriage were a great tragedy. "Don't get me wrong," he said, "some of my best servants are Africans. I had a very dear colleague, now resting in peace, whose daughter was *courted* by an African. But Othello is no king of Morocco."

"So, if I understand you correctly, General Othello is protecting the Venetian Republic but he will not be welcome at the in-laws for family holidays?"

"Oh, he talks a good fight, I'll say that for him. Your blackamoor is quite the commanding story-teller." He rolled his eyes. "Ever hear of the Anthropophagi?"

"No."

“They are a race of Africans who eat their enemies for lunch. Othello tells of having fought the Anthropophagi—by himself, plus a desperate band of ragamuffin Coptic Christians, not three of whom besides himself escaped being peppered. The Moor professes also to have fought with the Blemmyae, an African tribe of headless and shirtless freaks whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. And he claims to have battled the Caledonians, a legendary race of caber-throwing haggis-eating Androgyni who go into battle wearing tasseled caps and knee socks and cute plaid skirts and no underwear—says Othello. I was fool enough to let this thick-lipped, fast-talking Moor inside my house, to tell his war stories. ‘*Desdemon!*’ I said. ‘*Look who’s coming to dinner! A great African story-teller!*’ And what’s my recompense? My daughter has been undone by a black man.”

“Sir, it sounds more like your daughter has been *done* a black man. But if they’re happy together, what’s it to you?”

Brabantio said: “I don’t like Negroes in the first place and in the second place I don’t like them running off with my daughter, and in the third place I don’t like them in the first place.”

“I may be able to use that line,” I said, “in the theatre. Thank you.” I made a note of it.

“That was off the record,” said the Senatorè. “Nor will there be any stage-plays about this affair.”

“Playing tough, are we?”

“I don’t get tough. My lawyers do. I have the best in Italy. Look to it.”

“So what do you want from me?”

“Same thing everybody wants: I want my way. And I intend to get it. I want my daughter back. I want her marriage annulled by the Pontiff. Torture is not excluded. I want to inflict upon the Moor whatever confinement and interrogation techniques our law will allow—and it allows quite a bit, these days. Venice is not

without gallows, Master Marlowe. Before we are done, I expect to see this man well hung.”

“Yes, I imagine so.”

“And I want you to give me the ocular proof.”

“The ocular proof? Of what, that he’s well hung?”

“That he used witchcraft to seduce my daughter.”

“Tell me about the girl.”

“Nineteen years old, blonde hair, star-bright eyes, dove-white skin, rosy cheeks, pearl smile, coral lips, honey breath, button nose, and chaste. Quite a doll, if a father may say so.”

“She’s *nineteen*? But when the bird is fledged, Signore, she leaves the nest. C’è la vita.”

“She hasn’t just left the nest. She’s flown with him to Crete.”

“—and she’s in *Crete*?”

“Yes, at Rethymno Bay. But that’s still classified. We have misled enemy spies to believe that his real objective is Cyprus.”

“Othello, to *Cyprus*? And your daughter, along with him? Does the commander know what the Turks did to Bragadin, your last guy in Cyprus? They cut off his ears, then flayed him alive—skinned him, like a rabbit—and killed him, after.”

“Master Marlowe! Had she remained in Venice, I would not require your assistance.”

“Let me set you straight about something, Senator: if you think that you can just barge in here when I don’t know you from Dante, and expect me to sail the length of the Adriatic and halfway to Egypt, to an island possibly overrun by Islamists before I even get there; and then to violate the sanctity of holy matrimony by snatching a grown kitten from her Christian husband, who happens also to be a killing machine; if that’s what you think, then it’s a *maybe*.” [...] [*End of extract.*]

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