

GIRALDI CINTHIO – 7<sup>th</sup> short story

HECATOMMITHI

1565

### THE THIRD DECADE, STORY 7

...There was once in Venice a Moor, a very gallant man, who, because he was personally valiant and had given proof in warfare of great prudence and skilful energy, was very dear to the Signoria who in rewarding virtuous actions ever advance the interests of the Republic. It happened that a virtuous Lady of wondrous beauty called Disdemona, impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor's good qualities, fell in love with him, and he, vanquished by the Lady's beauty and noble mind, likewise was enamoured of her. So propitious was their mutual love that, although the Lady's relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in

marriage and lived together in such concord and tranquillity while they remained in Venice, that never a word passed between them that was not loving.

It happened that the Venetian lords made a change in the forces that they used to maintain in Cyprus; and they chose the Moor as Commandant of the soldiers whom they sent there. Although he was pleased by the honour offered him (for such high rank and dignity is given only to noble and loyal men who have proved themselves most valiant), yet his happiness was lessened when he considered the length and dangers of the voyage, thinking that Disdemona would be much troubled by it. The Lady, who had no other happiness on earth but the Moor, and was very pleased with the recognition of his merits that her husband had received from so noble and powerful a Republic, could hardly wait for the hour when he would set off with his men, and she would accompany him to that honourable post. It grieved her greatly to see the Moor troubled; and, not knowing the reason for it, one day

while they were dining together she said to him: 'Why is it, my Moor, that after being given such an honourable rank by the Signoria, you are so melancholy?'

The Moor said to Disdemona: 'The love I bear you spoils my pleasure at the honour I have received, because I see that one of two things must happen: either I must take you with me in peril by sea, or, so as not to cause you this hardship, I must leave you in Venice. The first alternative must inevitably weigh heavily on me, since every fatigue you endured and every danger we met would give me extreme anxiety. The second, having to leave you behind, would be hateful to me, since, parting from you I should be leaving my very life behind.

'Alas, husband,' said Disdemona, hearing this, 'What thoughts are these passing through your mind? Why do you let such ideas perturb you? I want to come with you wherever you go, even if it meant walking through fire in my shift instead of, as it will be, crossing the water with you in a safe, well-furnished galley. If there really are to

be dangers and fatigues, I wish to share them with you; and I should consider myself very little beloved if, rather than have my company on the sea, you were to leave me in Venice, or persuaded yourself that I would rather stay here in safety than be in the same danger as yourself. Get ready then for the voyage in the cheerfulness that befits the high rank you hold.

Then the Moor joyously threw his arms round his wife's neck and said, with a loving kiss: 'God keep us long in this love, my dear wife! Shortly afterwards, having donned his armour and made all ready for the journey, he embarked in the galley with his lady and all his train; then, hoisting sail, they set off, and with a sea of the utmost tranquillity arrived safely in Cyprus.

The Moor had in his company an Ensign of handsome presence but the most scoundrelly nature in the world. He was in high favour with the Moor, who had no suspicion of his wickedness; for although he had the basest of minds, he so cloaked the vileness hidden in his heart with

high sounding and noble words, and by his manner, that he showed himself in the likeness of a Hector or an Achilles. This false man had likewise taken to Cyprus his wife, a fair and honest young woman. Being an Italian she was much loved by the Moor's wife, and spent the greater part of the day with her.

In the same company there was also a Corporal who was very dear to the Moor. This man went frequently to the Moor's house and often dined with him and his wife. The Lady, knowing him so well liked by her husband, gave him proofs of the greatest kindness, and this was much appreciated by the Moor.

The wicked Ensign, taking no account of the faith he had pledged to his wife, and of the friendship, loyalty and obligations he owed the Moor, fell ardently in love with Disdemona, and bent all his thoughts to see if he could manage to enjoy her; but he did not dare openly show his passion, fearing that if the Moor perceived it he might straightway kill him. He sought

therefore in various ways, as deviously as he could, to make the Lady aware that he desired her. But she, whose every thought was for the Moor, never gave a thought to the Ensign or anybody else. And all the things he did to arouse her feelings for him had no more effect than if he had not tried them. Whereupon he imagined that this was because she was in love with the Corporal; and he wondered how he might remove the latter from her sight. Not only did he turn his mind to this, but the love which he had felt for the Lady now changed to the bitterest hate and he gave himself up to studying how to bring it about that, once the Corporal were killed, if he himself could not enjoy the Lady, then the Moor should not have her either. Turning over in his mind divers schemes, all wicked and treacherous, in the end he determined to accuse her of adultery, and to make her husband believe that the Corporal was the adulterer. But knowing the singular love of the Moor for Dismona, and his friendship for the Corporal, he recognized that, unless he could deceive the

Moor with some clever trick, it would be impossible to make him believe either charge. Wherefore he set himself to wait until time and place opened a way for him to start his wicked enterprise.

Not long afterwards the Moor deprived the Corporal of his rank for having drawn his sword and wounded a soldier while on guard-duty. Disdemona was grieved by this and tried many times to reconcile the Moor with him. Whereupon the Moor told the rascally Ensign that his wife importuned him so much for the Corporal that he feared he would be obliged to reinstate him. The evil man saw in this a hint for setting in train the deceits he had planned, and said: 'Perhaps Disdemona has good cause to look on him so favourably!' 'Why is that?' asked the Moor. 'I do not wish', said the Ensign, 'to come between man and wife, but if you keep your eyes open you will see for yourself'. Nor for all the Moor's inquiries would the Ensign go beyond this: nonetheless his words left such a sharp thorn in the Moor's mind, that he gave himself up to

pondering intensely what they could mean. He became quite melancholy, and one day, when his wife was trying to soften his anger towards the Corporal, begging him not to condemn to oblivion the loyal service and friendship of many years just for one small fault, especially since the Corporal had been reconciled to the man he had struck, the Moor burst out in anger and said to her, 'There must be a very powerful reason why you take such trouble for this fellow, for he is not your brother, nor even a kinsman, yet you have him so much at heart!'

The lady, all courtesy and modesty, replied: 'I should not like you to be angry with me. Nothing else makes me do it but sorrow to see you deprived of so dear a friend as you have shown that the Corporal was to you. He has not committed so serious an offence as to deserve such hostility. But you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge.'

Still more enraged by these words the Moor answered: 'Anyone who does not believe that may easily have proof



of it! I shall take such revenge for any wrongs done to me as will more than satisfy me! The lady was terrified by these words, and seeing her husband angry with her, quite against his habit she said humbly: 'Only a very good purpose made me speak to you about this but rather than have you angry with me I shall never say another word on the subject.'

The Moor, however, seeing the earnestness with which his wife had again pleaded for the Corporal, guessed that the Ensign's words had been intended to suggest that Disdemona was in love with the Corporal, and he went in deep depression to the scoundrel and urged him to speak more openly. The Ensign, intent on injuring this unfortunate lady, after pretending not to wish to say anything that might displease the Moor, appeared to be overcome by his entreaties and said: 'I must confess that it grieves me greatly to have to tell you something that must be in the highest degree painful to you; but since you wish me to tell you, and the regard that I must have of your

honour as my master spurs me on, I shall not fail in my duty to answer your request. You must know therefore that it is hard for your Lady to see the Corporal in disgrace for the simple reason that she takes her pleasure with him whenever he comes to your house. The woman has come to dislike your blackness.

These words struck the Moor's heart to its core; but in order to learn more (although he believed what the Ensign had said to be true, through the suspicion already sown in his mind) he said, with a fierce look: 'I do not know what holds me back from cutting out that outrageous tongue of yours which has dared to speak such insults against my Lady! Then the Ensign: 'Captain,' he said, 'I did not expect any other reward for my loving service; but since my duty and my care for your honour have carried me so far, I repeat that the matter stands exactly as you have just heard it, and if your Lady, with a false show of love for you, has so blinded your eyes that you have not seen what you ought to have seen, that does not mean that I am not

speaking the truth. For this Corporal has told me all, like one whose happiness does not seem complete until he has made someone else acquainted with it. And he added: 'If I had not feared your wrath, I should, when he told me, have given him the punishment he deserved by killing him. But since letting you know what concerns you more than anyone else brings me so undeserved a reward, I wish that I had kept silent, for by doing so I should not have fallen into your displeasure.'

Then the Moor, in the utmost anguish, said, 'If you do not make me see with my own eyes what you have told me, be assured, I shall make you realize that it would have been better for you had you been born dumb. 'To prove it would have been easy', replied the villain, 'when he used to come to your house; but now when, not as it should have been, but for the most trivial cause, you have driven him away, it cannot but be difficult for me, for although I fancy that he still enjoys Disdemona whenever you give him the opportunity, he must do it much more cautiously

than he did before, now that he knows you have turned against him. Yet I do not lose hope of being able to show you what you do not wish to believe.' And with these words they parted.

The wretched Moor, as if struck by the sharpest of darts, went home to wait for the day when the Ensign would make him see that which must make him miserable for ever. But no less trouble did the Ensign suffer by his knowledge of the Lady's chastity, for it did not seem possible to find a way of making the Moor believe what he had falsely told him, till, his thoughts twisting and turning in all directions, the scoundrel thought of a new piece of mischief.

The Moor's wife often went, as I have said, to the house of the Ensign's wife, and stayed with her a good part of the day; wherefore seeing that she sometimes carried with her a handkerchief embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion, which the Moor had given her and which was treasured by the Lady and her husband too, the

Ensign planned to take it from her secretly, and thereby prepare her final ruin. He had a little girl of three years old, much loved by Disdemona. One day, when the unfortunate Lady had gone to pass some time at the villain's house, he took the child in his arms and carried her to the Lady, who took her and pressed her to her breast. The deceiver, who had great sleight of hand, lifted the handkerchief from her girdle so warily that she did not notice it; and he took his leave of her in great joy.

Disdemona, knowing nothing of it, went back home and, being occupied with other thoughts, did not miss the handkerchief. But a few days later, she looked for it, and not finding it she became afraid that the Moor might ask for it, as he often did. The wicked Ensign, seizing a suitable opportunity, went to the Corporal's room, and with cunning malice left the handkerchief at the head of his bed. The Corporal did not notice it till the next morning when, getting out of bed, he put his foot upon the handkerchief, which had fallen to the floor. Not being able

to imagine how it had come into his house, and knowing that it was Disdemona's, he determined to give it back to her. So he waited till the Moor had gone out, then went to the back door and knocked. Fortune, it seems, had conspired with the Ensign to bring about the death of the unhappy lady; for just then the Moor came home, and hearing a knock on the door went to the window and shouted angrily: 'Who is knocking?' The Corporal, hearing the Moor's voice and fearing that he might come down and attack him, fled without answering. The Moor ran down the stairs, and opening the outside door went out into the street and looked around, but could see nobody. Then returning full of evil passion, he asked his wife who had knocked on the door below.

The Lady replied truthfully that she did not know. The Moor then said, 'It looked to me like the Corporal.' 'I do not know', she said, 'whether it was he or somebody else.' The Moor restrained his fury, though he was consumed with rage. He did not want to do anything before

consulting the Ensign, to whom he went at once and told him what had occurred, praying him to find out from the Corporal all that he could about it. Delighted with what had happened, the Ensign promised to do so. Accordingly he spoke to the Corporal one day while the Moor was standing where he could see them as they talked; and chatting of quite other matters than the Lady, he laughed heartily and, displaying great surprise, he moved his head about and gestured with his hands, acting as if he were listening to marvels. As soon as the Moor saw them separate he went to the Ensign to learn what the other had told him; and the Ensign, after making him entreat him for a long time, finally declared: 'He has hidden nothing from me. He tells me that he has enjoyed your wife every time you have given them the chance by your absence. And on the last occasion she gave him the handkerchief which you gave her as a present when you married her. The Moor thanked the Ensign and it seemed obvious to him that if he found that the Lady no longer had the

handkerchief, then all must be as the Ensign claimed.

Wherefore one day after dinner, while chatting with the Lady on various matters, he asked her for the handkerchief. The unhappy woman, who had greatly feared this, grew red in the face at the request, and to hide her blushes (which the Moor well noted), she ran to the chest, pretending to look for it. After much search, 'I do not know', she said, 'why I cannot find it; perhaps you have had it?' 'If I had had it,' said he, 'why should I ask for it? But you will look more successfully another time.' Leaving her the Moor began to think how he might kill his wife, and the Corporal too, in such a way that he would not be blamed for it. And since he was obsessed with this, day and night, the Lady inevitably noticed that he was not the same towards her as he was formerly. Many times she said to him, 'What is the matter with you? What is troubling you? Whereas you used to be the gayest of men, you are now the most melancholy man alive!

The Moor invented various excuses, but she was not at



all satisfied, and although she knew no act of hers which could have so perturbed the Moor, she nevertheless feared that through the abundance of lovemaking which he had with her he might have become tired of her. Sometimes she would say to the Ensign's wife, 'I do not know what to make of the Moor. He used to be all love towards me but in the last few days he has become quite another man; and I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents' wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us. But because I know that he is very friendly with your husband, and confides in him, I beg you, if you have learned anything from him which you can tell me, that you will not fail to help me. She wept bitterly as she spoke.

The Ensign's wife, who knew everything (for her husband had wished to use her as an instrument in causing the Lady's death, but she had never been willing to consent), did not dare, for fear of her husband, to tell her

anything. She said only: 'Take care not to give your husband any reason for suspicion, and try your hardest to make him realize your love and loyalty.' 'That indeed I do,' said Disdemona, 'but it does not help.'

In the meantime the Moor sought in every way to get more proof of that which he did not wish to discover, and prayed the Ensign to contrive to let him see the handkerchief in the Corporal's possession; and although that was difficult for the villain, he promised nonetheless to make every effort to give him this testimony.

The Corporal had a woman at home who worked the most wonderful embroidery on lawn, and seeing the handkerchief and learning that it belonged to the Moor's wife, and that it was to be returned to her, she began to make a similar one before it went back. While she was doing so, the Ensign noticed that she was working near a window where she could be seen by whoever passed by on the street. So he brought the Moor and made him see her, and the latter now regarded it as certain that the most

virtuous Lady was indeed an adulteress. He arranged with the Ensign to kill her and the Corporal and they discussed how it might be done. The Moor begged the Ensign to kill the Corporal, promising to remain eternally grateful to him. The Ensign refused to undertake such a thing, as being too difficult and dangerous, for the Corporal was as skilful as he was courageous; but after much entreaty, and being given a large sum of money, he was persuaded to say that he would tempt Fortune.

Soon after they had resolved on this, the Corporal, issuing one dark night from the house of a courtesan with whom he used to amuse himself, was accosted by the Ensign, sword in hand, who directed a blow at his legs to make him fall down; and he cut the right leg entirely through, so that the wretched man fell. The Ensign was immediately on him to finish him off, but the Corporal, who was valiant and used to blood and death, had drawn his sword, and wounded as he was he set about defending himself, while shouting in a loud voice: 'I am being

murdered!

At that the Ensign, hearing people come running, including some of the soldiers who were quartered thereabouts, began to flee, so as not to be caught there; then, turning back he pretended to have run up on hearing the noise. Mingling with the others, and seeing the leg cut off, he judged that if the Corporal were not already dead, he soon would die of the wound, and although he rejoiced inwardly, he outwardly grieved for the Corporal as if he had been his own brother.

In the morning, news of the affray was spread throughout the city and reached the ears of Disdemona; whereupon, being tender-hearted and not thinking that evil would come to her by it, she showed the utmost sorrow at the occurrence. On this the Moor put the worst possible construction. Seeking out the Ensign, he said to him: 'Do you know, my imbecile of a wife is in such grief about the Corporal's accident that she is nearly out of her mind!' 'How could you expect anything else?' said the other,

'since he is her very life and soul?'

'Soul indeed!' replied the Moor, 'I'll drag the soul from her body for I couldn't think myself a man if I didn't rid the world of such a wicked creature.'

They were discussing whether the Lady should perish by poison or the dagger, and not deciding on either of them, when the Ensign said: 'A method has come into my head that will satisfy you and that nobody will suspect. It is this: the house where you are staying is very old, and the ceiling of your room has many cracks in it. I suggest that we beat Disdemona with a stocking filled with sand until she dies. Thus there will not appear on her any sign of the blows. When she is dead, we shall make part of the ceiling fall; and we'll break the Lady's head, making it seem that a rafter has injured it in falling, and killed her. In this way nobody will feel any suspicion of you, for everyone will think that she died accidentally.'

The cruel plan pleased the Moor, and they waited for a suitable opportunity. One night the Moor concealed the

Ensign in a closet which opened off the bedchamber, and when the husband and wife were in bed, the Ensign, in accordance with their plan, made some sort of noise. Hearing it the Moor said to his wife:

'Did you hear that noise?'

'Yes, I heard it', she replied.

'Get up', said the Moor, 'and see what it is.'

The unfortunate Disdemona got out of bed, and as soon as she was near the closet, the Ensign came out and, being strong and muscular, he gave her a frightful blow in the small of her back, which made the Lady fall down at once, scarcely able to draw her breath. With the little voice she had she called on the Moor to help her. But he, jumping out of bed, said to her, 'You wicked woman, you are having the reward of your infidelity. This is how women are treated who, pretending to love their husbands, put horns on their heads.'

The wretched Lady, hearing this and feeling herself near to death (for the Ensign had given her another blow),

called on Divine Justice to witness to her fidelity, since earthly justice failed; and as she called on God to help her, a third blow struck her, and she lay still, slain by the impious Ensign. Then, placing her in the bed, and breaking her skull, he and the Moor made the ceiling fall as they had previously planned, and the Moor began to call for help, that the house was falling. Hearing his cries the neighbours ran in and found the bed, and the Lady dead under the rafters - which made everyone grieve, for they knew what a good life she had led.

Next day Disdemona was buried, amid the universal mourning of the people. But God, the just observer of men's hearts, did not intend such vile wickedness to go without proper punishment. He ordained that the Moor, who had loved the Lady more than his life, on finding himself deprived of her should feel such longing that he went about like one beside himself, searching for her in every part of the house. Realizing now that the Ensign was the cause of his losing his Lady and all joy in life, he

held the villain in such abhorrence that he could not bear even to see him; and if he had not been afraid of the inviolable justice of the Venetian lords, he would have slain him openly. Not being able to do this with safety he took away his rank and would not have him in his company, whereupon such a bitter hatred sprang up between them that no greater or more deadly feud could be imagined.

The Ensign, that worst of all scoundrels, therefore set all his mind to injuring the Moor, and seeking out the Corporal, who had now recovered and went about with a wooden leg instead of the one that had been cut off, he said to him, 'It is time you got your revenge for the leg you lost. If you will come to Venice with me, I shall tell you who the miscreant was, for here I dare not tell you, for many reasons; and I am willing to bear witness for you in court.'

The Corporal who felt himself deeply wronged but did not know the real truth, thanked the Ensign and came with



him to Venice. When they arrived there the Ensign told him that it was the Moor who had cut off his leg because of a suspicion he had formed that he was Disdemona's lover, and that for the same reason he had murdered her, and afterwards made it known that the fallen ceiling had killed her. Hearing this, the Corporal accused the Moor to the Signoria, both of cutting off his leg and of causing the Lady's death, and called as witness the Ensign, who said that both accusations were true, for the Moor had approached him and tried to induce him to commit both crimes; and that, having then killed his wife through the bestial jealousy that he had conceived in his mind, he had told him how he had killed her.

When the Signoria learned of the cruelty inflicted by the Barbarian upon a citizen of Venice, they ordered the Moor to be apprehended in Cyprus and to be brought to Venice, where with many tortures they tried to discover the truth. But enduring with great steadfastness of mind every torment, he denied everything so firmly that nothing could

be extorted from him. Although by his constancy he escaped death, he was, however, after many days in prison, condemned to perpetual exile, in which he was finally slain by Disdemona's relatives, as he richly deserved.

The Ensign returned to his own country; and not giving up his accustomed behaviour, he accused one of his companions, saying that the latter had sought to have him murder one of his enemies, who was a nobleman. The accused man was arrested and put to the torture, and when he denied that what his accuser said was true, the Ensign too was tortured, to compare their stories; and he was tortured so fiercely that his inner organs were ruptured. Afterwards he was let out of prison and taken home, where he died miserably. Thus did God avenge the innocence of Disdemona. And all these events were told after his death by the Ensign's wife, who knew the facts as I have told them to you.