Desdemona.

OTHELLO. ACT 1, SC. 3.

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DESDEMONA.

Desdemona was the daughter and heiress of Brabantio, a Venetian senator. Othello, a famous Moorish general, being a friend of Brabantio, made frequent visits to his house; and with no more studious wooing than the relation of his adventures and "hair-breadth 'scapes" in strange lands, did he win the love of the senator's beautiful daughter.

Desdemona, fearing the opposition of her father, who naturally wished to marry his child to some one of the many young nobles of Venice who were suitors for her hand, fled from her home by night, and became the Moor's wife.

On that same night, Othello was ordered by the reigning duke to set out at once to war against the Turks in the isle of Cyprus, whither his bride was permitted to follow him. On this expedition Othello had selected Cassio, a young Florentine nobleman, true friend to himself and Desdemona, to be his lieutenant, a post greatly desired by Iago, an old follower of Othello, who had received the appointment of "ancient" instead. Iago accompanied Othello in this capacity, while his wife, Emilia, attended upon the lady Desdemona as waiting-gentlewoman.

From the first, Iago had conceived the diabolic idea of prompting Othello to suspect his wife's intimacy with young Cassio, as

well to avenge his disappointed ambition, as from a suspicion of the Moor's previous relations with Emilia—but above all, to gratify the taste for treacherous plotting which was part of his detestable temper. His stratagems were admirably contrived for the victim they were intended to ensnare, though too transparent for a less generous and more suspicious nature than that of the passionate Othello. On the first night of the Moor's arrival in the island of Cyprus, Iago artfully prevailed upon Cassio to drink to excess—whence a brawl, ending in Cassio's disgraceful suspension from his military office. Nothing could be more natural, nor, as it proved, more fatal, to the tender Desdemona than to exert her influence with her newly-wedded lord to procure the pardon and reinstatement of their mutual friend, "Michael Cassio, that came a-wooing with him"—on which artless importunity the wily Iago ingeniously led Othello to put the vilest construction.

Desdemona possessed a curiously wrought handkerchief, most precious to her as the first gift of her husband, and which she superstitiously believed to be endowed with magic virtue. Iago bribed his wife to steal this dainty trifle from her mistress; and, having dropped it in Cassio's bed-chamber, he persuaded Othello that Desdemona had presented it to the young lieutenant as a token of her guilty preference. Such innocent trifles did this malignant spirit construe to his own vile meaning, till the Moor, maddened with jealous doubts of his wife's chastity, smothered her in her bed.

After the dreadful deed had been done, Othello received abundant proof of Desdemona's innocence from Emilia—whom Iago killed on the spot for betraying him; and, stabbing himself, the Moor, so miserably deceived, died on the body of his lovely victim.

The type of all gentle and refined beauty—"O, the world hath not a sweeter creature!"—Desdemona by her rare simplicity, her childlike artlessness of character, wins her way to the hearts of all who have conned the story of her woes and mourned her cruel fate.

In our own mind we class her naturally with Miranda and Ophelia; but she is less purely ideal than either of these; her dramatic condition differs from theirs in being simply domestic; though highly picturesque, it is dependent for its interest on no more romantic accessories than are afforded by the privacy of a sumptuous household, to the skilful management of which—notwithstanding that she was "an admirable musician," and of "high and plenteous wit and invention"—she does not scorn to devote a considerable portion of her time. With whatsoever of intense effects her married life is produced," herself is never part of them—she, indeed, constitutes their principal figure, but she is never involved in them, never understands them; her identity is preserved intact throughout.

Subordination, in thought and word and act, is the prominent feature of Desdemona's character: not simply the non-resisting humility of a weak, spiritless nature, but that honorable submission to one having authority (whether God, king, father, or husband) which, then, as in the later day of English Margaret More, formed an essential part of the education of the gently bred, only less important than religion itself, or, rather, included in that.

That Desdemona is not necessarily tame because her "spirit, so still and quiet," has been chastened by a graceful discipline, is proved by the boldness with which she takes her fate into her own hands when the occasion demands prompt action.

Disdainful of the "wealthy, curled darlings of her nation," she hearkens to and loves the gallant Moor, to whom "the flinty and

steel couch of war" was "thrice-driven bed of down;" and with the courageous delicacy of a true woman, she discovers her love to him who, last of all, would dream of winning it:

> She thanked me;
> And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
> And that would woo her;

and they elope and are married.

Again, no woman of meagre intellectual endowments—and as such Desdemona is too often regarded—or without sufficient of what we term *character*, could, with such force and graceful logic, have defended the step she had taken, in the presence of an august senate, which, of itself, would have overwhelmed the soft, timorous Desdemona as she exists in the popular imagination.

The reader will recollect that, on their wedding-night, Othello is brought before the Senate to answer the charge of Brabantio, of having procured the affections of his daughter by some unlawful means; Desdemona being summoned, her father appeals to her:

> * * * * * * * * * *
> Come hither, gentle mistress;
> Do you perceive, in all this noble company,
> Where most you owe obedience?
> *Des.* My noble father,
> I do perceive here a divided duty:
> To you I am bound for life and education;
> My life and education both do learn me
> How to respect you; you are the lord of duty—
> I am hitherto your daughter: But here's my husband;
> And so much duty as my mother show'd
> To you, preferring you before her father,
> So much I challenge that I may profess
> Due to the Moor, my lord.

And how full of eloquence, of the unfaltering pride of an honorable wife, is her petition to the duke to be allowed to follow her husband to Cyprus:

> That I did love the Moor, to live with him,
> My downright violence and scorn of fortunes
> May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued
> Even to the very quality of my lord:
> I saw Othello's visage in his mind;
> And to his honors, and his valiant parts,
> Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
> So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
> A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
> The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
> And I a heavy interim shall support
> By his dear absence: Let me go with him.

In Desdemona's passion for Othello we have a fair example of the proverbial tenacity of an Italian woman's love, however suddenly, or for whatever freak of fancy, it may have been conceived. No wrong, no outrage to her tender devotion, can for a moment alienate her loyal heart; while their honeymoon is yet high in the heavens, Othello treats her with "strange unquietness," with petulant impatience; but her generous fondness readily finds excuse for him:

> Nay, we must think, men are not gods;
> Nor of them look for such observances
> As fit the bridal.—Beshrew me much, Emilia,
> I was (unhandsome warrior as I am,)
> Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
> But now I find I had suborn'd the witness,
> And he's indited falsely.

He tries upon her unoffending head all the fantastic tricks of his half-crazed wits; he even strikes her—her of such tender

beauty, such careful nurture; yet no more bitter reproach escapes her injured heart than these patient words to Iago, to whom she has recourse in her afflicted strait:

> Those that do teach young babes
> Do it with gentle means, and easy tasks:
> He might have chid me so; for, in good faith,
> I am a child to chiding;

—concluding the interview with an appeal so touching as to move any but a fiend, or an Iago·

> O good Iago,
> What shall I do to win my lord again?
> Good friend, go to him; for, by this light of heaven,
> I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:—
> If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love,
> Either in discourse, or thought, or actual deed,
> Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense,
> Delighted them in any other form;
> Or that I do not yet, and ever did,
> And ever will,—though he do shake me off
> To beggarly divorcement,—love him dearly,
> Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;
> And his unkindness may defeat my life,
> But never taint my love.

There is nothing in all Shakspeare, to our mind, more affecting than the final night-scenes in this moving tragedy: the half-prescient sadness of the victim; her request, full of poetic pathos, to Emilia, to lay on her bed her wedding sheets, and, if she should die, to shroud her in one of them; the chanting of an old song which she had heard, long back in her childhood, sung by her mother's maid, who died of love—are all, from their sweet tinge of superstition, most touchingly effective. In her conversation

with Emilia, while disrobing for bed—that bed which is so soon to be her bier—the extreme delicacy of Desdemona's mind, the spotless chastity, which cannot be persuaded of the existence of a grossness so foreign to itself, is strikingly contrasted with the loose opinions, the coarse good sense, and the easy virtue of Iago's wife; it is the crowning beauty of her blameless life.