
Adaptations of Shakespeare

A critical anthology of plays from the seventeenth century to the present

Edited by

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Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief

Paula Vogel

Introduction

Paula Vogel, an American playwright, was born in 1951 and educated at Bryn Mawr College, Catholic University, and Cornell University. Having worked at a range of jobs (from secretary to packer for a moving company to factory worker), Vogel lectured at Cornell on women's studies and theatre before becoming artistic director of Theater with Teeth in New York. Author of numerous plays, including *Swan Song of Sir Henry* (1974), *The Oldest Profession* (1981), *And Baby Makes Seven* (1986), *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), and *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1992), Vogel '[l]ike Brecht, writes from a deeply rooted political sense' (Savran 1996: xi). Since 1985 she has been an associate professor and director of the Graduate Playwriting Program at Brown University. Winner of numerous fellowships and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for *How I Learned To Drive* (a response to Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*), Vogel articulates a particular brand of feminism described by David Savran as 'the result of contradictions that molded her when she was growing up' (1998: 17). From a mixed religious background – her father was a New York Jew (who left the family when Vogel was eleven), her mother a New Orleans Catholic – and a working-class family, as well as a lesbian who came out when she was seventeen, Vogel eventually gravitated toward both an academic and a theatrical career.

Vogel's work is startling for how it inverts audience expectations and challenges conventional notions of theatricality, especially with regard to simplistic readings of hot-button topics such as AIDS, domestic violence, the feminization of poverty, the non-traditional family, pornography, the sex trade, and child molestation. As Vogel states, 'I worry that there is no longer a place for audiences to come to a civic space – the theatre – to confront the disturbing

questions of our time. I remain scared of the dark – scared of our darkness – and I seek a communal light in the darkness of our theatres' (*The Baltimore Waltz*: 231). Vogel's lesbianism, like her gender politics, is devoted, as Savran writes, 'to exposing not just how women are entrapped and oppressed, but to the possibilities that figures like Desdemona or the oldest professionals have to contest, subvert and redefine the roles they have been assigned' (xi). 'I hate categorization,' Vogel affirms. 'At the same time, I think we have to exhaust categorization in order to break through it' (Clay). Despite this position, Vogel avers, 'I don't hate being "a lesbian woman playwright." I think there's no choice. And I'm aware that the thing has kept me out of a lot of theater companies, or has slowed down the progress of the career (and gender and race do that)' (Clay). Moreover, Vogel argues that 'it would be irresponsible of me, as a teacher and mentor to young men and women regardless of their sexuality, not to be out. It would be reprehensible of me to have a brother who died of AIDS but suffered far more from the homophobia that he experienced and not to be out' (Clay). Vogel complicates this position further by stating that 'I do not write lesbian plays. I will not speak for all women, and I will not speak for all lesbians' (Coen: 27).

Vogel's work has been characterized by crosstalk with other literary figures. *Desdemona*, a revisionist account of Shakespeare's *Othello*, in which Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca unfold their own unwritten counterplot in the back room of the palace while *Othello's* action is occurring off stage, 'suggests that Shakespeare's women are not quite the innocent victims of masculine desires they appear to be but active makers – and unmakers – of each others' destinies' (Savran 1996: x). Moreover, *Desdemona* places Shakespeare at the margins of its theatrical context, focusing instead on the society of women, which is at best a minor



Plate 4 Photo: © 1993 Gerry Goldstein. Production of *Desdemona* with (left to right) J. Smith-Cameron, Fran Brill, Cherry Jones

element in the Shakespearean original. Given its first staged reading in October 1987 at Cornell University with Vogel herself directing, the play has been restaged by, among others, the Bay Street Theater Festival in Sag Harbor, New York, and in November 1993 at the Circle Repertory Theater in New York City. The play, which has been called 'a rollicking, bawdy, postmodern, feminist reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* with no male characters' (Peterson and Bennett: 341), has also received predictable criticism for being a 'feminist tract' (Turvin).

Vogel calls the play 'a tribute (i.e., "rip-off") to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer' (*The Baltimore Waltz*: 176). Bauer, an Austrian dramatist, satirizes cultural pretensions associated with Shakespeare by linking Shakespeare's name with what, in the play, turns out to be a Swedish porno film. The play, which is not an adaptation of any recognizable

theatrical work by Shakespeare, stages the porno film's extreme acts of violence against women, which are enacted by Shakespeare in the notorious 'takes' (or scenes) 24 through 40. These 'takes' swing from the slapstick of the actors who are told by the stage directions to speak 'in imitation Swedish' (Bauer: 18) to Shakespeare's narcissistic self-interest as he reads into a megaphone from his own sonnets before torturing and degrading Sonia in a series of brutal scenes culminating in her decapitation.

Vogel's play imitates Bauer's structurally – it too is set as a series of cinematic takes. But Vogel departs from Bauer in her use of an entirely female cast (as opposed to Bauer's use of a predominantly male cast) and in her interrogation of the possibilities that emerge when an adaptation addresses the large silences in Shakespeare with regard to women's society. As Tish Dace points out, *Desdemona* 'provides us with everything which Shakespeare denies us: full portraits of the three women . . . high spirits which do not willingly suffer their men's foolishness, no easy acquiescence to being victimized, even a lusty, frank sexuality' (253), which includes a deliberately provocative homerotic interlude between Desdemona and Bianca. The play stages the difficulties of female solidarity: Emilia torn between loyalty to her mistress and a husband she barely tolerates; Desdemona, standing in for Bianca the hooker on Tuesday nights at a bawdy-house, torn between her own sensuality and her need for female companionship; and Bianca, split between her desire for a conventional family life and the freedom her status in the sex trade gives her.

Several adaptive strategies in *Desdemona* are worth mentioning. First is Vogel's rewrite of Shakespearean characterization, with a worldly Desdemona and a naive Emilia creating a very different stage dynamic from that in *Othello*. Second, Vogel provocatively recasts Emilia as stage-Irish and Bianca as stage-cockney, the servants being more clearly depicted in terms of class and nation than they are in Shakespeare, where Emilia is not classed in terms of speech at all. The play's notable omission of race as a further mode of adapting *Othello* may represent an unfortunate simplification on the part of Vogel, especially in the context of a play such as Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, another *Othello* adaptation, in which race is the central issue. Vogel's decision to focus on class and female sexuality rather than on race, however, do not prohibit a directorial practice that confronts this issue head on, either

through casting choices or through the rescripting of key passages. And her adaptation, like any adaptation, invites questions about the shifting paradigms of assumptions about performance. Does, for instance, Emilia's stage-Irishness necessarily prohibit her from being played by a black actor?

Dace argues that Vogel 'shows us we must blame the social system, implicitly responsible for denying the women sisterhood in a common cause, forcing them instead to depend on destructive men who exercise over them the power of life and death' (253). But the play avoids any reductive politics of blame, staging instead the difficulties of achieving autonomy or genuine solidarity (whether female-female, or female-male). Both Shakespeare and Vogel bring Desdemona to the same end. But with Vogel the sentimentality of Othello's murderous rage as an expression of a quintessentially male passion is displaced by a sensibility that frankly acknowledges the everyday pleasures and horrors of domestic life. That the pleasures and horrors figured in *Desdemona* are not easily reduced to a function of either sororal or patriarchal culture makes the play a sophisticated treatment of domestic life and of adaptive practices that too often reduce the complexities of Shakespeare to the simple solution of a happy ending, as in Nahum Tate's infamous rewrite of *King Lear*.

Like all the adaptations included in this anthology, Vogel's text is very much of its period and thus symptomatic of its cultural moment. Like Murray Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (1968), which makes Desdemona a reactive partner and is in many ways a pre-feminist text, Vogel's *Desdemona*, with its depiction of pre-AIDS, unprotected libertarian sexuality in scene 11, signals a different historical juncture, a different ideological underpinning. Adaptation, in this light,

is one of the ways in which historical (not to mention ideological) difference is represented and, ultimately, negotiated.

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Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief

Paula Vogel

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Note to directors

Desdemona was written in thirty cinematic 'takes.' The director is encouraged to create different pictures to simulate the process of filming: Change invisible camera angles, do jump cuts and repetitions, etc. There should be no blackouts between scenes. *Desdemona* was written as a tribute (i.e., 'rip-off') to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer.

Characters

DESDEMONA, Upperclass. Very

EMILIA, Broad Irish brogue

BIANCA, Stage-cockney

Place

A back room of the palace on Cyprus.

Time

Ages ago.

The prologue takes place one week before Desdemona's last day on Cyprus.

Prologue

A spotlight in the dark, pinpointing a white handkerchief lying on the ground. A second spotlight comes up on EMILIA, who sees the handkerchief. She pauses, and then cautiously looks about to see if she is observed. Then, quickly, EMILIA goes to the handkerchief, picks it up, stuffs the linen in her ample bodice and exits. Blackout.

I

A mean, sparsely furnished back room with rough, whitewashed walls. Upstage left there is a small,

heavy, wooden back entrance. Another door, stage right, leads to the main rooms of the palace. There are a few benches lining the walls, littered with tools, baskets, leather bits, dirty laundry, etc. The walls bear dark wooden racks that neatly display farm and work equipment made of rough woods, leathers and chain.

In the center of the room, there is a crude work table with short benches. As the play begins, Desdemona is scattering items and clothing in the air, barely controlling a mounting hysteria. Emilia, dark, plump and plain, with a thick Irish brogue, watches, amused and disgusted at the mess her lady is making.

DESDEMONA Are you sure you didn't see it? The last time I remember holding it in my hand was last week in the arbor – you're sure you didn't see it?

EMILIA Aye –

DESDEMONA It looks like –

EMILIA Like anybody's handkerchief, savin' it has those dainty little strawberries on it. I never could be after embroiderin' a piece of linen with fancy work to wipe up the nose –

DESDEMONA It's got to be here somewhere –

EMILIA After you blow your nose in it, an' it's all heavy and wet, who's going to open the damn thing and look at the pretty stitches?

DESDEMONA Emilia – are you sure it didn't get 'mixed up' somehow with your . . . your things?

EMILIA And why should I be needin' your handkerchief when I'm wearing a plain, soft shift which works just as well? And failing that, the good Lord gave me sleeves . . .

DESDEMONA It's got to be here!

(Returns to her rampage of the room) Oh – skunk water!

(A man's undergarment is tossed into the air behind DESDEMONA's shoulder) Dog piddle!!

EMILIA I'm after telling you m'lady –

DESDEMONA Nonsense! It's got to be here!

*(There is a crash of overturned chain.
DESDEMONA's shifts are thrown into the air)
Goddamn horse urine!!!*

EMILIA It was dear, once upon the time, when
m'lady was toddling about the palace, and all of
us servants would be follerin' after, stooping to
pick up all the pretty toys you'd be scatterin' -

DESDEMONA Emilia, please! I cannot bear a
sermon.

EMILIA There was the day the Senator, your
father, gave you your first strand of pearls from
the Indies - you were all of five - and your hand
just plucked it from your neck. How you
laughed to see us - Teresa, Maria and me -
scrabbling on all fours like dogs after truffles,
scooping up the rollin' pearls - *(There is a
ripping noise)*

DESDEMONA Oh, shit.

(Two halves of a sheet are pitched into the air.)

EMILIA But you're a married lady now; and when
m'lord Othello gives you a thing, and tells you to
be mindin' it, it's no longer dear to drop it willy-
nilly and expect me to be findin' it -

DESDEMONA Oh, piss and vinegar!! Where is the
crappy little snot rag!

(She turns and sees Emilia sitting) You're not
even helping! You're not looking!!

EMILIA Madam can be sure I've overturned the
whole lot, two or three times . . . It's a sight
easier hunting for it when the place is tidy;
when all is topsy-turvy, you can't tell a mouse
dropping from a cow pie!

*(DESDEMONA returns to the hunt; EMILIA picks
up the torn sheet)* Now see, this sheet here was
washed this morning. Your husband, as you
know, is fussy about his sheets; and while it was
no problem to have them fresh each night in
Venice - I could open the window and dunk
them in the canal - here on Cyprus it takes two
drooling orderlies to march six times down to
the cistern and back again.

(Regards the sheet carefully) It's beyond repair.
And now that your husband commands fresh
sheets, my Iago has got it in his head to be the
lord as well; he's got to have fresh sheets each
night for his unwashed feet.

DESDEMONA Emilia, please - I may puke.

*(DESDEMONA, in frustration, stamps on the
clothes she's strewn from the basket.)*

DESDEMONA It's got to be here, it's got to be here,
it's got to be here - Emilia - Help me find it!

EMILIA You're wasting your time, m'lady. I know
it's not here.

DESDEMONA *(Straightening herself)* Right. And
you knew this morning that my husband wasn't
mad at me. Just a passing whim, you said.

EMILIA Ah, Miss Desdemona . . . not even a
midwife can foretell the perfidiousity of men.

DESDEMONA Give me strength. Perfidy.

EMILIA That, too.

DESDEMONA It can't have walked off on two feet!

EMILIA Mayhap m'lady dropped it.

DESDEMONA Oh, you're hopeless. No help at all.
I'll find it by myself. Go back to your washing
and put your hands to use.

EMILIA Yes, m'lady.

2

EMILIA and DESDEMONA. EMILIA scrubs sheets.

DESDEMONA Will it come out?

EMILIA I've scrubbed many a sheet, but this is
the worst in my career . . . It's all that Bianca's
fault. I paid her well for the blood, too. 'And be
sure,' I says, 'it's an old hen - one on its last
gasp. Young chick blood's no good for bridal
sheets, it's the devil to come out.' 'Madam's
sheets,' I says, 'are the finest to be had in
Venice, and we don't want them ruined and
rotted from the stain.' And Bianca swore,
'I've an old hen on crutches that will wash
out clear as a maidenhead or a baby's
dropping.'

Ah, but that chick wasn't a week old. And
what with it bakin' in the sun for a month now -
but if anyone can, Mealy will scrub it virgin
white again.

DESDEMONA Oh, hush about it. I can't stand to
think on it . . . barbaric custom. And my best
sheets. Nobody displays bridal sheets on Cyprus.

EMILIA There aren't any virgins to be had on
Cyprus.

DESDEMONA Half the garrison came to see those
sheets flapping in the breeze.

EMILIA Why did the other half come?

DESDEMONA To pay their last respects to the
chicken!

(They laugh.)

3

*We hear EMILIA, in a good humor, humming 'When
Irish Eyes Are Smiling.' Another clatter of heavy
metal things being tossed onto the floor.*

DESDEMONA JESUS! WHAT IS THIS?!

EMILIA *(In disbelief)* You didn't find it!

(DESDEMONA crosses to EMILIA, holding a long, crooked bit of iron with a wicked point.)

DESDEMONA No - this!!

EMILIA 'Tis a hoof-pick.

DESDEMONA A hoof-pick? What is it used for?

EMILIA After all your years of trotting m'lady's bum over field and farrow, and you've never laid your eyes on the like? When your mount picks up a stone in its foot, and it's deep, you take the pick and hold on tight to the hoof, and then you dig it in and down to the quick and pry it out -

DESDEMONA You dig *this* in? Good lord -

EMILIA Aye, takes a goodly amount of sweat and grease. It's work for a proper man, it is.

(DESDEMONA, absorbed in fondling the hoof-pick, stretches out on the table.)

DESDEMONA Oh me, oh my - if I could find a man with just such a hoof pick - he could pluck out my stone - eh, Emilia?

(They laugh.)

Emilia, does your husband Iago have a hoof-pick to match?

(EMILIA turns and looks, then snorts.)

EMILIA What, Iago?

(DESDEMONA puts her hand on the base and covers it.)

DESDEMONA Well, then - this much?

EMILIA Please, mum! It's a matter o' faith between man and wife t -

DESDEMONA Ahh - not that much, eh?

(Covers more of the pick) Like this?

EMILIA Miss Desdemona!

DESDEMONA Come now, Emilia, it's just us -

EMILIA Some things are private!!

DESDEMONA It's only fair - I'm sure you know every detail about my lord -

EMILIA (Shrugging) When the Master Piddles, a Servant holds the Pot -

DESDEMONA (Persisting) This much hoof?

EMILIA Not near as much as that!

DESDEMONA This much?

(Pause.)

EMILIA (Sour) Nay.

DESDEMONA Good God, Emilia, I'm running out of -

EMILIA The wee-est pup of th' litter comes a'bornin' in the world with as much.

(DESDEMONA laughs.)

There. Is m'lady satisfied?

DESDEMONA Your secret's safe with me.

4

EMILIA, scrubbing. DESDEMONA lies on her back on the table, feet propped up, absentmindedly fondling the pick, and staring into space.

5

We hear the sound of EMILIA, puffing and blowing. Lights up on DESDEMONA getting a pedicure.

DESDEMONA Where is she? It's getting late. He'll be back soon, and clamoring for me. He's been in a rotten mood lately . . . Headaches, handkerchiefs, accusations - and of all people to accuse - Michael Cassio!

EMILIA The only one you haven't had -

DESDEMONA And I don't want him, either. A prissy Florentine, that one is. Leave it to a

cuckold to be jealous of a eunuch -

EMILIA (Crowing) Bianca would die!

DESDEMONA Then we won't tell her what I said, will we?

(EMILIA becomes quiet.)

What Bianca does in her spare time is her business.

(EMILIA's face clearly indicates that what BIANCA does in her spare time is EMILIA's business, too.

DESDEMONA watches EMILIA closely.)

DESDEMONA You don't much like Bianca, do you, Mealy?

(No response. EMILIA blows on DESDEMONA's toes)

Come on, now, tell me frankly - why don't you like her?

EMILIA It's not for me to say . . .

DESDEMONA Emilia!

EMILIA It's just that - no disrespect intended, m'lady - but you shouldn't go a'rubb'n' elbows with one o' her class . . . Lie down with hussies, get up with crabs . . .

DESDEMONA Her sheets are clean.

(Pause.)

You've been simmering over Bianca for some time, Mealy, haven't you?

EMILIA (Rancorously) I don't much like to see m'lady, in whose em-ploy I am, traipsing about in flopdens, doin' favors for common sloppots - Bianca! Ha! She's so loose, so low, that she's got to ad-ver-tise Wednesday Night Specials, half price for anything in uniform!

DESDEMONA Well, purge it out of your blood;

Bianca will soon be here -

EMILIA Here! Why here? What if someone sees

her sneaking up to the back door? What will the women in town say? A tart on a house call! How can I keep my head up hanging out the wash and feedin' the pigs when her sort comes sniffin' around -

DESDEMONA She's coming to pay me for last Tuesday's customers who paid on credit. And to arrange for next Tuesday -

EMILIA (*Horried*) Not again! Once was enough - you're not going there again! I thought to myself, she's a young unbridled colt, is Miss Desdemona - let her cool down her blood - but to make it a custom! I couldn't let you go back again - risking disease and putting us all in danger -

DESDEMONA Oh, tush, Mealy -

EMILIA You listen to me, Miss Desdemona: Othello will sooner or later find out that you're laying for Bianca, and his black skin is goin' to blister off with rage!! Holy Jesus Lord, why tempt a Venetian male by waving red capes? My Iago would beat me for lookin' at the wrong end of an ass!

(*VERY WORKED UP*) Your husband will find out and when he does! When he does!! (*Makes the noise and gesture of throat cutting*) And then! And then!! AIAIaiaiaahhh!! My lady!! What's to become of me! Your fateful handmaid! Where will I find another position in this pisshole harbor!

DESDEMONA Stop it, Mealy! Don't be . . . silly, nothing will happen to me. I'm the sort that will die in bed.

EMILIA (*Beseechingly*) You won't leave your poor Mealy stranded?

DESDEMONA You'll always have a position in this household . . . Of some sort. (*Mealy's face turns to stone*)

Oh, come now, Mealy, haven't I just promoted you?

EMILIA Oh, m'lady, I haven't forgot; not only your scullery maid, but now your laundress as well! I am quite sensible of the honor and the increase in pay - of two pence a week . . .

(*Suddenly turns bright and cheery*) And whiles we are on the subject -

DESDEMONA Oh, Christ, here it comes.

EMILIA But m'lady, last time an opening came up, you promised to speak to your husband about it in Venice. I suppose poor old Iago just slipped your mind -

DESDEMONA Look, I did forget. Anyway, I recommended Cassio for my husband's lieutenant. An unfortunate choice. But that subject is closed.

EMILIA Yes, mum.

(*EMILIA starts to return to her laundry. There is a knock at the door, and DESDEMONA brightens.*)

DESDEMONA There she is! Emilia, let Bianca in - No, no wait - (*To Mealy's annoyance, DESDEMONA arranges herself in a casual tableau.*)

(*The knock repeats. DESDEMONA signals EMILIA to go answer the door. EMILIA exits through the door to the palace, and then quickly returns.*)

EMILIA M'lady, it's your husband. He's waiting for you outside.

DESDEMONA (*Frightened*) Husband? . . .

Shhhittt . . .

(*DESDEMONA pauses, arranges her face into an insipid, fluttering innocence, then girlishly runs to the door. She flings it open, and disappears through the door.*)

DESDEMONA (*Offstage; breathless*) Othello!

(*And then, we hear the distinct sound of a very loud slap. A pause, and DESDEMONA returns, closes the door behind her, holding her cheek. She is on the brink of tears. She and EMILIA look at each other, and then EMILIA looks away.*)

6

DESDEMONA and EMILIA. DESDEMONA frantically searches.

DESDEMONA It's got to be somewhere!! - Are you quite sure -

EMILIA Madam can be sure I overlooked the whole lot several times.

DESDEMONA Um, Emilia . . . should, should you have 'accidentally' taken it - not that I'm suggesting theft in the slightest - but should it have by mistake slipped in with some of your things, your return of it will merit a reward, and all of my gratitude.

(*Tries to appear casual*) Not that the thing itself is worth anything - it's a pittance of musty linen - but still . . .

EMILIA (*With dignity*) I've never taken a thing, accidentally or not. I don't make no 'acc-idents.' Mum, I've looked everywhere. Everywhere.

(*Quietly*) Is m'lord clamoring about it much?

(*They eye each other. Pause.*)

DESDEMONA Which position, Mealy?

EMILIA (*Puzzled*) Which position?

DESDEMONA For your husband.

EMILIA Oh, Miss Desdemona! I won't forget all your -

DESDEMONA Yes, yes, I'm sure. What opening?

EMILIA It's ever so small a promotion, and so quite equal to his merits. He's ensign third-class, but the budget's ensign second-class.

DESDEMONA Very well, the budget office. Can he write and account and do - whatever it is that they do with the budget?

EMILIA Oh, yes - he's clever enough at that.

DESDEMONA I really don't understand your mentality, Emilia. You're forever harping on how much you detest the man. Why do you beg for scraps of promotion for him? Don't you hate him?

EMILIA I - I -

(*With relish*) I despise him.

DESDEMONA Then?

EMILIA You see, Miss, for us in the bottom ranks, when man and wife hate each other, what is left in a lifetime of marriage but to save and scrimp, plot and plan? The more I'd like to put some nasty rat-ridden in his stew, the more I think of money - and he thinks the same. One of us will drop first, and then, what's left, saved and earned, under the mattress for th' other one? I'd like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates - no matter what class buggers they all are. I says to him each night, 'I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow!'

7

EMILIA and DESDEMONA. *We hear the sounds of scrubbing between the scenes.*

DESDEMONA Please, my dear Emilia, I can count on you, can't I? As one closest to my confidence?

EMILIA Oh, m'lady, I ask no greater joy than to be close to your ladyship -

DESDEMONA Then tell me - have you heard anything about me? Why does Othello suspect Cassio?

EMILIA Oh, no, m'lady, he surely no longer suspects Cassio. I instructed Iago to talk him out of that bit of fancy, which he did, risking my lord's anger at no little cost to his own career; but all for you, you know!

DESDEMONA You haven't heard of anything else?

EMILIA No Ma'am.

(*But as DESDEMONA is to EMILIA's back, EMILIA drops a secret smile into the wash bucket. EMILIA*

raises her head again, though, with a sincere, servile face, and turns to DESDEMONA.)

EMILIA But if I did know anything, you can be sure that you're the first to see the parting of my lips about it -

DESDEMONA Yes, I know. You've been an extremely faithful, hardworking servant to me, Emilia, if not a confidante. I've noticed your merits, and when we return to Venice . . . well - you may live to be my *fille de chambre* yet.

EMILIA (*Not quite sure what a fille de chambre is*) I'm very grateful, I'm sure.

DESDEMONA Yes, you deserve a little reward, I think. (*EMILIA's face brightens in expectancy*) I'll see if I can wheedle another tuppence out of my husband each week. (*EMILIA droops*)

EMILIA (*Listlessly*) Every little tiny bit under the mattress helps, I always says to myself.

(*A pause. DESDEMONA paces, comes to a decision.*)

DESDEMONA Mealy - do you like the dressing gown you've been mending?

EMILIA It's a lovely piece of work, that is, Miss. I've always admired your dresses . . .

DESDEMONA Yesss . . . yes, but isn't it getting a bit dingy? Tattered around the hem?

EMILIA Not that anyone would notice; it's a beautiful gown, m'lady . . .

DESDEMONA Yes, you're right. I was going to give it to you, but maybe I'll hang on to it a bit longer . . .

(*EMILIA, realizing her stupidity, casts an avaricious, yet mournful look at the gown that was almost hers.*)

EMILIA Oh, m'lady . . . It's . . . it's certainly a lovely cloth, and there's a cut to it that would make one of them boy actors shapely . . .

DESDEMONA (*Peeved at the analogy*) Hmmmm - though, come to think of it, it would fit Bianca much neater, I think . . .

EMILIA Bianca! Bianca! She's got the thighs of a milch cow, m'lady!

DESDEMONA (*Amused*) I've never noticed.

(*EMILIA, sulking again, vigorously scrubs.*)

DESDEMONA (*In conciliation*) No, come to think of it, I believe you are right - it's not really Bianca's fashion. It's all yours. After tonight.

EMILIA Oh, Miss Desdemona!!

8

The same. In the darkness we hear EMILIA singing a hymn: 'La-la-la-la - Jesus; La-la-la - Sword; La-la-la-la - Crucifix; La-la-la-la - Word.'

Lights come up on DESDEMONA, lying stretched out on the table, her throat and head arched over its edge, upside down. A pause.

DESDEMONA You really think his temper today was only some peeve?

EMILIA I'm sure of it; men get itchy heat rash in th' crotch, now and then; they get all snappish, but once they beat us, it's all kisses and presents the next morning - well, for the first year or so.

DESDEMONA My dear mate is much too miserly to give me anything but his manhood. The only gift he's given me was a meager handkerchief with piddling strawberries stitched on it, and look how he's carrying on because I've lost it! He guards his purse strings much dearer than his wife.

EMILIA I'm sure my lord will be waitin' up for you to come to bed. Full o' passion, and embracin' and makin' a fool o' himself - You just see if your Mealy isn't right.

DESDEMONA Yes, of course you're right. Good old Mealy, I don't know what I'd do without your good common sense. Oh, it's the curse of aristocratic blood - I feel full of whims and premonitions -

EMILIA Perhaps it was something m'lady et?

DESDEMONA *(First she smiles; then she laughs)* Yes - that must be it!

(DESDEMONA laughs again. Mealy can't understand what is so funny.)

9

EMILIA and DESDEMONA.

EMILIA Ambassador Ludovico gave me a message and is wantin' a response.

DESDEMONA What does my cousin want?

(EMILIA digs into her bodice.)

EMILIA It's somewhere in here . . . wait . . .
(Searches)

DESDEMONA Oh, good Lord, Mealy, you could lose it in there!

(DESDEMONA runs to EMILIA, peers in her bosom and starts to tickle her.)

EMILIA Miss Desde -! Wait, now - no, STOP!! Here it is now -

(EMILIA finds a folded paper. She hands it to DESDEMONA, and then peers over DESDEMONA's shoulder.)

DESDEMONA *(Sighing)* Oh, Ludovico, Ludovico.

'Deeply desiring the favor . . . ' etceteras.

' . . . Impatient until I can at last see you in private, throwing off the Robes of State to appear as your humble friend.' He's just too tiresome.

EMILIA What response are you wanting me to give?

DESDEMONA Oh, I don't know. Let the old lecher wait. I told him it was entirely past between us, and then he bribes his way into being appointed Ambassador!

(DESDEMONA in a loquacious mood. EMILIA gives her a rubdown.)

DESDEMONA Ah, Emilia, I should have married Ludovico after all. There's a man who's always known the worth of ladies of good blood! A pearl for a pinch, a broach for a breast, and for a maiden-head . . .

(Breaks into laughter)

Ah, that was a lover!

EMILIA I don't know how those sainted sisters could let such is-sagnations go on in their convent -

DESDEMONA Assignations. Really, Emilia, you're quite hopeless. However can I, the daughter of a Senator, live with a washer woman as *fille de chambre*? All fashionable Venice will howl. You must shrink your vowels and enlarge your vocabulary.

EMILIA Yes, mum. As-signations, as it were.

(Muttering) If it were one o' my class, I could call it by some names I could pronounce. I've put many a copper in their poor box, in times past, thinkin' them sisters of charity in a godly house. Not no more. They won't get the parings of my potatoes from me, runnin' a society house of ass-ignations!

DESDEMONA Oh, those poor, dear sisters. I really don't think they knew anything about the informal education their convent girls receive. For one thing, I believe myopia is a prerequisite for Holy Orders. Have you ever noticed how nuns squint?

(Beat)

Each Sunday in convent we were allowed to take visitors to chapel. Under their pious gaze Ludovico and I would kneel, and there I could devote myself to doing him *à la main* *(Gestures)* right in the pew! They never noticed! Sister

Theresa did once remark that he was a man excessively fond of prayer.

10

EMILIA's *credo*.

EMILIA It's not right of you, Miss Desdemona, to be forever cutting up on the matter of my beliefs. I believe in the Blessed Virgin, I do, and the Holy Fathers and the Sacraments of the Church, and I'm not one to be ashamed of admittin' it. It goes against my marrow, it does, to hear of you, a comely lass from a decent home, giving hand jobs in the pew; but I says to myself, Emilia, I says, you just pay it no mind, and I go about my business. And if I take a break on the Sabbath each week, to light a candle and say a bead or two for my em-pliers, who have given me and my husband so much, and who need the Virgin's love and protection, then where's the harm, say I?

(*Breath. Gets carried away*) Our Lady has seen me through four and ten years of matreemony, with my bugger o' a mate, and that's no mean feat. Four and ten years, she's heard poor Mealy's cries, and stopped me from rising from my bed with my pillow in my hand to end his ugly snores 'til Gabriel - (*Stops and composes herself*)

Ah, Miss Desdemona, if you only knew the peace and love Our Lady brings! She'd help you, mum, if you only kneeled real nice and said to her . . . and said . . .

(EMILIA can't find the words that such a sinner as DESDEMONA should say as polite salutation to Our Lady. DESDEMONA erupts into laughter.)

11

EMILIA eats her lunch. DESDEMONA plays in a desultory fashion with a toy.

DESDEMONA (*Frightened*) Emilia, have you ever deceived your husband Iago?

EMILIA (*With a derisive snort*) That's a good one. Of course not, Miss - I'm an honest woman.

DESDEMONA What does honesty have to do with adultery? Every honest man I know is an adulterer . . .

(*Pause*)

Have you ever thought about it?

EMILIA What is there to be thinkin' about? It's enough trouble once each Saturday night, than

to be lookin' for it. I'd never cheat - never - not for all the world I wouldn't.

DESDEMONA The world's a huge thing for so small a vice.

EMILIA Not my world, thank you. Mine's tidy and neat and I aim to keep it that way.

DESDEMONA Oh, the world! Our world's narrow and small, I'll grant you; but there are other worlds - worlds that we married women never get to see.

EMILIA Amen - and don't need to see, I should add.

DESDEMONA If you've never seen the world, how would you know? Women are clad in purdah, we decent, respectable matrons, from the cradle to the altar to the shroud . . . bridled with linen, blinded with lace . . . These very walls are purdah.

EMILIA I don't know what this thing called 'purdah' means, but if it stands for dressing up nice, I'm all for it . . .

DESDEMONA I remember the first time I saw my husband and I caught a glimpse of his skin, and, oh, how I thrilled. I thought - aha! - a man of a different color. From another world and planet. I thought, if I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind - I can escape and see other worlds.

(*Pause*)

But under that exotic façade was a porcelain white Venetian.

EMILIA There's nothing wrong with Venice; I don't understand why madam's all fired up to catch Cyprus Syph and exotic claps.

DESDEMONA Of course you don't understand. But I think Bianca does. She's a free woman - a new woman - who can make her own living in the world, who scorns marriage for the lie that it is.

EMILIA I don't know where madam's getting this new woman hogwash, but no matter how you dress up a cow, she's still got udders.

Bianca's the eldest one of six girls, with teeth so horsey she could clean 'em with a hoof-pick, and so simple she has to ply the trade she does! That's what your Miss Bianca is!

DESDEMONA Bianca is nothing of the sort. She and I share something common in our blood - that desire to know the world. I lie in the blackness of the room at her establishment . . . on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights. And the men come into that pitch-black room - men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, with rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me,

Emilia – seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me. I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind – oh, how I travel!

12

EMILIA and DESDEMONA. DESDEMONA is recklessly excited.

EMILIA You're leaving?!! Your husband?!!

DESDEMONA It's a possibility!

EMILIA Miss Desdemona, you've been taking terrible chances before, but now – if my lord catches you giving him th' back wind, he'll be after murdering both of us for sure –

DESDEMONA Where's my cousin Ludovico? Is he in his room?

EMILIA He said he was turnin' in early to get some rest before th' morning –

DESDEMONA Yes, he'll catch the first tide back. Well, there's no harm in trying.

EMILIA Trying what!

DESDEMONA Trying on the robes of the penitent daughter. Ludovico can surely see how detestable this island, this marriage, this life is for me.

(Has worked herself to the point of tears. Then she smiles)

Perhaps a few tears would move him to intercede with my father on my behalf. If the disgrace of eloping with a moor is too great for Venetian society, a small annual allowance from Papa, and I promise never to show my face in town; and then . . . who knows . . . Paris! Yes, I'll go write Ludovico a note right away, asking to see him tonight. – Mealy, just in case, could you pack a few things for me?

EMILIA And what if your husband discovers –

DESDEMONA I'll leave first thing in the morning.

EMILIA If I may make so bold to suggest –

DESDEMONA What, what –

EMILIA That you by all means sleep with your husband tonight. So's he won't suspect anything. While you and he lie together, and if your cousin agrees, Mealy could pack up your things quiet-like in your chamber.

DESDEMONA Yes, that's good. My life rests on your absolute discretion, Emilia.

EMILIA No one will hear a peep out o' me. But, my lady –

DESDEMONA Now what is it?

EMILIA What becomes of me?

DESDEMONA Oh, good heavens, Mealy – I can't think of trivia at a time like this.

(Smoothly) I tell you what. Be a good girl, pack my things, and, of course, should I leave tomorrow, I can't very well smuggle you on board, too; but I will send for you within the week. And your services will be remembered in Venice; with freer purse strings – who knows? Eh, my *fille de chambre*?

(At this sop to her feelings, EMILIA becomes fierce.)

EMILIA That won't do, m'lady. If you leave me behind, I'll not see you again, as your laundress, much less as your '*fee der schomer*.'

(DESDEMONA, realizing the power that EMILIA now has, kneels beside her.)

DESDEMONA All right. I'll intercede with my cousin on your behalf. I'll plead with him to take you, too. But I can't promise anything. Are you sure it's what you want? *(EMILIA nods)*

You'd leave your husband behind? *(EMILIA nods vigorously)*

Then – not a word. *(Rises)*

(In turning to go) Oh, Emilia, since you're just dawdling over that laundry, why not stop and peel some potatoes for Cook. When my husband comes in, he'll want his usual snack of chips before he turns in – just the way he likes them . . . *(Shudders)* Greasy.

EMILIA But, Miss, it's not my place no more to peel potatoes! I'm promoted now! I'm no mere *(With disgust)* SCULLERY MAID!

DESDEMONA Now, Mealy, just this once –

EMILIA You said I wouldn't have to do potatoes anymore!

DESDEMONA *(Harshly)* I can leave you rotting on Cyprus all together, you know. Do as you're told. Peel the potatoes, and then look sharp and have that wash on the line by the time I return. Do I make myself clear?

EMILIA Yes, m'lady.

DESDEMONA *(Sweetly)* And Emilia, dear, if Bianca comes when I'm gone, let me know immediately – I'll be in my chamber.

EMILIA Very good, Miss Desdemona.

(DESDEMONA exits. EMILIA grudgingly gets up, and finds the barrel of potatoes. On the bench there is a paring knife. EMILIA brings everything back to the table, sits, and begins paring potatoes – venting her resentment by gouging out eyes, and stripping the skin from a potato as if flaying a certain mistress alive.)

EMILIA *(Snorts out in contempt)* '*Fee der shomber*!'

(Then she pauses again, and wonders if Desdemona might not be for real in her offer. She questions the empty room) 'Feeyah der schomber?'

(Before EMILIA's eyes, she visualizes splendid dresses, the command of a household of subservient maids, a husband less existence - all the trappings that go with the title.

EMILIA begins energetically, resolutely and obediently to slice the potatoes.)

13

EMILIA is hanging up the wash. BIANCA knocks several times; then enters.

BIANCA Gaw Blimey!

EMILIA And where is't you've lost your manners? Lettin' the door ajar and leavin' in drafts and the pigs -

BIANCA Aw'm sorry, Aw'm sure . . .

(BIANCA closes the door. She hesitates, and then with friendly strides, goes toward the clothesline.)

BIANCA 'Ow do, Emilia!

EMILIA I'd be doin' a lot better if ye'd stop your gaddin' and lend a hand with these things.

BIANCA Oh. Right you are, then.

(BIANCA goes briskly to the clothesline, and works. Silence as the women empty the basket. EMILIA leaves BIANCA to finish and starts in on her sewing. Pause.)

BIANCA Well, it's - it ain't 'arf swank 'ere, eh? *(Indicates the room)*

EMILIA *(Snorts)* Swank? What, this? This is only the back room. The palace is through those doors -

BIANCA Oh. Well, it's swank for a back room wotever it 'tis. Aw niver got to see it much; the Guv'nor in the owld days didn't let me near, said Au made the men tomoodle on their shifts; like as they'd be dis-tracted by me atomy. Aw think it's sweet o' him to gi' me such credit; me atomy ain't that bleedin' jammy - but then, the owld Guy was the first to gi' me the sheep's eye 'imself. Very sweet on me, 'e was. So you see, Aw'd niver got close to the place before. Aw fink it's swank!

EMILIA *(Icily)* I'm sure you do.

BIANCA Yes, it's quite - wot do ye call it - lux-i-orious.

EMILIA Lux-i-o-ri-us!! If I was you, I'd large my voc-abulary, an' shrink me vowels.

BIANCA *(Offended)* 'Ere now! Wot bus'ness is me vowels to you?! Leave me vowels alone -

EMILIA I'm after talking about your voc-abulary - your patter - not your reg-ularity.

BIANCA Oh.

(Keeping up a friendly front with difficulty)

Right. Well, then, is Desdemona 'ere?

EMILIA *(Sharply)* Who?

BIANCA Uh . . . Des-de-mona -

EMILIA Is it m'lady you're referrin' to as if she were your mess mate?

BIANCA Look 'ere, Aw'm only doin' as Aw was towld. She tells me to call her Desdemona, and she says Aw was to call and settle up accounts for last Tuesday night for those johns who paid on tick - oh, you know, who paid on credit, as yew la-de-da Venetians would say.

EMILIA *(Softly hissing)* You listen to me, lassie: You're ridin' for a fall the likes of which you never got paid for by your fancy men. The mistress of this house is not at home, nor will be to the likes of you. What m'lady does in the gutter is her own business, same as yours, but what happens here is the common buzz of all.

BIANCA *(Stunned)* Wot! Miss Desdemona herself is callin' us mates - Aw niver -

EMILIA Then she's gullin' you, as sure as 'tis she's gullin' that ass of a husband who's so taken with her; but let me tell you, you'll go the way like all the other fancies she's had in Venice . . . I should know. We all of us servants in her father's house talked on end about Miss Desdemona. - For a time, she wanted to be a saint, yes! A nun with the sisters of mercy. At age twelve, she was washin' the courtyard stones for penance, with us wiping up behind her. Then she was taken with horses, thank Jesus, and left sainthood behind. And then in turn again, she thought she was dyin' - stopped eating, and moped, and talked all dreamy and a little balmylike - until her father finally saw sense and sent her to the convent to be bred out of her boredom. You're nothin' but the latest whim, a small town floozy with small town slang, and if she's lucky, she'll tire of you before the master finds out. *(Significantly)* If she's lucky.

BIANCA *(Somewhat subdued)* So wot am Aw t'do, Emilia? Aw arks you -

EMILIA Then ask me by 'Miss Emilia' to you - *(With great dignity)* I'll have you know, I've hereby been promoted to 'fee der shimber' and if I was you, I'd keep on my right side.

BIANCA *(Impressed, scared)* Oh - 'fee dar shimber' -

Aw niver met one o' those before – Aw arks yer pardon, Miss Emilia, Aw'm sure.

EMILIA That's a bit of all right. You just listen to me: I know what side of me bread is buttered; behind this whimsy-cal missus is a power of a master – so you mind yourself; the smell of your sin's goin' to catch m'lord's whiffin' about, and he's as jealous as he's black. If m'lord Othello had a mind to it, he could have that little lollin' tongue of yours cut clean out of your head, with none of the citizens of Cyprus to say him nay. And then what would you do for your customers! If he caught you degeneratin' his wife –

BIANCA (*Starting to cry with fear*) Aw swear, Miss Emilia, Aw'm not degeneratin' m'lady; we was just mates, that's wot. If Missus Desdemona wants to lark and gull her smug of a husband, that's her business, then, ain't it? Aw done as she towld me, an' that's all. She's a good lady, an' all, and Aw've just been friendly-like to her –

EMILIA Don't be a little fool hussy. There's no such creature, two-, three- or four-legged, as 'friend' betwixt ladies of leisure and ladies of the night. And as long as there be men with one member but two minds, there's no such thin' as friendship between women. An' that's that. So turn yourself around, go out and close the door behind you, and take all traces of the flophouse with you, includin' your tall tales about your 'friendships' with ladies –

BIANCA (*Anger finally conquering fear*) You can call me wot you like, but Aw'm no liar! Aw'm as 'onest a woman as yerself! And wot's more, mebbe you can wipe yer trotters on women who have to crack their crusts by rolling blokes in Venice, but 'ere it's differnt. – Aw have a place 'ere and Aw'm not ashamed t'own it. Aw'm nice to the wives in town, and the wives in town are rather nice to me. Aw'm doin' them favors by puttin' up wif their screwy owld men, and Aw like me job! The only ponk Aw has to clean up is me own.

(*Starts to leave, but*) And wot's more, Aw likes yer lady, whefer you think so or not. She can see me as Aw am, and not arsk for bowin' and scrapin'. She don't have to be nobby, 'cause she's got breedin', and she don't mind liking me for me own self – wifout th' nobby airs of yer Venetian washer-women! Aw'm at home 'ere in my place – you, you Venetian washerdonna, you're the one out o' yer element!

(BIANCA stalks to the door, but before she can reach it, DESDEMONA enters.)

DESDEMONA Emilia.

14

The same. DESDEMONA, EMILIA and BIANCA.

DESDEMONA Emilia. I thought I told you to tell me the instant Miss Bianca arrived. Well?

EMILIA I didn't want to be botherin' m'lady with the Ambassador –

DESDEMONA I want none of your excuses for your rudeness to our guest. My dear Bianca! I've been waiting impatiently – I could have just died of boredom.

(*Bestows a warm hug on BIANCA*)

May I kiss you?

(DESDEMONA 'kisses' BIANCA by pressing both sides of their cheeks together.)

BIANCA (*Stammering*) Aw'm not worthy of it, m'lady –

DESDEMONA Oh, Bianca, so stiff and formal! – What have I done that you should be so angry with me?

BIANCA (*Quickly*) Nofing! Your lady's been all kindness to me . . . but mayhap . . . Aw'm not the sort o' mate for one o' your company!

DESDEMONA Nonsense! I'll decide my own friendships . . .

(DESDEMONA looks meaningfully at EMILIA.)

DESDEMONA (*To BIANCA*) You must excuse my entertaining you in such a crude barn of a room; my room's much cozier, but I don't know when my . . . my . . . 'smug' – is that right? (BIANCA nods) – When he'll return. (*Laughs*)

Right now Othello's out in the night somewhere playing Roman Orator to his troops.

(*Desdemona guides BIANCA to the table; they sit side by side*) Emilia . . . Ask Miss Bianca if she'd like some wine. (*To BIANCA*) It's really quite good, my dear.

(EMILIA glumly approaches BIANCA.)

EMILIA Well, are you wantin' any?

DESDEMONA Emilia! 'Would you care for some wine, Miss Bianca?'

EMILIA (*Deep breath; red*) 'Would you care for some wine, Miss Bianca?'

BIANCA Why thank you – D-Desdemona, Aw could do w' a sneaker –

DESDEMONA (*Laughs*) How I love the way you talk! . . . Emilia, fetch the wine and two goblets.

That will be all.

EMILIA Yes, mum.

(EMILIA exits and BIANCA relaxes.)

DESDEMONA My poor Bianca; has Emilia been berating you?

BIANCA Well, Aw don't know about that, but she's been takin' me down a bit. Aw don't think she likes me very much.

DESDEMONA Oh, what does that matter! Why should you want her friendship? You don't have to care what anyone thinks about you - you're a totally free woman, able to snap your fingers in anyone's face!

BIANCA Yea, that's wot all right - but still, Aw likes people to like me.

DESDEMONA Oh, well, you mustn't mind Emilia. She's got a rotten temper because her husband - her 'smug' is such a rotter. Oh, Iago! (*Shudders*) Do you know him?

BIANCA (*Smiling, looking away*) Aw know 'im by sight -

DESDEMONA You know the one, then - the greasy little man. He's been spilling his vinegar into her for fourteen years of marriage, until he's corroded her womb from the inside out. And every day she becomes more and more hollowed out, just - just a vessel of vinegar herself.

BIANCA (*Disturbed*) Wot a funny way of lookin' at it -

(*BIANCA is bewildered.*)

15

BIANCA and DESDEMONA.

BIANCA So you don't fancy Iago, then, do you?

DESDEMONA Detest him. But of course, I don't have anything to do with him - I only need suffer his wife's company. Poor old Mealy -

BIANCA 'Mealy?'

(*BIANCA laughs, her fear of EMILIA diminishing.*)

DESDEMONA Yes, I've nicknamed her that, because I suspect it annoys her. Still, it fits.

(*DESDEMONA and BIANCA giggle.*)

DESDEMONA Alas, when Othello and I eloped it was on such short notice, and my husband's so stingy with salary that the only maid I could bring was my father's scullery maid.

BIANCA Yer scullery maid! Not . . . nor yer - wot-de-ye-call-it - 'Fee dah - Feyah der -'

DESDEMONA 'Fille de chambre!' Heavens, no! I keep her in line with the prospect of eventual advancement, but she's much too unsuitable for that - why she doesn't speak a word of French, and she's crabby to boot. Still, she's devoted and that makes up for all the rest.

BIANCA Wot makes you fink she's devoted?

DESDEMONA Ah, a good mistress knows the secret thoughts of her maids. She's devoted.

BIANCA Well, it's a cooshy enough way to crack a crust . . .

DESDEMONA Crack a crust?

BIANCA Oh, beg yer pardon; Aw mean t'earn a livin' -

DESDEMONA (*Enthralled*) 'Crack a crust!' How clever you are, Bianca!

16

DESDEMONA, BIANCA and EMILIA. EMILIA stands before DESDEMONA, bearing a pitcher and two mugs on a tray.

EMILIA Wine, m'lady . . .

DESDEMONA Ah, excellent.

(*EMILIA serves DESDEMONA first with all the grace she can muster; then she negligently pushes the wine in the direction of BIANCA.*)

BIANCA Thank you, Mealy.

DESDEMONA (*Toasting Bianca*) Now, then: To our friendship!

BIANCA T' yer 'ealth -

(*DESDEMONA delicately sips her wine, as BIANCA belts it down so that the wine trickles from the corner of her mouth. EMILIA is aghast. As BIANCA wipes her mouth with her hand, she notices EMILIA's shock.*)

BIANCA (*Blurts*) 'Scuse me guttlin' it down me gob -

DESDEMONA Oh, tush, Bianca. Mealy, haven't you mending to carry on with?

(*EMILIA silently seats herself apart and picks up the drawers.*)

DESDEMONA I tell you, Bianca, it's a disgrace. My husband refuses to buy new linen for his drawers, so Emilia must constantly mend the old.

(*Confidentially*) He's constantly tearing his crotch hole somehow.

BIANCA (*Amused*) And how does that happen?

DESDEMONA (*Demurely*) I have no idea. - More wine, dear?

17

The same. BIANCA and DESDEMONA, drinking. EMILIA sews.

DESDEMONA How about another . . . round?

BIANCA All right, then.

(DESDEMONA *pours generously*) But not so much! Aw could get lushy easy.

(BIANCA *sips her wine*; DESDEMONA *knocks it back, and wipes her mouth with her hand. They laugh.*)

18

DESDEMONA and BIANCA, *drinking. They are giggling helplessly, spluttering.* EMILIA *sews.* DESDEMONA *starts to choke on her wine from laughing.*

19

The same. DESDEMONA and BIANCA *try to control themselves. Then DESDEMONA holds up the hoof-pick, and BIANCA and DESDEMONA explode in raucous laughter.* EMILIA *is furious.*

20

The same.

BIANCA Listen, luvs, where's yer five-minute lodging?

DESDEMONA My . . . what?

BIANCA Yer Drury Lane? Yer - where's yer bleedin' crapper! Yew know - where do yew make water?

EMILIA M'lady makes her water in a hand-painted Limoges pot, a holy sight with angels havin' a grand time - it's not for the like of you!

DESDEMONA There's an outhouse in the back by the shed . . . careful of the muck and the pigs.

BIANCA Ta. Be back in a few . . . Aw've got t' go see a bloke about a horse.

(BIANCA *exits.*)

EMILIA And you're after havin' yourself a proper time.

DESDEMONA Oh, Mealy, I'm sorry - we were just having fun -

EMILIA At my husband's expense. You finagled that out o' me, and then you went and told it to My Lady of the Public Square . . .

DESDEMONA It . . . It just . . . slipped out.

(*Goes into another gale of laughter; then*) Mealy, I'm going to ask her about Cassio!

EMILIA Why must you be knowin' every man's size?!

(DESDEMONA *laughs again.*)

DESDEMONA No, I mean I'm going to tell her that Othello suspects him.

EMILIA Are you daft from the wine?

DESDEMONA Why not? Maybe we can get to the bottom of this . . .

EMILIA Why is it mattering? Tomorrow morning we're leaving with the Ambassador -

DESDEMONA Yes, yes, but I can find out why -

EMILIA I don't understand why m'lady is in such a rush to havin' her throat slashed our last night on Cyprus -

DESDEMONA Look, I'll just tell her that my husband is under some false impressions and ask her for -

EMILIA And why should she be believin' you?

DESDEMONA She'll believe me! She'll believe me because . . . I'll give her . . . I'll give her . . . my word of honor.

EMILIA And just how much goat cheese does that buy at market? - I know the world! I've seen flesh buckets fightin' for their fancy men in the streets in Venice, and a pretty sight it was!

DESDEMONA Oh, Mealy -

EMILIA You'll be bleedin' on the wrong time of the month! Those trullies, all of them, carry slashers down in their boots -

(BIANCA *throws open the door and sticks her head in*; EMILIA and DESDEMONA *are startled.*)

BIANCA Did-jew miss me?

21

BIANCA, DESDEMONA and EMILIA.

BIANCA 'Ere now - let me settle w' you fer Tuesday night. Let's see . . . (*Rummages in a pocket of her dress*) It were six pence a john, at ten johns makes fer . . . five bob, an' tuppence fer tips.

(EMILIA *gasps.*)

DESDEMONA I can hear what you're thinking Mealy - Holy Mother, I made more in twenty minutes than you do in a week of washing!

EMILIA Five bob . . .

DESDEMONA How large now the world for so small a vice, eh, Mealy?

EMILIA I'm . . . I'm not to be tempted, Miss Desdemona.

DESDEMONA Brave girl!

BIANCA 'Ere's the brass ready. Tuppence for tips is bleedin' well for a Tuesday.

DESDEMONA Really?

BIANCA It so be as how Wednesday is payday 'ere; Tuesday nights are the cooshest layin', but the stingiest payin' -

EMILIA Aye, 'Men earns their money like Horses and spends it like Asses . . .'

DESDEMONA Never mind Mealy, Bianca; she's over there calculating what price fidelity. Now about next week -

EMILIA You two can cackle with laughter at me if you like, but it's a duty for me to stop your ladyship from gettin' into danger -

BIANCA (*Offended*) Danger! Wot danger! She helped me out on me Adam an' Eve Night - there's no danger. Aw gave her me lambs; the feisty, firkin' lads come on th' other nights, not on Tuesday. It don't take no elbow grease; Tuesday's just lying back and Adam an' Evein' it -

EMILIA I don't understand your 'Adam and Eve' and I don't think I want to . . .

DESDEMONA Oh yes you do, Mealy; 'Adam and Eve' is what you and Iago did on your wedding night . . .

BIANCA She just might fink it means fallin' asleep -

(*EMILIA vigorously stitches the linen.*)

DESDEMONA She's right, though, Bianca, she's only trying to protect me. - How about if we leave next Tuesday night open. If I can sneak away into the darkness of your boudoir, then I'll send word by Emilia -

BIANCA Right, then, but you understand me, Miss Desdemona, there'll be no firsky Johns when you comes clan-decently; just the meek ones who are low on pocket-brass, or the stingy-mingy-gits who don't want to pay for nothin' wild. An' there'll be a fresh bed, an' the room so dark that your own husband wouldn't know you -

DESDEMONA Oh, Bianca - what a thought - do you think he'd come? I'd die for sure - (*Laughs*)

And wouldn't he be mad if he'd paid for what he got for free at home!!

BIANCA Well, the room's bleedin' black - blacker than he is.

(*BIANCA and EMILIA laugh together; DESDEMONA is affronted.*)

DESDEMONA I beg your pardon?

BIANCA No, no, all my Tuesday Johns are reg'lars - Aw know 'em all. So if you want, let me know - it'll be treacle next to wot Aw had today -

DESDEMONA Do tell, Bianca -

EMILIA Hasn't m'lady had enough -

DESDEMONA Oh, hush, Mealy - just mend your crotches, and don't listen.

BIANCA All right, then. Aw have this one John who comes once a week for an L 'n B -

DESDEMONA 'L and B?'

BIANCA In th' Life, it's known as a lam an' brim - first they lam you, an' mayhap you lam them, then you brim 'em . . .

(*DESDEMONA looks blank*) You know - first they beat you, an' then you beat them, and then you give 'em wotever - an Adam an' Eve, or a Sunny-Side Over -

DESDEMONA (*Dawning*) You mean men actually pay to beat you? And to be beaten?

BIANCA Oh, well, it costs 'em a pretty penny, Aw can tell you; there's nothin' doin' for less than two bob.

DESDEMONA (*Eyes wide*) My. Well, carry on.

BIANCA Well, there's this one John, an owld mate, who's been on tick for some weeks, an' 'e's got quite a bill. But Aw feels sorry for 'im, 'is wife really lams 'im at 'ome, an' Aw figure 'e needs t' get it off 'is chest. So 'e comes in, an' Aw says, 'Tom, you owe me over two quid, now; when's it comin'?'
I
E

'Gaw, Bianca,' 'e says, 'Aw just been out o' collar, an' -'

DESDEMONA 'Out of collar?'

BIANCA Wot yew call un-deployed . . .

'Bianca,' 'e says, 'Gawd luv yew, me owld woman an' Aw've had a row, an' Aw'm all done in. Aw'll pay th' soddin' bill, some'ow; but fer now, fer owld times . . . 'e says.
2
T
D

Well, Gawd's Wounds, wot was Aw t'do? 'Right, then, Tom,' Aw said. An' Aw lays down on the bed - 'cause 'e liked me to go first - an' 'e puts the straps on me.
E
D

'Tom,' Aw says, 'listen, luv, th' straps are bleedin' tight!' An' before Aw knew wot, 'e was lammin' me fer real!! 'E did me fer a jacketin' such as Aw thought would be me last L 'n' B!!

Aw bite me teeth not to scream, 'cause the bobbies won't put up with no row, no matter how many quid Aw pay 'em . . . Well, Tom finally gets it over wif, an' it's my turn.
E
B
E

'Aw'm sorry, Bianca,' 'e says, 'if Aw got a bit rough.'

'Oh, it's nofin', Tom,' Aw says - 'cause Aw'm determined t' get me own back . . . So, Aw tie 'im down on th' bed - 'e's a big strapper o' a bloke - an' then Aw lam th' *pudding* out o' 'im!! An' 'e's 'ollerin' like it's th' Second Coming. Then after Aw gi' 'im a royal pasting, Aw go through 'is togs, an' in the back pocket Aw find a soddin' crown!
B
D
B

'You been 'oldin' out on me, Tom! Aw've had it wi' yer dodges an' flams - wot kind o' a soup

kitchen do yew fink me?' An' Aw let into 'im again!!

'Bianca - let me go, an' Aw'll niver flam to yew again!'

'BLEEDIN' RIGHT!' Aw says. So Aw copped 'is brass, takes up the belt, an' let 'im loose - straight into the street 'e runs, naked as a blue jay. Aw had to throw 'is togs after 'im.

'Yew Owld Stringer!' Aw yelled. "Ere's yer togs, an' fer yer change, Take This!" (*Raises her fist and slaps her elbow. Excited, she catches her breath*)

DESDEMONA Jesus. Weren't you scared?

BIANCA Aw'd be lyin' if Aw said nay. Aw thought it was me last trick. You can't be too careful, there's a lot of maggot-brained doodles in me bus'ness. But Aw can take care o' meself.

DESDEMONA Doesn't . . . doesn't it hurt?

BIANCA Naw, not usual. It's stingy-like, but it's all fakement.

(*Looking into DESDEMONA's eyes, gets an idea*)

Aw c'n show you if you likes . . . C'mon, it won't hurt you none -

DESDEMONA Well . . . yes, all right, Bianca, show me.

22

The beating scene. EMILIA, BIANCA and DESDEMONA.

EMILIA Are you out o' your mind? Lettin' a strumpet strap you in your own house like a monk in Holy Week?

DESDEMONA Turn around, Emilia, and mind your own business. Go on, turn around, and say your beads. Pay no attention.

(*To BIANCA*) Sorry - please continue.

(*EMILIA says her beads through the following.*)

EMILIA Hail Mary Full of Grace the Lord is with Thee . . .

BIANCA Get up on the table wi' yer tale end up -

EMILIA Holy Mary, Mother of - (*Turns and sees DESDEMONA spread-eagled*) - GOD!!!

BIANCA Right now. Aw'll just take a strap 'ere, an' Aw'll just brush you wi' it - but when Aw let's go, you move yer tail up. All right?

DESDEMONA I . . . I think so; it's rather like rising to the trot on a horse -

BIANCA Right then. One - up. Two - down. All right, now. One. (*DESDEMONA moves up*) Two.

(*Lightly straps DESDEMONA as she moves down*)

One. (*DESDEMONA moves up*) An' Two.

(*DESDEMONA moves down; a strap*) Does it hurt?

DESDEMONA No . . . no, it doesn't, really.

BIANCA Right then. Let's have some sound e-ffecks. One. Two.

(*Desdemona, screams, EMILIA clutches her rosary*) NO!! - Not that loud! The bobbies would be in on yew so fast yew wouldn't get yer panties up - just a moan enow to get 'im excited . . . Right, then? Now: One - Two; One - Two; One - Two; One - Two; One - Two; One - Two!!

(*DESDEMONA perfects her synchronized moans, building to a crescendo, at which point she breaks into peals of laughter.*)

DESDEMONA It's smashing! - Mealy - you really must try it!

23

As before.

BIANCA Aw want you t'take this in th' right way now - but if you weren't born a lady, you'd a been a bleedin' good blow-zabella. One o' the best. An' - well, no matter what fate holds, there's always room fer you in me shop.

(*Bashful*) Aw means it, too -

EMILIA Holy Mother, if anyone had so much as whispered in Venice that you'd be makin' a bonnie whore, there'd be a blood duel to settle in the streets!

BIANCA Aw'm payin' yer lady me respects as one pro-fessional t'anofer. You . . . you got as much notion of me craft as a donkey has of Sunday.

EMILIA Why, thank you - at least someone has noted me merit.

DESDEMONA (*Gently*) I'm very complimented, Bianca . . . and I really did enjoy Tuesday night - but I don't think I'd better risk covering for you again -

BIANCA You're . . . you're not brimmin' fer me anymore?

DESDEMONA No - I don't think I'd better.

EMILIA (*To herself*) Heigh-ho! On to the next -

BIANCA (*Trembling*) But . . . but we c'n still be mates, wot?

DESDEMONA Of course we can! I want that very much. I never tire of hearing your stories. They're so lively, so very funny. What else have I got for amusement's sake.

(*BIANCA is disturbed. EMILIA smiles.*)

But you haven't told me yet about your evening off with Cassio last Tuesday . . . did you enjoy yourself?

- BIANCA You don't want to 'ear about it none, it's not anyfing amusing -
- DESDEMONA Now, just tell me all about it, Bianca; you can tell me your secrets, too. Woman to woman. What did you two do?
- BIANCA (*Shyly*) We just talked.
- EMILIA (*Snorting*) All night?
- BIANCA Yes! 'E's differnt, you know. 'E's a gen'l'man, 'e is. An' 'e makes the rest o' the blokes round 'ere look like the ninny-hammers they are -
- EMILIA Oh, he's diffrent, all right. You'd think after all week of tomfoolin' with the like of hicks, you'd have more sense than to go prancin' about with some *Nancy* town stallion.
- BIANCA Wot! Nancy! Nancy, is it? Who're you callin' 'Nancy'?
- DESDEMONA Now, Mealy, don't tease her -
- EMILIA The way I see it, it's no acc-i-dent for himself to be an army man -
- BIANCA Aw tell you wot, m'lord Cassio 'twill make a smug more obligin' in bed than the one you've got -
- DESDEMONA (*Warningly*) Ladies, ladies -
- EMILIA Well, you'll never find out what it is to be havin' the like of a proper husband in the bed.
- BIANCA Mayhap Aw will, too. Aw'm ready to let my way of life go fer wash the second 'e arks me.
- DESDEMONA What!
- BIANCA Aw'm giving 'alfe me brass each week to the priest, Father Donahue, so's 'e c'n pray fer me sins an' t' gi' me apsolution. Aw'm ready t' say yes whenever 'e arks me an' - an' Aw c'n go to th' altar as unstained as you were on yer weddin' night.
- EMILIA (*Seeing BIANCA in a new light*) So, you're after goin' to the priest reg-ular?
- (*Impressed*) That's a lot of money.
- BIANCA Bleedin' right.
- DESDEMONA (*Crestfallen*) Oh, Bianca - oh, surely you're . . . you're not the type that wants to get married?
- (*Depressed. DESDEMONA goes and pours herself another mug of wine.*)
- BIANCA Wot's wrong wif that? Aw'm still young, an' Aw've got a tidy sum all saved up fer a dowry. An' m'lord Cassio's only got t' arsk fer a transfer to th' garrison 'ere. We'd make a bleedin' jolly life of it, Aw c'n tell you. Aw'd get us a cottage by th' sea, wif winder boxes an' all them kinds of fings, an' 'e could go to th' tippel'ouse as much as 'e likes, wifout me sayin' nay. An' then . . . then Aw'd be bearin' 'im sons so's to make 'im proud -
- EMILIA (*Triumphantly*) There! There's your new woman, m'lady! Free! Does for herself!
- BIANCA Why, that 'new woman' kind o' fings all hogwash!
- (*EMILIA nods her head in agreement.*)
- All women want t'get a smug, it's wot we're made for, ain't it? We may pretend differnt, but inside ev'ry born one o' us want smugs an' babies, smugs wot are man enow t' keep us in our place.
- DESDEMONA (*Quietly into her wine*) I don't think I can stand it . . .
- BIANCA 'Scusin' my cheek, but you're a lucky lady, an' you don't even know it. Your 'ubby might be wot you call a bit doo-lolly-tap-tap up 'ere (*Taps her head*) but th' marittle knot's tied good 'n' strong. Every time Aw 'ear, (*Dreamily*) 'Til deaf do us part,' Aw starts t' snurfle. Aw can't 'elp it. If only Cassio would say them words an' make me th' 'appiest o' -
- EMILIA And what makes you think m'lord Cassio - who's Venetian born, an' wears silk next to his skin, not none of your Cyprus scum - is goin' to be marryin' a tried-on strumpet?
- BIANCA 'Coz a gen'l'man don't lie to a bird - Aw should soddin' well know where ofs Aw speak. Besides, m'lord Cassio gi' me a token o' 'is es-teem -
- EMILIA Hmmpf! And I'm after supposin' you gave him the same, as you've given tokens of esteem to all your customers - a scurvy clap - that's your token.
- (*DESDEMONA becomes curious.*)
- DESDEMONA Hush, Mealy.
- (*To BIANCA*) Never mind her, Bianca - I believe you. What type of token did Cassio give?
- BIANCA (*As enthused as a teenage girl*) It's a real flashy bit o' goods. It's a muckenger so swank Aw don't dare blow me beak in it.
- (*Confidentially*) So Aw carry it down in me knockers an' next to me 'eart.
- DESDEMONA (*Lost*) A swank . . . muck . . .
- BIANCA Wot Aw mean is, it ain't yer typic sneezer.
- (*Gropes into her bodice, and tenderly takes out an embroidered handkerchief; proudly*) 'Ere it is, now.
- DESDEMONA (*Starting*) Why . . . (*Looks carefully;*

then in relief) Oh, thank God, Bianca, you've found it. I'm saved.

(Stops) But what - whatever are you doing with my handkerchief?

EMILIA (To herself) Oh, Jesus, he gave it to Cassio!

BIANCA (Blank) Your handkerchief? Yours?!

(Dangerously) What's Cassio doin' wi' your hand-ker-chief?

DESDEMONA That's precisely what I want to find out - Emilia!

BIANCA (Fierce) Aw bet. So - you was goin' t' 'elp me out once a week fer Cassio?

(Advancing) You cheatin' hussy - Aw'll pop yer peepers out -

(BIANCA lunges for DESDEMONA; EMILIA runs.)

EMILIA She's got a KNIFE! -

DESDEMONA Listen, Bianca -

BIANCA When Aw'm gulled by a woman, she don't live to do it twice -

DESDEMONA Bianca, I swear! -

(BIANCA sees the hoof-pick and picks it up, slowly advancing on a clutching DESDEMONA, who backs away toward the clothesline.)

BIANCA Aw'll carve you up into cag-meat an' feed you to the pigs. Aw'll gag yer puddings out yer gob, you'll choke so hard -

DESDEMONA I never! -

(BIANCA swipes at DESDEMONA with the pick; the two clench each other. Breaking away, DESDEMONA falls, and picks up a wine bottle in defense.)

BIANCA Yer gonna snuff it, m'lady - so say yer prayers, yew goggle-eyed scab o' a WHORE!

(DESDEMONA ducks behind the hanging clothes, with BIANCA following. We hear a scuffle, grunts and screams. EMILIA runs for the palace door, calling.)

EMILIA GUARD! GUARD!! -

(EMILIA flings the door open. Then she realizes she can't call the guard, and quickly closes the door behind her, turning to face the room with grim desperation.)

EMILIA (Softly) Jesus.

BIANCA (Offstage) BLOODY! -

DESDEMONA (Offstage) MEALY!!

(EMILIA runs away from the door, taking out her crucifix.)

EMILIA Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus.

(And then, we hear a scream, a splash and the sound of a bottle breaking. Slowly a dark, wet stain spreads on a cloth drying on the clothesline. For a moment, there is silence.)

BIANCA looking grim and fierce, strides out from behind the clothes, holding the hoof-pick. She looks at EMILIA, who backs away. There is a pause.

Then, DESDEMONA steps from behind the hanging clothes, holding a broken wine bottle. The torso of her gown is splashed with dark, indelible burgundy.)

EMILIA (Softly) Oh, thank Jesus -

DESDEMONA Bianca! . . . Bianca, I never did.

BIANCA Leave me alone . . . Aw've lost me chance of a smug!

(Erupts into weeping, starts to wipe her nose with the handkerchief) There! Take yer filthy linen! Aw wouldn't blow me nose in it -

DESDEMONA Bianca - I never did. I never did.

BIANCA Aw loved 'im -

DESDEMONA Bianca -

BIANCA An' Aw lost 'im -

DESDEMONA Bianca -

BIANCA An' oh, oh, the cottage by the sea . . .

DESDEMONA If it makes a difference, I didn't.

BIANCA You gulled yer 'usband an' you gulled me! An' Aw thought we was mates!

(BIANCA starts to leave; EMILIA calls after her.)

EMILIA I told you there's no such thing as friendship with ladies -

BIANCA You!! Washerdonna!! Shut Yer Potato-Trap! Don't you be so 'igh an' mighty smart!!

(Reaching the door, she opens it, and turns) And just where was your Iago last Tuesday night!

(Triumphantly, BIANCA slams the door behind her. A very long pause. Then, DESDEMONA tries to sound casual.)

DESDEMONA Um, Emilia, dear, just . . . just where was Iago last Tuesday night?

EMILIA (Distressed) He . . . he said . . . he said he was on guard duty . . .

(EMILIA begins to cry. DESDEMONA sits beside her, and tentatively puts her arms about EMILIA. Then, DESDEMONA rocks her maid.)

25

DESDEMONA *and EMILIA, at table, staring ahead into air.* DESDEMONA *wearily looks into her cup, and pours herself and EMILIA another cup of wine. They look at each other, nod to each other, and drink together.*

26

DESDEMONA *is drinking.* EMILIA *grasps her mug.*

EMILIA *(In a low voice)* Do you know which one he was?

DESDEMONA No . . . I don't think so. There were so many that night.

EMILIA Aye, you were having a proper time at it. Travelin' around the world!!

(Pause.)

DESDEMONA There was one man . . .

(Hesitating) It might have been him.

EMILIA *(Laughs harshly)* My husband's a lover of garlic. Was that the man you're remembering?

DESDEMONA No, it's not that - although . . .

EMILIA Well, what is it you remember!

DESDEMONA There was one man who . . . didn't last very long.

EMILIA Aye. That's the one.

27

The same.

EMILIA When I was married in the church, the knot tied beneath the Virgin's nose, I looked forward to the bed with as much joy as any girl after a hard day. And then Iago - well, he was still a lad, with the softness of a boy, and who could tell he'd turn into the man?

(Pauses to drink.)

But all that girl nonsense was knocked out of me by the nights. Night followin' night, as sure as the day's work came after. I'd stretch myself out on the bed, you see, waitin' for my good man to come to me and be my mate - as the priest said he could - but then . . . But then I saw it didn't matter what had gone on between us - the fights, my crying, a good meal or a cold one. Days could pass without a word between us, and he'd take his fill of me the same. I could have been the bed itself. And so, you see, I vowed not to be there for him. As he'd be lying on me in the dark, I'd picture up my Rosary, so real I could kiss the silver. And I'd start at the Blessed Cross itself, while he was

somewhere doin' his business above, and I'd say the first wooden bead, and then I'd finger the next bead in my mind, and then onto the next - *(Stops)* But I never did make it to the medallion. He'd be all through with me by the time of the third 'Hail Mary.'

(Pause)

Does my lady know what I'm saying?

DESDEMONA I'm not sure. I . . . I don't think it's . . . happened to me like that.

EMILIA Ah, well, men are making fools of themselves over you. The Ambassador is traipsing from the mainland just to hold onto your skirt; and your husband - *(Stops herself)* Well, maybe it's all different for the likes of you.

(DESDEMONA says nothing.)

And then, maybe not. It's hard to be seeing, when you're young and men watch you when you pass them by, and the talkin' stops between them. But, all in all, in time you'll know.

Women just don't figure in their heads - not the one who hangs the wash - not Bianca - and not even you, m'lady. That's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes. Only each other.

(Beat.)

And that's why I'm ready to leave the whole pack of them behind and go with you and the Ambassador. Oh, to see my husband's face tomorrow morning! When he finds out that I can get along by myself, with no thanks to his plotting and hatching! But it's leave him now or be countin' my beads through the years, waitin' for his last breath!

DESDEMONA *(Quietly)* Emilia, I'll be honest with you, even if it puts me in risk to do so . . . You're to stay behind tomorrow. I've asked my cousin for my own safe passage. I wish to go alone with Ludovico.

(EMILIA stands very still.)

I am in your hands. You can run and tell my husband all - but I don't want to trifle with your feelings and desert you with the first tide. This way, you see, I'm only temporarily leaving you behind. But I promise I'll need your service in Venice as much as tonight. So, you're to follow me when all household matters are in hand, taking with you whatever my husband permits. As a token of my esteem - here - *(Takes off a ring, and gazes at it wistfully)* I want you to have this. It's a memento given me by Ludovico for . . . well, never you mind what for. Little did he think it would wind up 'round the finger of an honest woman.

(DESDEMONA gives the ring to EMILIA)

EMILIA This ring is for me? but it's of value, m'lady . . .

(EMILIA tries to return it; DESDEMONA insists. EMILIA makes a decision.)

EMILIA Listen, Miss, you've gone and leveled with me, and I'm after doing the same with you!

(Blurts) M'lady, don't go to your husband's bed tonight. Lie apart - stay in my chamber.

DESDEMONA Why? Whatever for? It would raise suspicion.

EMILIA I'll say you're ill - with woman sickness.

DESDEMONA But why?

EMILIA Because . . . because . . . oh, m'lady, you know how easy it is to be seduced by a husband's soft word, when it's the like of angry words he pours down upon your head -

DESDEMONA (Very still) Emilia - what have you done?

EMILIA I took the handkerchief.

DESDEMONA You took the handkerchief . . . I thought you did.

EMILIA It was to be a joke, you see; my husband put me up to it, as a lark, he said, just to see -

DESDEMONA (Very softly) Iago - Oh, my sweet Jesus -

EMILIA And he was laughing about it, ye see, and he was as gay as a boy; he said he'd just . . . hide it for a while, all in jest -

DESDEMONA Oh, no - he . . . he must have . . . planted it on Cassio - that's why . . .

EMILIA It was just for a lark!

DESDEMONA Emilia, what has your husband been thinking!

EMILIA I don't know what he thinks.

(DESDEMONA twists the handkerchief.)

DESDEMONA What use is this to me now! If I return it, my husband will say that my lover gave it back to me!!

EMILIA Miss Desdemona - oh my lady, I'm sure your husband loves you!

DESDEMONA How do you know that my husband -!

EMILIA More than the world! He won't harm you none, m'lady - I've often seen him -

DESDEMONA What have you seen?!

EMILIA I've seen him, sometimes when you walk in the garden, slip behind the arbor just to watch you, unawares . . . and at night . . . in the corridor . . . outside your room - sometimes he just stands there, Miss, when you're asleep . . . he just stands there -

DESDEMONA (Frightened) Oh, Jesus -

EMILIA And once . . . I saw . . . I came upon him unbeknowin', and he didn't see me - I'm sure - he was in your chamber room and he gathered up the sheets from your bed, like a body, and . . . and he held it to his face, like, like a bouquet, all breathin' it in -

(The two women pause: They both realize OTHELLO's been smelling the sheets for traces of a lover.)

DESDEMONA That isn't love. It isn't love.

(Beat)

Why didn't you tell me this before?

EMILIA (Carefully) I always thought it was not my place.

(The two women do not speak for a moment.

EMILIA looks toward the palace door.)

EMILIA Well, what are we to be doin' now?

DESDEMONA We have to make it to the morning. You'd better come with me - it's not safe for you, either.

(EMILIA says nothing.)

We'll have to leave all behind. It's not safe to pack.

(DESDEMONA thinks.)

DESDEMONA (Carefully) Now listen, carefully, Emilia. I'll go to my own chamber tonight. You're to wait up for my husband's return - tell him I'm ill and I've taken to my own bed. He's not to disturb me, I'm not well. I'll turn in before he comes, and I'll . . . pretend to sleep if he should come to me.

(Pause.)

Surely he'll not . . . harm a sleeping woman.

EMILIA I'll do it.

DESDEMONA Good. I'd better go to bed.

(DESDEMONA starts toward the palace door and stops.)

EMILIA Would you like me to brush your hair tonight? A hundred strokes?

DESDEMONA Oh, yes, please, Emilia . . .

28

EMILIA brushes DESDEMONA's hair.

DESDEMONA leans back, tense, listening to the offstage palace.

EMILIA Now, then -

(Starts) One, two, three, four, five, six . . .

29

The same.

EMILIA Forty-five, forty-six, forty-seven . . .

30

DESDEMONA and EMILIA. EMILIA reaches the hundredth stroke.

EMILIA Ninety-seven . . . ninety-eight . . . ninety-nine . . .

(They freeze. Blackout.)

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